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An Understanding of How Peer, Genetic, and Environmental Influences Can Motivate Terrorists
or Ordinary People to Kill Themselves and Others.

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Suicidal ideation in America is not an unusual behavior among its population. Nearly every week, stories of people who attempt to give an end to their lives travels around the newspapers and the media. In fact, suicide is the third leading cause of death among teens in the Unites States (Balhara, Dhawan, & Natasha, 2007). However, there are more extreme cases where people's emotional instabilities are displaced to others. These highly seldom occurrences can be caused by several different factors or the combination of those. Factors can include genetic predispositions, peer and environmental influences, and even the culture a person is raised in. Shaping a person's personality, those influences have the power to not only cause harm to the person, but also to affect others. For instance, real life events like the 1999 Columbine High School massacres in Littleton, Colorado and the 2006 Dawson College incident in Montreal, Canada were mostly caused by certain persons' personality imbalances and influences from their lifetime experiences. Those very sad and disturbing events will help understand how a person's motivations are related to genetic and environmental influences.

The morning of April 20th, 1999 was not a usual day at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado. At 11 a.m., two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold arrived at school. However, their schedule for this day was not to study. Entering the school, Harris and Klebold carried two bags containing a bomb in each one of them. Putting the bomb in the cafeteria and setting it for 11:17 a.m., the two students left the school and waited for the explosion. However, no detonation occurred, so the two kids each pulled out a firearm and started to shoot at the students. After killing twelve students and one teacher and injuring 21 others, Harris and Klebold committed suicide (Clabaugh & Clabaugh, 2005).

Could genetic or hereditary traits be the cause of Harris and Klebold's behaviors? Were they destined to be psychopaths? Behavioral geneticists, scientists concerned with the genetic bases of behavior and personality traits, might argue so. Those mental experts believe that the Columbine killers had in fact showed signs of fledging or budding psychopathy (Stenson, 2009). Fledging psychopaths can show signs of psychopathy at a very early age. According to Stenson (2009), "Within a baby's first year or two, health professionals can spot signs of significant developmental disabilities, possibly even autism. And some now believe they can tell if preschoolers are showing risk factors for becoming a psychopath, someone potentially capable of committing bone-chilling crimes without an ounce of guilt or remorse" (p. 1). Some early markers like not being concerned about others' feelings or not feeling guilty about one's actions were some traits shown by Klebold and Harris. Also known as callous-unemotional (CU) traits, these features of a person's personality can predispose a person to psychopathy or emotional instability. Although Klebold and Harris might have showed CU traits in their childhood, this genetic influence is certainly not the only explanation for their insanity.

Combined with the genetic predispositions, peer and environmental pressures could certainly be a factor in the Harris and Klebold's dementia. In the aftermath of the 1999 Columbine rampage, the people of Littleton, Colorado questioned how come the parents never saw the massacre coming and criticized how they raised their sons. The people thought the parents should have known and prevented the incident. However, certain persons behave differently at home than with their friend or the world outside their house. Therefore, the parents are not to blame necessarily. In fact, when 275 freshmen were surveyed at Cornell University, the results showed that the majority of them had "secret lives" and private selves that they never revealed to their parents (Bedard & Garbarino, 2001). Similarly for Klebold and Harris, both had

a “double life.” For that reason, the parents didn’t see the incident coming. However, a more important factor played a role in that story. For several years, the duo—Harris and Klebold—was consistently bullied and hazed by other students, especially by the athletes of the school who were always favored by the school authorities. Adams & Russakoff (1999) from the Washington Post states that, “Columbine High School is a culture where initiation rituals meant upperclass wrestlers twisted the nipples of freshman wrestlers until they turned purple and tennis players sent hard volleys to younger teammates' backsides” (p.1). All of these harassments angered Harris and Klebold. The attacks of April 20th at Columbine High School were a revenge for them after all they had endured over the years. When the day of the massacre came, it was obvious that Harris and Klebold’s vengeance would target the athletes. In fact, when the duo entered the cafeteria, they screamed, “All the jocks stand up” followed by “anybody with a white hat or a shirt with a sports emblem on it is dead” (Adams & Russakoff, 1999). Peer and environmental influences was indubitably one of the major factors of their acts. However, another aspect might have played a role in their folly.

Cultural Influences are also part of your personality and traits. Those behavior and attitude characteristics of a peculiar social group can affect or even harm a person from a different social group or culture. For instance, a person might be disgruntled if you call him by his first name while others might think it’s convenient. On the other hand, some people might be offended if you call them by their last name while others might think it’s suitable. In the case of Klebold and Harris, a similar yet more extreme conflict occurred in 1991. The duo was actually part of a subculture called “Goth.” Furthermore, they had ties with an anti-clique known as the trench coat mafia (Goldberg, 1999). The Goth culture is seen as a malicious social group even though it’s generally non-violent. However, several crimes and school shootings have been

committed by persons who were part of the Goth subculture. Besides the Columbine rampage, the Dawson college shooting of 2006 in Montreal, Canada was among the school shootings that involved a Gothic killer. Just like in the previous greeting example, Harris and Klebold probably thought that the athlete clique was unethical and the athlete clique presumably thought in the same way towards the Gothic group. This culture conflict that happened in Columbine, along with genetic and environmental factors most likely caused the rampage of 1999.

In conclusion, killers' mind and their motivations are very complex and puzzling to grasp because it involves a myriad of elements. The genetic, environmental and culture influences are very broad so they can give us a general answer as to why certain people act in a specific way. However, we can ascertain that the combination of those factors were responsible for the Columbine rampage on April 20th of 2009. Now that we understand why they acquired such a personality and behavior, hopefully we will be able to better identify, predict, and most importantly prevent this type of incident.

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