

# Chapter 10

## A Catastrophic Solution: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on a Samurai School Attack in South Africa

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The psychoanalytic perspective focuses on exploring the unconscious and preconscious dynamics of the violent offender's personality, including environmental influences, object relations, beliefs, motives, defenses, and fantasies. Although psychoanalysis is often associated with a solipsistic understanding of the individual, contemporary approaches see the individual as inextricably linked to his or her social surrounds and impingements. From this perspective the social context profoundly influences how we construct conscious and unconscious representations that make up complex internal worlds.

The case I explore here occurred at Nic Diederichs Technical High School, South Africa, in 2008. A masked young man wearing a mask attacked four individuals with a samurai sword, killing one student. Morné Harmse's motive was a diffuse kind of revenge, targeting students, and a need to make a "statement." Although this was not a school shooting per se, it shares many characteristics typical of rampage attacks. From a psychoanalytic perspective it sheds light on a number of factors related to this kind of violence. The organizing function of violent omnipotent fantasy, the obsessive nature of fantasy, trauma, the role of shame, and the "willful" marshalling of alternate self-states related to violent acting out are of particular interest. Deterioration in the capacity to mentalize and the dominance of pseudo-mentalizing capacities also appear significant in this case.

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## 10.1 Psychoanalytic Understandings of School Violence

There has been relatively little commentary on school violence from a psychoanalytic perspective, perhaps reinforcing the perception that psychoanalysis largely ignores social issues (exceptions are Puget, 1988; Sandler & Alpert, 2000; Spiegel & Alpert, 2000; Twemlow, 2000, 2003). The most comprehensive psychoanalytic account of school violence and school shootings is found in the work of Twemlow, Fonagy, and colleagues. As well as focusing on the broader social context, including family background and parenting, their social systems psychodynamic perspective also draws on the day-to-day subjective accounts and experiences of children at school (Fonagy, Twemlow, Vernberg, Sacco, & Little, 2005; Twemlow, 2003; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004, 2005; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, O'Toole, & Vernberg 2002; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Vernberg, 2002; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, Vernberg, & Malcom, 2011). From this perspective, schools as social systems function as an attachment system that either reproduces or counteracts attachment pathology originating in the family (Fonagy, Target, Steele, & Steele, 2000). It follows then that if schools reinforce dehumanizing environments, the risk of outbreaks of school violence is greater (Twemlow, 2003).

Twemlow, Fonagy, and colleagues explore violence in schools from a bully-victim-bystander perspective. The heart of their argument is the enactment of unmitigated power dynamics in the school context, where victims are subject to repeated incidents of humiliation, with bystanders identifying with either the bully or the victim. In this way, bystanders become passive members of a pathological system. In addition to individuals having easy access to weaponry and potentially dangerous information, the school's response to "fixed patterns of teasing, ostracism, and bullying...especially by popular groups such as athletes and economic elites" (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Vernberg, 2002b, p. 475) creates higher risk for school attacks. Clearly many other risk factors are important too (O'Toole, 2000; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Vernberg, 2002; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000), but the core instigating factor, from this perspective, is a sustained, unchecked, attack on the individual's self-integrity.

The idea that violence serves as a last-ditch attempt to preserve some sense of self-integrity has been explored from a psychoanalytic perspective (Cartwright, 2002; Gilligan, 2000; Glasser, 1998; Hyatt-Williams, 1998; Meloy, 1992). Violent acts may vary in their sadistic or defensive qualities, as well as the extent to which the threat is real or perceived. But they all have in common the need for the offender to rid him- or herself of unbearable feeling states, or aspects of the self, that threaten the very existence of the self. From an Object Relations perspective we call this projective identification. Here, some semblance of integrity is maintained by the unconscious fantasy of locating vulnerable, victimized, or defective aspects of the self in others where they can be attacked. This process has behavioral, cognitive, and emotional correlates that are constantly mobilized by the violent offender to maintain rigid beliefs that others are bad, hostile, pathetic, vulnerable, or simply insignificant. Particular features of projective identification appear to be evident in

the case histories of school shooters (Sandler & Alpert, 2000; Twemlow, 2003; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, O'Toole, 2002; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Vernberg, 2002). It is well established that there is no single "linchpin" factor that might explain rampage school attacks or why the pathological process described above would lead to such generalized attacks. It is worth exploring, however, whether specific features of this pathological process are salient in school attacks or in the perpetrator. Aside from the school environment, what can be said about the quality of parenting and attachment relationships within the families of school shooters? What is the role of shame in the pathological process? How does one understand, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the role of fantasy and the building compulsion to commit the crime? What role does "leakage" play? How should we understand the "mental narrowing" that often occurs in the build-up to the attack?

### ***10.1.1 Attachment and Emotional Ties***

A significant body of literature draws on attachment theory to explain vulnerability to many different forms of violent behavior (Bond & Bond, 2004; Bowlby, 1984; Fonagy, 1999; Johns & Guetzloe, 2003; Laub & Lauritsen, 1998; Levy & Orlans, 2000; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999; Meloy, 1992; Twemlow, et al., 2011). Disorganized and dismissing disorders of attachment appear to generate a developmental vulnerability for violent acting out (Fonagy et al., 2000; Hesse and Main, 2000; Lyons-Ruth, Dutra, Schuder, & Bianchi, 2006; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Vernberg, 2002). Disorganized attachments are, in part, a product of frightening and frightened caregivers that manage their infant's needs reactively and through coercive means. This has the effect of escalating, rather than easing, emotional discomfort. It leads to a subjective sense of "fright without solution" and predisposes the child to a chronic hyper-aroused attachment system (Main & Hesse, 1990). In turn, children internalize a chaotic and disorientating dominant relational pattern where the experience of intimacy is frightening. Due to insufficient attunement and mirroring, dissociation is used to regulate affect (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2006; Putnam, 1992). In dismissing and disorganized attachment patterns the infant learns to dismiss meaningful somatic and emotional states, leaving them dissociated from conscious thought. High levels of dissociation deprive the individual of future opportunities for experiencing the relief and psychic growth afforded when affect is regulated as part of a trusting relational experience. A further consequence of attachment insecurity is a compromised ability to internalize a stable representational process. Put another way, too much hypervigilance and internal disorganization compromises the ability to make use of predictable ways of knowing, trusting, and thinking about the self (and others).

Although some contend that many school shooters come from relatively intact families (Ferguson, Coulson, & Barnett, 2011); Langman, 2009; Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, O'Toole, et al. (2002) argue that underneath this apparent intactness lies a pattern of superficiality, with parents often being afraid of their children and unable

to set reasonable boundaries. Communication styles are often reactive, or cease as a means of avoiding further disorganization. Parents sometimes tolerate extreme behaviors in their children, large parts of whose lives are left unsupervised or dismissed. As a result, it is often evident that parents of school shooters have very little knowledge of their child's habits and activities (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, O'Toole, et al., 2002). There is growing evidence that family relationships are indeed problematic (Böckler, Seeger, & Heitmeyer, 2010; Fast, 2008; Newman, 2004; O'Toole, 2000; Verlinden et al., 2000). It is likely that the kind of family dynamics described here produce over-controlling behaviors that mask a deep unfulfilled desire for emotional recognition (Böckler et al., 2010).

All these manifestations are symptomatic of attachment insecurity where emotional life seems to be a chaotic, frightening, and sometimes hopeless pursuit. There appears to be no safe means of communicating distress, which further compromises belief and trust in human relationships. It is likely that this sets up an implicit search for objects and experiences that appear to yield stability and a sense of self-worth. In disorganized attachments this is often achieved through coercive means where the adolescent "identifies with the aggressor" (Ferenczi, Dupont, Balint, & Jackson, 1995) to deny feelings of helplessness. While this may occur through identification with actual traumatizing figures, it also occurs when the adolescent identifies with imagined idealized destructive objects that control and destroy perceived weakness while generating a sense of power, grandiosity, and entitlement (Fonagy, 1999; Twemlow, 2003). At times this kind of profile gives an appearance of a hyper-mature and hypermasculine state (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Vernberg, 2002).

Clearly, attachment insecurity alone cannot explain the various forms of violence. It is well known that most individuals with disorganized or dismissive attachment histories do not commit violent acts. It is also important to distinguish between insecurely attached individuals who commit impulsive, self-preserving acts of violence, typical of impoverished school environments, and those who are capable of planned, calculated attacks (Twemlow, 2003; Twemlow et al., 2011). Clearly other aspects of the social context and personality require consideration.

### ***10.1.2 The Role of Shame***

Langman (2009) notes that despite varying degrees of trauma, psychosis, or psychopathy present in school shooters, underlying feelings of shame, and an unwavering sense of feeling inherently defective are prominent in most perpetrators. He finds that psychotic shooters often experience shame about psychotic symptoms and feelings of being "different." For trauma survivors, the shame emerges from being rendered defective and damaged, while those who present with psychopathic traits experience defective aspects of the self as narcissistic injury.

The majority of school shooters have some history of chronic or acute rejection (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Often they have been teased or ostracized and feel very much like an outsider, creating a great deal of shame, worthlessness,

and self-hate. Clearly, many adolescents endure teasing and bullying. Are there other factors that might explain why shame and rejection would lead to school violence? We have already discussed the idea of a disorganized attachment system increasing vulnerability. A history of trauma and the presence of psychopathology also appear to make shame affects more unbearable. In addition, feelings of envy are often found in the narratives of school shooters where the “shamed” defective self attacks the “ideal” lives of others (Langman, 2009). Often, especially given adolescent identity concerns, shame is strongly tied to issues related to a fragile “masculine” identity and a deeply felt “failure of manhood” (Newman, 2004, p. 6).

These unbearable feelings of shame are central to understanding violence from a psychoanalytic perspective (Cartwright, 2002; Gilligan, 2000; Lansky, 2005; Spiegel & Alpert, 2000). Shame affects are intimately tied to the very existence of the self as a coherent psychological entity. From a psychoanalytic point of view, how shame is incorporated into the defensive profile of the personality can help us better understand the use of violence. For example, James Gilligan’s seminal work (1996) demonstrates the toxic effects of internalized shame on men who have been incarcerated for antisocial violent acts. Elsewhere (Cartwright, 2002), I have explored how deep feelings of shame set up a particular kind of defensive profile that leaves some men vulnerable to committing rage-type acts of violence.

Although it appears that some inchoate versions of shame may exist very early in life, it emerges prominently with budding awareness of the self at about 12–18 months of age. Mahler termed this the “practicing” subphase typified by hyperstimulated states, grandiosity, and explorative behavior (Schore, 1991). Shame is thought to be activated when the caregiver is not adequately attuned to explorative achievements or interrupts such attempts with expressions of disdain, anger, or irritation. Repeated internalizations of these kinds of interaction leaves the individual feeling defective, permanently damaged, unlovable, and sometimes subhuman. Importantly, shame is not only linked to severe experiences of trauma, but can also be embedded in more ordinary verbal interaction. As aptly puts it: “Words alone can shame and reject, insult and humiliate, dishonour and disgrace, tear down self-esteem, and murder the soul” (p. 49).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, there is an important difference between experiences of shame affects, on the one hand, and internalized shame dynamics, on the other. The experience of shame simply refers to a range of experiences where a person feels exposed, embarrassed, humiliated, and mortified. The internalization of shame, on the other hand, instigates a process dominated by splitting defenses in order to avoid further anticipated humiliation. Shame is associated with split-off toxic aspects of the self that remain hidden and therefore cannot be modified or regulated by ongoing new experiences (Lansky, 2005, 2007; Morrison, 1985). These internalized object relations usually manifest in deep disdain for the self and sometimes lead to envy of others. This is exacerbated by constant comparisons with internalized values, ideals, and standards (the ego ideal) and the threat of rejection and ostracism (Lansky, 2005). Because internalized shame often contaminates the whole personality, any anticipated shaming event is experienced as repeating a total rejection of the self and the absence of love.

Shame is a core affect linked to the very existence of the self. For this reason, shame-prone individuals experience perceived rejections and defects as almost life-threatening. Awareness of these hypersensitivities can often help us understand individuals who are prone to impulsive actions like self-harm, defensive or rage-type violence, excessive and restrictive eating, and substance abuse; all serve to ward off painful life-threatening shame affects (Bromberg, 2006; Cartwright, 2002; Lansky, 2005, 2007).

It seems to me, however, that something more sinister occurs in the pathological process implicated in planned violent attacks like school shootings. Here, it appears that identification with “victimhood” arouses persistent and omnipotent thoughts of revenge in the potential attacker. The “victim” experience becomes fused with powerful, triumphant, feeling states. By “fetishizing” the shame experience, thoughts of difference, rejection, and defect are used to fuel thoughts of vengeance and violence which, in turn, are fused with omnipotence and power. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this may explain why school shooters are often described as being “injustice collectors” (O’Toole, 2000): every perceived slight, every action against the self, shores up a conscious resolve for vengeance. At a more unconscious level, it seems, ironically, to be related to a desperate need for recognition and for hidden shamed parts of the self to be heeded. I was struck by this when a young man who had committed an act of violence at school and was intent on continuing told me: “They’re all insignificant fuckers, the teachers and the kids. I’m going show them what a bigger, better, insignificant fucker can do!” This illustrates the connection between “insignificant” shame states and the emergence of an omnipotent, idealized, self-state still associated with “insignificance” and linked to thoughts of violence and sadomasochistic intent. While defensive violence seeks to keep shame at bay, if this continues, the pathological state becomes more sadistic as it becomes entrenched in the personality along with greater dissociation (Glasser, 1998).

If high levels of dissociation occur, affective states cannot be identified or regulated, often leading to a chronic sense of deadness or numbness. This is a very real subjective experience for those who have been deeply shamed. As Gilligan puts it: “To speak of these men as ‘the living dead’ is not a metaphor I have invented, but rather the most direct and literal, least distorted way to summarize what these men have told me when describing their subject experience of themselves” (Gilligan, 1996, p. 33).

Some have described similar states in school shooters (Langman, 2009; Twemlow, 2003; Weisbrot, 2008). In their build-up to the crime they are often described as being in “robotic” or “zombie-like” states. Twemlow (2003) understands this as the manifestation of a very primitive form of “autistic” defensiveness, where attentiveness to sensation (as a means of self-preservation) overrides more mature psychological defenses.

### **10.1.3 Fantasy**

Fantasies linked to rampage attacks often feature prominently in the build-up. Can particular features of these fantasies help us understand the crime and build-up to

the attack? Fantasizing is an important and creative aspect of normal psychic functioning. Fantasizing involves vague, conscious experiences stemming from our attempts to process internal and external emotional occurrences while integrating personal needs, values, and desires. The content of our fantasies is often open to modification as we integrate new information or emotional experience. In this way fantasy has an integrative function that helps build a coherent sense of self and regulate affect. This is not the case with school shooters, where violent fantasies often give rise to unbearable levels of affect. Importantly, their fantasy life seems to follow a particular course, eventually dominating the personality and leading to unrelenting pressure to eventually act out an internal scene (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Vernberg, 2002). From this point of view we could see the progressive building of destructive fantasy as a “crime in progress” (Depue & Depue, 1999, p. 66).

Can we isolate particular internal or external factors that help us understand why these fantasies build in intensity? As we shall see below, it seems that obsessive fantasy is linked to agentic qualities of the self drawn from identifying with destructive images. My sense is that these fantasies have an addictive quality that, along with diminished reality-testing and a deteriorating capacity to mentalize, put the subject at greater risk for acting out fantasy.

According to Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, O’Toole, et al. (2002), risk of violence is imminent when fantasy “pressure” is accompanied by the adoption of a fixed role, usually as the “avenging victim” (usually the victim, bully, and bystander roles are relatively fluid). This often involves acting out or rehearsing scenes that embody this role, and is accompanied by changes in the individual’s appearance. Twemlow (2003) shows how Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris began to adopt fixed roles about a year before the Columbine killings. They strongly identified with the role of “avenging victim” in the rehearsing of violent scenes. Both started to dress in trench coats and journaled more frequently about violent acts being justifications for repeated humiliations.

This fixed identification has significant impacts on the individual’s internal world. Many authors have noted the narrowing of perspective that occurs in the minds of school shooters in reaction to real or perceived dehumanizing environments. This is not something that can be managed internally, and directly effects the external environment. It leads to a sense of having “no identity other than that of avenging victim, and [therefore] no perceived path towards growth and development other than lethal retaliation” (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Vernberg, 2002, p. 226). Put another way, the enactment of fantasy is a desperate attempt to preserve some sense of self-integrity that they feel has been denied.

Still referring to Columbine, Twemlow explains how the rigid adoption of “avenging” roles sets in motion self-perpetuating group dynamics:

A child in a dehumanizing environment may well react by narrowing his or her cognitive and emotional focus in a desperate attempt to preserve self-integrity. The world of such a child becomes more and more restricted by a narrow and obsessive focus, perhaps inclusive of a retaliatory wish. . . . The need for retaliation and its justification are reminiscent of Erikson’s pseudo-speciation (Erikson, 1985, 1996), since these boys developed a pathological social group with narrowly defined, self-maintaining, grandiose cognitions, which although destructive, helped to maintain the integrity of the self (2003, p. 671).

Consistent with bully-victim dynamics, the content of the shooter's fantasy is made up of images of triumphant violent "heroes" who annihilate vulnerability, freedom, or anything associated with those who have created, or been blind to, "injustice."

Fantasy is often stimulated by drawing on ideas expressed in Satanism, music, and violent video games. There is little conclusive evidence that these elements actually instigate school attacks or can be clearly linked to chronic aggressive behavior (Ferguson, 2007; Szabo, 2008). In the case to be discussed, I will explore how music, masks, and swords were used as "dissociative devices" to enhance fantasy and further confuse the line between reality and imagination.

### ***10.1.4 Defensive Organization***

Simply put, "defensive organization" refers to the rigid and systemic use of defenses and object relations to prevent development of the personality. Are their particular defensive organizations evident in school rampage offenders? As mentioned earlier, dissociation and splitting, along with projective identification, may be important defenses. Shooters seem drawn to events that mirror past occasions that caused unbearable emotions. Often, "hurtful" situations are exaggerated in their minds in order to extract maximum justification for violent fantasies.

In many cases there is little evidence of a "final straw" that breaks through the defensive system. This is more typical of reactive or defensive forms of violence (Cartwright, 2002). Rather, the defensive organization feeds on perceived injustices, gradually leading to a build-up towards the compulsion to commit the attack. In the Harmse school attack, it appears that the adoption of a "false-self" organization is important in understanding the perpetrator's personality profile and the instigation of violence.

The fact that school shootings and similar attacks never occur without warning of some kind appears to be an important area of research (Depue and Depue 1999; Meloy & O'Toole, 2011). "Leakage" usually occurs with peers but is often also evident in school essays handed in to teachers. Are these acts attempts at warning, indirect cries for help, forms of intimidation, or the expression of a need for excitement? What does this imply about the defensive organization of the offender? In my understanding of the case at hand, it appears linked to a need for acceptance by peers and is a desperate source of narcissistic gratification.

Finally, in terms of defensive organization, it appears important that these attacks are mostly nonspecific and played out in the school context. The idea that school members are incorporated into a diffuse victim identity is prominent here. Usually bystanders are also targeted, but the singling out of specific targets does not feature in this form of violence. Rather, all individuals become part of what might be called "a shaming scene" in which the offender feels compelled to enact a catastrophic "solution," feeling this to be the only solution that will eventually impact the hearts and minds of the world. Indeed, we might say these tragic events succeed on this level in terms of the "discourse of fear" that is disseminated by the media after such attacks (Altheide, 2009).



### ***10.1.5 Mentalizing Capacities***

The decision to kill on the scale envisaged by the rampage offender is often embedded in contrived, pathetic, sometimes desperate, attempts to mean something in the minds of others, and to themselves. What does this mean about their ability to reason, empathize, and think?

“Mentalizing” refers to the capacity to accurately track, intuit, and interpret the mental states of self and others. Deficits in mentalizing and the ability to reflect on experience have been found to be prominent in violent offenders (Cartwright, 2002; Fonagy, 2003). Mentalizing capacities go hand in hand with the ability to empathize with others. It appears that shooters lose, or shut down, their capacity to mentalize in order to be able to kill. There is an exception here, however, when the offender fits a psychopathic profile. In these cases, mentalizing skills are misused in order to gain some satisfaction from manipulating the victim’s mind and seeing him or her suffer (Baron-Cohen, 2005).

In either case, however, the healthy capacity to track and use mental states to build a coherent, realistic sense of self appears to be markedly impaired. In its place, offenders tend to make use of concrete thinking and somatic experiences to generate a sense of cohesion and regulate painful affect. This is a very broad formulation that we return to in considering the specific case, so as to examine some of the peculiarities that may be typical of individuals capable of aberrant acts of school violence.

## **10.2 Samurai Sword Killing at Nic Diederichs Technical High School, South Africa**

At 7:10 a.m. on the morning of Monday, August 18, 2008, just before school assembly, Morné Harmse attacked and killed Jacques Pretorius (age 16) with an ornamental samurai sword he had brought from home.<sup>1</sup> He was wearing a bizarre homemade mask, gloves, knee and elbow pads, and had painted his face with black paint. Just before the attack he shouted to the group of students he was with: “Want to see something cool?” Harmse swung at Jacques Pretorius, slashing the back of his neck as he walked by with a group of students. Harmse then walked a few steps down the passage and attacked another student, Stephan Bouwer, slashing him in the back of the head and ear. Two groundsmen working at the school, Joseph Kodiseng and Simon Manamela, came to Bouwer’s aid and were stabbed in the face and back when they tried to stop the attacker. At this point Harmse halted his attack and moved into a courtyard area where he sat down and plunged his sword into the ground. Shortly after the attack he was approached by a teacher who asked him to remove his mask and took him to the school principal’s office. He reportedly said “Now what sir?” when he arrived. Harmse had not known Jacques Pretorius or Stephan Bouwer before the incident.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified all details of the case were obtained from the public records of the South-Gauteng High Court, case number JPV 08/0216.

### *10.2.1 Details of the Attack*

There had been regular talk between Harmse and approximately six friends about “doing something impressive” at the school so the other students would take notice of them. Conversations about creating a bloodbath at school appeared to be led by Harmse. Three months before the crime, he began making masks that resembled those worn by members of the heavy metal band Slipknot. Some of his friends also made masks and on at least two occasions Harmse and friends experimented with wearing the “Slipknot” masks at school (du Plessis, 2008a).

Harmse describes returning on the Friday before the attack to the discussion about “doing something impressive” at school (Ndaba & Foss, 2009). The discussion intensified and the group started formulating plans about what they would bring to school on Monday. One friend, Marco, said he would bring a bomb and two BB guns. There was also talk of another friend bringing a “rolling bomb.” Harmse said he would bring masks and swords and Max, another friend, said he would use one of Harmse’s swords and a mask. During the weekend Harmse messaged Marco to find out if he had made the bomb.

On the day of the attack, Harmse and his brother arrived at school together. Harmse was carrying a bag containing three masks and holding a number of swords in his hands. He met Marco, who said he had made the bomb but had not brought the guns. They walked in the direction of the boys’ change room. At the change room Harmse started asking his friends who was going to join him. He grabbed one of the swords and said: “Come on, join me and we’ll all be part of it. Now we go on with the masquerade” (Serrao & Foss, 2008a, b). In his testimony, Max confirmed Harmse said he wanted a bloodbath: “Today is the day, I want to start the day with a masquerade. . . . today is the day that you get the side back that has done bad to you.” Harmse appeared determined to continue his chosen path. He smeared black paint on his face and put on a mask that he claimed resembled the mask of Slipknot’s lead singer, Corey Taylor. He put on gloves as well as elbow and knee guards. He then put two swords into his belt and held a 60-cm Samurai sword in one hand and the homemade bomb (which turned out to be fake) in the other. Harmse is reported to have said he would blow everybody up when they were all together. He continued to try to persuade Max to join him. Max testified to feeling very threatened by Harmse and thought he would be attacked if he did not put on a mask and take a sword. Max reportedly tried to call others and shortly afterwards took his clown mask off, put the sword down, and said to Harmse, “you won’t do it.” Having heard that Harmse was “losing it,” more of his friends arrived to try to stop him. They laughed at him as he was acting strangely and “talking in a different voice.” One of his friends said: “the whole time Morné was speaking with a weird voice, almost like the Joker’s voice in [The Dark Knight] Batman [film]” (du Plessis, 2008b). He seemed euphoric as he said: “Look at my sword, want to see how it works? Want to see something cool?” He then turned on the group of boys that happened to be walking by. After the crime, laughing, he said to his friend, “I killed three people, didn’t I?” (Serrao & Foss, 2008a, b).

After the rampage his parents reported that their son had claimed that he could not stop the compulsion to commit the crime. In his words: “When I put on the mask, everything went dead quiet and my body started moving. I wanted to stop, but I couldn’t” (du Plessis, 2008c).

Following the crime there were many news reports that Harmse had been involved in Satanism and the occult. The heavy metal band Slipknot was also blamed for lyrics that insight violence and anger. It was known that Harmse had smoked cannabis approximately twice a week since age 17, but he tested negative for drugs at the time of the attack.

In a public statement, Harmse’s parents said:

Harmse was very small and skinny for his age group. Until Monday morning, we never thought he would be able to do something like this. . . . we raised our children strictly but with a lot of love. Because of his build Morné was regularly bullied during his formative years. Where we could, we stood up for him and on occasion spoke to the bullies, but also accepted it as a part of life . . . we had never realised the real impact of the physical and emotional abuse on Morné. He explained to us that he felt so powerless and worthless that he wanted to make a statement (du Plessis, 2008c).

His parents went on to encourage other parents to make sure they have “a proper conversation” with their children so as to better understand the difficulties and personality changes that children go through (du Plessis, 2008c).

### **10.2.2 Background**

Morné Harmse lived at home with his mother, father, and younger brother, who was 15 years old at the time of the attack. His father worked for a security company and his mother was a housewife. In terms of early development, his mother described a very difficult first year with her son. She struggled to feed him and he cried day and night. She reported observing some stereotypical behaviors in early childhood where Harmse would spin the wheel on his pram or toy motorbike for long periods of time. In 1994, when he was 4 years old, his mother was hospitalized for depression. Her depression appeared to be associated with ongoing marital conflict and domestic violence.

The social worker’s and psychologist’s reports describe a family situation where Harmse did not actively receive support and love. Coercive aggression and force were often used during his childhood and adolescence. When this escalated, his mother and her two sons would move out of the family home. Harmse was often terrified of his father, who was described as aggressive and short-tempered. It was reported that Harmse would sometimes receive “extreme beatings” from his father. He felt his parents saw him and his brother as “just stupid kids” who needed to comply without any opposition or expression. During his psychological evaluation he expressed difficulty in thinking about the abuse at home, but added that he just wanted to escape it somehow. Harmse reported having fantasies of attacking his father but never acted on them because his father was “stronger and bigger” than him.

In Grade 5 his parents were concerned about Harmse's lack of growth and took him to a "growth clinic." It appears that he had started to become self-conscious about his size from an early age. His parents described him as an isolated, passive, apathetic young child who preferred his own company. When friends came to play they would often end up playing with Harmse's brother while he isolated himself in his room, playing computer games.

Harmse's home environment was restrictive and he experienced childhood as extremely lonely, living with a sense that he never got what he desired. He felt he could not approach his parents for advice, opinions, or direction. The social worker was of the opinion that, as a young man, his pain and sadness were more easily expressed aggressively. Interpersonally, Harmse was described as "extremely introverted and very uncomfortable around others." He felt lonely even in company, distrustful of others, sensitive, easily embarrassed, and felt that others thought he was stupid. It appears that his passive, introverted appearance gave others the impression of a shy child who never caused problems (Serrao and Foss, 2008a, b).

In primary school Harmse participated in sports and his parents were not aware of any negative behaviors. At high school he felt he could never fit in and grew more insecure about his size. It worried him that he could not play rugby, the main sport in his school. There are reports of him participating in school debating (it is not clear for how long) but felt teased because it was not "manly enough." Interestingly, his parents described him as being afraid of school because he felt confused and disorientated by what he experienced as a lack of order and rules. He felt that students were left to their own devices. Academically, he was an average student.

From an early age Harmse took a keen interest in martial arts and idealized heroes associated with this world. Approximately 5 years before the crime his father bought him a set of samurai swords which were displayed in his room. Later, he bought himself another set of swords. Harmse fantasized about being a soldier and spent a great deal of time researching topics related to bombs and guns. He wanted to be a soldier, he said, and thought his research would be to his advantage when he joined the army. His friends described his room as relatively empty, with his swords neatly displayed on the wall. Harmse also spent time making other swords as well as various ninja paraphernalia. He also developed an interest in mind-reading and related subjects and collected books to satisfy his interest. The social worker reports that his parents bought him books about palm-reading and tarot cards in an attempt to satisfy his curiosity. It appears that Harmse later became curious about the occult and in Grade 7 expressed an interest in being a Satanist. Although his parents disapproved, it appears they never actively intervened. Harmse reported that he also developed an interest in researching topics linked to schizophrenia and psychopathy after watching a movie about "brainwashing." He said he was motivated by a sense of feeling "different."

Although initially denying observing any antisocial behavior, his mother later described a number of worrying observations that were never attended to. She reported that Harmse had once drawn detailed plans of his school and other houses. When questioned, he admitted wanting to break into the school's chemistry laboratories to obtain bomb-making chemicals. It appears that he had experimented with

making bombs, and this was a subject that often occupied his mind. He said he would sometimes imagine that school children were terrorists and fantasize about blowing up the “stupid” children. In his mind he appeared to separate “stupid” children from “smart” teachers.

Harmse and his brother were also involved in a break-in in the neighborhood. When the social worker asked about this, Harmse did not appear troubled by his behavior, because he felt “someone might do the same to him one day.”

The assessing psychologist noted that his affect was usually blunted or inappropriate during the evaluation and he would often smile when discussing serious matters. Throughout the assessment Harmse also found it very difficult to name feeling states. The psychologist described him as relating in a strangely inappropriate or “empty” manner, similar to a schizoid/schizotypal presentation. Although displaying some breakthrough affects related to regret about the crime, the psychologist felt he generally displayed a lack of remorse and found much of his presentation to be consistent with Antisocial Personality Disorder. Psychological testing (MMPI, MCMI, Rorschach) confirmed paranoid thinking and a sense that other people could influence his mind and “had it in for him.” He was not diagnosed with an Axis I disorder and was found to be psychotic.

After interviewing all parties and considering background details and reports, the social worker made some astute observations about Harmse’s personality and upbringing in her presentencing report. She reported that his parents demonstrated little love or physical contact and as a result felt absent to him. “He belonged nowhere as a child,” she writes, and carried a sense of emptiness inside him. The social worker describes his expression of a “huge desire for love, attention, and caring” and mentions a hypersensitivity to rejections and a tendency to “look for answers in abstraction” where he could feel safe and harness some degree of control. In this way an escape into a dreamworld of mystical figures and fantasy became a pivotal aspect of his world view. The social worker felt Harmse’s frequent use of “figurative” or “abstract” language had an eccentric and childlike quality and was accompanied by a need to “shock.” He would often make use of war imagery, dragons, mythological figures, and so forth, to describe his situation. His friends described him as obsessed with war and the thought of becoming a ninja. It appears he spent much of his time after school rehearsing and playing out these fantasies, climbing walls and roofs enacting ninja scenes (Serrao & Foss, 2008a, b). Accessing this world seems to have given him some relief from a sense of inadequacy. As the social worker indicates, “in this fantasy world he feels more accepted by friends and his father.”

### ***10.2.3 Build-up to the Attack***

In the year of the attack, Harmse and his friends developed an interest in the heavy metal band Slipknot. One of his friends reported that he noticed that the music appeared to “change him” (du Plessis, 2008a). Approximately 3 weeks before the

attack they made masks similar to the ones worn by the band members. In another press report, one of his friends described each of the masks as embodying themes like “rape, murder, or child abuse” (Serrao & Foss, 2008a, b). It appears that Harmse made a number of these masks and had, at some point, played around with trying to scare his father by wearing one. It seems that this quickly grew into an obsession and he started to photograph himself wearing the masks.

Was anything done about Harmse’s deteriorating state? His parents did not mention noticing any escalation of odd behavior, change in mood, or similar. Some of his teachers, however, reported noticing that he had become “withdrawn” over a period of 5 months. The week before the attack his class had had a discussion about their futures where his teacher noted his inappropriate affect and “silly answers” and observed that he appeared to have no sense of a future (Serrao & Foss, 2008a, b). His teachers worried about his “end-of-the-world philosophies” (Weisbrot, 2008, p. 50), which is a common feature linked to the mental crisis that school shooters often encounter. On the Friday before the killing, the day his group of friends firmed up their plans, his teachers had talked about trying to help.

As mentioned earlier, Harmse’s parents were deeply saddened by the realization that they had never noticed the “real impact of the physical and emotional abuse” (du Plessis, 2008c). After the crime Harmse was able to put into words feeling so “powerless and worthless that he wanted to make a statement” (du Plessis). Even with all the facts we have (he was bullied, witnessed violence, had access to weapons, displayed some antisocial tendencies, and so forth), it remains difficult to comprehend how his “statement” became so contrived, violent, faceless, but school-focused.

### **10.3 Discussion: A Catastrophic Solution**

A number of elements of the tragic events at Nic Diederichs Technical High School offer useful insights into rampage attacks of this nature. The crime certainly fits many common characteristics of the school shooter (Muschert, 2007; O’Toole, 2000). From a broad psychoanalytic perspective, I am primarily interested in what the case suggests about attachment relationships, the qualities of object relations, the function of fantasy, and the nature of defensive organization. This includes both intrapsychic and external factors that appear to have set Harmse on a path towards a particular kind of violent action.

#### ***10.3.1 Disorganized Attachment and the False Self***

A number of aspects of the case point to a prominent disorganized attachment dynamic:

- The prominence of violence in his background
- Hostility often experienced from his father

- A tendency to withdraw from relationships
- Some evidence of stereotypical behaviors in early childhood
- An apathetic, arrested predisposition
- A tendency to appear “empty” or vacant;
- Contradictory feelings towards attachment figures
- A need for rules and structure to down-regulate affects in order to feel organized

As already mentioned, individuals who experience disorganized attachment dynamics usually perceive attachment figures as either frightening or frightened (Main & Hesse, 1990). They feel caught and confused by their need to seek safety in a relationship with an attachment figure who is also experienced as frightened or frightening. Here, dissociation emerges as a key defensive maneuver that offers “an escape when there is no escape” (Putnam, 1992, p. 173). It involves a disintegration of the personality in an effort to separate unbearable and chaotic “bad” psychic states from other ego states. Sometimes defensive splitting is also expressed through dissociative or altered states where the individual enters a trance-like or withdrawn self-state in order to avoid being overwhelmed by internalized chaos. This internal state comprises unprocessed concrete images or sensations produced by frightening or frightened encounters that, in turn, lead to a sense of feeling caught in polarized thoughts of either being frightening or frightened, victim or persecutor.

Although the first-line response to disorganized attachment is further disorganization and submission (to stifle or obscure the “pain” of reality), individuals also tend to reverse roles as a way of attempting to “dominate” and control perceived threats to the self (Hesse & Main, 2000; Main & Hesse, 1990). They do so either by adopting an “adult role” to take care of their attachment figure, or appropriating aggressive, powerful roles to mask a real sense of fragility and confusion. We see the latter manifested in conduct disorders, oppositional disorders, and other antisocial tendencies in children. In Harmse’s case, the submission and apathy (the first-line response) is evident as a dominant part of his character. Oppositional aspects seldom occur overtly but exist, nevertheless, in a more clandestine form, symbolized by aggressive figures that are obsessively played out in fantasy or “play.” What is important here is how these aggressive and destructive fantasies start to yield a sense of internal organization, identity, and power. We will return to this shortly.

It is reasonably well known that a traumatic upbringing creates high risk for the experience of dissociative states (Herman, 1997; Lyons-Ruth et al. 2006; Lyons-Ruth & Spielman, 2004). The self splits in a desperate attempt to preserve some sense of psychic integrity. Experiences of numbing, dreamlike states, and out-of-body states are all common features of the experience of dissociation in response to trauma. They can, however, also occur with milder forms of ongoing relational trauma through parental misattunement and inattentiveness (Bromberg, 2006; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999; Lyons-Ruth & Spielman, 2004). What is dissociated, in either case, is not usually a coherent split off “bad self” that sets up an internal conflict with good aspects of the self. It is probably more accurate to refer to a splintering of the self (Kilborne, 1999). Here, trauma leaves in its wake experiences that

remain unprocessed, too unbearable to think about. As a result, they exist as ever-present fragments that constantly disrupt the continuity of experience and lead to a chaotic unregulated internal world.

I believe that given his attachment insecurity, Harmse's attempts to manage his internal world are in keeping with a version of what Deutsch (1942) first termed the "as-if" personality and Winnicott (1960) later called the "false-self" personality. The core feature of this kind of personality is a constant sense of apathy and emptiness as the "false-self" is appropriated in an attempt to appease others. Because it is not based on the self's true needs and desires, there is often a sense of awkwardness and inauthenticity reflected in interpersonal relations. Reports of Harmse being normal, good, polite, with little sign of overt conduct problems at school, and of his submissive and compliant character, appear to confirm this. Furthermore, because much of his interaction was based on "false" relatedness, responses from others would have felt equally futile, inauthentic, and empty.

Harmse's view of children being "stupid" and adults "smart" is of interest. It is speculative, but this perspective seems to say something about his "false self" world view where "stupid" children submit to "smart" adults/parents. Harmse certainly felt trapped by his father's strict authoritarianism and found it very difficult to openly oppose authority figures. He felt submission and compliance to be the only option. "If I ever had my own children," Harmse told the social worker, "I would bring them up with choices." Without an outlet to deal with his needs and difficulties *in reality*, it is likely that his sense of difference, frustration about his deficiencies, turned into seething anger towards a world that he felt did not understand him.

The one bullying incident we hear about at school involved a bigger boy taking Harmse's hat and not returning it. The following day his father went to school and angrily confronted the boy. As reported by the social worker, when Harmse recalls the incident he "wishes he had been like his dad." This appears to be a typical example of what called "identification with the aggressor." Harmse's exposure to traumatic experiences certainly made avoiding a sense of powerlessness and helplessness the easier psychic option. However, although this yields some sense of power and control over his world, it also sets up further difficulties related to repetition of early trauma relations: to identify with the very forces that he feels do not hear him, restrict him, damage him. Typically of the paradox evident in disorganized attachment, he desperately wants to emulate, be like, his father. But at the same time, he harbors immense anger towards him.

Thoughts and fantasies of aggression, sadomasochistic impulses, and so forth, have an incisive effect on the disorganized psyche. Here, a sense of power, aggressiveness, and omnipotence leads to a state of feeling more organized and, ironically, safe: rather act against or destroy vulnerability than be its victim. In terms of object relations theory, we could also understand this to be tied to a process of projective identification. The process is set in motion by unconscious fantasies aimed at getting rid of unwanted parts of the self. Projective identification manifests interpersonally when vulnerable disturbing aspects of the self are projected onto external objects and attacked so as to avoid the real pain of thinking about them as being part of the self. This is apparent in Harmse's fantasies seeing students as



“dumb terrorists” or “stupid,” where he tries to distance himself from “bad” or “stupid” parts of himself so he can locate and destroy them in others.

Apart from knowing that Harmse was rather passive and withdrawn at school, there is little information about his interactions with others. It would appear plausible, however, that negotiating ordinary adolescent conflicts, jostling for recognition as a young man amongst his peers, must have felt very difficult for him. In this context, ordinary adolescent difficulties, the search for role models, managing intense emotions, and negotiating independence must have felt unbearable. In his attempt to avoid this reality it appears that he imagined scenarios and used fantasy to fulfil his emotional needs. Included in these scenarios were adolescent yearnings for role models and independence. From this he starts to build the “imagined self” he so desperately wanted to be.

### 10.3.2 *Malignant Shame*

It is beyond doubt that Harmse was extremely shame-prone. His constant apathy and withdrawal, underlying rage, and contempt are typical defensive strategies for concealing and managing unbearable shame (Lansky, 2005, 2007; Morrison, 1985). But are there particular aspects of his internalized shame dynamics that help us understand more about what might contribute to an attack of this nature? My sense is that Harmse’s shame takes on malignant characteristics in that it encapsulates his whole world view, leaving little chance of escape. It becomes a terrible vicious cycle. He feels deeply inadequate, often embarrassed, but finds no relief or comfort in seeking help from others. His shame is split-off and hidden to preserve some sense of integrity, creating further distance between himself and others and exacerbating his sense of feeling “different.” Being bullied and feeling like a misfit with poor social skills probably also left Harmse feeling that he was unacceptable to others. All appear to contribute to further shame and the concealment of hurt. Harmse appears to hold out very little hope for a “good” caring object helping him out of this conundrum. As a consequence, none of these difficulties can be worked through *in reality*, depriving him of the opportunity of receiving some kind of realistic compassionate engagement to assist in working through his internal struggles.

It appears that school was a breeding ground for envy and confusion while Harmse tried to hide his shame. His parents claimed he was often teased by other students and felt unaccepted at school. We know that he hated school but he did not openly express this through common oppositional acts. Lansky (2007) describes how shame that is felt to be “unbearable” is split off from reality-orientated parts of the self. In its place, the individual begins to adopt fixed, vengeful states of mind in an attempt to gain some distance from perceived deficiencies and a sense of powerlessness. In keeping with the idea that aggressive fantasies help organize disorganized attachment systems, vengefulness is thought to give rise to an “experience” of power (Lansky, 2005, p. 887) over unacceptable deficient parts of the self.

Was it the constant strain and humiliation at school that sowed the seeds of revenge and retaliation? Notwithstanding the complexity of risk factors linked to school rampage attacks, it certainly appears that Harmse's sense of being defective, unworthy, and unseen by others was significant. Because the consequences of internalized shame are hidden it is easily overlooked, as appears to be the case here. The sense of being invisible to others is tantamount to annihilation of the self. When this is felt to be unbearable, violence may be seen as the only solution. As Gilligan observes in his work with antisocial men, if the situation is extreme, one would rather kill than feel or face up to shame.

Twemlow aptly explains how revenge against the school may appear to be the only option once passive bystanders are also viewed as being "against" the victim:

The victim is susceptible to the contempt of the group, reinforcing the fantasy that nothing good is left in him or her and that there is no help and no hope. Thus, the bystander audience helps create a mindset in the victim for which there seems no endpoint, as in a Faustian hell where one gets used to the pain. If the humiliation will never stop and if there is no worth in the victim, then there is nothing for the victim to live for but revenge (Twemlow, 2003, p. 677).

Apart from the school environment, many other background factors, already touched upon above, may have added to a deep sense of feeling defective. Harmse witnessed ongoing traumatic and violent incidents at home. He grew up in what appears to have been a very restrictive, harsh family environment. He also clearly had great difficulty relating to others and felt socially inadequate, preferring to isolate himself from quite an early age. But Harmse was not entirely isolated; he clearly had friends at school. It appears, however, that friendship was very difficult for him and the only way he could relate was through drawing on an imaginary world of mystical figures, through "war talk" and imagined ninja scenarios that served to override his feelings of vulnerability and give him a sense of power. When he talks about or identifies with these images, he told the social worker, he feels more accepted by his father and his friends. It is plausible that Harmse started to feel noticed, recognized after telling his friends about making bombs, his swords, and attack scenarios. He started to draw on the sense of identity and belonging that this brought in an attempt to redress an underlying "failure of manhood" (Newman, 2004).

There is one other very important factor that led to a terrible sense of deficiency in Harmse: his size. Langman (2009) notes that many shooters felt ashamed or self-conscious about their physical appearance, particularly their size and height. Others felt their appearance was defective in different ways. For instance, Eric Harris felt very self-conscious about his sunken chest. Attributions related to size are often present in shame-prone individuals, a sense of feeling small, diminished in comparison to others (Kilborne, 1995). In addition to being prone to shame experiences, Harmse was also faced with the reality that he was much smaller than his peers. It seems to me that when shame becomes tied to real physical ability and appearance, the sense of futility is greatly increased. His parents were vaguely aware of how debilitating this felt to him. It felt like a lifelong sentence about which he could do nothing. In his mind, his size deprived him of fitting in, doing "manly" things, and overcoming his powerless vis-a-vis his father.

### 10.3.3 *Dissociative Devices*

In the build-up to a school attack, perpetrators often make use of what might be called “dissociative devices” to strengthen their resolve. As discussed earlier, dissociation and splitting are well-established defensive features in Harmse’s psychological makeup, used to avoid psychic pain and further shame. But to kill another human being takes more than cutting off one’s own feeling states, it also means shutting down to the emotions and humanity of others. Eric Harris’ journal clearly illustrates “willful” aspects of this process:

I have a goal to destroy as much as possible so I must not be sidetracked by my feelings of sympathy, mercy, or any of that, so I will force myself to believe that everyone is just another monster. . . . So it’s either me or them. I have to turn off my feelings (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1998, Columbine Documents, p. 26).

The “self-induced” devices that serve to enhance the dissociative process are important here. Perpetrators search for “props” that resonate with their own sense of internal destructiveness to build up their own self-made “identity.” These “props” include immersion in “destructive” literature, satanic ritual, video games, as well as the acquisition of objects and weaponry associated with destructive iconic images with which they can identify.

The role of rehearsal and repetition is also a significant feature aiding a process of dissociation. It starts out as a willful, practiced, induced self-state that fuels a sense of destructive omnipotence and grandiosity. It also has the effect of anesthetizing “healthier” aspects of the personality that still hold the capacity to empathize with others.

My sense is that Slipknot’s music consolidated Harmse’s identification with the “avenging victim,” validating experiences he felt no one could understand. It makes little sense to discuss Slipknot’s music as actually inciting the murder, in the same way as we cannot assume that violent video games cause murderous rage (Ferguson, 2007). Instead, they act as a device to shore up a preexisting vengeful state. It is useful to understand how Harmse would have heard and internalized the music of Slipknot as a dissociative device. Here are some of their lyrics (Elyrics, 2012):

I want to slit your throat and fuck the wound/I want to push my face in and feel the swoon/I  
wanna dig inside find a little bit of me . . . I’m not supposed to be here . . . All I have is dead,  
so I’ll take you with me/Feel like I’m erased, so kill me just in case (Disasterpiece)

Life is just a killing field/It’s all that’s left, nothing’s real/Throw away your disposable  
past/And fall apart like a cigarette ash/We are the fatal and vital ones of the world/And we  
will burn your cities down (Gematria [The Killing Name])

In light of my ability to undermine/I walk away from apathy – I’m feeling fine/The  
Agony of Cynicism beckons me/It’s Everywhere/It’s Everyone/It’s Everything/Let’s pre-  
tend – we’re not at the end/Pretend – that we have nothing left/All hope is gone (Vendetta)

The very disturbing images in these lyrics evoke nihilism, sadism, and violence. Although most would understand the lyrics as evocative thoughts expressing the voice of the disaffected, for Harmse, I suspect they would be appropriated in a more concrete way as a call to action. Perhaps for the first time, he finds what

he perceives as “real” validation for his deeply held aggrieved view of the world. It strengthens his identification with the “warrior soldier” that he fantasizes of becoming and triggers new belief in the possibility of destructive fantasy becoming a reality.

This is a very primitive form of identification that involves mimicry (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, O’Toole, et al., 2002). In ordinary attempts at identification we engage in a struggle that involves recognizing what attributes we want to emulate, while realistically comparing them to our own differences, intentions, or limitations. This is illustrated by a friend of Harmse’s comment on the influence of Slipknot: “I was interested in Slipknot. The drummer is amazing; I would like to play like him one day.” Here, the attribute identified can be used for thinking about a realistic objective. In more primitive forms of identification, however, the object is incorporated into the psyche and imitated as a way of avoiding pain or reality. I suspect these lyrics would have been internalized in this way as a rigid road map of how to be and what to do (a substitute parental voice perhaps).

The wearing of masks was part of this primitive identification with Slipknot. It was central to the way Harmse chose to commit his crime and appeared to be a crucial dissociative device. As Harmse put it: “When I put on the mask, everything went dead quiet and my body started moving. I wanted to stop, but I couldn’t” (du Plessis, 2008c). His description appears to clearly describe a dissociative state which I have no reason to doubt. Reports of apparent disorientation and a change in appearance and voice also corroborate this. It is important not to misunderstand the implications of this dissociative state for his violent action. It is not that he is unaware of what he is doing as he enacts his own trauma. But he experiences it as a hypnoid state where he gets caught up in a much-rehearsed fantasy world that, aided by the mask, trumps reality.

He and his friends played with masks in the lead-up to the crime, and he used the masks to scare his father. Perhaps these masks had a playful quality for his friends and father. But for Harmse, they had taken on a more concrete meaning driving a wedge between his unthinkable deficiencies and his “built-up” warrior-like self. Put differently, the masks embodied his vengeance, while at the same time hiding his real shame-filled self. Harmse used the word “masquerade” in his euphoric and hypomanic state at the time of the attack. Perhaps “masquerade” was a reference to the “festival” qualities he envisioned his bloodbath adopting. One wonders how aware Harmse was of the mask as “pretence” (the other meaning of “masquerade”). Although the mask represents a vengeful “warrior” solution, it ironically perpetuates the shame and pretence: the continued need to hide his true self.

### ***10.3.4 Compulsive Fantasy Process***

Harmse spent much of his time preoccupied with imagined scenarios and mythical figures. Although there was no particular precipitating factor, this preoccupation

appeared to intensify at the beginning of his last year of school. His parents believed the stress of his final year was affecting him. A deep immersion in fantasy is a common feature in school shooters (Weisbrot, 2008). But it is the building pressure associated with fantasy and its compulsive qualities that appear important for understanding why such catastrophic actions are taken. As mentioned above, fantasy ordinarily alerts us to our needs and dreams and acts as a creative commentary on how we think about things. In school shooters destructive fantasies become obsessive and are linked to growing internal pressure. The more attention is paid to these images, the more the intensity grows to act them out (Depue & Depue, 1999). What are the possible dynamics behind building pressure and an obsessive engagement with fantasy?

We know that at an early age Harmse started playing out fantasies related to war, dragons, swords, and mythical figures. His friends reported that his preoccupations had an obsessive quality and his parents unwittingly encouraged various aspects of this fantasy process by buying swords and books about martial arts, magic, and tarot. It has often been found that activities related to aggressiveness and fantasy immersion go unsupervised in the histories of school shooters (Langman, 2009; O'Toole, 2000).

Within the context of a disorganized attachment organization, such fantasies would take on organizing qualities for Harmse. Given the fragility of his sense of self, his imaginings about symbolic figures would have had an intoxicating and riveting quality. In his mind's eye, this gloved, masked figure was an omnipotent and "impressive" warrior that created a perverted sense of purpose and agency. His enfeebled capacity to process emotional experience meant that this figure was very real to him.

It appears that Harmse's growing obsession with fantasy gives rise to a new-found sense of agency. His fantasies become a narcissistic source for building a self image that has little to do with reality. Because this sense of self has no real basis, the ruminating qualities evident in fantasy serve to shore up belief in the self-image. Harmse's sense of feeling deeply inadequate and invisible to others makes identifying with powerful destructive figures an addictive experience and starts to present an apparent solution to inner turmoil.

In most school rampage attacks, problems begin to escalate when perpetrators start to adopt a fixed role. This is often linked to a growing internal pressure to act on destructive plans. Fantasies begin to take on greater meaning and intensity as they are rehearsed or acted out with greater frequency. With this, the perpetrator searches for renewed justification for his need to act. Incidents related to perceived injustices are important. But so too are the reactions of others, which are easily taken to be supportive of this destructive and omnipotent view of the self. In short, when the omnipotent and grandiose content of fantasies escalates, so too does the pressure to validate them in real relationships, particularly with peers. In the Harmse case, the group discussions about planning an attack would have been fertile ground for this process. Although others joined these discussions, they did not share the same level of intent or belief. One of his friends played along and made a fake bomb. It is important to see these actions in the context of the complexities of normal adolescent conflicts and exaggerated expressions of emotion relating to bravado and jostling for attention. While this was the case for his friends, Harmse interpreted these discussions as validation for destruc-

tive fantasies and a much yearned-for sense of recognition and belonging. Thus he did not see his friends as bystanders. Although they may have thought about informing an adult and felt conflicted about peer betrayal (Twemlow et al., 2004), I believe they simply found it all difficult to believe and dismissed his antics as fantasy or some kind of game.

The concept of “leakage” takes on particular meaning in this case. It is linked to Harmse’s desperate need to receive some kind of validation. Although Harmse had turned away from trusting relationships from an early age, the need for recognition and acceptance of his new-found self was still paramount. It also appears that building fantasy pressure and its manic qualities made it difficult for him to avoid revealing some sense of his “feel-good” power and omnipotence.

### 10.3.5 *Psychic Equivalence and Pseudo-Mentalizing*

Some of the teachers at school noticed that Harmse could not think about his future in any meaningful way. He gave “silly answers” and his affect struck them as inappropriate. This “narrowing of perspective” is often more evident in the build-up to the attack and is worth briefly exploring using elements of mentalization theory (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). Having a sense of past and future is born out of an ability to think about ourselves as relatively coherent psychological entities. This relies on our ability to track, intuit, and interpret the mental states (thoughts, beliefs, motives, etc.) of ourselves and others. If the ability to mentalize is compromised in some way, more concrete—and developmentally more primitive—ways of seeing the world come to the fore. In combination with a loss of trust in the minds of others, a realistic appraisal of how mental states are linked to behaviors becomes difficult. It is replaced by greater reliance on the physical qualities of the object itself. Here, violence, pain, hyperaroused somatic states, physical outcomes, are needed because they can be “believed.” Put another way, physical outcomes become the only means of “knowing” that one has an impact on others. Harmse’s need to give answers that “shock” so he could *see* his impact on others is a good example of the process we are referring to here.

Deficits in mentalizing also compromise the distinction between internal and external reality. This is called “psychic equivalence” (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006) and is defined by the inability to use the representational qualities of thinking. As a consequence, objects, thoughts, and feelings all appear to blur into one and are difficult to distinguish. It is important to understand the use of the mask from the perspective of psychic equivalence. Firstly, it serves as a very concrete means of hiding or replacing his real appearance. The mask is equated with shutting down the self. Further, whereas one might expect the mask to *represent* a persona (“it is as if I am a destructive powerful being”), for Harmse, putting on the mask was the same as *becoming* the figure it embodied (“I am destructive and powerful”). While Harmse experimented with masks with his friends and “played around” with scaring his father, it is doubtful that others were aware of how real and powerful this experience felt.

There are other examples of psychic equivalence. We have already discussed how the Slipknot lyrics would have been difficult to distinguish from his own “avenging self.” His strange logic when asked about the house burglary is also a form of psychic equivalence. He said he did it because “someone might do the same to him one day.” Because it is difficult for him to separate his thoughts and beliefs from the intentions of others, it becomes reasonable for him to assume that what he wanted to do is the same as what others do/will do. Harmse’s interest in schizophrenia, psychopathy, and brainwashing could also have resulted from his belief that thoughts could be treated like physical objects that could be removed, replaced, and so forth.

Other essential features of psychic equivalence include inflexibility in thinking, causing the individual to rigidly adopt the first idea that comes to mind. Psychic equivalence also makes it very difficult to relate thoughts and feelings to reality. As Bateman and Fonagy (2006) point out, this often “leads to a deep sense of alienation and a feeling of not being understood” (p. 77). Without the ability to track and make use of mental states, more implausible, but seductive explanations for how thoughts work become attractive. This may include interests in mind control, brainwashing, the supernatural, and extrasensory perception. Apart from what has already been mentioned regarding these aspects, perhaps Harmse was drawn to the occult and supernatural powers for this reason. The problem with this, however, as Twemlow (2003) points out, is that it reinforces a preoccupation with grandiose superhuman qualities, particularly for those who have disorganized attachments.

It is interesting how much Harmse appears to make use of a pseudo-mentalizing capacity. Developmentally, this form of mentation is connected to the “pretend mode” (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006). This is a phase where “the child is capable of representational thought as long as no link between that and external reality is made” (p. 73). In this mode we are able to track and reason with mental states only if they have no link with reality. The mentation is self-serving and undermines the subjectivity of the other. Pseudo-mentalizing is often contrived and eccentric, with inappropriate affect, and leads to a sense of boredom or emptiness in others as there is no attempt to connect with their minds. It appears that Harmse, at times, came across in this way during his psychiatric evaluation. Harmse’s dreamlike world and his preoccupation with ninjas and soldiers also belonged in this “pretend realm.” His thinking seems best described as “destructively inaccurate pseudo-mentalization” (Bateman & Fonagy) where the realities of others are usurped by fantasy. Seeing all school students as doing “bad to him,” viewing them as “stupid terrorists,” attributes implausible mental states to his potential victims to justify his accusations.

Harmse’s use of figurative and abstract language is also a pseudo-mentalizing strategy that could be easily mistaken for an ability to use rich symbolic or metaphorical language in a meaningful way. In Harmse’s case, his thinking and use of mythical figures or “war talk” does not symbolize a plausible reality. Nor does his use of metaphor creatively elaborate a realistic need that can be reasonably understood by others. This kind of figurative talk is often used to prevent engagement with anticipated emotional turmoil in shame-prone individuals and closely resembles primitive unconscious fantasies (Schafer, 1997).

## 10.4 Conclusion

When the social worker asked Harmse about prison, he said that inside and outside prison were no different. To him, he said, both places were absent of choice or any sense of control and both were about leading an apathetic existence. Perhaps this reflects something of the internal prison that so encapsulates Harmse's personality. It might also demonstrate how out of reach choice and a sense of real control were to him (for internal and external reasons). For similar reasons, persons with disorganized attachments often find the simplicity, order, and lack of choice in prison quite containing (Twemlow, 2003).

Just before the attack, one of Harmse's friends took a photograph of the masked figure that he became. It was circulated on social media websites and is still available on the Internet. When I look at the photograph I am reminded of Twemlow's (2003) description of the "pathetic" qualities that such acts embody. He looks unimpressive, not believable as a "mighty warrior." Perhaps this is why he was laughed at by his friends (we have not considered whether the laughing contributed to his actions, although I think not): the gap between his view of himself and ours is vast. The psychoanalytic perspective discussed here has gone some way to explain why such a disparity exists.

I believe that ideographic case studies of rampage attacks are an essential means of gaining deeper insights into the experiences of such offenders. They also usefully balance and add "experiential" substance to quantitative reports. Clearly, as is the case in this report, first-hand interviews are often hard to come by as offenders are either in prison or have fallen prey to their suicidal intentions. Furthermore families, clearly traumatized by such occurrences and often bullied by the media, are also often unwilling to be interviewed directly by academic researchers. These challenges stand in the way of obtaining first-hand research accounts. This makes it even more important to access primary accounts from surviving perpetrators (or family members) to complement and balance secondary information. An interview with Harmse (time and red tape permitting) would certainly have added depth and veracity.

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