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Part one: Background of this study and overview of theoretical approaches of school shooting

1 About this research

Since the middle of the 20th century, more than 160 school shootings have occurred worldwide, with several hundreds of victims killed and many others wounded. Many people wonder why and how these tragedies can happen. Many speculate, but what do we really know about these tragic incidents? Answers to these questions are urgently needed because they can inform prevention and response policies. We cannot act accurately when we are not informed correctly.

"Tell me why, I don't like Mondays, I wanna shoot the whole day down." Unknown to many, perhaps, these iconic lines of the number one hit by Irish punk rock band Boomtown Rats (in the UK charts in 1979) actually refer to a school shooting. That year, Brenda Spencer killed two people at Cleveland Elementary School in San Diego, California. When the police asked her why she fired a gun at teachers and students, she answered, "I don't like Mondays."[1] But are school shootings truly that trivial and devoid of meaning? Regarding the impact of these events, the fact that the perpetrators plan the attacks over a period of time and accept possibly losing their own lives as a consequence means that one may assume that school shooters attach importance to their deeds and the guiding question of this study arises: *What are the meanings attributed to school shootings?* To answer this question, I analyzed in Part Two what meaning has been assigned to school shootings in the popular imagination. I was also looking for a creative, more out-of-the-box interpretation of the meaning of these events and therefore turned to popular culture, focusing on an analysis of movies about school shootings. In Part Three, I turned to the

[1] "Sniping suspect had a grim goal," *The Milwaukee Journal*, January 29, 1979, p. 33.

perpetrators. By analyzing egodocuments such as suicide letters or manifestos, I tried to "listen" to the school shooters themselves and the meaning they give to their deeds.

Little is currently known about the motives of school shooters. Although they often leave manifestos or suicide letters behind, expressing their motivation, these messages have seldom been researched. Studies on school shootings mostly consider the psychological and social circumstances of the perpetrators in order to find a reliable profile to serve early detection and prevention. However, the available information about school shooters does not add up to a useful profile (O'Toole, 2002; Robertz, 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2002). This follows in part from the simple statistical logic that the number of school shootings is relatively low. Known shooters have different family backgrounds and educational histories, the socioeconomic context differs and their age varies considerably, between eleven and twenty-five years old (Langman, 2009).

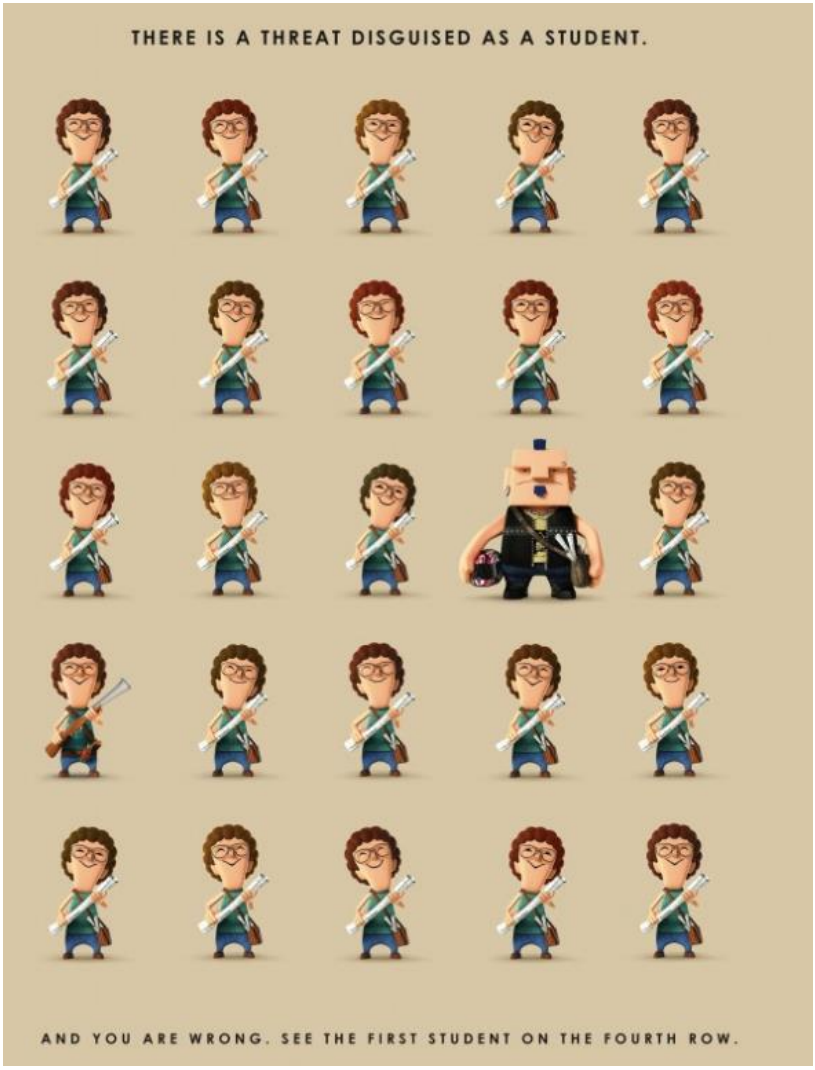
Nonetheless, based on previous incidents a number of characteristics can be identified. The majority of school shooters are

- male
- Caucasian
- keenly interested in weapons
- fond of presenting themselves in army clothes or black trench coats
- interested in violent movies or computer games (Kriek, van den Tillart, van Cooten, Timmer, Pfeifer, & Kobes, 2011).

Obviously, these risk factors are applicable to a large number of people, and there is no reliable way to pick out the very few who will actually commit a school shooting. Therefore, it has to be concluded that at this stage profiling is not an appropriate method for preventing these attacks. Moreover, agreeing to a

list of characteristics to identify potential school shooters could, on the one hand, be dangerous, because warning signals of students who do not have the characteristics on this list could be overlooked, and, on the other hand, could stigmatize nonviolent students (O'Toole, 2002). But if profiling is not helpful, what method is, and what do we need to know about this phenomenon to prevent school shootings? Certainly, enlarging the body of knowledge of this phenomenon is important and relevant not only for social science but for everyone who deals with young people professionally or personally.

Although no reliable profile of a school shooter exists, there does seem to be a popular image of the typical school shooter. Whenever a school shooting occurs, the media portray the perpetrator as a somewhat strange loner who had been bullied, and publish photos matching these assumptions. This creates stereotypes of school shooters and influences the popular perceptions of school shooters. To understand what these stereotypes are, as discussed in Chapter 3, I first identified a number of characteristics of school shooters based on media coverage. Second, I digitally asked an international panel of 142 individual education professionals, students and parents how typical these characteristics of school shooters are in their opinion. I argue that popular perceptions can be problematic because stereotypes and faulty perceptions hinder prevention possibilities. On the one hand, you could overlook a troubled youngster with violent fantasies just because he does not match the stereotype, and, on the other hand, you could stigmatize children as possibly dangerous because they happen to meet the stereotype. To illustrate this argument, I use an advertisement of the GSR Entrance Hall System titled "There is a threat disguised as a student." Which one of these students should be identified as a threat?



Use of picture approved by Juliano B. Hennemann, SPR Agency, Novo Hamburgo, Brazil.

Notably, the advertisers expected you to indicate the wrong student (which is the first student on the fourth row with a firearm in his hands). This advertisement problematizes popular perceptions of school shooters.

Identifying popular perceptions of school shooters and indicating to what extent the empirical evidence supports this perception leads to the first subquestion of this study:

> *What are the popular perceptions of school shooters, how do these perceptions relate to empirical data and how do expressions of popular culture interpret the motives of school shooters?*

In order to answer these first questions, I have identified commonly-held beliefs about school shooters, and the extent to which this matches the empirical data. However, to truly deepen our understanding of school shooters, we need to put popular perceptions and statistics aside and start to listen to the perpetrators. What do they tell us about their motives? These mostly middle-class white boys with no history of extreme violence killed peers, friends, sometimes members of their family and often themselves. Considering the life-ending nature of this crime, a pressing question is what meaning they give to their own lives and the lives of others, and, conversely, to death.

Fear of death is an existential concern; there is an instinctive fear of death in humans, from the most conscious level of human awareness to the deepest depths of the unconscious, which emerges in force during puberty (Yalom, 1980). Many of the analyses of warning signals, interpretations of motives, and risk-factors of becoming a school shooter fail to acknowledge that at least a number of shooters express clear and consistent existential messages of suffering or philosophical accounts of how they see the world and their place in it. As part of this project, school shooters' struggle with existential concerns, such as loneliness and becoming an outcast were documented (Pfeifer & Ganzevoort, 2016).

How far these existential concerns, as well as others, play a role in the genesis of a school shooting has never been studied, although such research can clearly deliver much-needed answers about the motives of school shooters. One

of the aims of the present study is to fill this gap. The next section describes what the term *existential* means in this study.

1.1 The Existential perspective

This section does not aim to address existentialism as such but to frame the discussion about the existential dimension of school shootings. Obviously there is a lot to say about existentialism, but doing so would be beyond the subject of the present study. To make clear how existentialism is understood here, I use Reker's (2000) understanding that "Existentialism is a philosophy that focuses on people's attempts to make sense of their existence by assigning meaning to it and taking responsibility to act accordingly" (p. 40).

The existential perspective, as addressed in this study, focuses on people's attempt to make sense of their lives. Since school shootings always evoke the question of why they happened, many scholars have attempted to understand these attacks. However, despite numerous scientific approaches from scholars in sociology, psychology and criminology, a predictive understanding of school shootings has not been achieved to date. An approach which focusses on the existential concerns of the perpetrators can help deepen our understanding of school shootings by telling us more about what the perpetrators themselves tell us about their motives. According to Reker (2000),

> Existentialists take the person as the starting point, bringing the person's inner world of experiences into our view of science. Existentialists pose fundamental questions about existence: who am I? Is there meaning in life? Is life worth living? Second, to be human means to exercise free will, to make choices, to pursue goals, to act

> authentically. Third, existentialists focus on the immediate experiences of a person's daily existence, on what is called being-in-the-world. (p. 41)

Studying school shootings from an existential perspective suggests a starting point which has so far been neglected in studies of school shootings, namely the "inner world of experiences" of the perpetrators. In other words, the starting point of this study is how school shooters experience their "being-in-the-world" (see Heidegger, 1927) and what meaning they assign to their lives and consequently to their deeds and possible deaths. The issue of meaning is where existentialism as understood in this study intersects with religion.

The term *religion* or *religious* in the context of this study does not refer to to a belief system which implies a metaphysical power or a God. In other words, I am not searching for the role religion - understood traditionally - plays in the genesis of school shootings, nor is it my intention to identify school shootings as religious violence. My search concerns one of the various aspects of *lived religion*, namely what Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) defined as the broader field of spiritual and existential practices, including phenomena which are not explicitly interpreted as being of a religious nature. I am aware of other understandings of *lived religion* and will discuss these and my chosen aspect in Chapter 6.

The process of identifying and analyzing existential concerns of school shooters aims to understand what meaning the school shooters give to their lives and ultimately to their deeds. Certainly there are multiple theoretical approaches by which to attain this goal, but Bailey's (1997) concept of *implicit religion* is the most appropriate hermeneutic tool in the study of these phenomena. The reason for this choice is, as Schnell (2007) noticed, that the theory of implicit religiosity is grounded in psychology:

> Psychology is the science of human cognition, behaviour and experience. It thus covers a broad range of phenomena, be they social or individual, behavioural, or attitudinal, central or peripheral. However, the emphasis is on the individual's perception of the world, and the effects of these influences on the person. (p. 87)

That Bailey uses the term implicit *religion* could be confusing to some readers. Religion or religious in his conception must not be necessarily understood as traditionally religious and no metaphysical power or God has to be involved. A definition of this traditional kind would be especially misleading in the study of implicit religion. Schnell (2007) argued that many scholars today have come to the insight that there is no single definition of what religion or religious is, hence the context and aim of a study establishes the definition. In Chapter 6, I will further discuss the concept of implicit religion and its function as hermeneutical tool.

Gaps in the analyses of school shootings discussed so far lead us to the second subquestion of this study:

> *What existential concerns can we find in autobiographical expressions of school shooters and to what extent can school shootings be understood as a meaning-giving construct in the sense of implicit religion?*

The term *autobiographical expression* concerns autobiographical writing, such as diaries, (suicide) letters, manifestos and videos. Presser defined these kinds of expressions as *egodocuments*. The writer is continuously present in the text as the writing and describing subject, and in the case of the present study, the

expressions somehow are related to the school shooting. The analysis of egodocuments leads to a certain understanding of the existential concerns; however, it also leaves uncertainties and lacunas. In these documents, school shooters express experiences. One can analyze the words and sentences but will never experience what the other experiences. Holding this in mind, to get a firmer grip on the existential dimension and the possible role they play in the genesis of a school shooting, I used existing concepts for my analyses. Regarding the question whether school shooters express existential concerns in egodocuments, I used Yalom's (1980) concept that existential concerns are related to the view of life and death, the freedom of the individual and the responsibility for one's actions, the awareness that one is fundamentally alone, and the problem of meaning. Koole, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2006) developed Yalom's concept and added a fifth existential concern to death, isolation, freedom, and meaning, namely identity. These five existential concerns are addressed in the analyses of the egodocuments.

Existential concerns can provoke an existential crisis and urge us to pursue a quest for meaning (Wong & Fry, 1998). In consequence, confrontation with an existential crisis precipitates the search for a meaning-giving construct. In Chapter 6, it is assumed that, following an existential crisis, school shooters are searching for meaning in life and in this process develop a number of narratives, behaviors and experiences which not only justify their deed but also create the idea that they have to do it. To understand to what extent school shootings function as a meaning-giving construct to the perpetrators, I again used Bailey's (1997) concept of implicit religion as well as Schnell's (2004) method to identify the meaning giving function of school shootings. When *meaning* is addressed in this context, it refers to the ways people experience or generate meaning in their lives. Yalom (1980) points out that life can be considered meaningful in both a cosmic and a personal sense. According to Schnell (2012, p. 7):

> The expression “meaning of life” is typically used to denote the significance of life on a cosmic scale, from a God’s eye point of view. In contrast to this, “meaning in life” refers to the ways people experience or generate meaning in their lives. It is this personal meaning that is assessed, described and analysed in empirical research on meaning in life. In applying the above mentioned philosophical definition of meaning to “meaning in life,” the subjective character of life meaning is highlighted. Regardless of the object meaning is attributed to - be it a matter, a person, an experience, or life in general - the act of ascribing meaning is inherently subjective. (p. 7)

In applying this concept, I have to take into consideration that it is extremely difficult, maybe even impossible, to scientifically gather knowledge about factors constituting the *meaning in life* of a person, for the simple reason that this is not controllable. A subjective experience, as for example the existential concern of being mortal, can never be reduced to a measurable process. Consequently, an expression of an experience is nothing more than a static picture, a glimpse into the soul of school shooters, and the researcher has to consider that the living person eludes him or her. For that very reason, the responsibility of the researcher is to be as thorough and inquisitive as possible. Presenting the outcomes of my analyses as indisputable facts would imply a claim of grasping the dynamics of different factors constituting personal experiences, and therefore of understanding the other better than he does himself. On this issue, Tolstaya (2013) writes that the researcher should be conscious of the fact that, even when one analyzes egodocuments, the essence,

the "man in the man"[2] will elude the reader. In other words, the living person is "more" than the author. This is why personal experience depends on various stimuli in any given situation and is therefore literally unlimited. With this Tolstaya suggests that

> man must be seen in his totality, i.e. in his reality, to be able to understand him as man. Essential to this reality is that the core should not be conceived of as something static, but is incorporated in the movement of life. (p. 4)

In relation to the existential concerns, it is important to distinguish author and living person. The latter has "more roles, facets and activities and is therefore always 'more' than an author" (p. 22). Regarding the present study, it has to be argued that the existential dimension of a person cannot be deduced purely from his texts. An expression of an existential concern is nothing more than a static picture, a glimpse into the soul of school shooters. Following Tolstaya, this does not mean that one cannot interpret the egodocuments according to existing concepts or theories. However, it has to be taken into account that despite the amount of text one reads, videos one watches and expressions one analyzes, one can never fully understand the whole person. Regarding the understanding of the *meaning in life* of school shooters, I followed Tolstaya, who says regarding the understanding Dostoevsky's religiosity attained by studying his writing, even his egodocuments:

[2] Tolstaya derives this notion from F.M. Dostoevsky; cf. Tolstaya (2013), 3.

> The religious, or "the man in man," as far as it refers to God, continues to elude the reader both in the novels and in the ego documents. Partly for this reason I have defended the need to introduce the formal entity of the living person as being "more" than the author, particularly as regards religious faith. The formal openness of the character (his place in the dialogue of the novel's world) and his intrinsic incompleteness ("the man in man," the religious) do not mean that a reader can interpret him according to concepts or theories external to the novel, and certainly not according to his own religious concepts. But the glass fragments in the novelistic kaleidoscope have their source in Dostoevsky's kaleidoscope. (p. 39)

Although the aim of my study is not to understand the religious faith of the school shooters, Tolstaya's thoughts on the extent to which we can attain full understanding of individuals' existential experiences from egodocuments are also applicable to the existential concerns and implicit religion as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Even if the shooters express their deepest feelings and experiences in their egodocuments, I was not able to talk to them personally. Tolstaya addressed this problem using the metaphor of a *kaleidoscope*. Every little glass disc contributes to the whole picture. Every twist of the kaleidoscope changes this picture. The variations are endless. One thought or feeling, although expressed by the person himself, never represents the whole person and his existential dimension. In theory, a moment later, the person can think or feel the opposite. Analyzing the egodocuments of school shooters, the researcher must be aware that the egodocuments themselves are not the living

person, but constitute only glass fragments in his kaleidoscope. According to Tolstaya (2013),

> The image of the kaleidoscope has a methodological function: the number of glass fragments in the kaleidoscope is limited, the combinations in the kaleidoscope are infinite in time. In exactly the same way the number of characters in the novels [or for my investigation the number of people surrounding a school shooter, B.P] is limited, but the consequences of their inter-human relations are infinite. It is important in this image that the kaleidoscope is in motion, whereas in my study I need to stop the kaleidoscope in order to describe the glass fragments. (p. xviii)

Looking through the kaleidoscope, however, is not only purely to describe what you see but also constantly to ask yourself whether what you see is really what you think you see. The researcher has to observe facts and details about the egodocument, notice rhetorical features and structural elements. Moreover, he or she has to be aware of lacunas in an egodocument (for example in a text), has to notice things that are confusing, and has to address this in the analyses. In this study, I analyze only autobiographical materials (texts and video fragments) in which the school shooters refer to their crime. This means that I am concentrating only on a part of the whole picture. Using different concepts and methods means that at some point I turn the kaleidoscope. But I have to be aware of the fact that "the man in the man" will always elude me. The kaleidoscope functions as a certain reflective adjustment to the concepts and theories I use in Chapter 5.

Another issue has to be accounted for in this introductory section. A major problem in research of school shootings is posed by the relatively small number of school shooters and consequently the restricted amount of data. Perhaps because of this, research comparing school shootings and other attacks with a surface resemblance to them is very rare, while research comparing the existential dimension of the perpetrators' motives is non-existent. Particularly relevant in this regard are so-called lone wolves[3]. This is a missed opportunity to enlarge our body of knowledge, for despite the distinctions, school shooters and lone wolf terrorists resemble one another in several ways:

- They plan and execute high-impact violent acts.
- A majority of them act solitarily.
- They often leave manifestos or videos, mostly as Internet postings.

By making a clear distinction between lone wolves and school shooters, researchers such as Bakker and de Graaf (2010) run the risk that important information for our understanding of their crimes remains unknown. This, therefore, leads us to the third subquestion of this study:

> *To what extent can we find relevant common themes in egodocuments of perpetrators of lethal violence comparable to school shootings, to add to our understanding of school shootings?*

[3] Lone wolves individually carry out terroristic attacks, without belonging to an organized terrorist network. They develop their own ideology or are influenced by existing ideologies and beliefs (Spaaij, 2010).

1.2 Purpose of the study

The proposed study has a twofold aim. First, it has a theoretical purpose: the study is exploring a new reading of the motives of school shooters and seeks to contribute to scholarly research by addressing the lack of school shooting studies examining the existential dimension of the perpetrators' motives. This will enlarge the body of knowledge and therefore will contribute to prevention possibilities. Second, it has a purpose for the practice of professionals: the study can make professionals in education aware of misperceptions about school shooters and helps them identify potential school shooters by adding the existential dimension to the warning signs. The study also addresses the importance of making existential concerns a topic in education and aims to offer a theoretical framework for educational professionals. Teachers should realize that if they are neglecting the troubled student today, they could be overlooking the school shooter of tomorrow. In the following, I show that neglecting the existential dimension in the genesis of a school shooting unavoidably leads to misunderstandings, stereotyping and even stigmatizing young people who possibly fit popular perceptions of school shooters. By means of content analyses, the veil of the existential dimension of school shootings will be lifted. Adding the results of this study to the existing body of knowledge will thus be a significant contribution to prevention possibilities.

1.3 Method and approach

This study is structured in four Parts. In each the aim has been to connect empirical data and observations and theory, taking a different starting point each time. Various methods were used to approach the problem from different angles. In Part One, the reasons for the study, the problem addressed, the scope, relevance and purpose are discussed. A conceptualization of school shootings

and an overview of relevant theory is presented. The literature survey determines what scholars so far have argued concerning the motivations of school shooters. What the study shows is that the theoretical argumentation does not provide an unambiguous answer, and, more strikingly, some findings even contradict each other. Because the theoretical examination did not help to fully illuminate what motivates the school shooter, popular perceptions of the phenomenon are examined to determine if they can bring more insight into the motives of the perpetrators.

As already discussed in the present Chapter, the media often draw a picture of the typical school shooter which does not match theoretical findings. To determine what these popular perceptions are, 142 teachers, students and parents from Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and the U.S.A. were questioned, which is discussed in Part Two. As popular perceptions are closely related to the audience reception of media portrayals, a two-step approach was chosen to identify important shooters' characteristics according to popular perceptions. In the first step, a list of popular perceptions was compiled. This list was based on media coverage of school shootings in the past two decades.

In the second step, these popular perceptions were ranked to assess the relative importance attributed to them by the audience. To do so, these perceptions were administered digitally to an international panel of individuals in school-related settings. After identifying popular perceptions, they were compared with statistical facts to discover misunderstandings and stereotypes. As popular perception is not only influenced by the media but also by popular

culture, it was explored how popular culture[4] interprets school shootings by analyzing fiction movies with this topic. The analysis of the films, which involved hours of watching and re-watching six movies, was performed by three researchers: Ruard Ganzevoort, Professor of Practical Theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Roel Blanken, a student of Ganzevoort; and the present author. We opted for theoretical selection to maximize heterogeneity of the movies, which are the following:

- *Bang Bang You're Dead*, 2006, USA, director Guy Ferland;
- *Elephant*, 2003, USA, director Gus van Sant;
- *Heart of America*, 2002, Germany, director Uwe Boll;
- *Home Room*, 2002, USA, director Paul Ryan;
- *Ihr könnt euch niemals sicher sein*, 2008, Germany, director Nicole Weegmann;
- *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, 2011, USA, director Lynne Ramsay.

The model used was based on a film analysis model by Vos (2004), Plate's filmmaking-worldmaking model (2008) and Ganzevoort's analysis model of narrative structures in films (2005). We combined elements of all three models for the content analyses.

The results of Parts One and Two show that not only the theoretical approaches lead to ambiguous interpretations of shootings but also popular

[4] For purposes of this study, popular culture is defined as "cultural commodities and experiences produced by the culture industry and marketed to mass audiences" (Papke, 2007, p. 1226).

perceptions and popular culture interpret the phenomena differently. Therefore, it was decided to "question" the school shooter himself about his motives. Because it was impossible to interview school shooters directly[5], egodocuments of school shooters are explored in Part Three using content analyses, and expressions of existential concerns are defined and interpreted. School shooters were selected based on differing contexts of the educational system as well as differences in age and social circumstances of the perpetrator. Moreover, it was essential that trustworthy material could be found and that the amount of material was extensive enough to make valid analysis. The selection process resulted in the following cases:

- Luke Woodham, age 16, Mississippi, USA, 1997, Pearl High School; killed his mother and two students at school; serving three life terms and an additional 140 years in prison.

- Kipland Kinkel, age 15, Oregon, USA, 1998, Thurston High School; after killing his parents, shooter killed two people at school; serving a 111-year sentence without parole.

- Eric Harris, age 18, and Dylan Klebold, age 18, Colorado, USA, 1999, Columbine High School; 13 people killed; both shooters committed suicide.

- Sebastian Bosse, age 18, Germany, Europe, 2006, Geschwister Scholl Schule, Emsdetten; five people injured by firearm; he also had lit

[5] Some perpetrators are deceased or are imprisoned. Because of the young age of the perpetrators, the law is very strict about their privacy. Perpetrators who are released from prison have gotten a new identity.

several smoke bombs and had explosives strapped to his body; shooter committed suicide.

- Seung-Hui Cho, age 23, Virginia, USA, 2007, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg; 32 people killed; shooter committed suicide.

- Pekka-Eric Auvinen, age 18, Finland, Europe, 2007, Jokela High School, Tuusula; eight people killed; shooter committed suicide.

To identify expressions of existential concerns, methods of quantitative content analyses were used to assess frequency and weight (Bortz & Döring, 2006). This led to an assessment of the relative importance of the various concerns for the perpetrators. Moreover, traces of implicit religion in these existential expressions are examined. I used directed content analyses to shed more light on the existential dimension of the motives of school shooters, gathering the expressions of the various existential concerns and making a summary of content. In addition, I selected the phrases that appeared most typical as examples in order to identify a relation between implicit religion and school shootings, with particular attention to religious terminology in shooters' language use. Using Schnell's (2004) method of indicating implicit religion, the three aspects of personal myth, personal rituals and transcendent experiences were identified in the school shooters' egodocuments.

Comparing various perspectives of theory, popular perception/culture and adding the perspective of existential concerns and implicit religion have led to new insights into the motives of school shooters. The question arises over how far these findings apply to comparable perpetrators. Can a comparison lead to a further deepening of our understanding of school shootings or maybe even to new insights into comparable phenomena? In Part Four, I compared egodocuments, such as suicide letters or manifestos, of school shooters and so-called lone wolf terrorists as the most comparable perpetrators to deepen our

understanding of school shootings. Lone wolves individually carry out terroristic attacks, without belonging to an organized terrorist group or network, and their method of attack is directed by themselves and not by any outside hierarchy (Spaaij, 2010). For this comparison, I used the outcome of my analyses of the existential concerns and implicit religion of school shooters as presented in Chapters 5 and 6 and selected five cases. Moreover, I selected three cases of lone wolves for which an adequate amount of trustworthy material was available, aiming for heterogeneity in terms of cultural contexts and assumed motives. The selected cases of lone wolves are the following:

- Anders Breivik, Utøya attack, July 22, 2011.
- Elliot Rodger, California, Isla Vista mass shooting, May 23, 2014.
- Larossi Abballa, France, Magnanville, June 13, 2016.

I analyzed the egodocuments to find common themes. To this end, I used "techniques to identify themes" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), which means that to identify themes I asked the question, "What is this expression an example of?" The more the same concept occurs in a text, the more likely it is to be a theme. Part Four also presents a conclusion and recommendations. The targeted audience for the recommendations consists not only of professionals in an educational context but everyone who deals with youths. Because the topic is approached from different disciplines, theoretical frameworks and methods are presented in each chapter as needed.

With the purpose and set-up of this study made clear, it is now time to turn to its relevance. Consequently, the following section discusses why it is important to identify the existential dimension of school shootings.

1.4 Relevance of this study

School shootings are shocking and disturbing, and rightly cause great fear among parents, teachers and students. Every case gets extensive media coverage and provokes public discussion about the cause of such terrible crimes. After the 1999 Columbine shooting, the question of who to blame was frequently discussed in political and societal debates. On the one hand, pro-weapon parties have argued that teachers should wear guns to be able to protect children against active shooters. On the other hand, anti-weapon parties blamed easy access to firearms as a cause for these events. For the public, it was a terrifying idea that the boy next door could be capable of killing peers and teachers. As a result, different institutions and people were made scapegoats. For one, the educational system was blamed for not attending to the problem of bullying at school. Some people argued that violent computer games inspire the youth to become murderers. Musicians like the German band Rammstein[6] and Marilyn Manson[7] have been blamed for promoting violence and school shootings in particular. The latter has especially been criticized, due to the myth that the Columbine shooters were part of Goth subculture. To support these allegations, rumors and myths were passed around: after the Columbine shooting, the media reported that the shooters were fans of Marilyn Manson, were dressed like him and wore typical Manson make-up during the shooting. In fact, it became clear from the police reports that neither were the shooters dressed like goths nor were they

[6] *Rammstein* is a German metal band. Their music style is a combination of progressive metal and techno with Gothic-influences.

[7] Marilyn Manson is the lead singer of the identically named Marilyn Manson band. His name (a pseudonym) is a combination of Marilyn Monroe and Charles Manson. He gave himself the title “antichrist superstar.”

wearing make-up of any kind. Moreover, Eric and Dylan are even known to have disliked Manson's music.

In the aftermath of Columbine, parents were frightened to leave their children at school. Students whose appearance fit the image some people had of typical school shooters were stigmatized as weird and potentially dangerous. As I am going to show, popular perceptions of the causes of school shootings, such as playing violent computer games or extensive bullying, are mostly based on myths, rumors and biases and differ from scientifically-based arguments. To overcome these assumptions which lead to polarization and can hinder prevention, it is important to provide empirically-based information to the broader public. Studying the existential aspects of school shooting will produce knowledge to counterweigh prevailing misconceptions and prejudices on this subject, knowledge which is essential in the prevention of school shootings because the more we know, the better we can recognize warning signals, interpret themes, and turn them into prevention acts. Recognizing warning signals of troubled students must be part of the practice of every teacher. The answers to the three subquestions presented previously will be of crucial influence - for example, for the way we set up school curricula for teacher education and the way we build future teachers' competence in recognizing signals.

A school shooting is breaking news across the world within minutes. The main question the media always asked in their wake is why the shootings happened. The other question often asked in the aftermath is how we can prevent these attacks. Searching for answers to these questions, studies of school shootings have been conducted in a variety of disciplines, including sociology, psychology and criminology. Notably, studies from a perspective which concerns the existential questions of the perpetrators, their world-view and the meaning they give to their deed are lacking. Academic Practical theology addresses not just traditionally understood religious topics, but also

existential questions such as the meaning of life and death and the occurrence of and response to evil, also in a secular context. However, an approach addressing the existential dimension of youth violence or school shootings is yet to be developed. This is a striking observation in view of the many existential questions from different angles that are raised while studying this phenomenon. Existential questions are posed not only of the perpetrator, but also of the surviving family members and their society. Indeed, school shootings touch the individual person as well as society as a whole. Neglect of the existential dimension can result in social polarization, desperation about norms and values, and also, as argued in this study, in violence. The present study explores the implicit religious dimension of school shootings in order to understand the meaning of these events. It is suggested that a practical theological perspective is indispensable and urgently needed in the fervent academic and societal debates on school shootings.

1.5 Definition of the term school shooting

As argued in the previous section, it is important to consider the existential dimension of the underlying causes of school shootings, thus adding this missing perspective to the academic and societal discussion on the topic. Such is the purpose of the present study. In the Chapter 2, I present an overview of existing theories about the causes of school shootings. But before it is possible to discuss these theories properly, it is necessary to define the term *school shooting* more precisely. This is important because neither in public nor in academic discussion is the term sharply delineated. To date, while the term *school shooting* seems clear at first sight, it is primarily a pragmatic label with little theoretical content. Moreover, the term *school shooting* as used in the media overlaps with other concepts. Incidents of extreme violence at school are referred to in the media by all of the following terms: serial murder, spree

killing, mass murder, amok or indeed school shooting. Each of these terms carries specific elements of meaning. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a short overview of these concepts to finally come to a precise and usable definition for this study.

The first two concepts to be discussed, serial murder and spree killing, are related to the concept of serial killer. The term *serial murder* is mostly used when one or more perpetrator(s) commit(s) two or more murders, Jack the Ripper and Ted Bundy being well-known examples. Most of the definitions also presuppose a period of time between the murders. This break in time distinguishes *mass murder* from serial murder. A required temporal (and often also spatial) separation between the different serial murders is described as separate occasions interspersed with cooling-off periods (Morton, 2005).

When there is no cooling-off period between the murders, the term *spree killing* applies. This typically involves multiple locations within a limited time frame. An example is the 2011 attack by Anders Breivik, who killed eight persons in an Oslo bombing and on the same day went on to shoot 69 young people on the island of Utøya.

The next notion, already briefly noted above, is *mass murder*. It is usually defined as the killing of three or more persons during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders. These incidents involve a single location in an on-going event (Holmes & Holmes, 1998). An example is the 2011 shooting in a Dutch shopping mall by Tristan van der Vlis, who killed seven people before committing suicide.

The differences between the three terms therefore relate to time and place: *mass murder* implies a single location and single event; *spree killing* multiple locations and a single (extended) event; *serial murder* multiple events and often multiple locations. Most school shootings fall in the categories of spree killing or mass murder. However, it must be stressed that there is

absolutely no consensus about the definition of a school shooting and the underlying phenomena.

What further obscures the picture is that in German academic discussions extreme violence at schools committed by youths has been framed in an entirely different discourse. Here the key term *amok* is not criminological but cultural-psychiatric in origin. Amok has its roots in the Malaysian word *amuk* which means furious or evil minded (Lübbert, 2002). Colonial officials from the 16th century reported that Malaysian warriors rushed at hostile troops, shouting "amuk" and trying to kill as many people as possible, sacrificing their own lives. In the 19th century, interest in this by psychologists grew and amok became classified as a psychiatric condition rather than a typical phenomenon from Malaysian culture.

By the middle of the 20th century, this psychiatric condition was observed in almost every country. Culture was seen as a factor that determined how the phenomenon of amok manifested itself, but not whether or not it occurred (Teoh, 1972). Amok was then defined as an attack-like event with four phases: depressive discontent, sudden attack, random killing of mostly arbitrary victims without a motive, and memory loss (Vogl, 2004). The presence of depressive discontent and memory loss led many psychiatrics to believe that amok is a mental health issue, offering a different perspective to the understanding of school shootings.

Adler (2000), however, argued that memory loss is only observed in a few cases of amok. He used four criteria to differentiate amok from other violent offences. First, amok leads to at least one death or could have done so if no external circumstances would have obstructed the deed. Second, amok leads to suicide of the perpetrator or his killing by another person, or at least the perpetrator seriously takes into account the possibility that he can be killed. Third, amok starts as an impulsive deed, and the offence has homicidal and

suicidal elements. Last, the fourth criterion, according to Adler, is that amok has no political, ethnic, religious or criminal motives. This cultural-psychiatric perspective may highlight some aspects of school shootings; however, it only partially applies to them. The first and major difference is that school shooters plan their crimes over a long period (O'Toole, 2002). Moreover, between 1974 and 2002, only 20% of perpetrators committed suicide, while no perpetrator to date was killed by another person during or directly after the crime.[8] Remarkably, though, since 2003, the number of school shootings ending in a suicide has increased to nearly 65%. The terms *serial murder*, *spree killing*, *mass murder* and *amok* are often used in the public discussion to indicate a school shooting. As mentioned above, the academic concepts of these events do not entirely correspond to school shootings. So let us now examine academic definitions of school shootings. Researchers apply different definitions of *school shootings*, depending on the discipline they work in. They set their own specific explicatory priorities such as socio-demographics, medication, or institutional factors.

The term *school shooting* is by now established as a pragmatic label to describe extreme youth violence at schools, both in popular media and in scientific studies (O'Toole, 1999). The generally accepted definition is the following: A school shooting takes place on a school-related public stage before an audience; involves multiple victims targeted randomly; involves one or more shooters who are (former) students of the school (Newman, Fox, Harding, Metha, & Roth, 2004).

The term *shooter* shows that in this definition a school shooting is defined in part by the use of firearms. However, this definition seems to exclude

[8] These percentages are based on data from 75 school shootings: 62 in the USA, 4 in Germany, 4 in Canada and 5 in other countries.

incidents such as Ansbach, Germany. In September 2009, an 18-year-old student attacked students at his high school with an axe after throwing Molotov cocktails into the classroom. Several aspects of this incident are relevant to the study of school shootings. However, it happened at a school before an audience; the perpetrator was a student; he made multiple (nine) random victims; and he planned and announced his crime.[9] These incidents cannot be excluded only because the choice of weapon differs so that no "shooting" occurred. The scientific literature therefore rightly classifies these events as school shootings. In contrast, gang-related shootings at a school or a shooting because of an interpersonal conflict would fit most elements of the definition, except for the crucial fact that the victims are chosen specifically rather than targeted randomly. These crimes are therefore usually not included when speaking of school shootings. Therefore, the definition as chosen in this study is the following:

> *A school shooting is an armed attack on a school location by youths who have the aim to kill randomly school-related persons without a concern over the loss of their own lives. This implies that the victims are attacked because of their school function (student, teacher, head master, etc.) and not because of personal or criminal motives.*

This finally gives us a definition as a basis for this study and makes it possible to look in an unambiguous way at the various theories concerning the causes of school shootings. From Chapter 5 onward, I complement these theories with the perspective of the existential dimension of school shootings.

[9] Although planning and announcing the killing is not a part of the definition, it is observed in all known cases of school shootings (O'Toole, 2002).

2 The genesis of school shootings according to theoretical approaches

The definitions and descriptors given so far already suggest that school shootings share a common pattern. Beyond this common pattern, however, the more interesting exploration perhaps concerns what causes school shootings. For many it is not acceptable just to think that an angry young man went into a school to kill. For them, this would make what has happened even more meaningless. Instead, they speculate that there has to be some greater reason why these rampages have occurred, such as bullying, mental illness, or the impact on individuals of certain aspects of Western society, or popular culture. The media often fuel these speculations. This has resulted in different theories of what causes these events. A brief summary of empirical findings will lead us to theoretical concepts, including socialization, cultural scripts of masculinity, and the biographical, psychodynamic background of shooters. These theories can be divided into two approaches. One approach accounts for individual causes for these events, while the other studies social causes. In the next section, theories of social causes and theories of individual causes are discussed in turn. However, the aim of this section is not to assess the applicability of the various theories to actual school shooters' characteristics. Primarily, it is meant to demonstrate different perspectives for understanding school shooters. Importantly, this overview of personal and social causes, which is in part an adaption of the article "Assessing popular perceptions of school shootings in light of prevention possibilities" (Pfeifer & Ganzevoort, in preparation), will also demonstrate that some findings of empirical studies contradict others.

2.1 Theories of social causes

Theories of the social causes of school shootings have concentrated on the cultural script of (hyper) masculinity, bullying and social isolation, family structures and the role of the Internet and video gaming have been put forward. The number of theories discussed here has been narrowed down to those discussed most frequently which also have a link to school shootings, starting with the theory of the cultural script of (hyper) masculinity.

Most school shooters are male and the majority of school shootings take place in Western society (Langman, 2009). Because the development of gender identity is linked to the context where this development takes place (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani & Seaton, 2004), the role of masculinity in Western society is often a topic of discussion when it comes to the cause of school shootings. Many theorists argue that the acceptance or even glorification of violent behavior has become a status quo in Western society. According to Myrttinen (2003),

> weapons are part of one notion of masculinity, a militarized view that equates "manliness" with the "sanctioned use of aggression, force and violence." Weapons are used as status symbols but also as tools to achieve economic and social gains, wielding power over unarmed males and females. This can often be linked to a crisis of masculinity, when there is a "fear of loss of male power and privilege" through social transformations, leading to a backlash in which "traditional" gender roles are reinforced. The construct of the male warrior/protector relies on the suppression of others - including competing concepts of masculinity. Weapons

> and their public display seek to underline the "manly" prowess of the bearer. (p. 37)

Extremely violent behavior by the "hero" is typical of Hollywood movies and other forms of popular culture. This violent behavior, if on the part of the hero, is never depicted as aggression, but as a means of defending what is worth fighting for. This message that violence is masculine and danger is exciting leads to a concept of hypermasculinity (Spencer et al., 2004). As may be expected, this view on masculinity also influences male youth. In order to be a popular kid, one has to be good at sports, strong and dominant. Bullying others is one way to demonstrate masculinity and superiority. Boys who do not possess these characteristics can have the feeling that they are failing at attaining manhood (Newman, 2013), especially when they are also teased as being gay, as was the case with a number of school shooters. Kimmel and Mahler (2003) found that nearly every perpetrator in their study had been confronted with insinuations of being gay. Following the theory that the cultural script of hypermasculinity causes school shootings, it can be argued that the perpetrators deliberately choose an act of brutal violence, associated with masculinity, as response to what they logically perceived as attacks on their masculinity. Gilligan (1996) similarly observes that violence has its origin in "the fear of shame and ridicule, and the overbearing need to prevent others from laughing at oneself by making them weep instead" (p. 77). When shame and vulnerability threaten one's self-image, one's identity, violence can be seen as offering redemption from this threat and can function as restoration of the masculinity one wants to experience.

As argued above, bullying others is one way to demonstrate masculinity. Conversely, however, being the victim of bullying and social isolation is also often discussed as a cause of school shootings. It appears that school shooters often felt socially isolated (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999) and

approximately one third of the shooters studied (Vossekuil et al., 2002) considered themselves loners. Moreover, school shooters often seem to be victims of teasing and bullying (Leary, Kowalski, Smith & Philips, 2003; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002). According to Clarke and Kiselica (1997), victims of bullying experience isolation and loss of self-esteem. The consequences are often a higher level of depression, even in adulthood. Many studies confirm that being the victim of bullying has a negative effect on children's psychosocial development. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that effects of bullying play a role in the motives for school shootings. In fact, many researchers argue that bullying and rejection by peers are the most important factors involved (Dodson, 2009). Bullying may be a common experience of school shooters, then, but empirical studies have also demonstrated that there are examples of school shooters who were popular students, with many friends, while other school shooters were bullies themselves (Sommer, Leuschner, & Scheithauer, 2014; O'Toole, 1999). As a result, it must be concluded that bullying cannot be the only crucial factor in the genesis of a school shooting (Thompson & Kyle, 2005; Langman, 2009).

The following theory is built on the notion of reinforcements and gratification and is inspired by Rational Choice Theory: "The aim of violence is understood as gaining status, possessions, or power" (Ganzevoort, 2006). Tedeschi and Felson (1995) developed a social-interactionist theory in which violence serves specific social purposes. Ganzevoort (2006) summarized these purposes as influencing others to achieve something; expressing grievances and establishing subjective justice; and enhancing or defending social identities. These purposes are expressed by many school shooters in their videos and suicide letters. They also seem to think that the shooting will yield them power and control or even fame. In this light a school shooting may be interpreted as *purposeful behaviour*, because it is directed to attain a particular and recognized goal (Cziko, 1992). Ganzevoort (2006) suggested that "the decision-making

process resulting in coercive actions is influenced by the position of power, the cost-benefit analysis, and the use of alcohol". This notion of power is reflected in Dylan Klebold's yearbook, in which Eric Harris had drawn a gunman among many dead bodies and written down the words "The only reason you are still alive is because someone has decided to let you live." This decision about others' lives implies an infinite dominance. Among these social interactionist motives, one can also count the outright condescending philosophical views on the nature of mankind that some shooters put forward as the reason behind their vengeful deeds.

Besides (hyper) masculinity and bullying, the family structures and shooters' relationship with their parents especially are often seen as important factors in the process of becoming a school shooter (Twemlow, 2003; Fox & Levin, 2005). O'Toole (1999) argued that a lack of familiarity and empathy is typical for families of school shooters. Also, parents of school shooters seem to fail at setting boundaries. But this view, too, is contradicted by other researchers who point out that shooters come from a variety of family situations. Two thirds came from two-parent families with active ties to the community, while some come from foster homes with histories of neglect (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Heath High School (Kentucky) shooter Michael Carneal, for example, had loving parents who were married for 26 years at the time of the shooting. His friends often visited Michael at home, and they were always welcome to join the family dinner (Newman, 2004).

Family structure as an isolated factor seems unrelated to school shootings. Nevertheless, parents of school shooters are often blamed in the media. In the majority of the cases, the parents do not speak with the media. However, there are some exceptions - for example, the parents of then 18-year-old Pekka-Eric Auvinen, who in 2007 killed eight people at a school in Finland and afterwards committed suicide. Pekka-Eric's parents expressed their

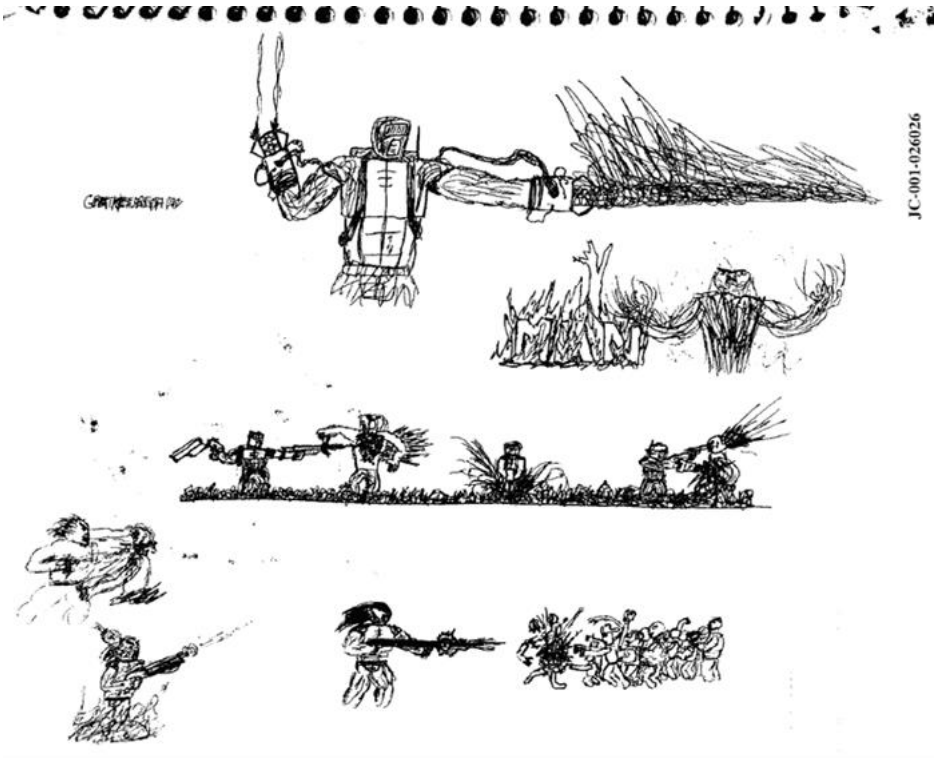
unconditional love for their son in numerous interviews, excepting his horrible deed. They always tell that they did not recognize the problems their son seemed to have because he was nice and kind at home.[10]

As mentioned before, school shootings get an enormous amount of media attention. The media themselves, in fact, have also been suggested as cause for school shootings. In the following theory, media attention and particularly the Internet cause school shootings because of the *copycat effect.* Philips, a sociologist, was the first who suggested that massive media attention for suicide could increase the number of suicides. He called this copycat phenomena the *Werther effect* (Phillips, 1974) after the main character of the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* written by Goethe in 1774. In the novel, the youthful Werther falls in love with Charlotte, who is already engaged to another man. Because of the fact that he will never be able to be together with Charlotte, Werther sees no other choice but to take his own life. He puts on a blue coat and a yellow vest, sits down by his desk and shoots himself at precisely the eleventh hour. In the years after publishing this novel, many young people copied Werther's death, shooting themselves in the same clothes with an open copy of the novel next to them on a desk. For a while the book was even banned in several European countries for this reason. Phillips discovered that copy-suicides are a reality also in modern times; for example, Marilyn Monroe's suicide caused an increase of more than 10 percent of the suicide rate the following month (Halgin & Withbourne, 2006). Regarding school shootings, there are a number of indications they may also be triggered by a copycat effect. For example, in 1996, 14-year-old Barry Loukaitis killed two students and a math teacher. According to court records, witnesses say that he

[10] An example of an interview with Pekka-Eric's parents can be watched in the Dutch documentary PEKKA made by Alexander Oey in 2014.

ended the shooting, saying, “This sure beats algebra, doesn’t it?” (Eagan, 1998). This expression comes directly from the novel *Rage* by Stephen King, which was published under the pseudonym Richard Bachman and is about a student killing his teacher and holding students hostages. This shooting got high media attention worldwide, and Robertz (2004) suggested that this might elicit further shootings.

Part Three of this study shows that school shooters also often refer to prior shootings in their autobiographical texts. Especially the Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold seem to be some sort of a role model. This brings us to a relevant commonality of school shootings: They are never a spontaneous act and usually involve elaborate preparation. During this period of planning, the perpetrator almost always announces his plans (O’Toole, 2002; Pollak, 2008; Vossekuil et al., 2002). This is called leaking. Leaking can be indirect, for example in the form of school essays, drawings, wearing particular clothes, or presenting themselves with weapons on video clips.



Drawing in a journal of Eric Harris, one of the Columbine shooters.[11]

It can also be direct, as for example in threats on social media, suicide letters, videos, or manifestos (O'Toole, 2002). The Internet and especially YouTube plays an important role in leaking. Several school shooters actively posted messages on YouTube prior to their crime (Oksanen, Hawdon & Räsänen, 2014). These expressions contain statements about existential themes such as life and death, love and hate, isolation and the struggle with their identity which can help us to understand the crux of their motives. These expressions have a wide range, from the seemingly trivial "I don't like

[11] Retrieved from

< http://www.acolumbinesite.com/eric/writing/journal/journal25.html>.

Mondays" of Brenda Spencer (Grover Cleveland Elementary School shooting, 1979, San Diego) to the embittered words of Sebastian Bosse (Geschwister Scholl school shooting, 2006, Germany):

> What is the meaning of life then? Nothing! So you have to give meaning to your life, and that is not what I do when I crawl around an overpaid boss' ass or have myself fucked by fascists who want to tell me we live in a state governed by the people. No, for me there is still one way to give meaning to my life, and I will not waste it like all the others before! (Bosse, 2006).

Neither the media attention nor the Internet but violent video games are assigned as cause for school shootings in the next theory. Twemlow (2000) refers to the Columbine killers as possibly inspired by violent videogames, *Doom* specifically. This relates to another type of explanation for school shootings, that is, social learning theories. Bandura (1973) claimed that aggression results from the learning process called behavior modeling. In this view, violence is not innate or the result of injurious experiences of the individual but is modeled on others, either personally or through media, culture and environment. An important factor in this is the belief of the perpetrators that aggression produces power and control, such as the reduction of tension, financial rewards, praise by others, or self-esteem

Social learning theories still play a significant role in discussions about violence, with Grossman (1996), for example, arguing that so-called shooting games or killer-games serve to overcome the perpetrator's hesitation to kill. Research, however, shows that watching violence on television affects only a limited number of individuals (Kunczik & Zipfel, 2002; Tedeschi & Felson, 1995) and Ferguson (2008) concluded that "no significant relationship between

violent video game exposure and school shooting incidents has been demonstrated in the existing scientific literature" (p. 25). However, these kinds of video games certainly promote violence. First, the user gets rewarded for aggressive behavior, for example by scoring points (Krahé & Möller, 2004). Second, the user is challenged to actively make the decision to use violence (Anderson, 2014). Third, because of the increasingly realistic images in these games and the fact that the user plays from the perspective of the aggressor, the user easily identifies himself with the violent actor (Konijn, Bijvank & Bushman 2007). The case is probably too complex to find an easy solution; influence may depend on the type of games, the intensity of game play, the personality of the gamer, and his or her social background (Mikos, 2003). Moreover, shooting games are a part of youth culture and the overwhelming majority of players never become killers. One could also argue that shooting games do not influence shooters' motivation but only shooting accuracy, leading to a higher number of victims.

This overview of a number of theories of social causes shows that no unambiguous answer of what causes school shootings has been found. In the introductory remarks of this chapter, I argued that there are two main readings of the genesis of school shootings. Let us now therefore change perspective from the theories of social causes to those of personal causes.

2.2 Theories of personal causes

There are a number of different perspectives about personal causes of school shootings. Like the overview for the theories of social causes, the overview below is not a complete summary but aims to give an impression of the most prominent perspectives not only in academic but also in public discourse. In doing so, it will also show the diversity of explanations and perceptions. First, a

theory built on the notion of reinforcements and gratification is discussed. Second, the theory that fantasy plays an important role in the genesis of a school shooting is discussed. Third, narcissistic personality, mental health issues and psychiatric medication are discussed as personal causes. Fourth, the anti-Christian sentiment theory is covered.

The next type of theory to be discussed builds on the concept of frustration as the starting point of violence: "Psychoanalytic theories of violence usually take some sort of frustration as their starting point, focusing on early parental relationships or later experiences" (Ganzevoort, 2006). As a case study for a combination of psychoanalytic theories, Twemlow (2000) interpreted the Columbine High School shooting as influenced by the perpetrators' experiences of bullying and rejection. In various cases, shooters explicitly speak of revenge for how they have been humiliated or excluded by others and how this is frustrating to them. In this category of motives, one should also look at the poor coping skills and low self-esteem that some shooters portray and the narcissistic and self-aggrandizing characteristics observed in others.

Following these theories based on gratification and frustration, the next theory is based on the concept of fantasy, introduced by Robertz (2004) as playing a role in the development of a school shooting. He argued that feelings of loss of control are compensated by the fantasy of becoming one of the controlling, violent role models created by mass media such as action movies. Throwing themselves into the part, the line between fantasy and reality fades. After a trigger, such as being expelled, the decision follows to make an existing fantasy reality. Robertz suggested that the school shooter is acting in a fantasy during the attack and realizes his error only when something occurs during the shooting that is extremely different from the fantasized order of events. In addition to the type of fantasy mentioned above, school shooters also seem to fantasize about being superior to others, even god-like. This can be indicative of a narcissistic personality, which is often addressed as a possible causal factor of

school shootings. O'Toole (1999) identified narcissistic personalities in several school shooters. She noted that the shooters in her study lacked empathy, had a superior self-image, blamed others for their own failures, and felt victimized. School shooters are easily offended and over-sensitive with regard to teasing and feelings of rejection (Fast, 2008). The combination of narcissism and social rejection often leads to high levels of aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) and is a powerful predictor of aggressive behavior. The experience of narcissistic injury creates fantasies of revenge that lead to restoration of self-confidence and a renewed feeling of superiority (Bell, 2002), which become reality in the case of school shooters. However, Bondü and Scheithauer (2015) found that narcissism is not a typical characteristic of school shooters, if possibly more frequent than in the general population. The majority of school shooters were not diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder. Interestingly, nearly half of the perpetrators were diagnosed with psychiatric disorders after the shooting and mostly post mortem, only approximately one third had ever had a mental health evaluation before, and short of twenty percent had been diagnosed with disorders prior to the shooting (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

The next theory of personal causes involves mental health issues. Contrary to the "amok" view, psychiatric disorders diagnosed (post mortem) in school shooters cannot explain their actions from a medical point of view. Metzl and MacLeish (2015) state, for example, that connections between mental illness and gun violence are less causal than current public opinion allows. Following Metzl and MacLeish school shootings "have a social context, and that context is not something that 'mental illness' can describe nor that mental health practitioners can be expected to address in isolation." Nevertheless, most school shooters contemplated or attempted suicide and/or have a history of depression (Meloy, Hempel, Mohandie, Shive, & Grey, 2001; Vossekuil et.al, 2002; Langman, 2009). Langman (2013) examined 35 cases, concluding that approximately half of the school shooters under study were psychotic. He

argued that "the prevalence of psychosis among school shooters often receives insufficient recognition" (p. 137)[12]. However, there is no evidence that the prevalence of emotional problems or psychiatric disorders is any greater in the case of youths who execute mass shootings than in the adolescent population generally (Elliott, Huzinga, & Menard, 1989; Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991). In addition, Langman himself pointed out that a psychosis does not make one a school shooter, nor is it sufficient explanation for school shootings, while in order to understand these perpetrators, we have foremost to recognize their diversity.

There is an additional aspect to the discussion surrounding this theory of mental health issues as causing school shootings, namely the hypothesized causal link with the use of psychiatric drugs. Wilson (2015) claimed it is not easy access to guns, music, or video games that causes school shootings but the practice of medicating youth with Prozac coupled with the amphetamine Ritalin. Similarly, Mars (2009), an award-winning investigative journalist, argued that

> Today, one of the biggest problems we have, and one of the things that shocks so many Americans, is the rise of teen suicides and the rise of school shootings. Yet all we hear from the corporate mass media on the shootings is "Well, we need to take the guns away." Let me tell you something, I went to school in Texas. We took guns to

[12] It has to be said, however, that Langman used police reports, court documents, students journals, and other secondary sources only, and his findings are not based on direct examination of the shooters.

> school. Nobody shot anybody. So what's changed? Drugs. Kids on psychiatric drugs. Nearly every school shooter in this country can be shown to have been involved with psychotropic drugs - either taking them at the time of the shootings, or what can be even worse, coming off of them.

However, the belief that psychiatric medications cause school shootings is not supported by many other researchers and often disputed by statistics. To evaluate the theory, Langman (2009) looked into the medical history of 48 cases and found that only approximately 12% of the shooters were on medication at the time of or shortly before their attacks. Consequently, he concluded that although some school shooters took medication at some point in their lives, that does not mean there was any connection between the drug and the school shooting.

So far, a number of theories of the causes of school shootings have been discussed that are prevalent in academic discussion. As we reach the end of this chapter, I finish by shedding light on a theory which was mainly pursued in public discussions: the theory that school shooters are motivated by an anti-Christian sentiment. Indeed, after the 1999 Columbine shooting, a discussion flared up about supposed anti-Christian prejudice on the part of the perpetrators. Christian media, especially, raised a theory that the shooters' supposed hatred of Christianity was the force behind the shootings. For example, Rabay (2000, February 7) supported this theory in *Christianity Today*, based on the content of videotapes the shooters made some weeks prior to their deed:

> “What would Jesus do?" asks Klebold, yelling and making faces at the camera. "What would I do?" Then he points an imaginary shotgun at the camera, takes aim, and says, "Boosh!" "Yeah, 'I love Jesus. I love Jesus.' Shut the f—up," Harris says on the same tape, made on March 15. "Go Romans," Harris says later. "Thank God they crucified that a—hole." Then the two teenagers both chant, "Go Romans! Go Romans! Yeah! Whoo!" Klebold, who reportedly had a crush on Christian student Rachel Scott, singles her out for particular disdain, calling her a "godly whore" and a "stuck-up little b—."

Many Christian media reported that the Columbine killers targeted students known as devout Christians. Statistically, this is not accurate. Of the thirteen mortally wounded victims, just two were known as evangelical Christians, Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott.

Interestingly, school shootings have occurred more frequently in areas with a highly conservative religious population (Arcus, 2002):

- Michael Carneal (Heath High School shooting, Kentucky, 1997) came from a family of devout members of the Lutheran Church.
- Mitchell Johnson (Westside Middle School shooting, Arkansas, 1998) sang in the Central Baptist Church youth choir (Newman et al., 2004).
- Dylan Klebold (Columbine shooting, Colorado, 1999) attended confirmation classes in accordance with Lutheran tradition.

However, not all school shooters had a Christian background. Some of them declared themselves atheists, as Kip Kinkel (Thurston High School shooting, Oregon, 1998) did when he wrote, “Anyone that believes in God is a fucking sheep.” A different perspective is found in Luke Woodham (Pearl High School

shooting, Mississippi, 1997), who wrote about his hatred for the Christian God for creating humanity. Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech school shooting, Virginia, 2007) also made anti-Christian statements in his manifesto: "Only if you could be the victim of your reprehensible and wicked crimes, you Christian Nazis, you would have brute-restrained your animal urges to fuck me." Pekka-Eric, meanwhile, comments in his YouTube profile, "I am a cynical existentialist, antihuman humanist, antisocial socialdarwinist, realistic idealist and godlike atheist" (Auvinen, 2007).

Returning to the unevenly divided news coverage of the victims, note that Cassie and Rachel's story got more attention than most victims of the attack. Only the stories of Dave Sander, the only teacher who was killed, and Isaiah Shoels, the only African American who was mortally wounded, appeared more frequently in the media (Muschart, 2007). As a consequence, many people firmly believed, based on various media reports, that Cassie and Rachel were killed because they believed in God. One example of this was published in *Christianity Today,* where Wendy Murray Zoba reported on October 4, 1999 the following:

> Rachel Scott was on the ground crying. There are conflicting reports about what happened next, but friends told the Scott family that the killer walked up and pulled Rachel's head up by her hair. Says Dana: "They confronted her with the question, 'Do you believe in God?' and she said yes, and they took a gun to her temple and killed her."

Another example is Cassie Bernall's father, who in an interview for *Good Morning America* said, "When that young man asked Cassie if she believed in God, she boldly said yes, and he shot and killed her. The reason he did that was because she believed in God." In 2000, Rachel's parents published *Rachel's*

Tears: The Spiritual Journey of Columbine Martyr Rachel Scott (Scott, Nimmo, & Rabey, 2000). This book is about Rachel's life and how her parents found meaning in her death, which they describe as martyrdom. Cassie's mother also published the story of her daughter's death in the book *She Said Yes* (Bernall, 1999).

Versions of these stories became the accepted media version of Cassie and Rachel's deaths. However, there are discrepancies between these stories and the findings presented in government documents. The sheriff's report of May 2000 mentioned nothing resembling these narratives. According to this report, none of the interrogated eyewitnesses confirmed them. After hearing direct eyewitnesses and analyzing government reports, Dave Cullen, whose book about the Columbine shooting has won several awards, reconstructed the event and came to the conclusion that Cassie was under a table in the library praying quietly. The shooter looked under the table, said, "Peek-a-boo" and shot her. Cassie died instantly (Cullen, 1999). Truth or myth, however, these narratives of the shooting seemed to give hope to many and gave the American Christian community a powerful symbol for teenagers. But the question of the extent to which the shooters had specifically anti-Christian motives remains unanswered.

Strikingly, scholars such as Fast, in *Ceremonial Violence. A Psychological Explanation of School Shootings* (2008), compare the almost ritual preparation and execution of school shootings with religious rituals, referring to their selection of clothes, preferred music and adoration of prior school shooters. Although school shootings have never be defined as religious violence, there are a number of factors in these crimes which can be linked to what Juergensmeyer (2003) addressed as the unifying concept in interpreting religious violence, namely its performative character. Agreeing with Juergensmeyer's reading, Ganzevoort (2006) argued further that the performative dimension of violence resembles religious ritual. He also raised

the relevant point that religious violence is based on a metaphysical perspective of a war between good and evil, involving the death of martyrs. Such symbolism of a battle between good and evil and the idea of martyrdom can be found in numerous expressions of school shooters prior to their deed (Pfeifer & Ganzevoort, 2016). Part Three examines these expressions of school shooters and reflects on the existential dimension and implicit religion of school shooters.

2.3 Different approaches, my approach and the link to existential concerns

As may be seen from the overview in the previous section, researchers have in recent years approached the issue from isolated scholarly perspectives including sociology, psychology, criminology, and medicine (Harding, Fox, & Metha, 2002), but clearly school shootings arise from a combination of different risk factors, as has been pointed out by some (Robertz, 2004; Newman et al., 2004; Henry, 2009). Therefore, studying isolated factors such as bullying or violent computer games as causes of school shootings will not provide reliable answers but instead will lead to a narrowed perspective of the problem and misguided polarization in the discussion about prevention.

The various theories about personal or social causes reflect a different take on the relationship between the individual and the social context. Combinations of these approaches are probably the most fruitful avenues to investigate the causes of school shootings. Moreover, as Ganzevoort (2006) notes:

> In the end, however, all these theories regard the individual dimension of violence. A much-needed

> complement is therefore found in theories of collective violence often originating in sociology or social psychology. Genocides and terrorist attacks cannot be interpreted satisfactorily by individualistic theories (Suárez-Orozco & Robben, 2000) but must look at the social and cultural background. Covert violent processes like racism, sexism, and homophobia are likewise of a collective rather than individual nature.

This notation links to the observation that several shooters showed racial or religious intolerance. Following Ganzevoort's argument, and exploring the cultural dimension of school shootings could contribute to a deeper understanding of school shootings, especially if we want to account for the fact that almost all perpetrators are male and Caucasian. In the present study, one of the school shooters is Asian. Seung-Hui Cho immigrated with his family from South Korea to the United States when he was eight years old. He is one of the few non-Caucasian perpetrators, and the only one in this study. The reason his ethnicity is not discussed further in this study is the same that led to my exclusion of family circumstances or disorders of any kind in the case studies. First, these facts have been studied before by many researchers from various disciplines. Second, the aim of my study is to broaden the body of knowledge about school shootings rather than to deepen existing knowledge. Third, existential concerns, the focus of my study, are something all humans experience, regardless of where they come from, which ethnicity they have, and whether or not they suffer from psychological problems.

However, social and cultural backgrounds can never be an exclusive explanation of school shootings. After all, there is only a very small number of people who commit these crimes of extreme violence next to all the others who

come from the same or very similar backgrounds and live in the same cultural context. According to Terror Management Theory perspectives, existential concerns are the reason groups and individuals engage in violent actions as part of political, ethnic, and religious conflicts. Existential motives such as the fear of death can increase support for violence (Motyl & Pyszczynski, 2009). Therefore, McBride (2011) concluded that though there are differences between the language of empirical psychology and that of philosophy or theology, the concepts of Terror Management Theory are fundamentally existential. Although school shootings are not defined as terroristic attacks in theoretical contexts, in Part Four I will argue that since there are various similarities between lone wolf terrorists and school shooters, the latter should not be approached as an isolated phenomenon. Finally, approaching school shootings from an existential point of view can deliver crucial information about the motives of the perpetrators.

Interestingly, despite the fact that the empirical findings so far are in favor of heterogeneity of the phenomenon, there seems to exist a typical homogeneous image of school shooters. Particularly, when a school shooting occurs, the media often portray the perpetrator as a bullied loner. This image-forming influences popular perceptions of school shooters. The consequence can be, on the one hand, that harmless students who meet this image can be stigmatized, and, on the other hand, that warning signals in the behavior of seemingly nice boys can be overlooked. For this reason, the next part of my study turns to these popular perceptions of school shooters and examine their range, accuracy and prevalence. Based on the media coverage of school shootings, I asked a panel to indicate how typical they found characteristics of school shooters, which I found in media coverage. These perceptions of school shooters and causes of their crime will be held against empirical data. I will also analyze fiction movies about school shootings to determine how the characteristics of the perpetrators and their motives are interpreted in this form of popular culture.

Part two: Deconstructing popular perceptions of school shooters and an analysis of movies about school shootings

3 Popular perceptions of school shooters

Derived from Reays' (1998) definition of popular culture, popular perceptions, as interpreted in this chapter, refers to widely-held thoughts. Since popular perceptions are closely related to the audience reception of media portrayals, a two-step approach was chosen to identify important characteristics of school shooters according to popular perception. In the first step, a list of popular perceptions was compiled. This list was based on media coverage of school shootings in the past two decades. It was chosen to analyze the media coverage starting in 1997. Although there had been school shootings before, during 1997-1998 there occurred a series of school shootings with a large number of victims and an intense media coverage (Fuentes, 2013). One year later, in 1999, the Columbine shooting took place, which gained far more media attention than any school shooting before or since (Birkland& Lawrence, 2009). Schildkraut en Muschert (2014) argue, that Columbine had set the precedent for media coverage of school shootings.

I only used media coverage in American, German and Dutch media, as I am familiar with these languages and wanted to avoid errors in translation. Because it was decided to analyze egodocuments of school shooters from the U.S.A., Germany and Finland in a later stage of this study, the list was also presented to experts in Finland (a policeman and a professor at the University of Helsinki) with the question whether they recognized the popular perception of school shooters in the media coverage in Finland. Because they did not perform a structured analysis, their confirmation that Finnish media present a similar image of school shooters is in fact offers a general indication.

I collected digitally available news items, assuming their availability would make them reliable representations of the perspective offered to the audience. I counted the appearance of characteristics of school shooters in the news items, assuming a link between the quantity of appearance and the importance which is attributed to the characteristic. The final list consists of 13 elements of popular perceptions of school shooters' characteristics, ranked from very typical (i.e. characteristic of school shooters) to least typical, starting with the most typical characteristic found in the media coverage: school shooters are male; they commit suicide; they are bullied; they are loners; they have a psychiatric history; they are Caucasian; they are obsessed with violent computer games; they showed aggressive behavior in the past; they come from broken homes; they just snapped; they have low intelligence; they use drugs; they have been sexually abused.

In the second step, these 13 characteristics were ranked to assess the relative importance attributed to them by the audience. To do so, this list (in a random order) was administered digitally to a panel of individuals in school-related settings in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and the U.S.A.[13]. The author asked participants of several international conferences, namely the Religious Education Association (REA), the International Association of Practical Theology (IAPT) and the School Safety Advocacy Council,to send the digital questionnaire to relevant contacts in their networks. Furthermore, the author used her network among the Dutch police, the University of Helsinki, Windesheim University in the Netherlands, and various Dutch and German schools to approach teachers, students and parents. Professor Antti Räsänen of

[13] Finland, Germany and USA were chosen because the cases of these countries are studied. I chose to also question a Dutch panel because the present author is living and working in the Netherlands.

the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki translated the questionnaire into Finnish. Translations from German and Dutch were done by the author, who holds a degree in German studies and lives and works in the Netherlands more than 20 years.

Approximately 500 teachers, 11-22 years old students and parents were approached. Of this group, 142 responded anonymously via a digital questionnaire.

Table 1: Participants

	teachers	***students***	***parents***	***total***
U.S.A.	10	4	13	27
Finland	18	7	5	30
Germany	17	7	9	33
Netherlands	22	25	5	52
Total	67	43	32	142

Table 1a: Demographic information participants[14]

Country	*Teachers*		*Parents*		*Students*	
	gender	***age***	***gender***	***age***	***gender***	***age***
U.S.A.	6 female	3: 25-29[15] 1: 45-49 2: 50-54	10 female	1: 30-34 2: 35-39 1: 40-44 4: 45-49 2: 50-54	1 female	1: 14
	4 male	1: 40-44 1: 45-49 1: 55-59 1: 60-64	3 male	1: 30-34 2: 45-49	3 male	1: 14 1: 18 1: 21
Finland	10 female	2: 40-44 3: 45-49 2: 50-54 1: 55-59 2: 60-64	5 female	1: 40-44 4: 45-49	4 female	1: 13 2: 14 1: 20
	8 male	2: 25-29 3: 35-39 2: 50-54 1: 60-64	0 male		3 male	2: 16 1: 21
Germany	7 female	4: 50-54 1: 55-59 2: 60-64	4 female	1: 40-44 3: 45-49	4 female	1: 16 1: 17 1: 18 1: 21
	10 male	1: 25-29 1: 45-49 5: 55-59 3: 60-64	5 male	1: 35-39 1: 40-44 2: 45-49 1: 55-59	3 male	1: 16 1: 17 1:19
Nether-lands	18 female	8: 25-29 1: 30-34 4: 45-49 5: 55-59	3 female	1: 30-34 2: 45-49	11 female	1:13 1:14 2:15 1:16 3: 17 1: 18 1: 20 1: 21

[14] The respondents were not asked to fill in their age themselves. Students were able to choose from 11 to 22 in steps of a year. Parents and teachers chose from 20-24, 25-29 and so on. The questionnaire is included in the appendix.

[15] Years old.

Participants were asked to write down a percentage of how many school shooters they think share the characteristics in the list. For example, "What percentage of school shooters do you think were bullied?" I concluded that the highest percentage represents the most important characteristic in the panel's perception. This way I determined the perceptions of every group in each country. Then, a comparison between the countries was made. Because of the relatively small amount of samples no distinction has been made between the roles (teacher, parent, student) within the individual countries. Because this comparison of the countries draws a very similar picture of how characteristics of school shooters are assessed, I decided not to present this table in this section but to consider all participating teachers as one group, all students as one group and all parents as one group and compared the results, to get an acceptable size of subgroups. The results are presented as an average of the numbers the participants entered (see Table 2).

Table 2: Panel Perception of Characteristics

Characteristic	***Average***	***Parents***	***Students***	***Teachers***
School shooters are male.	86%	90%	82%	86%
School shooters commit suicide.	76.3%	77%	73%	79%
School shooters are bullied.	72.6%	76%	72.6%	72%
School shooters are loners.	72.6%	80%	72.6%	70%
School shooters have a psychiatric history.	65.7%	69%	65.7%	64%
School shooters are Caucasian.	63%	65%	63%	64%
School shooters are obsessed with violent computer games.	59.6%	67%	59.6%	58%
School shooters have a history of violent behavior.	54%	58%	54%	54%
School shooters come from broken homes.	53.6%	47%	53.6%	52%
School shooters snapped.	49.6%	49%	49.6%	49%
School shooters have a low IQ.	29.3%	29%	29.3%	27%
School shooters are drug addicts.	27.6%	30%	27.6%	24%
School shooters are sexually abused.	22.6%	23%	22.6%	24%

Table 2 provides the outcome of the comparison of the different groups (i.e., the average percentage of the characteristic is presented). To read the table properly, here is an example: According to the teachers, 86% of school shooters are male. Notably, the panel ranked the importance of the characteristics similarly to the media coverage, with minor differences between the groups. Teachers ranked the importance of the characteristics in a way that corresponds with the popular perception found in the media coverage. Notably, students ranked the characteristic broken home as more important than Caucasian or obsession with violent computer games. Interestingly, unlike teachers and students, parents ranked the characteristic loner as more important than being bullied or committing suicide.

Because of the minor differences between the perception of the panel and the media coverage and the fact that sample values almost always differ somewhat, I decided to treat the media coverage and the panel's perception as one independent sample of popular perception and divided the characteristics into three categories. The categories were based on the quantity in which these characteristics appear in the media coverage and the average percentage our panel as a whole assigned to them: *typical*, *less typical*, and *not typical*. I defined the categories as follows: a characteristic is *typical* when the average the panel gave is more than 70%, *less typical* when the average is more than 50% but under 70%, and *not typical* when the average is less than 50%.

With the popular perceptions collected and ranked, possible gaps between these perceptions and scientific data can now be analyzed. To do so, data were collected from a survey of the scientific literature. The following section presents this comparison of popular perceptions and scientific data.

3.1 Scientific data versus popular perception

The collected scientific data are diverse in nature and origin, as will become clear from Table 3. Some are based on research on American school shootings only, while others compare different studies from across the world. That means the aim necessarily was not to create fully valid scientific coverage of characteristics of school shooters. Instead, the data serve as indications of the gap between popular perceptions and scientific data, a gap that becomes clearer if one compares characteristics which are overestimated in popular perceptions with underestimated characteristics.

Table 3: Comparing Popular Perception and Scientific Data

Characteristic	***Popular perception***	***Scientific data***	***Empirical evidence***
School shooters are male	typical	typical	This is one of the most consistent characteristics: 95% of school shooters are male (Vossekuil et al., 2002).
School shooters commit suicide	typical	less typical	Suicide occurs in approximately 20% of the cases (Robertz, 2004, p. 77). Vossekuil et al. (2002) and Langman (2009), however, argue that many perpetrators contemplated or attempted suicide and/or have a history of extreme depression.
School shooters are bullied	typical	less typical	Bullying may be a common experience of school shooters. The Safe School Initiative study showed that 75% of perpetrators felt bullied (Vossekuil et al., 2002). However, in an empirical study of 126 cases from 13 countries, Sommer et al. (2014) observed that a minority of school shooters (29.9%) were bullied physically, while 53.7% experienced verbal bullying and otherwise.
School shooters are loners	typical	less typical	Although most shooters did not gain much respect from other students at school, Newman (2004) argued that only between 11% and 26% were loners. One third were seen as outsiders by others or found themselves at the edge of society at the time of the shooting (Faust, 2010). None of the studied school shooters were socially very successful. Waldrich (2007) argued that the shooter was often reclusive and excluded.
School shooters have a psychi-	less	not	Although 52 % of perpetrators were diagnosed with psychiatric disorders after the shooting, only 34% had ever had a mental

atric history	typical	typical	health evaluation before, and 17% had been diagnosed with disorders prior to the shooting (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Contrary to the "amok" view, psychiatric disorders diagnosed in school shooters who were examined afterwards cannot explain their actions from a medical point of view. Robertz (2004) argued that school shootings often involve a gap between fantasy and reality, in which the perpetrator acts in a fantasy world and does not relate to the standards of others.
School shooters are Caucasian	less typical	typical	In 76% of the cases, shooters are Caucasian (Vossekuil et al., 2002).
School shooters are obsessed with violent computer games	less typical	not typical	Ferguson (2008) concludes that no significant relationship between violent computer game exposure and school shootings has been demonstrated in the existing scientific literature.
School shooters have a history of violent behavior	less typical	not typical	Shooters are typically inconspicuous students. Approximately 63% had never had any troubles at school before. Only 10% were suspended from school at least once. However, Waldrich (2007) stated that shooters often choose violent role models like serial killers, Hitler or other school shooters.
School shooters come from broken homes	less typical	not typical	Shooters came from a variety of family situations. Two thirds came from two-parent families with active ties to the community. Some 5% come from foster homes with histories of neglect (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Family structure seems unrelated to school shootings.
School shooters snapped	not typical	not typical	A school shooting is never a spontaneous act and usually involves long preparation (Robertz, 2004). O'Toole (2002) in fact argued that long planning and announcing plans in some way are the only two things that always appear. In 98% of the cases, perpetrators told others about their plans (Pollak, 2008).
School shooters have a low IQ	not typical	not typical	The intellectual capacities of perpetrators are average to above average. Only in exceptional cases (less than 5%) do the shooters have low intellectual capacities. More than 40% of the shooters performed very well as students. Even shortly before the shooting, no obvious lowering of performance at school was observed (Vossekuil et al., 2002).
School shooters are drug addicts	not typical	not typical	Although research showed that some shooters did experiment with drugs (Newman et al., 2004), no accurate percentages of substance abuse among perpetrators are available.
School shooters are sexually abused	not typical	not typical	Some school shooters were sexually abused, such as 1998 Jonesboro shooter Mitchell Johnson (Newman et al., 2004). There is no clear evidence whether sexual abuse is a more common characteristic.

To help the reader understand the table properly, some resources of the empirical data in Table 3 should be placed in perspective. Langman (2009) based his results on his study of ten school shooters in USA from 1997 to 2007. O'Toole's (2002) study was based on nearly 25 years of experience in threat assessment and an in-depth review of eighteen school shooting cases in USA, though no time range was identified. Pollak (2008) used the data from *The Safe School Initiative* (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Newman et al. (2004) performed an in-depth study of the social roots of the Heath High School shooting in 1997, Kentucky and the 1998 Westside Middle School shootingin Arkansas. Faust (2010) used data from the studies from Vossekuil et al. (2002) and Robertz (2004). Waldrich (2007) studied 80 school shootings worldwide from 1979 to 2007.

The list of characteristics from which they had to choose probably created a reporting bias. The panel could have tended to assume that at least some of the attributes are scientifically relevant. However, the list was based on what in an analysis of media coverage was found as typical for a school shooter. Seemingly, an image of the typical school shooter does exist although empirical data show that there is no scientifically based profile of these perpetrators. The analysis above is an impression of the gap between popular perception and scientific data. Therefore, the terms 'overestimated' and 'underestimated' have to be understood with this discretion.[16]

The characteristics 'overestimated' by the panel are discussed next, followed be the 'underestimated' characteristics. The overestimated characteristics are grouped into three categories. The first consists of social problems attributed to the school shooter. More often than is realistic, participants expected school shooters to come from a broken home, to be loners,

[16] I am grateful to prof Sander Koole for pointing me to this important fact.

and to be bullied. The second category refers to mental problems and/or deficiencies. The panel overestimated the prevalence of a psychiatric history and unwarrantedly believed that shooters commit suicide afterwards. The third category regarded violent tendencies believed to be characteristic of school shooters. These include an obsession with violent computer games and a history of violent behavior.

There is a single underestimated characteristic that is the most basic demographic variable: school shooters tend to be Caucasian more often than the panel should think. However, it has to be considered that the base rate of Caucasian people is much higher in the countries of study than that of other ethnicities. Thus, in reality, lay people are likely to be correct in their perception that ethnicity is not systematically linked with school shootings.[17]

Apparently, the panel scored highly the characteristics that might explain school shootings by means of negative life events and social limitations. A tendency toward violence and/or a negative life attitude were assumed. One can interpret this outcome as an effort in popular perception to explain the inexplicable. It is hard to accept the idea that school shooters might be ordinary youngsters. Instead, people look for factors beyond the ordinary in individual risk factors or in cultural trends and problems. This leads to debates about gun control, bullying, substance abuse, family problems, and violence in games, films or music. If one assumes that bullying, for example, causes a school shooting, why does not every victim of bullying become a murderer? If bullying could in some cases be the trigger, what motive can be found on the surface? Even though factors such as those mentioned above may be involved, we do not know enough about their actual contribution to the emergence of extreme

[17] Also for this observation I am indebted to prof Sander Koole.

violence such as school shootings. Popular perceptions could misguide us so that we overestimate these factors.

3.2 Discussion: School shootings as purposeful behavior

Studies have established that popular perceptions tend to overestimate the importance of social and personal causes in comparison to scientific data.

Notably, the issue of shooters expressing clear and consistent existential concerns was neither found in media coverage nor in scientifically based research. Approaches so far failed to acknowledge that school shooters express philosophical ideas, and that they have explicit worldviews. Sometimes these expressions are interpreted as psychopathological, using labels such as depression or other disorders. This may not suffice to fully grasp the processes students go through in becoming school shooters.

Understanding the existential struggles of school shooters as they appear in their letters, e-mails, drawings, and Internet postings may be a step forward to unravelling their motives. So far, research has not produced a single international comparative study of the original statements of school shooters focusing on their existential issues. Unless we assume that school shootings are void of meaning from the perpetrators' points of view, we would do well to try to understand how they see the world and their own positions in it. Given the fact that original statements from the planning phase are available for many school shooters, this material warrants further exploration. Obviously, school shooters are not alone in their struggle with existential questions; a great number of students experience this struggle and discontent without escalating into acts of rampage. Still, this existential dimension is what school shooters frequently mention as essential to understanding their actions. Similarly, Hacker (1994) pointed out that adolescent behavior is a manifestation of the adolescent's defense mechanisms. They develop their behavior in response to

conflict arising from experiencing the existential concerns as dread of death, meaninglessness, and despair of isolation. To the shooters, the shooting seemingly has the purpose to express or even solve their existential struggles. In this light we could interpret a school shooting as *purposeful behavior* as noted in Chapter 2.1. However, neither in public debate nor in academic discussion, we can now conclude, are these existential concerns at all considered as possible cause of school shootings.

Maybe we should look further than public and academic discussion. After all, these discussions are based on (assumed) facts. Therefore, it may be fruitful to look at more creative interpretations of school shootings. School shootings form the subject of numerous manifestations of popular culture. The working definition of the term popular culture, as addressed in this study, is "all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally though not necessarily disseminated through the mass media," in short, "popular culture consists of the spoken and printed word, sounds, pictures, objects and artifacts" (Browne, 2006, p. 21). There are various fiction books about school shootings, such as *Hate List* by Jennifer Brown (2009), *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult (2007), and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* by Lionel Shriver (2003). As already said in Section 2.1, long before the Columbine shooting, which took place in 1999, Stephen King wrote the 1977 novel *Rage* (using the pseudonym Richard Bachman). In this novel a troubled student kills his teacher and holds his classmates hostage. During the hostage situation, he forces each and every one to justify his or her existence.

Popular music includes a number of songs with school shootings as a topic. As mentioned in the Introduction, "I Don't Like Mondays" by the Boomtown Rats is one example. This song is based on the school shooting by Brenda Spencer. The song has also been covered by Bon Jovi and Tori Amos. Rammstein sings about a school shooting from the perspective of the shooter in "Weisses Fleisch." In another example, Elton John wrote the song "Ticking":

At St. Patricks every Sunday,
Father Fletcher heard your sins

"Oh, he's unconcerned with competition
he never cares to win"

But blood stained a young hand
that never held a gun.

And his parents never thought of him
as their troubled son.

The list of songs inspired by school shootings is long, enough so to establish that popular culture is intrigued by the topic. As discussed in Chapter 1, this fascination is mutual. School shooters are seemingly intrigued by popular culture since they often refer to certain music, movies or popular video games in their egodocuments. This is also reflected in the very large number of movies about school shootings. To deepen our understanding of the interpretation of school shootings, the next chapter deals with movies about school shootings and how they interpret the motives of the perpetrators. A key question is whether the existential dimension and the perspective of purposeful behavior will be better represented here than in the popular and scientific discussions analyzed so far.

4 Popular culture and school shootings: film analyses

In the eyes of society, school shootings altered school, at least temporarily, from a safe place for children into a place of horror and violence. The fact that the shooters are young, mostly white, middle-class boys (O'Toole, 2002; Robertz, 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2002) is experienced as especially disturbing. In popular perception, this group of youths is not seen as typically violent. School shooters do not fit the profile of the typical American juvenile offender, who is an African American male from a deprived and violent inner city neighborhood (Schmalleger, 2006). We have already discussed the reasons for extensive media attention: school shooters are atypical perpetrators and their deeds have an enormous impact. Every detail of the event gets published, from the clothes the perpetrators wear during the shooting to their victims' last words. Often the coverage of these details is not based on pure reality but on rumors and popular perceptions.

In the aftermath of every school shooting the question why? arises. Why do kids kill other kids? What are their reasons and, most of all, who is to blame? The Michael Moore (2002) documentary *Bowling for Columbine* shows that popular culture is often labeled as cause of these crimes. As discussed above, expressions of popular culture are often blamed for the Columbine shooting. Marilyn Manson and Rammstein in particular are accused of promoting school shootings in the lyrics of their songs:

> Du auf dem Schulhof / Ich zum Töten bereit
> Und keiner weiβ hier / Von meiner Einsamkeit[18]

[18] Translation: "You in the schoolyard/I am ready to kill/And no one really knows/Of my loneliness."

The violent computer game called *Doom* (id Software, 1993) is directly linked to the Columbine shooting because the perpetrators often played this game and refer to the game's content in their autobiographical expressions. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that school shootings follow a certain script which makes one think of the movies and computer games found in the perpetrators' possession (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011). During the shooting, they wear similar outfits as the hero of the film *The Matrix* (Silver, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 1999), they recite catchphrases such as "natural selection"[19], use quotations from films such as *Natural Born Killers*[20] or play special music as part of the preparation for the crime. School shooters always plan their deed in detail (O'Toole, 2002; Vossekuil et al., 2002) down to the background music and what they will wear. They also catalog their grievances in, for example, journals or weblogs. As already discussed in Chapter 2, Fast (2008) defined this as the *ceremonial aspects* of the killings. Notably, the school shootings themselves become "scripts" for copycat shootings or expressions of popular culture. The Columbine shooting, for example, was not only inspiration to numerous fiction and non-fiction books, documentaries, poems and songs, but also the script for a computer game called *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (Ledonne, 2005). A link between school shootings and popular culture thus seems to exist, as popular culture is an inspiration for school shootings and vice versa.

[19] Eric Harris wrote about "natural selection," and Pekka-Eric Auvinen named his manifesto "Natural selection manifesto."

[20] *Natural Born Killers* is an Oliver Stone movie from 1994, with script by Quentin Tarantino.

One genre of popular culture seems to be more inspired by school shootings than any other: movies. After just a simple search on *Google*, at least 100 movies and episodes of television series about the topic were found. On the cultural function of film in general, Vanhoozer (2007, p. 36) argued that movies can be "the lens through which we view everything else and as the compass that orients us toward the good life." Moreover, film creates a space for reflection and thinking about existential questions of life, death and the state of being human. Films are indeed capable, it has been shown, of confronting an audience with existential questions (Bettelheim, 1990). Consequently, this is where religion and film can meet, and maybe this also explains why young people turn especially to films and other forms of popular culture in constructing their identity and interpretation of the meaning of life (Clark, 2002). School shooters, in turn, may therefore find popular culture especially useful to construct an aggressive identity as school shooter. Twemlow (2000) refered to the Columbine killers as possibly being inspired by violent videogames (specifically, *Doom*).

The influence of popular culture on school shooters can possibly be connected to social learning theories, discussed in Chapter 2. Bandura (1973) suggested that aggression is the result of a learning process called behavior modeling. In this view, violence is modeled on observation of others, for example through media. This can be connected to the copycat behavior we discussed in Section 2.1. An important concept in the context of popular culture and copycat behavior is that of *priming.* In the context of the present study, priming refers to the effect of the content of popular culture on the behavior and understanding of youth. Priming implicates a number of ideas and beliefs which construct a certain reality (see also Section 4.1 on filmmaking and world-making). In this created reality, it is possible that a belief is constructed that violence is justified. In Section 2.1, we discussed this in the context of hypermasculinity. Extremely violent behavior of the "hero" in some movies was

addressed, and it was noted that this is never depicted as aggression if on the part of the hero but as a means of defending what is worth fighting for.[21] Even when this created reality is clearly labeled as fiction, real-world beliefs can be affected (Green & Brock, 2000). As discussed in Chapter 2.1, Ferguson (2008) argues that existing scientific literature fails to demonstrate any significant relation between violent computer games and school shootings. However, this does not exclude a possibility that the myth of the violent 'hero' could have affected the real-world beliefs of the school shooters. Moreover, the personal myth of being a 'hero', and the school shooting being a 'war' between Good and Evil fighting evil is a common theme found in the egodocuments of the studied school shooters (Pfeifer & Ganzevoort, 2016). This will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Given that school shootings primarily occur in Western society, the perpetartors' role models consequently come from this cultural context, one in which the image of powerful heroes fighting evil with violence is widespread. However, this Chapter focuses on the question of the extent to which popular culture has been influenced by school shootings. I am especially interested in seeing how the underlying dimension of a school shooting is interpreted. What we saw in Chapter 3 was that popular perceptions of school shooters construct an image of the presumed typical perpetrator. In Chapter 4 it is discussed to what extent these perceptions are mirrored in popular culture. To gain insight into how the filmmakers interpret the genesis of a school shooting, a number of films were analyzed. As mentioned before, the leading question in this Chapter is whether the existential dimension and the perspective of purposeful behavior is better represented in films than in the popular perception and scientific discussions analyzed so far.

[21] In Section 4.1, this will be connected to Wink's concept of redemptive violence.

Before we turn to the analyses of the individual movies in Section 4.4, I would like to shed further light on the theory which was leading in my analyses in Section 4.1 and 4.2, and then in 4.3 discuss the method used to analyse the movies.

4.1 Filmmaking and worldmaking

Wink (1992) has argued that the idea that violence can solve all conflicts is a powerful myth of the modern Western world. What Wink calls the "myth of redemptive violence" is the dominant religion in our society today, and violence functions as a god (2001). Indisputably, the myth of redemptive violence is reflected in Western action movies. The heroes in these movies use violence to end evil, to solve all problems, to save the world, and to make it a better place. As Plate (2008) pointed out, movies re-create the existing world into a better place or send the viewer prophetic warnings of what our world could look like if we do not change our ways for the better. In fact, he argued, religion and movies are comparable in their ability to re-create the world and force it to fit certain standards. Film does this, among other ways, through costuming, acting or camera angles. Religions accomplish this through paying attention to symbols, telling myths and gathering people to participate in rituals. It may be argued, though, that the act of watching movies resembles participation in such religious rituals. Fundamentally, Plate (2008a) claims, the result of both religion and film is that they re-create a world:

> By paying attention to the ways films are constructed, we can shed light on the ways religions are constructed, and vice versa. To create this relationship, I play the role of editor, or perhaps of bricoleur, juxtaposing film theory and religious theory in order to highlight the ways both

> religion and film are engaged in the practice of worldmaking. (p. 4)

Plate's approach dealt with the question of how the existing world and the recreated world in movies or "at the altar" (p. 4) are connected and mutually impact each other: "Worlds, religious and filmic, are made up of borrowed fragments and pasted together in ever-new ways; myths are updated and transmediated, rituals reinvented, symbols morphed" (p. 5).
Following Plate, this chapter uses both film theory and religious theory to analyze the world-making of movies about school shootings. In other words, "we must see, hear, feel, and think through the ways these worlds are made and re-created" (p. 14). In the context of this study, I have adopted Plate's approach to the extent that that re-creating the world of a school shooting is seen as an attempt to give meaning to the phenomenon. The researcher has to look for this meaning. It can be found in the narrative, symbols, and technical film aspects, and also through personal experiences the film evokes.

4.2 Between tragedy and malice

Twemlow (2000) has interpreted the Columbine High School shooting as influenced by the perpetrators' experiences of bullying and rejection. As said before, school shooters struggle with existential concerns, such as loneliness and meaninglessness (Pfeifer & Ganzevoort, 2014). Is a school shooting the tragic result of the perpetrators' incapability to cope with existential concerns and the wish of being redeemed from the humiliating experience of being bullied? Although such interpretations rightly draw attention to the role of existential concerns, the question remains why in some cases they lead to a school shooting, while in other cases, youths cope with these concerns in a way

that does not endanger themselves or others. Possibly, then, a school shooting is nothing but a malicious murder committed by violent young men.

Ganzevoort (2008, p. 248) distinguishes between tragic or malicious events as a "tragic dimension of human existence" like getting cancer on the one hand, and "acts of bad intent such as violence" or "evil committed by others" on the other. Ganzevoort notes that tragedy and malice are not always easily distinguished, though, "especially because they are not elements of the actual events but of the meanings attributed to the events." A school shooting could be interpreted as a tragic incident if, for instance, the perpetrator is presented as a psychiatric patient. His illness would be the reason for the deed. A school shooting constructed as a malicious event could be interpreted as individual evil but also used by the filmmaker as a symbol of social problems like a highly competitive culture. The analysis of movies about school shootings will therefore consider their interpretation in terms of these two concepts and pose the question whether they interpret the event as malicious or tragic. This is important because it helps us to identify to what extent the films present a perspective of school shootings as purposeful behavior.

To answer this question, different movies referring to a school shooting were analysed. First, a number of movies was selected: Section 4.3 explains the selection process. Second, three researchers repeatedly watched the movies.[22] Despite the use of analytical models, an interpretation is always personal partly due to the previously discussed difficulty of distinguishing tragedy and malice. Therefore, we opted to get a more intersubjective result by analysing in threes. All researchers are theologians, one with an additional academic background in

[22] As said in Section 1.2, the three participating researchers were Ruard Ganzevoort, Professor of Practical Theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Roel Blanken, a student of Ganzevoort; and Birgit Pfeifer.

German language and literature. Third, we analysed the movies using the film analysis model in Vos (2004) and the model for narrative analysis in Ganzevoort (2005). Lastly, following Plate (2008) in his claim that religion and movies are comparable in their ability to re-create the world, we used his filmmaking-worldmaking approach to help us understand the meaning of school shootings as interpreted in the movie.

4.3 Analyzing movies to find the interpretation of school shootings

As noticed in Chapter 4, after a simple search on *Google* 100 movies and episodes of television series about school shootings came up. We decided not to consider episodes of television series but to concentrate on movies. In our opinion a movie about school shootings focusses on the event and therefore provides us more relevant information than an episode of a series, which has to consider the story of the main characters and narrative of the series. The choice was further based on the definition of a school shooting as presented in Chapter 1.5 (see p.30). For example, a movie about the shooting at the Amish West Nickel Mines school in 2006 was not considered because the perpetrator of this crime was not a (former) student of this school and the event is therefore not considered as a school shooting in the context of this study.

Considering the criteria above 15 movies about school shootings were found:

1. **Bang Bang You're Dead (2002)**, USA/Canada; 7.9/10 stars[23]; drama, thriller.
2. **Heart of America (2002),** Germany/Canada; 4.4./10; drama.

[23] Rating at IMDB website on January 11, 2013.

3. **Home Room (2002),** USA; 7.3/10; crime, drama.
4. **Zero Day (2003)**, USA; 7.4/10; drama.
5. **Elephant (2003),** USA; 7.2/10; drama, thriller, crime.
6. **American Yearbook (2004),** USA; 5.4/10; drama, thriller.
7. **The Only Way (2004),** USA; 8/10; crime, drama.
8. **State's Evidence (2006),** USA; 5.9/10; drama, thriller.
9. **The Life before her Eyes (2007),** USA; 6.4/10, drama, mystery.
10. **Ihr könnt Euch niemals sicher sein (2008),** Germany, 7.1/10, drama.
11. **April Showers (2009),** USA; 6/10; drama.
12. **Polytechnique (2009),** Canada; 7.3/10; drama, crime.
13. **We Need to Talk About Kevin (2011)**, UK/USA; 7.5/10; drama, mystery, thriller.
14. **Beautiful Boy (2010),** USA/Canada; 6.6/10; drama.
15. **Blackbird (2012),** Canada; 7.1/10 stars; drama.

Out of these movies, a selection was made based on differing countries of publication, genre, and International Movie Database (IMDb) rating (high and low ratings). Although the aim of this analysis was not to reach a general statement of how movies interpret school shootings, we wanted to avoid to get to a too one-sided thesis and therefore opted for heterogeneity in the selection criteria. For example, we also chose low-rated movies, because we assumed that they might provide us with a different view on school shootings (and maybe more clichés regarding the perpetrator) than high-rated movies. Another criterion was a difference in interpretation of school shootings, for example whether the film considered social or personal causes, or whether stereotypes were used.

Table 4: Selected Movies, Country and Year of Release, Director, Rating and Short Description Provided by the Internet Movie Database

title	***country, year of release***	***director***	***IMDb rating***	***short description***
Bang Bang You're Dead	USA, 2006	Guy Ferland	8	Trevor is a troubled high school student, thanks to the effects of bullying.[24]
Elephant	USA, 2003	Gus van Sant	7.2	Several ordinary high school students go through their daily routine as two others prepare for something more malevolent.[25]
Heart of America	Germany, 2002	Uwe Boll	4.1	School shooting drama in a suburban high school, believed to have been inspired by the Columbine Massacre and possibly other school shootings.[26]
Home Room	USA, 2002	Paul F. Ryan	7.4	A high school shooting has repercussions for both town and students.[27]
Ihr könnt euch niemals sicher sein	Germany, 2008	Nicole Weegmann	7	An initially harmless situation at school becomes dangerous because of miscommunication and misunderstanding.
We need to Talk about Kevin	USA, 2011	Lynne Ramsay	7.5	Kevin's mother struggles to love her strange child, despite the increasingly vicious things he says and does as he grows up. But Kevin is just getting started, and his final act will be beyond anything anyone imagined.[28]

[24] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0288439/?ref_=nv_sr_4

[25] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0363589/?ref_=nv_sr_3

[26] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0279037/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

[27] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0264689/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

[28] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1242460/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

The procedure was as follows: first, we watched the movies to gain an overall impression. After writing down our global impression, we watched the movie several times while writing down our findings. As mentioned, these findings were structured by models by Vos, Plate, and Ganzevoort to help focus on relevant themes. Vos (2004) divided the analysis of movies into three layers: a narrative layer, a technical film layer, and a symbolic layer. This was the starting point of the analyses. I implemented Ganzevoort's model (2005) in the narrative layer and Plate's model (2008) in the symbolic layer.

a. Narrative layer

The narrative layer is concerned with the story elements and the way they shape the movie. It focuses on elements such as story structure, the viewpoint(s) from which the story is told, and the division of roles. A theological mode of thought was used as method for interpretation of the narrative layer of the films. A theological interpretation gives us an insight into the dimension of meaning and symbolization of identity. It is an interpretation with the focus on deepest concerns or what transcends human existence (Ganzevoort & Knecht, 2004). This approach does not concern religion in itself but searches for that which is often implicitly religious. What implicitly religious means in the context of the present study is related to Bailey's (1997) concept of *implicit religion* which he initially defined with the term *secular religion*. With this concept, Bailey discussed the idea of practices and beliefs in a secular context that can be seen as comparable with traditional religious frameworks and can thus function as meaning-giving constructs. In Chapter 7, the concept of implicit religion as meaning-giving constructs in relation to school shootings is considered in more depth.

Concerning cinema in the context of implicit religion, Fătu-Tutoveanu and Pintilescu (2012) argued "that going to the cinema involved a ritualistic

level - darkness, silence etc. - and a symbolic, both unified in the religious". But even more importantly, "religiousness is conveyed within cinema through the virtual world it creates, possessing a real impact in shaping identities, values, realities" (p. 191). In this context, films are seen as interpretations of the world that provide meaning and - in the context of the present study - interpretations of school shootings. Questions from Ganzevoort's (2005) model of analysing narrative structures in film were added to the analyses. Examples of these questions are: What feelings does the movie evoke? What is the ethical/philosophical/religious claim of the movie? Can we find cross-references to narratives from ethical/philosophical/religious traditions or are these traditions brought up for discussion? Which motives are ascribed to the school shooter in the movie? How does the movie interpret the event (malicious, tragic, personal, social)?[29]

To help us in our understanding of the interpretation of school shootings in these films, the questions were modified to suit the subject matter and to include a cinematographic dimension. All questions allowed open answers that would lead to a better understanding of the way the chosen films interpret the motives of school shooters (according to themselves and others) and how they portray the perpetrators.

b. Film technical layer

The technical layer covers aspects of the movie like mise-en-scene; framing; editing; camera movements and positioning; sound; and montage. We limited the analysis of this layer to aspects that stand out because of their relevance to the subject matter. We did this by focusing on questions such as the following:

[29] An overview of the leading questions (in Dutch) can be found in the Appendix.

Which film technical elements stand out in relation to the way school shootings and their perpetrators are recreated? Why do these elements stand out? How do these elements influence the viewer's perception of school shooters? What may the filmmakers have tried to convey with these film technical elements? We will only discuss elements of the film technical layer, which provides us with relevant insights regarding the questions above.

c. Symbolic layer

The filmmakers' normative claims and the way in which standards and values are present in the movie are the focus point of the symbolic layer. This layer is concerned, in our analysis, with questions such as the following: What does the movie show to be the cause of someone's becoming a school shooter? What underlying issues does the movie point out as causes or catalysts for school shootings? Does the issue of blame appear in the movie and if so, to whom or what is the blame directed? This layer also concerns itself with whether or not the movie contains explicit symbolic imagery. These questions are related to Plate's (2008) filmmaking-worldmaking approach. Plate defines film as a recreation of the world because it offers the audience a way to see things in a new perspective: "Viewers see the world, but see it in entirely new ways because everyday perceptions of space and time are altered. Such time and space travel are not foreign to the procedures of religious worldmaking" (2008, p. 15). In short, the making of a film is not far removed from the making of religion. Further, "We go to the cinema and to the temple for recreation, to escape, but we also crave the re-creative aspects, maintaining the canopy of meaning over our individual and social lives as we imagine how the world could be. What if?" (p. 17). Following Plate's filmmaking-worldmaking model, we included questions of the following type in our model: What thoughts and questions does the film evoke to me personally? Which ethical, religious or

philosophical appeals does the film make? Are there cross-references to normative narratives and symbols from religious traditions? The aim of the film analyses is to contribute to our understanding of popular perceptions of school shootings. In the next section, the results of the analyses are discussed. Interestingly, the various movies interpret the motives of school shooters in more ways than had been expected. Some of them mirror the popular perceptions I presented before, but others obviously try to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Since popular culture and school shooters seemingly intrigue and influence each other, a film analysis can help us to apprehend the re-created world/reality of school shootings and the implicated myths, symbols, beliefs and judgments. The following section provides an impression of this world"

.

4.4 *Bang Bang You're Dead* (USA, 2002, director Guy Ferland)

4.4.1 Narrative layer in *Bang Bang You're Dead*

"Welcome to the nightmare" is the first line of the movie. Trevor says this by way of introducing us to his school, which is in the grips of the post-Columbine insanity known as "Zero Tolerance." In the second minute of the film, the principal states, "Any suspicion of violence, physical or verbal, will result in immediate suspension or expulsion. That is Zero Tolerance." The film quickly exposes that the Zero Tolerance policy can have a stigmatizing effect on the one hand and on the other hand does not succeed in preventing bullying and social rejection.

Trevor is an intelligent student who is perceived as an outsider by most students and teachers. A year before he made a bomb threat against the

school football team and therefore is alienated as a troubled student and a risk for further violence. His return to school is noted by the faculty, students, the principal, and the police officers who work at the school, searching bags by the metal detectors at the door. He is carefully watched and this adds to the pressure of the pain the bomb threat caused in his family. He isolates himself socially. Through the lens of his camera, he takes pictures of the reality of his daily life, and the audience is invited to experience the events from his point of view. Trevor experiences bullying by the popular pupils, who are all members of the football team. He feels humiliated and ashamed and has the idea that his identity is changing because of the bullying. He fears that no one he cares about will ever see him who he really is.

One teacher refuses to stigmatize Trevor, Val Duncan. He is the kind of teacher who wants to make a difference in the lives of the students. He is initiator of the drama group at school and he decides to produce the play *Bang Bang You're Dead*. William Mastrosimone wrote the play *Bang Bang You're Dead* in 1999 to raise awareness of school shootings and its causes. Mastrosimone based his play on Kip Kinkel, who, after killing his parents, shot 27 of his classmates at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon on May 21, 1998. The one-act play is intended to be performed by students, for students. An Internet search shows that almost 20 years later the play is still performed. This play is about a young man who has committed a school shooting at the canteen of his school and is now confronted with his victims. Val gives the part of the school shooter to Trevor. He thinks that this would be a good idea because this way Trevor could explore his feelings of rage. The double layer in the narrative is interesting because the play confronts Trevor with the victims he never created because he did not go through with the bomb threat.

When parents learn of Val's plan to stage the play, they force him to move the school production off school grounds. They not only accuse him of glorifying violence with this play, they also cannot understand his choice to

give Trevor the lead role. After all, Trevor threatened to commit an attack before and is considered dangerous.

Jenny, also a member of the drama group, is his only friend until the Trogs,[30] a group of outsider students, invite Trevor to join them. They are also bullied and alienated at school and recognize the rage in Trevor. They become friends and sometimes they ride into the woods to shoot and blow things up. During these violent trips, they fantasize about getting revenge for the bullying. These boys' backgrounds are not elaborated. They are portrayed as stereotypes of school shooters: outsiders who are bullied and wear army clothes, with an extensive interest in weapons and violence. Stereotypes are also used to portray the "enemy," the popular boys who are the typical American football players, bullies, and machos who do not hesitate to humiliate others to feel superior themselves. One example is the scene when they *trash can* Trevor. *Trash canning* means violently forcing students into a trash can in front of other students. It is a method of bullying.

Trevor slides off into dark and violent fantasies about getting revenge for his suffering at school, caused by the members of the football team. These fantasies are reflected in a video he had to make as an assignment for school. The video contains disturbing images of gun violence against the football team. In this video he also reveals the constant bullying and its tremendous impact. After seeing the video, Trevor's parents, the school psychologist and the teachers seem to understand where Trevor is coming from, and they feel ashamed that they did not know what Trevor had to go through. The fact that he feels understood makes him eventually stop his friend from carrying out a shooting at their school.

[30] Trogs is short for *troglodytes* (people who lived in caves in prehistoric times). The name is given to a group of outsiders by the "popular" kids.

Trevor's character develops over the course of the narrative. He first is a loner and alienated from school and the whole community. Then he makes friends who are in the same situation as he is. They express their frustration with violence and fantasies of getting revenge. Initially, Trevor joins them in their frustration, but because of the play he learns to handle his frustration in another way. The adults in this movie stigmatize and reject the "strange" boy and therefore put him in a hopeless situation. Even his parents reject him. Only the drama teacher is willing and able to help Trevor handle his feelings through acting in a play.

4.4.2 Film technical layer in *Bang Bang You're Dead*

The film's first shot is made through Trevor's video camera. He is filming his arrival at school in the school bus. From his perspective, the audience follows him into school where he is immediately confronted with teasing comments by students in football jackets.

00:00:58: Hey Trevor, let's take a peak in the backpack.

00:01:39: Hey, Trashcan!

00:01:43: You blow up any schools lately?

Through the camera the audience becomes an "eyewitness" of the events and is challenged not to be a neutral bystander but to take a clear position on the subject. Experiencing some events through Trevor's eyes by way of his camera gives the audience a sense of Trevor's feelings and motivation. Cinematically, a number of cross-references with Columbine are made. For example, some video recordings of Trevor are almost identical with video recordings of the actual Columbine shooters that were made prior to the attack. The polarization at school becomes clear in the cafeteria. Each subculture has its own place. As a student you seemingly not only have to choose an identity

dictated by the subculture, you also have to make sure that you choose the "right" group or end up as a "freak."

The following speech is delivered to Jenny when she is looking for a place to sit down and eat lunch in the cafeteria:

> 00:06:07: You can't just sit where you want. You have to be Varsity or a Cheerleader to sit at this table. Or know everybody. That table's for the Druggies, Stoners, Deadheads, Burnouts, and the Hippies. That one, Preppies. Then you have the Skateboarders and Skateboard Chicks. Then Nerds and Techies. Up against the wall, the Wiggers, Hip-Hoppers, Rednecks, Goths, and all manner of Freaks, Troublemakers, Losers, Sluts, Gays, Floaters, and the Trogs…Troglodytes. Freakiest of the Freaks.

4.4.3 Symbolic layer in *Bang Bang You're Dead*

Social rejection and pigeonholing is interpreted as the cause for the school shooting. The events take place in an American high school. In the movie, school is a symbol of polarization and exclusion. Trash-canning is an act of humiliating students who do not fit in. On the one hand, by trash-canning others, the actors label them as trash, while on the other hand, it makes the victims feel like trash. School is a place where bullying and rejection can escalate to violence and murder. In the highly competitive culture of American high schools, the masculine, sporty kids are popular, but for the kids who do not fit this image, school can be a nightmare. The movie shows an image of school shooters which is similar to popular perception as identified in Chapter 3. The school shooting is caused by social exclusion and bullying. Trevor especially seems to be lonely. The adults stigmatize him as possibly dangerous and do not notice that he is bullied severely. Trevor also struggles with his identity. On the

one hand, others see him as a danger because of his previous threats to plant a bomb. By playing aggressive shooting games with his friends, he seems to want to meet this image others have. On the other hand, he is a boy drawn to theatre and poetry. This identity, however, does not fit into the macho world of an American high school and therefore makes him a target of bullies.

This movie implicitly attends to a number of existential themes, for example, the loneliness which, on the one hand, originates from exclusion and a highly competitive school environment. On the other hand, Trevor also excludes himself. He puts himself in the role of outsider by putting a camera between himself and reality. This way he is not a participant in life, only a witness. Another existential theme addressed in the movie is identity. The need to develop your own identify, especially when you are young, is restricted by the narrow-mindedness which dominates at school.

The themes found here, of struggles with isolation and identity, are discussed further in Chapter 5, where existential concerns found in egodocuments of school shooters are identified.

4.5 *Elephant* (USA, 2003, director: Gus van Sant)

4.5.1 Narrative layer in *Elephant*

The movie does not offer a single, connected narrative. It only shows us various situations in the life of adolescents. We are shown the routine of daily life at an American high school. We see scenes of the football team training, some boys break dancing, and without being given any context, we see girls throw up in the school restroom. We never see the whole picture, only a repetition of the last 15 minutes before the school shooting, each time from a different character's perspective.

We see high school students do what typical teenagers do: they date, make out, argue with their parents. Some kids are very outgoing and participate in sports, others are more the quite type. Alex is the latter. He gets picked on by some boys. Together with his friend Eric, we see him researching guns online and ordering firearms without any difficulty. Sometime later they sign for a mail package with a rifle in it. This happens with an ease as if they have ordered a t-shirt online. Alex and Eric drive to school, armed with various guns and bombs. They calmly walk into school and start shooting. We see students, who weave in and out during different scenes in the movie, get killed without any warning.

4.5.2 Film technical layer in *Elephant*

In the opening scene, we see a car swaying on a domestic road and hitting other cars. John, a student, is a passenger in this car while his drunk dad drives. John summons his dad to stop the car and to take his hands off the steering wheel. The movie thus starts with the image that the teenager is acting responsibly while the adult is the irresponsible one. Despite the fact that John obviously comes from a troubled home, he seems to be developing into a responsible adult. The other characters in the movie also constantly face the choice between good and bad. In some scenes we see bullying taking place but no context is given and the phenomenon is not probed further. It is almost like watching a police video which shows only what is happening without any explanation or interpretation. In the beginning, the viewer does not know which of the adolescents will develop into a shooter or even, without knowing more about the film, that there will definitely be a shooting. The movie does not provide clues, as if the movie maker is trying to stay objective. Van Sant's choice of repeating the narrative from different perspectives and presenting the movie as series of meandering takes puts the viewer in real time with victims and school

shooters. The latter is also emphasized by the camera work. The camera is often stationed behind the characters, and the audience watches the movie as participants in the events. But the various perspectives do not give us different insights into the events or different explanations of what is happening and why. They only show the terrifying fact that no victim has any idea of what is going to happen.

Eric and Alex, the actual shooters, do not differ much from the other characters. Their life seems to be monotonous. They think weapons are cool, and violence to them is a form of entertainment. They are outsiders with an interest in Nazism, and their friendship turns into a sexual relationship some hours before the shooting. They seem to be bored by their lives, and during their deed they seem to be disappointed that the shooting is not as exciting as they thought it would be. The scenes of the actual violence are bland and unimpressive. This is in marked contrast to how violence is usually presented in action movies. The shooting has no heroes and no excitement. Even the shooters themselves seem to be bored by their actions. In the re-created world of this movie, unthinkable violence seems to be normalized. Their plans involve suicide. Alex says, “Well this is it. We' re gonna die today. I've never even kissed anyone before, have you?” After the deed, Alex shoots and kills Eric. The movie is open to interpretations. It is possible that the filmmakers tried to make a shooting as unattractive as possible. Maybe they are aware of the fact that popular culture can be an inspiration for potential copy cats.

4.5.3 Symbolic layer in *Elephant*

The title refers to an English expression: the elephant in the room. This means that we do not want to see the obvious. In this case, the title probably means that we do not see what really goes on in the life of adolescents, nor consider that an adolescent could possibly become a school shooter. The film does not

explicitly point a finger at what causes a school shooting. Adolescents and adults live in different worlds. Teenagers struggle with eating problems, identity, and bullying, but the adults are absent and forsake the teenagers, leaving the characters alone with their questions and concerns. They cope with those without any guidance from adults, who are not aware of what is going on with the adolescents. Adults and adolescents seem to live in two separate worlds. Almost no interaction between teenagers and adults is shown in the movie. At the end of the film, Alex is going to kill a young couple. To pick which one of them to kill first, he begins reciting, "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe," a children's rhyme used to select a person in games. Van Sant underlines with this absurd ending the randomness of the choice of victims. The viewer does not get any suggestions of what happens now. Van Sant does not answer these questions. The school shooting happened and that's all.

Neither popular perceptions nor the existential dimension of the genesis of the school shooting are explicitly represented in *Elephant.* As we will see further on in Chapter 5, in reality, school shooters do express existential concerns such as questions about their identity. What these expressions are is discussed in Chapter 5 and will deepen our understanding of the genesis of a school shooting. However, Van Sant's message, if any, is that school shootings just happen: they are meaningless incidents. Having said that, the absence of adults is notable and could be related to the arguments discussed in Chapter 2.1, that possibly the shooters' relationship with their parents are factors in the process of becoming a school shooter. (Twemlow, 2003; Fox & Levin, 2005) However, a number of researchers contradict each other on 'the family argument'. On one hand, for example, O'Toole (1999) argued that a lack of familiarity and empathy is typical for families of school shooters. On the other hand, a number of researchers point out that shooters come from a variety of family situations (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The absence of (responsible) adults in *Elephant* should perhaps be interpreted not so much as cause for a school

shooting but as a comment on a lack of involvement of adults in the life of adolescence.

The approach that school shootings are purposeful behavior to the perpetrators, as discussed in Chapter 3, is not in any way attended to in the movie. With his objective, almost sterile approach, he also underlines the idea that understanding the genesis of school shooting cannot be achieved by solely studying the social circumstances or behavior of youth. Van Sant demonstrates that this does not lead to understanding of the phenomenon or to prevention. In this way, *Elephant* invites the viewer to look below the surface and search for underlying dimensions in the motives of shooters.

4.6 *Heart of America* (Germany, 2002, director: Uwe Boll)

4.6.1 Narrative layer in *Heart of America*

A clear example of a movie that mirrors popular perceptions is *Heart of America*. Let us first look at the main characters of the film. Not only do the three main characters, Dara, Barry and Daniel, come from different backgrounds, but their characters and personalities are very different too. Maybe this is the one factor in the narrative where the filmmaker deviates from popular perceptions and indicates that the typical school shooter does not exist.

Dara comes from a rich family, and her parents are almost never at home. At one point it is suggested that Dara, who is a drug user, is considering ending her life. She also has psychological problems and hears voices in her head. Daniel's father is a bully who belittles his son constantly. He even calls his son the Dark Lord. Consequently, Daniel cannot imagine a bright future for himself. He wants to prove to his father and all of his other bullies that he is stronger than they think. On the one hand, he feels powerless in relation to the humiliations he experiences; on the other hand, he feels superior to others,

expressed in statements that others are worthless compared to him. The third main character, Barry, is raised by a single mother, who is affectionate and loving. He too is a victim of bullying and harassment at school and does not know how to defend himself. He feels humiliated and seeks revenge. Interestingly, in the end, Barry is the one who decides not to participate in the shooting, perhaps because unlike Dara and Daniel, he has a loving home. This is consistent with the popular perception, discussed in Chapter 3, that school shooters come from broken homes. Although the panel considered a broken home as less typical, in media coverage it was among the thirteen most frequently found characteristics.



Cover of DVD *Heart of America*
(use of picture is approved by Uwe Boll).

Also relevant is the fact that Barry and Daniel are played by actors who are real look-alikes of the Columbine shooters Eric and Dylan. This is not the only cross-reference to the Columbine shooting. Before he shoots a boy, Daniel says, “This is your fault,” words which are also found in the manifestos of many school shooters. In Chapter 5, I will further examine such autobiographical expressions of school shooters.

4.6.2 Film technical layer in *Heart of America*

The scenes of Barry and Daniel being bullied are brutal and very explicit. The boys are terrorized by their peers. When they seek revenge, one can almost sympathize with the idea of getting back at the bullies. The bullies are presented as stereotypes. They are very macho, terrorize other kids, and even rape a mentally-challenged girl. Their bullying Barry and Daniel also involves sexual violence, which takes place on the school’s football field, a location that acts as clear symbol of trials of strength, competition, and masculinity. This is not a place where boys who perform less well physically are equivalent to the athletically-gifted boys boys. This can be linked to the theory that hypermasculinity in American society and especially at American high schools is an important factor in causing school shootings, as discussed in Chapter 3.

4.6.3 Symbolic layer in *Heart of America*

As mentioned before, the movie contains a number of clichés. The bullies are football players, talk about girls in a derogatory way, and one of them even raped a girl to prove his masculinity. The interpretation of what causes the school shooting is very similar to popular perception. The perpetrators come from broken homes and are bullied, while psychiatric disorders are suggested, and drugs and sexual abuse are mentioned. Nevertheless, the movie also

includes attention to the role of a number of existential concerns about identity, the meaning of life, isolation and death.

Identity issues are addressed implicitly. For example, the boys' masculinity is questioned symbolically when they are forced to perform sexual acts in front of the bullies. They try to regain it by adopting a superior identity of avenging angels who will punish their abusers. In a different example, Dara's feelings of meaninglessness almost end in her suicide. All three main characters in fact feel isolated and lonely. These existential concerns are raised but not expanded on in the narrative, but this movie is the first among those analyzed so far to link existential concerns to the motive for school shootings. In fact, school shooters actually express existential concerns in their autobiographic expressions. In the next chapter, we will learn more about this existential dimension of school shootings. At the end of the movie, a powerful message is sent to the audience, especially to those who are in a similar situation as the school shooters. Barry, who decides not to follow through with the shooting, walks away from the event and crosses the football field. This is the place he suffered from severe bullying and experienced terrible humiliation. Despite all that, he decides not to get revenge by murdering his attackers, saying instead, "There are other ways to take a stand."

4.7 *Home Room* (USA, 2002, Paul F. Ryan)

4.7.1 Narrative layer in *Home Room*

Alicia, a witness of a school shooting, is a "goth" student. She is suspected by the police to be an accomplice of the shooter. Alicia visits fellow student Deanna in the hospital because the school principal told her to do so. Both were in the same homeroom when a classmate walked in and began to shoot. Six students died and two others, including Deanna, were seriously wounded. Alicia

herself was unharmed. Detective Martin Van Zandt suspects Alicia to be an accomplice of the shooter because she not only knew the shooter but also had contact with him the night before the killings. When he interrogates her, he literally says, “We just want to know *why*?” However, the movie does not answer this question. The viewer can interpret this as a statement on the part of the director that this question cannot be answered at all. There is no possible reason for such a crime. The detective at one point simply concludes that “school is no place for kids anymore.” The police captain puts Van Zandt under a lot of pressure. He wants Van Zandt to arrest someone in connection with the attack and wants them to find someone to blame as soon as possible. His aim is not to understand why something like this could happen but to find someone who is responsible, bring him or her to justice, and let everyone go on with life. Meanwhile, the school principal is more concerned with helping his students heal than finding someone to blame. He thinks Alicia should visit Deanna, who shows signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. At first sight, the two girls cannot differ more. Alicia is a typical outsider and comes from a single parent home. She despises society and holds it in contempt. Meanwhile, Deanna comes from a wealthy family, is successful at school and is popular with her classmates. But soon it becomes apparent that the two girls have a lot in common. The seemingly cheerful Deanna has psychological scars as a result of the shooting. Alicia is also battling with problems, including a suicide attempt in the past. Both try to cope with their dissimilar traumas.

4.7.2 Film technical layer in *Home Room*

The film starts with only the deafening sound of police sirens. The first take shows someone in black clothes with a weapon in his hand. Knowing the topic of the movie, the first thought as viewer is that this person is a school shooter. The clothes and weapon mirror the popular perceptions of a school shooters as

discussed in Chapter 2. But seconds later, the viewer realizes that he or she was fooled. The person is actually a police officer. As he looks around, the perspective changes and we see what he sees: young people, lying dead on the ground of a classroom. We see a painting of President Washington: this is America. There is no visual of the school shooter, although we learn from the narrative that he killed his parents before the shooting and that he was killed by the police.

4.7.3 Symbolic layer in *Home room*

In contrast to the movies discussed above, the school shooter in *Home Room* is not portrayed on screen. For the director, then, the most important question appears not to be who the person behind a school shooting is, but how people who take part in such an event can deal with the effects. The movie highlights the devastating aftershocks of the event rather than the event itself. The viewer learns that six students were killed in a school shooting. The shooter, who also killed his parents before he went to school, was killed by police during a confrontation after the actual shooting. The only thing we learn about the shooter is that he had never had trouble at school before, that he had good grades and that Alicia was his only friend. The fact that the role of the school shooter is not elaborated at all and we do not learn much about him or his motives seems to lead to the conclusion that the director is not interested in the shooter as such. Regardless of the shooter's issues and motives, a school shooting is a meaningless, malicious event. The movie offers an appeal not to direct too much attention at the perpetrator, but instead to consider his victims.

The beginning of the movie holds a number of symbols. The fact that the viewer is fooled by the filmmaker can be interpreted as a warning not to be fooled by popular perceptions and stereotypes of school shooters. Interesting is the take with the picture of George Washington. He was the president of the

United States at the time the Constitution came into force in 1789. The Second Amendment of the Constitution protects the right of the people to keep and bear arms and was adopted in 1791, also during Washington's presidency. It may be that with this painting Paul Ryan points at the American laws which make weapons easily accessible for American youth as underlying cause for school shootings. The motives of the perpetrator or the meaning of the shooting are not discussed. The movie only addresses the victims and the traumatic consequences of the shooting they have to face.

4.8 *Ihr könnt euch niemals sicher sein* (Germany, 2008, director: Nicole Weegmann)

The title means "You can never be sure." What do parents know for sure about their children, especially when they are teenagers?

4.8.1 Narrative layer in *Ihr könnt euch niemals sicher sein*

The film starts with a verbal conflict between Oliver, who is 17 years old, and his female German teacher. He had an assignment to write an essay about Goethe's *Werther*. Instead, he actually wrote a rap song with dark but virtuoso lyrics. His German teacher gives the rap zero points. Oliver is furious. Later in the movie, he will discuss this event with his psychiatrist in the following dialogue:

> Oliver: "Because I did not write precisely what 10.597 idiots wrote before me, I get zero points." Psychiatrist: "But you know what she

wants to hear, don't you? And you know how you can get a better grade." Oliver: "But I don't want to function like a brainless clone."

When Oliver leaves the classroom because of the argument, a note falls out of his bag. The German teacher reads the note and is daunted by its content: "I'll shoot you all." Immediately, she suspects Oliver of planning a school shooting and the police are brought in. They search Oliver's room and find violent computer games, newspaper cuttings about school shootings, and an old pistol, an heirloom of his grandfather. By now, everyone believes that he is dangerous, even his parents. Oliver feels really disappointed and isolated because his parents do not defend him. Shouldn't they know him better than that? The psychiatrist, who gets involved to assess if Oliver is a danger, concludes that he has issues typical for a teenager. She says that his parents should talk with him more and should take him more seriously. But no one really pays attention to the psychiatrist's assessment. Oliver has come to be seen as a bad apple, and there is nothing he can do about it. As he says, "If you are caught even before you did something, then you cannot prove that you would not have done it." At the end of the movie, Oliver succeeds in proving everyone wrong. Katja, a friend of Oliver's who actually has psychiatric problems, tries to kill the hated German teacher. She blames her for Oliver's problems and wants revenge. Oliver prevents this attack and becomes a hero for the teachers, the principal and his parents. This is a highly interesting element of the movie. Contrary to the hyper-masculinity theory discussed in Chapter 2 and the theory of redemptive violence by Walter Wink discussed in the next chapter, the hero does not beat evil by using violence but by preventing it.

4.8.2 Film technical layer in *Ihr könnt euch niemals sicher sein*

Because of the subjective point of view of the movie's opening shot, the viewer has the feeling that everyone is staring at him in a disapproving way. But it turns out to be Oliver, a 17-year-old student, who is stared at. Because of this introduction, the viewer identifies himself with Oliver from the beginning. The message of the movie is already made in this first shot. Most adults have a clear opinion of what is good and what is bad, and apply this opinion to ethical, aesthetic, and other life standards; if an adolescent does not fit the picture, he or she will be punished. Moreover, the adolescents become stigmatized.

4.8.3 Symbolic layers in Ihr könnt Euch niemals sicher sein

Notably, the movie starts with a disagreement between Oliver and his German teacher about an assignment about Goethe's Werther. In Chapter 2, the Werther effect (Philips, 1974) was discussed in connection with copycat behavior as one of assigned causes of school shootings in theoretical approaches. But beyond this possible connection, copycat behavior is not referenced in the movie. The actual attack is interpreted as a tragic event. Katja is mentally ill, and in her reality, she is helping a friend by killing a person who causes him a lot of trouble. The malicious side of the story is that Oliver is stigmatized because he is different and because he refuses to fit in. Even his parents distrust him and that leaves him in total isolation. This is also symbolized by the hooded sweatshirt he wears. He uses the hood to close himself off from a world that does not accept him and where he feels that he does not belong. He tries to express his concerns through rap music, but his music is not understood by the people he tries to reach, such as his teachers and parents. They do not speak the

same language, as in the eyes of adults, rap is violent and not socially acceptable. Nevertheless, his lyrics tell a strong story:

> Ihr schiebt Paranoia und legt überall euer Feuer. Euer Spießerleben kotzt mich an, euch ist es lieb und teuer. Ständig ist euch angst und bange, liegt beklemmt wie in ‚ner Zange, und kommt mit euern Gefühlen nicht zugange. Mit eurem peinlichen Geschrei führt ihr nur Chaos herbei. Macht die Augen auf: es gibt keinen Amoklauf! sagt Goodbye zur Hysterie und fickt euch adäquat ins Knie. Ihr habt eure Codes und ihr habt eure Regeln und behandelt die Jugend wie Flegel. Eine wie Katja, die wollt ihr nicht sehn und ihre verlorene Kindheit ist für euch kein Problem: einfach fort mit ihr und schließt sie schnell weg. Ihr steckt sie in die Klapse, für euch ist sie wie Dreck. Ihr habt eure Norm und verschleiert ihr. Ihr sagt nicht die Wahrheit. Mein Name ist Oliver, meine Rhymes sind brutal, doch die Opfer eurer Kriege sterben täglich global. Ich scheiß auf eure normen. Bei mir regieren Umgangsformen. Ihr habt eure Codes, Codes, die die Jugend nicht versteht. Ihr scheißt auf uns—Hauptsache ihr gebt! Doch ich wünsch mir eine Welt, in der mich Eltern versteh‘n. Ich versuch nur auf meine Art den eigenen Weg zu geh’n.[31]

[31] Roughly translated, this means the following: “You are all paranoid and you see problems everywhere. I hate your philistine life, but to you your life is oh so precious. You are so scared all the time, you are jammed and keep yourself at bay, you cannot

This rap, which ends the movie, tells a story about his existential questions: his longing for freedom, his search for meaning in life, and his need to be accepted and understood. Chapter 5 discusses how actual school shooters express similar existential concerns in their egodocuments. But first let us turn to the last analyzed movie in this study.

4.9 *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (USA, 2011, director: Lynne Ramsay)

4.9.1 Narrative layer in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

As a baby, Kevin rarely cries, and as he gets older, he refuses to talk or to allow himself to be potty-trained. By doing so, he gains a manipulative dominance over his mother. In the presence of his father, he acts as a normal child and Eva, his mother, is convinced that Kevin is consciously playing with her mind.

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handle your feelings. You cause only chaos with your embarrassing yelling. Open your eyes: there is no running amok. Say goodbye to hysteria and fuck yourself. You have your manners and your rules and treat youth as idiots. You ignore people as Katja and you do not care that she has lost her childhood: get rid of her and lock her up. You lock her up in the crazy house, to you she is like trash. You are lying all the time. My name is Oliver, my rhymes are brutish, but the victims of your wars die daily worldwide. Fuck your norms. I have other ways of behaving. You have your codes, codes, which youth do not understand. You fuck us all. I long for a world where my parents understand me. I only want to live my life my way."

Kevin's father believes that he is a wonderful son. He even expresses an impression that Eva is an emotionally unavailable mother, which leads to problems in their marriage. But Kevin appears to have no empathy, also intimidating and severely harming his younger sister Celia. When his father buys him a set of bow and arrows, a single camera shot shows Kevin changing from child to teenager. With this bow, Kevin will kill his father and sister and several children at school. He purposely committed his deed before his 16th birthday because he knows that he will be judged as a juvenile. Near his 18th birthday, Eva visits him in prison. "You don't look happy," Eva says to him. "Have I ever?" he responds.

4.9.2 Film technical layer in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

This film, which is adapted from the 2003 novel by Lionel Shriver, starts in silence. We see open French doors, wind gently swaying the curtains. The viewers follow the camera through the doors into light. Suddenly the scenery changes. We see half-naked people tossing and turning in tomato puree. Instinctively, the viewer thinks of a bloodbath. This turns out to be some sort of annual Italian tomato festival, but the image is disturbing nevertheless. One woman is lifted up by a couple of people. We later learn that she is Kevin's mother, Eva. As a crucified Jesus, she is carried above the others, where she gets covered in tomato juice. This powerful image symbolizes the role of the mother of a school shooter.

4.9.3 Symbolic layer in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

The audience experiences the story from the mother's perspective. It is almost told as a horror story. Kevin, Eva's son and the shooter, is presented as either psychopathic or evil. Maliciously, he terrorizes his mother and has done so

almost since the beginning of his life. At least, that is the way she sees it. For the audience, there is often the impossible question of whether nature or nurture caused the school shooting. There is an implicit suggestion that Eva, who was Kevin's reference person during his formative years, must have something to do with Kevin's development into the terrifying person that he becomes. The question of whether or not she is responsible is just as difficult to answer as the question of why Kevin decides to kill his father, sister and classmates with a bow.

As mentioned above, the movie is told from Eva's perspective. Eva blames herself and gets blamed for the deeds of her son. The color red is a symbol of this in a number of scenes. First is the tomato puree scene in the beginning when Eva gets crucified symbolically. She is crucified for her son's deeds, similar to the doctrine that Jesus Christ died for the sins of humanity. Eva's house gets soiled with red paint and during the movie she tries to remove the paint. This is also a reference to a biblical symbol and makes us think of Exodus, when God commands Moses to mark the doors of the Israelites with blood, to render safe their firstborn sons. While Eva is trying to remove the paint, her fingers get dirty with red paint which she tries frantically to wash off. In another biblical theme, washing one's hands is a symbol of innocence (Psalms 26:6, 73:13 ; Matthew 27:24). Lying in bed, she remembers the night of her son's conception. The room is lit with a red light thanks to red paint vengeful locals have thrown on the front of her house after Kevin's attack at school. She remembers having sex with her husband and the red light functioned like a warning sign cautioning her to stop. The alarm clock displays that it is one minute after twelve, that is, it is too late, symbolically.

The film poses two big questions: where does "pure evil" come from, and how should we as a society respond to it? The film never attempts to resolve the nature/nurture debate regarding what makes a boy into a killer. When Eva asks Kevin in prison, face to face, why he has done it, the answer

does not give the audience closure. He simply does not know anymore. When Eva asks Kevin why he didn't kill her, however, he replies, "You don't want to kill your audience." Throughout the movie, he made his mother the only witness of his evil side. This was also the reason that his father never shared the opinion that something was wrong with Kevin. This also indicates a message Ramsey seems to have included in the movie implicitly: you should really know your child, and parents should not turn a blind eye to the possibility that they are deeply troubled. Moreover, Kevin's reply to his mother's question triggers a comparison: one of the school shooters discussed in Chapter 6 killed his parents before the school shooting, explaining in a note that he killed them because "It would destroy them. The embarrassment would be too much for them. They couldn't live with themselves." [32] Kevin does not want to spare his mother all that; on the contrary, he purposely lets her survive. Her survival means that she has to feel shame and guilt; she has to deal with blame and carry the sins of her son on her shoulders. This reminds us of the beginning of the movie when Eva is carried as a crucified Christ. Eva has to carry the heavy burden of her son's guilt, even as she prepares his return from prison.

4.10 What we learned from the analyses of movies about school shootings

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, among the genres of popular culture, it is film which seems to be most inspired by school shootings. At least 100 films and episodes of television series about the topic can be found in an

[32] Quotation taken from Kip Kinkel's writings, available at <http://www.schoolshooters.info>.

Internet search. Therefore, an analysis of only six movies can offer only a tentative answer of how filmmakers interpret the motives of school shooters.

Notably, the interpretation is as diverse in the movies as we saw in popular perceptions and empirical studies. There are interpretations featuring social causes, such as bullying and hyper-masculinity, and personal causes, such as psychiatric problems. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, the question is cast as part of the nature/nurture debate, as the possibility is discussed that someone can be just born "evil." What is interesting is that being "evil" is not linked explicitly to mental illness. Following Ganzevoort (2008), it can be stated that in this film the school shooting is interpreted as a malicious event, and even more, Kevin is depicted as malicious. The only one who suspects Kevin's hateful character is his mother Eva. Kevin, who does not show any remorse or feelings of guilt, purposely spares his mother's life to make her a witness of his cruel deed. Although she is also a victim of the events, she gets blamed by others for what her son did. This reminds us of the beginning of the movie when Eva is carried as a crucified Christ, who, as Romans 4:5 says, was handed over to die because of our sins.

In *Elephant*, the director steers clear from any explicit interpretation about the causes. This, of course, can also be seen as the statement that school shootings cannot be explained. What makes the film so daunting for the viewer is just this absence of interpretation of the filmmaker. What we see are ordinary kids, living ordinary teenage lives, yet among them are school shooters who are prepared to kill. It reminds of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* from 1963 and her hypothesis that people who commit terrible misdeeds may not be crazy criminals, but rather ordinary people. Nothing indicates what makes the shooters decide to kill other students. This uncertainty is what troubles us the most. If there are no reasons, what can we do to prevent shootings from happening? If there are no signs, how can we identify potentially dangerous youth? To me, watching *Elephant* increased the

need to understand the genesis of school shootings. After studying the results of different theoretical approaches (Chapter 2), my conviction remains that studying this phenomena from the "outside, " that is, the context of school, society, or family, will not lead to new insights.

In *Home Room,* the focus is on the victims of a school shooting and the traumas it causes. In addition, by giving the perpetrator no attention, one can conclude that the message of this movie is to deny the shooter the questionable fame he gets by media coverage.

Instead, it is implied, we should focus on the terror these events cause. In a related but different message, there is a prominent aspect in both *Ihr könnt Euch niemals sicher sein* and *Bang Bang You're Dead* of sending the viewer prophetic warnings of what can happen if the world does not change for the better, as discussed above in the discussion of filmmaking and world-making. Specifically, adults who do not listen to adolescents and do not try to understand their way of thinking can easily stigmatize children who do not (want to) fit in. One's identity is determined by how others view you and interact with you. When others see you as outcast and dangerous, you become just that. This self-fulfilling prophecy is also explained in Myer (2002): "One's reputation, whether false or true, cannot be hammered, hammered, hammered, into one's head without doing something to one's character" (p. 142).

Heart of America contains the most stereotypical depiction of school shooters, but also includes a number of existential questions experienced by young people. On the one hand, implicitly, all movies prompt reflection on existential topics in the viewer. They are, in different ways, expressions of human lives. They show us how people, like us, cope with traumas, social isolation, identity and the struggle of creating meaning in their lives, things we all experience in life. On the other hand, the filmmakers do not search explicitly for what drives the perpetrators. What we see in the movies is similar to what

we see in the theories of what causes these events, which I divided into two approaches: one which accounts for individual causes, like mental illness, and a second that points out social causes, such as bullying. This division can also be found in the movies analyzed here. Moreover, a number of stereotypes of school shooters are observed. In this sense, popular perception and popular culture not only influence each other but also endorse mutual notions of the causes of school shootings. To break through this reciprocal influence, I propose to listen to the school shooters themselves.

In the 2002 documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, filmmaker Michael Moore asked the American singer Marilyn Manson, who was blamed by many for the Columbine shooting because of the violent lyrics in his music (see Chapter 1), what he would say to the Columbine shooters if he could talk to them. "I would not say a single word to them," he answered. "I would listen to what they have to say and that's what no one did." Indeed, listening to what school shooters say about their experiences in life and how these experiences influenced their motives would logically lead to a deeper understanding of the causes of their deed. However, school shooters are either dead by suicide or imprisoned. In the cases that they are released from prison, they have new identities because of the young age they had when they committed their crime. But many did discuss their hatred of the world and existential loneliness in their manifestos, suicide letters, diary entries or social media updates, many of which are publicly available. Studying these autobiographical expressions gives us the opportunity to "listen" to what they have to say. In the next part, therefore, I analyze these egodocuments and search for the existential concerns they express. Although the analysis of concrete texts and videos helps us gain an insight into the existential concerns of school shooters, we must acknowledge nonetheless that the living person behind the text will elude us. In Chapter 1, I reflected on Tolstaya's (2013) thoughts that the researcher, who is trying to reach the existential dimension of another person, has to realize that he or she

will never fully understand "the man in the man." To get a grip on the egodocuments, I will use Koole, Greenberg and Pyszczynski's (2006) concept, which is based on Yalom (1980), of five existential concerns. However, honoring Tolstaya's arguments, and being aware of the impossibility of fully understanding the experiences of the Other, I will indicate where "the man in the man" eludes me at the end of the next chapter. Having said this, to get to a deeper understanding of the genesis of school shootings, I will have to interpret the identified existential concerns in a more conceptual way. I want to understand how the existential concerns in the studied cases led to a school shooting. My argument in Chapter 3 was that none of the diverse scientific approaches to school shootings has so far addressed the issue of shooters expressing existential concerns. I argued that this gap in the body of knowledge means that we do not as yet fully understand the processes students go through in becoming a school shooter. Consequently, in Chapter 6 I use the concept of *implicit religion* (Bailey, 1999) to identify the role that existential concerns play in the genesis of school shootings. We will see that school shootings are meaning-giving constructs and can be seen as implicit religion. Of course, the problem of not reaching "the man in the man" plays a role in studying this concept as well as in examining existential concerns.

Part three: Existential concerns of school shooters and implicit religion

5 The existential concerns in autobiographical expressions of school shooters prior to their deed

As discussed in Chapter 2, researchers have approached this issue solely from their own fields. However, school shootings arise from a number of different risk factors (Robertz, 2004; Newman et al., 2004; Henry, 2009). Unfortunately, studying isolated factors, such as mental illness or bullying, as a cause of school shootings does not provide reliable answers but leads to a narrowed perspective of the problem and possible polarization in the discussion about prevention. To overcome this polarization, Böckler, Seeger, and Spitzer (2013) published an international and interdisciplinary overview of research, cases studies and concepts for prevention. It forms a collection of the latest empirical findings and theoretical concepts and claims to "turn attention to the violence-affirming setting in its entirety" including socialization; institutional circumstances of school and study; and biographical, psychodynamic background. The book contains articles by leading researchers of school shootings and their most relevant findings. However, what is missing in this work is a reflection on the relations between the different findings.

When we see the diverse answers to the questions posed in the various scientific disciplines, we can determine that there is no consensus regarding the answer to the question *Why do school shootings happen?* Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 2, often the various answers contradict each other. There is also the problem that for every underlying cause researchers ascribe to school shootings one can state that many other kids experience the same and do not become school shooters. Consequently, it must be clear by now that there are limits to the exclusively empirical understanding of human behavior (Harcum, 1996). Traditional scientific research methods have not given us a gratifying answer to

the essential question *why* children kill other children. Therefore, a complementary approach is necessary, one which focuses on the *meaning* school shooters assign to their deeds. Analysing the existential questions of school shooters can help us understand this aspect, for example, by questioning to what extent they consider their life meaningful, and how they deal with existential loneliness versus the need of belonging. Despite the obvious relevance of such a consideration, the aspect of existential concerns the perpetrators deal with prior to their crime is missing entirely in the research of school shootings. Of course there is a practical problem in such an endeavor, namely that researchers are mostly not able to speak to school shooters to interview them about questions they face regarding the meaning of their existence. As discussed in Chapter 4, they are either dead by suicide, imprisoned or have a new identity because they were juveniles when they committed the crime. But, as discussed in Chapter 2, school shooters almost always leave us egodocuments such as videos, suicide letters, comments on social media such as Facebook, graffiti, or school essays. In these documents one can find statements about existential themes such as life and death, love and hate, isolation, and the struggle with their identity. The existential concerns in these expressions can help us to understand the crux of their motives. The aim of this chapter is therefore to complement the existing body of knowledge by answering the question: Which existential concerns are found in autobiographical expressions of school shooters prior to their crime? Once these concerns are identified, we have to ask if they seem to have a role in the genesis of a school shooting.

According to Frankl (1977), in Western society man feels the boundaries of the expectations of the other and these boundaries can make us marionettes on the strings of conformism and/or totalitarianism. Frankl also states that this can result in a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness. The loss of meaning possibly causes existential frustration and the wish to escape

from a life experienced as meaningless. Escape can happen in the form of drugs, suicide or violence. Hegel and Sartre identified violence as a way to overcome limits which frustrate personal freedom and meaningful actions (Stigliano, 1983; Diamond, 1996). Notably, adolescents often express their existential frustration through violent behavior (Attig, 1996; Brown, 1996). This could be important to consider when we explore the existential dimension of school shootings. Without denying the obvious ethical boundaries, we should acknowledge that violence, in some cases, provides an existential reward (Carlson, 2003). Before presenting the results of the analyses of the egodocuments, however, it is necessary to reflect on how existential concerns are considered for this analysis.[33]

5.1 Existential concerns as addressed in this chapter

Existential concerns, as addressed in this chapter, are related to the view of life and death, the freedom of the individual and the responsibility for one's actions, the awareness that one is fundamentally alone, and the problem of meaning (Yalom, 1980). Ernest Becker (1973) even argued that the fear of death is the foundation of all existential concerns. He suggested that it is the fear of losing our own life which makes us use violence against others. By killing others, we create an illusion of being invulnerable in an attempt to deny the reality of our mortality.

Based on Yalom's seminal work, Koole, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2006) further developed the five major existential concerns of death, isolation, identity, freedom, and meaning. These originate from the knowledge that death is inescapable, that identity, beliefs, and values are uncertain, that the array of

[33] This chapter is an adaptation of Pfeifer & Ganzevoort (2016).

choices one has is bewildering, and that essentially everyone is alone. Although these concerns are traditionally discussed in the field of philosophy, Koole et al. empirically investigated the role these concerns play in psychological functioning to understand how these issues affect human behavior and experience. According to Koole (2008), "Existential concerns are a major force in human behavior, and that ignoring these concerns only serves to deepen the psychological conflicts that are associated with them." The Table below indicates how the various existential concerns are related to psychological conflicts.

Table 5: The Five Existential Concerns and the Existential Problems They Represent (Koole et al., 2006)

Existential Concerns	***Existential Problem***
Death	Psychological conflict of people between their mortality and the desire to live forever
Isolation	Wish to be connected to others versus experiences of being rejected; realization that one's subjective experience of reality can never be fully shared
Identity	A clear sense of who one is and how one fits into the world versus uncertainties because of conflicts between self-aspects, unclear boundaries between self and non-self, or limited self-insight
Freedom	Experience of free will versus external forces on behavior and the burden of responsibility for one's choices in response to a complex array of alternatives
Meaning	Desire to believe life is meaningful versus events and experiences that appear random or inconsistent with one's bases of meaning

Experimental studies point out that those existential concerns have an immense influence on people's emotions, thoughts and deeds (Koole et al., 2006). The question addressed in this chapter is what role - if any - these concerns play in the lives of school shooters prior to their deed. For this, seven cases were selected from Europe and the United States. Before the outcome of the analysis is presented in section 5.3, though, the next section discusses the method that was used in more detail.

5.2 Searching for existential concerns in egodocuments of school shooters

Selected school shooters and material

To answer the leading question, original egodocuments and videos in English and German were used because crucial information could be lost in translation from other languages the present researcher is not familiar with. The selection was restricted to documents and videos which the perpetrators had produced themselves prior to the shooting and which had a direct reference to the crime and/or his existential concerns. Unless otherwise stated, all original expressions of the school shooters and transcriptions of their videos were retrieved from www.schoolshooters.info. Langman, the author of this website, is a psychologist and the author of the book *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (2009). He is a sought-after expert on the psychology of youths who commit rampage school shootings. The FBI National Academy, Homeland Security, and the State Department have consulted him as an expert regarding school shootings. He has done research on school shooters for more than 20 years and was given numerous awards for his research. Therefore I consider the material on his website appears as trustworthy. Moreover, texts from the

Columbine shooters are retrieved from the FBI (FBI, 1999), who published an investigation report on its website.

The chosen egodocuments contain explanatory narratives, meaning that the shooters justify their planned actions and give reasons for the shooting. The contents of perpetrators' original statements referring to the planned shooting are analyzed with content analyses. The seven cases are selected because an adequate amount of trustworthy material was available. Other shooters were excluded due to insufficient material; it was essential that material was trustworthy and extensive enough to make a valid analysis. Egodocuments written in German were translated by the present researcher since I have knowledge of German and English. In Table 6 below, the seven school shooters whose documents were analyzed are presented.

Table 6: Selected School Shooters and Materials

Name	***Age***	***Incident***	***Impact***	***Material***
Luke Woodham	16	Mississippi, USA: October 1, 1997, Pearl High School, Pearl	Kills his mother and two students at school; serving three life terms and additional 140 years in prison.	Several writings: 4 pages
Kipland Kinkel	15	Oregon, USA: May 21, 1998, Thurston High School, Springfield	After killing his parents he kills two people at school; serving a 111-year sentence without parole.	Journal, essay: 5.5 pages
Eric Harris Dylan Klebold	18 17	Colorado, USA: April 20, 1999, Columbine High School, Columbine	13 people killed, shooters commit suicide.	Journal, writings in school planner: Harris 2.5 pages; Klebold 3.5 pages
Sebastian Bosse	18	Germany, Europe: November 20, 2006, Geschwister Scholl Schule, Emsdetten	5 people injured by firearm, shooter commits suicide.	Suicide note: 3 pages

Seung-Hui Cho	23	Virginia, USA: April 16, 2007, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg	32 people killed, shooter commits suicide.	Manifesto: 9 pages
Pekka-Eric Auvinen	18	Finland, Europe: November 7, 2007, Jokela High School, Tuusula	8 people killed, shooter commits suicide.	3 online documents, confession video: 9.5 pages

5.2.1 Process of analyzing the texts

In exploring a new reading of the motives of school shooters, a qualitative method was chosen to analyze the egodocuments. As starting point of the qualitative analysis sensitizing concepts (Padgett, 2004) were used, which give the researcher "a sense of how observed instances of a phenomenon might fit within conceptual categories" (Bowen, 2006, p. 7-8). This approach contrasts inductive analyses. The latter means "that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (Patton, 1980, p. 306) while sensitizing concepts "merely suggest directions along which to look" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). The sensitizing concepts that appeared appropriate to meet the research questions of this study were the concept of the five existential concerns, which Koole, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2006) developed, building on Yalom (1980): death, isolation, freedom, and meaning, and identity. Using these concepts of existential concerns, I started coding with the predetermined codes using QDA Miner qualitative data analysis software. If I could not assign a code to an expression, I decided if I needed to form a new category or could assign a subcategory to an existing code. The five existential concerns were used as the main coding categories to analyze the text. The subcategories were

developed inductively. For example, the expressions *I want to die* or *I will kill myself* are found in the texts and therefore the subcategory suicide was attached to the main coding category death. This leads to the following list of subcategories:

- Death: revenge, murder, suicide and mortality
- Isolation: feeling outcast, loneliness, rejection.
- Identity: feelings of superiority self-image (resulting from how school shooters sees themselves, how others see them, how school shooters perceives others as seeing them), self-esteem, self-concept (beliefs about oneself).
- Freedom: responsibility, free will.
- Meaning: hope, faith, purpose.

The egodocuments were first analyzed on a case-by-case basis. When shooters acted in pairs (e.g., Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold), their statements were analyzed both individually and as a pair. A secondary analysis was performed on the whole corpus.

As first step in the analysis, I used methods of quantitative content analysis (Bortz & Döring, 2006), looking at how frequently existential concerns occurred in the texts using QDA Miner. For this purpose, the material was divided into text segments, based on structure and content. For example, if the perpetrator wrote about death and then changed the subject to feelings of isolation within a single document, that text was divided into two segments. If he changed from introspective thoughts to addressing an audience directly, each was also counted as a new segment. Likewise, if he changed to writing in capital letters for one or more sentences, it was treated as a segment. In video material, a new segment was considered to start after a pause in the monologue.

The smallest segment was one sentence in length, while the largest segment consisted of eight sentences. The number of segments varied between

cases, ranging from 59 segments for Sebastian to 141 segments for Eric, with an average of 71 segments. Following this first step, the relative importance of the various concerns for the perpetrators could be assessed.

The following ranges were used: top frequency (TF) when a concern was found in more than 60% of the text; high frequency (HF) for occurrences between 41%-60%; medium frequency (MF) for 21%-40%; and low frequency (LF) for 1%-20%.

In a second step, I analyzed how the existential concerns were valued in the text (see "valence analyses" in Bortz & Döring, 2006). The range was positive, negative, neutral. For example, death was analyzed as being valued positively when the perpetrator expressed that he thought of death as a solution for his problems. Murder would then be the fulfilment of his desire to take revenge for the injustice done to him by others. Suicide would be the solution to end his suffering.

Statements were ranked as neutral when they had a more general content; for example, death is not special because everyone has to die. Pekka-Eric Auvinen, for example, stated that "not all human lives are important or worth saving." Negative statements would be expressions such as "I do not want to die." Because this step is more prone to subjective interpretations by the researcher, the ranking was done conservatively, meaning that I only ranked an expression when it was clear that it is positive, negative or neutral. Where needed I discussed the ranking with other researchers to reach consensus.

In a third and final step, I analyzed co-occurrence of existential concerns, both in the individual cases and in the overall corpus.

In the next section, the results of these analyses are presented.

5.3 School shooters do express existential concerns prior to their deed

The egodocuments show clear expressions of existential concerns. Two existential concerns are found in every case: death and identity. Isolation is found in five of the seven cases, and the expressions of feeling isolated are always very emotional and strong. In most cases, the shooters feel superior and are frustrated that no one else seems to acknowledge their superiority. They feel rejected and do not know how to cope. Meaning, also found in five cases, is mostly expressed as a disappointment about reality and life. "Normal" life, that is, school, work, or having a family, is meaningless to them. The results are presented per existential concern and in the patterns in which they emerge. Egodocuments are presented without spelling or punctuation corrections.

5.3.1 Death

Death is found in all cases, and in six cases in a top frequency; only Sebastian Bosse's text contains expressions about death in a low frequency. In four cases, the concept of mortality is mentioned as a more general idea. A positive value is assigned to the subcategory *murder* in all cases. Murder is seen as a way of being more powerful than others and being able to choose who will live and who will die. It is also expressed as revenge and getting back control. Suicide is valued ambivalently. Positively valued segments are found in all cases where suicide is seen as a way of bringing an end to suffering. Some school shooters express the idea that their own death will grant them the status of hero or martyr and therefore will make them unforgettable. Negatively valued segments appear in three cases because of the pain caused to family and friends. Mortality is found in four cases and has a neutral value. Some perpetrators state that only the best should survive and therefore people's deaths are not tragic. In some

expressions, one can find that the perpetrators think the death of inferior people or even the whole human race is necessary to change a society which in their opinion is rotten. In all egodocuments, school shooters express that they do not expect to survive their attack. Addressing their planned suicide, they seem to want to overcome their mortality when they state that after the shooting they will not be forgotten.

Of all cases, Luke Woodham most frequently expressed concerns about death. Death in his case is mostly expressed as murder. In his egodocuments, Luke fantasized about shooting others: “If I can’t do it through pacifism, if I can’t show you through displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet.” Revenge also seems a motive for murder: “I killed because people like me are mistreated every day.”

Kinkel’s egodocuments express an urge to kill people, and his feelings of hate obviously disturb him. Death is mentioned in his document with a high frequency in the form of murder and a possible suicide. Kip defends his plans of killing people by saying, “All humans are evil. I just want to end the world of evil.” Kinkel values death as something positive. Like Woodham, he argues that killing people is a good thing because through his deed he frees the world from evil. Revenge also again plays a role: “That is how I will repay all you mother fuckers for all you put me through.” However, Kinkel also sees murder negatively. After killing his parents he writes, “I have just killed my parents! I don’t know what is happening. I love my mom and dad so much. I just got two felonies on my record. My parents can’t take that! It would destroy them. The embarrassment would be too much for them. They couldn’t live with themselves. I’m so sorry.” It seems that he kills his parents to spare them the consequences of their son’s crime.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold seem to be a role model for other school shooters. They are quoted literally or mentioned by all the perpetrators in

this study posterior to their shooting at Columbine High. Death is the most often mentioned existential concern in Harris' egodocuments. He calls his planned murder a "final solution" and refers to the genocide of the Jews by the German Nazis. He also calls his murder revenge. People whom he sees as having wronged him will be his victims. He refers directly to the shooting when he says, "And if you pissed me off in the past, you will die if I see you." Harris sees himself as superior and states that he therefore has the right to decide who will live or die. This gives him a feeling of power. He writes that

> once I finally start my killing, keep this in mind, there are probably about 100 people max in the school alone who I don't want to die, the rest, MUST FUCKING DIE[34]! If I didn't like you or if you pissed me off and lived through my attacks, consider yourself one lucky god damn N*.

He also states that the death of inferior people is a natural law, and therefore his murder is natural selection: "People that only know stupid facts that aren't important should be shot, what fucking use are they. NATURAL SELECTION." It should be noticed that Auvinen also uses this term. He quotes Harris a number of times in his manifesto.

Although Klebold mentions death with top frequency, it is not the most mentioned existential concern in his egodocuments, but isolation is. He often talks about suicide and his wish to be dead. Death is given a positive value. Thinking of death gives him hope of getting out of his misery. He hopes that suicide will help him "finally not be at war with myself, the world, the universe." But he also talks about murdering others and refers directly to the

[34] Capital letters are used as they appear in the original text.

planned shooting when he writes, “I’ll go on my killing spree against anyone I want.” Thinking of murder seems to give him a great feeling of power and “fun.” When he refers to the plan to commit their crime together, Klebold writes, “We, the gods, will have so much fun with NBK!! [35] Killing enemies, blowing up stuff, killing cops!!” Killing to get revenge is a theme again too: “The little zombie human fags will know their errors, & be forever suffering and mournful.” He gives death a neutral valence when he writes, “It’s interesting, when I’m in my human form, knowing I’m going to die. Everything has a touch of triviality to it. Like how none of this calculus shit matters.”

In Pekka-Eric Auvinen’s egodocuments, death is a top frequency concern. He explains his deed as natural selection, a term also used by Eric. He even named his YouTube manifesto *Natural selector’s manifesto.* Obviously he sees his crime as an act nature has failed to accomplish: the killing of inferiors. These feelings of superiority are strongest in his expression “I am actually godlike.” Murder seems to give him a feeling of ultimate power. Seeing himself as a natural selector, he defends his deed as necessary: “I, as a natural selector, will eliminate all who I see unfit, disgraces of human race and failures of natural selection.” The concept of natural selection is also used for a more neutral evaluation of death: “Death and killing is not a tragedy, it happens in nature all the time between all species.” For some perpetrators, like Auvinen, their deed is almost political. They see society and the whole human race as doomed. With their deed they solve this problem:

> I have had enough. I do not want to be part of this fucked up society. Like some other wise people have said in the

[35] NBK means “Natural Born Killer.” It was the codename they used when they communicated about school shooting. It refers to a Quentin Tarantino film from 1994.

> past, human race is not worth fighting for or saving... only worth killing. Long live the revolution... revolution against the system, which enslaves not only the majority of weak-minded masses but also the small minority of strong-minded and intelligent individuals! If we want to live in a different world, we must act (…) Of course there is a final solution too: death of entire human race. It would solve every problem of humanity. The faster human race is wiped out from this planet, the better... no one should be left alive.

As mentioned, Auvinen, like Harris, calls killing people "natural selection." He writes, "I am prepared to fight and die for my cause. I, as a natural selector, will eliminate all who I see unfit, disgraces of human race and failures of natural selection."

Interestingly, Sebastian Bosse is the only perpetrator who talks about death in a low frequency. Suicide and murder are each mentioned once, exceptionally less than in all other cases. In his eyes, humans deserve to die. For Bosse, the positive value of death or suicide is that it is a way out of his misery: "When you know that you will not be happy in your life ever again and when the reasons for unhappiness get more every day, then there is nothing left but to get out of this life. And that is what I am going to do."[36] The opportunity to get

[36] Original text: "Wenn man weiss, dass man in seinem Leben nicht mehr Glücklich werden kann, und sich von Tag zu Tag die Gründe dafür häufen, dann bleibt einem nichts anderes übrig als aus diesem Leben zu verschwinden. Und dafür habe ich mich entschieden."

revenge by killing others also gives death a positive value for him. He writes in his suicide letter that "I do not want to run away any longer! I want to do my bit in the revolution of the outcast! I want REVENGE!"[37] In addition, the idea of leaving a footprint in the world seems to play a role: "Before I go I will teach you all a lesson so that no human being will ever forget me."[38] By contrast, Bosse also attaches a negative value to death. In his suicide letter, he apologizes for his deed: "In the end I want to thank the people, who meant something to me, or who were at some time nice to me, and I want to apologize to them for all of this."[39] In other phrases Bosse treats death neutrally: "When someone dies, then he is dead. So what? Real life holds death! If his relatives cannot handle their loss they can commit suicide, no one will bar them from doing it."[40]

In Seung-Hui Cho's manifesto, death is mentioned with high frequency. Death is expressed mostly as murdering and destroying other people out of revenge. He describes precisely how he wants to kill his victims when he writes that he will "Slash your throat, bullet in your back, torture you with knives, hammers, bolt cutters, scissors." To Cho, death and murder are primarily about revenge and freeing the world from evil, which are positive in

[37] Original text: "Ich will nicht länger davon laufen! Ich will meinen Teil zur Revolution der Ausgestossenen beitragen! Ich will R A C H E !

[38] Original text: Bevor ich gehe, werde ich euch einen Denkzettel verpassen, damit mich nie wieder ein Mensch vergisst!

[39] Original text: Als letztes möchte ich den Menschen die mir was bedeuten, oder die jemals gut zu mir waren, danken, und mich für all dies Entschuldigen!

[40] Original text: Wenn jemand stirbt, dann ist er halt tot. Und? Der Tod gehört zum Leben! Kommen die Angehörigen mit dem Verlust nicht klar, können sie Selbstmord begehen, niemand hindert sie daran!

his perspective. He writes that “you had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today, but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off, you Apostles of Sin.”

5.3.1.1 Reflection on the existential concern of death in the egodocuments

Yalom (1980) placed death at the forefront of the existential concerns. He suggested that this concern exists at every level of human awareness, from the most conscious to the deepest depths of the unconscious. Yalom believed that the fear of death emerges in force at adolescence. Therefore, teenagers often are preoccupied with death through popular culture such as games, movies and daredevil behavior. This is also an age when teenage fantasies of death can result in self-harm, suicide or violence against others. Combined with other existential concerns such as feelings of isolation or experiencing identity problems because of experienced injustice through others, this can lead to extreme violence. Yalom (1989) stated that Western cultures avoid facing the reality of death more than others and develop coping methods to deal with the fact of death. These coping methods involve fantasies that offer comforting images of death-defying superheroes.

It does not follow logically that the school shooters in this study seem to justify the killing of others because of the injustice they experience. Like avenging angels, they kill bullies. Like a martyr, they accept death in return for revenge. But is murder not the greatest injustice? Obviously, the school shooters do not think so, because they see o as inferior and define the murder of them as natural selection. Paradoxically, the pursuit of justice and a better world has been responsible for many acts of terrible violence. Social thinkers such as Fromm (1941) and Becker (1975) have all argued that before. The Nazis stated

that the genocide of Jews was to purify the world by killing those they viewed as inferior. Many terrorist attacks were motivated by terrorists as providing retribution for injustices in the Middle East (Stern, 2003; Richardson, 2006). In 2011, Breivik killed 77 people in order to, as he stated during his trial, defend Norway against Islam. The list of examples of this paradox would possibly be endless. The shooters do not express fear for their own deaths in their egodocuments, as would be expected based on Yalom's conclusions. On the contrary, they seem to count on the massive media attention school shootings get and the impact of their deed to see to the fact that, in Bosse's words, no human being will ever forget them. It seems, then, that they do not want to accept the fact that they are mortal and their desire to live forever leads to the fantasy of becoming immortal by turning into a school shooter. The identity switch from a seemingly "normal kid" into a school shooter occurs next to their adapting to the cultural script of a school shooter, which was discussed in Chapter 2. Newman et al. (2004) noted that "the scripts provide an image of what the shooters want to become and a template that links the message to the goal" (p. 230). Through the cultural script of a school shooting, the perpetrators in a way create a new identity as school shooters. The fact that they need to create a "new" identity indicates that a clear sense of who one is and how one fits into the world was missing before. It is therefore interesting to find that, beside death, identity is an existential concern all perpetrators in this study express.

5.3.2 Identity

As noted in the previous section, death and identity are the existential concerns all perpetrators discuss in their writings. In five cases the concern with identity occurs with a top frequency, in one with a high frequency, and in one with a low frequency. Six of the perpetrators write about how they are seen by others, and

all discuss how they see themselves. In three cases there is an expression of who-I-want to-be but it is more significant that all perpetrators express who or what they don't want to be.

The perpetrators display a positive, even superior, self-image, except for Kinkel and Woodham. The latter argues that he not only hates all people but also God for making humanity. He sees himself as an unloved person. In all the other cases, the perpetrators see themselves as superior to others and emphasize that they are very different from other people. This is always seen as positive because they disregard others and feel that they are superior to other people. A notable commonality is that the perpetrators hate and despise other people. In Woodham's writings, identity is referred to in high frequency. Because of his feelings of isolation, he hates people. However, hatred also forms his identity: "I am the hatred in every man's heart!" He has become hateful and blames people for torturing him. Woodham expresses no feelings of being superior, unlike most other school shooters. He sees his identity negatively.

Kinkel writes, "I don't know who I am. I want to be something I can never be. I try so hard every day. But in the end, I hate myself for what I've become." Identity is the existential concern mentioned most in Kinkel's egodocuments. It is assigned a negative value. He struggles with the question of who he is, literally saying that he does not know who he is and that he wants to be someone who he never can be. He struggles to understand other people and assumes everyone thinks he is a psychopath. Actually, he seems to think that too as he states, "My head just does not work right" and "Why aren't I normal?" He wonders if he is able to feel love because he thinks he has a "black heart," and he can only feel hate. Like Woodham, he does not express feelings of superiority like the other school shooters in this study.

Harris addresses identity in a top frequency. He calls himself a racist, and he states that he is proud of it. He refers to Nazi ideology and uses

expressions from the German language. He says that he is "full of hate and I am loving it." He considers himself one of the few people with intelligence. This feeling of superiority shows in statements such as "No one is worthy of this planet, only me and whoever I choose." One he chooses is Dylan Klebold, the only person he sees as having "SELF AWARENESS" [capitals in original] while other people are just "robots." Through this sense of superiority, he associates himself with God: "I feel like God and I wish I was, having everyone being OFFICIALLY lower than me. I already know that I am higher than most anyone in the fucking welt[41] in terms of universal Intelligence" [capitals in original] (Langman, 2009).

Although Klebold also expresses feelings of superiority when he addresses identity, he does so much less frequently than Harris, the other Columbine shooter. Klebold also expresses feelings of superiority and feeling god-like. He writes, "I think too much, I understand, I am GOD compared to some of those un-existable [sic] brainless zombies." He makes a note in Harris' yearbook that "we, the gods, will have so much fun with NBK!! Killing enemies, blowing up stuff, killing cops!! My wrath for January's incident will be godlike. Not to mention our revenge in the commons. GAWWWD sooo many people need to die."

Auvinen discusses identity not only in a high frequency but more often than any other perpetrator. He sees himself as superior to others and states that people are mostly under-evolved and should be killed as the final solution, a term also used by Eric Harris. As mentioned earlier, Auvinen uses more terms and expressions found in Harris' writings. Also like Harris, he lists things he likes and dislikes. He knew and admired the Columbine shooter and refers to

[41] Klebold uses the German word for world: Harris and Klebold showed a great interest in Hitler and the Nazis.

the writings and deed of Harris a number of times (Langman, 2009). His manifesto says that "when I look at people I see every day in society, school and everywhere... I cannot say I belong to same race as the lousy, miserable, arrogant, selfish human race! No! I have evolved one step above!" He shares this feeling of superiority and an association with God with all shooters studied here except Kinkel and Bosse. The latter point is expressed when Auvinen writes that "compared to you retarded masses, I am actually godlike."

Identity is found in Bosse's egodocuments in a high frequency. As in the other cases, he considers himself superior. However, he does express not so much a god-like self-image but rather sees himself as an individualist who refuses to live his life by the rules of society. He is full of hate against humans and humanity, blaming society and other people for his misery and in this way accusing them of being responsible for his planned deed. Bosse's valuation of his identity is mostly positive. He seems to be proud that he differs from other people and that he dares to question social norms and values. More negatively, he states that society disowns individualists and makes them outcast, an injustice that has to be avenged. He wants to be the avenging angel: "I do not want to run away any longer! I want to play my part in the revolution of the pariahs! I want revenge!"[42] Even though Bosse does not express a feeling of superiority like other perpetrators, he sees his deed as superior and predicts a big impact, as when he says "after my deed some fat politicians will make silly comments like 'We will hold together now.'"[43]

[42] Original text: Ich will nicht länger davon laufen! Ich will meinen Teil zur Revolution der Ausgestossenen beitragen! Ich will Rache!

[43] Original text: Nach meiner Tat werden wieder irgendwelche fetten Politiker dumme Sprüche klopfen wie "Wir halten nun alle zusammen"

Cho's writings contain expressions that discuss identity in a high frequency, mostly describing how he sees other people. He calls them Christian Nazis, Apostles of Sin, and Descendants of Satan and claims that they have to suffer because of their crimes against him and others like him. He compares himself with Jesus Christ, Moses, or an anti-terrorist who will take revenge, as in "Thanks to you, I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people." He also calls himself a martyr, referring to the Columbine shooters: "Generation after generation, we martyrs, like Eric and Dylan, will sacrifice our lives to fuck you thousand folds for what you have done to us."

5.3.2.1 Reflection on the existential concern of identity in the egodocuments

In their egodocuments, school shooters create an identity strikingly different from their social self. On one hand, they express feelings of being treated as outcast, loneliness, and underestimation. On the other hand, they create a superior identity for themselves, an identity of being the chosen one and an avenging angel. For this new identity, they use role models such as the Columbine shooters, religious figures and, more abstractly, the typical male hero who uses violence. They fantasize of being superior and even god-like. They are not willing to face the fact that they are normal and ordinary, just as most people are. Avoiding reality, they create an unreachable identity. The more unreachable this identity becomes, the more frustrating reality gets. The only way out of this dilemma seems to be destroying the old, unloved identity by the new, superior, and violent identity through a violent, dominating attack that will guarantee media attention.

5.3.3 Isolation

Expressions about isolation are found in four cases, always in top frequency and with a negative valuation. In all these cases, expressions can be found of feeling lonely, rejected, and treated like outcasts. In each of the cases isolation is valued negatively. The perpetrators point out that isolation is a motive for their deed. All feel that they are treated as outcasts by other students, teachers and society.

Luke Woodham, for example, writes, "And all throughout my life I was ridiculed. Always beaten, always hated." Just as strikingly, Klebold writes, "I have no money, no happiness, no friend." In Woodham's text, isolation is found in top frequency. Through his hatred, he feels isolated and outcast, as if everyone tortures him. His hate targets not only humanity but also God: "Hate him for making humanity Hate him for making you!" A sense of rejection strengthens the feeling of being isolated, as when he writes, "I suffered all my life. No one ever truly loved me. No one ever truly cared about me."

Isolation seems to be a very important issue for Kip Kinkel, too. He feels lonely and misunderstood. He himself does not understand other people and he assumes that everyone is against him. For him, isolation has a negative valence. He writes, "I sit here all alone. I am always alone." He is desperate for love but does not believe that anyone is able to love him, writing, "I think I love her, but she could never love me. I don't know why I try." No other perpetrator studied here mentions love as extensively as Kinkel, but for him love is "a terrible thing. It makes things kill and hate." He cannot find a way out of his isolation and therefore concludes that "My firearms […] will be the only things to fight my isolation."

In Harris' writings, isolation is not addressed directly. By contrast, isolation is the existential concern Klebold addresses most. He sees others having fun and falling in love and regrets that he has none of this because "I do not fit in." When Klebold describes what is bad in his life, he focuses on

isolation: “What’s bad - no girls (friends or girlfriends), no other friends except a few, nobody accepting me even though I want to be accepted.” He feels rejected when one of his best friends gets a girlfriend and spends less time with him. “Ever since 7th grade, I’ve felt lonely … when ( )[44] came around, I finally felt happiness (sometimes) we did cigars, drinking, sabotage to houses, everything for the first time together and now that he’s[45] ‘moved on’ I feel so lonely, without a friend.”

Like Harris, Pekka-Eric Auvinen does not express feelings of isolation, in line with the remarkable similarity between their writings. Through his feelings of absolute superiority, he isolates himself, but he seems not to be bothered by this or aware of it.

Bosse expresses isolation in a low frequency and only in expressions of feeling outcast, always combined with his intended revenge for being excluded and laughed at. Experiencing rejection evokes Bosse’s hatred and negative feelings. He feels like an outsider in society and does not want to cope with realities like the obligation to go to school or, in a later stage of his life, to work.

Cho expresses isolation in a high frequency. He claims that society makes him outcast. This isolation is unbearable and he accuses others of destroying him: “You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and torched my conscious again and again.” The people who “tortured” him are thus responsible for his deed, as

[44] To protect privacy, the girl’s name is left out.

[45] Harris is referring to one of his best friends who gets a girlfriend and therefore spends a lot less time with him.

> You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today, but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off, you Apostles of Sin.

5.3.3.1 Reflection on the existential concern of isolation in the ego documents

According to Yalom (1980) people have deep desires for belonging and the appreciation of others. People join groups and take on their identity. On the web we find like-minded people, with whom we form a community which offers a feeling of belonging but also amplifies the idea of not fitting in in real life. This increases the feeling of isolation. Isolation also reminds us of our own mortality. When we are isolated, we are also more vulnerable and any choices we make can lead to hazard (Yalom, 1980). What Yalom addresses as isolation is generally experienced as loneliness. Factors causing this isolation may include, among others, inadequate social skills and a limiting personality style, for example a narcissistic personality. In their egodocuments, the shooters express their feelings of superiority and hatred towards others. They often express frustration because they do not feel understood or accepted and have the idea that others turn them into outlaws instead of recognizing their superiority. The loneliness and isolation grow as the frustration gets bigger.

At this point the question arises whether the school shooters on whom I focus actually meet the popular perception of the loners. It has to be considered that self-perception of existential loneliness is not the same as actually being a loner. As said in Chapter 3, Newman (2004) argued that only between 11% and 26% of the school shooters she studied were loners. Faust (2010) argues that one third of school shooters in his research were seen by

others as outsiders. On one hand, the image of the typical loner fits some of the seven shooters in the present study, for example Cho can be perceived as such. On the other hand, Eric had many friends, played sports and dated girls (Langman, 2015). Although they might not be the typical loners as presupposed in popular perception, they do express feelings of existential loneliness which is connected to the existential need of belonging. According to Yalom (1980), "The existential conflict is thus, the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish to be part of a larger whole" (p. 9). In the case of the school shooters, it seems that the bigger the gap between the wish of belonging and the feeling of isolation gets, the larger the willingness to use violence gets too. Existential struggles and, subsequently, violence can result from feelings of loneliness and isolation (Diamond, 1996; Sandhu, 2000). According to Cooper (1990), isolation causes feelings of emptiness and disconnectedness. A person can become so concerned with *fitting in* that he or she begins to live an inauthentic life and eventually creates an inauthentic identity. The imagined self is superior and makes decisions about life and death. It is an identity not to be loved but to be feared, like death itself. This absolute power does not match with boundaries of normal life like the rules of society. Some school shooters express a preoccupation with this lack of freedom in their egodocuments, and it is to this we now turn.

5.3.4 Freedom

Freedom is discussed in the expressions of four shooters, once low frequency, twice medium frequency, and once high frequency. It takes the form of, for example, a feeling that their personal freedom is in conflict with the demands of society. Freedom itself is always valued as a positive thing, but school shooters often experience a restriction of freedom. When Woodham talks about freedom in a low frequency, he relates it to Existentialism: "Study the philosophies of

others and condense the parts you like as your own. Make your own rules. Live by your own laws." Here, freedom is positive and something one should pursue. In Kinkel's and Klebold's egodocuments, there are no expressions about freedom, but Harris seems to struggle with freedom and talks about it in a medium frequency. He states that there is no freedom, and he hates it when other people like parents, teachers or politicians tell him what to do. Moreover, he sees the boundaries of society as restricting everyone's freedom: "Human nature is smothered out by society, job, and work and school. Instincts are deleted by laws." Freedom seems to be an important existential concern for Auvinen (high frequency). He, too, struggles with the rules that society lays on him. He states that society will declare people with a free will and opinion mentally ill instead of making them its rulers because of their superiority. In connection to this, he says that stupid people should be slaves and intelligent people, like him, should be free. Freedom is important and positive, but a lack of freedom frustrates him. People are turning into robots without free will: "Totalitarian governments rule people through education system, consumerism, mass media, monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force (police, military) and laws discriminating people who think differently than the majority. Democracy... you think democracy means freedom and justice? You are wrong. Democracy is a dictatorship of the moral majority." He holds society responsible for the absence of freedom and therefore seeks revenge.

In Bosse's egodocuments, freedom is discussed in a medium frequency. Bosse wants to free himself of the boundaries of society. He is concerned with freedom mostly through its absence, which is given a negative value. Bosse writes that "a big part of my revenge will focus on the teachers, because these

are the people who interfered in my life against my will and put me in the position where I am know; On the battlefield."[46] He also argues that

> I have experienced in the 18 years of my life that one can only be happy if by adjusting to the masses, adapting to society. But I could not do this and did not want to. I am free! No one has the right to interfere in my life, and if someone does so anyway then he has to accept the consequences! No politician has the right to make laws which forbid me to do something, No copper has the right to take my weapon away, especially when he wears his on a belt.[47]

[46] Original text: Ein Grossteil meiner Rache wird sich auf das Lehrpersonal richten, denn das sind Menschen die gegen meinen Willen in mein Leben eingegriffen haben, und geholfen haben mich dahin zu stellen, wo ich jetzt stehe; Auf dem Schlachtfeld.

[47] Original text: Ich habe in den 18 Jahren meines Lebens erfahren müssen, das man nur Glücklich werden kann, wenn man sich der Masse fügt, der Gesellschaft anpasst. Aber das konnte und wollte ich nicht. Ich bin frei! Niemand darf in mein Leben eingreifen, und tut er es doch hat er die Konsequenzen zu tragen! Kein Politiker hat das Recht Gesetze zu erlassen, die mir Dinge verbieten, Kein Bulle hat das Recht mir meine Waffe wegzunehmen, schon gar nicht während er seine am Gürtel trägt.

5.3.4.1 Reflection on the existential concern of freedom in the egodocuments

According to Yalom (1980), freedom and individual choice are linked to isolation. When we are without others, our feeling of control increases because we can create our own meaning. We can choose our action and make our behavior purposeful, even though it may not be the best for all others. Freedom, as Yalom addresses it, means that we are entirely responsible for our existence: "To be aware of responsibility is to be aware of creating one's own self, destiny, life predicament, feelings, and if such is the case, one's own suffering" (1980, p. 218). He added that becoming aware of this freedom of creating our own world can be a deeply frightening insight and can lead to displacement of responsibility to another person. Denying responsibility leads to finding others responsible for our own suffering. School shooters present themselves as victims who are robbed of control and therefore robbed of their freedom. They blame others for their planned deed and even state that others made them do it and that, therefore, they had no choice but to execute the shooting. School shooters deny their responsibility for their own suffering, their crime and their freedom of choice. The meaning of the school shooting seems to be the restoration of the existential misbalance. At this point, let us discuss how school shooters express the existential concern of meaning in their egodocuments.

5.3.5 **Meaning**

Meaning is discussed in five cases, once in a top frequency, twice in a medium frequency and twice in a low frequency. One could argue that death, identity, isolation and freedom are also related to meaning, and therefore these percentages are inaccurate. However, it was chozen to look at the existential concern of meaning separately and as defined by Yalom (1980): the wish that

life is meaningful versus the experience that some events are inconsistent with their bases of meaning. In all five cases, meaning is valued as negative. The perpetrators are disappointed in the reality of life. In two cases, meaning is also valued as neutral. For example, Auvinen argues that "life is just a meaningless coincidence."

No expressions discussing meaning are found in Woodhams' or Cho's egodocuments, and Kinkel expresses struggles with the meaning of life in a low frequency in two expressions about hope. He expresses the hope that the girl he likes will like him back and the hope that things will get better. In fact, "The only reason I stay alive is because of hope." If as he hopes things were to get better, he would not have to kill people. However, he also states that this hope is meaningless and nothing good will happen to him. In all, the value assigned to hope is negative.

Expressions discussing meaning are found in a low frequency in Harris' writing. Interestingly, he specifically says that killing as many people as he can is what he wants to do in life. This suggests his deed gives meaning to his life. However, Harris does value meaning as negative. He considers himself the only one who realizes that reality is not like most people think and that their goals are meaningless: "Society may not realize what is happening but I have; you go to school, to get used to studying and learning how you're 'supposed to' so that drains or filters out a little bit of human nature […] After school you are expected to get a job or go to college. To have more of your human nature blown out your ass. Society tries to make everyone act the same by burying all human nature and instincts." Reality does not meet his expectations, and he argues that he is the only one who recognizes that life as most people know it is meaningless.

Klebold writes about meaning in a medium frequency. Interestingly, Klebold equates meaning with being loved, the "meaning of each life: to be

loved by your love," in contrast to Harris' statement that killing others gives meaning to his life. Meaning is still given a negative valence, as it is seen as illusion: "a farm, sunshine, a happy feeling in the presence, Absolutely nothing wrong, nothing ever is, contrary 180 to normal life. No awareness, just pure bliss, unexplainable bliss, The only challenges are no challenge, & then…. BAM!!! realization sets in, the world is the greatest punishment."

Auvinen addresses meaning in a medium frequency and mostly values it as negative. He struggles with society and the reality of life. He seems to give his deed meaning by arguing that only his "revolution" can change the world for better, and he calls his plans "my war." His life became meaningless at a certain point: "Some time ago, I used to believe in humanity and I wanted to live a long and happy life... but then I woke up. I started to think deeper and realized things. But it was not easy to become existential." He is more neutral when he says that "Life is just a meaningless coincidence."

Bosse's expressions discuss meaning much more frequently than any of the other cases. He addresses meaning in a top frequency. One whole document is related to the dilemma of personal dreams versus the reality of life. Bosse values meaning as negative: "I recognized that the world, as I thought it is, does not exist, that it is an illusion, which is mainly created by media."[48] He is obviously disappointed in reality and cannot find meaning in life the way most people live it. He does not want to be how society wants him to be and as a result he wants to kill others and himself. The murders are his revenge for these disappointments.

[48] Original text: Ich erkannte das die Welt wie sie mir erschien nicht existiert, das sie eine Illusion war, die hauptsächlich von den Medien erzeugt wurde.

5.3.5.1 Reflection on the existential concern of meaning in the egodocuments

Yalom's (1980) definition of meaning as an existential concern is related to the wish that life is meaningful versus the experience that some events are inconsistent with their bases of meaning. Yalom pointed out that there is a difference between the questions "What is the meaning of life?" and "What is the meaning of my life?" The first, *meaning of life*, indicates a cosmic meaning. This implies a grand design existing outside of the individual. It is about "whether life in general or at least human life fits into some overall coherent pattern" (p. 423). The latter, *meaning of my life*, regards a personal meaning and a belief that each of us has some particular role to play in the world. What we see in the egodocuments is that school shooters have a strong idea which role they should or want to pla,y but at one point they are disappointed that they are not succeeding in fulfilling this role. Metaphorically speaking, they are losing their meaning. School shooters seem to struggle with what they wish or expect of life and with the disappointment of being confronted with grim reality.

5.4 Patterns found in the expressions

The most common combinations in the various egodocuments (i.e., segments in which categories coincide) are death/identity and death/isolation.

In Woodham's egodocuments, the most common combination of existential concerns in the expressions is death and isolation. He feels unloved and singled out, and in revenge he fantasizes about murder. Death and identity are also frequently combined. Woodham identifies himself as the one who kills to take revenge for all mistreated people.

Kinkel's expressions most frequently combine death and isolation. He wants to fight his isolation with murder and suicide. Death is also frequently found in combination with identity. He sees himself as the one who frees the world from evil.

Harris combines death and identity. Because of his godlike feelings of superiority, he feels he has the right to kill people who are inferior in his eyes. The combination meaning and death is also found, as his deed gives meaning to his life.

When Klebold expresses a concern with death, he talks about suicide and murder. Because he feels that no one loves him, he does not want to live anymore. He also wants to take revenge on all people who do not fulfill his desire of being loved. Identity and murder are also combined frequently. Although feelings of superiority are expressed less than in Harris' egodocuments, Klebold also writes that he has the right to kill others because of their inferiority.

Auvinen writes very frequently about death in combination with identity. Like Harris and Klebold, he derives the right to kill people from his absolute superiority. Freedom and death also form a frequent combination. Everyone tries to take away his freedom and the freedom of others, and therefore everyone has to die. The combination of freedom and meaning is also found in a number of his expressions. Without absolute freedom there is no meaning to life.

Bosse combines meaning and freedom. He is unable to accept the fact that life does not seem to be what he would like it to be. The boundaries of society or school make life senseless. Death and meaning are also combined is his expressions. Because of the meaninglessness of life, he wants to kill himself and others so that he will be remembered. The deed actually gives his life meaning. Identity and isolation are also combined. Bosse sees himself as a true

individualist, but because of this, people see him as outcast. Death and isolation is found as a combination, but, unlike the other cases, not very frequently.

Cho combines death and isolation when he notes that he kills people because they treat him as outcast and torture him. Identity and death is also found as a combination. Cho sees himself as an angel of revenge who kills people who are tormenting others like him, a god-like figure who frees the world from evil.

5.4.1 Reflection on the pattern in which existential concerns arise in egodocuments

It seems that certain combinations of certain existential concerns play a significant role in the egodocuments which are related to the plans of a school shooting. Threats to self-esteem and identity trigger extreme violence in school shooters whose self-appraisal is on shaky ground because they exaggerate their (narcissist) self-image. According to Martens and Palermo (2005), loneliness plays a significant role in the development of extreme violence, antisocial attitudes and behavior. Concerns of death, identity and isolation are found in all egodocuments, and in all documents, these three concerns are part of a pattern. Not being able to handle feelings of being unloved and rejected, school shooters develop anger and hate against life, people, God and the world. Defined in psychological terms as narcissistic injury, this results in rejecting one's own real identity and replacing it with a highly developed "false self" (Johnson, 1987). To avoid facing and addressing their existential concerns, they nurture their *false self* by acting as what they see as a superhero, avenging angel, chosen one, and so on. Not willing to face death, they try to become immortal by committing a high-impact crime, which will make them famous and never

forgotten by the victimized. Hirschberger and Pyszczynski (2011) commented that Terror Management Theory

> contends that the uniquely human awareness of the inevitability of personal death generates the potential for overwhelming terror because it frustrates the very basic desire to live. This potential for terror drives people to construct their reality in a way that infuses life with meaning, value, and hope of transcending death. (p. 334)

The next section or sections reflect on the findings so far.

5.5 Through the kaleidoscope: Sebastian Bosse

Let us, for example, look through the kaleidoscope (Tolstaya, 2013) at Sebastian Bosse. I chose his case because to me his text is the least disturbing. Other shooters wrote some really disturbing things, like Luke Woodham, who describes how he enjoyed violently killing his dog. Or Seung-Hui Cho, who calls himself Jesus or Moses and uses apocalyptic scenarios for his manifesto. Eric Auvinen's text has highly fascistic content. Some of the egodocuments of the Columbine shooters are also of fascistic nature. But Bosse's egodocuments could be written by any angry teenager and I myself could have made some statements like this when I was his age. First I would like to discuss where the living person eludes me by looking at a diary entry and a video Sebastian published on the Internet shortly before his attack. On August 10, 2006, he wrote in his diary the following:

> Von allen Leben auf dieser Welt ist meins anscheinend das einzig sinnvolle. Ist doch wahr ... guckt man sich die Menschen heute an sieht man leere Körper, aufgetakelt und rausgeputzt bis zum geht nicht mehr doch das ist alles nur die Hölle. Innendrin ist es leer. Man lebt nur noch um sich zu produzieren. Man vermarktet sich regelrecht. Jeder Mensch will das Produkt «Ich» als etwas wunderbares verkaufen, und weil einer noch dümmer wie der andere ist, klappt das auch prima. Wer da nicht mitzieht, steht allein da. Ich sage «Fickt euch». Wieso fällt es Menschen so schwer, Dinge so zu nehmen wie sie sind, ich meine warum akzeptieren meine Eltern, meine Tante oder sonst wer meinen Iro nicht? Wieso akzeptieren Leute mein Aussehen nicht? (Bosse, 2006)[49]

[49] Of all the lives in this world, apparently mine is the only one that's meaningful. This is the truth . . when you look at people today, you see empty bodies, dressed up and dolled up to the max, all of this is only a shell. Inside, it is empty. We only live to make a spectacle of ourselves. We are downright selling ourselves. Every person wants to sell the product "I" as something wonderful, and because one person is dumber than the other, it works great. Whoever doesn't want to go along with it, will be alone. I say: "Fuck you!" Why do people have such a hard time taking things the way they are, I mean why don't my parents, my aunt, or whoever else accept my Mohawk? [The mohawk (or mohican) is a hairstyle. Both sides of the head are shaven, leaving a strip of noticeably longer hair in the center.] Why do people not accept my appearance?

As we can see, Bosse wrote that his life is the only one that is meaningful. What I cannot understand is the following: if he really sees his life as the only meaningful one, why is he prepared to end it, or even put in danger? Maybe this makes his alleged sacrifice even bigger? This is where the living person eludes us and the researcher has to admit the limitations of the study.

Noticeably, by putting himself in a higher position than any living human being, he seems to choose isolation himself, which is interesting because a number of expressions of hating the fact that he feels outcast and that he is isolated are found.

Another discrepancy is the fact that he criticizes people with a big self-image, but at the same time, he claims to be superior to everybody. He also makes comments on the shallowness of people who only care for superficial things like clothes. On the other hand, he longs for acceptance of his appearance. His description of people as empty and dumb reminds us of expressions of other shooters, who see people as robots or brainless zombies (e.g., Klebold). But he continues, using the personal pronoun "we." This is interesting because, the word "we," includes "I." What eludes the researcher is whether Sebastian sees himself as a part of this group of shallow people, whether he maybe wants to be part of it but feels excluded, or whether he really wants to be different from everyone else.

But in the next sentence, he expresses the extensive social marginalization he experiences: "Whoever doesn't want to go along with it, stands alone." In other words, if you don't want to be all dressed up and empty inside, you will become assigned the role of outsider. With a strong (exclamation mark) "Fuck you!" he rejects these boundaries. People should accept things the way they are, the way he is. The problem is that he finds it really hard to accept the way things are himself. In a number of other diary entries, Sebastian also expresses having experienced a long period of exclusion

and other forms of social humiliation. For example, on May 23rd he wrote, "I hate to always be everybody's dimwit. I hate to always be portrayed as a dork." I wonder if others actually see him as dimwit or if he just wanted so much positive attention and admiration that, whatever people did, he would never be satisfied. Police reports show that Sebastian was bullied at the time; Faust (2006) explained that a consequence of humiliating experiences is that one tries to escape into isolation and fantasies of ultimate superiority to raise the value of the injured Self. Moreover, according to Faust (2006), this self-perception enlarges the grievance of being relegated to an outsider and, finally, this can lead to a performative act of extreme violence, resulting in a heroic death. What we can find in Sebastian's diary are indeed expressions of grievances about exclusion and experienced humiliation as well as fantasies of an omnipotent Self. Let us now look further at one of his Internet postings.

During the 4:44 minute video[50], which he posted shortly before the attack, he stands in his parents' living room, wearing a black t-shirt. In contrast to his diary, which is a personal document, this video was meant to reach an audience. Since he speaks English in this recording, he may well have been fully aware of the international attention his deed would get. Nevertheless, the choice of language stands out. Sebastian was not raised bilingually and his English was far from perfect. So when Sebastian tapes his last video, a goodbye to the world, knowing that he will die soon, it surprises me that he does so in English. Is this because he tries to protect himself from big emotions and talking in a foreign language allows him to do so? Is it really part of a performance and does he want to reach a broad audience? Is it maybe because he tries to resemble his role models Eric and Dylan? Maybe with this choice of language he distances himself from his real life? Possibly he only wants to

[50] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZrAiQMzkDY&t=13s

reach a broader, more international audience? Here the living person eludes me. But let us now look at the transcript of the video:

> I want make clear, that nobody, had a fucking clue about what is going to happen on Monday. This was my plan, my work. I did this alone. Completely alone. Since first grade, people picked on me. And I was a loser. I wanted to have friends, I wanted to have clothes with the brand name on it in big letters, but all that fuck changed in 2003/2004. I learned that there is more in life than just consuming fuck. Like death, like clothes, or hip hop music, or - I never listened to hip hop music! Don't believe that. And in 2003/2004 my life changed then. I wasn't a human anymore. I was - God-like. And I began planning this, this massacre. I wanted to kill them all, because they ruined my life. Because they, they changed my, they changed . . . the people, who are like that, who are jocks[51], who are fuck consumers, the people change how you think. You are alone and you want to have friends, and they change completely how you think. The more you are with them, the more you, you become like

[51] Jocks are popular kids. The Columbine shooters often expressed in their document that they hated the Jocks. Sebastian, who was a particular fan of Eric Harris, seemingly copies this word, since this is not a youth slang word in Germany.

them. And I said, “Fuck that. I’m not in this.” And it was my thing, I made the GSS[52] massacre.

Life has been beautiful, until I went to school the first time. There are two main reasons for that massacre. First reason, school, teachers, students, everything in that fucking building. Second, the politics. I want anarchy. . . it is . . . the only thing where you are really, really free, nobody has to tell you, nobody has the right to tell you what to do or not to do. It’s my life. Not the fucking life of my parents or fucking fat Angela Merkel[53], or any fucking teacher in the fucking whole world. It’s my damn life. Humans are a sickness. This earth is sick. I can’t fucking wait until I can shoot every motherfucking last one of you. Fucking damn bitches.

They arsched[54] me, they spit on me, they knocked me down, they laughed on me, and I will shoot them? “Where’s the problem?” “There is no problem.” I can shoot whoever I want. It’s my life, my gun, and I can do with it whatever I want. One time, some dude out of my class heated a . . . heated a key. He take his lighter and heated it, and then the fucking moron just come to me and pressed it on my, on my, on my hand. What the fuck?

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[52] GSS is short for Geschwister Scholl Schule.

[53] When Bosse refers to Merkel, she was Chancellor of Germany and the leader of the Christian Democratic Union party.

[54] Verarschen is a German slang word which means to hoax somebody.

> Every kid in school who is different from the majority is a loner. And why is every kid who is different a loner? Because the fucking media tells the people, tells the majority of the people what is cool and what is not. So baggy pants are cool, yeah? I bet you can't run in it. But it would be better if you can run, on Monday, because I got a gun, I got bombs, I got Molotov cocktails. You are in a war. This is war.

First I would like to point out the body language in this video. Sebastian waggles during his talk, his hands along his side. Only sometimes does he underline his words with gestures. For example, he points at himself with his finger when he says, "This was my plan, my work. I did this alone. Completely alone." Sebastian begins by taking full responsibility for his actions. However, after that he blames others for ruining his life and, consequently, causing the shooting. I already have discussed the existential dilemma of freedom and responsibility. On the one hand, he desires absolute freedom, which he also expresses in the passages about anarchy. On the other, he is not willing to accept that this freedom comes with absolute responsibility, including responsibility for one's own suffering. He continues by saying that his suffering started at the age of six. This statement can also be found in his other documents. From that time until 2003/2004 he felt excluded till. Seemingly, something happened at this point. What happened that made everything change for him? What caused him to become dehumanized, as he puts it, and consider himself god-like? When he says that he became god-like, in the video he scratches his head. We can see the same scratching (at this point arm and hand) when he says, "because they ruined my life. Because they, they changed my, they changed . . . the people change how you think." Kemter (2011) pointed out that scratching the head or arm indicates a person's experiencing uncertainty or

doubt and aims to reduce stress. Why Sebastian shows uncertainty or stress through his body language eludes the viewer, but when speaking the next few sentences, he also acts with some agitation, using more gestures: “You are alone and you want to have friends, and they change completely how you think.” After that he makes little waving movements with his lower arm, like someone who is looking for the right words: “The more you are with them, the more you, you become like them.” This creates the impression that he is struggling to explain exactly what his problem with “that people” really is.

According to Meloy et al. (2001), feelings of powerlessness and rejection can lead to a violation of self-esteem, which is a perceived existential threat. To release the tension that has been developed in this situation, one searches for ways to maintain a positive self-image. According to Robertz (2004), one way to deal with this tension is to escape in a fantasy world where adolescents can take on a superior identity. In the video, we can see and hear that Sebastian is struggling somewhat when he explains what happened to him and why life is so miserable. His body language and tone change when he says, “Fuck that. I’m not in this.” He becomes more determined. Notably, after he says, “I made the GSS massacre,” he goes to the camera and obviously turns it off. In the next shot, we see him going back to the place he stood before to continue his speech. His attitude now changes. He almost appears to give a lecture, summing up the reasons for the massacre, as he calls it. Notably, at the point at which he says “The earth is sick” he turns away from the camera, almost symbolically turning his back on the world. When he turns around, he goes back to the camera, crosses his arms, and says directly into the camera, “I can’t fucking wait until I can shoot every motherfucking last one of you.” He comes close to the camera, until you can only see his chest, says “Fucking damn bitches,” and turns off the camera again.

He starts the third section of the video in a more agitated voice and sums up the humiliations he claims to have experienced, and then threatens to

shoot everyone. When he says, “Where is the problem?” he spreads his arms, which reminds me of the moment at the start of a fight when people move toward each other, spread their arms, and say, “What is your problem.” It seems as though he is provoking the viewer to tell him why he should not go ahead with his plan. But then he turns his back to the camera again and says, “I can shoot whoever I want. It’s my life, my gun, and I can do with it whatever I want.” This turning happens a number of times. This could be interpreted that at one point he makes contact with reality, and a moment later he turns back to his own reality. The sequence in which he tells about the heated key is interesting because this incident is also mentioned a number of times in his diary. After telling about the incident, he turns his back again and pauses. In the documentation, I could not find when exactly the incident with the heated key happened. However, one can assume that to him the incident with the heated key was a painful humiliation. At this point there is a cut in the video, which continues with his starting to talk about loner kids. The fact that his personal myth of being a loser and outcast changed to being superior to others may have triggered the idea that violence and murder are justified revenge. Hand in hand with this change, he distances himself from a society that he sees as too materialistic. He specifically expresses aversion against the hip-hop subculture and strongly denies that he likes this music. When he says, “I never listened to hip hop music! Don’t believe that,” he not only raises his voice a little, he also points at the camera. At the end of the video, he addresses kids of the hip-hop scene when he cynically says that they will not be able to flee from his attack because they cannot run when wearing wide-legged jeans, a style of clothing popular in the hip-hop scene. Why he dislikes this particular subculture can be guessed from his other statements about brand clothes and consumer society. Hip-hoppers often wear expensive clothes and sneakers; they like “bling” and expensive cars.

What also strikes me is a number of discrepancies in this video. For example, he switches a number of times between being superior and being outcast. He also expresses the wish to have friends but at the same time he rejects the idea. What also strikes me is that on the one hand he blames individual people for his misery, and on the other hand he blames the whole system and all humans. The trigger for Sebastian to actually execute his plans of a school shooting could lie in the vicious circle between dealing with real failures and his personal myth of superiority, between dealing with isolation and the wish to belong, between rejecting responsibility for the choices he makes and the idea of freedom.

The last two sentences in his video are also very interesting: "You are in a war. This is war." Killing someone in a war is very different from killing someone because of personal motives. The first makes you a hero, the latter makes you a criminal. The other shooters in this study make similar statements. They define their deed as a war or a revolution. That is an odd use of these terms. A war or revolution implicates the involvement of co-warriors who are fighting for political, religious or social motives. But school shooters act individually and at first sight their reasons seem to spring from personal grievances. By using the term *war* or *revolution*, however, they change their crime from a personal vendetta into a more universal fight. Let us now discuss what we can learn from the content analyses and the kaleidoscope.

5.6 Understanding the existential dimension of school shootings

Apparently, to the school shooters in this study, their lives do not live up to the standards and expectations set for them. They seem to consider their deeds meaningful. Like avenging angels or superheroes, they take revenge for

injustice, rejection and bullying. In their eyes, others make them outcasts and deny their superiority (identity). Therefore, they feel lonely and misunderstood, unaccepted and excluded from society (isolation). This creates a meaninglessness and an existential vacuum they seem to fill with hate. To rectify this existential vacuum (meaning), they had no other choice (freedom) but to kill (death) those who represent the cause of their struggles. The existential themes these adolescents express are connected to "daunting facts of life" (Koole et al., 2006, p. 212): they are average boys, mortal, like all of us; we all are existentially lonely. In fact, these existential themes implicate existential dilemmas, and one has to find a balance between a clear sense of who we are and how we fit into the world versus uncertainties about who we really are and unclear boundaries between self and non-self; the need to feel connected to others versus the experience of rejection; the desire for life to be meaningful versus the reality that certain aspects of life or incidences can be meaningless to us; the experience of free will versus external expectations of our behavior and the responsibility for our choices; and the awareness of our mortality versus the desire for continued existence. But school shooters are not searching for balance - they try to solve their existential dilemmas.

The idea of solving existential dilemmas drives the studied school shooters to construct their identity and reality in a way that infuses their life with meaning, gives them a superhero identity, and allows them hope of transcending death. In this way they bear a resemblance to terrorists with religious or political motives. Chapter 7 develops this line of thought. Every human being experiences the anxiety accompanying thoughts of death, meaninglessness, freedom, fundamental isolation, and identity. In response to existential struggles, we seek respite in a meaning-giving construct. This can be, for instance, hobbies, work, or religion.

Philosophers have noted the meaning-giving capacity of war (Mael & Ashforth, 2001) and arguably school shootings might serve a meaning-giving

function as well. What we learn from the egodocuments of these school shooters is that existential concerns play an important role in their lives prior to their crimes. Because they feel superior, they argue that they have the right to kill inferiors. The narcissistic self-image - feeling god-like - combined with rejection or insults (narcissistic injury) leads to a high level of aggression towards the source of complaint. Notably, under the same circumstances, low self-esteem does not lead to this kind of aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). One has to consider, though, that many adolescents have a relatively favorable self-image, and they are able to cope with narcissistic injuries without turning to violence. In the cases studied here, a sense of isolation is combined with narcissistic traits, amplifying the development of aggression against the sources of the insult and rejection. The shooters find it unbearable that other people question their identity by not acknowledging their superiority. Defending their superiority, they want to demonstrate their power by choosing who may live and who has to die. These adolescents hold the whole world - and their world at this point is mostly their school - responsible for their existential concerns and consequently set out to kill teachers and fellow students.

The relatively small sample of school shooters is a limitation of the study. Because in other cases the material was not trustworthy and extensive enough to make a valid analysis, I had to restrict my analysis to these seven cases. Nevertheless, it is notable that the analysis of the egodocuments shows notable similarities and common themes, since most school shooters do not share other characteristics (O'Toole, 1999; Robertz, 2004). As said in Chapter 1, I tried to "listen" to the individual school shooter and the meaning they give to their deeds. I exclusively wanted to concentrate on what school shooters said about their motives. However, this analysis and interpretation of the existential concerns of the studied school shooters should incorporate one more element that, although obvious, has not been addressed in most research on school shooters: the perpetrators in this study and the majority of school shooters as

such are male adolescents in Western societies as argued in Chapter 2 where theories of social causes were discussed. This begs for an interpretation of the critical existential challenges young men experience in these particular societies (Dykstra, Cole, & Capps, 2009; Kindlon & Thomson, 2000; Pollack & Shuster, 2001). Pollack (1998) claims that especially in Western societies, boys struggle with feelings of isolation, frustration, and the inability to handle their emotions. This matches the expressions of existential concerns in the egodocuments analyzed in this study. Therefore, it is not too far-fetched to see a cultural dynamic at play as well. Chapter 2 discussed the way in which many theorists argue that the acceptance or even glorification of violent behavior has become standard in Western society. For example, extreme violence is a common component of Hollywood movies and popular culture. When the "hero" of a story uses violence, it is rarely depicted as aggression, but instead as a means of defending what one believes in. The Other becomes the enemy, against whom violence is accepted easily. Giroux (2013) argued that warlike values like "survival of the fittest" ethics have become the "primary currency of a market-driven culture." This "pedagogy of brutalizing hardness and dehumanization is also produced and circulated in schools" (Giroux, 2013, p. 37). With this, Giroux refered inter alia to the transformation of schools into an extension of the criminal justice system, where metal detectors at school entrances and surveillance cameras in hallways are very common.

Redemptive violence, as another cultural aspect of violence, was introduced by Walter Wink (1992), whom I discussed in Chapter 4. He argued that the idea that redemptive violence solves all conflicts is a powerful myth of the modern Western world, tapping directly into religious language like spiritual warfare and even crucifixion. According to this myth, violence exercised by the true-hearted person redeems society, even if it means that the violent redeemer loses his life. This corresponds with many expressions in the egodocuments studied here that reveal the perpetrators feeling god-like when fantasizing about

murdering people. They claim that, with their deed, they do what God should have done, that is, kill inferior humans. Justifying the shooting as an act of freeing the world from evil or inferior people is found in some way in all the egodocuments. These adolescents use violence to feel superior and powerful, mimicking the role models of male-dominated societies believing in redemptive violence. Society defines what a "real man" should be (Harris, 1995); and from a young age, male heroes are presented as victorious because of violence. The desire for superiority as experienced by the school shooters versus the impossibility of meeting Western male role models leads to struggles such as "I feel lonely," "no one understands me," "there is no real purpose in life," and "I am outcast." To be redeemed from these struggles and to feel superior and powerful, some boys resort to extreme violence, fostered by cultural and religious myths of redemptive violence.

These myths are also represented in the language the school shooters often use in their egodocuments: they call themselves god-like, the chosen-one, and martyrs; they compare themselves with biblical figures; and they use apocalyptic metaphors and religious symbols. Apocalyptic myths, almost by definition, affirm violence as sacred (Lifton & Mitchell, 1995) and a "gun, it seems, spiritualizes violence as it renders immortal those who can most effectively use it" (p. 287). Although, at first glance, a school shooting does not appear to be religious violence, we should consider that school shootings do have an implicit religious dimension. When we want to understand the seemingly religious dimensions of school shootings, we therefore have to make use of a broader definition of religion. The most relevant definition in this search for a possible relation between school shootings and the existential concerns of the perpetrators is that of implicit religion, conceptualized by Bailey (1997).

6 The genesis of school shootings: implicit religion

From the analyses of egodocuments in the previous chapter, it became clear that school shooters explicitly struggle with such existential concerns as their own mortality, isolation and identity. Existential concerns provoke an existential crisis and hasten our quest for meaning (Wong & Fry, 1998). Thus, confrontation with an existential crisis precipitates the search for a meaning-giving construct. In the present Chapter it will be argued that school shootings are a meaning-giving construct in response to feelings of an existential crisis the perpetrators experience. The question is the following: How can we identify something as a meaning-giving construct? Traditionally, religion is one of the major resources used to generate meaning in life. But the aim of this chapter is not to define school shootings as some new age religion or as religiously motivated violence, nor do I intend to identify a traditionally-understood religious dimension in the motives of the perpetrators. I discussed this already in Chapter 1. The purpose of this chapter is, rather, to understand how a school shooting provides meaning to the perpetrator.

Bailey's concept of *implicit religion* offers the possibility of identifying a meaning-giving construct in a secular context. That he uses the word *religion* as part of this concept can be confusing because religion does have, to many, the connotation of belief in a metaphysical higher being or a god. The question this raises is whether any secular phenomenon then can be seen as implicit religion. As described in Chapter 1, the theory of implicit religiosity is grounded in psychology, which is the science of human cognition, behavior and experience (Schnell, 2007). In the current section as well as section 1, I will discuss which kind of cognition, behavior and experience can be called implicitly religious. But let us first return to the discussion about the term *religion* in the definition of implicit religion. Thus, on one hand the term is

ambiguous because to many *religion* relates to a belief in a metaphysical higher being or a God. On the other hand, concerning the present study, the term implicit *religion* indicates the character of this concept properly since it frames secular phenomena as meaning-giving construct, a function which is traditionally assigned to religion.

I am aware of the fact that there are other concepts which could have been considered. In Chapter 1, the term *lived religion* was introduced. The term *lived religion* has its roots in academic scholarship. Although the study of lived religion was originally understood as exploring what religious people do and what they believe, today the field of lived religion includes various topics and scholars and examines individual religiosity including phenomena that are not explicitly interpreted as being of a religious nature (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014). An example of this is the Dutch study *De Lage Landen en het Hogere* (Van den Brink, 2012). The term *Lage Landen*, literally *lowlands*, refers to the Netherlands, and the term *het Hogere*, literally *the Higher*, indicates an entity which transcends the individual self, something bigger than ourselves. According to Van den Brink, *the Higher* was religious in nature in the past and has nowadays changed into an idea of a unity with which one feels a connection and which inspires altruistic actions. The study showed that Dutch people are inspired by the idea of what Van den Brink names *the Higher*. The respondents spend a lot of time on volunteer work; they make an effort to help to conserve nature and feel involved in animal welfare. Apparently, ideals and morals play an important role in their lives. Notably, the respondents did not connect *the Higher* with religious concepts or spirituality, but with constructing individual meaning in their lives. In other words, Van den Brink's study showed that where in the past devotion to *the Higher* was sacral or religious in nature, nowadays it is often has a social or vital dimension. Van den Brink concluded that *the Higher* did not disappear but changed its form from dedication to God to topics such as society and to more vital subjects such as nature.

This brings us back to Bailey's implicit religion. Bailey (2009) suggested three possible definitions of implicit religion which are presented here in random order. The first possible definition is *commitment*. This description of the meaning of implicit religion

> directs attention to the whole hierarchy of layers of consciousness that, in any particular instance, can fall within the purview of the expression: it recognizes that the commitment may be at the sub- or pre-conscious level, or at the unconscious or conscious level, or at the self- or (as self-conscious experience of transcendence might be termed) sur-conscious level. (p. 802)

When Bailey studied the *commitment* of 100 people by asking them questions about meaning, the holy, and transcendent experiences, he found three domains of commitment: the inner, the outer, and the other. The domain of the inner concerns the self, being human, the holy, and ethics. The outer includes other people and the world, and the other relates to morality, God and explicit religion. What Bailey found in all interviews was that the respondents did not subdivide the world into the holy and the secular in a dichotomous way but instead, as Bailey called it, in a trichotomous way. Between the holy and the secular there was now a space where respondents united these two levels. It is in this space that implicit religion can be found. Thereby, implicit religion involves a major commitment to the self.

The second possible definition is *integrating foci*. This description of the meaning of implicit religion "directs attention to the whole width of possible forms of sociality" (p. 802). The difference with the definition above which "draws attention to the whole hierarchy of levels of consciousness" is that this

description considers the societal level, family, groups, gender, ethnicity, and the cosmic. The various foci connect different levels of reality in a meaningful way but can be "logically inconsistent, emotionally incoherent, or cognitively conflicting, even if they are not consciously in dispute" (p. 802).

The third possible definition of implicit religion is *intensive concerns with extensive effects*. This description directs attention to an intensive engagement with a subject, which has extensive consequences on other areas of life: "It makes plain that the commitment suggested by attendance at a football match on Saturday afternoon is assessed less by decibel […] than by the influence it has upon the rest of the week" (p. 802). The question may be raised whether this is really religion. It is certainly not religion as we understand it traditionally. In implicit religion, neither the belief in a greater power nor a relation to transcendence is seen as a required criterion for religiousness (Schnell, 2004). But like traditional religion, it provides the individual with meaning, as Nesti (1990) explains:

> Implicit religion is a request for meaning that originates in the subject's life-world, expressing itself by means of a complex system of symbols and practices. These in addition to a series of paths replete with meaning have the effect of reassuring the subjects themselves on the unconditional relevance of their existence here and now. (p. 432)

This is how implicit religion is addressed in this study: it is a meaning-giving construct, or, from the point of view of criticism of religion, a way to make the unbearable aspects of life bearable (Schnell, 2007). In Chapter 2, Yalom's (1980) argument that life can be considered meaningful in a cosmic and in a

personal sense was discussed. The *cosmic* (from a god's point of view) consideration of meaning of life is not so much considered in this study as is the *personal* consideration of meaning in life, which refers to how people generate (or experience) meaning in their lives (Schnell, 2012).

As the aim of this study is to understand to what extent school shootings are meaning-giving constructs, Bailey's implicit religion approach is used because it can help us understand "phenomena of secular life [in the present case, school shootings], if we compare them with what we already know of religious life" (Bailey, 1997, p. 16). Linking a school shooting - a ruthless killing of people - to implicit religion may seem a paradox within the common understanding of religion. However, as Bailey argued, explicit and implicit religion can differ tremendously. Nonetheless, Bailey does not give a clear definition of what is implicit religion and above all what is not (Schnell, 2004). An example of this problem of identification of implicit religion is my discussion with Bailey who wrote an email in response to an earlier publication in this project, "The Implicit Religion of School Shootings: Existential Concerns of Perpetrators Prior to their Crime*"* (Pfeifer & Ganzevoort, 2015), and remarked the following [55]:

> I' ve now had a little longer since my return from hospital to re-read your handsomely written Paper, and I see 2 strands in how you and I are using the expression. Yes, of

[55] Bailey's wife Joanna sent the email on May 28, 2015 shortly after her husband died. Going through the papers left on his desk, she came across the message, which he had written for her to type. I am very thankful that she took the effort to send his message and that she approved the publication of its content.

> course it covers someone calling him Godlike, because that is the only word he knows to describe how he feels. In that sense he's borrowing a religious word that no one knew he had, from a traditional religion. That use is perfectly legitimate, because it expresses the person's deepest commitment; at that moment, it is to himself. However, a "purer" form of IR is the sheer commitment to oneself. There probably isn' t much difference.

To overcome the problem of identification of implicit religion, Schnell (2004) suggested a *configurational definition* of implicit religion. As said before, implicit religion is a theoretical concept based on psychology. The aim of this chapter is to explore implicitly religious forms of cognition, behavior and experience. Schnell argued that there are structures in thinking, acting and experiencing which also underlie explicit religion. These structures are myth, ritual and transcendent experiences. Specifically, Schnell (2007) argued that

> Further elements that had been identified could either be subsumed under one of these three, such as taboo, sacrifice, and so on, or they would emerge by combining them. All three elements common to every religion can be associated with one of the areas of psychological study: myth is located in cognition, ritual in behaviour, and experience of transcendence in experience. (p.87)

One can only identify implicit religion if these three structures are present and fulfill the functions which are assigned to religiosity, which is, in the case of this study, constructing meaning. Schnell links these three structures to three

dimensions of psychology: thinking (myth), behavior/acting (ritual), and experiencing (transcendent experiences).

According to Schnell, only if these structures play an essential role in the life of a person can implicit religion be identified. This implies that a researcher has to consider the personal perspective of the person under study. Implicit religion, as Schnell claimed, is a specific construct that conditions a certain self-image and world-image. In this context, myth, ritual and transcendent experiences are used with different meanings than in traditional religious studies.

6.1 The meaning of "myth," "ritual" and "transcendent experiences" in the context of implicit religion

In contrast to the more anthropological definition of the essence of a myth - that it is a shared narrative giving coherence to the history of the community (Graeme, 2011) - in the context of implicit religion, we have to find the personal myth, and in the context of this study, the personal myth of the school shooter. A personal myth is a construct of the individual person, based on his or her individual and cultural circumstances. As Schnell (2004) argued, it creates the story of his or her life and contains existential themes, meaning, and a strong opinion about what is right and wrong. Schnell further suggested that a personal myth creates an identity and a philosophy of life as an experience of being the chosen one:

> Sobald dem eigenen Leben ein Plan zugrunde liegt, wird es besonders. Was geschieht, ist gewollt (von wem oder was auch immer): Ich habe eine Aufgabe; mir wird etwas

> zugetraut; was ich tue, zählt...' Weil der persönliche Mythos eine Erfahrung des Erwähltseins vermittelt, hebt er das Individuum aus der gesichtslosen Menge, stiftet Selbstwert und Identität. (Schnell, p. 34)

According to Schnell, at the moment that one's life has an underlying plan, it becomes special. Whatever happens in life, it happens with a purpose (regardless of who or what assigns this purpose): "I have a task; I am trusted to do something; what I do has purpose…." Since the personal myth conveys an experience of being chosen, it raises the individual above the faceless crowd and creates self-worth and identity.

Personal myths are, in Bailey's terms, meaning providers, which offer the protagonist - in this case the school shooter - a coherent interpretation of the world. Because of the individual and subjective character of a personal myth, it can also have a destructive consequence. If the "hero" of the personal myth is seen as a tragic victim, the myth can end in self-destruction. As stated before, implicit religion can be identified only if each of the three structures of myth, ritual, and transcendent experiences plays an essential role in a person's life. Later in this chapter, I elaborate on the personal myth of school shooters and the essential role they play in their life, but let me first explain the meaning of the second structure in implicit religion, the ritual. To identify implicit religion, we have to analyze personal rituals which, in contrast to institutionally established rituals, are developed or chosen from existing rituals by an individual. Another difference is that personal rituals do not necessarily have a social aspect as rituals traditionally have. The commonality, however, is that both personal and traditional rituals are proceedings that are carried out deliberately. As such, rituals are proceedings with a performative character; they include symbols, and they are ascribed significant (holy) meaning. Therefore, they never are carried

out only for fun (Schnell, 2004). Bailey (2009) described these performative aspects of behaviors as secular manifestations of religious behavior. With regard to the concept of implicit religion, then, a ritual is a behavior that is turned into ritualized practice through the manner in which it is exhibited and repeated. In Chapter 2, I discussed the cultural script of school shootings. Part of this script are actions that meet the characteristics of ritual practice described above. They are carried out deliberately, have a performative character, include symbols, and have a special meaning to the shooters. As part of the preparation for the crime, they use quotations from films such as *Natural Born Killers* or they play special music, and during the shooting, they wear similar outfits.

Other typical actions of how the perpetrators plan the shooting also match what (2008) defined as the ceremonial aspects of the killings: they make announcements of their plans through leaking (O'Toole, 2002; Vossekuil et al., 2002); they catalog their grievances in journals, YouTube videos or weblogs; they make hit lists of possible victims; they collect weapons; and they search information about other shootings on the web. Fast compared the preparation and execution of school shootings, including the clothes worn, preferred music and adoration of prior school shooters, with religious rituals. Juergensmeyer (2005) similarily labeled this as performance violence and stated that the unifying concept in interpreting religious violence is its performative character. In a related analysis Ganzevoort (2006), argued that the performance dimension of violence resembles religious ritual and that religious violence is based on a metaphysical perspective of a war between good and evil. Adapting these theories to the empirical material discussed in this study, one can conclude that the school shooting itself is a ritual: Since the shooter is prepared to give his life, it can be stated that the school shooting has a significance for the perpetrator, contains symbols such as the clothes they wear during their deed, is consciously carried out, and has a performative character. In this way, we can

argue that rituals are part of the cultural script of school shootings and thus meet the criteria for this indicator of implicit religion.

Before discussing the indicators of implicit religion further, I first will explain what the third essential structure of implicit religion, transcendent experiences, means in the context of implicit religion. Experiences of transcendence are a commonality of all religions (Maslow, 1964). According to James (1902), the essence of religion is that "we can experience union with something larger than ourselves" (p. 506). This "something larger" is identified as "a unique God who is the all-inclusive soul of the world" (p. 506). But in the context of implicit religion this "something larger" is not related to God:

> Meanwhile the practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals. All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves. Anything larger will do, if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivably even be only a larger and more godlike self. (p. 506)

Schnell (2007) similarly embraced the thought that transcendent experience does not necessarily have to be associated with metaphysical power or a god. She suggested that "the term should be taken literally. Transcendo means 'I go beyond,' hence to pass a border, to go over a certain limit" (p. 91). Transcendent experience thus means to experience something bigger than oneself but can also mean experiencing a bigger self.

Like James, Maslow (1964) argued that this something can be found in daily life. He noticed that the term *experience of transcendence* is connected to religion as it is traditionally understood, while in a secular context he named these experiences *peak experiences.* Schnell (2000) explained the difference between peak and transcendent experience as follows:

> Falling in love is a peak experience in human life as are transcendent experiences of explicit religious character. Both show a surprising similarity in their characteristic qualities. The most significant difference is probably one of causal attribution: transcendent experiences are cognitively represented as caused by a super-natural source, while the reason for falling in love of course is located in the respective partner. (p.117)

The peak-experiencer develops his own religion out of his own private revelations. He develops his own private myths, symbols and rituals, which may be of the deepest meaning to him personally and yet of no meaning to any other person (Maslow, 1964).

In the present study, the term *transcendent experience* is never used to mean *religious experience* but always in the sense of experiences beyond the conscious self that can be a more godlike self (James, 1902) or a unity larger than oneself (Maslow, 1964).

What defines these experiences is that they are perceived as important and that they are commonly seen as an escape from daily life (Bailey, 1997). There are a number of essential characteristics of transcendent experiences. According to Schnell (2004), they must differ from everyday experiences; are

passive-receptive; and cause an intense feeling of power, significance, or happiness. She also pointed out that the protagonist has to express that his experience is relevant and meaningful to him. Regarding the present study, this raises the problem that we cannot ask the school shooters themselves. But there is a more heuristic way of searching for these experiences: we have the egodocuments, which through close reading and re-reading, or watching and re-watching in the case of video material, tell us a lot about their feelings, actions and thoughts and whether these were perceived as meaningful. However, as already discussed in Chapter 1, it has to be considered that analyzing these egodocuments means that only a static glimpse of the kaleidoscope (that is in motion) can be described and *the man in the man* (Tolstaya, 2013) eludes us.

However, implicit religion, understood as a theoretical construct which abstracts from reality (Schnell, 2012), offers a hermeneutical tool to understand the meaning-giving function of school shootings without claiming to allow us to fully understand the individual school shooter. To this end, the egodocuments used in Chapter 5 are analyzed once again, this time to find myth and transcendent experiences. To find the rituals of school shooters, we instead go back to the cultural script of school shootings as described in Chapter 2.

6.2 Method

To identify the personal myth of the selected school shooters, I adopted Schnell's (2004) theory of the relevant components of a personal myth: the expected development of one's own life and of the world/humanity, a philosophy of life, identity/experience of being the chosen one, role models/heroes, life themes, and one's purpose in life. In the process of close reading and re-reading, and watching and re-watching, I used the following questions:

Table 7: Relevant Components of a Personal Myth and Questions to Identify Components

Expected development of own life and of the world/humanity	What does he say (or write) about his expectations of what his own life will look like? How does he feel about the world around him? What does he think about the future of the world?
Philosophy of life	What is a transcending theme in the myth? What is seen as general truth? What are strong opinions about what is right or wrong?
Identity/experience of being the chosen one	Which identity is created in the myth? Are there expressions of being the chosen one?
Role models/heroes	Which role models or heroes can be found in the egodocuments? Are there any idealized self-images?
Life themes	Which turning points in life are described? Which meaningful experiences are described? What is described as the biggest problem?
Purpose in life	Does he feels destined for higher things? What is said about his own future? What does he say about his purpose in life?

As argued before, transcendent experiences or, following Maslow, peak experiences, are difficult to describe and to identify, especially when the protagonist cannot be asked about his experiences in person. But through close reading of the egodocuments, expressions of experiences, which are perceived as very important and seen as an escape from daily life (Bailey, 1997), can possibly be found and identified as transcendent experiences. When shooters describe experiences which (1) differ from everyday experiences; (2) are passive-receptive; and (2) presumably cause an intense feeling of power,

significance or happiness (Schnell, 2004); a transcendent experience as defined in the previous section can be assumed. When performing a close reading and re-reading, I used the following questions regarding transcendent experiences:

- Does he express a feeling of unity with a greater whole?
- Does he express an experience of a power larger than his conscious self?
- Does he express an experience of a more godlike self?
- Does he express an experience of intense feeling of power, significance or happiness?

Regarding ritual, recall that the performative character of school shootings itself identifies it as some kind of a ritual. Moreover, these actions are consciously carried out and they contain symbols. One of the aspects of performative violence is that school shooters leak their plans, often on the Internet. These actions also have the character of a ritual. For each case, I analyzed the performative character of the individual preparation and execution of the shooting. In a last step, I searched for commonalities in the myths, experiences of transcendence, and rituals between the individual cases to find a more general answer to the question if implicit religion provides a valid interpretation in the analysis of school shootings.

6.3 School shootings as meaning giving constructs: implicit religion of school shootings

Before discussing the similarities between the cases, the additional outcome of my analysis is presented per individual case. Note that the existential themes in the myths are not explicitly addressed in this analysis because there were discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

6.3.1 Myth, transcendent experiences, and rituals of Luke Woodham

On October 1, 1997, then 16-year-old Luke killed his mother with a knife and drove her car to Pearl High School, Mississippi, USA, where he killed two students with a rifle. He is serving three life terms and an additional 140 years in prison.

Table 8: Overview of the Myth, Transcendent Experiences, and Rituals of Luke Woodham.

Myth	**Transcendent experiences**	**Ritual**
No one every loved me/will love me. The world mistreated me and therefore people have to die. I am an avenging angel for all mistreated people. Humanity is evil. I am a hero because I dare to take revenge. Others caused the school shooting.	Epitome of Evil, feeling of great power-decision maker about who lives and who dies.	Collecting weapons, writing about plans, leaking, performative violence.

Luke's myth, as found in his egodocuments, is that no one ever loved him in his entire life, that people are only mean to him, and that he therefore hates them and wants to kill them. In Luke's myth, it becomes clear that he blames the world for the fact that he becomes a killer. Obviously, he sees his experienced mistreatment as a big wrong, so wrong that people deserve to die for it: "I have no mercy for humanity, for they created me, they tortured me until I snapped and became what I am today!" In his myth, killing another living being is an experience of fun and beauty. An example is the chilling story he tells about killing his dog:

> We beat the dog, tied her up in a plastic garbage bag, put that bag in another bag. We put the subdued little pooch in an old book bag and went to some woods. When we got out to the woods I took a billy club…. I … handed it to my accomplice. He ran and hit the bagged dog with it. I will never forget the howl she made. It sounded almost human. We laughed and hit her hard. I picked up the book bag, which was now soaked in her blood, and drug her across the ground dropped into the woods. A hole developed in the bag and the dog stuck her head out, fully engulfed in flames. We put more on her, and more and more, and more. She got out and tried to run. I took the night stick and hit her in the shoulder, spine and neck. I'll never forget the sound of her bones breaking … We set her on fire again, the foolish dog opened her mouth & we sprayed fluid down her throat, her whole neck caught on fire, inside & out. Finally, the fire went out and she was making a gurgling noise. I silenced the noise with the club again. I hit her so hard the crusted burnt scar on her shoulder fell of[f]. I hit her so hard I knocked the fur off her neck…. Then we put her in the burned bag and chunked her in a nearby pond. We watched the bag sink. It was true beauty.

This appalling story becomes even more grotesque when we see his comment that "the victim was a loved one. My dear dog Sparkle." At this point, the question can be raised whether this is not simply an indication of a

psychological disorder. Since I am not a psychologist, an answer to this question would be beyond my expertise. However, the argument that mental illness is a social construct is a central theme in medical sociology. For example, according to Scheff (1966), mental illness can also be seen as behavior which is not considered socially acceptable and a diagnosis as such is simply based on social or ethical standards. Thus what is viewed as normal in one culture may be seen as abnormal or mentally ill in another: "However much we may be personally convinced that we can tell the normal from the abnormal, the evidence is simply not compelling" (Rosenhan, 1973, p. 250). Maddi (1967) suggests that many patients diagnosed with mental illness are actually suffering from meaninglessness. He argues that these people are labeled with some official diagnosis while they should more appropriately be considered existentially ill. The aim here is not, however, to discuss contradictory views on mental illness. The arguments above are only meant to be a reminder to all of us not to assign too easily the stamp of mental illness to a school shooter.

Something Luke does not address in his egodocuments is the murder of his mother. In court he first claimed not to remember killing his mother but later on he argued that she deserved to die because she never loved him (Langman, 2012). For the analyses of myth and transcendent experience, I focused on egodocuments and therefore hesitated to take the court statement into account. However, I did not want to ignore the fact of that murder completely, especially because Kip Kinkel (the next case I will discuss) killed his parents too, giving a very different explanation of the murder. Another aspect of his personal myth is formed by his feelings of being victimized: "I am not insane! I am angry. This world has shit on me for the final time. I am not spoiled or lazy, for murder is not weak and slow-witted, murder is gutsy and daring. I killed because people like me are mistreated every day." This is also an indication of his feelings of being a chosen one. As an avenging angel, he

retaliates against all mistreatment in the world: "No-one loves me, I am treated unrightfully and therefore I'll kill you, because I am the hatred and the evil."

This is also already an indicator for transcendent experiences. In his egodocuments, Luke expresses that he sees himself as a greater power and that he feels connected with *the outer*, namely all people who are mistreated. One example of a transcendent experience, in the form of seeing himself as a greater power, can be found in this expression: "I am the hatred in every man's heart! I am the epitomy[56] of all Evil!" Here, he expresses a feeling of great significance. With these feelings of his being a greater power, being the one who takes revenge for all mistreated people, he provides himself with an argument that he has the right to kill people. He seemed to believe that he not only had the right to kill, but also had no other choice. To assistant principal Myrick, who stopped the attack by holding a gun to Luke's head, Luke said that he had to do it because the world had wronged him (Moffatt, 2000).

It is clear, then, that a personal myth and transcendent experiences can be found in Luke's egodocuments. Both seem to be of great significance for him. But what about the third essential structure, the ritual? During the shooting he was wearing a trench coat, a garment typical for perpetrators. Luke leaked his plans indirectly a number of times. For example, he fantasized about killing at school in school assignments. Only minutes before he went into the school to kill he gave a message to a friend which includes the following sentences: "It was not a cry for attention, it was not a cry for help. It was a scream in sheer agony saying that if you can't pry your eyes open, if I can't do it through pacifism, if I can't show you through the displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet."

[56] The spelling of the original documents is maintained regardless of errors.

Luke's personal myth, transcendent experiences, and ritual all constructed meaning for his school shooting. He felt mistreated not only by individuals but by all of humanity, as he expresses. His fantasy of getting revenge gave him a feeling of empowerment. The idea that he not only avenges himself but everyone who is mistreated like him gives him a feeling of even greater power than his conscious self: "I killed because people like me are mistreated every day. I did this to show society 'push us and we will push back!'" In Luke's case, then, indicators of an implicit religion of school shootings can be assumed and the school shooting clearly had a meaning-giving function. The next case I discuss is that of Kipland (Kip) Kinkel.

6.3.2 Myth, transcendent experiences and rituals of Kip Kinkel

On May 21, 1998, 15-year-old Kinkel shot his parents and drove to Thurston High School, Springfield, USA, with several guns. He killed two people and wounded many others. He is serving a 111-year sentence without parole.

Table 9: Overview of the Myth, Experience of Transcendence, and Rituals of Kip Kinkel

Myth	**Transcendent experiences**	**Ritual**
No one ever loved me/will love me. The world is evil and I want to end evil, this is what I have to do.	Power to end the world of evil.	Collecting weapons, writing about plans, music, leaking, performative violence.

As discussed above, personal myths can also have a destructive consequence. In Kip's case, the "hero" of his personal myth is seen as a tragic victim which in the end results in self-destruction. His personal myth, the story of his life that he created, is that of an unloved human being. His myth contains the aspects that no one ever loved him, no one loves him now, and will ever love him in the future. Even God left him: "Why did God just want me to be in complete misery?" In return he rejects everyone: "Every single person I know means nothing to me. I hate every person on this earth." Notably, however, after killing his parents, he writes in a note,

> I have just killed my parents! I don't know what is happening. I love my mom and dad so much. I just got two felonies on my record. My parents can't take that! It would destroy them. The embarrassment would be too much for them. They couldn't live with themselves. I'm so sorry. I am a horrible son. I wish I had been aborted. I destroy everything I touch. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I didn't deserve them. They were wonderful people. It's not their fault or the fault of any person, organization, or television show. My head just doesn't work right.
> God damn these VOICES inside my head. I want to die. I want to be gone. But I have to kill people. I don't know why. I am so sorry! Why did God do this to me. I have never been happy. I wish I was happy. I wish I made my mother proud. I am nothing! I tried so hard to find happiness. But you know me I hate everything. I have no other choice. What have I become? I am so sorry.

This is striking because on one hand, he seems to care at least for two persons, his parents. He states that he killed them out of compassion, because what he is going to do next would destroy them. How does this fit into his personal myth? Or maybe his parents are a discrepancy in his myth that no one, even God, loves him? Could it be that his parents' love is a threat to his myth? The only thing we know is that he shoots his parents in the back of their heads. He actually shoots his mother six times after having told her that he loves her - so he tells the police. [57] In the police interview quoted above, he also states that he had no other choice but to do this. Regarding the development of his own life, he expresses that he hates what he has become. He forecasts that in the end he will kill people, because "All humans are evil. I just want to end the world of evil."

This last, almost apocalyptic, sentence is a first indicator of transcendent experiences. Thinking about ridding the world of evil gives the experience of a union with a larger, more god-like self (James, 1902), a Kip who is so much more powerful than the real Kip that he can end the world. However, he more often expresses that he feels as if something is wrong with him: "I don't want to see, hear, speak or feel evil, but I can't help it. I am evil. I want to kill and give pain without a cost." These feelings of hate and revenge are always present in some way in the announcements he makes. He repeatedly leaks his plans, and it seems to be very important to him to tell people about his violent fantasies. However, the people he tells do not take him seriously.

[57] (Eye) witness testimonies and police interviews as used in this paragraph come from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cm9huZL_oxU Frontline, January 18, 2000, director Michael J. Kirk.

This repeated and conscious behavior strongly indicates a ritual, as does the fact that he was wearing a trench coat and had several weapons in his possession. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the trench coat did not just become a symbol for school shooters in popular perception and movies about these events, but was also the clothing many school shooters wore during their deed. Many think that the shooters copy Eric and Dylan, but Kip and Luke as pre-Columbine shooters already wore these clothes during the shooting. The explanation can be found in the ritual of school shootings. The commonality of the rituals is listening to certain music, watching certain movies, and playing certain games. One of Kip's favorite artists is Marilyn Manson. While surfing the Internet for porn and information on bomb-making, Kip listened to Manson's music. The line "no forgiveness, no salvation" in the song "The Reflecting God" on the 1996 album *Antichrist Superstar* seemed to be of special importance to Kip, since he printed and underlined it.

Music is a powerful symbol in Kip's ritual more generally, too. After he murdered his parents, he hit the continuous repeat button on the CD player at home and played the soundtrack of the movie *Romeo and Juliet*. [58] It was still playing when the police arrived after the shooting at school. During the shooting, he wore a baseball cap with the logo of one of his favorite bands, Nine Inch Nails. Another of Kip's rituals was collecting guns. The myth of redemptive violence (discussed in chapter three) includes weapons as symbols of power and masculinity. But for Kip his guns are more than that, as he saw them as his most reliable friends: "My guns are the only things that haven't stabbed me in the back," he wrote. In the police interview right after the shooting, Kip said several times that he "had to do it" and that he "had no other choice." In both of the cases examined so far, Luke and Kip, we find the three

[58] *Romeo and Juliet*, 1996, director Baz Luhrmann.

structures which indicate implicit religion. The next case to be treated is the case of the Columbine shooters.

6.3.3 Myth, transcendent experiences, and rituals of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris, then 18 years old, and 17-year-old Dylan Klebold killed 13 people at Columbine High School, Colorado, USA, wounded many others, and then committed suicide.

Table 10: Overview of the Myth, Transcendent Experiences, and Rituals of Eric and Dylan

Myth	**Transcendent experiences**	**Ritual**
People are inferior to us. We are superior in many ways, god-like. We will be famous after our deed, immortal. Our deed will bring us to a place of eternal happiness. We are avenging angels. School shooting is a necessity.	Feelings of power and great significance, feelings of being god-like. We will be famous, immortal, unforgotten.	Collecting weapons, writing about plans, music, leaking, performative violence.

Eric and Dylan had very different characters. Eric was loud and outgoing and Dylan was shy and depressed. During their friendship, however, they developed a joint myth. They saw themselves as superior and expressed that everyone who they thought inferior should die. This they called "Natural Selection." In their personal myth they are very different from other people, wiser, greater and more god-like, yet no one else accepts them. In their

egodocuments, they wrote that to them the world is lost because bad things like war happen over and over again. People who think they can change the world for the better are fools in their eyes. Dylan expressed this myth of an incorrigible world in his diary as follows: “Good things turn bad, bad things become good, the ‘people’ on the earth see it as a battle they can win. HA fuckin morons. If people looked at History, they would see what happens.” The pair thought that only they could see this reality and therefore are superior to all the other people, as when they write, “I think, too much, I understand, I am GOD compared to some of those un-existable brainless zombies.” They also consider themselves superior to previous school shooters. As Eric said on a videotape, “Do not think we’re trying to copy anyone. We had the idea before the first one ever happened. Our plan is better, not like those fucks in Kentucky with camouflage and .22s. Those kids were only trying to be accepted by others.” They gain a sense of power from the idea of getting revenge by killing those who do not accept their superiority. In a video they brag about their plans and how they will kill as many as they can.

Regarding experiences of transcendence, the strongest indicator is formed by the many expressions of their experience of a more god-like self when they fantasize about the shooting, as when Dylan said in a video, “Directors will be fighting over this story. I know we’re gonna have followers because we’re so fucking god-like. We’re not exactly human - we have human bodies but we’ve evolved into one step above you, fucking human shit.” In Dylan’s egodocuments, one can also find depressive feelings and the need to be loved and accepted. Then he appears to be a vulnerable, lonely boy. However, his belief that he will be powerful, famous, and feared when he turns into a shooter gives him the feeling of rising above himself. As he wrote, “We will have our revenge on society, & then be free, to exist in a timeless spaceless place of pure happiness.” Eric also feels that his plan for a shooting serves a higher goal. In his eyes, they are going to start a revolution of the dispossessed,

as he says in a video. In another video he explains to his parents, “Our actions are a two man war against everyone else.” In their videos and egodocuments, they leaked their plans several times. Even very shortly before the shooting, maybe half an hour, they made a video saying goodbye to their families and friends in which Dylan said, “We did what we had to do.” To them, apparently, their myth and transcendent experiences lead to only one possible action, a school shooting.

The leaking through documents such as videos is part of the ritual they developed, as is gathering a distinctive collection of explosives and weapons. They also made videos of their target practice in the woods. In these videos, guns and black trenchcoats, which they also wore during the shooting, function as symbols of their idea of being powerful. It is part of their identity as a school shooter, which they created in their myth. The performative character of their deed becomes very clear when they directly address the viewer, looking into the camera and bragging about their planned violent attack.

After the first three cases, we can already see some commonalities in the myths, transcendent experiences, and rituals of school shooters. The next case I discuss is that of Sebastian Bosse.

6.3.4 Myth, transcendent experiences, and rituals of Sebastian Bosse

Sebastian Bosse, then 18 years old, went to the Geschwister Scholl Schule in Emsdetten, Germany, on November 20, 2006, where he injured a number of people with firearms and smoke bombs, before committing suicide.

Table 11: Overview of the Myth, Transcendent Experiences, and Rituals of Sebastian Bosse

Myth	**Transcendent experiences**	**Ritual**
I am superior. School shooters are role models. People, society is shallow, inferior, evil. I am in war with the world. Normal life is meaningless, school shootings give meaning. School shooting is caused by the world.	Feelings of power and great significance, feelings of being god-like.	Collecting weapons, writing about plans, music, leaking, performative violence.

Sebastian admired the Columbine shooters.[59] Eric especially is Sebastian's role model: "ERIC HARRIS IS GOD. There is no doubt," he wrote in his diary. He expressed that he felt as if he is living Eric's life all over again and that he thinks exactly the way Eric thought. Sebastian was very interested in school shootings in general. Sebastian's personal myth is akin to the school shooters' myths discussed so far. He felt misunderstood and was offended that no one recognized his superiority. He wrote,

> Of all the lives in this world, apparently mine is the only one that's meaningful. And that's the truth. When you

[59] Sources for this paragraph are the following: school shooters.info; The ARTE documentary: Amokläufer im Vizier by director Marta Neher. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8IwhGWD-mY

> look at people today, you only see empty bodies, all dressed up and dolled up to the max but that is only the shell.

To him everybody else is shallow and the world is not real but shaped by the media. In Sebastian's myth, life has no meaning. People are brainwashed at school and by politicians. All that awaits him in life is working for a boss, getting a family who will hate him in the end, and then death. This depressing story only changes when he fantasizes about the school shooting. In his myth, he is at war with the world and the school is his battlefield, and by holding a weapon in his hands, he outgrows himself:

> Right now I'm holding a 12 Gauge Alarm Patrone in my godly hands! It's filled with circa 90 grain ass kickin' black powder, which I need for my muzzle loader guns. On November 17, 20 or 21 I will blow up that fucking piece of shit school! This is a war. The whole World against RX! [60]

I turn next to transcendent experiences, Sebastian's expressions of the kinship he felt with Eric Harris indicate these experiences. Sebastian, who often expressed feelings of isolation, had found his alter ego in Eric. The symbiotic connection he felt with the Columbine shooter becomes clear when he wrote, "It is scary how similar Eric was to me. Sometimes it seems as if I were to live his life again, as if everything would repeat itself." But Sebastian also felt a

[60] RX relates to his nickname on the Internet.

connection with a greater whole, which is also an indicator for transcendent experiences. He saw his crime as his part of the revolution of the outcast and revenge for every mistreated soul. Making the decision to commit a school shooting gave him the feeling of being superior: "And in 2003/2004 my life changed then. I wasn't a human anymore. I was - God-like. And I began planning this, this massacre." We can witness his transcendent experiences in the videos he posted online. He put on music, was dressed in clothes similar to those worn by the Columbine shooters, pointed guns at the camera, and ecstatically talked about killing people.

Making these videos can also be seen as part of a ritual. He was aware of the performative character of a school shooting and wanted to make sure that his egodocuments are published: "Because I know that the fascist police won't want to publish my videos, notebooks, diaries, basically anything, I took it into my own hands." He also explained that "Sometimes I write shit in English, because I want everybody to understand what the hell I'm talking about!" The trench coat and dark glasses, which he wore during the shooting, he also sometimes wears in the videos, at which time they had already become symbols for school shooters. Like the other school shooters, he leaked his plans on his website. He collected weapons and accurately recorded the purchases of guns and ammunition in his diary. Just like the school shooter discussed previously, Sebastian claimed that he had no other choice but to do as he did, for "my actions are a result of your world." His myth that humanity and the world are evil and that he was mistreated by others, the transcendent experiences when he thought of revenge, the idea of obtaining god-like power through killing people, and repeated recording of his plans till he had no other choice in his mind than going through with it together paved the way to the school shooting.

6.3.5 Myth, transcendent experiences, and rituals of Seung-Hui Cho

The next case is that of Seung-Hui Cho. Then 23 years old, he shot 32 people and then killed himself at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, USA, on April 16, 2006. This shooting caused the highest number of deaths to date.

Table 12: Overview of the Myth, Transcendent Experiences, and Rituals of Seung-Hui Cho

Myth	**Transcendent experiences**	**Ritual**
The world, humanity is evil. I am a martyr, die for a good cause. After my deed I will be an inspiration to others. School shooting is caused by others. Other school shooters are role models.	Feelings of power and great significance, feelings of being god-like.	Collecting weapons, writing about plans, leaking, performative violence.

Seung-Hui mailed a manifesto, including pictures, digital video files, and documents to NBC News. His personal myth becomes clear when we study these documents. To him the world is evil and people have done nothing but try to destroy him. He needs to stand up against evil and has to avenge the injustice and atrocities people have done to him and others. He sees himself not only as an avenging angel but also as martyr. In his myth, school shooters in general are martyrs: "Generation after generation, we martyrs, like Eric and Dylan, will sacrifice our lives to fuck you thousand folds for what you Apostles of Sin have done to us." Just as the shooters discussed previously, part of his myth, or perhaps rather a consequence of his myth, is that he has no other choice than to kill others: "You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today,

but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option." In his myth, he creates an identity of the chosen one. He says that he, like Jesus Christ, will die to "inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people." This also can be interpreted as a transcendent experience. Seung-Hui experienced great excitement at this idea that he will inspire generations after his death, and he felt a bond with the people he is prepared to die for. It should be considered that these are only words and we cannot ask the shooters what the experiences they put into words constituted exactly. But we can interpret their words in relation to their deeds, considering the theory discussed in Section 6.1. When we do so, expressions like the following strongly indicate transcendent experiences in the context of implicit religion: "Like Moses, I spread the sea and lead my people - the Weak, the Defenseless, and the Innocent Children of all ages that you fucked and will always try to fuck - to eternal freedom. Thanks to you Sinners, you Spillers of Blood, I set the example of the century for my Children to follow." In the case of Seung-Hui, the same rituals as in the other cases can be observed. He repeatedly leaks his plans. Although the other shooters also made a final statement before attacking the school, his multimedia manifesto is exceptionally extensive. Using symbols like weapons and typical clothing in his videos, he addressed his audience directly. What also underlined the performative character of his actions were the apocalyptic scenarios and violent language he used.

As discussed in the previous chapter, all school shooters expressed existential concerns in their egodocuments. The analysis of these documents in this chapter already shows that they also developed personal myths, that indications of transcendent experiences can be found, and that specific rituals can be identified.

6.3.6 Myth, transcendent experiences, and rituals of Pekka-Eric Auvinen

The last case of this section is that of 18-year-old Pekka-Eric Auvinen. On November 7, 2007, Pekka-Eric killed eight people and wounded many at Jokela High School in Tuusula, Finland. He committed suicide after the shooting.

Table 13: Overview of the Myth, Transcendent Experiences and Rituals of Pekka-Eric Auvinen

Myth	**Transcendent experiences**	**Ritual**
I am superior. Inferior people should not live. I will change the world. Other school shooters are role models. School shooting is something I have to do, others forced me by their behavior.	Feelings of power and great significance, feelings of being god-like.	Collecting weapons, writing about plans, leaking, performative violence.

Pekka-Eric's personal myth is very similar to the myths of the other school shooters in this study. Humanity is inferior and he is superior to other people: "I can't say I belong to same race as the lousy, miserable, arrogant, selfish human race! No! I have evolved one step above!" In his eyes, too, inferior people should be killed: "Only superior (intelligent, self-aware, strong-minded) individuals should survive while inferior (stupid, retarded, weak-minded masses) should perish." He calls himself god-like and a natural selector who will kill all people who he thinks are unfit for life. For his cause, he says, he is prepared to die. In his myth, humanity and politics have failed to construct a meaningful existence in this world and with his act he will change it forever.

Months before the attack, he made an entry in his diary that he was planning an operation against humanity. In his personal myth, his actions are a war against the world, and he knows that he will not survive his fight. Other school shooters were his role model. He wrote in his diary that he was delighted about the Virginia tech shooting and that he celebrated the anniversary of the Columbine shooting.

Regarding transcendent experiences, Pekka-Eric expresses numerous times that he experienced a greater, more god-like self who will change the world and as a natural selector will choose who is unfit for life. He experienced an immense hatred, and he seemed to love this feeling: He loves this intensive and immense feeling of hate; in fact, this is actually the one thing he really loves. Pekka-Eric leaked his plans on a Columbine fan community website during the last days before the shooting. He published pictures of his weapon and posted videos of his practicing with a gun. Collecting weapons and involving them in the leaking is part of the ritual, as we also saw in the cases before. However, Pekka-Eric differed in the clothes he wore in his leaking videos. Instead of trench coats or army clothes typical for school shooters, he wore, in one picture, a t-shirt with the printed text "human races is overrated." The videos and his manifesto published on his YouTube channel were in English. He obviously counts on an international audience. He seems to know that his deed is a "performance" which will make him famous and, as he appears to sees it, immortal.

Having analyzed the seven cases, it can be stated that indicators of implicit religion can be found in every case. Not only are a personal myth, transcendent experiences, and rituals found in the egodocuments, they also play an important role in the perpetrator's lives, so important, in fact, that they become a great influence on their daily lives and eventually turn these boys into killers. Let us now discuss in summary the implicit religion which is involved in

school shootings and how that implicit religion functions as a meaning-giving construct.

6.4 School shootings as implicit religion and meaning-giving construct

Discussing the individual cases in the previous chapter already showed that there are a number of commonalities in the myths, transcendent experiences and rituals of school shooters.

Table 14: Implicit Religion of School Shootings

Myth	**Transcendent experiences**	**Rituals**
School shootings are a war between good and evil; I am an avenging angel, martyr, god-like. There is no other way to solve my problem; others make me do this. I will become famous, immortal, never forgotten	Feelings of superiority; more god-like self; identification with other shooters or powerful role-models; feelings of great ignificance…they will change the world.	Collecting weapons; making violent videos with symbols like clothes, music; performative violence.

The commonalities in myths of school shooters also can be found in explicit religious myths in a number of ways. For example, the concept of a *fight between good and evil* is present several times: Kip and Luke argue that killing people is a good thing because they free the world from evil. In Kip's words this is expressed as, "all humans are evil. I just want to end the world of evil," while Luke states, "I killed because people like me are mistreated every day." In addition, in their myths they create *apocalyptic scenarios*: Sebastian

says, for example, that "People will be lying dead on school grounds, the school will be burning and my brain will be blown out!" Another example comes from Seung-Hui: "We will raise hell on earth that the world has never witnessed. Millions of deaths and millions of gallons of blood on the streets will not quench the avenging phoenix that you have caused us to unleash." Next, in their myth they construct an identity of an *avenging angel*: they kill to take revenge for not only themselves but (in most cases) for all humiliated people. Also, they see themselves as *martyrs:* Seung-Hui, for example, writes, "Thanks to you, I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people." He also refers to the Columbine shooters: "Generation after generation, we martyrs, like Eric and Dylan, will sacrifice our lives to fuck you thousand folds for what you Apostles of Sin have done to us." They also see themselves as *the chosen ones* who had no choice but to do what they did because the evil in the world had to be exterminated. School shooters use traditional religious phrases to underline the significance of their words. Seung-Hui, who seems to nominate himself as a messiah, declares, "All of you who have been beaten, humiliated, and crucified, Children of Ishmael, Crusaders of Anti-Terrorism, my Jesus Christ Brothers and Sisters, you're in my heart. In life and death and spirit. We'll soon be together." Their myths give meaning to their lives and most of all they function to construct meaning for their deed. They have transcendent experiences or peak experiences when they fantasize about their planned shooting. The idea of getting power and taking revenge gives them an experience of a greater, god-like self. This goes hand in hand with certain behavior: collecting weapons and making videos in which they display themselves with guns; searching information about other school shootings; and making manifestos which aim a specific audience. The shooting itself has a performative character, which is also a characteristic of rituals.

Regarding Schnell's (2004) configurational definition of implicit religion, one can state that the three structures - myth, transcendent experiences,

and ritual - are all clearly present in the studied cases. They construct meaning for the shooters, which means they fulfill a function which is assigned to implicit religion. Or, as said before, from the point of view of criticism of religion, they make the unbearable aspects of life bearable. The unbearable aspect for school shooters, as also discussed in the previous chapter, is the feeling of being undervalued, powerless, and mistreated. Becoming a school shooter makes them feel superior, powerful, and famous. They are no longer average boys but an avenging angels, martyrs, and at war with the whole world. They no longer have to face mortality but instead will become famous and unforgettable. They are no longer boring students who have to fight the normal problems of puberty; instead, they will have fan websites, and documentaries will be made about them.

But does this mean that we can speak of school shootings as meaning-giving constructs, as implicit religion? Although the analyses were done accurately, and the sources I consulted were very extensive, I did not speak to the perpetrators. However, I managed to look at the phenomenon from a new and more holistic perspective. So far, researchers from different disciplines have studied myth, transcendent experiences, and rituals individually. Let us go back to Chapter 2 to recall some examples of this.

Regarding the myths, we can make the comparison with the study by Robertz (2004) of the role fantasy plays in the development of a school shooting. He suggested that the fantasy of becoming a person of power and control, like the violent role models school shooters admire, eventually leads to their deeds. At a certain point, according to Robertz, they cross the line between fantasy and reality, which leads to the school shooting. The fantasy can be seen as the personal myth. The shooter originally feels powerless, mistreated, and misunderstood, and the personal myth or fantasy makes him feel powerful again. He becomes a greater self, even god-like (see also Schnell's indicator of

personal myths: it makes the unbearable aspects of life bearable). This idea of a powerful, more godlike self is what James (1902) defined as a personal transcendent experience. Arguably, we can connect this to studies of the narcissistic personality of shooters, as discussed in Chapter 2. Regarding rituals, the third defining structure of implicit religion, recall the discussion in Chapter 1 about scholars such as Fast (2008) who address school shootings as ceremonial violence. Fast (2008) compared the ritual preparation and execution of school shootings with religious rituals. Although these approaches of isolated factors of school shootings produced remarkable results, they did not lead to a full understanding of these events (see Chapter 2). One can, of course, argue (correctly) that mental disorders, antisocial personality disorders, and/or severe bullying can lead to school shootings, but these factors may not provide the whole picture. Considering a more holistic view on school shootings using the concept of implicit religion offers new insights into these phenomena.

School shooters respond to an existential crisis by constructing meaning through personal myths, rituals, and transcendent experiences to make the unbearable bearable. As argued in Chapter 5, the unbearable things in their life are struggles such as feeling outcast, being afraid of isolation, not being willing to accept responsibility for all aspects of one's life, experiencing meaninglessness, and dealing with mortality. To be able to cope with these facts of life, school shooters construct a personal myth of being a hero at war with an inferior humanity, an avenging angel who takes revenge for all underdogs. This myth gives them a feeling of being a powerful, more god-like self. Holding a weapon in their hands and making videos of themselves with guns are meaningful rituals to them. Through these actions, they bring their personal myths closer to reality. To them there is no going back to the facts of life. The idea of being a "loser" again, who is struggling with all his concerns about life and death, isolation, and identity, is too unbearable to them. Therefore, they create the myth that they had no other choice than to turn their fantasy of a

school shooting into reality. To them, this is the right thing to do. This perception of school shootings allows us to argue that to the perpetrators the school shooting is a rational act. The deed is a meaning-giving construct which reduces the existential struggles discussed in Chapter 5. School shootings can be understood as trans-ethical violent actions driven by implicit religion.

Part four: School shootings seen in a broader context, lessons learned and recommendations

7 School shootings are not an isolated phenomenon

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, a new perspective on school shootings regarding the existential concerns and implicit religion of the perpetrators helps us to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon. However, the fact that we are dealing with limited data remains a problem in the research of school shootings. For further investigation and to deepen further our understanding of school shootings, we have to search for the possibility of comparable groups of offenders.

On the surface, one specific group of offenders appears already to have been considered: the so-called lone wolves. Following the definition Spaaij (2012, p. 16) proposed, lone wolves are acting individually, do not belong to a organized terrorist group or organization, and their modi operandi are conceived and directed by the individual without any outside command or hierarchy. Apparently, there are a number of commonalities of lone wolves and school shooters. However, various studies explicitly foreclose school shooters when they define the term *lone wolf*. Bakker and De Graaf (2010), for example, stated that lone wolf acts are politically or religiously motived and that this kind of motive cannot be found in school shootings; therefore, school shooters and lone wolves are a very different kind of perpetrator. In the next chapter, I argue that making this distinction is the result of a misunderstanding of the motives of school shooters. Moreover, I will demonstrate that school shooters should be considered as lone wolves and therefore included in the studies of these perpetrators.

At this point, let me give the term *lone wolf* a moment of critical thought. Some scholars and experts disapprove of this term. Mainly, this is because they argue that it has a romantic connotation and could therefore inspire violent acts. Some critics of the term prefer terms such as *lone actor* or

individual terrorist. In addition to having faced criticism, the definition of lone wolves varies from study to study (Pennington, 2011). The inconsistent research definitions result in questionable research findings and are mainly problematic when rating lone wolf terrorism. In the context of this chapter, however, it is not a great obstruction, as obviously the aim of my study is to deepen our understanding of school shootings and not dispute existing definitions of lone wolves. After thorough consideration, I decided to use the term *lone wolf* because of the following arguments. First, the idea of being a lone wolf has nothing romantic about it. Humans by nature are social beings and long to be part of a group in some way. Second, the metaphor provides a distinctive comparison. As animals, wolves are very social and live in packs. Because each pack only has one breeding pair, young wolves leave to find a breeding mate. Some of them do not succeed in their search and remain lone wolves. Typically they are more aggressive and dangerous than average wolves. Third, the term *lone wolf* is not only used in popular media, but also in security circles and by governments (Kaplan, Lööw, & Malkki, 2014). President Obama also used the term in an interview with *The Situation Room* anchor Wolf Blitzer in 2011:

> The risk that we're especially concerned over right now is the lone wolf terrorist, somebody with a single weapon being able to carry out wide-scale massacres of the sort that we saw in Norway recently. You know, when you've got one person who is deranged or driven by a hateful ideology, they can do a lot of damage, and it's a lot harder to trace those lone wolf operators.

In this study, I mainly follow Spaaij's (2012, p. 16) definition of lone wolves. In the following, I trace the similarities with school shooters.

One of the similarities is that school shooters plan and execute high-impact performative violent acts. Like lone wolf attacks, school shootings get worldwide media attention and have a high social impact. Spaaij (2012) underlined the performative character of lone wolf attacks, which aim to send symbolic messages to a global audience. As a reminder, let me point out the performative character of school shootings as discussed in previous chapters: school shooters not only address an audience in their manifestos, their crime itself is aimed at an audience in two ways. On the one hand, the attack is executed in a public place where the presence of a great number of people is expected. On the other hand, school shooters are well aware of the media impact of their deed as is shown in expressions in their egodocuments.

Another similarity is that these perpetrators act individually. Except for a few occasions when school shooters act in pairs like the Columbine shooters, the majority of school shootings are committed by a single perpetrator (Langman, 2009; Robertz, 2004; Vossekuil, 2002); lone wolves also act mostly solitarily (Spaaij, 2012; Bakker & De Graaf, 2010). In addition, leading scholars in lone wolf terrorism research also define pair attacks like the Boston bombing as lone wolf attacks or, as Pantucci (2011, p. 9) proposed, *lone wolf packs*.

Another commonality is the lack of a reliable profile. I argued before that because the (socio-) demographic differences between school shooters are too broad, a clear profile of these perpetrators cannot be developed (Langman, 2009; Newman et al., 2004; Robertz, 2004). Researchers who aim to profile lone wolves encounter the same problem (Alfaro-Gonzales, Barthelmes, Bartol, Boyden, Calderwood, Doyle, & Yee, 2015; Parker, 2015). The commonality here is that there is no typical school shooter or lone wolf. Moreover, *leakage* is a typical characteristic for both. Therefore, the next commonality I would like to argue for is the fact that these perpetrators always announce their deed in some way. School shooters commonly make announcements of some kind, such as suicide letters or manifestos, and post them often on the Internet (O'Toole,

2002; Vossekuil et al., 2002). Lone wolves often make use of the Internet to spread their beliefs and motives prior to their attacks (Brynielsson, Horndahl, Johansson, Kaati, Martenson, & Svenson, 2012). The last similarity I would like to point out is the existential dimension of the pathway to their deed. Notably, the announcements of school shooters contain expressions of existential themes like the meaning of life and the struggle with their own identity (Pfeifer & Ganzevoort, 2014). Spaaij (2012) noticed that in the radicalization process of lone wolves, a search for meaning also plays a key factor.

Despite these commonalities, research comparing school shooters and lone wolves appears to be very rare. Comparison takes place based on analyses of the mental health status or the socio-demographic data, often only to dismiss any possible similarities. What is more, a number of studies explicitly foreclose school shooters when they define the term *lone wolf*. Bakker and De Graaf (2010), for example, state that lone wolf acts are politically or religiously motivated and that this kind of motive cannot be found in school shootings, so that therefore school shooters and lone wolves are a very different kind of perpetrator. First of all, I question whether religious or political motives are distinctive characteristics of lone wolves. Lone wolves may sometimes be motivated by personal agendas in response to real or at least perceived institutional events (Bates, 2012), or by personal grievance and moral outrage (Meloy & Jakeley, 2014), or by a combination of political and personal motives (Pantucci, 2011). According to Spaaij (2012), it is extremely difficult to determine the true motivation of lone wolves inter alia for the reason that "lone wolves tend to create their own individualized ideologies from a mixture of broader political, religious or social aims and personal frustration and aversion" (p. 20). A personal grievance can therefore develop into, for example, a political motive. But what a priori seems to be a political motive can appear to be a religious one and vice versa after closer analysis. On the one hand, labeling Muslim lone wolves as religiously motivated has become something of a

convention despite the fact that these perpetrators often express their interest in global politics. On the other hand, what one group of scholars clearly identifies as politically motivated may be considered doubtful by others. For example, Breivik's manifestos led many scholars to the conclusion that his attack was politically motivated. However, in 2011, Juergensmeyer argued in the *Huffington Post* that Breivik's motives were religious and even defined him as a Christian terrorist:

> It is true that Breivik was much more concerned about politics and history than about scripture and religious belief. But much the same can be said about Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and other Muslim terrorists. Bin Laden was a businessman and engineer, and Zawahiri was a medical doctor; neither were theologians or clergy. Their writings show that they were much more interested in Islamic history than theology or scripture, and imagined themselves as recreating glorious moments in the Muslim past in their own imagined wars.

The usual arguments, according to Juergensmeyer, lead to the conclusion that if we identify Bin Laden as a Muslim terrorist, we should see Breivik as a Christian terrorist. Extending this line of thought, one could also argue that if we identify Breivik as a politically motivated terrorist, we can say the same about Bin Laden. One could conclude that it is not only difficult to determine if a lone wolf has religious or political motives, it is also possible that the genesis of his motive is a personal grievance. So why would that be different from a school shooter? Let us go back to the argument in Bakker and De Graaf (2010) that school shooters and lone wolves are a very different kind of perpetrator because school shooters do not have political or religious

motives. The arguments above showed that this depends on how one interprets what constitutes religious or political motives. That brings me to my second argument for researching lone wolves and school shooters as one phenomenon: School shootings can be interpreted as implicit religion (Pfeifer & Ganzevoort, 2014), as I concluded in the previous chapter.

Therefore, secondly, I question the reading that the motives of school shooters cannot be interpreted as religious. This depends on how one defines *religion* and consequently *religious*. In Chapter 5, I argued that school shootings may be understood as trans-ethical violent actions driven by existential concerns. In Chapter 6, I discussed how existential concerns provoke an existential crisis which leads to the search for a meaning-giving construct. In response to existential concerns, the shooters develop a personal myth and rituals, have experiences of transcendence, and create a meaning-giving construct which can be interpreted as implicit religion. Interestingly enough, current research on terrorism claims that all terrorist ideology functions as a meaning-giving construct. The psychological constructs supporting this theory stem primarily from Terror Management Theory research. In the 1980s, Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski developed the Terror Management Theory (TMT) on the idea that people experience existential anxiety when they are reminded of their mortality. They manage their existential concern of death by creating a worldview that gives meaning to their actions. TMT researchers argued that ideology reduces this death-anxiety by permitting people to make sense of the world. Following this theory, choosing or developing a violent worldview is no less rational than choosing or developing any other. One could argue that in TMT the existential concern of death is the only existential struggle people experience when they are defending their ideology. However, Koole, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2006) suggested that death-anxiety can be a trigger for meaninglessness-anxiety. This type does not exclusively concern death-anxiety but relates to five major categories of existential anxiety: besides

death, these are isolation, identity, freedom, and meaning. Interestingly, McBride (2011) came to the same conclusion I made regarding school shootings: she suggested that terrorist ideologies and activities function as a meaning-giving construct. She also stated that this idea is consistent with contemporary psychological research.

Let us follow the idea that school shootings as terrorist actions serve a meaning-giving function, as can hobbies, work, and religion, for example. Although at first these meaning-giving concepts appear dissimilar, they all help to find meaning by means of an external construct. The implicit religion of school shooters and radicalized ideologies promoting terrorism thus perform similar functions. Following this line of thought, the common factor in the motives of lone wolves and school shooters is that their ideology (regardless of whether this is at first sight political, religious, or implicitly religious) and actions function as a meaning-giving constructs.

In conclusion, the argument that school shooters cannot be labeled as lone wolf terrorists because of motivational differences can be disputed. On the contrary, one could state that lone wolves and school shooters have very similar motives. In their search for meaning, they create a meaning-giving construct which leads to their actions. The next question then becomes what factors involved in their meaning-giving constructs lead to violence, and whether these factors are comparable. Examining this could give us the final conclusion that school shooters and lone wolves share a number of striking commonalities, and studying them as one phenomenon can help us to deepen our understanding of their motives. Therefore, in the following section of this chapter, I focus on egodocuments of lone wolf perpetrators and what they say about their motivation. An in-depth study would exceed the limitations of this project. This chapter represents a first exercise in analyzing school shooters and lone wolves as one phenomenon. To do so, I looked at manifestos of various perpetrators. *Techniques to identify themes* (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) were used. Themes, as

addressed in this chapter, are abstract constructs that link expressions found in the manifestos. Ryan and Bernard (2003) stated that you know you have found a theme when you can answer the question "What is this expression an example of?" (p. 87).

Some of the egodocuments analyzed in this study are available as written text and some were videos that had to be transcribed first. To get acquainted with the texts, I read each text twice, looking for repetitions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The more the same concept occurs in a text, the more likely it is to be a theme (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Because of the sometimes restricted extent of the manifestos I analyzed, I considered a theme important starting with two repetitions. The themes I found in this process were compared with the themes I identified in a next step, using a different method. In this step, I cut and sorted expressions (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After identifying expressions which seemed important and arranging them into piles of quotes that go together, I named each pile according to the theme of the quotes. In a last step, I compared the themes found in the first two steps. Only themes I found in both steps were determined to be definitive themes for this chapter. Existing ideas about the motives of these perpetrators were also brought into the analysis, as were the results of my study so far about motives of school shooters. For the comparison, I used the results of my analyses of the existential concerns and implicit religion of school shooters as argued in Chapter 5 and 6 and selected three lone wolves for which trustworthy autobiographical material was available. In the selection process of the cases, I was searching for various religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, aiming for heterogeneity in terms of cultural contexts. The choice of lone wolves was, besides heterogeneity, also based on a practical consideration: the number of accessible egodocuments. Elliot Rodger, who was American and biracial (Asian mother and Caucasian father) left a manifesto of 141 pages and a video on YouTube. Anders Breivik is a Caucasian European, has a Christian background and left a manifesto of 1500

pages. Lastly, Larossi Abballa, whose ethnical background was North-African, was Muslim and used social media to broadcast a 12-minute, live-stream video shortly after his attack.

Table 15: Selected cases of lone wolves

Case	***Material***
Anders Breivik	Utøya attack. July 22, 2011, killed eight people in a bombing attack at the Government quarter in Oslo, then shot 69 participants of a Workers' Youth League (AUF) summer camp, Norway. His 1500-page manifesto, in English, is a collection of texts from different sources. Some parts are written by other people. Notably, the American Unabomber's manifesto, written in 1995, is plagiarized with minor changes. Of the 1500 pages, Breivik is the author of a 58-page diary and a 37-page self-interview. Because I was looking for themes in egodocuments, only these 95 pages were used for the analyses. Manifesto available at https://info.publicintelligence.net/AndersBehringBreivikManifesto.pdf
Elliot Rodger	California, Isla Vista mass shooting, May 23, 2014, six people were killed, before shooter took his own life. Manifesto video available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Q-flRsvUZ4 Written manifesto: My twisted world, the story of Elliot Rodger. 141 pages, available at: http:abclocal.go.com/three/kabc/kabc/My-Twisted-World.pdf
Larossi Abballa	France, Magnanville, June 13, 2016, killed a French police commander and his wife at their home. During the attack he swore allegiance to ISIS. He was killed by police. Manifesto available at http://heavy.com/news/2016/06/larossi-abballa-magnanville-attacker-isis-islamic-state-allegiance-full-uncensored-facebook-youtube-video/>

The results are presented as follows. Every theme which was found is presented as a section. In this section, expressions of the perpetrators are used as examples of the theme and in addition relevant empirical studies are discussed. The themes were named as follows: The avenging angel: from personal grievance to universal revenge; the expected reward: eternal fame, paradise, and 'transcendental-future'; the chosen one: I have to do this for the greater good; the imagined war: the apocalypse. First, I present the theme of the avenging angel and how personal grievance seems to become an universal revenge.

7.1 The avenging angel: personal grievance or universal revenge

In their egodocuments, each of the studied perpetrators expresses experiences of personal grievance and/or identifies himself with the perceived suffering of others. They justify their deed as an act of revenge for injustice against them or people like themselves. Sageman (2008) and Spaaij (2012) likewise stated that the decision to commit a terrorist act is motivated by a combination of personal grievance and moral outrage. Personal grievances evoke a psychological defense: Because one does not want to accept personal responsibility for one's circumstances, one starts to blame others (Meloy & Jakeley, 2014). We can see the same psychological defense occurring in the studied cases. Let us look at an example of this in the text of Elliot Rodger. In fact, the very first sentence of his manifesto sets out this theme: "Humanity… All of my suffering on this world has been at the hands of humanity, particularly women." His personal grief, as we learn reading his manifesto, is that he has never had a girlfriend. Several times he writes that he is too insecure to even speak to a girl. He starts to disavow any personal responsibility for his inability to find love and blames the ignorance of all females for his sexless life, writing, "Because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me," they forced him "to

endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance" (p. 1). Eventually, he decided that he "had nothing left to live for but revenge. Women must be punished for their crimes of rejecting such a magnificent gentleman as myself" (p. 118). He called this punishment a day of retribution and it "will be so devastating that it will shake the very foundations of the world" (p. 124). Although Rodger blames women for his misery in his egodocuments, his first victims were three male Asian students who were stabbed to death in Rodger's own apartment. Rodger didn't hate women exclusively. He identifies himself as Eurasian, and his manifesto contains expressions of racial hatred towards Blacks and Asians (despite his own Chinese heritage on his mother's side). The idea that Blacks and Asians, who in his eyes are inferior, can get dates while he cannot increases his hate:

> How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me? I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. He is descended from slaves. I deserve it more. (p.84)
>
> I came across this Asian guy who was talking to a white girl. The sight of that filled me with rage. I always felt as if white girls thought less of me because I was half-Asian, but then I see this white girl at the party talking to a full-blooded Asian. (p. 121)

His personal grievance of never having had a girlfriend changes into the plan to change the world: "I formed an ideology in my head of how the world should work. I was fueled both by my desire to destroy all of the injustices of the world, and to exact revenge on everyone I envy and hate" (p.57).

Another chilling example can be found in Seung-Hui Cho's manifesto, in which we can also see the development from personal grievance to moral outrage. He starts his manifesto by blaming others for the suffering he has experienced: "You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and torched my conscious (sic) again and again" (p. 7). Soon his personal suffering becomes a universal suffering of the "weak and defenseless" (p. 7), whom he addresses as his "brothers and sisters" (p. 7). However dark and violent the predicted last moments of the perpetrators' life may be in their descriptions, after death they all expect some kind of reward for their deeds. This theme is discussed in the next section.

7.2 The expected reward: eternal fame, paradise, and "transcendental-future"

The fact that lone wolves and school shooters leave behind letters, manifestos, and videotapes is in itself an indication that they seek the attention of a broad audience. While lone wolf Muslim terrorists are motivated by expected heavenly rewards for their deed in the afterlife (Berko & Erez, 2005; Moghadam, 2008; Whitehead & Abufarha, 2008), school shooters are generally not attempting to gain entry to paradise. They do seek fame through their actions, though. Moreover, some kind of transcendental reward or search for immortality is a theme in all the cases studied here. What can be found in the studied cases is a desire to be remembered beyond their early existence. Borowitz (2005) refered to killers who perpetrate attacks for the sake of self-glorification as the *Herostratos Syndrome.* The perpetrators lack the capacity for great contributions to the world and therefore revert to infamous deeds that will make them unforgettable like Herostratos. The latter burned down the Artemis Temple in Efeze in the fourth century just to become notable. Larkin (2009) identified gaining fame as a critical motive for a number of school

shooters. He explained that the killing of innocent people is aimed at getting extensive media attention. I discussed some examples of this in previous chapters, such as the fact that Dylan and Eric, in one of their videos, discussed the possibility that a movie would be made about them after their deaths. Terrorism scholars describe the mission of lone wolves in remarkably similar terms. For example, Muslim lone wolf terrorists believe that dying as a martyr will give them fame and glory and will provide their families with respect and a chance to climb higher on the social ladder (Charny, 2007). Larossi recorded his video manifesto at the crime scene. In it, he showed his victims and their three-year-old son, who eventually was saved by the police. Despite the cruelty he had just committed when recording it, he states his expectation that his deed will bring him to heaven: "Imagine, all you have to do is to go forth and die and you will go to paradise." Another kind of transcendental future is expressed in Breivik's manifesto. Not the idea of going to paradise but eternal fame seems to motivate him:

> I am one of many destroyers of cultural Marxism and as such; a hero of Europe, a savior of our people and of European Christendom - by default. A perfect example which should be copied, applauded and celebrated. The Perfect Knight I have always strived to be. (p. 1435)

In his manifesto, he calls on readers to translate it into different languages so as to spread his word worldwide. Aside from his manifesto, there is also the fact that Breivik was desperate to avoid being killed by police. He wanted a trial because he was well aware that with it he would get worldwide media attention and a chance to spread his ideas publicly. Even if the assumed reward for their deed differs on first sight, then, it always has the component of a transcendental future. In other words, the perpetrators expect that their acts

will lead to goals which extend from the point of death to infinity. Boyd and Zimbardo (2006) explained that

> Related to numerous psychological variables, the transcendental-future is a component of, but not synonymous with, many religious beliefs. From the perspective of the transcendental-future, behaviors often seen as irrational, such as suicide, extreme heroism, and excessive tithing, are transformed into rational behaviors expected to lead to fulfillment of transcendental-future goals (p. 107).

In a way, the school shooting feeds the idea of becoming immortal because you will never be forgotten. But where does this component of a transcendental future come from? In the previous chapter, I discussed three structures that are indicators for an (implicit) religion,[61] namely personal myth, personal ritual, and experiences of transcendence. The latter can be, in the context of implicit religion, experiences of a larger and more godlike self (see James, 1902). As discussed in Chapter 6.1 Schnell (2004) also indicated this as an experience of being the chosen one, which brings us to the next theme I found in my analyses.

[61] Religion and implicit religion (which political ideologies can also be) are all meaning-giving constructs.

7.3 The mission of the chosen one: I have to do this for the greater good

Lone wolves and school shooters seem to create a personal myth that they are the chosen ones who have to fight evil because no one else would do so. They often frame their deed as a sacrifice for the greater good. Sometimes they see themselves as martyrs. For example, Seung Hui Cho's manifesto presents himself as martyr, using religious symbols: "I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people, my brothers, sisters, and children." Breivik addresses his presumed followers with a very similar sentiment: "We have taken these thankless tasks upon ourselves because we possess these traits; the self-insight, the ideological and moral confidence and strength and we are willing to sacrifice our lives for our brothers and sisters, even though they will openly detest us" (p. 8).

In yet another example, Elliot says, "I must be destined to change the world, to shape it into an image that suits me!" (p. 56). Their larger and more god-like self sees no other solution than to sacrifice themselves using deadly violence on the way. To them, there is no alternative other than violence and to them the killing of innocent victims is justified (Meloy, 2016). One example of this consequence is, in Seung Hui Cho's words, that "You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off." The idea of being chosen is also expressed by Larossi who does so by calling on fellow Muslims to follow his example. The reason for this, as he says in the video, is that "Allah has chosen you out of billions and billions people." In his eyes, they are chosen to kill disbelievers in a "holy" war. Rapoport (1990) explored the subject of terrorist attacks committed in the myth of defending Islam. He argues that modern acts of religious martyrdom are based on *projective narratives*. These narratives, in the case of Muslim terrorists, refer to the past "when the basic rules of the

religion were established" (p. 118), while in the case of Christian terrorist, the projective narrative "is not related to action in the past so much as it is to a vision in the Second Coming" (p. 119). Following Rapoport, it is a small step to acknowledge that projective narratives in the case of political terrorists refer to a vision of society and, in the case of school shooters, to the idea that their deed is carried out not for personal reasons (only), but for the sake of many. In all studied cases it indicates the readiness to give up their lives for a higher cause. What can easily be interpreted as a random and meaningless act of violence by the majority of people is a sense of mission of the chosen one to the perpetrators, to purify the world on a symbolic level.

7.4 The imagined war: the apocalypse

The idea - emerging from my analysis of the perpetrators - that their criminal deed is an act of war for a higher cause is the next theme I discuss. Berko and Erez (2005) argued that Muslim suicide terrorists see their actions as a form of holy war, and Meloy, Mohandie, Knoll, and Hoffmann (2015) defined the psychological desire to have a warrior mentality as one important warning for intended violence. Juergensmeyer (2014) argued that to such people real wars are very appealing. Moreover, imagined wars provide perpetrators with a justification for their deeds. In the previous chapter, I discussed the personal myth of being at war with the world found in many statements by school shooters. Also, the fact that school shooters often present themselves in military clothes in their videos, with weapons as accessories, can be seen as an indicator for their imagined warrior identity. The theme of being in a war or being a warrior is a further commonality of lone wolves and school shooters, as the lone wolves, too, express such a concept of themselves. Anders Breivik, for example, titled his manifesto, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence.* He had apparently published this online on July 22, shortly before launching the

attacks, suggesting that this day would start a seventy-year war as a result of his actions. Notably, seventy years from 2011, the year of the attack, would be 2081. So why did Breivik title his manifesto 2083? Juergensmeyer (2014) found the answer:

> On page 242 of Breivik's manifesto, where he explains that on 1683 at the battle of Vienna, the Ottoman Empire military was defeated in a protracted struggle, thereby insuring that most of Europe would not become part of the Moslim empire. The date in Breivik's title is the four hundredth anniversary of this decisive battle and in Breivik's mind he was recreating the historic efforts to save Europe of the what he imagined to be the evils of Islam. (p. 128)

Breivik signed his diary, which is part of his manifesto, with, "Sincere regards, Anders Berwick, Justiciar Knight Commander, Knights Templar Europe, Knights Templar Norway." In the appendix of his manifesto, he includes photos of himself wearing clothes which are emblazoned with the Crusader cross. The medieval military order of the Knights Templar conquered Jerusalem in the First Crusade. They were missioned by the Roman Catholic Church to protect Christian pilgrims in the Holy land. Breivik states in his manifesto that this order has been reconstituted in 2002 (Breivik 2011, p. 827) to stop, as he puts it, the Muslim invasion/colonization of Europe. He sees himself as a resistance fighter against multiculturalism, Marxism, and the Islamization of Europe (Leonard, Annas, Knoll, & Torrissen, 2014) and considers his actions to be self-defense against an apocalyptic threat to the existence of European culture.

Next, Elliot Rodger, who calls his manifesto "a story of a war against cruel injustice" (p. 1), illustrates how personal grievance can develop in an imagined war when he argues:

> I will deliver a blow to my enemies that will be so catastrophic it will redefine the very essence of human nature. (p. 131)
>
> Humanity is a disgusting, depraved, and evil species. It is my purpose to punish them all. I will purify the world of everything that is wrong with it. On the Day of Retribution, I will truly be a powerful god, punishing everyone I deem to be impure and depraved. (p.135)
>
> I didn't ask for this. I didn't want this. I didn't start this war… I wasn't the one who struck first… But I will finish it by striking back. (p. 137)

Seung Hui claims that his deed is a revolution (p. 11, 20) and will initiate an apocalyptic confrontation between the defenseless and the rest of the world:

> There is nowhere in the world you can run, you Lovers of Terrorism. There is nowhere in the world you can hide, you Lovers of Sadism. You will never know when and where the Weak and Defenseless that you fucked will strike - day, night, at school, in the public, in your home, during your most comfortable hour and protected place. You will never know how we will kill you - slash your

> throat, bullet in your back, torture you with knives, hammers, bolt cutters, scissors. You will always live in fear. (p. 12)

Larossi Abballa calls on other Muslims not only to attack police and prison guards but also other Muslims who are not prepared to take up their weapons and fight. In this explicit call for violence, he says, "Cause France and her souls to tremble." Notably, these expressions of the idea of being at war often go hand in hand with apocalyptic terminology. The notion of the apocalyptic, as I use it in this sense, is any expression of absolute destruction while at the same time renewal is yearned for. For example, Cho says that his revenge will cause

> hell on earth that the world has never witnessed. Millions of deaths and millions of gallons of blood on the streets will not quench the avenging phoenix that you have caused us to unleash (…). By destroying we create. We create the feelings in you of what it is like to be the victim, what it is like to be fucked and destroyed. Because of your annihilations, we create and raise new breeds of Children who will show you fuckers what you have done to us. Like Easter, it will be a day of rebirth. (p. 11)

7.5 Violent acts as purposeful behaviour

Having found striking common themes in the manifestos of the cases under study, the question remains how these themes can be interpreted with regard to the perpetrators' motives. The answer seems to lie at least partly in their

personal myths and experiences of transcendence. Their interpretation of "real" circumstances seems less important than the system of meaning they construct and the personal myth they present. Looking at the themes in the egodocuments, we can assume that all the perpetrators create a myth involving an identity featuring a larger, superior and more godlike self. Hamm and Spaaij (2015) found, based on direct contact with imprisoned lone wolf terrorists, that at a certain point in the radicalization process the individual performs an identity transformation into an armed warrior. Chapters 5 and 6 discussed how school shooters perform a very similar transformation. I discussed that these experiences of a greater self can be interpreted as transcendental experiences. In their myths, they change from ordinary men into avenging angels and heroes. With apocalyptic language, they then seem to justify their deeds as a cosmic war, and so their deeds become ones of deserved revenge on an imagined enemy instead of the cowardly murder of innocent people. In short, they possibly see themselves not as murderers but as warriors in their imagined war. In the final part of their myth, they get a transcendental reward for this heroic act of vengeance in the form of an eternal abode in paradise and/or eternal fame, which is nothing less than a kind of immortality. These myths lead them to the conviction that the only option they have in life is to execute their murderous plans. In this chapter only a small number of cases was analyzed and compared. Therefore, the conclusions should remain somewhat hypothetical. Foremost, rigorous empirical testing which can provide validation has yet to be done.

What I found in each of the analyzed egodocuments were personal myths, sometimes combined with existing myths and experiences of transcendence. According to Schnell (2004), these are two of the three structures indicative of implicit religion. The third structure, ritual, is also present in all studied cases. As argued in Chapter 6, the violent attack in itself can be seen as a ritual, and the making of plans and announcements to an audience are part of it. Implicit religion has as its main function that it is a

meaning-giving construct. The motive of all these perpetrators seem to lie in a search for meaning in their lives. This suggests that despite our initial definition of deeds as driven by political, religious, or personal factors, there is likely a more universal motivation underlying these crimes, for school shooters and lone wolves alike. Studying these two kinds of perpetrators as one phenomenon thus appears justified.

8 Lessons learned

Although a conclusion is included in every individual chapter of this study, I would like to address here the important findings of this study and then discuss recommendations and calls for further research.

Three interrelated questions have led me through this study: what are the popular perceptions of school shooters, how do these perceptions relate to empirical data, and how do expressions of popular culture interpret the motives of school shooters?

I found that a number of academic studies from several disciplines such as sociology, psychology and criminology have been devoted to the understanding of the genesis of school shootings and the motives of the perpetrators. Notably, studies focusing on the existential concerns and the meaning the perpetrators attribute to their deed where so far lacking. The present study fills this gap in the approaches of understanding the genesis of school shootings. Regarding the causes of these crimes, a general bipartite division of scientific explanation is found: personal causes and social causes. In an overview of a number of theories of social causes and personal causes, no distinct answer of what causes school shootings has been found. Moreover, whatever the scientific angle of the researchers is, they always conclude that drawing an unambiguous picture of a school shooter is not possible. The personal characteristics of the perpetrator vary too much as do their social circumstances. There are some characteristics most of the perpetrators share, such as that they are mostly male and a majority are Caucasian (though as that wording suggests even those are not germane in all cases), but those are so common that they do not help us any further in our understanding of this phenomena.

Although research so far shows that a typical school shooter does not exist (O'Toole, 2002; Robertz, 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2002), there seems to exist a homogeneous image of these perpetrators. An analysis of the media coverage of school shootings shows that the perpetrators are often portrayed as bullied loners and obsessed with violent popular culture. What we see is that this image-forming influences popular perceptions of school shooters. On one hand, this can be a problem regarding prevention. Influenced by incorrect perceptions, one could easily overlook warning signals, which a seemingly nice and popular student sends. On the other hand, this could damage harmless students if they are stigmatized by others because they meet this image. Awareness should be stimulated among teachers, students, and parents that even very popular teenagers can turn into school shooters. An example of this is Jaylen Fryberg. On October 24, 2014, 15-year-old Jaylen killed four people and after that shot himself at the Marysville Pilchuck High School shooting, Washington. One week prior to the shooting, he had been announced as the school's freshman Homecoming Prince because he was one of his school's most popular students. Interestingly, neither in public debate nor in academic discussion are school shootings interpreted as meaningful behavior, and an existential crisis of the perpetrator never is considered as genesis of this crime.

Even more creative interpretations of school shootings are restricted to social causes, such as bullying and hyper-masculinity, and personal causes such as psychiatric problems. Although we can conclude that the topic has become a part of popular culture, the existential dimension and the perspective of purposeful behavior is not represented more in popular culture than in the popular and scientific discussions. In my analyses of movies with school shootings as topic, I found that the genesis of these crimes is interpreted in various ways. Some filmmakers portray social factors like bullying and hyper-masculinity as motive for the shooters, while others see personal causes such as psychiatric problems as cause. In the movie *We Have to Talk about Kevin,* the

idea that someone may just be born "evil" is triggered in the audience. With the exception of the movie *Elephant*, where the director steers clear of any interpretation about the causes, and *Home Room*, where the focus is on the victims, the popular perception of a school shooter seems to have great influence on the filmmakers. They often use a number of clichés, such as the isolated, somewhat weird loner who is bullied, to paint the picture of a school shooter or, alternatively, a youngster who becomes a suspect because of these clichés. The existential concerns of the perpetrators are never explicitly addressed. Nevertheless, the movies implicitly stimulate consideration of the existential dimension in the viewer in the sense that they are expressions of human lives. They show us how people, like us, cope with traumas, social isolation, identity, and meaning.

Let us go back to the fact that the typical school shooter does not exist. There is one commonality which can contribute to our understanding of what motivates these perpetrators: They all announce their plans in some way. This "leaking" comes in various forms. It can be indirectly, for example, in drawings, and directly, for example, in manifestos in the form of videos on the Internet. These expressions present a valuable source for understanding how school shooters see the world and their own position in it.

Another research question addressed was: What existential concerns can we find in autobiographical expressions of school shooters and to what extent can school shootings be understood as a meaning-giving construct in the sense of implicit religion? Analysis of the egodocuments of seven school shooters showed that the studied perpetrators all express existential struggles. In the egodocuments, I found that all studied shooters express existential dilemmas. More importantly, the documents show that the shooters do not find a balance between existential concerns and the facts of life. For example, the fact that we are all mortal is counterweighed by the idea that the school shooting will make them world-famous and never-forgotten, immortal in a way. In

another example, the fact that existential freedom makes us, consequently, fully responsible for our lives, including our failures, is counterweighed by school shooters by blaming others for their misery and ultimately for the shooting. Or the fact that they do not have the feeling that they are accepted by others is counterweighed by the claim that they are superior to everyone, even god-like. Apparently, to the school shooters, their lives do not live up to the expectations set for them. To deal with this imbalance, they deny facts of life and develop the idea that with a school shooting they can create meaning for both their life and death. In other words, the school shooters in the present study are not searching for balance; instead, they try to solve their existential dilemmas with violence. Denying the fact of life that they are average boys, maybe rejected by others, or, occasionally, bullied, they create an identity of an avenging angel, a god-like person who takes revenge and kills inferiors. A quotation from Söderberg's 1905 novel *Doctor Glas* summarizes this quite accurately:

> We want to be loved; failing that, admired; failing that, feared; failing that, hated and despised. At all costs we want to stir up some sort of feeling in others. Our soul abhors a vacuum. At all costs it longs for contact.

School shooters deny the fact that we all are in essence alone, instead creating the idea that their deed is for the benefit of many others. Cho, for example refers to his brothers and sister, and other school shooters say that they are doing this to take revenge for all people who are made outcast by others. Denying the fact that they are mortal, like all of us, they assume that the shooting will make them famous and never forgotten. Denying that the consequence of freedom is responsibility for our own lives, including misery, they blame others for the shooting. The notion that they "have to do this" because others made them can be found in the expressions of all perpetrators. Denying that their crime is a

meaningless act of violence, a murder of innocent people, they call their deed a revolution or a war. The idea of solving existential dilemmas drives school shooters to construct reality in a way that infuses their life with meaning. These exaggerated myths of becoming immortal, scapegoating others, and declaring themselves god-like all indicate an existential crisis. Following Wong and Fry (1998), I argue that an existential crisis spurs a search for meaning.

Traditionally, religion is one of the major resources used to generate meaning in life. School shooters find meaning in their violent deeds. In this way, school shootings are meaning-giving constructs. This does not lead to the argument that school shootings are religiously motivated but does indicate the religious dimension of these crimes. In order to understand the possible religious dimensions, I made use of a broader definition of religion, Bailey's (1997) concept of *implicit religion.* To identify the implicit religion of school shootings I used Schnell's (2004) method. She argued that three structures - myth, ritual, and experience of transcendence - are common to all explicit religions. When associated with personally meaningful contents, these structures become representatives of implicit religiosity. Then they turn into personal myth, personal rituals, and subjectively accessible transcendent experiences. Not only did I find these structures in the studied cases, I also discovered commonalities in the personal myths, personal rituals, and transcendent experiences of the perpetrators:

- Regarding the myths, I found that the perpetrators portray their deed as a war between good and evil. In the myths of school shooters, their identity changes from average school boy into a god-like avenging angel who is prepared to die like a martyr. To them there is no other way to solve their problems than to execute their violent plans. In addition, the shooting will make them famous and ensure they are never forgotten.

- Regarding the rituals, I found that they collect weapons, which also have a symbolic function. Some even name their weapons. The shooting itself is a performative form of violence which resembles religious rituals.
- Regarding transcendent experiences, I found feelings of superiority and experience of a more god-like self. They identify themselves with other school shooters or powerful role-models and create feelings of being of great significance. They express that with the shooting they will change the world.

This new perception of school shootings of school shootings as meaning-giving constructs gives rise to the provocative notion that to the perpetrators the school shooting is a rational act. The deed is a meaning-giving construct which reduces the existential crisis of these adolescents. School shootings can be understood as trans-ethical violent actions driven by implicit religion. This can lead to a very new understanding of school shootings as meaningful behavior. Moreover, this leads to querying the common perspective of school shootings in terrorism studies.

This leads us to the last question of my study: To what extent can we find relevant common themes in egodocuments of perpetrators of lethal violence comparable to school shootings, to add to our understanding of school shootings?

Although including school shooters in the group of lone wolves increases the number of data and can therefore help us deepen our understanding of the phenomenon, a number of studies explicitly foreclose the addition of school shooters when they define the term *lone wolf* because those in the latter category have political or religious motives and the researchers state that this cannot be found in school shootings. Spaaij (2012) put this firm statement in perspective when he pointed out that the true motives of lone

wolves are very difficult to determine and that "lone wolves tend to create their own individualized ideologies from a mixture of broader political, religious or social aims and personal frustration and aversion" (p. 20). In my comparison of the existential concerns of school shooters and lone wolves in Chapter 7, I found that myth, ritual, and transcendent experiences are present in all studied cases. Sometimes the myths are more personal, and sometimes they are influenced by existing religions or political movements, but it appears that their violent deed is a meaning-giving construct to these perpetrators. Notably, in the egodocuments of the analyzed cases, I found a number of common themes:

- The deed is justified as an act of revenge. As avenging angels they retaliate for injustice against them or people like themselves.
- Seeking for some kind of transcendental reward is a theme. To some it is the expectation of paradise, to others eternal fame, but it is always a kind of reward that lasts longer than earthly life.
- Expressions were found that describe how the perpetrators feel that they are chosen to fight evil. To them, they sacrifice themselves for the greater good.
- It was found that the perpetrators do not see their crimes as a meaningless acts of violence but as acts of war or revolution. To them, it is a fight between good and evil, and they express this with apocalyptic language.

These perpetrators seem to share similarities, and therefore school shooters should not be excluded from studies of lone wolves. Studying these perpetrators as one phenomenon will enlarge the body of data and thus make more profound research possible. Eventually, this will deepen our understanding of the motives of these perpetrators and possibly help us to identify more effective intervention with the purpose of prevention. The above demonstrates that these perpetrators have obvious motivational commonalities. Having said this, I acknowledge immediately that my analysis has limitations.

First, as I already said in Chapter 5 about existential concerns of school shooters, one person never will fully understand the other. Second, my analysis is based on a limited number of cases. However, the findings lead to the consideration that school shooters and lone wolves should be seen and studied as the same phenomenon, and the possibility of investigating terroristic violence as meaning-giving construct calls for further research. This brings me to the recommendations that result from this study.

8.1 What to do and a call for further research

I begin this section with the recommendation that, in the case of a school shooting, the media should be very conscious of the fact that worldwide attention given to the perpetrators may possibly stimulate others to copy this event. Furthermore, over-reporting every detail of school shootings only contributes to public fear. It does not help deepen the understanding of school shootings since existential concerns of the school shooters are never discussed in the media, even though this study suggests that they indeed play a role in the causes of school shootings. This recommendation of restraint is also valid for popular culture. Songs or movies and even violent computer games do not cause school shootings, but they contribute, for example, to the myth that the perpetrators will be famous and never forgotten. In a way, the present study is a contradiction of my own recommendation. For the last five years, school shooters and what motivates them was one of the main issues in my life. On the one hand, by publishing my findings, I implicitly contribute to the "fame" of these perpetrators. On the other hand, ignorance is neither bliss nor strength, and it is necessary to learn as much as we can about school shooters in order to understand what is possibly effective in prevention. I address this dilemma at the very end of this study.

One of the limitations of this research is the restricted number of studied cases and the fact that only publicly accessible egodocuments could be analyzed. A number of documents which it would have been interesting to study were out of reach because the authorities concerned did not grant permission to access confidential papers. For further research on the genesis of school shootings, it would be necessary for scientific researchers to get access to imprisoned perpetrators, or, in the case the perpetrator is deceased, to egodocuments. A greater accessibility to perpetrators or relevant documents for scientific use is therefore recommended.

To return to the present study, the recommendation that school shooters should not be excluded from the studies of lone wolves was briefly discussed in the previous chapter. It was also stated that the possibility of terrorist violence as meaning-giving construct calls for further research. Moreover, the role of existential dilemmas in various radicalization processes should be considered.

8.2 Recommendation for educational context

If the suggestion of the present study that school shooters struggle with existential concerns is taken seriously, it should have implications for the educational context. Considering the hypothesis that school shooters are unable to find a healthy balance between these concerns and the facts of life, which results in an existential crisis, which, as Wong and Fry (1998) stated, precipitates the search for meaning, teachers might consider to address these existential concerns in their lessons. The present study suggests that school shooters find meaning in their personal myths, personal rituals, and transcendent experiences. The danger would be that these myths contain an identity of an avenging angel, a god-like warrior with a self-given assignment of killing others. The personal ritual could lead to collecting weapons, preparing, and executing the attack, and the transcendent experiences would provide the

shooters with a feeling of superiority, world fame, and, implicitly, the idea of immortality. A very similar process is found in the three studied cases of lone wolves.

Education professionals should be aware of how youths become radicalized and what the process towards the acceptance of violence looks like. Yet it is equally important to understand how one can help youths shift to another trajectory. Currently, education does not appear to protect against radicalization. The reason, probably, is that policymakers, school boards, and safety experts often emphasize the importance of the early detection of violent behavior. The issue of security is the dominate perspective. That is understandable, because after all the safety of students is at issue here. However, by focusing on the detection of warning signals, we seem to think that we can get a grip on radicalization and, in the context of this study, that in this way we can prevent deadly violence in schools. Perhaps we should approach the problem differently. Worrisome behavior is only the visible tip of the iceberg. Professionals in education should not solely focus on the tip of the iceberg but should, metaphorically speaking, dive beneath surface in order to come to the crux of the problem.

The radicalized student, and in the context of this study, the school shooter, is just the tip of the iceberg. This is what we see. I assume that what stays unnoticed is the existential crisis, which possibly lies at the root of the genesis of a school shooting. Moreover, an existential crisis and meaninglessness lie at the very root of other problems faced by adolescents, such as depression and suicide (Tillich, 1952; Phillips, 1980; Young, 1985), drug abuse (Newcomb & Harlow, 1986; Weerman, 2016), alcohol dependence (Waisberg & Porter, 1994), emotional functioning (Tillich, 1957), and neurosis (Ruffin, 1984). Therefore, teaching young people how to find a balance between existential concerns and the "daunting facts of life" (Koole et al., 2006, p. 212) could serve not only the aim of preventing school shootings or radicalization

but also contributes to a psychologically healthy upbringing. If we follow the idea developed in the present study that an existential crisis plays a role in the development of a school shooting, schools would need to offer room for existential questions and staff who can teach how to approach these issues. Garbarino (1999) concluded that school shooters live in a crisis of meaninglessness and spiritual emptiness. He also stated that the fact that these adolescents' spiritual needs are not met can damage them as much as their nutritional or emotional needs not being met. Garbarino & Haslam (2005) noted,

> I think there are at least three reasons why a spiritually empty kid is in jeopardy. First, because a spiritually empty kid has a kind of hole in his heart and that hole must be filled with some sense of meaningfulness. Second, a kid who is spiritually empty has no sense of limits. Third, a spiritually empty kid has no emotional floor to fall back on when he gets sad. He can go into emotional free fall and can fall as low as a human being can possibly go. (p. 449)

For religious education, the question arises which role religious education can play in the guidance of students struggling with meaninglessness, spiritual emptiness and existential questions like those of the school shooters in this study. This would show that education pays attention to all the human capacities, not only the cognitive ones. Students who struggle with existential dilemmas and in consequence possibly develop a meaning-giving construct that could be dangerous to themselves or others cannot be helped by an intervention which only contains a counter-narrative. This only addresses the myth and, following Schnell (2004) (only) the cognitive dimension of the psychological

human being. Referring to Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "Non-violence, which is the quality of the heart, cannot come by an appeal to the brain," I would argue that restrictedly addressing cognition offers too little countervailing power to help them find the needed balance in their existential dilemmas. One could assume that if we want school to be a place where students can learn to handle life questions and can learn how to construct meaning for their lives without ending up in violence against themselves or others, we have to see school as a place where meaning-giving plays an important role; what I mean is that school should be a place where attention is payed to myth, ritual, and transcendent experiences. All three structures should involve non-violence, inclusion, acceptance of diversity, and interest in the other. School must consider which values and vision they have of how they want to guide their students into humaneness. I now translate these findings into religious education.

8.2.1.1 Recommendation for religious education

Since this study focused only on a limited number of cases, it cannot be said without any doubt that all school shootings are caused by an existential crisis. What can be said is that all studied school shooters expressed existential struggles in their egodocuments, that one way or another these struggles played a role in their motives. Widham, Hooper, and Hudson (2005) argued that religious factors, among others, have a protective effect regarding the development of at-risk behavior which may lead to fatal school violence. Yet, Pfeifer and Ganzevoort (2014) concluded that a number of known school shooters participated actively in church life, and school shootings have occurred more frequently in areas with a strong conservative religious population (Arcus, 2002). Possibly, the related conservative religious education gives students only answers to existential questions in accordance with these churches' doctrines instead of guiding these students' search to find answers. If the idea of implicit

religion of school shooters as presented in Chapter 6 is taken seriously, a teacher of religious education should always consider the various dimensions of religiosity, which Cardwell (1980) described as follows:

> The cognitive dimension is concerned with what individuals know about religion, i.e., religious knowledge. The cultic dimension makes reference to the individual's religious practices, i.e., ritualistic behavior. The creedal dimension is concerned with a personal religious belief, and the devotional dimension refers to a person's religious feelings and experiences, i.e., the experiential dimension. (p. 6)

In Chapter 5 it was argued that the studied school shooters struggle with existential concerns prior to their deed. If it is assumed that these struggles play a role not only in their cases but also in other school shootings, religious education with attention to these problematics could play an important role in the prevention of such events. Bultmann (1959) understood the assignment of religious education to include sensitizing students to their existential questions, in other words, to empower students to critically examine their ideas of life and their world-vision. Since someone's ideals and values indicate their most important life goals, these also influence someone's actions in the realization of these goals. Being able to critically examine your own, personal world-vision is therefore crucial and, in the cases of the studied school shooters, possibly could have led to 'de-radicalization' of their personal myths. This implies that you need the other in order to be able to discuss your vision, to hear the other's vision, and, above all that, to accept that they can differ. Consequently, as Sutinen, Kallioniemi, and Pihlström (2015) stated in their consideration of Dewey's concept of religious education as a pedagogical transaction, in

religious education, the adult or educator should not transfer his thinking on religion to a learner's mind. Therefore, Roebben (2007) defined as important goals of religious education considering the opposition, being able to have a respectful dialogue, and having empathy and appreciation for the other. Primrose (2017), citing the British author Lewis, suggested that

> one will gain greater insight into other belief systems by stepping inside and looking 'along' them, rather than looking 'at' them from the outside. The key to this kind of understanding is dialogue. This isn't the all-too-common conversation in which the goal is to poke holes in another's religious argument. Rather, the purpose is only to understand, however fanciful or wrong the beliefs might appear.

According to Primrose this "religious literacy" will not automatically lead to more agreement but will help people to be able to disagree "by tampering cheap stereotypes and petty caricatures." Teaching religious literacy means that students have to learn how to actively listen to others, how to honestly question others, and how meet the other in humility.

Furthermore, we should consider that the aim of religious education should be the development of fundamental values as well as the capability of students to handle existential dilemmas. Besides cognitive reflections on ethical problems, students should also learn to express, share, and listen to existential concerns, personal experiences, and feelings. This could be reached by discussing and reflecting on ethical dilemmas in popular culture such as movies. This emotional dimension of learning should get an important place in the process of teaching in religious education, especially in schools which

traditionally focus on the cognitive aspect of education. Particularly the topic of violence, which is based on emotions such as anger and grief, cannot be addressed purely with reason and rationality, but must always also be connected to emotion, which is an indisputable dimension of the human existence and therefore an indisputable dimension of religious education.

8.3 Remembering the victims

Finally, I would like to give some thought to the worldwide media attention for school shootings. As already discussed, this questionable fame, the perpetrators gain, becomes part of the "script" of school shootings. It also contributes to the dangerous myth of heroism and immortality and consequently plays a role in the genesis of school shootings. Moreover, it inspires makers of popular culture. There are uncountable numbers of songs, books, websites, movies, and documentaries where the "hero" is the shooter, which unwittingly promote these crimes. School shooters are also objects of academic research, as in the present study. All this attention can trigger copycat behavior, and in a way is a partial factor too. We all know the names of the Columbine shooters, but do we know the names of victims?

Knowing that with this study I also contributed to attention for the perpetrators, I would like to end this book with the names of the people who died in the school shootings I discussed.

In memoriam

Pearl High School shooting:

Mary Ann Woodham (50 years old), Lydia Kaye Dew (16 years old), Christina Menefee (17 years old), **died 1 October 1997.**

Thurston High School shooting:

William Kinkel (59 years old), Faith Zuranski (57 years old), Ben Walker (16 years old), Mikael Nickolauson (17 years old), **died 21 May 1998.**

Columbine High School shooting:

Kyle Velasquez (16 years old), Steven Curnow (14 years old), Cassie Bernall (17 years old), Isaiah Shoels (18 years old), Matthew Kechter (16 years old), Lauren Townsend (18 years old), John Tomlin (16 years old), Kelly Fleming (16 years old), Daniel Mauser (15 years old), Corey DePooter (17 years old), Rachel Scott (17 years old), Daniel Rohrbough (15 years old), William David Sanders (47 years old), **died 20 April 1999.**

Polytechnic Institute shooting:

Jamie Bishop (35 years old), Jocelyne Couture-Nowak (49 years old), Kevin Granata (45 years old), Liviu Librescu (76 years old), G.V. Loganathan (53 years old), Ross Alameddine (20 years old), Brian Bluhm (25 years old), Ryan Clark (22 years old), Austin Cloyd (18 years old), Daniel Perez Cueva (21 years old) , Matthew Gwaltney (24 years old), Caitlin Hammaren (19 years old), Jeremy Herbstritt (27 years old), Rachael Hill (18 years old), Emily Hilscher (19 years old), Matthew La Porte (20 years old), Jarret Lane (22 years old), Henry Lee (20 years old), Partahi Lumbantoruan (34 years old), Lauren McCain (20 years old), Daniel O'Neill (22 years old), Juan Ortiz (26 years old), Minal Panchal (26 years old), Erin Peterson (26 years old), Michael Pohle Jr. (23 years old), Julia Pryde (23 years old), Mary Karen Read (19 years old), Reema Samaha (18 years old), Waleed Shaalan (32 years old), Leslie Sherman (20

years old), Maxine Turner (22 years old), Nicole White (20 years old), **died 16 April 2007.**

Jokela school shooting:

Ville Valtteri Heinonen (16 years old), Mikko Tapani Hiltunen (17 years old), Sirkka Anneli Kaarakka (43 years old), Helena Marjatta Kalmi (61 years old), Hanna Katariina Kinnunen (25 years old), Sameli Iisakki Nurmi (17 years old), Ari Juhani Palsanen (18 years old), Mika Petteri Pulkkinen (17 years old), **died 7 November 2007.**

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Appendix

1. Questionnaire popular perceptions

Windesheim

Research School Shootings

Items marked with an (*) are required.
Please don't forget to submit the form.

Would you please answer this question first?

What is the first thing you think of when you hear/read the term **school shooting**?	

Country: *	USA Finland
Sex: *	Male Female
You are: *	Student Parent Teacher

Characteristics of a school shooter
We listed a number of characteristics of school shooters.
In your opinion how many perpetrators share these characteristics.
Please give us a percentage for each characteristic.
Under other.... You can fill in a characteristic you may have missed in our list.
Please give a percentage for this characteristic as well.

What is the percentage of perpetrators that	
are bullied?	
commit suicide after shooting?	
are obsessed with violent computer games?	
just snapped?	
come from a broken home?	
are male?	
are loners without friends?	
have psychiatric history?	
have a low intelligence quotient?	
have a history of violent behaviour?	
are Caucasian (white)?	
are drug addicts?	
are sexually abused?	
Other:	

Motives

What do you think are the motives of the perpetrators?	

* = Input is required

This form was created at www.formdesk.com

2. Film-analyses model

Niveau 1
Bij de analyse van de filmische laag (het eerste niveau) wordt gekeken naar: Mise-en-scene, beelduitsneden, beeldovergangen, camerabewegingen en -posities, geluid, montage en intertekstualiteit. Omdat het mij aan een filmwetenschappelijke achtergrond ontbreekt beperk ik mij hier tot het noemen van de filmische aspecten die vanwege hun relevantie met betrekking tot de onderzoeksmaterie in het oogspringen.
Hierbij stel ik mijzelf de volgende 3 vragen:
1. Welke zaken met betrekking tot de filmische laag zijn opgevallen?
2. Wat zou de bedoeling van de filmakers hiervan geweest zijn?
3. Hoe beïnvloeden deze zaken de interpretatie van de schoolshooting?

Niveau 2
Bij de analyse van de narratieve laag, bekijk ik verhaal elementen en hoe deze de film gestalten geven. Er wordt gelet op: de structuur van het verhaal, het perspectief of de perspectieven die worden ingenomen in de vertelling van het verhaal, de rolverdeling, enz.

Ook wordt er gekeken naar welke thema's de film verbeeldt, hierbij wordt extra aandacht besteed aan de in de manifesten gevonden thematiek. Van elk van deze thema's wordt afzonderlijk gekeken of deze is te vinden in de narratieve laag van de film. Alvorens de zoektocht naar deze thema's worden er in een aparte tabel indicatoren voor de aanwezigheid van deze thema's opgesteld, deze indicatoren kunnen mogelijk worden uitgebreid. Indicatoren zijn hierbij waarneembare gegevens uit de film die naar het thema verwijzen.

Thema	Indicatoren
Apocalyptic	
Avenging angel	
Messenger	
Poetic	
Superiority	
Martyr	
Dehumanization of the other	
Terrorist	
Fight between good and evil	
Superiority/Eternal fame	
Existentialism	

Niveau 3

Bij de analyse van de symbolische laag zal ik vooral naar de claims die de filmakers doen en de waarden en normen die zij uitdragen. Het is zeer interessant om hierbij vooral te kijken naar welke oorzaken de film aanvoert voor een schoolshooting, en welke motieven er in de film door de schutters worden gekoesterd. Dit is interessant omdat de veronderstelde oorzaken en motieven kunnen worden vergeleken met de huidige wetenschappelijke visies op school shootings.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Filmgegevens</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="3">1. Filmische laag</th></tr>
<tr><td>Waargenomen</td><td colspan="2">Vragen:
1. Welke zaken met betrekking tot de filmische laag zijn opgevallen?:
2. Wat zou de bedoeling van de filmakers hiervan geweest zijn?
3. Hoe beïnvloeden deze zaken de interpretatie van de schoolshooting?</td></tr>
<tr><td>0:00:02-4.01</td><td colspan="2">1. Bijv. Kikkerperspectief in deze scene….
2. Bijv. De filmmakers kiezen waarschijnlijk voor dit camera standpunt om de dominantie van de pestkop(bully) over de toekomstige schutter uit te beelden
3. Bijv. De dominantie roept afkeer van de pestkop(bully) bij mij op, en zorgt ervoor dat ik de shooting interpreteer als een poging van de schutter om de machtsverhoudingen om te keren.</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><th colspan="3">2. Narratieve laag</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Vragen</th><th>Waarnemingen</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Hoe functioneren de tijd- en ruimte-ordening in de film?</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Is er sprake van één of van meerdere werkelijkheden en hoe verhouden die zich tot elkaar?</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Welke tijdsspanne en welke ruimte worden benut?</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Wat is / zijn de centrale gebeurtenis(sen) in het plot?</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Welke conventies / codes bij de verhaalrangschikking (stereotiepe wendingen en afrondingen die op het genre zijn terug te voeren)?</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Welk personage(s) is / zijn bepalend voor het perspectief van de film?</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Met wiens belang wordt de kijker uitgenodigd zich te identificeren?</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Welke subplots zouden ook verteld kunnen</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

worden maar blijven ondergeschikt?	
Welke emoties worden gepresenteerd of gesymboliseerd, in relatie tot welke verhaalelementen en waarom?	
Welke rollen worden door de verschillende personages (en personificaties) verbeeld? En hoe is dat aangeduid?	
Wat is de functie van de verschillende rollen voor de ontwikkeling van het plot?	
Waar zijn de rollen personages meerduidig of ontstaan er rolverschuivingen?	
Welke thema's en probleemstellingen worden behandeld?	
Welke waarden zijn in de film waar te nemen?	
Welke normen zijn in de film waar te nemen?	
Welke motieven worden aan de schutter toe geschreven?	
Welke oorzaken voor een school shooting worden in de film naar voren gebracht?	
Welke symbolische betekenis zouden de rollen en rolverhoudingen kunnen hebben?	
Appèl/intertekstualiteit (Ganzevoort)	
Vragen	**Waarnemingen**
Wat roept de film bij jou als kijker op?	
In welke mate is dat bepaald door je eigen biografie en in welke mate is het inherent aan de film?	
Welk appèl doet de film op je?	
Wat is de ethische of levensbeschouwelijke claim/uitdaging die er op je af komt?	
Hoe wordt het appèl of de claim van de film onderbouwd?	
Is er sprake van verwijzing naar normatieve verhalen en beelden uit levensbeschouwelijke of filmische tradities of worden de normatieve verhalen juist ter discussie gesteld?	
Welke interactie is er met klassiekers of genres uit de filmtraditie en filmcitaten?	
Hoe verhouden zich het tijdperk waarin de film speelt, het tijdperk waarin de film gemaakt is en het tijdperk waarin de kijker zich bevindt?	