The Virginia Tech Massacre as a Starting Point for Threat Assessment Programs in European Universities

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The Virginia Tech mass murder shocked not only U.S. academics but also academics across Europe. The event simultaneously opened the door for violence prevention as an important issue for universities across Europe and became a slow-burning catalyst with step-by-step threat assessment programs developed in several European countries. In contrast to the United States, until recently there have been no reports of mass murder cases in Central Europe. Therefore, most threat assessment programs do not focus on the prevention of lethal violence as their main activity. Instead, they primarily address incidents of stalking, threatening communications, and other forms of behavior of concern that are then identified and managed by local threat assessment teams.

Keywords: campus threat assessment, violence prevention, stalking, mass murder

The idea that acts of mass murder could happen in a university setting seemed for many decades to be almost unthinkable in Europe. Higher education was seen as something sublime and beyond violence and other destructive agendas. In most European countries, programs that focused on prevention of physical violence had for a long time been virtually absent in the academic world.

This illusion of invulnerability was shattered in 2007 when the Virginia Tech shooting dominated international news. Especially in German-speaking countries, namely Germany and Switzerland, many universities developed a fear that an attack like that could occur on our campuses. This insecurity was compounded by shootings that occurred in secondary schools in Germany. Starting in 1999, more than 40 students, teachers, school staff, and police officers died as a result of targeted violence in German schools (Böckler, Seeger, Sitzer, & Heitmeyer, 2013; Hoffmann & Roshdi, 2013). Germany

has as a result the second highest number of victims worldwide of targeted lethal violence in secondary schools, followed in Europe by Finland (Oksanen, Räsänen, & Nurmi, 2012). This was especially surprising as in most countries in Central Europe gun access is strictly regulated, making it difficult for most citizens to obtain a firearm. Against this background the fear arose that such cases might stimulate similar forms of targeted violence in universities as a copycat effect. With this fear, and the publicity of the Virginia Tech massacre in Europe, working groups were hastily formed in a number of institutions of higher education in Europe. They called themselves names such as "Amok Prevention Groups" and were initially plagued by confusion between concepts such as crisis management, self-defense, evacuation plans, and verbal de-escalation. The threat assessment and management approach was, at that time, barely known in the academic world in Europe.

In Germany, the University of Darmstadt had a partnership with Virginia Tech, which intensified the shock felt as a result of the shooting. Understandably, academics worried about their colleagues, including those seconded from Darmstadt to Virginia Tech. At the time of the massacre the author of this paper was affiliated with the University of Darmstadt and was consulted about an appropriate response. This was accepted with the University of Darmstadt becoming the first European university to create a

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threat assessment program. At the same time the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich also formed a threat assessment program and both institutions were exchanging their concepts (Hoffmann & Timmel Zamboni, 2014).

Targeted Violence at European Universities

Mass homicide events in European universities are comparatively rare, resulting in less research being published in this area from Europe. Contrasting this, between 1900 and 2008 one study identified 272 cases of lethal or potentially lethal campus attacks in the United States (Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010). During those incidents, 281 individuals died and 247 were injured.

One available European study, although much smaller in scope, focused on international rampage killings at universities where a student or former student was the attacker (Rau, Fegert, Hoffmann, & Allroggen, 2013). In the 12 incidents that were identified by the researchers in the decade from 2002 to 2012, 69 individuals died and more than 67 were wounded. The majority of the cases (58%) occurred in the United States with 51 total fatalities, 32 of whom were victims of the mass murder at Virginia Tech. During the same period, three incidents (25%) took place in Central Europe with three people being killed and at least nine being wounded.

Another study analyzed 45 incidents of lethal or potentially lethal violence in institutes of higher education throughout the world (Bondü & Beier, 2015). The time frame was ranging from 1930 to 2012. Only eight of the assaults (18%) happened in Europe and three fourths (76%) in the United States. Most of the offenders (80%) were current students at the educational institution concerned. In three cases the offender was female (7%). In 87% firearms were used. The attacks caused 118 fatalities and 118 injured; 38% of the offenders committed suicide after the attack. All cases in institutes of higher education were committed by single offenders.

Although no mass murder incidents at universities in Central Europe have been reported, there are homicides that repeat typical patterns of violence that also occur outside of the campus settings. The particulars of these cases are provided below.

Shooting

In 2009 a 23-year-old pharmacology student at the University of Pécs in Hungary opened fire inside the biophysics research institute. He killed a 19-year-old student and three others were wounded in the attack. He had been a member in a shooting club. Other students reported that he had behaved strangely in the time before the attack and had a history of not getting along well with others at his university.

Intimate Partner Homicide

In 2009 in Darmstadt, Germany at the University of Applied Science a 24-year-old student stabbed his former girlfriend in front of numerous other students. He had threatened and assaulted her several times before the murder. His previous threats included the statement: "If I cannot have her, no one should have her."

Lethal Attack With a Knife

In 2010 a 26-year-old Chinese student stabbed to death a 49-year-old secretary and wounded three bystanders, one of them seriously, at a university in the French town of Perpignan. The attacker had been hospitalized before in a psychiatric ward. He had also threatened other students in the time before the attack.

Failed Mass Murder

In 2012 in the Polish town of Krakow a university chemistry lecturer was arrested by police. He was an admirer of the Norwegian mass murderer and right wing extremist Anders Breivik, who had killed 77 people the year before in a mass homicide event. The police found several tons of explosives, detonators and a pistol. The lecturer was convinced that foreigners ran Poland and therefore the government and the president needed to be assassinated. Students had become alarmed by their lecturer's comments about the need to remove the government. The lecturer said he belonged to a nationalistic, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic movement. Police revealed after his arrest he had already blown up 250 kg of explosives in a number of tests around Poland. A former neighbor reported that he had always played with explosives, and had lost some fingers to an explosion when he was young.

These cases illustrate the concept of warning behaviors, that is, behaviors that have been found to indicate risk of violence in cases of targeted and planned violence (Hoffmann & Roshdi, 2015; Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldimann, & James, 2012). The cases show that examining warning behaviors in cases of targeted violence on university campuses may also have merit, although the empirical research is not well advanced (Mohandie, 2014; Van Brunt, 2012). These four short case studies from Europe also support this notion. They are cases that may not be well known in the academic world both within and beyond Europe. Professionals in universities are even less aware that warning signs occur and often precede violent events. With the increase of violence-prevention programs this awareness will hopefully raise and warning behaviors will be recognized as opportunities for early intervention and violence prevention.

Stalking and Other Forms of Threatening and Problematic Behaviors

In recent times there has been a focus on the more commonly occurring forms of aggressive behaviors at European institutions of higher education. This has included research studies that focus on nonlethal forms of campus violence. For example, a study at the German University of Bochum found that 13% of female students had been victims of stalking during their time of studying (Schneider, List, & Höfker, 2012). With the limited time period being a student, this victimization rate is substantially higher than in the general population. Similar findings have emerged from an Italian study of female students being stalked (Maran, Zedda, Varetto, & Munari, 2014) as well as a Finnish study (Björklund, Häkkänen-Nyholm, Sheridan, & Roberts, 2010).

An anonymous survey at a German university found 19% of students had been confronted directly or indirectly with problem behaviors during their time at university (Hoffmann & Blass, 2012). The most frequent problem behavior was stalking reported by 23% of the affected students and staff. More than half of the respondents (58%) stated they felt unsecure or fearful when entering the campus as a consequence of being stalked. One third (37%) noticed as a result of their stalking victimization a decline in their academic performance. In 38% of cases the stalker was a stranger, in 10% a classmate, and in 24% a former sexual partner. The stalking lasted less than 1 month in 26% of the cases and in 21% it persisted longer than 1 year.

The second most frequent problem behavior was threats of violence (Hoffmann & Blass, 2012). Eighteen percent of the sample reported being either threatened personally or were bystanders during their time at university. The vast majority (88%) had been exposed to verbal threats, 18% to electronic threats, and 6% to pen and paper threats. Those being victimized by threats of violence reported as a consequence that they felt unsecure at the university (28%), had sleeping problems (11%), and difficulty concentrating (11%).

The German study (Hoffmann & Blass, 2012) also revealed that distressed students and staff threatened to hurt themselves. Here 13% of all student or staff respondents reported having been in contact with someone from the university who spoke about committing suicide. This was in most cases a fellow student (46%), in 31% a colleague, in 8% a former sexual partner, and in 4% a stranger who they met at the university but did not know. Only one third (35%) of those who had been aware of the suicidal indications established contact with a professional. The others said they did not know where to go (27%), were worried about negative consequences for the person who spoke about suicide (20%), or were afraid not to be taken seriously (13%).

Physical violence was also present. A minority (7%) reported to be physically attacked at the university, with more than half being injured. A feeling of fear at the campus, sleeping disturbances, and depressiveness were common responses of such an experience.

For some universities in Europe there is still no awareness that harassment, threats, stalking, and other problem behavior occur in the academic world. However, the cases of severe violence described above and surveys have highlighted the extent to which aggression and violence does, in fact, occur in European universities. These data have proven helpful in encouraging stakeholders to adopt a threat-assessment approach. For those who have been resistant, surveys in their own universities have raised sufficient awareness to understand the need and provide clarity about what was occur-

ring, to their astonishment, on local campuses. With education about campus threat management and its applicability to nonlethal forms of targeted violence such as stalking, the approach is increasingly accepted in Europe as a way to identify, assess, and manage less dramatic forms of possible preincident behaviors (Hollister & Scalora, 2015), some of which may escalate into more severe forms of violence if not managed properly.

Threat Assessment Programs at European Universities

As lethal violence in an academic context is rare in Europe, most threat assessment programs do not have campus shootings or other forms of lethal violence as their main focus. Nevertheless, the systematic campus threat management approach that was first developed in the United States (Deisinger, Randazzo, O'Neill, & Savage, 2008; Deisinger, Randazzo, & Nolan, 2014; White & Meloy, 2016) has been adapted by a number of institutions of higher education in European countries such as Switzerland, Germany, and Austria.

Specifically, in the German context the development of TAM (threat assessment and management) was boosted by the state-funded Institute for the Development of Universities adopting this approach. This institute is a basic educational provider for institutions of higher education and has a very good reputation. As it picked up and promoted threat assessment this was the catalyst for universities to take a closer look at this approach and take it seriously. Also, the growing fear of radicalism, terrorism, and amok played a role in academic institutions becoming more open minded about such an approach. This was a total contrast to the past where there was a feeling of moral superiority at universities that was based on the presumption that no violence could take place. The result of this shift in thinking is that TAM programs have become a desirable entity for universities, something unimaginable only few years ago. This change has included some structured procedures that have established the quality standards for setting up a threat assessment program at universities in German-speaking countries in Europe (Hoffmann & Timmel Zamboni, 2014).

Forming the TAM Team

Members of the core TAM team in German-speaking universities typically come from departments such as human resources, psychological and counseling services, the legal department, and student affairs. The university directorate also plays an important role, but it is not necessary integrated operationally in all casework. As security professionals are not standard in European universities it is not always possible to have this expertise automatically in the TAM team. It may also be a strategy to avoid including in-house academic researchers into the casework since they often offer extensive knowledge on theoretical aspects of violence, but have never actively been involved in hands-on interventions. The core team needs training from experienced threat assessment experts, learning more about TAM concepts and practical casework.

Formulating a Mission Statement

Campus threat management does not only deal with the prevention of physical violence, but more often with prevention of threatening behaviors that often create fear. Promoting a clearly worded statement in the university community is therefore an important step in the establishment of a TAM process. Also, it should be outlined that universities have been encouraged to protect the mental health and the feeling of security that can be undermined by threatening behavior. Here is an example from the Swiss university ETH Zurich:

> The safety of all employees and students is an important priority for ETH Zurich. No one should be afraid of becoming a target for violence, threats or stalking, and no one should feel that they are alone if something like that does happen to them. This is why a team for Threat Management has been created under the leadership of the Office for Safety, Health and the Environment (SGU). The aim of Threat Management is to ensure a university that is safe and free of violence for all members of ETH Zurich. It helps people who find themselves in disturbing threat situations. It advises them on what to do, and helps them to find solutions. It is made up of members of the Office for Safety, Security, Health and the Environment, the Human Resources Department, the Universities' Counseling Service, the Rectorate, the Legal Service and Corporate Communications. The group regularly consults an outside expert in violence prevention strategies.

Creating Awareness

Often students and staff at universities who have recognized behavior of concern do not know what to do and whom to call. An important issue is therefore awareness raising and a clear message to all members of the university community promoting awareness of whom to contact when this happens. This is difficult because in a university environment the turnover is often high, not only because of new members joining the university or others leaving it, but also because functions in the academic field and the administration change from time to time. One important duty of the TAM team is therefore to continuously inform and disseminate information about the team, what to report, and whom to contact.

Internal Network

Setting up an internal network of staff well trained in recognizing problem behavior and to act as the "eyes and ears" of the university is critical. The department heads, heads of certain areas, equal opportunities officers, housing agencies, specialist societies, janitors, institute secretaries, social counseling offices and many more need to be considered. The staff turnover at a university is often high, which means that constant information and awareness raising is needed. The TAM team can only do its job if it receives information about people who possibly pose a risk. It is important to inform as many members of the University as possible about the TAM team. Many universities in Europe have a large number of buildings scattered across town instead of a dedicated campus. Recognizing who might be the "eyes and ears" on site is central to establishing a TAM team. These groups of people must be supplied with information so that they know what they need to report and to whom. They have to be able to trust that their information will be treated confidentially, the issue will be dealt with, and they will receive feedback on what happens.

External Network

The interaction of the TAM team with external entities such as the police, the psychiatric services, and the judiciary is critical to the good running of threat management. The police are a particularly important contact as universities in Europe usually do not have their own campus police. It makes sense to install a regular exchange with the local police, whether in workshops on TAM that the university can organize or within the scope of managing specific cases. Inviting the police to TAM team meetings has become a good strategy to reinforce cooperation and common understanding. In order to establish this kind of collaboration, it has proven to be helpful if the university management also contacts the police command directly at the beginning of the process to underscore the importance of collaborating. If there are regular exchanges between the police and the university, this creates an important interface for the TAM process. Also the possibilities and boundaries of the legal system are important to know and need to be explained to people affected by problem behavior within the university. Psychiatric facilities also play an important role within external networks. When people who exhibit threatening behavior also suffer from mental disorders, psychiatric intervention is helpful to reduce aggression and violence risk precipitated by their state of mind.

Conclusion

The mass homicide at Virginia Tech has had a ripple effect across the globe, to which Europe was not immune. The European effect was to start something new, namely the beginning of professional violence prevention in the academic sector and in particular the set-up of threat assessment programs at universities.

At this stage, European nations, and in particular the German-speaking nations, have adopted threat management practices but have much to do to consolidate this as standard practice. The future will hopefully include more interest in advanced trainings and recognition of TAM teams as a critical part of the risk management infrastructure in academic settings. Still some universities go the first steps only and then languish. Also the use of professional risk and threat-assessment instruments could be more prevalent for universities. On the positive side we see a rising interest in the AETAP (Association of European Threat Assessment Professionals) certification criteria for organizations, which may help to establish more professional threat assessment and management standards in the European academic system.

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