

# Suicide by mass murder: Masculinity, aggrieved entitlement, and rampage school shootings

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## **ABSTRACT**

*School shootings have become more common in the United States in recent years. Yet, as media portrayals of these ‘rampages’ shock the public, the characterisation of this violence obscures an important point: many of these crimes culminate in suicide, and they are almost universally committed by males. We examine three recent American cases, which involve suicide, to elucidate how the culture of hegemonic masculinity in the US creates a sense of aggrieved entitlement conducive to violence. This sense of entitlement simultaneously frames suicide as an appropriate, instrumental behaviour for these males to underscore their violent enactment of masculinity.*

**KEYWORDS:** sociology; masculinity; mass murder; suicide; school shootings

*We just want for you to understand. We just couldn't let them keep doing that shit to us anymore.* – a would-be school shooter in William Mastrosimone's 'Bang Bang, You're Dead'<sup>1</sup>.

Over the past three decades, the United States has witnessed nearly 30 'rampage' school shootings in which a student (or students) opens fire on classmates and teachers, seemingly at random (see Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Newman et al. 2004). Many of these crimes culminate in the shooter's suicide, perhaps as an avenue to avoid prosecution, possibly as part of a premeditated plan, or perhaps as a combination of both. Efforts to understand these seemingly senseless acts have ranged from the

overly psychological assertions of serious mental illness to Pavlovian responses to violent video games or Goth music or the internet. Some American conservative commentators blamed an overly permissive 1960s saturated culture, the teaching of evolution and 'working mothers who take birth control pills' (Sowell 2007; The Nation 1999). Others on the left claimed it was the more constraining restrictions of homogenous, evangelical jockocracies (see Larkin 2008).

The school shootings since 1982 represented a departure from lethal school violence in prior years. Before 1982, school shootings were more typically carried out by a young black male, in an inner city school, using a handgun, who selected his targets specifically to avenge a

<sup>1</sup> This film is based on a play meant to draw attention to the problem of school shootings in the US. Ironically, the play premiered on April 7, 1999, in Eugene, Oregon. This is less than two weeks *before* the shooting at Columbine High School.

specific event. This pattern, plus the decline of the crack epidemic, led to three reforms that greatly reduced accounts of lethal school violence: metal detectors in schools, armed security personnel in inner city schools, and new statistical techniques that limited the category of ‘school shooting’ to shootings that happened on school grounds or within the school. (Given the armed security personnel and metal detectors, it became far easier to wait off school property to exact one’s revenge, which might get counted as a violent crime, but, since it was off school property, was not counted as a ‘school’ shooting.)

Since 1982, the scene has shifted to the suburbs and rural areas (28 of 30 cases), where a white boy (or boys) brings semi-automatic rifles or assault weapons to school and opens fire seemingly at random. (We say ‘seemingly’ because in several cases, there were some individuals who were specifically targeted among the others.) Thus did the names Michael Carneal, Barry Loukaitis, Luke Woodham, Evan Ramsay, Kip Kinkel, and others become known to Americans<sup>2</sup>. There are similar cases from Europe as well: in March 2009, in Winnenden, Germany, Tim Kretschmer killed a number of students and teachers before killing himself; in April 2002, in Erfurt, Germany, a 19-year-old expelled student killed 17 and himself; and in March 2000, in Brannenburg, Bavaria, a 16-year-old student shot a teacher and then himself.

In this theoretical essay, we examine school shootings that culminate in the suicide of the assailant(s). We do so to elucidate how the culture of hegemonic masculinity available to young American men encourages the use of violence to avenge a perceived challenge to their masculine identity. When these attacks to one’s masculine identity affect someone to

the point of suicidal ideation, committing mass murder can be an instrumental way to achieve a sense of power; and framing one’s suicide with violence and aggression may serve to make it appear a more potent act. We begin with a brief description of the three most recent – and most horrific – American cases. We then turn to some of the similarities and differences between these cases and previous rampage school shootings. We follow this with a review of the literature on the ‘gender’ of suicide, and finally analyse our findings concerning the media coverage of these cases.

### THREE CASES: COLUMBINE, VIRGINIA TECH, AND NORTHERN ILLINOIS

The rampage at Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado, sent such a shockwave through American society that it has now become a synonym for rampage school shootings in general, the point of reference for virtually all subsequent perpetrators. Almost weekly, we read of a student who threatens to ‘pull a Columbine’.

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold brought a variety of weapons to their high school and proceeded to walk through the school, shooting whomever they found. Students were terrified and tried to hide. Many students who could not hide begged for their lives. The entire school was held under siege until the police secured the building.

In the videotape made the night before the shootings, Harris says ‘People constantly make fun of my face, my hair, my shirts’. Klebold adds ‘I’m going to kill you all. You’ve been giving us shit for years’. As they began their shooting spree, a group of girls asked Harris and Klebold ‘Why are you doing this?’ They replied: ‘We’ve always wanted to do this. This is payback. We’ve dreamed of doing this for years. This is for all

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that only when white boys began to open fire in their schools did psychologists and journalists rush to diagnosis of mental illness. Apparently, urban black youth who open fire in their schools are being ‘rational’, while suburban white boys require significant psychological analysis.

the shit you put us through. This is what you deserve' (cited in Larkin 2008:6).

Nearly 8 years later, almost to the day, on April 16, 2007, Cho Seung-Hui began his murderous spree at Virginia Tech, a university known for overachieving students and an inescapable sense of school pride. In the early morning, he shot two students in a dormitory, returned to his room, changed his bloody clothes, deleted his email and removed the hard drive from his computer, and mailed a package of videotapes to NBC News. Over 2 hours later, he walked into Norris Hall, an engineering classroom building, and walked methodically through the second floor, entering classrooms, shooting first the professors and then the students. When he was done, less than 15 minutes later, 32 people were dead, 17 more injured. He then took his own life.

On the afternoon of February 14, 2008, Steven Kazmierczak entered a large lecture hall at Northern Illinois University where he had been a graduate student in sociology. He stood on the stage and fired into the crowd. Twenty-four people were shot, six died, including Kazmierczak, who killed himself before the police arrived.

These three school shootings share several characteristics that mark them as typical of the contemporary rampage. All the perpetrators were males, all were students in the rural or suburban schools they terrorised, and all evinced a self-justifying sense of righteousness to their actions. These characteristics conform to the pattern established by the other cases.

Yet the differences are telling as well. First, these perpetrators were significantly older than the earlier perpetrators; indeed, two of these events took place at Universities: Harris was 18 and Klebold was 17, both high school seniors; Cho was 23 and Kazmierczak was 27. The average age of the perpetrators in the other cases was 14.7, and the modal age was 15. (Of the more recent American cases, for example, consider 16-year old Evan Ramsay, from Bethel,

Alaska; 16-year old Luke Woodham, from Pearl, Mississippi; 14-year old Michael Carneal, from Paducah, Kentucky; 11-year old Andrew Golden and 13-year old Mitchell Johnson, from Jonesboro, Arkansas; and 15-year old Kip Kinkel, from Springfield, Oregon).

Second, these perpetrators cut a far wider swath in their rampage. Klebold and Harris murdered 12 of their classmates and a teacher and wounded 21 others in the worst school shooting in an American high school in history. Cho left 32 students and teachers dead, and 17 more injured in the worst peacetime shooting of any kind in American history; and Kazmierczak murdered five students and injured 18 more in the nation's fourth most-deadly university shooting.

And third – and most important for this essay – they killed themselves. These three terrible events were all homicide-suicides. It is impossible to determine whether the suicide was planned (we know it was planned for Klebold and Harris, and it appears to have been for all three), but it is clear that suicide and homicide were linked in all the perpetrators' minds. For Klebold and Harris, the suicide appeared to be the final act in their plan, as evidenced by their suicide notes (Larkin 2008), and based on the actions of Cho and Kazmierczak prior to the shootings, it appears their suicides were pre-planned as well. They knew police would intervene, and they took their own lives, possibly to avoid prosecution. Analogous to 'suicide by cop' – in which someone decides to commit suicide by committing a violent felony and resists arrest, expecting to be shot by the police (who, unfortunately, usually oblige) – the school shootings at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Northern Illinois all seem to be cases of what we can call suicide by mass murder.

In the remainder of this essay, we examine these three cases of 'suicide by mass murder'. We argue that the similarities with other suburban rampage shooters are, in the end, more

telling than these differences. Or, better put, that the similarities of both form and content are necessary to an adequate explanation of the differences.

For the purposes of this essay, we sidestep psychologically reductionist arguments about the mental health of the perpetrators. For the sake of argument, let's grant journalist David Cullen's (2009) claim that Klebold and Harris were seriously psychologically disturbed. It is equally clear that Cho was diagnosed as mentally ill, and that Kazmierczak had also had a long history of mental illness. (That such decidedly disturbed young men managed to fool everyone who ever came into contact with them as they glided under the radar of every parent, teacher, administrator and guidance counsellor offers a seemingly unintentional indictment of our entire school system and mental health system, but it doesn't explain them as 'types' only as existentially unique cases.)

The sociology of these school shootings need not ignore individual pathology. It contextualises it. To ignore the categories they share – all were boys, all but one were white, all but two were suburban or rural – is to lose sense of the forest in which these boys were lost, although we may be offered instead a very good idea of the feel of the twig. Race, region, religion – all these and more shape the social context in which school shootings take place.

There are discernible patterns among all the school shooters, and a group sociological profile of those young boys sheds a different sort of light on the problems of these tragic events. Nor does it diminish the specificity of that tragedy to also note that all the *schools* in which random school shooters also exhibited certain similarities. The schools themselves share characteristics that make random school shootings more likely in some places than in others. We believe that profiling the school *shooters* must be accompanied by a profile of the shooters' *schools*. While we cannot address this topic here, it adds a significant dimension to the analysis

(see Williams 2005; Kimmel 2008b, 2010). A full picture requires that we pay equally close attention to race, region, religion as we do to psychopathology.

For this analysis, however, we focus on one aspect: gender. These perpetrators were not just misguided 'kids', or 'youth' or 'troubled teens' – they're boys. They are a group of boys, deeply aggrieved by a system that they may feel is cruel or demeaning. Feeling aggrieved, wronged by the world – these are typical adolescent feelings, common to many boys and girls. What transforms the aggrieved into mass murders is also a sense of entitlement, a sense of using violence against others, making others hurt as you, yourself, might hurt. Aggrieved entitlement inspires revenge against those who have wronged you; it is the compensation for humiliation. Humiliation is emasculation: humiliate someone and you take away his manhood. For many men, humiliation must be avenged, or you cease to be a man. Aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back. And its gender is masculine.

To make this case, we first take a step back and review the literature on the gender of suicide. We then turn to brief discussions of these three cases as illustrations of our argument. To make our case, we rely on a sampling of media reports of the events. (We do this as much for the facts that media reports might have uncovered, but also because these reports in these major news sources frame the national discussion about the cases. That is, they not only tell us what happened but why, and they present the concepts that will engage us in cultural conversations.) Using the shooters' names as our search terms, we gathered articles from six major media sources – the three major weekly news magazines: *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* (in order from greatest circulation to least) – and three major daily newspapers: *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles*

*Times*<sup>3</sup>. In conducting our analysis, we found a striking pattern from the stories about the boys who committed the violence: Nearly all had stories of being constantly bullied, beaten up, and, most significantly for this analysis, ‘gay baited’. Nearly all had stories of being mercilessly and constantly teased, picked on, and threatened. And, most strikingly, it was *not* because they were gay (at least there is no evidence to suggest that any of them were gay), but because they were *different* from the other boys – shy, bookish, honour students, artistic, musical, theatrical, non-athletic, ‘geekish’ or weird. Theirs are stories of ‘cultural marginalisation’ based on criteria for adequate gender performance – specifically the enactment of codes of masculinity. We can learn from queer studies that gay youth have higher rates of suicide than their straight counterparts (Remafedi et al. 1998). The shooters here display evidence of such marginalisation, but they choose a decidedly heteronormative way to combat it: violence.

### ‘THE GENDER OF SUICIDE’

Frequently in academic discourse, when one invokes the question of groups with disproportionate power, the minority group becomes the focus of the discussion. When discussing race, we speak of racial minorities, regarding sexual orientation, we speak of sexual minorities. Often, the privileged category is obscured, hidden by its privileged standpoint (Johnson 2005). Suicide is no exception: when gender is introduced to studies of suicide behaviour, the results frequently describe *women’s* suicide behaviours,

and the introduction of gender into the issue of suicide is at times a discussion of *sex* differences in suicidality. We learn that women engage in suicide behaviours more frequently than males (Canetto 1997; Canetto and Sakinofsky 1998; Stack and Wasserman 2009), yet we often also learn that males have higher mortality rates from suicide (Canetto 1997; Canetto and Sakinofsky 1998; Roy and Janal 2006; Stack and Wasserman 2009). This has been referred to as the gender gap in suicide (Canetto 1997).

Interestingly, the gender gap in suicide is not present at all ages, nor is it universal in all parts of the world, suggesting that sex is not the only reason for this difference, emphasising the need for an examination of gender and the cultural forces that shape gender socialisation across the world. We know that suicide rates among young children are quite low; however, for children’s suicide behaviours, the rates for male and female children are similar (Fedorowicz and Frombonne 2007; Girard 1993). When looking at world averages, even during adolescence, a time when sex differences in suicides are thought to be most pronounced (Fedorowicz and Frombonne 2007) we see similar rates of suicides. Fedorowicz and Frombonne (2007) report that worldwide, among youth aged 15–24, the rate of suicides per 100,000 are 12% for women and 14.2% for males. Canetto and Sakinofsky (1998:2) also report exceptions to the suicide gender gap found in Finland, among Native Hawaiian adolescents, and Puerto Ricans in New York, again suggesting that cultural factors are important in the gender differences in suicide. Further, in a sample of patients with

<sup>3</sup> These papers were selected because they comprise three of the top four daily newspapers in circulation. The Wall Street Journal, which has the highest circulation of any daily newspaper in the US was not included in our analysis since its substantive focus is on business related issues. In order to extend our analysis to local media outlets, we also selectively sampled from smaller regional papers. We recognise that using secondary media reports as indicators of ‘what really happened’ leading up to and during these shootings is a questionable tactic. In order to further tease out the causes of these shootings, one would have to conduct first hand interviews with those directly involved in the shootings – the shooters themselves, classmates, teachers, administrators, parents, etc. However, we feel that an analysis of media reports is nevertheless a valuable approach in this instance, because one of our major points is that while virtually all of these accounts contained some evidence indicating the connections between masculinity, homophobia, and violence, they all somehow overlooked this fact.

major depression, being female was associated with a lower level of suicidality (Schaffer et al. 2008). Surrounding cultural context is an important factor in suicide behaviours.

Women's lower suicide mortality may be caused by the difference in women's choice of method in suicide behaviours. Women often use methods that take longer before resulting in death, and thus allow the possibility for some sort of intervention before the action would claim their life. Common methods of suicide behaviour for women are taking pills or poisoning themselves with gas (Stack and Wasserman 2009). Both of these methods involve time elapsing from the commencement of the behaviour until death. Additionally, both of these methods may be mischaracterised as accidental deaths rather than suicide, which would affect women's mortality rates from suicides (Stack and Wasserman 2009). Men, however, tend to use methods that are more immediate, such as suicides involving the use of a firearm (Stack and Wasserman 2009). In a gendered way, men are thought to engage in methods of suicide that are more immediately lethal, while women are thought to want to preserve their appearance, even after death. Stack and Wasserman test the so-called 'beautiful corpse' hypothesis and its relationship to sex differences in suicide mortality by examining men's and women's suicides involving a firearm. They found that the differences in mortality can also be explained by the wound site, where men tend to shoot themselves in the head, while women shoot themselves in the body. Shots to the head are more fatal than gunshots to the body (Stack and Wasserman 2009).

Some researchers examine men and women's suicide behaviours, as well as the perceptions of these behaviours. These scholars tell us that nonfatal suicide is seen as a feminised behaviour (Andriolo 1998; Canetto 1997; Canetto and Sakinofsky 1998; Range and Leach 1998). This is due to the fact that women engage in suicide behaviours at higher rates than men (Canetto 1997; CDC 2007; Fedorowicz and Frombonne

2007; Roy and Janal 2006; Stack and Wasserman 2009). Nonfatal suicide is often seen differently from fatal suicide, where the nonfatality of the act is taken as synonymous with the actor's intent (Canetto 1997). Regardless of whether or not fatality from suicide tells us anything about the actor's intent, suicidal ideation is more common in females (CDC 2007; Fedorowicz and Frombonne 2007; Roy and Janal 2006; Stack and Wasserman 2009). This may be due to differences in reporting suicidal thoughts, as females are more likely to seek treatment and be diagnosed with depression (Canetto 1997; DeCoster 2005; Rosenfeld et al. 2006).

Additionally, scholars have examined the reactions of men and women to various vignettes describing different suicide outcomes with actors of both sexes. They find that people who lose their lives as a result of a suicide behaviour are seen more positively than those who survive suicide behaviours (Canetto 1997). Women's nonfatal suicide is often seen more positively than males' nonfatal suicide behaviours. Nonfatal suicide behaviours are thought to be germane to femininity (Canetto 1997; Range and Leach 1998). There is a stigma attached to a nonfatal suicide when the actor is a male (Canetto and Sakinofsky 1998), yet when the suicide is fatal, males are seen more favourably than women (Canetto 1997; Range and Leach 1998; Stack and Wasserman 2009). 'To summarise, US studies of the meaning and acceptability of gender and suicidal behavior among adolescents and young adults have found that surviving a suicidal act is perceived as an inappropriate behavior for a male. Concomitantly, killing oneself is viewed as masculine' (Canetto 1997:346).

The reasons behind suicide behaviours are also seen through a gendered lens, and this affects how the actors are viewed. When actors behave in accordance with socialised notions of appropriate femininity or masculinity, they are viewed positively, and when their behaviour does not conform to these notions, they are viewed negatively. Female suicide behaviour is often thought

to result from depression over relational failures, problems with relationships or family (Canetto 1997). Suicide behaviour in males is believed to result from achievement failures, or identity threats that can constitute a failure of living up to a masculine identity (Canetto 1997; Girard 1993). Accordingly, when women engage in suicide behaviours as a result of a relational shortcoming, their behaviour is seen as compatible with female socialisation, and as such, they are not stigmatised (Canetto 1997). When males engage in suicide behaviour as a result of an achievement failure, that behaviour is only seen as appropriate for a male if the suicide results in a fatality (Canetto 1997), since, as discussed above, nonfatal suicide is seen as an impotent act, which is characterised as emasculating. Suicide behaviours are often seen as a 'cry for help', something more frequently associated with appropriate feminine behaviour, which is why nonfatal suicide behaviours in females are not stigmatised (Canetto 1997). It may then be argued that suicide behaviours as enacted by females are seen as an expressive behaviour, while those utilised by men are seen as instrumental. It would follow that 'successful' (i.e., fatal) suicides by men are seen more positively, in the sense that they achieve the desired instrumental result, while nonfatal suicides by women demonstrate their expression of emotions. This supports the ideology that masculinity restricts the range of emotion afforded to men, while femininity encourages the expression of feelings for women; feelings of despair and the thought of taking one's own life would not be an exception. We will come back to the idea of instrumental suicide below, and apply it to rampage school shootings.

Andriolo (1998) looked at suicide behaviours among different cultural groups in an examination of socially sanctioned or otherwise 'good' suicides. She asserts that in warrior cultures, those characterised by a high level of warfare and support for acts of vengeance, men have access to a socially approved form of taking their own life: what she calls 'Masked Suicide', which occurs

when, 'an individual arranges for a high chance to have himself killed by others while performing an act that is culturally approved, even highly esteemed' (1998:40). Masked suicides are public behaviours, they are highly ritualised, and the actions surrounding the suicide are closely aligned with cultural ideals. Andriolo states that the actor 'conforms to dominant cultural values, and in doing so publicly and flamboyantly, he also *confirms* these ideals' (1998:41, italics in original).

In spite of the fact that the school shootings discussed here culminated in the shooters taking their own lives, and not being killed by another, Andriolo's (1998) theory of masked suicide can shed light upon how we view rampage school shootings, illuminating how suicide by mass murder can be an instrumental way of living up to cultural ideals for those who feel marginalised. Even as these cases differ from masked suicides in their infrequency and lack of support from the larger society, the theory of masked suicide can help us appreciate the instrumental nature of the shootings which culminate in suicide. Indeed, the circumstances of the shootings detract from the events even being characterised as a suicide, and instead may be mistaken as a way to avoid being apprehended, but the shooter's death in cases of suicide by mass murder is pre-planned.

Certainly, not every element of the theory will apply, but some characteristics of masked suicide can be useful in an analysis of rampage school shootings ending in suicide. While masked suicides occur in warrior cultures, it can be argued that the lives of adolescent males in the US can be seen as having elements of a warrior-supportive culture. Young men in the US today live in a culture characterised by glorified violence, as seen in the array of media at their fingertips, and as such, they may take on an aura of warrior culture in their perception of their social worlds. Furthermore, young men are socialised to embrace a set of behaviours designed to prove or assert their masculinity, and taught to use violence, especially in response to threats against one's manhood (Kimmel 2008a).

In masked suicides, support for the actor comes from his behaviour being a public performance (Andriolo 1998). School shootings take place in front of others, a public display of violence. In fact, the public nature of school shootings are an example of their instrumental nature; they are done to get a point across, to send a message that the shooter wants to convey to the localised culture that has marginalised him, as well as the larger society. The detailed plans laid out by school shooters, as well as their methodical reasoning for their actions that impose blame on their peers demonstrate how they view their actions as public, as well as the entitlement they feel in their actions. The note left behind by Columbine shooter Eric Harris explicitly places the blame for his actions on his surrounding community (Klein and Chancer 2000).

Additionally, masked suicides are done in a manner that conform to and simultaneously confirm cultural values (Andriolo 1998). If we agree that young American males live in a culture that condones violence as a way to enact masculinity, then school shootings are an almost perfect example of a behaviour conforming to those values. If young men who are surrounded by messages telling them that real men are strong, tough, and violent, and that they do not back down to threats, then using lethal violence to prove one's masculinity is not only expected, it supports those very values<sup>4</sup>.

However, to fully appreciate the strength of Andriolo's (1998) theory as it applies to school shootings, we must first examine adolescent culture itself, which can illuminate differences among males and females' behaviours in light of identity or relational threats, aspects of the gender gap in suicide, and may potentially explain why virtually all known cases of rampage school shootings are perpetrated by young

men (Kimmel 2008b; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Klein and Chancer 2000).

Adolescence has been identified as the time period in which gender differences in suicide emerge (Canetto 1997; Fedorowicz and Frombonne 2007; Girard 1993). Adolescence is a precarious time for an individual's socialisation and development. Leaving childhood, but not yet fully an adult, adolescents are increasingly affected by peer group socialisation more so than socialisation by institutions such as the family (Seidman 2003), and as such, adolescence can be a crucial time in one's identity formation (Canetto 1997; Kimmel 2008a). Peer groups can be very strict regulators of behaviour. Accordingly, when a young person finds it difficult to fit in socially, they may be vulnerable to social scorn, stigma, or insults. Because the peer group is such a dominant regulating force, scorn from the peer group can be quite damaging, and this can last well beyond adolescence.

For young men, adolescence is the time for them to prove themselves to be men (Kimmel 2008a), and if they should falter, they are often thought to be homosexual. The taunt of calling a young man gay is thought to be the worst insult a young man can face (Katz 2006; Kimmel 2008a). Kimmel describes the 'Guy Code', in his recent book, *Guyland: The Perilous World in which Boys Become Men* (2008a). Part of the Guy Code entails proving one's masculinity, and indeed, one's heterosexuality, on a daily basis. To live up to these ideals, young men aged 16–24 must be popular, athletic, and in no way associated with anything seen as feminine. And, the Guy Code encourages the use of violence to avenge any perceived slight or wrong. In this context, is it surprising to hear of school violence? Studies of school shootings tell us that the perpetrators have almost universally been taunted as gay or called a

<sup>4</sup> Even if the application of masked suicide to school shootings is disputed, there is much to be gained by considering school shootings in light of Andriolo's (1998) discussion of militant martyrdom, which describes certain death in the pursuit of a mission, usually involving the killing of enemies. Militant martyrs are seen as having a good death, in that it occurs in the service of religion, so it is not seen as suicidal. School shooters could see their actions similarly.



'fag' (Kimmel 2008b; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Klein and Chancer 2000).

So, for young men who have been called gay, their budding masculinity is threatened. These young men may feel isolated and hopeless. They may become suicidal. However, they are not supported should they seek help (DeCoster 2005), so they direct their feelings externally (Girard 1993; Rosenfeld et al. 2006) and turn to violence. Girard (1993) tells us that men engage in suicide when their identity is challenged, and nonfatal suicide behaviours from males are seen negatively, so a young man in such a situation may choose a suicide behaviour that does not allow for failure – such as a rampage school shooting that is likely to result in his death by law enforcement if not by his own hand. Such a behaviour would also be seen as an instrumental act from his perspective; it avenges the perceived wrong he has faced and is done so in a way that can be thought to enhance his own masculinity, thus offering a potential solution to a depressed young male who has been socialised to use violence to assert his masculinity. Let's not forget the words of young Luke Woodham, speaking of his rampage shooting and emphasising the masculinity inherent in the act: 'Murder is not weak and slow-witted', distancing himself from feminised impotence or weakness; 'Murder is gutsy and daring', showing that he feels more power from his murderous acts (Klein and Chancer 2000:145, 143).

A contemporary reading of Andriolo's (1998) theory about masked suicide may shed light on how we consume stories about violence, particularly rampage school shootings. Considering suicide by mass murder as a behaviour that would appear to the actor to be identity affirming in the face of an oppressive peer culture, we are able to argue that school shootings may be thought of as an appropriate, instrumental way for young adolescent males to commit suicide while preserving, if not actually enhancing, their perception of their own masculinity through the aggrieved entitlement of their violence.

## **GENDER AND THE DYNAMICS OF AGGRIEVED ENTITLEMENT**

These three cases under discussion here share certain characteristics that are of sociological significance. In all three cases, the shooters felt both victimised by others and superior to them. They felt humiliated by their presumed inferiors. The Guy Code was at work here. All of the shooters described their inability to live up to their peers' expectations of 'cool'. Yet for Harris and Kazmierczak, 'warrior' culture may have been more close at hand: Harris's father was a retired Army officer, and Kazmierczak had enlisted in the armed forces and was discharged for failure to disclose his mental health history. This is an example of how one can attempt to conform to warrior culture and fail.

When Klebold said 'you've been giving us shit for years' what he meant was constant gay baiting, being called 'queer', 'faggot', 'homo', being pushed into lockers, grabbed in hallways, mimicked and ridiculed with homophobic slurs (see, for example, Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Larkin 2008). For some boys, high school is a constant homophobic gauntlet, and they may respond by becoming withdrawn and sullen, using drugs or alcohol, becoming depressed or suicidal, or acting out in a blaze of over-compensating violent 'glory' (see Egan 1998). Here are the words of Evan Todd, a 255-pound defensive lineman on the Columbine football team, an exemplar of the jock culture that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris found to be such an interminable torment. Todd said:

Columbine is a clean, good place, except for those rejects, 'Sure we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? It's not just jocks; the whole school's disgusted with them. They're a bunch of homos ... If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos.' (Gibbs and Roche 1999:40)

Ben Oakley, a soccer player, agreed. '[N]obody liked them', he said, 'the majority of them

were gay. So everyone would make fun of them' (Cullen 1999). Athletes taunted them: 'nice dress' they'd say. They would throw rocks and bottles at them from moving cars. The school newspaper had recently published a rumour that Harris and Klebold were lovers.

Both appeared to have a relatively stable home life. Harris's parents were a retired Army officer and a caterer. Klebold's father was a geophysicist who had recently moved into the mortgage services business and his mother worked in job placement for the disabled. Harris had been rejected by several colleges; Klebold was due to enrol at Arizona in the fall. But the jock culture was relentless. One friend said:

Every time someone slammed them against a locker and threw a bottle at them, I think they'd go back to Eric or Dylan's house and plot a little more – at first as a goof, but more and more seriously over time. (Pooley 1999:27)

For some students, the high school environment continues in institutions of higher education. Virginia Tech, for example, is a university where school spirit is ubiquitous, and that sets up a social hierarchy similar to those found in high schools, where students with more connection to the school culture are rewarded with more status. Awkward socially, Cho never seemed to feel that he fit in. He had no friends, rarely, if ever spoke with his dorm mates, and maintained a near-invisibility on campus. His web screen name was a question mark – he toyed with his invisibility. No one seems to have actually known him – although his teachers in the English department said they thought he was strange and possibly dangerous.

His marginalisation also appeared cultural, and class-based, not entirely the result of his obvious over-determining psychiatric problems. His videotape raged against the 'brats', and 'snobs' at Virginia Tech, who weren't even satisfied with their 'gold necklaces' and 'Mercedes'. And, apparently, some of it had a racist component. The few times he had mustered the courage to actually speak in class, his tormentors told him to 'go

back to China'. (Remember, Cho was Korean-American; his parents owned and operated a dry cleaner, and he felt his marginalisation had a class and race basis.)

But what if one does not feel valued as a member of their college community? What is it like to feel excluded in 'Hokie Nation', as the Virginia Tech campus culture is called? What if one isn't much interested in football, or in sports-themed, beer-soaked weekend party extravaganzas? It's possible that to the marginalised, 'Hokie Nation' doesn't feel inclusive and embracing, but alien and coercive. If one is not a citizen in Hokie Nation, one does not exist. And perhaps, for some, if *I* don't exist, then *you* have no right to exist either.

Of course, as Ben Agger (2007) notes, '[n]ot everyone who is bullied in school, or marginalised, picks up the gun'. There has to be something more. Cho's videotaped testament shows a young man enthralled with fantasies of revenge, in full-bore aggrieved entitlement, externalising his inner torment on everyone around him. He declared on his videotape:

You have vandalised my heart, raped my soul, and torched my conscience. You thought it was one pathetic boy's life you were extinguishing. Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ to inspire generations of the weak and the defenceless people.

While a student at Northern Illinois, Kazmierczak was described as an outstanding student; he had received the Dean's Award in 2006. Campus police used phrases like 'fairly normal' and 'unstressed'. He had co-authored an academic article with one of his sociology professors, which was published in a peer-reviewed journal. In the fall of 2007, he was enrolled in a graduate program in Social Work at University of Illinois. He was variously described as both outgoing and quiet, sensitive and a loner. 'He was anything but a monster', his girlfriend, Jessica Baty said. 'He was probably the nicest, most caring person ever'.

But there may have been a darker side to this wholesome, nice guy. Kazmierczak had enlisted in the military in September 2001, but was 'administratively discharged' only a few months later when his mental health history was exposed (he had concealed it in his enlistment). Being denied the opportunity to fight for his country after the attacks of 9/11 may have contributed to his spiralling sense that he somehow did not measure up. In his application to graduate school, Kazmierczak had described himself as a sensitive person who also felt victimised:

For as long as I can remember, I have always been an extremely sensitive individual and feel as though I am able to empathize with other people's emotional and social needs. However, some of my peers were not very understanding or accepting and I feel as though I was victimized to a certain degree during my adolescent years. (Carney 2008)

A detailed article in *Esquire* offered a portrait of an anxious young man, with a history of mental illness and a victim of bullying, who harboured fantasies of revenge and discussed Columbine constantly. In the weeks leading up to his rampage, he appeared increasingly erratic, and apparently stopped taking his medication (he was prescribed anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medications, and sleeping aids).

As is clear, all four boys felt themselves to be both victimised and superior. The evidence is clear that they felt they had been unfairly targeted, bullied, beaten up, gay baited and worse – virtually every single day of their lives. Theirs are stories of 'cultural marginalisation' based on criteria for adequate gender performance – specifically the enactment of codes of masculinity. (In this sense, their stories were similar to the stories told by the other rampage shooters.)

And so they did what *any* self-respecting man would do in a situation like that – or so they thought. They retaliated. In his insightful book on violence, James Gilligan (1998:77) suggests that violence has its origins in 'the fear of shame

and ridicule, and the overbearing need to prevent others from laughing at oneself by making them weep instead'. Shame, inadequacy, vulnerability all threaten the self. Violence is restorative, compensatory.

Boys who are bullied are supposed to be real men, supposed to be able to embody independence, invulnerability, manly stoicism. (In fact, the very search for such collective rhetoric might be seen as an indication of weakness.) The cultural marginalisation of the boys who committed school shootings extended to feelings that they had no other recourse: they felt they had no other friends to validate their fragile and threatened identities; they felt that school authorities and parents would be unresponsive to their plight; and they had no access to other methods of self-affirmation. It was not because they were deviants, but rather because they were over-conformists to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to a perceived humiliation.

In his exemplary analysis of the shootings at Columbine high school, sociologist Ralph Larkin (2008) identified several variables that he believed provided the larger cultural context for the rampage. The larger context – the development of a culture of celebrity, the rise of paramilitary chic – spread unevenly across the US; some regions are more gun-happy than others. (Larkin credits the west; Cho's rampage implicates the south.) But more than that, he profiles both the boys and the school, and suggests that the sociological and psychological variables created a lethal mixture.

First, he stresses that the school must be characterised by the presence and tolerance of intimidation, harassment, and bullying within the halls of the high school and on the streets of the larger community. One boy described what it was like to be so marginalised:

Almost on a daily basis, finding death threats in my locker ... It was bad. People ... who I never even met, never had a class with, don't know who

they were to this day. I didn't drive at the time I was in high school; I always walked home. And every day when they'd drive by, they'd throw trash out their window at me, glass bottles. I'm sorry, you get hit with a glass bottle that's going forty miles an hour, that hurts pretty bad. Like I said, I never even knew these people, so didn't even know what their motivation was. But this is something I had to put up with nearly every day for four years. (Larkin 2008:91)

It wasn't just that Harris and Klebold and Cho were bullied and harassed and intimidated every day; it was that the administration, teachers, and community colluded with it. At Columbine, when one boy tried to tell teachers and administrators 'the way those who were "different" were crushed ... what it was like to live in constant fear of other kids who'd gone out of control' the teachers and administrators invariably would turn a blind eye. 'After all', he says, 'those kids were their favorites. We were the troublemakers' (Larkin 2008:107). Thus, Larkin concludes that:

[b]y allowing the predators free reign in the hallways and public spaces and by bending the rules so that bad behavior did not interfere too much with sports participation, the faculty and administration inadvertently created a climate that was rife with discrimination, intimidation and humiliation. (2008:121)

And sanctimony. Larkin (2008) also argues that religious intolerance and chauvinism directly contributed to the cultural marginalisation of the boys. Jefferson County, where Columbine High School is located, is more than 90% white, 97% native-born, and almost entirely Christian with nearly 40% evangelical Protestants. (Indeed, it has one of the largest concentrations of Christian evangelicals in the US.) And while local preachers saw in Klebold and Harris the presence of the devil, Larkin believes that evangelical intolerance of others is more cause than consequence. 'Evangelicals were characterized', he writes, 'as arrogant and intolerant of the beliefs of others'

(Larkin 2008:53). Evangelical students were intolerantly holier than thou – they would 'accost their peers and tell them that if they were not born-again, they would burn in hell' (Larkin 2008:61).

In most cases, Larkin writes, this would be 'merely annoying'. But 'in combination with the brutalisation and harassment dished out on a regular basis by the student athletes, it only added to the toxicity of the student climate at Columbine HS' (2008:61). That toxic climate combined brutal harassment, sanctimonious superiority, traditional gender norms, and a belief in violence as restorative. It's a long-standing masculine trope. Cho and the others were, according to *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert (2007:27):

young men riddled with shame and humiliation, often bitterly misogynistic and homophobic, who have decided that the way to assert their faltering sense of manhood and get the respect they have been denied is to go out and shoot somebody.

Felson et al. (1994) found that regardless of what a boy's personal values, boys are much more likely to engage in violence if the local cultural expectations are that boys retaliate when provoked. And their local gender culture certainly encouraged that.

It is the gender culture that is an important element in each of these young men's decision-making. They felt marginalised, less than, and they desperately sought a way to make themselves feel better and simultaneously punish those they saw responsible for their oppression. In doing so, these boys chose over-conformity to gendered ideals. These young men were all socialised to see violence as a way to prove their manhood. Additionally, they were socialised in an environment that provided access to firearms. The access to guns proved a crucial element of their trajectories, since without such availability, it is unlikely that these young men would have made the same decisions. They may have wanted to end their lives, but without access to guns, their suicides would likely not have been preceded by mass murder.

## CONCLUSION

Klebold, Harris, Kazmierczak and Cho Seung-Hui, experienced what we here call ‘aggrieved entitlement’ – a gendered sense that they were entitled, indeed, even expected – to exact their revenge on all who had hurt them. It wasn’t enough to have been harmed; they also had to believe that they were justified, that their murderous rampage was legitimate.

Once they did, they followed the time-honoured script of the American western: the lone gunman (or gang) retaliates far beyond the initial provocation and destroys others to restore the self. It’s historian Richard Slotkin’s (1973) thesis on American history – a ‘gunfighter nation’ pursuing ‘regeneration through violence’. It’s Margaret Mead’s (1942) indictment of the culture of revenge, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*. American men don’t get mad; they get even. It’s not just some westerns or action movies – it’s virtually every western or action movie. It’s Bruce Springsteen singing about how he ‘feel[s] so weak’ he just ‘want[s] to explode’, and ‘tear this whole town apart’ as a way to ‘take this knife from my heart’.

It’s a truly lethal equation: weakness and explosive rage, tearing the whole town apart as a way to lessen your personal agony. There are many Dylan Klebolds and Cho Seung-Huis out there, so many victims of incessant bullying, of having their distress go unnoticed. So many teen suicides have this same profile: they turn their rage on themselves. So many teenagers who fit this profile self-medicate, take drugs, drink, or cut themselves. So many others revel in their marginalisation as a coping strategy, the way Erving Goffman described ‘minstrelising’ in the face of experiencing the shock of a stigmatised identity. There are so many of them, and virtually all fly just beneath the radar of teachers, parents, administrators. (And, as we have suggested, the level of distress has to rise to heightened radar levels, since the paucity of funding has so raised that bar).

But they don’t all explode. In addition to their own psychological predisposition, we believe

that it is important also to consider the environment in which they lived. We believe that further study of rampage school shootings will need to include access to firepower, an explosive young man who is utterly marginalised, humiliated, and drenched in what he feels is righteous rage – as well as an environment that sees such treatment of its weakest and most marginalised as justified, as ‘reasonable’.

That narrative has become a globalised rhetoric of aggrieved entitlement, and teenagers all over the world have access to the same story. And yet it is still an utterly gendered story, and that suicidal explosion remains a distinctly masculine trope.

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