'I will force myself to believe that everyone is just another monster from doom': A corpus stylistic analysis of agency in pre-massacre narratives

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The language of culpability in criminal accounts elucidates the moral struggle of offenders and may indicate the likelihood of them offending again. While agency has been analysed in offenders' accounts of past crimes (O'Connor, 2000; Presser, 2004), little research has been carried out into how criminals navigate their responsibility in texts written preceding crime. This paper aims to offer insights into transitions in the agency of criminals before they commit crimes and challenge existing assumptions concerning the link between a sense of agency and transgression.

In the criminal justice system, offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and acknowledge the impact of their offences on others. This is based on the premise that taking responsibility will encourage desistance and change behaviour. O'Connor (2000) suggests that using more agentive language encourages an offender to take responsibility and may reduce the chance of them reoffending. However, there is some evidence (e.g. McKendy, 2006) that offenders need to explore their own victim role before they can change their behaviour. An analysis of the language of offenders in the midst of their preparations *before* a crime therefore offers us a unique insight into how they position themselves and others in relation to their current and future actions, without the responsibility imposed on them by the criminal justice system or the benefit of hindsight, and contributes to the debate around the link between responsibility and desistance.

Agentive language has been discussed widely in relation to the use of the passive or nominalisations (Fairclough, 2001), disengaged lexis and pronouns (O'Connor, 2000), reported speech (Schiffrin, 1996) and representational choices such as the objectivation of actions and the deagentialization of actors (van Leeuwen, 1996). However, measuring levels of agency is problematic (Ahearn, 2001) because it assumes that agency is dichotomous and also implies that we can be certain of the reasons for the use of a certain structure or phrase. Alternatively, exploring categories of agency allows us to examine how offenders present their crimes and the different elements of it (e.g. the victims, the condemners, the agent, the weapon), and what they do with their agency (e.g. sharing it with others, using virtual agency or lending agency to natural phenomena).

This study uses a corpus stylistic approach to investigate the language of responsibility in pre-crime narratives written by mass murderers. The corpus consists of diaries and manifestos, and vlogs (video blogs) written in English by five high profile perpetrators (see table 1) in the months and years leading up to their massacres. All of the offenders being studied acted without the organisation of a wider terrorist group and with minimal help from others. The actions of such perpetrators are difficult to prevent or predict ahead of time because their profiles and behaviour before they commit crimes are not necessarily distinctive (Gill et al., 2014) and therefore any insight into their state of mind prior to their offences will add to research aimed at understanding and preventing such attacks.

Table 1. Corpus of Pre-Massacre Narratives

Anders Breivik	Oslo bomb and Utoya massacre 2011	Manifesto: 81,230 words
Eric Harris	Columbine shooting 1999	Diary: 6647 words
Dylan Klebold	Columbine shooting 1999	Diary: 5840 words
Elliot Rodger	West Coast US massacre of women 2014	Manifesto: 107,958 words + 8 video diaries.
Sebastian Bosse	German school shooting 2006	Diary Entries: 1906 words Online Journal: 5170 words

The corpus stylistic approach has traditionally been applied to fiction (e.g. Mahlberg, 2007) and uses corpus techniques to identify variations in style within or between texts. However, Hunt and Carter (2012) suggest that the same techniques can be applied to non-fiction texts and may elucidate the world view of a narrator by revealing patterns of language. In this study, after dividing the corpus for each perpetrator into sub-corpora of key events, variation in the language of the perpetrators is diachronically analysed by looking at key words, phrases and concepts, and their collocation networks in each sub-corpus. This allows us to explore the way in which each offender moves linguistically between different categories of agency over the years and months leading up to their crimes. These categories relate to constancy of the self over time, to what extent they consider themselves to be the same or different to others, and whether they present themselves as able to act on the world or controlled by it (Bamberg, 2011). The results demonstrate that changes in their sense of agency do not necessarily align with existing assumptions relating to crime and responsibility.

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