

Why kids kill

A study of age and anger.

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Part 1

Why would a teenager or young adult kill someone else?. To beginning one must look into the area of anger. Why anger?. One can assume that when one kills another person that is a violent act and violent acts often involve anger at some point.

The development of anger.

The new-born infant has very rudimentary understandings of itself. So one assumes that just after birth the infant understands little. One of the things that it does understand is when it feels discomfort. It has to understand this or it will die. So it can understand the states of comfort/discomfort or pleasure/pain.



When the infant feels discomfort such as hunger, nappy change, wind or what ever its natural response is to express displeasure. That is usually done by crying. If what is supposed to happen happens and the child's needs are met, then it learns that when it feels discomfort it cries and then someone does something and it feels better and stops crying. This obviously is learnt very quickly.

As time goes on the infant begins to demarcate its feelings. (This was first

discussed in my book "The treatment of character"(1987)). That is it learns to discern different types of discomfort. It is no longer just the broad category of discomfort for the infant, but it becomes hunger discomfort, soiling discomfort, boredom discomfort, wind discomfort and so on. It is around this time that you hear mothers say, "I can now understand Johnny's different cries". This is a good sign because it means her and baby Johnny are developing a rapport but also it means that she can understand the different cries because Johnny has learnt to have them. It represents a new level of understanding in Johnny about himself.

Of course one of the very early emotions that Johnny learns about is anger. Johnny has plenty to be angry about because he quickly learns that life on the outside (of the womb) is different than life on the inside. On the inside every need was met but on the outside he has to fit in with the needs of others (mother mainly). So he is constantly frustrated, his older sister might hit or bite him, he gets put to bed when he is not ready and so forth. As time rolls on he learns a to demarcate the different types of anger such as rage, hurt, annoyance, spite, resistance, resentment and so forth. These are all in the same 'family' of feelings but are separate subgroups in that overall group.

As he learns more about his anger and the different subgroups of anger he needs to learn to communicate to others about it. One of our main ways of communicating is with speech. So Johnny needs to learn that when he has the feeling of anger that that equates to a word spelt - A. N. G. E. R. Then when he feels it he can communicate that by saying the word. People need to learn to put a word to the feelings they have.

The problem with feelings is you cannot see a feeling or you cannot touch a feeling. All you can see in others is the behaviour that results from the feeling and the words used to express that feeling. You cannot actually see or touch the feeling. This causes problems because when ever someone says they feel angry the only way we can really know what they are saying is by thinking about our own feelings of anger. For instance if some one says they felt frustrated then we understand that by recalling the last time we felt frustrated and remembering what that felt like. Then we understand what the other person is talking about.

The problem can occur when the person says, "I felt so frustrated I shouted out". The problem is some people will shout out when they have 5 units of frustration and some do not shout out until they have 30 units of frustration. So if your 5 unit friend says he shouted out, and you are a 30 unit person then you will assume they have 30 units of frustration when in fact they only have 5. There is miscommunication and you have mis-comprehended what the other person is saying. Most people will automatically think that the rest of the world feels the same way they do. Indeed in the training of Transactional Analysis

counsellors this is one of the main lessons to be learnt. "My clients do not feel the same way I do". This seems obvious but it usually takes quite some learning to really understand what I am saying here.

In passing I should mention that this is particularly a problem for people who are depressed. Everybody gets depressed some time and has 'normal' persons depression. These people feel down and sad and after a relatively short period of time they can jolly themselves out of it, distract themselves out of it or think positive thoughts or give themselves a kick in the backside and get out of it.

Problems occur when a person has a major depression or what is sometimes called 'clinical' depression. This is much more pervasive (than normal depression) and it is not possible to think positive thoughts or jolly oneself out of it. However when 'normal' people meet those who are clinically depressed they will think (as we do) that all others feel the same way we do. When the clinically depressed person does not 'just snap out of it' (because that is what the normal person did), they don't understand and will commonly conclude that the person does not want to snap out of it, is being manipulative, is wallowing in self pity and so forth. There has been miscommunication because the 'normal' person has assumed that his 5 units of depression is the same as the clinically depressed persons 50 units of depression. Obviously it is not.

Here I have discussed how children begin to learn about the feeling of anger. Next posting I will look at how kids learn about the expression of the feeling of anger.

Why Kids Kill - Part 2.

As the infant learns to demarcate his feelings and learns how to identify the various feelings he also learns how to show or express his feelings. The new-born has only one way initially to express displeasure and that is with a cry. As it grows it learns more and more different ways. Coing and gurgling when happy, a mild grizzle when annoyed and a full loud cry when angry or rageful.

One of the main things to learn is how to give the expression of a feeling a direction. A very young child's feelings have no direction. It knows that it is feeling discomfort of some kind so it just cries, screams, bites, hits out and so forth. As it does not know what the feeling is called, he does not know what caused the feeling and thus he does not know what would solve the problem.

A good example of a directionless feeling is a temper tantrum. A temper tantrum is an uncontrolled expression of anger or tension. It can include arms and legs thrashing about, arching of the back, crying, screaming, stamping feet, throwing

self onto the floor. This is a sign of considerable anger or rage, but it has no direction. It is not directed at the source of the frustration or anger. There is very little thinking involved. This is what we call a very regressed type of anger release. It includes little Adult or Parent ego state and is just Child ego state.

Most people as they grow learn how not to have a temper tantrum because they learn how to identify the feeling they are having and how to identify the source of the action that lead to the feeling. An adult may think that he wants a new car and when told he can not have it because it costs too much, then he can feel angry and frustrated. He then can vent that feeling by telling someone in an angry way, or by slamming a door and some may then use that anger as a motivation to start a savings plan to get enough money to buy the car. This person has identified the feeling and vented it in a direction that is appropriate.

A young child in a supermarket when told it cannot have lolly may drop to the ground and have a temper tantrum. It is frustrated and angry and just has a feeling reaction that has no direction or problem solving properties. Most adults learn how to move from the directionless expression (like a temper tantrum) to a directional expression of anger that is socially appropriate and is more likely to led to the problem being solved.

Some teenagers and adults do not learn such things and then you can get very odd behaviour in the grown up people. Sometimes it can be dangerous and very occasionally it can have tragic consequences.



Temper tantrums in adulthood.

In 1996 Martin Bryant (a man in his early twenties) murdered 35 people at the tourist location, Port Arthur in Tasmania, Australia. Below is what the judge said at the sentencing. Cox(1996).

"The prisoner, having had a murderous plan in contemplation and active preparation for some time, deliberately killed two persons against whom he held a grudge, and then embarked on a trail of devastation which took the lives of a further 33 other human beings who were total strangers to him and which caused serious injury, distress and grief to literally thousands more. The repercussions of these crimes have been world-wide. His selection of victims was indiscriminate. He killed and injured men, women and even children".

He killed a married couple the night before. This was obviously planned. The next day he went to the tourist location and killed a further 33 more. He wandered around the area shooting anyone who came into his line of fire, thus the victims were selected at random and there is no known motive for this. It could be argued that he switched to a different ego state. A regressed very angry Child ego state. This behaviour is representative of a temper tantrum. Very angry, dramatic lashing out, unfocused, with no motive for the attack on any individual. A 2 year old lashes out in the same way, anyone in arms reach gets hit or kicked. There is a loss of control and no direction in the anger expression.

In some of the kids who kill you get this type of temper tantrum behaviour. Not uncommonly in such random attacks on others the final attack will be on the teenager himself and he kills himself. Just like a child who throws a temper tantrum can quite easily hurt himself. Martin Bryant almost did this. He went back to the house where he killed the couple the night before and set it on fire, he stayed inside the house as his goal was to burn himself to death. At the last moment he fled the house badly burnt.

Fire in itself is an interesting expression of anger. People can destroy something by dismantling it, hitting it with a baseball bat, burying it, throwing it off a cliff and so forth. Of all the ways to destroy something, one of the most (if not the most) destructive ways is by burning it. Fire is a very destructive force and thus people who have a history of arson can often be very angry people and the fire is an expression of that anger. Self immolation can be seen to be a very violent act that is representative of a very angry person, and the anger is turned on self.

In Why Kids Kill Part 1 the development of anger over the life span was considered . In this posting on Why Kids Kill Part 2 the different ways anger can be expressed was talked about. In particular the more regressed types of anger expression were looked at in how some people can kill others.

Why Kids Kill - Part 3.

I Don't Like Mondays
by the Boomtown Rats

"The silicon chip inside her head
Gets switched to overload.
And nobody's gonna go to school today,
She's going to make them stay at home.
And daddy doesn't understand it,
He always said she was as good as gold.
And he can see no reason
'Cause there are no reasons
What reason do you need to be shown?"

Tell me why?
I don't like Mondays".



Even in murderous acts there is
still that quality of childlike innocence

The Boomtown Rats were at a US radio station for an interview when the story of Brenda Spencer came over the news wire. The 16 year old California high school student made headlines when she grabbed her father's gun and opened fire on her school from a house across the street, injuring eight students and killing the school's principal and custodian. When later asked why she'd gone on the shooting spree, she responded "I don't like Mondays."

As a teenager I have tried to kill - twice. I tried to kill myself. How similar are suicide and homicide. Some say there is no difference and that suicide is the just homicide of the self. Some would say they are different. Whatever one says both are violent acts that involve the taking a human life or the attempt to take a human life. So I will endeavour to say what was in my mind.

There are probably a variety of reasons why kids kill and I will only be addressing one 'type' here. Of course the 'type' that is relevant to me and how I got into a mindset where I could attempt as a teenager to take my life. In my blog posting "Teenage suicide note" I say: "As an adult I have seen TV shows and documentaries about teenagers who have killed and when asked why they don't really have an answer. I understand that, because one does not know why".

In the above discussion of Martin Bryant's killing at Port Arthur, Tasmania, no one has ever found out why, or what his motive was. Probably because Mr Bryant does not know why himself.



Children view the world differently to adults

As I have said before teenagers are old enough to know the definition of death but some do not understand the meaning of it. So killing someone else or yourself does have any real meaning. In this sense one can say that the consequences of the actions have not been thought through or understood in a meaningful way. They know it at a head level but it has no real meaning for them.

Teenagers have a sense of omnipotence, "It won't happen to me", "I will be the exception to the rule", "It will all turn out all right in the end" are the types of things some teenagers can think. Related to this that the teenage stage of development is seen as a risk taking stage of human development. I don't think this is actually correct. It would be better stated that it is a misunderstanding of risk stage of development or perhaps a minimisation of risk stage of development. They just don't think about the risk and/or they don't correctly assess the risk. It is sometimes stated that the teenager and the criminal personality have a good deal in common and one thing known about the criminal mind is the lack of fear or scare. This is why such people can sometimes become war heroes. They can do very brave things in battlefields because they don't have fear and don't have a sense of the risk.



This river is full of man-eating crocodiles, so to walk across it is to take a great risk. Teenagers either don't think about the crocodiles or feel they are omnipotent and indestructible. So when a teenager walks across the bridge he is not taking a risk (in his mind).

The "Bali 9" are a group of nine young Australians who are currently awaiting trial in Indonesia for drug smuggling. The drugs were heroin and of a substantial quantity that they probably will get the death penalty. The media have been attracted to the story partly because they are so young, some being in their late teens and early twenties. These people strapped large quantities of the drug to their chest and thighs and then proceeded through customs and so forth. Each of the 9 would have known that if they were found out they would be put in a Balinese jail (which is far from a pleasant experience) and would likely if not very likely face execution by firing squad. If it's strapped to your body you can't say you didn't know it was there or someone planted it on you. You are going to be caught red handed.

With this in mind, imagine the feeling of strapping the drugs to yourself and then travelling to the airport, waiting at customs and passport clearance knowing the officials are checking you out closely and then waiting 2 hours in the transit lounge with all those police around before you fly out. Then when you arrive in Australia you have to go through the whole experience again.



I would say that a 'normal' individual could not physically do that. The adrenaline would be too much, the heart would be beating too hard for too long, the stress would be so overwhelming that most people would either pass out or become incapacitated in some form. Those youngsters must have misunderstood the risk, have had little fear, have had a grand sense of omnipotence, not truly understood the consequences at a feeling level or a combination of these. They would make good war heroes because they must have had little fear in the face of a very threatening and virulent "enemy". If they happened to be smuggling in top secret information that would win the war then they would have been given the medal of highest honour in the country.

Perhaps Kid Who Kill can be of the same mindset. I know when I tried to kill myself, in particular the second time, I had not thought it through. I knew I would be dead but it didn't have any real meaning. Thus there was little 'risk' involved. I certainly was not scared or frightened as I got the gas bottle, closed the windows and so forth. The exercise was thought out and carried out in a methodical fashion. It would have been a completed suicide except for the bottle running out of gas after I had lost consciousness. It was one of those gas bottles where you could not see how much was left in it.

There was also one other thing that added to this for me and that was the robotic type of existence that I had for most of my teenage years. You exist and go through the motions of living. Related to this is a detachment and a sense of loss of contact with the world and others. Obviously if one feels this way then any threat coming from the environment one will feel detached from and will not have a sense of contact with it. Thus the fear caused by the threat will be lessened. This of course allows one to act in an effective and methodical fashion in a time where most others would be frantic and ineffective. Martin Bryant must have been like this in order to have accurately shot so many people over such a long period of time. Some of the Bali 9 may have been like this to have been able to last as long as they did without collapsing before they were identified.

Like many teenagers I was also angry, but it was repressed. I was shut down emotionally. When I have talked with 'street kids' and they say something like, "I feel like I have to burn myself with a cigarette to actually feel something", or you see them on a very cold day wearing only a t-shirt and showing no effects of the cold, I feel like I can understand why that can be. The feelings are so shut off that one does not feel the bitter cold or has to burn self in order to actually feel something.

But alas no shut down of feelings is ever perfect and it can only last for a certain period of time before it collapses in on itself. Shutting one's feelings

off is often a good short term solution to surviving considerable stress. But if one keeps them shut off sooner or later the wheels fall of the bus and the cracks start appearing. So one has to take other actions to keep the feelings away. For instance one starts to hit the grog or gets out of it on some form of drug, depression starts to appear or anxiety levels go through the roof, eating disorders, insomnia can all be a result of a very emotionally shut down person



Human or doll?

However the point at hand is that with a robotic, shut down type of mindset one feels a lack of contact with reality and thus can act effectively in 'unreal' ways. An example of that is to kill others or self. This is more so likely if there is considerable anger mixed in with these conditions. Thus one is more likely to get an act of some violence particularly when the risk is misunderstood and thus the fear of the consequences of ones actions is minimised. Hence one can get the very odd answer to the question of Why Kids Kill?, "because I don't like Mondays".