



NEWTOWN KILLER

EXPLAINED BY BOWEN THEORY

By: Michael E. Kerr, M.D.

We all remember the day in which a twenty-year-old man methodically shot and killed his mother, twenty elementary school students and six adults, wounded two other adults, and then killed himself at Sandy Hook Elementary School. With heavy hearts we stared at the television and asked the daunting one word question, “Why?”

On November 25, 2013 the Office of the State’s Attorney in Danbury, Connecticut released a 48-page report detailing the tragic event, providing a vivid portrait of the killer, Adam Lanza, but failing to suggest a motive for his crime. The December 5, 2013 release of the 911 calls from inside the school allow us to relive the painful emotions of that day, but they also fail to get us closer to an answer. It appeared the last chance to grasp a motive and thereby find some closure left when Lanza killed himself at the scene.

However, in 1966, Dr. Murray Bowen (1913-1990), founder of the Georgetown University Family Center in Washington, D.C. published his family systems theory (Bowen theory), which contains concepts that can connect the dots between the vast amount of factual information that investigators have gathered about the shootings and thus discern a motive. Bowen conducted the research for the theory over fifteen years, culminating in a five-year inpatient family study project at the National Institute of Mental Health in the late 1950s. Study families lived on a research ward for extended periods, which enabled new discoveries about family interactions. The most significant discovery was that families are not collections of psychologically autonomous individuals, but function as emotionally interdependent systems.



What makes the Newtown shooting and similar tragedies so perplexing is that the actions are so carefully planned and executed that they seem almost rational. Comprehending Adam's motive begins with appreciating the powerful role of emotions. Raw emotions such as fear, panic, and rage hijack the neocortical brain, a brain that normally can consider feeling as well as thinking in its rational contemplations, and regress its capacities to a coldly reasoning, heartless computer.

Whereas most psychologists have tried to excavate Lanza's mind to find the method in his madness, Bowen theory would view the chaos as the outcome of an intense symbiosis of two minds: those of Adam and his mother, Nancy. The motive emanates from a deep disturbance in their unresolved symbiotic attachment.

The state's attorney's extensive report and other news reports offer remarkably transparent information about their strong yet often fraught relationship. Nancy was a dedicated, and often worried mother, with a deep devotion to improving her son's life. He was smart, but also an extreme introvert. She worried incessantly about his social limitations, particularly after he entered school. She wrapped herself passionately around his wants and needs, often orchestrating abrupt and major changes in his schooling and surroundings to smooth his academic and social paths. Bowen theory and other research points out, the tendency to act in introverted ways can develop to be an asset, or a liability, depending on how the family and others relate to it. It became a liability with Adam.

Adam's father, Peter, had been separated from Nancy for nearly a decade. They divorced in 2009. He maintained regular contact with his son for most of those years, but unwittingly fostered Adam's problems by emotionally and financially supporting Nancy's zealous mission to fix him. Fathers in such situations commonly want to avoid conflict with their spouses and also often think that their spouses know what they are doing rather than appreciating how anxious everyone is. The combination of Nancy "overfunctioning" and Peter supporting her posture undercut Adam's ability to manage his own difficulties. The child plays an equal part in this process by learning how to pressure the parents into solving his problems.

Adam refused further schooling by 2010 and became immobilized in doing anything about his future. He would have been content to spend most of his time alone in his room at home playing video games and having his mother continue to attend to his needs. Adam had fulfilled a need in



Nancy's life for a sense of meaning and purpose. She had also been sustained for a long time by the belief that she could ultimately help her son. However, as his inaction persisted, Nancy panicked and pushed, cajoled, and issued uncertain threats in an attempt to motivate him. He resisted and withdrew more. He and his mother, once the center of each other's universes, communicated only by e-mail in the last three months of their lives. They were both becoming more isolated as well. Adam ceased having contact with his father and older brother and Nancy was less involved with extended family and friends.

Bowen theory assumes that emotional interdependence is part of human nature and is part of all emotionally significant relationships. In instances this extreme, however, it functions as a precarious lifeline, jeopardizing the viability of one or both parties. Bowen theory describes how loss of the other equals death. At its most unstable extreme, when no solution looms, "Either you die or I'll die!" becomes the alternative. At one level, people know the power of human relationships, to heal and to kill, but commonly underestimate or overlook that power.

The ominous change that eventually pushed Adam towards violence was when he began interpreting his mother's motivational tactics as signs that she wanted to be rid of him, clearly a gross misinterpretation.

Furthermore, he came to believe that his mother loved the children at Sandy Hook Elementary, where she had volunteered, more than she loved him. Bowen theory identifies this as the most malignant form of rejection (real or imagined): when the person on whom you are so heavily dependent chooses someone else over you.

Dependency can sustain a life as long as there are no threats that disturb it. Other factors fit into the picture that likely played roles in the violent expression of Adam's emotional state, such as his preoccupation with mass school shootings like Columbine and the accessibility of guns that he knew how to use.

Without an adequate theory to explain families, people are easily confused in trying to assess a family environment. Furthermore, for many the family seems sacrosanct and that no one can explain it without blaming someone, particularly mothers. Bowen theory is not about blaming Nancy Lanza, but about explaining how her best of intentions went awry.



The interactions within the Lanza family that rendered Adam vulnerable can be observed in all families, but usually to a lesser degree. The degree of potentially destabilizing interdependence in our own nuclear families is usefully examined in previous generations as well as in the here and now. The multigenerational study provides needed perspective, relieving the urge to blame. Understanding the emotional forces and how they have been shaped over time will not necessarily enable us to predict and prevent the next crazed shooting incident, but it can help. Objective knowledge about the patterns and forces that govern human behavior can help us distinguish between actions that unwittingly undercut the capacities of those we want to help and actions that truly help. Given the emotional haze that exists in most family situations, it requires a discipline to observe more objectively, but it is doable and potentially life saving. Family systems theory is there to help with this process.

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