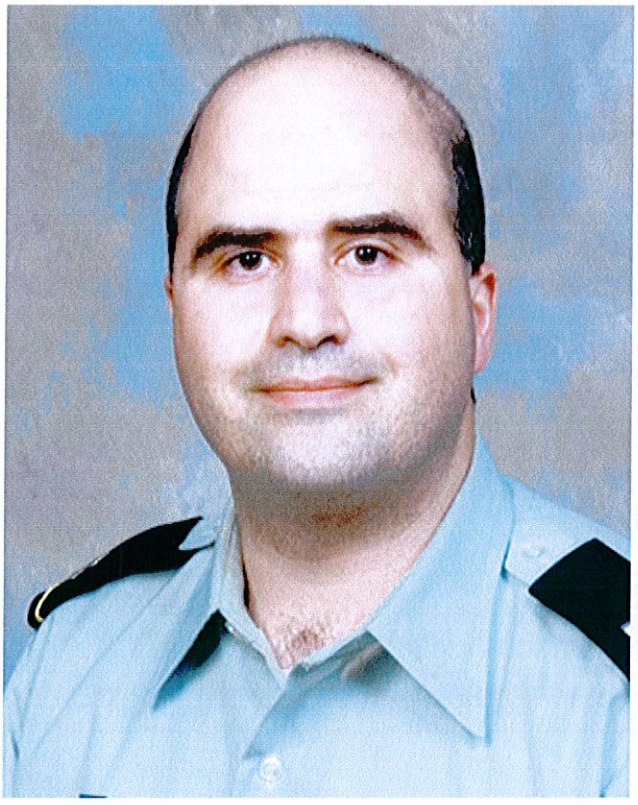
The Mind of a Mass Killer *By Nick Reilly*
http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2009/11/16/the-psychology-of-mass-shootings-photos.html

What makes shooters target many victims?

The shootings at Fort Hood, Texas, in October 2009 were brutal and shocking. But they are hardly an anomaly: two days after the killings, two other mass shootings occurred: one in Tampa, Fla., and one in Portland, Ore. Mass killings have had a long and painful history in the United States. Normally perpetrated by male aggressors, the motivations for these occurrences vary, ranging from acts of revenge, twisted showings of compassion, fervent ideology, and, most often, a person who for one reason or another, snaps. Authorities are still determining the motivations and mental state of accused Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan (right). But for every occurrence, the same question is invariably raised: What causes someone to commit mass homicide? NEWSWEEK asked experts about the various motivations that can lead to these tragedies.



Conspiracy Killers

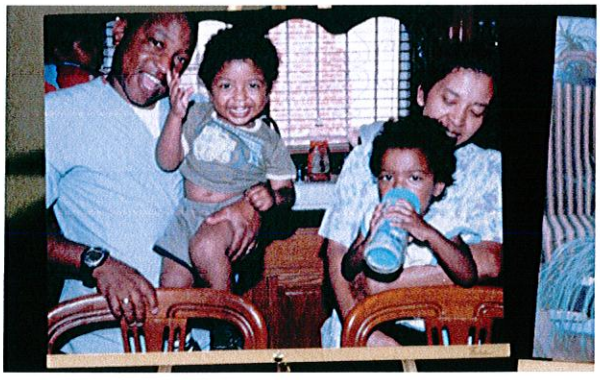
One of the more common mass shooters is the disgruntled killer, who targets those he feels wronged him, whether they're co-workers, classmates, or women who have rejected him. Usually, this shooter attacks after a lengthy buildup of feeling oppressed, persecuted, and misunderstood. To him, the killings are a heroic act. "He tends to see his victims as villains," says Jack Levin, professor of criminology at Northeastern University and coauthor of The Will to Kill: Making Sense of Senseless Murder. "He believes sincerely that he has been victimized, that there is a conspiracy against him, and that his life is miserable as a result of the people he intends to harm." These killers are able to morally justify their behaviors--in their minds, they are "ridding the world of evil [and] securing sweet revenge against those who are responsible for all of [their] miseries in life," says Levin. Columbine shooters Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris fit this classification, as does Jason Rodriguez (at right, in navy blue shirt), who is accused of killing one and wounding eight in a November 2009 shooting at an engineering firm in Orlando, Fla., from which he was fired two years earlier.

Blame It on Videogames

The rise of disgruntled killers in school shootings following the 1999 Columbine attack--nearly 50 school shootings have taken place since 1999, compared to half that number from 1989 to 1999--has led many concerned parents and politicians to blame a rise in gun violence on an increase in the number of violent videogames. However, there has been no clear evidence indicating a connection between the two. Studies done by L. Rowell Huesmann, director of the aggression-research program in the research center for group dynamics at the University of Michigan, have found that children exposed to violent games are more likely to be violent and tend to gravitate toward like-minded friends. But that doesn't necessarily make them mass killers. The motivation for mass murder is "multidetermined, and to blame it on videogames is oversimplistic and incorrect," says Dr. Louis B. Schlesinger, professor of forensic psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. However, Schlesinger notes that videogames may help shooters in one way: they're quite effective in the military training sharpshooters. Klebold and Harris (seen here in security-camera footage), both of whom reportedly played violent, first-person-shooter videogames, were more accurate than many police officers are, says Schlesinger.

It's a Family Matter

"Family annihilators," people who kill themselves and their entire families, fall into two classes. The first are often the most difficult for friends and relatives to understand: it's the case of the seemingly devoted father who shoots his wife and children before turning the gun on himself. According to Northeastern's Levin, these men often equate their self-worth with being able to provide for their family and value their role as family protector. Their decision to kill comes from a mix of rational and irrational thought. "Someone who loses his job in a terrible economy when the unemployment rate is very high may want to commit suicide," says Levin. "He may decide--rationally--that his suicide will stigmatize his family members. He may feel that they cannot survive without him, and clearly he does not want to leave his children without parents, so he annihilates the family as an altruistic measure. He believes sincerely that they are better off in the hereafter than in this miserable existence." Ervin Lupoe (far left), who murdered his wife, Ana, and their five children before killing himself in January 2009, did so after both he and his wife had lost their jobs. In letters he faxed to a Los Angeles television station, he made his motives clear: "After a horrendous ordeal my wife felt it better to end our lives and why leave the children in someone's [sic] else's hands." As California continues to struggle financially, occurrences like these may become more frequent; the Lupoes were the fifth family in California to suffer such a fate in less than a year's time. Other murderous heads of families are classified as proprietary or paranoid killers. This type of killer feels that he owns his family, says Schlesinger of John Jay College. When members of the family try to assert their own will, such as when a wife attempts to leave the relationship, he responds with a final, fatal act of possession and control.



The Sniper

There's a different psychology behind opening fire into a crowd at random, and selecting a target and shooting from a hidden distance. To be a sniper also requires a certain amount of skill and control--often, these shooters have had military training. Charles Whitman, who killed 14 people and injured 31 with a sniper rifle from the clock tower at the University of Texas in 1966, had served as a sniper in the Marines. (This photo shows the clock tower as framed through a bullet hole created by Whitman's gun.) Although their method of killing takes place from a great distance, they are no less detached from their victims than one who kills face to face, says Loren Coleman, author of The Copycat Effect. They see and choose their targets--the victims of a directed rage--before they pull the trigger. John Allen Muhammad, the recently executed D.C. sniper, was reportedly after financial gain, not emotional revenge--he hoped the local government would pay $10 million dollars for the killing to stop.

The Delusional Killer

Some individuals open fire out of religious or political fervor, but mental instability often also plays a factor. Clark McCauley, professor of psychology at Bryn Mawr College, says that these men, often called "lone-wolf terrorists," believe what they're doing is rational and right, based on delusions of superiority, personal victimization, distrust, or vulnerability. They draw inspiration from extreme political groups, but their violent acts aren't commissioned by these movements. In many cases, the killings are an attempt to impress the leaders or show their devotion. Or they may feel that the movement is not going far enough, and that they need to take action. McCauley says these men think of themselves as action heroes: rushing in to right a wrong despite threats of jail or bodily harm, doing what they think is right no matter the consequences. Suicide is not always the desired outcome, but rather one of the risks that comes with glory. Jim David Adkisson shown right) was convicted of killing two people and wounding six at a Unitarian church in 2008; his motive was to kill liberals. He had reportedly been an avid reader of right-wing literature about the damage liberals were doing to the country.

Women Shooters

Shooters like Brenda Ann Spencer (seen here in 1979) are unusual not because of their actions, but because of their gender. The vast majority of mass shooters are men. Women, says Levin of Northeastern, are more likely to turn their anger inward and commit suicide rather than homicide. When they do turn violent, either against themselves or others, they're less likely to use a gun. Spencer, who explained her reasoning for opening fire on a group of elementary-school students with the statement "I don't like Mondays. This livens up the day," is an example of the rare woman shooter.

Terrorist Activity

"When one person is paranoid, we call it mental illness. When a whole group of people share that paranoia, we call it a social movement," says Levin of Northeastern. Those involved in a terrorist organization can accept violent behavior they might reject on their own. "They would do things they wouldn't dream of doing separately," he says. In recent history, the majority of gun-related terrorist violence has been done abroad, such as the Chechnya rebels who held a school hostage in 1994. In the U.S., gun-related terrorism was more prominent in the 70s, as some leftist groups used guns in robberies and targeted killings. San Francisco Police Department Sgt. John V. Young (at left) was killed in 1971; the shooters pointed their shotgun through the opening in the bulletproof glass at the police station. In 2007, former Black Liberation Army members were charged in the shooting. Authorities implicated the BLA in a number of shooting incidents.

As Suicide Ritual

The fresh laundry (shown here) left in the dryer by accused Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan left many wondering whether the Army major planned to return home after his alleged rampage. But most mass shootings are elaborate suicide rituals, experts say. "Homicide is a masked form of suicide--they don't plan to get out of this alive," says Coleman. In his research, he interviewed mass shooters who survived their attacks. Every one of the school shooters he interviewed had planned to die in their attacks; almost 100 percent of workplace shooters said the same thing.

Heat of Passion or Premeditated

One of the big questions in the Fort Hood killings is whether the shooter snapped or planned ahead of time. Whether or not mass shootings are planned often depends on the motivation of the shooter. Lone-wolf terrorists typically spend months training and planning their kills, as do some disgruntled shooters, says Levin. Seung-Hui Cho, who killed 32 people at Virgina Tech in 2006, wrote a manifesto and sent videos to NBC (seen on the Today show at right) timed to arrive just after his rampage. For those killers who see their actions as an elaborate suicide, the details are often fantasized about and sometimes even practiced for months ahead of time. But sometimes, a disturbed individual can just snap. Sixty years ago, Howard Unruh, convinced that his neighbors were talking about him, kept what essentially amounted to a kill list of who said what about him and who deserved retaliation. Unruh's turning point was when he arrived home late one night in 1949 to find his gate stolen. Starting early the next morning, he only took 12 minutes and 14 shots to kill 13 people.