

## Nova Scotia mass killer should be subjected to psychological autopsy: experts

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HALIFAX — As the RCMP investigate the case of the Nova Scotia gunman who killed 22 people during a 13-hour rampage last month, a key question remains unanswered: Why?

The Mounties have said little about possible motives behind one of the worst mass killings in Canadian history. But experts say police could use an unusual tool to help them find answers.

It's called a psychological autopsy — an investigative technique that goes well beyond regular forensic analysis.

When asked if this approach was an option for the RCMP, spokeswoman Cpl. Jennifer Clarke said the Mounties would be providing an update on their investigation as early as today.

“That is something that we would like to address,” she said in an emailed statement. “We are considering every tool at our disposal.”

In use since the 1950s, psychological autopsies are most often used to learn why individuals take their own lives. But these in-depth studies can also help unravel the motives of killers, including suicide bombers.

“These are much more than police inquiries,” said Antoon Leenaars, author of the 2017 book “The Psychological Autopsy” and a clinical and forensic psychologist based in Windsor, Ont. “They are investigations of the mind.”

The probes involve extensive interviews with family, friends and co-workers of the individual in question. They also examine personal documents, email and any record that could reveal the reasons underlying the tragedy.

The goal is to build a psychological profile beyond what police are capable of assembling and shed light on what motivates homicidal or suicidal people.

“These are in-depth interviews, but they are done by people who are trained in psychology or psychiatry,” said Leenaars, who has conducted research in 35 countries and studied under a pioneer in the field, the late Edwin Shneidman, at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Leenaars used the technique in 2007 after police in London, Ont., investigated the deaths of two London Police Service colleagues.

On June 7, 2007, acting Insp. Kelly Johnson and retired superintendent David Lucio were found badly injured in a van that had crashed into Johnson’s apartment building, and both later died from gunshot wounds. A police investigation revealed Johnson had shot Lucio before taking her own life.

Leading a team of experts, Leenaars’ psychological autopsy found that Johnson was under an immense amount of stress following her mother’s death and the breakup of her extramarital relationship with Lucio.

The report included telling details about the demise of their relationship and her alcohol abuse, but it found no evidence of domestic abuse. Emails from Johnson reflected “emotionality, narrow thinking and other indicators of suicidal ideation.”

The team concluded the deaths were neither predictable nor preventable by the London Police Service or other individuals, mainly because Johnson concealed her problems from others.

Leenaars said a psychological autopsy of the gunman in the Nova Scotia case would begin to answer some questions about why he killed so many people — some he knew, others he didn’t — on April 18 and April 19.

“Given what this was designed for, I think this would be a perfect situation .... That evidence can be extremely helpful in terms of trying to understand what happened.”

Simon Sherry, a professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax, said a psychological autopsy could put an end to unchecked speculation about the killer’s motives.

“Many are calling for a public inquiry and I understand and I support that, but someone should also be conducting a psychological autopsy to help understand why this occurred,” he said in a recent interview.

“So much speculation occurs according to pre-existing scripts, which often boil down to some sort of aberrant, mentally ill person who just snapped.”

Once the motives have been clarified, recommendations for preventing such tragedies can be drafted, he said.

Last week, a senior Mountie confirmed the Nova Scotia gunman — wearing an RCMP uniform and driving a replica RCMP vehicle — was armed with several semi-automatic handguns and two semi-automatic rifles when he killed 13 people in Portapique, N.S., on April 18 and another nine people the following day in several other communities.

His victims included an RCMP officer, two nurses, two correctional officers, a family of three, a teacher and some of his neighbours in Portapique.

A Mountie fatally shot 51-year-old Gabriel Wortman at a gas station in Enfield, N.S., about 90 kilometres south of Portapique on the morning of April 19.

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