Case Analysis: Nicolas Cruz

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February 14, 2018, is marked with one of the deadliest massacres of a school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland. The gunman opened fires on 17 innocent school children and staff members. The gunman was also the school student, aged 19 years, named Nicolas Cruz. Soon after killing 17 people, he escaped the scene to get some food at McDonald's and Walmart but was arrested shortly. Moreover, he confessed his crime and remained under arrest; his death penalty case has not yet started. This paper will analyze Cruz's personality, thoughts, behaviors, and life events that might have contributed collectively to the deadly act done by him.

The biographical information of Nicolas Cruz reveals that he is an adoptee and like every adoptee experiences trauma when prematurely separated from the birth mother. Infants only a few hours old can make long term memories, and traumatic events will be recorded as emotions at this early stage. Compounding, this was the death of his father and the sudden death of his adopted mother. Multiple traumas in the same context of attachment magnified their impact on his emotional state. While its likely Cruz had some preexisting mental disorder from his history, the belief that he is being abandoned will trigger rage when one has a history of this severe. The final straw was his expulsion from the school, another experience of being abandoned. The students avoided him because of his strange and violent behavior, which is seen as another reject. This made the school and its students the perfect targets for his rage. He bought a gun three days after the expulsion. With this kind of rage and determination, Cruz would have used any means he could to kill as many as possible. A truck, pressure cooker bomb, gasoline anything he could use since these rampage attacks are well planned.

He stopped whatever treatment he was getting about a year before the shooting and proceeded to deteriorate very rapidly. He was behaving in a very bizarre manner, typical of psychotic disorders. He frequently spoke of wanting to shoot up the school, drank gasoline, aimed a gun at his head, and got into fights with classmates. There is an uncertainty in the fact that whatever treatment he was getting back then was adequate. I would think not since he walked out of treatment, and 'adequate' treatment of that severe a **psychosis** could not possibly involve allowing the person to terminate treatment without being hospitalized. It is fathomable that his mentally disrupted state, combined with his life events (both school and family life), are few contributory factors in his violent actions.

According to the behavioral theories, behavior is something learned from interaction with the social environment, including **violent behaviors**. The day to day experiences of people make them violent, people learn to act violently after the episodes of negative events. For instance, behaviorist also argues that children sometimes model the violent behavior of their parents. According to theorists, a few factors that make a person violent are the stressful stimulus that heightens arousal, the skill of aggression learns from others, a belief that rage would be rewarded socially, and a value system that excuses violent. The life events of Cruz as mentioned in the above paragraph offers a better understanding underlying reasons behind his violent thoughts, behavior and his violent actions.

In addition, Nikolas Cruz was responding to 'command hallucinations' when apprehended. Command **hallucinations** are a strong risk factor for violence and are often coupled with **'delusions'** (bizarre ideas that are not believed by others in the community, and are not thoughts or ideas in the usual sense of those words, but are due to **irrational thinking** that the individual cannot ignore or forget). When a person is a psychopath, he is 'out of touch with reality' and does not do things for personal advantage, as would a person with so-called psychopathy. Example: a psychopath might shoot up a school out of anger at people who did things he didn't like.

Whereas a psychotic individual would shoot up a school because the voice of God told him to, and he will unquestioningly and sincerely believe that not only did God talk to him, but also that he must obey. The psychotic person may have been bullied or may have been jilted by a girl in the school or flunked a class, but his thinking and behavior are extremely distorted and not reality-based. Command hallucinations indicate the symptoms of psychosis or psychotic, a mental state where the persona loses control over his or her mind. In his confession to police, he told, he heard voices "burn, kill and destroy" that inspired him to kill.

The concept of moral development was applied by Kohlberg (1969) to criminal behavior (Kohlberg, 1969). The high level of **moral reasoning** helps a person with acts of non-violence. On the other hand, people who lack moral reasoning engage in criminal activities when they get an opportunity. Following this theory of **cognitive development**, research suggests that people who engage in violent behavior try to defend themselves when they experience a misinterpreted level of threat. This theory and research also suggest that Cruz violent behavior followed the principle of self-esteem (R.J., n.d.). His actions were aimed at protecting and enhancing his self-esteem that was disrupted by the by rejection and expulsion at school. People want to believe that Cruz is 'mean', a 'psychopath' and 'evil.' They don't want to hear that he has a mental illness, they want to be angry, plus they think that the mentally ill get 'leniency', which is an utter lie, but people believe it anyway. However, his life events analyzed using some behavioral theories, theories of cognitive moral development alongside analysis of his violent behavior unearth that he was a psychosis going through severe mental illness.

A few facts about Cruz, studied by some investigating his case, revealed that he was mentally disabled, autistic, and never given a caseworker when his two parents died, leaving him to his own devices without supervision/surveillance. Studies find a direct relationship between mental illness and violent behavior (Swartz, Borum, & Wagner, 2001). He was expelled from school for "outbursts," which is common in disabled people and couldn't support himself. Personally, this tells me all I need to know. It sounds like he never got proper help with his social problems stemming from being disabled, which made him increasingly frustrated. He is also obviously going to be very naive and will probably jump through hoops to fit in with people, so he was easily taken advantage of by racist youths who probably didn't realize how profound their effect on him as an autistic person really was.

Moreover, studying the profile and personality of a school shooter, it is revealed that insecure attachment normally comes from a poor relationship with one's parents. Everyone is born with the desire to be loved, however one needs to learn how to love and that ability is taught by one’s primary caregivers. Children of abusive or indifferent parents do not learn how to love back, and they do not learn how to regulate their emotions properly. The areas of the brain from where emotions arise, the lambic region develops much faster than the cortex; the area that allows to integrate information from the senses, reflect, and make decisions. Consciousness resides between in a fuzzy space between the two areas, everywhere and nowhere in particular. Ideas are fed in by emotions and transformed by memory. Children with insecure attachment learn strategies to fend for themselves because no one else would, and thus they respond more aggressively and selfishly to others. Emotion regulation cannot be learned the way we learn a new word. The brain needs to make physical connections, wiring that will favor appropriate responses.

Furthermore, individuals with insecure attachments may not have developed that proper wiring. They mistrust others, and in extreme cases, they may not fear the consequences of violence as much as other people. For instance, an important reason why video games and violence in media do not cause people to become violent is that we tend to be aware of the consequences of responding with violence: it can get us in trouble. Our mothers teach us to be courteous, to fear authority, and that kindness works better. A person with an insecure attachment will not necessarily be violent but will be less kind and lovely. In extreme cases where there has been too much trauma, that person may become a sociopath under certain circumstances that may lead a person to become a criminal or a mass shooter. Many school shooters seem to have had insecure attachment: poor **socioemotional regulation** caused by a traumatic childhood, bullied at school, beaten by the parents, etc. (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015). All these factors impact the mental development of children, and in later stages, their violent thoughts and feelings take the form of violent actions as depicted in the case of Cruz.

# References

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