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# Entitlement and Anguish: An Analysis of Masculinity and Misogyny in American School Shootings

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Entitlement and Anguish:  
An Analysis of Masculinity and Misogyny in American School Shootings

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors requirements  
for the Department of Sociology

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Why does it have to be this way? I ask all of you. All I ever wanted was to love women, and in turn be loved by them back. Their behavior towards me has only earned my hatred, and rightfully so! I am the true victim in all of this. I am the good guy. Humanity struck at me first by condemning me to experience so much suffering. I didn't ask for this. I didn't want this. I didn't start this war... I wasn't the one who struck first... But I will finish it by striking back. I will punish *everyone*. And it will be beautiful. Finally, at long last, I can show the world my true worth (Rodger 2014:137).

It was a balmy and cloudy spring day on Friday, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014, in Isla Vista, California.

The spring semester at the University of California, Santa Barbara was a few weeks away from ending, and students were awaiting this Memorial Day weekend for much-needed relaxation before the final academic push preceding summer vacation. UCSB's reputation as a party school translated to Friday evenings full of spontaneous nightlife and boisterous house parties. Members of the Alpha Phi Sorority house were getting ready to enjoy the night when at 9:15pm, they heard aggressive knocking at their front door (Brown 2014:8-9). Although several young women were present in the house that night, miraculously, no one decided to answer. Minutes later, the sound of gunshots and terrified screams filled the air. The sisters of the Alpha Phi sorority were safe, but just outside their home, three other UCSB sorority girls were shot multiple times with a semi-automatic pistol. One of them was 20-year-old Bianca de Kock. As her friends died beside her, de Kock looked into the eyes of her attacker as he smirked, shooting with purpose and shooting to kill (Sullivan 2014).

Fortunately, de Kock survived her five bullet wounds. Others were not so lucky; Elliot Rodger killed a total of six people and wounded fourteen others that day in Isla Vista. After shooting the three sorority sisters, he continued a drive-by rampage through the city, hitting some civilians with his BMW and shooting others through his open passenger-side window before following through with his own suicide. Days after the shooting, United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called the event a "senseless tragedy" (Jaschik 2014). Yet, this attack

was anything but senseless. In fact, every detail was part of Rodger's plan, including the decision to target sorority girls. In his 137-page autobiography and manifesto, he wrote, "I cannot kill every single female on earth, but I can deliver a devastating blow that will shake all of them to the core of their wicked hearts. I will attack the very girls who represent everything I hate in the female gender: The hottest sorority of UCSB" (Rodger 2014:132). In his writing and in video recordings, Rodger described his lifelong feelings of sexual frustration and social rejection by women as well as his hatred for men engaged in successful heterosexual relationships. Rodger's (2014:136) autobiography culminates in a graphic description of his "ideal world," in which women are quarantined in concentration camps where "the vast majority of the female population will be deliberately starved to death [and where Rodger] can gleefully watch them all die." Although the Isla Vista killings were gruesome and Rodger made his misogynistic ideology explicitly clear, violence against women is not uncommon. Stories of interpersonal violence on college campuses—such as the May 2010 murder of Yeardley Love by her ex-boyfriend or the April 2015 murder of Grace Mann, a member of Feminists United on her college campus—pepper the news with the faces of young women whose lives were cut short by the violent actions of men (Dean 2015; Flaherty 2012). School shooters take this brutality to another level, enacting violence that hurts innumerable people, terrorizes entire communities, and undermines the sense of safety in academic spaces.

Fear about mass shootings has consumed the American public as news media seems to report new attacks regularly. According to the Stanford Mass Shootings of America (MSA) Project, there have been 238 mass shooting incidents since 1966, nearly half of which have occurred since 2010 (Stanford Geospatial Center 2015). Furthermore, 65 mass shootings occurred in 2015, a 400% increase from 2014, and school shootings comprise approximately

30% of all mass shootings in the United States (Stanford Geospatial Center 2015).<sup>1</sup> The number of fatalities and injuries caused by school shootings has dramatically increased, coinciding with the rise in event frequency (Stanford Geospatial Center 2015). In a study conducted by the non-profit organization Save the Children (2014:3), 70% of parents are “at least somewhat concerned” that their school-aged children face the possibility of a school shooting, and 35% are “very or extremely concerned.” With the ongoing threat of public health and safety, there is a national urgency for better understanding of these increasingly frequent, deadly shootings in order to more effectively prevent and address them. Despite these figures, though, school shootings are rare events. Most academic institutions will never experience a homicide, much less a mass school shooting (Kimmel 2010:132-3). Yet, when they do occur, mass school shootings result in the loss of primarily young lives, disrupt the perception of safety present in academic institutions, instigate panic among community members, and have lasting social, psychological, and economic impacts (Harding, Fox, and Mehta 2002:175-6). Additionally, while mass shootings are disproportionately an American issue—the United States contains 4.4% of the world’s population but 30.8% of its mass shooters—they have set an international precedent for mass shootings now occurring more frequently in other developed countries (Ziv 2015). Prior to the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, “the only other country to have

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<sup>1</sup> There are a number of findings in online media that argue that mass shootings are on the rise, but there are also some that argue that mass shootings as an ongoing issue. The Senior Director of News and Online Communications at Harvard suggests that the key to conflicting findings is the understanding of *public* mass shootings versus *private* mass shootings. Private mass shootings, such as those instigated by domestic disputes, have not shown considerable increase over recent years, while mass shootings in public spaces, like schools, have been especially increasing over recent years (Datz 2015). Furthermore, it is important to note that although the percent increase in mass shootings between 2014 and 2015 was indeed 400%, between 2013 and 2014 it was -20%, suggesting a fluctuation of mass shooting incidence (Stanford Geospatial Center 2015). Still, others suggest that mass shootings have increased in similar proportions over time: *Mother Jones* writers Cohen, Azrael, and Miller (2014) use information from a different database to claim that mass shootings have tripled since 2011.



experienced rampage shootings was Canada,” but since then, “school shootings modeling Columbine [have occurred] in Canada, Sweden, Bosnia, Australia, Argentina, Germany, and Finland” (Larkin 2009:1316). Some school shootings abroad have even matched Rodger’s explicit misogyny; Marc Lépine, perpetrator of the École Polytechnique Massacre in Montreal, Canada, specifically attacked female students, citing his hatred for feminists who “ruined [his] life” (Bindel 2012; Sourour 1991:7). This further necessitates the urgency for research that can create solutions for both domestic and abroad communities facing school shootings.

Like Durkheim’s (1897:85-6) seminal work on suicide, in which he studies this seemingly individual, isolated act as a sociological phenomenon and product of social factors, I have also chosen to research school shootings from a sociological perspective. School shootings are, like suicide, typically understood at the individual level as acts of interpersonal violence. Therefore, the mental health of the perpetrator is often questioned. Yet, the sociology of school shooters is also relevant, because considering all individual school shootings together “constitutes itself a new fact *sui generis* [“of its own kind”], which has its own unity and individuality, and therefore, its own pre-eminently social nature” (Durkheim 1897:85). Despite the sheer number of mass shootings and the variety of their circumstances in America, there remains one constant across nearly all of the cases: men account for 96% of all mass shooters and 96% of all school shooters (Stanford Geospatial Center 2015). The majority of these male perpetrators are white and under the age of 25 (Stanford Geospatial Center 2015). This gender breakdown follows a more general connection of masculinity and violence observed in America in which 89.5% of all perpetrators of homicide are men (Cooper and Smith 2011:3). In contrast, only 45.3% of homicide perpetrators are white, pointing to an important distinction that school shootings are committed by primarily young white men (Cooper and Smith 2011:3). In this way,

although shootings are typically conceptualized as interpersonal physical violence, they are not simply the result of random encounters carried out by random people. There are identifiable patterns that indicate larger connections between violence and the social world. Additionally, the tension between violent men and victimized women that typically characterizes interpersonal gender violence is present in mass shootings. Women are twice as likely to die as men in a mass shooting incident, and in many cases—such as Rodger’s—women are specifically selected as targets (Chemaly 2015). By considering the patterned gender arrangement of both mass shooting perpetrators as well as their victims, we can work to identify the factors that influence these events. This comprehensive sociological understanding establishes a foundation for my work. I explore the intersections between school shooting massacres and misogynistic violence, and how the social construction of masculinity is at the root of these devastating events.

Durkheim (1895b:63) encouraged sociologists to recognize that social phenomena are manifested in observable human activity and social interactions. In this way, sociologists often study the experiences of individual people in order to better understand social relations. “The internal manifoldness of individual experience reflects the complexity of reality as it exists for society to which the individual belongs” (MacDougall 1912:18). In order to better understand American society and the rapidly growing phenomenon of school shootings, I explore how the social construction of hegemonic masculinity informs school shootings by using a gender studies lens to examine ten selected shooting incidents occurring over the past 20 years. In this qualitative case study analysis, I focus on cases that exemplify how perpetrators’ relationship to masculinity helps to explain their attacks. I analyze both primary and secondary sources from all ten school shooting cases to interpret the complex relationship between masculinity, misogyny, and mass violence. Through this study, I explore how masculinity and misogyny function in the

lives of school shooting perpetrators and how these experiences reflect broader societal conceptions of gender.

I decided to explore this topic, because I believe that in order to properly address and reduce American school shootings—primarily perpetrated by men—it is imperative to understand how the social construction of gender functions and relates to acts of violence. Research literature focusing on the sociology of gender, and especially men’s studies, has gained momentum by addressing the high incidence of violence in the United States. Leading scholars in these fields, including Michael Kimmel, R.W. Connell, and Michael Messner, explore related issues in their work. Academic gatherings such as the 2015 International Conference on Masculinities hosted by the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities and the 2016 American Men’s Studies Association’s 24<sup>th</sup> Conference on Men and Masculinities provide opportunities for critically discussing and deconstructing masculinities. I situate my work on mass shootings in the context of this research literature and relevant events.

Personally, I became interested in school shootings a few years ago, in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in 2012. I spent my winter break home from college staying updated through news and social media as more information about the shooting became available. I was mystified by this devastating event that seemed indicative of widespread violence threatening academic communities across the country. By the summer of 2014, when I heard about Elliot Rodger’s shooting, I was intrigued not only by the violence itself, but also by the way in which it seemed to overtly challenge 21<sup>st</sup> century notions of the status of gender equality in America and ultimately reveal strands of discernible, persisting misogyny. The bitter language used in Rodger’s manifesto, the flagrancy with which he asserted himself in opposition to women, and the cruelty of his actions deeply disturbed and fascinated me, and as a young

woman positioning herself as an intersectional feminist, I felt vicariously threatened, reminded of the all-too-real dangers that continue to exist for women in America. Until this point, I honestly possessed little academic interest in analyzing men's narratives, but I quietly made a mental note to return to this topic if I could at some point in my undergraduate career. My previous experiences studying gender and sexuality, health, and sociological theory positioned me well to tackle this new endeavor. Additionally, although I doubtlessly hold personal disdain for the men I write about in this work, I am unquestionably motivated to analyze the social construction of masculinity in order to create a better world for men as well as women. Throughout my life, I have maintained many strong familial, platonic, and romantic relationships with men, and too often have witnessed how the current conception of masculinity negatively impacts the people I love. Through this project, I have discovered a passion for masculinities studies that I hope to pursue in the future.

The reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity in the United States is problematic, perpetuating violence through its idolization of aggressive, dangerous behavior in men and promotion of a gender hierarchy between men and women. These characteristics enforce a strict definition of masculinity and consequently encourage misogyny among men. In mainstream media, perpetrators of school shootings are often explained away as "mentally ill" rather than conscious actors and architects of violence who are shaped by harmful socialization. High-profile cases, including the Columbine Massacre, Virginia Tech shooting, and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting all involved perpetrators that possessed a turbulent relationship with masculinity and revealed contempt for women before committing violence. Furthermore, the male shooters responsible often expressed a purposeful, self-righteous desire to commit acts of violence. Therefore, I explore the following research questions: 1) How are these misogynistic

ideologies manifested in such cases? and 2) Why are they then expressed through acts of extreme violence? I argue that the socialization of American men—especially in regards to entitlement, sexuality, and the objectification of women—is crucial to explaining why mass shootings are occurring on campuses nationwide. Redefining the dominant understanding of masculinity is necessary in order to successfully address and reduce school shootings in America.

## **Literature Review**

### **Understanding the Social Construction of Gender**

Although many people continue to use the terms “gender” and “sex” interchangeably, movements to differentiate the terms have been accepted by most social, psychosocial, biological, and behavioral scientists. “Sex” refers to the physical manifestation of male or female characteristics, including the anatomy, chromosomes, and chemical balances of one’s body, whereas “gender” refers to the sociocultural roles and meanings ascribed to these characteristics, as well as how one personally and politically identifies, in congruence with or in spite of their respective sex characteristics (Kimmel 2004:3). Sociologists generally agree that gender is socially constructed, but utilize different methods to interpret gender’s meaning, purpose, and relationship with individuals and groups of people in society. Two major theories that work to explain gender sociologically are social constructionism and performance theory. Social constructionism assumes that social reality is not natural or inherent. It is instead constructed through “meanings, notions, or connotations that are assigned to objects and events in the environment and to people’s notions of their relationships to and interactions with these objects” that may be specific to a particular society (Gale 2008). If gender was universally inherent, all expressions of gender would appear identically across time and place. However, anthropological

research shows that gender is perceived of and performed differently within and across different societies. For example, within the Aka hunter-gatherer society of central Africa, fathers participate in both childcare and playtime just as much as Aka mothers—whereas American fathers spend significantly less time with their children compared to mothers (Hewlett 46, 48-9, 54). In this way, Aka men are expected to be nurturing and domestic, whereas American men are generally expected to be hard-working economic breadwinners. Gender differences such as these “invariably reveal[s] the dynamic nature of social reality,” illuminating how gender roles are constructed and negotiated between people in ongoing social interactions that are dependent on their sociocultural environment (Gale 2008).

Performance theory, like social constructionism, posits that inherent social categories do not exist, but are instead created as a result of particular behaviors or actions being repeated so frequently that these characteristics are normalized, attributed to particular social categories, and ultimately believed to be true (Johnson 2010:149). The research of Judith Butler has been especially influential in developing an interpretation of gender through performance theory. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999:43-4, 179) suggests that the supposed essential connections between sex, gender, and the body are untrue, because gender is produced as we perform it in everyday life and that the “binary framework for both sex and gender [...] naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression.” Butler contends that “to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start,” but that gender is instead produced and reproduced through our behaviors, actions, and language that solidify the requirements for being a man or being a woman in society (Big Think 2011). Performance theory aligns with symbolic interactionist perspectives of gender that further explain how gender categories are constructed and maintained. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman

(1959:15, 26-7) explains that within any social interaction, individuals are performers who play roles, and in order for the performers to achieve their goals in the interaction—primarily the avoidance of stigma (Goffman 1963)—performers employ impression management, the process of attempting to manipulate the perceptions that others hold of ourselves. Every aspect of the self is performed, including gender. Gender categories then acquire social meaning when a particular performance and its stereotypes become institutionalized (Goffman 1959:27).

Both social constructionism and performance theory consider how gender identity and expression are continuously negotiated and constructed in social spaces. This negotiation functions within and often perpetuates gender hierarchies that enforce inequality. According to Friedrich Engels (1884:739), the rise of private property established capitalism, the nation-state, and the nuclear family. The emergence of private property in turn spawned the importance of wealth and control of wealth production. In this way, inheritance of land required a man to be certain about the paternity of his sons in order to transfer land, and therefore wealth, within his family (Engels 1884:736-7). This is the origin of gender inequality from the Marxist perspective. Anthropological and sociological research agrees that the development of gender inequality coincides with the evolution of new modes of economic production adopted by societies over time. Bonvillain (2007:1) suggests that these economic shifts allowed for changes within the arrangement of social institutions including family structure and gender roles, because “access to and control over subsistence resources are instrumental in determining an individual’s status in household and community.” The less that women are able to economically contribute to their society, the more gender inequality they are likely to endure (Bonvillain 2007:1-2). Simply because gender is socially constructed does not diminish its power to define social hierarchies and impact the lives of men and women through experiences of inequality. Although today’s

conception of dominant masculinity assumes men as superior to women, change—even seemingly difficult, ideological change to the collective understanding of masculinity in America—is possible, because gender roles, inequality, and hierarchies are not, and have never been, inherent or static.

If gender is socially constructed as these scholars argue, why are generalizations about the “natural” characteristics of men and women so common in society? Alsop et al. (2002:14) suggest that:

The appeal to nature is commonly an appeal to a certain kind of givenness, an appeal to a world which has a structure and order independent of our interactions with it, a structure which we cannot modify and which conditions our lives and agency.

Similarly, R.W. Connell (2005:71) offers that “gender is a way in which social practice is ordered,” arguing that society uses gender as categories to arrange human behaviors into simplified groups of “men” and “women” even though these practices have no essential connection to gender. In this way, it seems that crafting clear definitions of men and women, ones that can be attributed to biological traits, is a more easily digestible concept than determining how gender is constructed from our amorphous, invisible society. This points to difficulties in critically analyzing society, because it relies on our ability to critique social structures that are presumed by many in society to be natural. It is also important to note that the perpetuation of strict gender categories supports the current hierarchical system of gender in the United States. Gender difference is not innocuous. In a patriarchal system where hegemonic masculinity occupies the top tier of gender categories, men profit by allowing this system of gender hierarchies to continue indefinitely, unchallenged. Therein lies the importance of scrutinizing gender as it exists in today’s society.



In patriarchal America, the prevailing construction of gender supports the hierarchy of men maintaining power and privilege over women in society. Coined by sociologist R.W. Connell (2005:77), the term hegemonic masculinity refers to “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” Hegemonic masculinity promotes ideals such as emotional stoicism, physical strength, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and independence that characterize men’s importance by their ability to be autonomous, powerful, and in control to the exclusion of other, more sensitive traits. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity is equated with a white, heterosexual masculinity (Apple, Au, and Gandin 2011:165; Frank 1987:161). This describes the dominant version of masculinity in America but unsurprisingly does not reflect the version of manhood to which most men subscribe (Connell 2005:76-8; Kimmel 2004:10; Spade and Valentine 2011:xvi). Instead, hegemonic masculinity acts as a measure against which other forms of masculinity, such as gay masculinity, can be compared (Connell 2005:76-8). This creates a hierarchy that not only arranges men as superior to women but also some men as superior to other men. Alternative masculinities sometimes challenge the hegemonic standard but are continually deemed inferior (Connell 2005:76-8). Men define themselves via this model, but few truly succeed in meeting the standards of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005:79).

Patriarchy also pressures women to behave in accordance with hegemonic masculinity and conform to notions of “emphasized femininity.” This standard imposed on women is “organized around compliance with gender inequality and is ‘oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men’” (Kimmel 2004:10-1). In this way, boys are socialized to believe that they are superior—to take up more space, voice their opinions, play physically and

aggressively—while girls are socialized to believe that they are inferior—to take up less space, preface their suggestions with “I’m sorry,” and play kindly and calmly. While men are encouraged to exercise power and privilege, women are encouraged to please and placate. Over time, these characteristics have helped shape the experiences of men and women so that contesting gender norms remains extremely difficult. To “be a man” but refuse to subscribe to the mainstream definition of masculinity is not impossible, but demanding, because it requires the strength of an individual to overcome the scripting of gender identity by society. Durkheim (1895a:113) argued that societal forces are “not only external to the individual, but are, moreover, endowed with coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him, independent of his individual will.” His argument is applicable today in expressing the power that the social construction of gender has over individuals. Generations of men have consumed the model of physical dominance and aggression imposed by hegemonic masculinity. The rigidness of hegemonic masculinity combined with its encouragement of violent behavior and masculine dominance presents a dangerous standard of masculinity for young men to achieve—with serious consequences for both men and women.

### **What Masculinity Means for Young Men**

The model of masculinity enforced by society perpetuates gender rigidity and inequality that harms both men and women. Characteristics such as hypersexuality and sexual dominance, homosociality, and emotional impassivity—that are simultaneously promoted to and perpetuated by young men—create social spaces in which men compete to prove their manhood, and women are objectified and dismissed. In his book *Guyland*, Kimmel reveals the importance of sexuality in establishing men’s masculinity. His interviews with over 400 boys and men aged 16 to 26

show that unequivocally high sex drive, sexual prowess, and the consumption of women are all highly valued as dominant masculine traits. He argues that sex—specifically, college hook ups—is a path toward male bonding, because men can “show off” and “prove something” to one another as they brag about their sex lives (Kimmel 2009:205-8). In this way, sexual competition between young men encourages them to view their female peers—particularly those who fit the prevailing notion of femininity—as a means to affirm their masculinity and acquire social status. It also frames men who are not sexually active as abnormal and subordinate to other men. Because “scoring” with many women is stressed, heterosexuality is also a major component of masculine sexuality; many men possess the fear of being perceived of as gay, because that would insinuate that they are effeminate (Kimmel 2009:48-50). This emphasizes that men are constantly performing for and competing against other men, even during their heterosocial and heterosexual interactions with women. In this way, men are communicating their masculinity to other men. These acts also present the social hierarchy to women. Women receive an important message: men are in charge. Interactions with women—especially sexual interactions—are important for the sake of one’s social positioning among men rather than for a genuine experience with the woman herself. Sexual competition, in this way, enforces active and aggressive heterosexuality in order for men to assume dominance, because social interactions with women still primarily benefit men’s homosocial world.

The world of men’s sports is another well-studied arena that illustrates the importance of homosociality in masculinity. Homosociality refers to the social, typically non-romantic and non-sexual relationships among people of the same sex and is a concept often used to explain “how men, through their friendships and intimate collaborations with other men, maintain and defend the gender order and patriarchy” (Hammarén and Johansson 2014:1). Messner’s

(2011:166) research reveals that in youth sports, although “many boys are being exposed to an expanding emotional and sexual repertoire, and are also being taught to view girls and women as equals” off of the field, the still homosocial world of sports may present inconsistent messages to them about how to develop positive relationships with women. In *Our Guys*, Bernard Lefkowitz presents a thorough sociological analysis of the sexual assault of a mentally disabled teenager in the affluent white suburb of Glen Ridge, New Jersey. This tragedy was particularly notable, because the perpetrators of the rape—a group of white football players—were popular, skilled athletes and the sons of respected community members. Yet, the boys’ homosocial comradery and public perception as “our guys,” the football stars of Glen Ridge, provided them with copious amounts of protection that allowed their various heinous acts to go unchallenged. They demonstrated entitlement over and exploitation of their female peers on numerous occasions, from sharing girls between one another to spying on unsuspecting girls having sex to publically masturbating during classes (Lefkowitz 1998:148, 167, 184). In this way, they controlled young women in both public and private spaces that suggested their blatant disregard for viewing women as equals. Moreover, they established masculine authority among as well as outside of their homosocial group through their social status. In *Guyland*, Kimmel (2009:128, 134-5) explains how even men who do not participate in sports are influenced by consuming them via media. Liking sports, Kimmel (2009:134-6, 138-9) contends, helps men create all-male friend groups that bond over all-male professional sports teams and male players, appreciating their physical athleticism and skill—characteristics of hegemonic masculinity—that serve to connect the average man with the masculine social world. Meanwhile, women are often excluded from these fan spaces, all-female teams are treated inadequately in professional settings, and sports

talk remains sexist (Kimmel 2009:136-40). Furthermore, the excitement and nostalgia of sports games offers men an emotional outlet that they typically cannot access (Kimmel 2009:129).

In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, bell hooks (2004:7) offers that anger is the only emotion men are rightfully able to express under America's patriarchal system. Kimmel (2009:55) agrees, saying that hegemonic masculinity requires that "boys and men shut down emotionally, that they suppress compassion, and inflate ambition," making anger the only viable emotion left to pursue. It should not be a surprise, then, when men act out violently. Additionally, Kimmel (2009:148-54) reports that the media men consume, often to excess, is filled with aggression and violence—from *Grand Theft Auto* to pornography to action films. While consuming violent media does not necessarily cause one to commit violence, it is important to recognize how media both reflects and enforces ideologies about social reality. Even though paying for and subsequently murdering a prostitute in *GTA* may be fantasy, it certainly is not unknown to reality in America and exemplifies our culture of violence. In this way, anger and aggression are marketed to young men through the interactive fantasies provided as "fun" escapist outlets for teenagers, and violence is portrayed as a reasonable option to work through these emotions within the context of the game. Expressions of anger have acquired a new role in hegemonic masculinity as the dominance of white heterosexual men has become more widely contested through recent history.

### **Masculinity in Post-World War II and Post-Vietnam America**

In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, Susan Faludi explores the transition of American masculinity from World War II to the post-Vietnam era. Faludi (1999:5, 29) suggests that the generation of men who fought in World War II "had 'won' the world," returning home to

a joyous welcoming of our country's new "heroes," and thereafter enjoyed a period of strong, uncontested masculinity. Masculinity of the World War II era emphasized brotherhood, the protection of women, and masculine dominance (Faludi 1999:30). This image of self-assured and heroic masculinity was mirrored in spaces of both the public and private spheres where men "pursued authority and power [in] politics, religion, the military, the community, and the household" (Faludi 1999:34-5).

American culture promised the same spoils for the boys and men who became Vietnam soldiers—who witnessed the military success of their acclaimed fathers—but ended up horribly disappointed (Faludi 1999:29). The controversy between older generations and young, anti-war American protestors made the war a contentious issue. Despite their service, Vietnam soldiers faced a hostile homecoming (Faludi 1999:29). Further, there was a prominent shift in the culture of the two wars as well:

There was nothing clear about any of it [in the Vietnam War], not the nature or the identity of the enemy, not the mission, not where they should be shooting or who was shooting at them, and certainly not the meaning of victory. Nor was this a "masculine" war in the World War II mode. There were no front lines, no ultimate objectives. It was essentially a war against a domestic population, against families where huts were burned with Zippo lighters, cattle slaughtered, children machine-gunned—a war in which the most remembered grunt leader was not a benevolent Captain Waskow but Lieutenant William Calley, a callow young man known only for going on a murderous rampage of monstrous proportions at My Lai (Faludi 1999:29).

Rather than heroes, Vietnam veterans were viewed as the enemy (Faludi 1999:29). Moreover, Faludi argues that masculinities were also in flux due to a significant cultural shift. In contrast to previous cultural ideologies that valued function and utility, post-war America adopted an ornamental culture that valued "celebrity and image, glamour and entertainment" that suggested masculinity was something to be purchased and consumed rather than a collective understanding of identity (Faludi 1999:35). Susan Jeffords also addresses this transition in her

1994 book *Hard Bodies* in which she analyzes hypermasculine imagery in Hollywood movies during this era and connects it with the nationalistic political discourse prominent during Ronald Reagan's presidency. The hard, muscled body that characterized leading actors of this time period became a symbol of national heroism that would save the country from the damage done during the civil rights era and the Carter presidency (Jeffords 1994:53). These models of masculinity were dangerous, because they glorified male aggression and dominance and communicated conservative rhetoric through their imagery. They also "represent the desperation of an aging superpower that is reluctant [...] to relinquish its international status and influence and may [...] be willing to punish harshly those who insist it do so" (Jeffords 1994:193). The strong white male figure, dependent on physicality and comfortable in social privilege, has recently been caught in a crossroads of liberal politics and social justice movements that challenge its authority in America.

Faludi and Jeffords's ideas about masculinity are echoed in *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America*, where James William Gibson (1994:9) suggests that American masculinity underwent a massive transformation in the 1980s. He argues that, after the nation's defeat in the Vietnam War, there was a collective loss of male self-esteem across the country which, coinciding with the ongoing civil rights and feminist movements, challenged white male authority and American nationalism (Gibson 1994:10-1). Gibson (1994:11-4), however, contends that American men became the "new warriors" after that, enthralled with a fascination for war films, technological advances in automatic weapons, and paramilitary groups. This glorification of violence peaked in the 80s when gun violence and especially mass murder in America increased, a result of these "warriors" attempting to prove their manhood, lacking a real war in which to fight. He asserts that understanding the social significance of paramilitary

culture is paramount in recognizing why masculinity and gun violence have been so closely linked through the Reagan-Bush era into the end of the 20th century.

### **Defining Violence and Understanding Violent Men**

School shootings are disproportionately perpetrated by men, an accurate reflection of the gender profile of violent offenders more broadly. Understanding violence from a holistic perspective is critical to understanding the connections between masculinity and violence. Iadicola and Shupe (2013:26, 33) define violence as “any action, inaction, or structural arrangement that results in physical or nonphysical harm to one or more animals” and categorize violence into three levels—interpersonal, institutional, and structural. While school shootings could be conceptualized within all three of these categories, the relationship between masculinity and violence is particularly illuminated within a structural framework. Structural violence “occurs in the context of establishing, maintaining, extending, or reducing the hierarchical ordering of categories of people in a society” (Iadicola and Shupe 2013:35). This type of violence articulates how hierarchies create and perpetuate violence between groups of people, including men and women in the gender hierarchy. The violent perpetrator consciously or unconsciously acknowledges their social positioning which helps to inform their actions. School shootings are a prime example of structural violence as I argue that they are a gendered phenomenon, demonstrative of men acting out within their positions as men as a result of their tumultuous relationship with hegemonic masculinity.

The reasons why violence occurs are multifaceted and complex. One particularly illustrious study blends psychosocial perspectives and extensive qualitative interviewing to determine the factors that precede acts of violence. In *Violence: Reflections on a National*



*Epidemic*, psychiatrist James Gilligan uses his experience working with hundreds of violent men in prison systems to craft a theory that explains why violence occurs. Gilligan (1996:11-2, emphasis in original) contends that:

The first lesson that tragedy teaches (and that morality plays amiss) is that *all violence is an attempt to achieve justice*, or what the violent person perceives as justice, for himself or for whomever it is on whose behalf he is being violent, so as to receive whatever retribution or compensation the violent person feels is “due” him or “owed” to him, or to those on whose behalf he is acting, whatever he or they are “entitled” to or have a “right” to; or so as to prevent those whom one loves or identifies with from being subjected to injustice. Thus, *the attempt to achieve and maintain justice, or to undo or prevent injustice, is the one and only universal cause of violence.*

Gilligan connects this to the primary argument of his book: that shame is the fundamental motivator of all violence, whether it be an individual physical altercation, a sexual assault, or mass murder. These violent acts are an attempt to acquire justice by “replac[ing] shame with pride” (Gilligan 1996:110-1). This is what Gilligan (1996:65) describes as the “emotional logic” or “logic of shame” behind acts of violence. Although committing instances of extreme violence would be considered unthinkable to most people, offenders are able to rationalize their actions through the idea that violence is justified, because it achieves justice and assuages their personal shame. Furthermore, Gilligan (1996:33-4, 64) also emphasizes the “ordinariness” of these offenders, yet contrasts it with how these men are unique in their experiences of a “death of the self” that makes it possible for them to commit acts of mutilation and murder against others. In this way, Gilligan focuses on the traceable psychological patterns that emerge from studying multiple violent offenders. He reveals the importance of experiences of shame and pride in men’s social world, creating connections between masculinity and violence. While Gilligan has crafted a thoughtful and compelling hypothesis on why violence occurs, previous literature

focusing on school shootings has implicated a number of potential factors—from mental health to gun accessibility—for these attacks.

### **Explaining School Shootings: A Review of the Literature**

Although the first school shooting occurred in 1966,<sup>2</sup> mass school shootings became recognized as an American phenomenon in research and literature after the “perceived wave” of events during the late 1990s and 2000s when several mass shootings were occurring each year (Muschert 2007:65). The 1999 Columbine High School Massacre came to exemplify this period, becoming one of the most prolific school shootings to date and spawning an incredible variety of conversation attempting to explain why shooters commit their crimes. Mental health, access to guns, and bullying remain the focus of these conversations. Journalist David Cullen’s *Columbine* is one of the best-known accounts among this literature. He describes the series of events from that day, drawing from news and witness testimonies, and covers the aftermath of the shootings including the media’s response, the investigation into shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s backgrounds, and the impact on survivors. Cullen acknowledges the complex network of factors that influenced the shooting itself as well as public discourse about the shooting. The media, for example, played a significant role in early explanations of Harris and Klebold’s actions. Approximately 450 reporters and 60 television cameras were on-site to document the initial findings from the attack and express their perspectives regarding the boys’ motives (Muschert 2002:16). The confusion and chaos that persisted while local police—unprepared to handle a mass shooting—failed to address the situation quickly and effectively provided time for

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<sup>2</sup> As identified by the Stanford Mass Shootings of America database.

immediate media coverage to unwarrantedly blame goth culture, homophobia, and school cliques for the shooting (Cullen 2009:149-50, 157-58; Washington Times 2009). These assertions were based off of reports from approximately 2,000 witnesses who were at Columbine that day, some of whom provided conflicting observations or unsupported opinions about the shooters and many of whom did not even know Harris or Klebold personally (Cullen 2009:149). Witness testimony supported arguments that the killers were specifically targeting particular students or particular groups of students, even though others claimed that the pair “didn’t care” who got hurt and that “everyone” was vulnerable (Cullen 2009:154). Despite inconsistencies, these reports were crucial to developing the early national understanding of Columbine; as they ran regular pieces on the massacre, CNN and Fox News garnered their highest ratings of all time, and Columbine was front-page news on the *New York Times* for fourteen consecutive days (Cullen 2009:178). Some reporters in the news media were quick to condense the massacre into a digestible story of two troubled Goths obsessed with violence and death (Cullen 2009:156). These spontaneous reactions, common to media coverage of school shootings, contributes to the misguided understanding of these events as a “media spectacle,” singular community tragedies rather than patterned events with sociological grounding (Katz and Kellner 2008). Similarly, headlines regularly fail to acknowledge school shooters’ gender and racial backgrounds, despite that the actions of one Black shooter or one Muslim shooter are often generalized as a representation of an entire racial or religious group (Earp and Katz 2013).

Some researchers sought patterns across individual school shooters, thoroughly questioning the mental health status of perpetrators. In *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters*, psychologist Peter Langman (2009:18) categorizes ten perpetrators into three categories: psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized shooters. These typologies provide a

framework for understanding the mental capacity for mass shooters to commit their devastating, premeditated, and seemingly unthinkable attacks. While Langman (2009:131-52) concedes that not all people with severe mental health issues will commit mass shootings, he acknowledges several common characteristics shared among the school shooters he studied, including a lack of empathy; existential rage and existential anguish; extreme reactivity; shame, envy, and the failure of manhood; and an idolization of fantasy. Although Langman posits these characteristics as specifically connected to an individual's mental health, other research on mental illness and gun violence suggests otherwise. A seminal report by Swanson et al. (1990:769) illustrated that acts of violence are more closely associated with men, poverty, and substance abuse than mental illness. Since then, several more studies have indicated similar results (Van Dorn, Volavka, and Johnson 2012; Steadman et al. 1998; Swanson et al. 2002). Furthermore, a contemporary report produced by Swanson et al. (2015:367) suggests that the perpetuation of mass shooters as mentally ill by news media reinforces that notion among the American public, despite ongoing studies that suggest mental illness has only a small relationship with violence. Langman's psychological profiles of school shooters are contingent upon the assumption that the perpetrators' violent actions and disturbed dispositions are a result of their mental health, but most psychiatric studies counter this narrative. Moreover, Metzler and MacLeish (2015:240-1) suggest that calls to reform mental health processes following school shooting events reveal anxieties about mental health, race, and politics rather than provide a viable solution to preventing future attacks. While they agree more generally that greater mental health support networks and investment in those networks would be beneficial to reducing some types of crime, oversimplifying and assuming causal links between mental health and violence unfairly "stereotypes a vast and diverse population of persons diagnosed with psychiatric conditions"

(Metzl and MacLeish 2015:240-1). Their assessment of mental health narratives among mass shooters is supported by studies that show only 17% of school shooters were diagnosed with a mental illness prior to their attack (Newman et al. 2004:243). However, approximately 52% were affirmatively diagnosed after their shooting (Newman et al. 2004:243). Although this might indicate a failure of the American health care system to promptly address individuals in need, the retroactive diagnosis may also reveal a social bias that violent people are presumably mentally ill. Psychotic individuals only account for 5% of all perpetrators of violent crime, and of that percentage, “age, gender, diagnosis, and type of criminal offense all affect the odds ratios for violent convictions” (Appelbaum 2006:1319). Psychotic women in particular are severely underrepresented among all psychotic violent crime perpetrators (Appelbaum 2006:1319). Moreover, if a lack of mental health access was to blame for school shootings, one could expect that more poor women of color—the demographic with the worst access to health care—would be responsible for perpetrating them (Kerby 2012:4; Murphy 2012). In this way, while comparing mental health profiles across school shooters may produce a broader understanding of school shooting motives, Langman’s work still focuses on the problem as internal to school shooters rather than existing externally at a societal level.

In this way, arguments surrounding mental health—a criticism of the individual—are at odds with America’s gun accessibility—a criticism of society. Although there is only a weak relationship between mental health disorders and gun violence, a 2013 Gallup Poll revealed that 48% of respondents believe that the “failure of the mental health system to identify individuals who are a danger to others” is to blame for mass shootings, while only 40% fault the easy accessibility of guns in America (Saad 2013). Still, gun control advocates have pushed to the forefront of national conversations about mass school shootings. Following the Columbine

Massacre, filmmaker Michael Moore created a documentary in 2002 entitled *Bowling for Columbine* that primarily criticized American gun accessibility in regards to the shooting. The Academy Award-winning film features two particularly infamous scenes: one where Moore opens an account at a Michigan bank that includes a free gun with his first deposit and another where Moore escorts two Columbine survivors to a Kmart superstore to ask for a refund on the bullets, purchased at the superstore chain by Harris and Klebold, still embedded in the survivors' bodies (2002). Although the film's provocative storytelling invites criticism, Moore's actions helped to blatantly tackle the powerful gun industry and end the sale of gun ammunition at Kmart across the country (CBS News 2001).

Conversations about stricter gun control's role in preventing school shootings have also emerged in academic research. In *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*, Newman et al. (2004:297-8) acknowledge that limiting access to guns, although does not tackle the core of the issue, does provide another obstacle for potential killers to navigate when planning their attacks. "Mass murders tend not to happen—in school or anywhere else—when knives are the only weapon available" (Newman et al. 2004:69). Advancements in gun technology and production have made guns more affordable, more widely available, more lethal, and the most frequently-used weapon in homicides (Beeghley 2004:116). In this way, for people who want to commit acts of violence—and particularly mass violence, where the goal is often to harm as many people as possible—the accessibility of guns makes these events more easily possible. While this assertion has merit, Newman et al. (2004:55-6) also point out the differences between urban and suburban or rural locations. Mass school shootings more often occur in the latter, but because guns are also accessible in urban areas—and individual, ongoing gun violence disputes

occur regularly there—simply having access to guns on its own does not explain why *mass shootings* specifically are perpetrated (Newman et al. 2004:55-6).

*No Easy Answers*, by Brooks Brown—a close friend of Dylan Klebold—and Rob Merritt, is an attempt to reveal the culture of primarily white, suburban Columbine High School where bullying commonly kept students in their social place. Brown’s experiences revealed that bullying was not only frequent but also ignored by administrators (Brown and Merritt 2002:50-1). This experience is corroborated by Ralph Larkin (2007:196) in *Comprehending Columbine* whose major argument suggests that “anger and resentment” created as a result of the top-down hostility among the school’s social hierarchy and the arrogance from the evangelical “moral elite” were significant factors instigating the shooting. Although, as their title suggests, there are no easy answers, Brown and Merritt (2002:163) assert that ““Eric and Dylan are the ones responsible for creating this tragedy [...] [h]owever, Columbine is responsible for creating Eric and Dylan.”” While this does acknowledge a sociocultural influence—rather than merely an innate psychological influence on the boys—it fails to recognize that Columbine is not unique; bullying is a ubiquitous problem experienced in schools across the country, yet school shootings are rare events that occur only at a few locations.

To date, Columbine still acts as a trigger word for “a complex set of emotions surrounding youth, risk, fear, and delinquency in 21<sup>st</sup> century America” that inspires questions about violence and school shootings in particular (Muschert 2007:60). Cullen’s account, acknowledging Harris and Klebold’s varying psychological mindsets, the Columbine culture, and their access to guns presents the complexity of factors preceding their attack. Although he states that “there is no profile” of a school shooter, he concedes that nearly all shooters are men (Cullen 2009:15, 322). If the causes of school shootings were only found in mental health, gun

control, bullying, or a combination of these factors, girls and women should instigate school shootings just as frequently as men. Because they do not, one must wonder how Cullen could claim that school shooters do not have, at the very least, a gender profile. It is necessary to study the construction of masculinity and how it may influence the lives and experiences of school shooters.

Since Columbine, mainstream discussion surrounding school shootings has primarily continued to encompass three topics: mental health, gun control, and bullying. It is only recently that sociological understandings of white masculinity have become linked with these factors. These conversations are rarely discussed in mainstream news media, but are offered through the academic lenses of sociology and gender studies by scholars such as Michael Kimmel, Jackson Katz, Douglas Kellner, and Katherine Newman.

Michael Kimmel has contributed three articles focusing on the subject of school shootings: “Suicide by Mass Murder: Masculinity, Aggrieved Entitlement, and Rampage Shootings” (with colleague Rachel Kalish, 2010), “Profiling School Shooters and Shooters’ Schools: The Cultural Contexts of Aggrieved Entitlement and Restorative Masculinity” (2008), and “Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence: Random School Shootings, 1982-2001” (with colleague Matthew Mahler, 2003). Although each of these articles contains a slightly different focus, the core of Kimmel’s work seeks to explain why young white boys and men are the primary perpetrators of mass school shootings.

In “Suicide by Mass Murder,” Kalish and Kimmel (2010:457) analyze the link between masculinity and murder-suicides in mass violence, explaining that suicide in young men is attributed to “achievement failures, or identity threats that can constitute a failure of living up to a masculine identity” and that it is important for the suicide to be successful; a failed suicide



attempt is just another example of his impotence as a man. Moreover, perpetrators experience a gendered sense of “aggrieved entitlement” that encourages them to retaliate against people who have bullied or humiliated them (Kalish and Kimmel 2010:454). “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” (Kalish and Kimmel 2010:454). In this way, Kalish and Kimmel (2010) poignantly illustrate how school shooters view suicidal and homicidal violence as one in the same, and both are crucial to demonstrating their masculinity.

In “Profiling School Shooters and Shooters’ Schools,” Kimmel (2008) identifies demographic similarities not only among school shooters, but also among the schools where shootings occur. According to Kimmel (2008:134-7), a mass violence-prone school is located in a politically conservative rural or suburban area, tolerates bullying on the institutional level (“[i]t wasn’t just that [shooters] were bullied and harassed and intimidated every day; it was that the administration, teachers and community colluded with it”), and maintains a toxic climate where boys are encouraged to “retaliate when provoked.” Using Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho as an example, Kimmel (2008:138-9) explains the social marginalization and alienation present at these schools where communities are centered around jock culture to the exclusion of other students and social groups. This, combined with the ability to access guns and the experience of aggrieved entitlement, provided Cho with the motivation to commit his deadly assault.

In “Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence,” Kimmel and Mahler (2003:1440) present their theory that school shooters committed their acts as a result, at least in part, of bullying that targeted the shooter’s sexual orientation that threatened their sense of manhood by publically emasculating them. Although there is no evidence that any of the school shooters studied identified as gay, “being constantly threatened and bullied *as if you are gay* as

well as the homophobic desire to make sure that others know you are a ‘real man’ plays a pivotal and understudied role in these school shootings” (Kimmel and Mahler 2003:1446, emphasis in original). While not all bullied students commit mass violence, Kimmel and Mahler (2003:1453-54) finally suggest that if boys do not have alternative coping strategies and safe communities—like engaging in a personal passion or modeling oneself after positive male or female role models—violence may seem like their only solution.

In *Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombing to the Virginia Tech Massacre*, Douglas Kellner (2008:26) analyzes the relationship between gun culture, male socialization and the social construction of masculinity, and violent American society. He posits that the social identity of white heterosexual men is challenged in today’s society where people of racial, religious, and gender minorities are enjoying relatively greater equality that endangers the position of white men as leaders (Kellner 2008:90-3). Because of this threat, white men are desperate to reconstruct and reaffirm their masculinity as socially dominant. Kellner (2008:97) eloquently links white masculinity with gun use, saying:

The crisis in masculinity drove many men to seek solace in guns and weapons. Gun and military culture in particular fetishize weapons as an important part of male virility and power, treating guns as objects of almost religious veneration and devotion. In this constellation, the expression of violence through guns and the use of weapons is perceived as an expression of manhood.

These men also turn to right-wing conservative politics to reassure themselves of their importance in society, commiserate about their frustration with minorities, and justify their gun use (Kellner 2008:110). Therefore, the “combination of male rage, right-wing paranoia and identity politics, and a culture of violence is extremely lethal” as it creates an environment where

“men use violence to create identities, gain meaning, and assert their power” such as in the case of mass shootings and domestic terrorism (Kellner 2008:110).

In *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*, Newman et al. (2004) present the results of their research on two events, the Heath High School shooting and the Westside Middle School shooting. They propose five conditions that always precede school shootings: 1) the perpetrator must perceive himself as marginal in his social groups, 2) the perpetrator must possess psychosocial problems that intensify this experience of marginality, 3) models of violence must be available that indicate that enacting a school shooting will “resolve [the perpetrator’s] dilemmas, 4) the academic institution must lack a system for and advocacy of peer reporting, and 5) the perpetrator must have relatively easy access to one or more guns (Newman et al. 2004:229-30). They assert that, while not an exhaustive list, this framework provides the conditions necessary for school shootings to occur (Newman et al. 2004:230-1). Applying this theory to nearly thirty total shootings reveals that it holds true across nearly all of them (Newman et al. 2004:268-70).

Reviewing the existing literature on mass school shootings—especially that which specifically addresses issues of gender—has been invaluable for my project as I attempt to reconcile American hegemonic masculinity and its influence on school shooters while framing my cases through expressions of misogynistic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Throughout my data analysis, I draw from these theories on gender and violence in order to explain why school shootings occur. Moreover, I support and contribute to existing literature by adding a thorough analysis of the University of California, Santa Barbara shooting perpetrated by Elliot Rodger, too recent to have been discussed in previous studies, and specifically focus on how misogyny manifests in these cases. Through this, I discover how the social construction of hegemonic

masculinity that promotes the supremacy of men to the subordination of women informs the actions of young white men, the picture of American privilege—and typical mass shooter.

## Methodology

I offer a qualitative case study analysis of ten school shootings across America, each of which occurred between 1997 and 2015, a span of 18 years. All twelve shooters in these cases were male, eight were white (two were biracial, one was Asian American, and one was Native American), and eleven were under 30 (one was over). This sample is fairly representative of the demographics found of school shooters nationally, and I describe how I constructed this sample more in detail later in this methodology. Using a dataset curated by the Stanford Mass Shootings of America (MSA) project, of 71 school shootings and 79 perpetrators since 1966, I calculated that 96.2% of all school shooters are male, 54.4% are white, and the average age is 22.5 while the median age is 19.<sup>3, 4</sup> A majority of the incidents occurred on university campuses (40.8%), followed by high schools (31.0%), middle schools (14.1%), elementary schools (12.7%), and

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<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, no datasets exist that solely contain data on mass school shootings. What does exist are databases of information regarding mass shootings, with categorical markers indicating those mass shootings occurring on school campuses. Some available mass shooting databases include those provided by Stanford University Libraries, the Gun Violence Archive, and *Mother Jones*. For this work, whenever possible, I calculate statistics on national school shootings using the MSA data project, an ongoing “data aggregation effort” of 237 mass shootings as reported in online media over the past 50 years, produced courtesy of the Stanford Geospatial Center and Stanford Libraries (2016). From this initial dataset, I extracted just the entries I identified as school shootings, that is, those premeditated mass shootings purposefully occurring on school grounds. The new dataset consists of 71 of these mass shootings, all which are labeled affirmatively as “school-related” incidents from the original dataset.

<sup>4</sup> I point out two abnormalities in these data. First, the race of one perpetrator in the MSA dataset (Elliot Rodger) was listed as White American/European American, when official reports (as well as his own manifesto) identify him as half-white and half-Chinese. Thus, I relisted him as “two or more races” and did not include him in the White American/European America category for this calculation. Second, the average age listed here excludes one outlier by age. Biswanath Halder, age 62, committed a mass shooting at Case Western Reserve University in 2003. The mean age in this dataset is 22.987 and its standard deviation is 10.022. Three standard deviations higher than the mean is the age 53.055, leaving Halder as an outlier beyond that. To note, the average age including Halder is 22.987, increasing the average age by 0.5 years. I believe that excluding Halder provides a more accurate demographic profile of the typical American school shooter.

other (1.41%).<sup>5</sup> All of the perpetrators in my sample are male, 66.7% are white, and the average age is 20 while the median age is 19. A majority of my cases occurred at universities (40.0%), followed by high schools (30%), elementary schools (20%), and middle schools (10%). Finally, within my sample, mental health issues were assumed present in eight out of twelve perpetrators, three of whom obtained retroactive diagnoses and five who had diagnoses prior to their attacks. While each case has its own individual circumstances, they possess similarities that reflect the perpetrator's relationship to American hegemonic masculinity. Through qualitative case study analysis, I am able to explore how the social construction of masculinity informs school shooters' actions and how misogynistic ideologies are expressed by the perpetrators.

I began this project in my Sociology of Violence senior seminar at Dickinson College in fall 2015. At that time, this analysis consisted of only four cases: the 2006 West Nickel Mines Amish school shooting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut; the 2014 Isla Vista killings in Santa Barbara, California; and the 2015 Umpqua Community College shooting in Roseburg, Oregon. My efforts in this seminar culminated in a 32-page paper in which I focused predominantly on a theoretical literature review and an analysis of the four cases through various interdisciplinary theories regarding violence and masculinity. Many of those ideas have been reproduced in this work with considerable editing and the addition of six more school shootings. Although I would describe my research method last semester also as case study analysis, I discovered the formal process of

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<sup>5</sup> The category "other" includes only one shooting which took place at the American Civic Association Immigration Center in Binghamton, New York. The ACA Center provides immigration services, refugee resettlement services, and cultural and ethnic preservation education services to community members (American Civic Association N.d.). The shooting there was perpetrated in a classroom by a former student, so while it did not take place within a traditional school system, it still culturally reflected a mass school shooting.

case study analysis later while expanding this research into my current thesis project. Robert K. Yin's foundational text *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* has been particularly helpful in understanding and developing this research method, but some of my framing of those four cases has been retroactive. Not all of my research actions beginning last semester have aligned with Yin's portrayal of the best way to conduct case study analysis.

When I developed my original sociology thesis proposal, I planned to conduct a joint research project considering the impact of the social construction of gender within both school shootings in America and the experiences of LGBT individuals. Because of difficulty marrying these two very different topics within one analysis and the limitation of time needed to do so, I decided to abandon the LGBT History Project portion of my original thesis idea in favor of pursuing my research of school shootings more thoroughly and effectively.

### **Understanding Qualitative Case Study Analysis**

Qualitative case study analysis is a holistic social science research method that has been rising in popularity over the past several decades (Yin 2014:xix). According to Baxter and Jack (2008:544), qualitative case study analysis is “an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon [...] using a variety of data sources.” It utilizes case studies, defined as “detailed description of an event, incident, occasion, group, or institution,” that the researcher can study to make an argument about these events in relation to the social world (Pandey 2009:9-10). “The case serves as the main *unit of analysis* in a case study,” that is, it is the entity being studied (Yin 2012:6). Although many case studies in this methodology incorporate traditional qualitative research methods of observation and interviewing, my opportunity as an undergraduate student to study school shootings at the sites where these events have occurred is

limited. Instead, I analyze documentation about my cases from multiple sources, including primary documents such as police reports, transcribed interviews, perpetrator's manifestos and personal correspondences, and journal entries. I also draw on secondary sources such as news articles, academic reports, and books. Yin (2014:105) establishes that the six sources of evidence in case study work are documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. My research resources primarily consist of documentation, but I also draw from retrospective interviews conducted with perpetrators' family and friends, witnesses and survivors of the shootings, and in some cases, the perpetrator themselves. Using multiple data sources is a key component of case study research in order to analyze the studied phenomenon more comprehensively (Baxter and Jack 2008:554). Therefore, my data analysis features both documentation and interview data intermingled within each of my larger themes.

By using qualitative case study analysis, researchers are able to investigate the answers to a developed research question by collecting and interpreting data. This method also provides the opportunity for “deconstruct[ing] and [...] reconstruct[ing]” phenomena, because case studies can reveal the way social structures impact specific experiences (Baxter and Jack 2008:544). Yin (2014:6) suggests that a qualitative case study design should be implemented when the research answers “how” and “why” questions and/or when the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of the subject being studied, as would be done in any experimental or quasi-experimental approach. In addition, most case studies focus on contemporary topics (Yin 2014:6). This model aligns with my own objectives, as in my work I aim to explore *how* masculinity informs American school shootings and *how* misogynistic ideologies are expressed through mass violence.

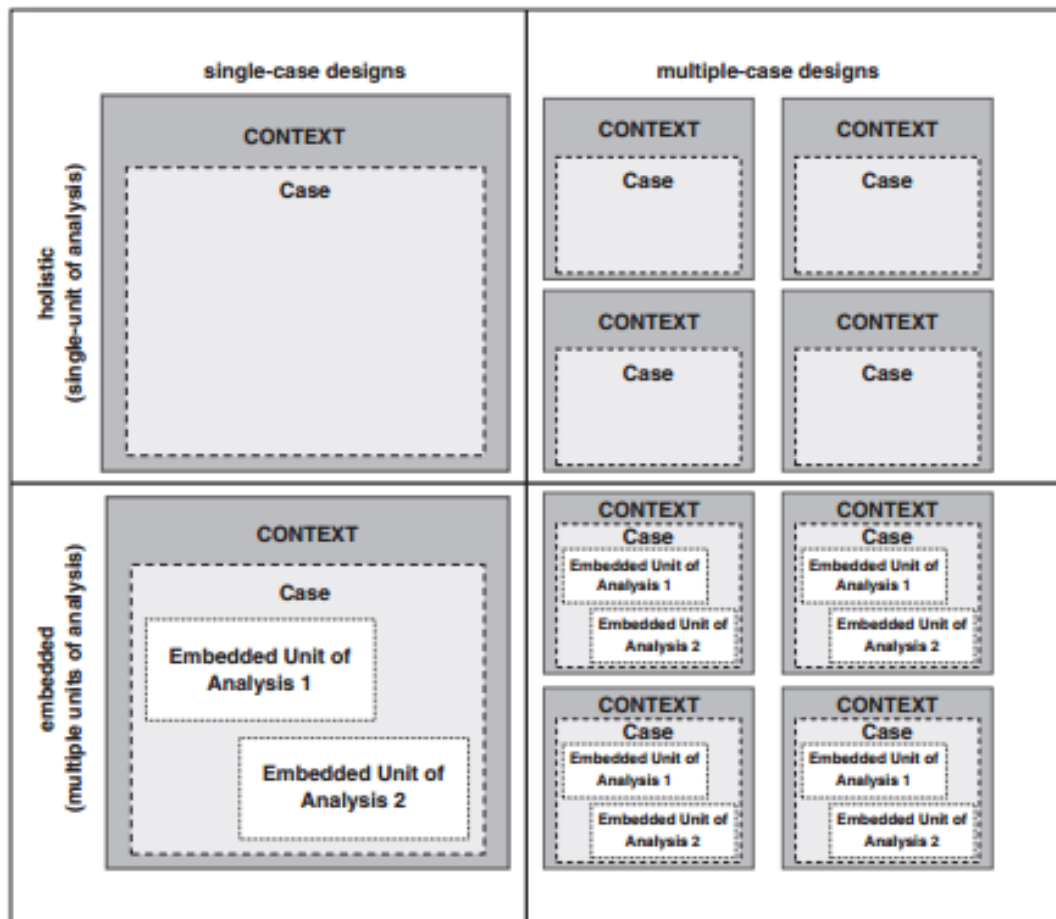
Harding, Fox, and Mehta (2002:176, 209) offer that in-depth qualitative case study analysis of “rare events” like school shootings can provide more effective analysis than other methods of study, because it allows the researcher to create a theoretical argument about how these cases function within society. Although they are a public safety concern and have the potential to cause extreme loss of life, school shootings occur relatively rarely, which makes them a difficult subject for research (Harding et al. 2002:209). Yin (2003:2) suggests that an important strength of qualitative case study analysis is that it “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events.” In this way, qualitative case study analysis is an appropriate selection for my research method, because it enables me to examine a specific sampling of school shootings through an analysis of the social construction of gender, maintaining the significance of these individual events while theorizing how masculinity functions structurally within them.

There are three major types of case study analysis: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. Explanatory analysis is used to “explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for survey or experimental strategies” (Baxter and Jack 2008:547). Exploratory analysis is used in “situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes” (Baxter and Jack 2008:548). Descriptive analysis is used to “describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Baxter and Jack 2008:548). My work most closely aligns with the explanatory or descriptive categories of case study analysis, because I am both examining the potential cause-effect relationship between hegemonic masculinity and school shootings as well as describing how mass school shootings are a gendered phenomenon.



These types of analysis also fall into two additional design categories: either single-case or multiple-case, and either holistic or embedded (Yin 2014:50). See Figure 1 below for a visual representation of this matrix categorization. Single-case studies focus on one case within a single social, cultural, economic, or other context, while multiple-case studies examine multiple cases within multiple larger contexts (Yin 2014:50-5). Holistic studies use only one unit of analysis in a case, while embedded studies utilize multiple units of analysis at various levels within each case (Yin 2014:50, 53-6).

*Figure 1: Basic Types of Designs for Case Studies (COSMOS Corporations as cited in Yin 2012:8)*



For example, if a researcher sought to study the efficacy of particular health care practices, the researcher could create a holistic study by only examining the “global nature of an organization or a program” as a whole without additional research at various levels (Yin 2014:55). Or they could instead pursue an embedded approach where they might discuss outcomes on hospital staff, directors, and patients—each of these groups would then be considered embedded parts to the whole study, each acting as a unit of analysis to explain a larger concept, organization, or phenomenon (Yin 2014:55).

Regarding its design, my work would likely be categorized as a holistic analysis (of American school shootings) via multiple cases (represented by each individual shooting incident). Encompassing each case study is the context of that particular situation: the shooter’s background, demographic profile, mental health, the school’s location and security, the accessibility to guns, the experience level of local police, as well as other factors. These circumstantial factors directly influence how the school shooting incident occurs. I expand on these factors and argue, however, that the social construction of masculinity is not only manifested in the actions of individuals. It is reproduced by social structures and group socialization and this informs the school shooter’s beliefs, behaviors, and actions even before their attacks occur. By analyzing the social construction of gender at the case level, I am able to draw comparisons between independent events and reveal how sociocultural ideologies thread them together under a similar understanding of masculinity and misogyny.

While this method has its notable strengths, Harding et al. (2002:177-185) also address five challenges in researching school shootings, specifically through the qualitative case study method: 1) the case study definition problem, 2) the comparison case study problem, 3) the degrees of freedom problem, 4) the combined causes problem, and 5) the different causes

problem. The case study definition problem refers to the issue of properly defining a “case,” a school shooting in my research (Harding et al. 2002:177). Without a universal definition for “school shooting,” it is up to the researcher to decide how to define it and therefore select particular cases that fit that definition for inclusion in the research. The comparison case study problem describes the issue of “identifying the ‘nonevent’ with which cases of the outcome could be contrasted,” meaning that in order to explain the potential causes of school shootings, a researcher must also consider what allows some schools to never experience school shootings (Harding et al. 2002:178-9). The nonevent in this case could be identified on individual, community, or national levels of analysis by comparing shooters to nonshooters, schools where shootings have occurred to those where they have not, or the United States (a country where school shootings are frequent) to another country where school shootings rarely if ever happen (Harding et al. 2002:179). This may be an issue of concern, because without understanding why school shootings do not happen, how can we posit why they do? The degrees of freedom problem addresses the situation of having only a small group of incidents available to study, but many possible causes for those incidents (Harding et al. 2002:179). This is especially difficult in the case of school shootings where everything from mental health issues to violent video games have been said to influence the behaviors and actions of school shooters. The combined causes problem offers that phenomena are often caused by multiple factors and, therefore, the researcher must recognize the complexity of social issues (Harding et al. 2002:182-3). “Because [school shootings] are rare but the universe of potential cases in which the[se] events might occur is extremely large, many settings in which the event does not occur are exposed to many of the same causal factors” (Harding et al. 2002:182-3). Still, case study research is particularly strong at handling this issue. By developing a thorough literature review and then analyzing multiple

instances of school shootings, I can address the multiplicity and complexity of its relationships. Finally, the different causes problem considers that two or more seemingly alike cases may in actuality be the result of different causes (Harding et al. 2002:184). I address each of these challenges in my own work.

### **Creating My Qualitative Case Study Sample**

I use the Stanford MSA's definition of mass shootings ("three or more shooting victims, not necessarily fatalities, not including the shooter, [and] must not be identifiably gang or drug related") as the basis for my own definition: school shootings are premeditated mass shootings specifically arranged by the perpetrator to occur on school grounds. By defining school shootings in this way, I assert that they are not the result of spontaneous interpersonal drug- or gang-related issues, but are premeditated. Additionally, while the entirety of the attack does not have to take place on school property, there must be identifiable, purposeful intent by the perpetrator to commit at least part of the violence at a school. Moreover, the imagery of a "school shooting" in American media overwhelmingly suggests the type of disastrous violence such as the Virginia Tech Massacre where over 30 people were killed, so although a simple gun firing on school property may technically fit into a broad understanding of a "school shooting," it is "quite disingenuous on an emotional level" to describe them in this way; therefore, it is important to recognize that I define school shootings as mass shootings (Carroll 2014).

The ten school shooting incidents in my qualitative case study analysis were chosen because they fit my established definition of school shootings. They meet the criteria for mass shootings as per the Stanford MSA definition, were premeditated attacks, and were specifically chosen by the perpetrator to occur on school grounds. In addition, these ten incidents were also

referred to as “school shootings” in the media, indicating that professional news sources as well as the local and/or national public culturally understand these specific crimes as school shootings. They all also occurred within the past 20 years, so this selected group of incidents is relevant in discussions about school shootings as a social issue today and into the future. Another prerequisite to selecting these particular shootings was the availability of information about the shooting and perpetrator as well as availability of primary sources in the shooter’s own words or images. My goal of analyzing perpetrators’ beliefs and attitudes about masculinity would be limited if I did not have sufficient materials available expressing the perpetrators’ perspectives. This might introduce bias into my research, because I am selecting cases where misogynistic attitudes are perhaps more observable, and those who expressed these feelings may have been more affected by these factors than other shooting perpetrators. Although this bias does exist, I hope that it is compensated by my research integrity and honesty—by admitting to my faults while providing accurate information throughout this paper—as well as the fact that I selected high-profile cases that are not obscure, but represent the total universe of American school shootings in terms of gender and racial profiles.<sup>6</sup> There are many other incidents that could meet my definition for school shootings, but comprehensive accounts of some school shooting events are limited, reducing the number of incidents that would qualify for this case study analysis. Gathering information in full even for some of the most devastating and well-covered school

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<sup>6</sup> Case study research is limited in three primary ways. Firstly, it relies on written records, which are biased narratives based on who had the resources to originally create and save such documents. It unfortunately prioritizes the voices of these individuals. Secondly, it requires a conscientious and self-aware researcher who recognizes their implicit bias in selecting cases. Thirdly, case studies focus so much on studying specific events within a specific context that the findings cannot be easily generalized. While this method is not inferential due to these limitations, it enables us to thoroughly study the intricacies of a particular social phenomenon. Focusing on the complexities of a single issue can provide detailed insight on that topic. Moreover, in a phenomenon where most of the subjects are deceased or incarcerated, there are little other alternative methods for studying this subject.

shootings can be challenging due to the fear of copycat crimes as well as the need to respect family, friends, and communities directly affected by the attacks. For example, police reports often contain censored or redacted information to protect the privacy of family and friends of the perpetrator. While this is completely valid, my work as an undergraduate researcher is made more difficult when I encounter limited information about particular cases.

I analyze these ten cases in the context of a theoretical exploration of the social construction of masculinity, determining how hegemonic masculinity's focus on superiority impacts the beliefs, behaviors, and actions of American school shooters.

### **My School Shootings Sample**

Table 1 is a chronological list of the ten incidents in my sample and includes demographic information corresponding to each incident. I reiterate that the average school shooter of these cases is a 20-year-old white man shooting on a university campus; this closely resembles the average school shooter at the national level.

*Table 1: List of School Shootings in My Sample*

School Name	Location	Date of Shooting	Perpetrator's Name	Perpetrator's Age	Perpetrator's Gender	Perpetrator's Race
Pearl High School	Pearl, Mississippi	October 1, 1997	Luke Woodham	16	Male	White American or European American
Westside Middle School	Jonesboro, Arkansas	March 24, 1998	Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden	13 and 11	Male	White American or European American
Columbine High School	Columbine, Colorado	April 20, 1999	Eric Harris and Dylan Kebold	18 and 17	Male	White American or

						European American
West Nickel Mines Amish School	Lancaster, Pennsylvania	October 2, 2006	Charles Carl Roberts IV	32	Male	White American or European American
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University	Blacksburg, Virginia	April 16, 2007	Seung-Hui Cho	23	Male	Asian American
Northern Illinois University	Dekalb, Illinois	February 14, 2008	Steven Kazmierczak	27	Male	White American or European American
Sandy Hook Elementary School	Newtown, Connecticut	December 14, 2012	Adam Lanza	20	Male	White American or European American
University of California, Santa Barbara	Isla Vista, California	May 23, 2014	Elliot Rodger	22	Male	Two or more races
Marysville Pilchuck High School	Marysville, Washington	October 24, 2014	Jaylen Fryberg	15	Male	Native American or Alaska Native
Umpqua Community College	Roseburg, Oregon	October 1, 2015	Christopher Harper-Mercer	26	Male	Two or more races

What follows are brief descriptions of the events that occurred at each shooting as detailed by news media and other reported accounts. They are in chronological order, beginning with the Pearl High School shooting in 1997 and ending with the Umpqua Community College shooting in 2015. These descriptions detail what happened in each incident as reported by news sources as well as document the primary materials available for my analysis.

*1997 Pearl High School shooting*

On October 1, 1997, a white 16-year-old boy named Luke Woodham walked onto the Pearl High School campus where he attended school. He had a rifle hidden under a trench coat after having murdered his mother earlier that morning (Holland 1997; “Teen Guilty” 1998). In a courtyard commons outside the school, he approached his ex-girlfriend and opened fire, “shooting her fatally in the neck” (Hewitt 1997). He proceeded through the area, shooting methodically, injuring seven other students and killing one other girl, resulting in a total of three female deaths (Hewitt 1997; Holland 1997). Woodham was stopped and seized by the school’s assistant principal before being arrested by police (Holland 1997). Later police investigation would discover journal entries and a manifesto that detailed Woodham’s fixation on violence and his devastation over his previous breakup (Hewitt 1997; Woodham 1997). Additionally, although Woodham himself committed the crime, six other male students (one attending a nearby community college) were also arrested for conspiring with Woodham on the attack. The group supposedly wanted to eliminate their enemies, gain power, and acquire status (Hewitt 1997). Woodham is currently serving three life terms in Mississippi State Prison (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2016).

*1998 Westside Middle School shooting*

On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998, two white male cousins, thirteen-year-old Mitchell Johnson and eleven-year-old Andrew Golden drove Johnson’s mother’s van loaded with rifles and pistols, food, and sleeping bags to Westside Middle School (Kifner 1998; Koon 2008). Once there, they parked the van, and Johnson brought the weapons to the edge of the woods outside of the school while Golden entered the school building and pulled the fire alarm (Kifner 1998). He exited



quickly after, rejoining Johnson in the woods where they donned camouflage vests and prepared their weapons, including a semi-automatic rifle (Kifner 1998; Koon 2008). As teachers and students began filing outside in response to the alarm, the boys opened fire, killing four female students and one teacher while wounding ten others (Koon 2008). The boys were apprehended by police officers as they attempted to escape to their van (Koon 2008). Tried as juveniles, they were imprisoned for seven and nine years, respectively, until their 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays, making them the only living mass school shooters not currently incarcerated (Keneally 2016). Interviews with Johnson as well as community members and survivors of the Westside Middle School shooting recount the day's events and the impact on their lives since.

#### *1999 Columbine High School massacre*

On April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999, two white boys, eighteen-year-old Eric Harris and seventeen-year-old Dylan Klebold opened fire in the Columbine High School cafeteria where they attended school. They had earlier planted homemade explosives around the school, although those failed to fully detonate (Erikson 2001:25-6; Kohn 2001). After shooting students in and around the cafeteria, the pair then entered the school library where 56 students, faculty, and staff were hiding (Erikson 2001:29). They continued their rampage there, wounding and killing many more students. Following this, they wandered the halls, shooting randomly and threatening students while police failed to intervene effectively—the potential for bombs and booby traps as well as unknown information about the shooters were later cited as cause for delay (Kohn 2001). Harris and Klebold finally returned to the library and died by suicide together (Kohn 2001). The two killed fifteen people and injured over twenty more, making the Columbine tragedy the deadliest high school shooting in American history (Shen 2012). Both Harris and Klebold left behind

journals filled with drawings and entries that provide some insight to the boys' thoughts. Police reports detail the timeline of events on April 20<sup>th</sup> as well as the extent of the damage caused that day. Interviews conducted with the shooters' relatives and friends and other members of the Columbine community also provide many other statements about the Columbine massacre and the two shooters.

#### *2006 West Nickel Mines Elementary School shooting*

On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006, a white 32-year-old man named Charles Carl Roberts IV parked his truck outside of the West Nickel Mines School. He entered the schoolhouse once, asking about a lost mechanical part, then reentered again, brandishing a gun (Hastings 2006). Inside, he ordered the young boys to help unload his truck of lumber, guns, wires, chains, others tools, and a small bag that contained a change of clothes, toilet paper, and flexible plastic ties (Hastings 2006). Afterwards, he separated the young girls from the boys and older women, ordering the two latter groups to leave (Hastings 2006). Roberts barricaded the schoolhouse doors using lumber, then called his wife, telling her that he had molested two family members as toddlers and wished to commit the crime again (CNN 2006). He lined up the ten schoolgirls against the blackboard and restrained them with wire and flex ties (Hastings 2006). He also was carrying K-Y brand lubricant at the time of the offense, suggesting that he planned to sexually assault the girls prior to killing them, but there is no evidence that he actually molested them (CNN 2006). He shot horizontally, "executioner style," brutally killing two girls on scene and wounding the other eight, three of whom would later die from injury complications (Hastings 2006). As police finally stormed the schoolhouse, Roberts died by suicide (Hastings 2006). Roberts left four suicide notes for his wife and children, which described his anger at God over the couple's first

child who had passed away nine years prior (Hastings 2006). Additional interviews with Roberts' wife and mother as well as with Amish families in the West Nickel Mines community also provide context for this crime. A number of books have also been written about the shooting and the forgiveness professed by the Amish community following this tragedy, including one authored by Roberts' mother.

### *2007 Virginia Tech Massacre*

On April 16th, 2007, 23-year-old Korean-born Seung-Hui Cho initiated the deadliest school shooting in United States' history when he perpetrated the Virginia Tech massacre (Turkewitz 2015a). In the early morning, Cho shot and killed two students in the dormitory West Ambler Johnston Hall, one being a freshman girl for whom Cho reportedly had romantic feelings (Virginia Tech Review Panel 2009:26). Shortly after this incident, he returned to his own dormitory room to change out of his bloodstained clothes, erase data from his computer, and mail a package containing a manifesto and video recordings to NBC News (Virginia Tech Review Panel 2009:28-9). Approximately two hours after the first murders, Cho then entered the academic building Norris Hall, chaining three entrance doors shut behind him, and began firing into classrooms on the second floor (Virginia Tech Review Panel 2009:29). Cho killed an additional thirty students and faculty members, then died by suicide promptly at the arrival of police on the academic building's second floor (Virginia Tech Review Panel 2009:30A). After the incident, Virginia Governor Kaine established the Virginia Tech Review Panel and assigned them with the task of producing a written report that would compile all of the most important information about the Virginia Tech Massacre. The Panel interviewed over 200 people during

the creation of this report (2009). Supplementing this report are Cho's manifesto and other writings as well as emails between Cho and Virginia Tech faculty.

#### *2008 Northern Illinois University shooting*

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008, white 27-year-old Steven Kazmierczak entered a lecture hall at his alma mater Northern Illinois University (NIU) and began shooting across the students' seats with a shotgun (2008:1-2). As individuals attempted to escape or hide, he continued shooting up and down the room's aisle as well as from the stage in the front of the room (Vann 2011:135). After spending all of his shotgun ammunition, Kazmierczak used a pistol to continue his assault (NIU Department of Public Safety 2008:2). After killing six people and injuring twenty-one more, he died by suicide before police arrived on scene (NIU Department of Public Safety 2008:1). Later that year, Northern Illinois University released a report detailing the circumstances of the incident, the shooter's psychological background, and his history at the college. This report formally revealed that Kazmierczak was suffering from the destruction of some personal relationships and was intermittently taking medication for anxiety, depression, schizoaffective disorder, and other mental disorders (NIU Department of Public Safety 2008:23-4). Police reports, emails and interviews with family, friends, and close acquaintances reveal more information about Kazmierczak's background.

#### *2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting*

On December 14, 2012, a white 20-year-old man named Adam Lanza entered Sandy Hook Elementary School with a rifle after having murdered his mother earlier that morning (Sedensky 2013:9, 24). Upon entering the building, he shot and killed the school principal and

psychologist and wounded two other adult employees (Sedensky 2013:9-10). In the nearby first grade classrooms, Lanza shot and killed four adults as well as eighteen children, wounding two other children who later died from their injuries (Sedensky 2013:10). Soon after, Lanza died by suicide via a pistol shot (Sedensky 2013:10). A police search of his home and computer records would later reveal a document entitled “Selfish” about the inherent selfishness of women as well as numerous articles about previous mass shootings, including Columbine, the Northern Illinois University Shooting, and the West Nickel Mines school shooting (Sedensky 2013:26-7; Solomon 2014). Lanza did attend Sandy Hook Elementary during his primary education (Sedensky 2013:33). Police reports on this incident, online correspondence involving Lanza, and interviews with his family inform my understanding of this incident.

*2014 University of California, Santa Barbara, shooting*

On May 23rd, 2014, 22-year-old biracial (half-white, half-Chinese) male Elliot Rodger committed mass murder near the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) campus (Brown 2014:8). He began the event by stabbing his two roommates and one of their friends to death in their shared apartment (Brown 2014:34). Hours afterward, he emailed his manifesto entitled “My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger” to family members, his therapist, and others to inform them of his long history of social rejection and contempt towards women (Brown 2014:1). In conjunction, he uploaded a final video entitled “Retribution” to his YouTube channel, which verbally summarized similar feelings (Brown 2014:1). Shortly afterward, Rodger drove to the university’s Alpha Phi sorority house where he had planned to open fire on the house of sorority sisters. When his initial plan failed, he turned his gun onto three women walking nearby, killing two of them (Brown 2014:1). Then, he drove along the crowded streets

of Isla Vista, purposefully striking pedestrians with his vehicle and shooting from his open window (Brown 2014:1-2). He killed one other person by shooting in this way, while injuring several others (Brown 2014:14). Finally, after an encounter with law enforcement, Rodger died by suicide while still behind the wheel of his vehicle (Brown 27-8). Rodger had not attended UCSB, but had abandoned his course of study at Santa Barbara City Community College in 2012 (Rodger 2014:101). Rodger's manifesto is one of the most thorough documents written by a mass shooter to date; this document along with Santa Barbara police reports provide significant information about this shooting.<sup>7</sup>

#### *2014 Marysville-Pilchuck High School shooting*

On September 15th, 2014, 15-year-old Native American Jaylen Fryberg approached seven of his friends eating in the Marysville-Pilchuck High School lunchroom where he attended school and used a handgun to begin shooting (Snohomish County 2015:3-4). He killed four of the students and injured another before an adult teacher attempted to intervene, when Fryberg shot himself and died by suicide (Snohomish County 2015:3-4). Prior to the shooting, he had exchanged several text messages with his father and other family members, friends, and on-and-off girlfriend (Snohomish County 2015:5). Within these, he expressed the intention of committing a mass shooting as well as the need to bring his friends “to the other side”

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<sup>7</sup> Rodger's case is too recent to be included in most literature about mass shootings and school shootings. Due to this absence of academic discussion regarding Rodger as well as the sheer wealth of documentation regarding his case, the Isla Vista killings are used frequently—perhaps more than the other cases I study—throughout this paper as a primary example of misogyny in school shootings in the United States. Focusing on Rodger may reveal a bias in my work, but I believe that, while Rodger's case is unique in some ways, it is important for illuminating themes that are common across the other cases as well. I explain this further in my data analysis.

(Snohomish County 2015:5). Police reports include a series of interviews conducted with Fryberg's relatives, friends, and students from the dining hall that day.

### *2015 Umpqua Community College School shooting*

On October 1st, 2015, 26-year-old biracial (half-white, half-Black) male Christopher Harper-Mercer entered his writing class at Umpqua Community College wearing a bulletproof vest and brandishing a gun (Turkewitz 2015b). After firing a warning shot into the back of the classroom and demanding that everyone lie face-down on the ground, he first killed the professor (Turkewitz 2015b). Early news sources reported that the primary motive for this shooting was religious, because Harper-Mercer began methodically asking each student if they were religious (Francis 2015). Later, survivors of the attack disagreed with this perspective; he did not seem to be shooting based on their subsequent responses to this question and instead seemed to be simply asserting that they would die soon (CBS 2015). Harper-Mercer killed a total of nine people, injuring at least seven others, before shooting at police officers outside of the classroom window (Turkewitz 2015b). He left an envelope with a flash drive inside containing a manifesto with one survivor (Wozniacka and Malley 2015). After being injured himself from a bullet wound to the hip, Harper-Mercer died by suicide at the college (Turkewitz 2015b). In the following police investigation, Harper-Mercer was found to have “white supremacist, anti-government, and anti-religious leanings,” praised the Irish Republican Army, referenced Nazism online, and was recently spurned by a woman (Winton, Mejia, and Mozingo 2015). Additionally, he showed interest in previous mass shootings and may have also been involved on an online discussion board the day prior to this incident, warning students of the northwest United States to stay home from school (O'Malley 2015; Winton, Mejia, and Mozingo 2015).

## **Data Analysis**

There are several common themes across the mentalities of the school shooting offenders I studied, including: 1) a distorted perception of women's relative social progress in post-industrial society, providing women more freedom to selectively choose sexual and romantic partners, as personal rejection, 2) a belief that violence will achieve justice and produce retribution for perceived injustices, and 3) a transferal of blame and hatred toward one or more particular women onto all women. These themes are discussed throughout my data analysis and are revisited in the concluding discussion.

## **Gender Conflict: Women's Social Progress and Men's Sexual Inadequacy**

Heterosexuality and virility are two major elements of hegemonic masculinity that enforce the importance of using sexual prowess to gain and maintain social standing among men. Across the school shooting case studies, perpetrators described their inability to have relationships—most commonly sexual relationships—with women that they desired. According to Michael Kimmel, this experience is common among boys and men more generally. These “guys” are young men between the ages of 16 and 26, “poised between adolescence and adulthood,” who illustrate a dichotomy of boys participating in too-adult activities and men perpetually acting like children (Kimmel 2009:3-4). Nearly all young men in the United States occupy Guyland before becoming functioning adults. He theorizes that heterosexuality and virility are necessary components for guys to assert their masculinity in the homosocial realm of Guyland (Kimmel 2009:169). “The problem, however,” Kimmel (2009:169) writes, “is that for guys, girls often feel like the primary obstacle to proving manhood.” Since the introduction of greater sexual freedom, increased economic equality, and relative advancement of women in



society over the past half-century, women now have more privilege to decline sexual advances, yet guys and girls are continually bombarded by sexualized images of available women that conflict with this message (Kimmel 2009:171). Kimmel (2009:172, emphasis added) further explains how this messaging fuels frustration in young men:

The sexual mandate of the Guy Code—have sex with as many women as possible, as frequently as possible, no matter what—is so unattainable that virtually every young man feels at least a little bit inadequate. [...] Add to this the impossible idea that the *world is filled with women who are available to everyone but you* and you have a toxic brew of entitlement and despair. [...] Guys seem to need that reassurance in part because they feel so *besieged* by gender equality, so trampled by the forces of political correctness, they that can't even ogle a woman on the street anymore without fearing that the police will arrest them for harassment.

Although here Kimmel is specifically discussing pornography, his ideas can be applied to the ways in which such frustration plays out in the context of school shootings committed by young men. Both Elliot Rodger and Adam Lanza were engaged in anti-feminist discourse, enraged by the “inherent selfishness” of women, as seen through Rodger’s manifesto and the document on Lanza’s computer. Luke Woodham and Jaylen Fryberg suffered from significant breakups prior to their attacks. Fryberg said in a text message prior to the Marysville-Pilchuck shooting that his “last dying wish” was that his ex-girlfriend would not date another particular guy (Kutner 2015).<sup>8</sup> Woodham’s ex-girlfriend was the first victim of his attack; he believed that shooting her would allow him to get even (Hewitt 1997). In each of these situations, the boys expressed their sense of entitlement, wanting to maintain control over their ex-girlfriends who were free to see other guys, challenging their positions of dominance.

Throughout his manifesto, Rodger discussed both his concerns of sexual inadequacy as well as his perceived entitlement to women. He summarized his feelings of superiority and anger

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<sup>8</sup> The name of this person was redacted in the original police statement to protect the individual’s privacy.

towards women, writing, “Women should not have the right to choose who to mate with. That choice should be made for them by civilized men of intelligence [...] Women must be punished for their crimes of rejecting such a magnificent gentleman as myself” (Rodger 2014:117-8).

Rodger perceived his biggest obstacle in life as his inability to achieve successful sexual relations with women, which impacted the security of his manhood. In this way, his anger also extended to men who seemed to be navigating Guyland successfully. “They deserve [death]. The males deserve it for taking the females away from me, and the females deserve it for choosing these males instead of me” (Rodger 2014:87). Rodger perceived others’ relationships as a personal affront that clashed with the entitlement he believed he had to women and the responsibility for women to respond accordingly. The insistence on heterosexuality and virility for young men under the pressures of hegemonic masculinity establishes and reinforces these beliefs. Yet, these societal expectations are unrealistic: most college men are not hypersexual. Kimmel (2009:209) reports that only five to ten percent of college-aged men have sex on any given weekend. However, the social construction of masculinity as well as the prevalence of hook-up culture on college campuses push the normalized image of men as dominant, experienced sexual beings who regularly enjoy multiple partners. The proliferation of this idealized masculine image leads men like Rodger feeling entitled to such a culture. Without it, they perceive themselves to be isolated from the masculine experience, and in turn, blame women for their failures. Because they cannot enact their masculinity through an illustrious performance record with women and sex, men like Rodger need something else that can project their masculinity. Thus, they turn to violence.

### **Physical Strength and Violence: An “Inadequate” Man’s Solution**

Toxic masculinity enforces a tough male ideal, emphasizing the need for heroic men who are physically and emotionally strong as well as completely fearless. This ideology is promoted widely by American media and common discourse. For example, when people say “be a man,” they typically mean that a man should be physically strong, emotionally stoic, and in control of his surroundings. Other phrases like “grow a pair” contain coded biological and sexual language, establishing that these characteristics are not only ideal, but also inherent to every “real” man. Kimmel (2004:267) explains that hegemonic masculinity limits men’s ability to express a range of emotion in healthy ways by emphasizing the importance of possessing “masculine bravado,” the “posture of strength and the repression and denial of fear” in order to remain superior to women. This ideology combined with societal gender inequality encourages men to utilize violence as a method of expressing emotion and reclaiming one’s manhood. The capacity for violence allows a man to showcase his superiority, the key to hegemonic masculinity, over others by denying their safety through his strength. Strength can be possessed by anyone with access to a gun; in this way, even men typically excluded by hegemonic masculinity—and who do not possess physical or social strength—can recover it for themselves through the power of weaponry. After purchasing several guns for the first time, Eric Harris (1998) confided in his journal the feelings of confidence, strength, and even godliness that owning guns gave him. In his manifesto, Woodham (quoted in Newman et al. 2004:249) explained similar feelings:

It was not a cry for attention, it was not a cry for help. It was a scream in sheer agony saying that if I can’t pry your eyes open, if I can’t do it through pacifism, if I can’t show you through [the] displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet.

Here, Woodham plainly illustrates that gun violence is an easy way to command attention when, in his everyday life, it was otherwise not possible. For school shooters, power can at long last be wielded through the use of guns.

With this newfound power, shooters can seek revenge in order to achieve perceived justice and alleviate their persistent feelings of shame. Bullying is commonly posited as a factor that influences the perpetrators of school shootings to commit their attacks, and eight out of ten of my case studies featured perpetrators who were also victims of bullying. While I agree that bullying influences the intentions of school shooters, I believe that rather than only a psychological response to bullying, these boys also experience a sociological response, feeling the need to meet the prescribed standards of manhood that dictate for men to be tough, powerful, and in control. Together, psychological and social factors simultaneously influence one another to create an unbearable experience of shame that shooters believe that only violent power can overcome. Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, who were bullies rather than the bullied at their middle school, still recognized the power of gun violence in establishing themselves as men. Johnson and Golden, only 13 and 11 at the time of the Westside Middle School shooting, often bragged about smoking weed and participating in gang activity among their friends (Kifner 1998).<sup>9</sup> They also often threatened other students with violence and claimed that they “had a lot of killing to do” (Kifner 1998). Despite their age, the cousins already knew how to create cool, tough personas for themselves through the use of violence. As Luke Woodham (1997) said in his manifesto, “murder is not weak and slow-witted, murder is gutsy and daring.” The combination of toxic masculinity and easy access to guns that exists in the United States makes devastating

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<sup>9</sup> Whether or not they actually engaged with drugs and gangs is questionable, but even if it is not true, their disposition for bragging about these activities still illustrates their desire to be perceived as tough guys.

violence like school shootings possible—and desirable for boys who want to be seen as powerful men. If bullying itself was the sole motive for school shootings, girls, who are bullied more frequently than boys, would be committing school shootings at the rate men are (Associated Press 2015). Instead, bullying elicits a sociological response by fueling feelings of humiliation and weakness that threatens boys on a social level. I contend that this is one of many ways in which school shootings are the ultimate expression of Kimmel’s “masculine bravado.” By embracing this ideology, shooters are also able to exact their perceptions of justice via the power granted through gun use.

In their quest to achieve the masculine bravado, school shooters often attempt to get revenge for their misfortunes, because revenge provides a chance to actively assert one’s masculinity. Roberts admitted feeling extreme anger toward God for the death of his young daughter nine years prior to the West Nickel Mines shooting, and achieving revenge for his loss through violent means was an expression of strength—reclaiming control over life situations that were uncontrollable (Hastings 2006). Similarly, Christopher Harper-Mercer faced rejection from a woman prior to committing the Umpqua Community College shooting. Like Rodger, one of Harper-Mercer’s motivations for violence was revenge (Turkewitz 2015b). Woodham also sought revenge after his girlfriend asked to end their relationship, shooting her first in the Pearl High School shooting (Hewitt 1997). Andrew Golden and Seung-Hui Cho also shot girls who they had identified as previous girlfriends, although follow-up police reports suggest that the girls did not intimately know their shooters (Kifner 1998). Misogyny informed by standards of hypermasculinity colored these perpetrators’ perception of their friendships with girls and women. As long as these young men felt stifled—as Susan Faludi (1999) would say—by girls and women in their lives, they became viable targets onto which to concentrate their anger. The

pursuit of revenge combined with the physical power of guns has provided school shooters with a way to create a scenario in which they overcome their inadequacies and prove their dominance.

The repression of fear required to execute a mass shooting comprises the latter half of Kimmel's "masculine bravado" profile. National statistics reveal that approximately 40% of mass shooters die by suicide at the culmination of their violent episode (U.S. Department of Justice 2013:12). Most school shootings are premeditated—calculated from at least a week in advance in the case of Roberts to over a year in the case of Harris and Klebold—acknowledging the risks and consequences of executing such violence. Even when shooters choose not to end their lives before capture—or death—by police, they recognize that prison is also an inevitable consequence of their actions, effectively ending their free life. Rodger (2014:133) admits that while he was "profoundly eager" to execute the Isla Vista killings, "there was also an extreme sense of fear inside of [him]," because "it will mean [his] death, and [he has] always been afraid of death." In this way, shooters overcome what many people perceive to be one of the most fearful things in life—death. Moreover, typically mass shooting suicides are carried out when a comparable police force is present. In this way, the shooter who accomplishes his act of mass violence is surmounting this fear and reclaiming the masculine bravado profile that Kimmel describes. For those struggling to succeed under the standards of hegemonic masculinity, mass shootings can be an easy avenue to develop strength and portray the illusion of manhood.

Gilligan (1996:32) explains that "No one who loves life, who cherishes and feels his own aliveness, could want to kill another human being. But the living dead need to kill others, because for them the most unendurable anguish is the pain of seeing that others are still alive." Applying Gilligan's theory of shame and violence to the violent men who commit school shootings, while also considering the construction of hegemonic masculinity, reveals how most

offenders match Gilligan's profile. Because hegemonic masculinity requires men to be sexually experienced, physically strong, emotionally stable, and fearless in order to fit the idealized social norm, men who are unable to achieve these qualities are likely to face social ridicule or perceive themselves to face it. Elliot Rodger (2014:124) discusses the "insult" of being "deem[ed] inferior of [women's] love and sex" and constantly attributes these feelings of inferiority—a result of the standards established by hegemonic masculinity—as the reason for his anger. He also points toward a lack of alternative options to his violence, writing:

The Day of Retribution had always been in the back of my mind as a final solution if all else failed in my life, ever since I had moved to Santa Barbara. As it so happened, all else did indeed fail. Women continued to reject me and mistreat me, and I remained an unwanted virgin (Rodger 2014:116).

In this way, Rodger specifically identified what he needed to be successful in life—women—and without them, he had begun planning for the Isla Vista killings. Furthermore, by describing women as rejecting and mistreating him, Rodger recognized the source of his shame, what Gilligan (1996:63) would describe as his "feelings of impotence and inadequacy as a man," that left him "vulnerable and hypersensitive to any experience that would reflect that image of himself back to him." By executing his attack at the University of California in Santa Barbara, Rodger acted upon the emotional logic that surmises his violence will "kill shame" by achieving the retribution he desired (Gilligan 1996:65). This situation emerges within several of the other case studies as well. Having never been in a relationship before, Harper-Mercer also lamented being a virgin in the manifesto that he left behind (O'Malley 2015). His document also seemed to align with the musings of a group called the "Beta boys," comprised of men and boys who identify as subordinate men to society's alpha males—those who successfully meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity (Hughes and Johnson 2015; Wilson 2015). Shooters who fit this

profile and contemplate or actually enact shootings are said in online forums to be part of the “Beta Rebellion” against the world built for alphas, illustrating how effective the hierarchy of masculinities is at defining a man’s sense of self-worth and need to overcome it through violence (Craig 2015). Similarly, Steven Kazmierczak “had little to show for the first twenty-one years of his life,” according to the official report of the Northern Illinois University (2008:32) shootings, which details his failures in employment, the army, mental health, and more. He also admitted to his sister that he might be gay and frequented the Casual Encounters forum on Craigslist, eventually having sex with both men and women in the months prior to his attack (Northern Illinois University 2008:21, 47; Vann 2009). In establishing the concept of hegemonic masculinity, R.W. Connell (2005:76) suggests that not only is there a hierarchy between men and women, but also that a hierarchy exists among men. Because heterosexuality is a core component of hegemonic masculinity, gay masculinity is considered a subordinated form of masculinity (Connell 2005:76-8). To be gay is to not meet the standard of manliness valued in society; to be gay is to be thought of as less than a man and more like a woman. In this way, Harper-Mercer and Kazmierczak both experienced shameful circumstances that Gilligan would argue are motivating factors for them to commit acts of violence.

Some shooters express hatred for their victims, a hatred that overwhelms any feelings of guilt or love that they may also possess. For example, Rodger (2014:135) writes, “When I think about the amazing and blissful life I could have lived if only females were sexually attracted to me, my entire being burns with hatred. They denied me a happy life, and in return I will take away all of their lives. It is only fair.” Rodger speaks to the sense of justice and entitlement he applies to his violence and rejects any notion of remorse. In this way, Rodger confirms Gilligan’s assertion by expressing that his violence is the only way of redeeming the injustices committed



against him. Similarly, Columbine shooter Eric Harris (1998) commented in his journal that “if I could nuke the world I would, because so far I hate you all” and “you people could have shown more respect, treated me better, asked for my knowledge or guidance [sic] more, treated me more like senior, and maybe I wouldn't have been as ready to tear your fucking heads off,” asserting not only that he harbored a deep hatred for humanity, but also that it is not his fault for committing the shooting—the people he interacted with on a daily basis had the power to change his mind. Woodham who killed three and wounded seven others at Pearl High School, too, expressed the sentiment that his shooting was purposeful and necessary, but avoidable if others had acted differently towards him. “I am not insane! I am angry. The world has shit on me for the final time. [...] And all throughout my life, I was ridiculed. Always beaten, always hated,” he wrote in his manifesto, “Can you, society, truly blame me for what I do?” (Woodham 1997). Virginia Tech Massacre perpetrator Seung-Hui Cho's (2007:5) manifesto was similarly angry: “You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today, but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours.” The violence of school shootings seemingly achieves the compensation that these shooters feel as if they are owed and, at the same time, poignantly blames society or other individuals while portraying the shooting as a natural course of events. Jaylen Fryberg also mentioned the necessity of his attack in a text to his family, but in a different tone, saying, “I LOVE YOU FAMILY!! I really do! [...] I needed to do this tho... I wasn't happy. And I needed my crew with me too. I'm sorry” (Kutner 2015).<sup>10</sup> Fryberg was apologetic rather than angry at his victims, but still communicated that his attack was necessary. Gilligan's theory of righting

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<sup>10</sup> All quotes are faithfully reproduced from their sources and are not edited to reflect conventional English spelling, capitalization, and/or grammar.

injustices through violence is wholly applicable to many instances of school shootings. Anger often, but not always, accompanies these feelings. The social construction of masculinity remains an integral part of this process, defining the shame that perpetrators experience, allowing for anger, and encouraging the use of violence as a solution.

### **Condemning Women: Casualties of Unfulfilled Entitlement and Misplaced Blame**

School shooters also often use sweeping generalizations of entire social groups—especially women—in order to justify their actions. In “Convicted Rapists’ Vocabulary of Motive: Excuses and Justifications,” Scully and Marolla analyze the results of interviews conducted with men who are in prison for sexually assaulting women. Scully and Marolla (1984:47) acknowledge that, while rape is only committed by a small proportion of all men, many men do possess the “attitudes and beliefs necessary” to execute rape. In this way, they affirm the cultural and social circumstances that influence a disproportionate number of men to commit violent crimes. One of the major findings from their research was that revenge and punishment are key motives for violent perpetrators; these motives are legitimized by the offender through the concept of “collective liability,” which asserts that “all people in a particular category are held accountable for the conduct of each of their counterparts. Thus, the victim of a violent act may merely represent the category of individual being punished” (Scully and Marolla 1984:51). The mindset of collective liability solidifies misogynistic ideology in men—if a man believes he is entitled to sex, and one or more women reject him, that rejection would then be seen as a fault inherent in female sexuality. This ideology operates in a similar way to those surrounding issues of racial representation. When mass shooters are white, they are considered lone wolves, troubled, or mentally ill, whereas shooters of color or certain religious

affiliations are political or religious terrorists, representing their entire racial, ethnic, or religious group (Earp and Katz 2013).

Collective liability is a major problem in school shootings. Roberts employed collective liability in the school shooting at West Nickel Mines by purposefully selecting the school for its location and because it “had the female victims he was looking for”—vulnerable female students who represented the daughter he had lost—and then intentionally separating the girls from boys and adults in order to specifically harm the young girls (Kocieniewski and Gately 2006). Roberts justified his decision to harm those schoolgirls through his anger at God over the death of his own young daughter years earlier (Hastings 2006). In this way, Roberts wanted to inflict the pain of his personal tragedy onto other men’s young daughters. In another example, Rodger (2014:117) angrily asked why women “behave like vicious, stupid, cruel animals who take delight in my suffering and starvation?” and reconciled that “women are flawed... [having] something mentally wrong with the way their brains are wired, as if they haven’t evolved from animal-like thinking,” attributing his issues to the inherent configuring of female intelligence rather than questioning his own misconceptions about the world. Of course, in some instances the person perceived to have wronged the shooter is, in fact, one of the victims. Cho, Woodham, and Golden all murdered girls that they identified as romantic interests; this might suggest that collective liability does not apply to every school shooting event. However, there still exists a complexity in that these shooters not only killed their romantic interests, but several others as well. Why did these shooters commit mass shootings that harmed numerous individuals, instead of purposefully seeking out and hurting only the girls in question? Scully and Marolla’s application of collective liability can partially explain the reasons underlying misogynistic

ideology expressed through school shootings—it is the result of the displacement of blame from one or a few women onto all women.

Hegemonic masculinity positions men—specifically those who are physically and emotionally strong, aggressively heterosexual, and white—as the dominant gender category over women and men of other masculinities (i.e. LGBTQ+ men, men of color, etc). Segal (1990:x-xi) argues the dominant form of masculinity actively marginalizes other masculinities in order maintain privilege. This positioning provides young, white heterosexual men with layered power and privileges that, unconsciously or not, accompany them throughout their lives. When these powers are challenged—such as through increasing gender equality in society—white male entitlement emerges as their seemingly infallible beliefs, behaviors, or lifestyle are no longer as strongly supported as they once were (Angyal 2010). Hegemonic masculinity, as understood by many school shooters, offered the allure of easy and available sexual relationships, but in reality these relationships were much harder to obtain. All of the shooters I studied would have enjoyed privileges as men—and for the majority of them, as white men—however, they possessed an unfulfilled sense of entitlement to women.<sup>11</sup> This idea has been captured extensively in Michael Kimmel’s research on masculinity and violence where he discusses the “aggrieved entitlement” of school shooters who want to get revenge for their social deficiencies as men (Kalish and Kimmel 2010:454). By idolizing and desiring the sexual virility embraced by the masculine norm, the value these shooters held for sex, power, and status were left ultimately unrecognized.

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<sup>11</sup> Additionally, both Rodger and Harper-Mercer can be considered white supremacists. Although both were mixed race, Rodger frequently emphasized his European ancestry in his manifesto, and Harper-Mercer “supported white supremacist causes” and publicly supported Nazism. Rodger, in fact, is often mistakenly referred to as white in news media and online articles. In this way, these two, although not white themselves, would have also acquired some privileges through aligning with white communities and white supremacist ideologies.

Rodger (2014:114-5) captured this idea best when he wrote, “Having to walk through SBCC [Santa Barbara City College] with all of those beautiful girls strutting around in their revealing shorts, showing off their sexy legs... It is torture, because I know that they would all reject me. [...] Life would have been so perfect there if only girls were attracted to me,” expressing his intense objectification of women—even those he passes on the street—and desire for a sexual relationship that remained unrequited. Columbine shooter Eric Harris (1998) explicitly states in his journal that women are naturally subordinate to men, establishing self-recognition as a dominant being. In later journal entries, he suggests that “get[ting] laid” might prevent him from initiating the school shooting, defining sex as an especially desired aspect of dominant masculinity; he also graphically describes how he wants to “trick” a girl to enter his room and subsequently sexually assault and violently mutilate her (Harris 1998). Although Harris objectifies women, considering them an appropriate target for his sexual and physical frustrations, his entitlement over them seems to remain unfulfilled until he kills at Columbine. Whereas Harris’s entries focus on sexual entitlement and grotesque violence, the journal of his partner in crime, Dylan Klebold, surprisingly centers on unrequited romantic love. Several of Klebold’s (1997) journal entries fixate on a particular girl that he claims he is in love with, yet they have little to no close interactions: in one entry, he chides himself for thinking that she even waved to him on the last day of school. Although it clearly seems that Klebold (1997) and his crush are not friends and do not speak or interact regularly, he “loves” her from afar. Although his feelings do not encompass sexual aggression or hatred, his imagined perception of her still reduces this girl as a means to an end. She represents love and affection that Klebold strongly desires, but does not have. Lastly, Fryberg sent several messages to his ex-girlfriend in the week before the Marysville-Pilchuck shooting, harassing her for supposedly flirting with other boys

and insisting that she call him despite the fact that he instigated their previous breakup so that he could see other girls (Everett Police Department 2015:3, 5, 7, 9). In this way, Fryberg displayed possessiveness for his ex-girlfriend, feeling uneasy due to threat of other boys in her life. He expressed his entitlement to her, demanding her time and attention, even though they were no longer an exclusive couple. According to police interviews, she decided to block Fryberg's phone number, only unblocking it after hearing about the shooting days later (Everett Police Department 2015:102-103). Although these small interactions with women may not cause someone to murder, they do infringe upon the sense of entitlement that these young men possess. Therefore, the entitlement and necessity to acquire a woman in order to gain status under hegemonic masculinity becomes problematic when it is then left unfulfilled. Violence, rape, or shootings may result.

These perpetrators' sense of masculine entitlement also helps to explain their frequent idolization of previous violent male figures, including the Oklahoma City bomber and genocide leader Adolf Hitler. After the Columbine High School massacre, Harris and Klebold created a legacy of their own that inspired shooters across America as well as around the world. The police investigations of Lanza, Rodger, and Harper-Mercer revealed that they all had saved information about previous mass shootings on their computers. Kazmierczak, a sociology major with a particular interest in criminology, closely followed violent news media and had a wide breadth of knowledge about Hitler. The official report of the Northern Illinois University (2008:47) shootings even concluded that his "long-standing obsession with serial killers and mass murderers offered numerous examples as to how his own rage might be expressed." Of course, there are many individuals who share these unconventional interests. Rather than suggesting a definite correlation between an interest in violent figures and enacting violence oneself, I want to

maintain that it is important for school shooters to recognize violence as a feasible option for accomplishing their goals. Modeling their violent behavior after another “successful” individual is one way to achieve this. In another example, Rodger’s internet search history revealed that he was “very interested in some of the practices and techniques of the Third Reich,” because his browser history search terms included “Reincarnation of Hitler” and “If you were Adolf Hitler” (Brown 2014:39-41). These search phrases illuminate Rodger’s desire to emulate Hitler’s actions, identifying himself so closely with the genocide leader that he imagines himself becoming a restored version of Hitler. His manifesto also pointedly reflects Hitler’s ideology; Rodger (2014:136) graphically described his desire to create concentration camps, to torture and eradicate women, and to practice eugenics in his “ideal” world. This indicates more than a casual interest in Hitler, but a specific interest in recreating his conception of the perfect world which would require mass genocide. In Kamierczak’s case, the “success” of Seung-Hui Cho only months before Kazmierczak’s shooting may have illustrated to him that school shootings are a viable way of gaining the attention, notability, and praise that was otherwise missing from his life. This idea is not revolutionary; the term “Columbine Effect” was coined after researchers realized that mass shooters following the Columbine Massacre were using that event as a model for their own attacks (Follman and Andrews 2015). There have been approximately 74 known Columbine copycat cases with perpetrators in at least ten of the cases revering shooters Harris and Klebold as “heroes, idols, martyrs, or gods” (Follman and Andrews 2015). Although Rodger loathed the jocks attending the University of California Santa Barbara and Santa Barbara City College, he desired the women, sex, and status that they possessed. In this way, he idolized previous mass shooters and genocide leaders, because they, too, lacked status that was then earned as a result of their violent crimes. For school shooters, violence is the key to achieving

fulfilled entitlement. And somehow, Rodger did become the man he wanted to be as a result of his attack. Just days after he committed the Isla Vista shootings, members of a forum that Rodger frequented called *Pick Up Artist Hate*—a website where “involuntarily celibate men” could “commiserate about their frustrations with women”—celebrated Rodger’s mass shooting, commenting “elliot is a hero” and “he is famous 4 ever now” (Brown 2014:42; Ryan 2014).<sup>14</sup> Others started to use Rodger’s name as a colloquialism, proclaiming, “why can't i fuck a virgin 16-18 year old. i am entitled to this or else i will go rodger” (Ryan 2014).<sup>12</sup> This reveals not only that Rodger’s radical mindset is not unique among men, but also that there are serious consequences to sensationalizing mass shootings. If perpetrators commit school shootings to obtain justice and ease their shame, publicizing their attack promotes their achievement nationwide. This allows other boys and men to witness, idolize, and potentially model their attacks, demonstrating the cycle of aggrieved men seeking violent retribution for their grievances.

## Conclusion

I explored the relationship between masculinity, misogyny, and American school shootings, investigating how shooters’ misogynistic beliefs and behaviors provide greater insight into understanding why these deadly attacks occur and how they are undeniably gendered. I discovered that the socialization of American men—especially in regards to entitlement, sexuality, and the objectification of women—is crucial to explaining, at least in part, why mass shootings are occurring on campuses nationwide. The social construction of hegemonic

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<sup>12</sup> All quotes are faithfully reproduced from their sources and are not edited to reflect conventional English spelling, capitalization, and/or grammar.



masculinity enforces the importance of superiority through attributes such as heterosexual virility and physical strength. When this superiority is not achieved, inability to meet the standard evolves into hatred that is then displaced onto women through misogynistic ideology. Then, violence is used as a means of bolstering or reclaiming one's masculinity that constantly needs to be proved, exacting perceived justice against the victim, and ultimately restoring masculine pride. This pattern was evident, in some way or another, through all of the school shootings I studied.

This indicates to me, unlike the position of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, that school shootings are not senseless tragedies, nor can they be easily explained by gun accessibility or mental health. Instead, they are informed by a complex network of factors in which white hegemonic masculinity is at the core; ignoring these patterns prevents us from critically reflecting on the way school shooters are influenced by their social world. Misogyny is intricately woven into the fabric of hegemonic masculinity. Goffman (1963:128) acknowledged hegemonic masculinity's pervasiveness, saying:

Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective, this constituting one sense in which one can speak of a common value system in America. Any male who fails to qualify [...] is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as un-worthy, incomplete and inferior; at times he is likely to pass and at times he is likely to find himself being apologetic or aggressive concerning known-about aspects of himself he knows are probably seen as undesirable.

School shooters revealed time and time again that they were acutely aware of shortcomings in their masculinity. For shooters dealing with these issues, misogyny functions as an outlet for resulting feelings of overwhelming anger, frustration, powerlessness, and resentment. It allows for shooters to identify with the hegemonic sphere, even when they otherwise struggle to prove themselves worthy. It also provides a scapegoat for blame, because if women or humanity are

perceived as a barrier to success, shooters can attack and feel that their actions are justified. In this way, it is imperative to recognize the presence and functions of misogynistic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors among school shooters in order to address school shootings as a form of gendered violence.

Violence is central to hegemonic masculinity, alongside other emphasized characteristics such as hypersexuality, aggression, and strength, which create a destructive combination for men who compare themselves to this standard and ultimately feel inadequate. My findings expand on the school shooting research of Michael Kimmel, Douglas Kellner, and Katherine Newman by focusing on the relationship between masculinity and violence. The core ideas from their work, including aggrieved entitlement, gun fetishization, and social marginality formed a theoretical foundation for my own research that developed my themes of perceived inadequacy and displaced blame. I also complicate previous research and provide a new perspective on school shootings by specifically examining the role of misogyny in perpetrators' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. By including shootings occurring as recently as 2015, five years after Kimmel's most current publication on school shootings, I have been able to contribute an original analysis of recent attacks and the explicit expressions of misogyny within them. As other sociologists have suggested, redefining the current social construction of American masculinity is necessary to alleviating the onslaught of school shootings occurring across the country.

Although I blame the social construction of gender for breeding a climate of toxic masculinity and misogynistic ideology which informs school shooters' actions, I am not suggesting that the shooters themselves should be absolved of their responsibility for committing these heinous acts. I am also not stating that all white men will become mass shooters or that all white men are violent. Not everyone who is marginalized by hegemonic masculinity will commit

a school shooting. Most men, in fact, do not meet the strict standards of hegemonic masculinity. Of course, only a significantly small proportion of men will ever commit violence at the level of Elliot Rodger or Adam Lanza. Moreover, the conclusions drawn in this paper may not apply to every school shooting and cannot be used to predict who will be the next school shooter. As Newman et al. (2004:231) admit, “It is unlikely that such a [predictive] theory will ever be developed. Rampage shootings are (thankfully) too rare and the factors too omnipresent.” However, it is undeniable that the majority of perpetrators of these crimes *are men*. It is also undeniable that violence—and the social construction of masculinity—ultimately hurts men, too. In fact, men are not only disproportionately more likely to incite violence against others, but they are also disproportionately more likely to inflict violence against themselves (Kaufman 2007:49-50). Numerous studies indicate that men who attempt suicide use more violent methods than women, resulting in more successful suicide deaths than those attempts made by women, despite the fact that women attempt suicide more often (Canetto and Sakinofsky 1998:1, 6; Denning et al. 2000:282; Freeman and Freeman 2015). The majority of perpetrators in my case studies also decided to die by suicide, and although they committed egregious, brutal, and purely awful acts—and do not deserve sympathy even if they had all lived—they were not evil. They were human, and they were informed by the society we all live in. Recommendations developed from my findings can help to address issues of masculinity that may prompt young men to consider executing acts of violence.

First of all, while structural changes at the local or community level are likely the most effective way to limit the factors that precede school shootings, I have several recommendations focused at the individual level for parents, teachers, coaches, relatives, and friends who are in the best positions to immediately instigate positive change for the boys and men in their lives. The

simplest change an individual can make is to challenge the norms suggested by hegemonic masculinity in everyday life. Refuse to promote reductive stereotypes like “boys don’t cry,” and instead foster open spaces and safe relationships where boys and men are free to express themselves in a variety of ways, even if they do not reflect traditional assumptions of masculinity. Always listen attentively and be aware of issues connected to masculinity like aggression, entitlement, and an emphasized value on sex which may signal that someone is struggling. Do not tolerate even suggestions of violence; believe that anything said has the potential to materialize and try to report threats whenever possible. Encourage students—who are most likely to hear about a potential attack from their peers before it occurs—to report as well (Newman et al. 2004:288-9). Ensure opportunities for cooperative coed relationship building among young children where boys can gain invaluable experience viewing girls as their equals. These acts, although small, work to subvert the gendered power structure and have the potential to create safer spaces more generally. I also support the suggestions posed by Kimmel (2003) and Newman et al. (2004) aimed at improving academic institutional policies. It is imperative that schools increase the number of non-sports extracurricular activities and eliminate unfair favoring of sports team players in order to create safer social environments for boys lacking hypermasculine physicality (Newman et al. 2004:284). They should also provide avenues for resiliency among students through peer mentoring groups; if a would-be shooter can develop even one personal passion or strong friendship it may be enough to dissuade him from perpetrating violence (Kimmel 2003:1453-4). Both Kimmel (2003:1453) and Newman et al. (2004:280-2) agree that meaningful adult connections and role modeling, especially within schools, are crucial for creating student engagement. Therefore, it is desirable to maintain programs that match one adult mentor with one student. Lastly, I believe that if white hegemonic

masculinity is at the core of the problem of school shootings, then gun accessibility is its perimeter. The two are deeply intertwined and the abundance of and ease of access to firearms must be addressed at a national level in order to mitigate the potential for future school shootings.

Mass shootings in America have become so prevalent that they are now a significant issue of public health care and safety. Political conservatives support gun ownership because of the American Constitutional “right” to defend and protect ourselves—often against the illusive threat of terrorism—through the use of firearms. Yet, guns are so often repurposed against our own citizens—young Americans comprising a disproportionate number of the victims—that there is an argument to be made that these mass shooters are the real terrorists. If guns were not as abundant and easily obtainable as they are today, America’s issue of gun violence would likely decrease. Although conservative rhetoric suggests that increased gun control would only result in criminals possessing weapons, leaving law-abiding Americans defenseless, the shooters I described in this essay did not have criminal backgrounds before they committed these devastating acts of mass violence. Everyday men were able to acquire guns to defend and protect their own misogynistic ideologies—to right perceived societal and personal wrongs—and they killed innocent people to demonstrate their convictions. Despite these realities, the conversations surrounding mass shootings too often focus only on gun control or the mentally ill, ignoring the striking realization that mass shooters are consistently young, white men. As Kimmel (2009:64) poignantly suggests, “The cultural dynamics that enable the most extreme and egregious offenses in Guyland are equally present even in the more everyday aspects of guys’ lives. We need to take a close look at the kind of culture that allows this to happen even once.” This is the sociocultural examination that must be applied regularly in order to mitigate future violence. Without effective

scrutiny, we are vulnerable to more unbridled masculine entitlement causing more human anguish. With greater education about the social construction of masculinity and its implications especially on American men, we can begin to challenge societal gender norms and progressively nurture generations of healthier, more compassionate men.

## Appendix A

### America's Pervasive Gun Culture

Gun culture is pervasive throughout American history and continued following the aftermath of the Vietnam War, exemplified through our booming present-day gun business. Today, gun culture is rooted in the \$17-billion gun and ammunition industry that would be devastated if stricter gun control laws prevented them from selling millions of guns every year (El Akkad 2015).<sup>13</sup> In fact, firearms have become just another necessary purchase in American consumer culture—the FBI processes more background checks for gun purchases on Black Friday than any other day of the year (Santos 2015). This is an almost understandable figure when “every form of media reinforces the notion that the solution to your problems can be held in your hand and provide immediate gratification” (Bellesiles 1996:425). One study shows that general violence in films has “more than doubled since 1950,” while gun violence in “PG-13-rated films has more than tripled since 1985” (Bushman et al. 2013:1014). Interactive violent video games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* series—which have each garnered billions of dollars in sales—have been shown to desensitize players to real-life violence (Bartholow, Bushman, and Sestir 2005:537; Poeter 2014; Thier 2014). War-based video games are actually so realistic that they are used in training American military recruits (Newsom 2015). In this way, Americans are immersed in a gun culture that makes it easy and desirable to consume real guns or lifelike experiences of gun violence through media. Consumerism

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<sup>13</sup> The exact number of guns sold each year is actually unknown. While records of total national gun sales are not kept, the FBI does monitor the number of firearm background checks that they process. In 2015, the FBI processed 19,827,376 background checks, which cannot be assumed a 1:1 ratio of successful gun purchases (Sanburn and Johnson 2015). However, only 1-2% of background checks will be denied—and approximately 5% of those denied successfully appeal their claims, suggesting that gun sales do total into the millions (Kessler 2013; Sanburn and Johnson 2015). This also does not account for private and illegal sales that may bypass FBI regulations, accounting for approximately a third of all gun sales in the United States (Sanburn and Johnson 2015).

normalizes and glorifies the culture of gun violence in America which is supported through lenient gun laws.

Despite some existing restrictions, guns are remarkably accessible in the United States. Regulations on gun ownership and gun purchase are established by both the federal government as well as individual states. The Second Amendment of the Constitution, the right to bear arms, is one federal law most often cited by gun rights activists in promoting their agenda. Federal law prohibits the sale of a firearm or rifle, or ammunition of those weapons, to anyone under the age of 18 (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence 2012). Despite this, thirty states in America have no minimum age requirement for the possession of a long gun, meaning that although minors cannot purchase long guns themselves, they can still legally own them (Ferdman 2014). In contrast, the legal age for purchasing a handgun is 21, but federal law also mandates that no one under 18 can own a handgun (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence 2012). Additionally, the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act requires all firearm customers to undergo a background check before purchase (U.S. Congress 1993). These laws alone are not enough to prevent all of those who want guns, but are barred access, from acquiring them. While stolen guns only account for up to 15% of weapons used in violent crime, there are other more common ways that guns are retrieved illegally (Noyes n.d.). One way is to simply have an adult of legal age without a criminal record purchase the gun in place of the person unable to do so (Noyes n.d.). Another way is to purchase a firearm through a private gun dealer, who is not federally obligated to conduct background checks on their customers (Noyes n.d.). While this is technically not illegal and has been pointed out as a loophole in current gun policy, many illegal guns are channeled through these private dealers (Hale 2013). The accessibility of guns, whether acquired legally or illegally, illustrates the pervasiveness of American gun culture. Despite numerous mass



shootings and other devastating events over recent years that call into question current gun policies or the lack thereof, gun rights activists have powerfully stood their ground. In particular, the activism of the National Rifle Association has helped to perpetuate America's dangerous gun culture for its own benefit.

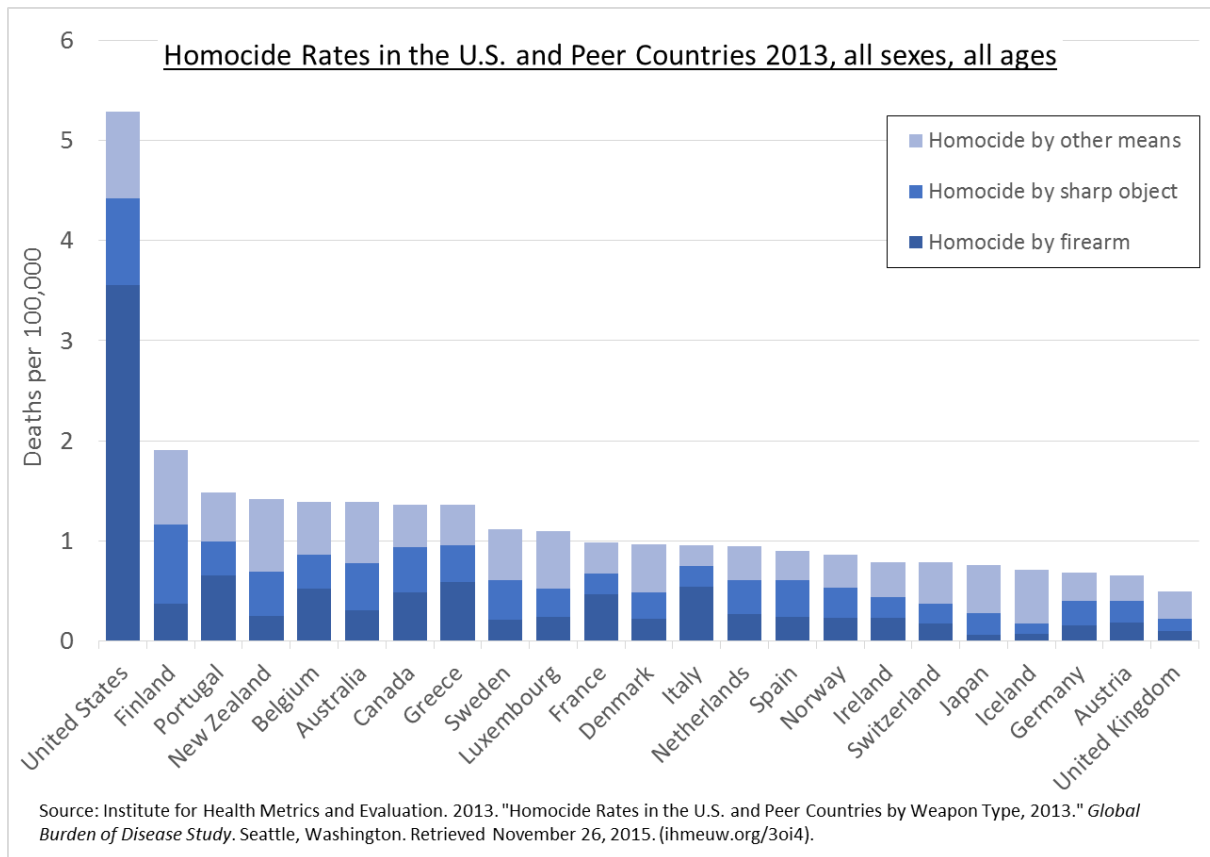
The political power of the National Rifle Association (NRA) has been one of the most substantial barriers to the passage of strong gun control legislation in America. The NRA was established in 1871 initially to “promote and encourage rifle shooting on a scientific basis,” but grew to tirelessly advocate for the protection of gun rights beginning in the 1970s, after the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr. threatened to place restrictions on gun ownership (Kirk 2015; NRA n.d.). They appealed to “core American values like individualism and personal liberty” and created a following of passionate, politically engaged gun owners who eagerly voted against gun control laws (Kirk 2015; Surowiecki 2015). In the 1990s, the NRA created a funding amendment that prevented the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from funding firearm injury and gun safety research that could “be ‘used to advocate or promote gun control’” (Johnson 2015). Through this act, the NRA was able to effectively halt early research on gun violence prevention, protect the gun and ammunition industry, and solidify their position that gun control would not reduce gun violence. In this way, they suggest that shooting events can be perceived as isolated incidents or those that are caused by bullying or mental health disorders, rather than the presence of guns—because, as the well-known phrase says, “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people.” Today, the NRA maintains an annual budget of up to \$250 million and contributes over \$3 million per year to political candidates that support free gun ownership (El Akkad 2015; Zaitchik 2012). It has the monetary and political capabilities to keep its interests supported, despite recent executive actions released by President Obama to

reduce gun violence which address the private sale loophole and encourage gun safety research, but have yet to be ratified (Office of the Press Secretary 2016). American gun culture is evident in its political history, economic dominance, and social strength. While these aspects of American culture have not been proven to directly cause increased rates of gun violence, America's lax sociopolitical environment regarding guns increases the capability and brutality of violent events. Access to guns is key to enacting gun violence, yet, demographics illustrate a broader sociological picture: American women and girls are born and raised within this same gun culture—yet, they do not perpetrate gun violence nearly as much as men do in the United States (Earp and Katz 2013). While it is necessary to understand America's gun culture in order to better understand American gun violence, it alone does not provide a complete comprehensive understanding of this issue.

### **Gun Violence: An American Problem**

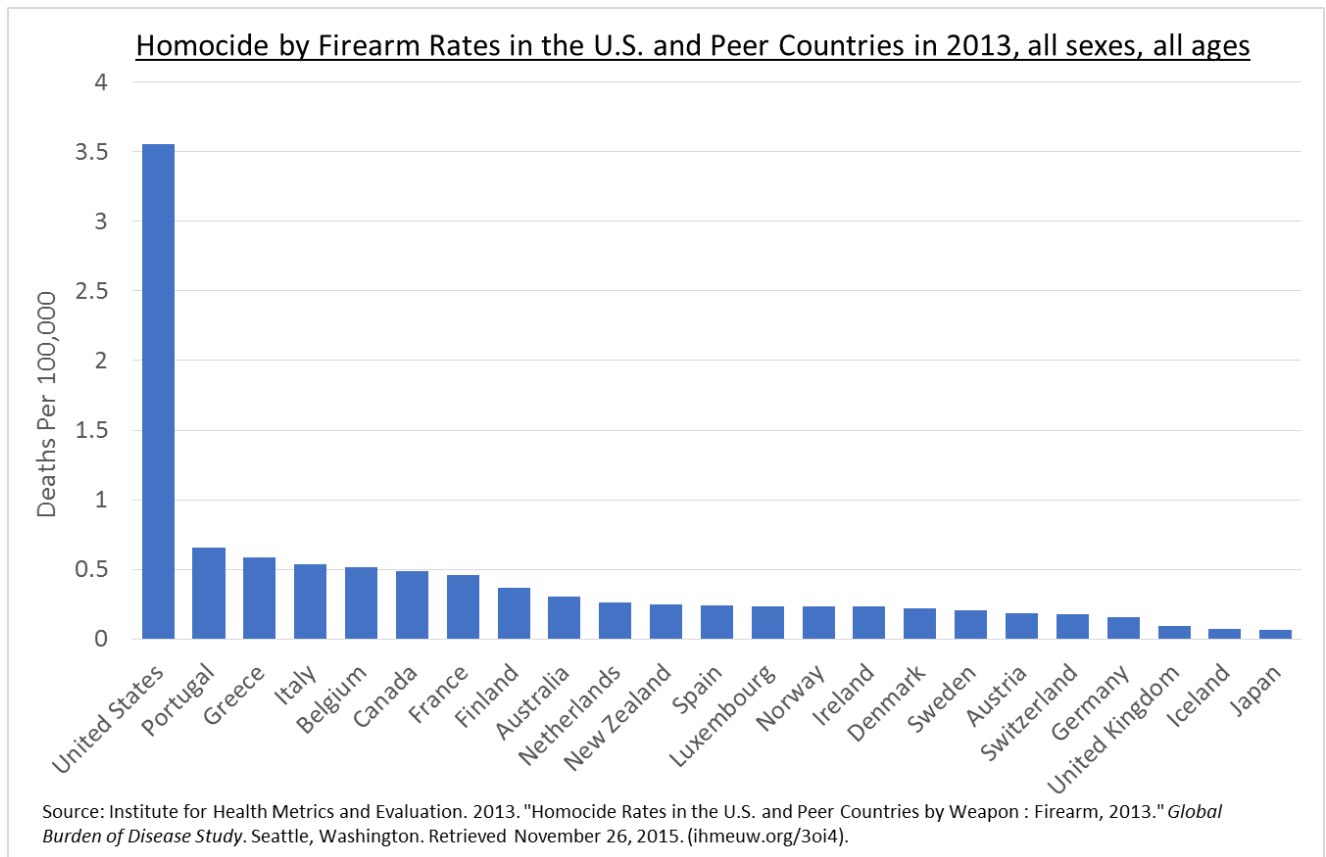
Compared to its peer countries, high rates of homicide and gun-related violence are a uniquely American problem. In 2013, the United States had a violent assault rate of 5.28 deaths per 100,000 people, more than twice that of any developed North American or European country (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2013). [See Figure 2]

Figure 2



Sixty-seven percent of those deaths occurred due to gun violence, a rate over five times higher than the second-place country, Portugal (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2013). [See Figure 3] Surprisingly, this rate is actually lower than previous year in the United States. Rates of murder and overall violent crime have decreased by 17% and 19% between 2003 and 2012, respectively, but about 33,000 Americans are still killed every year due to gun violence (Parsons and Johnson 2014:2).

Figure 3



The only developed nation—not pictured in the above graphs—that trumps the United States homicide rate is South Africa with a rate of 32.2 deaths per 100,000 people, but the two countries have such diverging economic, political, and cultural situations that direct, accurate comparisons between those countries are difficult (Africa Check 2014). While gun violence is not unheard of elsewhere, the United States dramatically exceeds compared to similar countries in rates of homicide and gun violence.

Gun violence may be prevalent in America, because widespread gun ownership is also a unique characteristic of United States citizens. Americans comprise 4.43% of the world's population, but possess approximately 42% of privately owned firearms in the world (Lopez

2015). Yet, gun ownership is concentrated in the U.S. among 34% of its citizens (Pew Research Center 2014:50). Even though this means the majority of people do not own a single gun, it also suggests that American gun owners, approximately one-third of the population, retain more than one firearm on average. While gun ownership is staunchly protected by the NRA and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, research does suggest a relationship between gun ownership and gun violence. Studies show that “living in a home where guns are kept increase[d] an individual’s risk of death by homicide by between 40 and 170%,” this is backed by a second study that reported “persons with guns in the home were at greater risk of dying from a homicide in the home than those without guns,” offering that owning guns does not increase one’s protection, but actually puts someone at greater risk for harm (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence 2015). In this way, the unique accessibility to guns in America is a major factor informing gun-related violence and incident there.

The demographics of gun violence offenders and victims helps to further contextualize this American phenomenon. Regarding age, victims of gun-related homicide are disproportionately comprised of young adults. According to a report published by the Center for American Progress, less than 3% of Americans who die every year are under the age of 25, yet 21% of people who died in 2010 as a result of gun violence were under the age of 25 (Parsons and Johnson 2014:3). If you consider people under the age of 30, this percentage rises to 54% (Parsons and Johnson 2014:2). Clearly, those who are harmed most by gun violence are young Americans. In fact, homicide became the second-highest cause of death for young people between the ages of 15 and 24, and “approximately 83% of those homicides were committed with a gun” (Parsons and Johnson 2014:4). In 2015, for Americans under the age of 26, gun violence deaths were projected to surpass motor vehicle deaths in 2015 (Parsons and Johnson

2014:5-6).<sup>14</sup> The average offender—not only the average victim—is also disproportionately more likely to be a young adult. In 2012, 65% of all arrests for weapon offenses were of people between the ages of 10 and 29 (Parsons and Johnson 2014:10). In 2011, “4,998 individuals between the ages of 12 and 24 were arrested for homicides,” and 70% of those assaults were classified as gun-related incidents (Parsons and Johnson 2014:10). In this way, young people are both the producers as well as the receivers of gun violence, but this profile also intersects with categories of race and gender.

Gun violence is a significant social issue for poor Black inner-city youth. Black individuals are “six times as likely as whites to be the victim of a homicide” and “seven times as likely to commit a homicide” (Frum 2013). Another study indicates that firearm-related fatalities are twice as high for African Americans as whites and that Black men are victims over five times more often than Black women (Kalesan et al. 2014:1; Reeves and Holmes 2015). Despite this, Black individuals are also “only about half as likely as whites to have a firearm in their home” and are more likely to support stricter gun control measures (Cohn et al. 2013; Ferdman 2014; Frum 2013; Morin 2014). In this way, some journalists and researchers speculate that Black individuals may recognize the tragedy in their communities and want to stop the cyclical nature of gun ownership leading to gun violence, while gun-owning whites are far removed from this environment and condemn gun control efforts for fear of losing control as well as their individual rights (Frum 2013).

Gun violence does exist in white communities, but materializes in vastly different ways. Although 82% of gun deaths among Black individuals were considered homicides, only 19%

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<sup>14</sup> In November 2015, the U.S. Department of Transportation (2015) released estimates for motor vehicle deaths of the first six months of 2015, but the total results are not yet available to confirm or reject this projection.

were homicides among gun deaths of white individuals—instead, 77% are suicides (Reeves and Holmes 2014). White individuals still perpetrate 65% of all forcible rapes, 63% of all aggravated assaults, and 48% of all murders and nonnegligent manslaughters (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2012). Furthermore, particular types of violence are perpetrated by predominantly white offenders. White individuals have committed the majority of serial killings between 1900 and 2010 in the United States (Aamodt 2015:6). Murder-suicides, events where an individual kills one or more people (often family members) and then kills themselves, are also most often perpetrated by non-Hispanic white men (Auchter 2010:11). In this research, I study school shootings, a specific derivative of mass shootings: 98% of mass shooting perpetrators over the last 30 years were men, 90% of shootings at American elementary and high schools were committed by young white men, and 80% of mass murder perpetrators aged 20 or under were also white men (Kimmel 2012). Furthermore, women are twice as likely to die in mass shootings as men, and 78% of murder-suicide shooting victims are women (Chemaly 2015). In this way, it is predominately young, white men who are the perpetrators of these particularly violent crimes and women who are their victims. Gun culture and accessibility contextualize these situations but must be considered together with demographic trends and gender socialization in order to begin to address the complexity of school shootings.

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