

# **“Empty Vessels: A New Dimension to Assessing Violence Potential in High-Risk Youth”**

*Originally prepared for and presented to:  
The British Columbia Association of School Psychologists  
November 6, 2002*

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It is commonly understood that the best predictor of future violence is past violent behaviour. However, there are two problems with the above formula when related to the new wave of high profile violence and threats of violence occurring in American and Canadian schools, such as the tragic school shootings in Littleton, Colorado and Taber, Alberta. Firstly, the definition of violence is very broad and includes descriptors such as “great force and intensity”; “excessive force”; “harmful or unlawful use of strength”; “roughness or brute force” and many others. Although using an individual's past violent behaviour to predict frequency, intensity, and type of future violence can be useful, many people engage in violent behaviour and yet never come close to becoming murderers. Secondly, many of the students who have turned guns and knives on their peers had no history of violence prior to becoming murderers. (See “The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative, (2002) United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education).

Following the 1999 school shooting in Taber, Alberta<sup>1</sup> we were forced to find answers to how “good kids” become murderers. Not just because we experienced it in “our own backyard” but also because we were left dealing with multiple threat-makers in the aftermath of the shootings in Littleton and Taber. An experience that we later learned was common to most school jurisdictions across North America.

The concept of “empty vessels” first came into use as we noticed the dramatic lack of connection many of our threat makers and almost all of our school shooters<sup>2</sup> had to healthy mature adults and their lack of clear identity, place, and purpose. Their parental and other adult relationships were often marked by extremes on a continuum from neglect to over-involvement. Some experiencing both extremes at different times and others experiencing predominately one or the other. In 1999 the FBI released a monograph titled “The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective”. In it they introduce a four-pronged assessment model that includes 1) personality of the student;

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Cameron was the team leader for the Taber Crisis Response Team and subsequently one of the members of the Alberta Government Taber Response Project. The views provided in this paper are those of the author and do not represent an official viewpoint of the Government of Alberta.

<sup>2</sup> One result of Kevin Cameron's role as team leader in the Taber incident is the open lines of communication that now exist between him and several colleagues throughout the United States whose communities have likewise been affected by school shootings.

2) school dynamics; 3) family dynamics, and 4) social dynamics. In conducting threat assessments we are now interested in how much our threat makers are influenced by these dynamics in what we refer to as “contextual assessments” (i.e. what factors outside the individual may be contributing to elevating violence potential?). One of these dynamics, family patterns and relationships, seem to contribute to what some family therapists refer to as “other-validated” individuals: individuals highly influenced by context.

A recognized pioneer in the family therapy movement, Dr. Murray Bowen and his colleague Dr. Michael Kerr in “Family Evaluation” (1988) described the other-validated person this way:

People at this level are so immersed in a feeling world that they are mostly unaware of an alternative. Major life decisions are based on what feels right. They are so responsive to others’ opinions and to what others want them to do that their functioning is almost totally governed by their emotional reactions to the environment. Responses can range from automatic compliance to extreme oppositional behaviour. The “self” is so poorly developed that use of the pronoun “I” is confined to narcissistic pronouncements such as “I want, I hurt, I want my rights”.... The lack of self is usually manifested in being complete emotional appendages of the relationship systems to which they are attached. They reflexively adapt to alleviate others’ discomforts. On the other hand, very poorly differentiated people, if stressed sufficiently, may murderously strike out at others, particularly at those on whom they are most dependent (pg. 101).

Empty vessels appear to be highly other-validated and this has become one of many concepts used in the search to understand how some children can strike out with such generalized homicidal intent. If the empty vessel is currently exposed to healthy human connections he or she can be stabilized but if connections are not healthy neither is the empty vessel.

Two related concepts come into play when assessing threat makers. The first is referred to as the “primary emotional system”. In a high-risk students life, the primary emotional system is the human system influencing them the most. The term “human system” refers to the intense emotional dynamics generated by human structures such as family systems, peer group systems and school systems. Therefore, the primary emotional system is whatever human system is contributing most to the threat makers’ symptom development. In assessing these systems we sometimes see family dynamics playing the largest role in moving a student towards more violent thinking and behaving and at other times it appears to be peer dynamics or broader school dynamics.

A second related concept is the “secondary emotional system” which is important to the threat makers functioning but secondary in emotional influence. The family system is always either the primary or secondary emotional system with peer,

school, and other systems vying for the remaining emotional system of influence. A key question then, in assessing empty vessels, is what emotional system seems to be contributing the most to the students “justification process” for moving on a course towards violent behaviour? Is the student being bullied at school or abused at home? Is the student under unreasonable pressure from home to achieve and is now weighed down by failures he or she is keeping secret from parents? Or, did he or she lose a close friend to suicide and is now confronted with a traumatically closed school dynamic that suppresses emotional pain but elevates other high risk symptoms as a result? When multiple factors are present the risk may increase substantially. A student whose primary emotional system is a family where they are being physically abused by an older sibling while parents turn a blind eye may have an even greater risk of acting out against home or school if they are also being physically abused at school (secondary emotional system) and believe the “staff” are likewise turning a blind eye. This is referred to as a “parallel process” which means the same dynamic is influencing an individual in two separate human systems (e.g. home and school). When neither system is a stabilizing force, violence potential is increased.

As the empty vessel becomes less and less connected to healthy human systems they start to look elsewhere in search of people or things to be identified with. These students are experiencing significant emotional pain as they look for identification of meaning in self. Some end up identifying with the aggressors in their lives and others begin to identify with those more publicly infamous: our school shooters. When this happens, these empty vessels draw content from high profile violence that they can identify with that differs from that of other students. The student considering an attack against their school may view attackers from other incidents of school violence as “lame” or “pathetic”. Their reason for this critique is that in their opinion the numbers of dead were too low. They may see themselves as taking far more people “out” when they launch an attack. They also give us a further clue to their own emotional pain when the high-risk student concludes their critique with “and I can’t believe they didn’t kill themselves afterwards”. This last comment is important because the majority of school shooters were suicidal. The same is holding true for the majority of threat makers who have come to our attention. Although most threat makers do not pose a risk to others they often are students experiencing intense emotional pain.

When students reach the point of identification with other aggressors, the concept of an empty vessel becomes more clear in its relevance to threat assessment. In the assessment process the question becomes, “what is the empty vessel filling themselves up with?” Students moving rapidly towards committing serious school violence are filling themselves up with a variety of things from violent books and video games to personal stories and drawings depicting their building anger and desperation. Their Internet journeys reflect themes of violence and hatred, as well, and they always tell someone what they are planning. They always become threat makers before carrying out a plan. In many cases of completed homicide we believe the threats were an attempt to draw attention to their intensifying

desperation. Although it is a double-edged sword, the good news with empty vessels is that they are highly influenced by context and thus responding to their threat making behaviour can create a new context to decrease their risk if we do it right!