School Shootings: A Nexus of Adolescent Masculinity, Bullying, and Homophobia

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• In 2017: 346 mass shootings in the U.S. (Gun Violence Archive 2018)

• US: average of 16.4 multi-victim school shootings a year from 2007 to 2013 vs. 6.4 from 2000 to 2006 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2013)

• Multi-victim school shooters: 97% male, 79% white (Xie 2014)

• 53.1% of school shooters are aged 10-19 (Langman 2016)
  • The number of perpetrators under the age of 16 has more than doubled from 1996 to 2015

• Bullying victims twice as likely to bring a weapon to school (Mother Jones 2014)
Research Questions

- What is the relationship between adolescent masculinity and mass violence?
- ...between homophobia and mass violence?
- Why is there a gender gap with respect to adolescent-perpetrated school shootings?
- How well does the theoretical framework of Kimmel and Mahler (2001) analyze contemporary school shootings?
- What can contemporary literature lend to their analysis?
Politicians on Mass Violence
“These violent video games are stealing the innocence of our children — and it is certainly making the job of being a parent even more difficult.” – Hillary Clinton in 2005 (Peterson 2015)

"Video game violence & glorification must be stopped—it is creating monsters!” – Donald Trump in a tweet from 2012

Public Opinion: 63% of Americans say “shootings reflect a failure to identify and treat people with mental health problems”, and 23% blame inadequate gun control laws (Washington Post-ABC News Poll, 2015)
Wayne LaPierre, president of the National Rifle Association, blames “delusional killers” for incidents such as Sandy Hook, and calls for a “national registry” of people with mental illness (Metzel and MacLeash 2015)

“My biggest frustration is that this society has not been willing to take some basic steps to keep guns out of the hands of people who can do just unbelievable damage.” – Barrack Obama (Herring and Jacobson 2015)

“Guns have little or nothing to do with juvenile violence. The causes of youth violence are working parents who put their kids into daycare, the teaching of evolution in the schools, and working mothers who take birth control pills.” – Tom DeLay, Republican Party House Majority Leader 2003-2005 (Kimmel and Mahler 2001)
Debunking Myths

- Despite the ostensible increase in violent media, youth violence, school violence, and gun violence have all steadily decreased over time (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2013, Chappell 2013, Kimmel and Mahler 2001).

- Only three of the multi-victim school shootings that have taken place since 2014 can be attributed to or associated with radical Islam (Schwindt 2016).

- Psychological variables—such as a history of child abuse or a turbulent family environment—do not apply in many cases.
  
  - Many shooters come from “relatively stable families” with “no history of child abuse” (Kimmel and Mahler 2001)
  
  - Mentally ill much more likely to be the victims of violence than to perpetrate it (Canadian Mental Health Association 2018)
  
  - These variables apply to both boys and girls equally—why, then, is the gender gap between male and female mass violence so large?
Under-examined Factors

Toxic masculinity: constituted through violence in a patriarchal culture (Haider 2016)

Homophobic bullying: a "disciplinary tool" and "central mechanism" in the construction of adolescent masculinity (Pascoe 2007)
Analytical Framework

- Kimmel and Mahler (2001)

- If **toxic masculinity** permits the use of violence to bolster a male gender identity and if **homophobic bullying** is the key mechanism denigrating the masculinity of other boys, then **violence can be used to reconstitute that lost masculinity**.

- Adolescent mass-shooters as **over-conformists**

- Gender-gap: violence defies gendered expectations for girls
Research Methods

• Borrowing Kimmel and Mahler's (2001) framework

• Qualitative analysis of 8 school shootings between 2001-2018

• Using the location of the shooting as search terms, gathered 20 articles from major reputable news sources

• Articles scanned for mentions of homophobic bullying, compromised masculinity, or other gendered content

• Shootings chosen due to their high-profile nature, allowing for availability of information
  • Cases only included if enough information was present to make definitive judgment on presence of above factors

• Perpetrator names omitted to avoid making further spectacle out of these events
## Summary of Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Perpetrator Age</th>
<th>Victims*</th>
<th>Homophobic Bullying?</th>
<th>Compromised Masculinity?</th>
<th>Articles Examined</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Santana High School</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Umqua Community College</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>2/14/2018</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Both fatalities and non-lethal injuries sustained.*
Shootings

- Santana High School Shooting -- 3/5/2001
  - 15 years old
  - Killed 2, wounded 13
  - Was called a "queer", beat up, or otherwise harassed (ABC News 2001)
  - Was ashamed to admit that he had been bullied in the first place (Dickey 2013)

- North Forest High School -- 1/10/2012
  - 18 years old
  - 3 victims
  - Targeted the students that had been bullying him—bullying intense enough for the perpetrator to claim it was in self-defense (ABC 2016)
  - Bullying contained homophobic content
Shootings

• Taft Union High School -- 1/10/2013
  • 16 years old
  • Wounded 2
  • Had been a victim of relentless homophobic bullying, according to information released by the police (Press 2012, Goldman 2013)

• Sparks Middle School – 10/21/2013
  • 12 years old
  • Killed 1, wounded 2, suicide
  • Was teased for his speech impediment and constantly called gay (Reno Gazette Journal 2014)
  • In suicide note, expressed anger over his mistreatment at school and indicated he would get his revenge (Siobhan 2014)
  • Police never conclusively identified a motive
Shootings

• Marysville Pilchuck -- 10/24/2014
  • 15 years old
  • Fatally shot 4, injured 3, suicide
  • Reportedly not teased
  • Fought with another student over a girl—one of his victims was a girl that had turned him down (Aimsay, Conlon, and Brumfield 2014, Connor 2014, Johnson 2014)
  • Still fits into the backdrop toxic masculinity despite lack of teasing
    • Retaliatory demonstration in light of slighted masculine identity, still fits pattern

• Umqua Community College Shooting -- 10/1/2015
  • 26 years old
  • Killed 9, suicide
  • Anti-religious, white supremacist, expressed sexual frustration as a virgin and isolation (Gray 2015, Muskal, Winston, and Gerbel 2015)
  • Masculinity is tied to successful sexual conquest, virginity can be perceived as a mark of shame—compromised masculinity
Shootings

- Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School -- 2/14/2018
  - a.k.a. the Parkland shooting
  - 19 years old
  - 17 dead, 17 injured
  - Police have yet to release official motive (Rozsa, Berman, Merle 2018)
  - No evidence to prove perpetrator was subject to homophobic bullying or compromised masculinity
  - Digital footprint: anti-black, Islamaphobic, white supremacist
    - "I whana [sic.] shoot people with my AR-15" and "I wanna die Fighting killing s**t ton of people"
    - Singled out Antifa activists and law enforcement as groups he wanted to kill
  - Role of reactionary politics and radicalizing ideology – alt-right is a "digital coalition of identity politics for straight white American men" (Kelly 2017)
Shootings

• Marshall County High School -- 1/24/2018
  • 15 years old
  • 16 victims
  • Perpetrator claims that he was not bullied and had good relationships with his family
  • Carried out shooting because he was curious about life in prison and because that life has no meaning (Sayers and Wolfson 2018)
  • No evidence of compromised masculinity
Discussion

• 6 out of 8 examined cases: evidence that these rampages are retaliatory in nature, specifically in regards to homophobic or otherwise gendered threats against their manhood
  • Violence serves as restitutive toward one's damaged masculinity

• Kimmel and Mahler's framework does not always fit perfectly
  • 2 out of 8 examined cases—neither bullying nor compromised masculinity played an apparent factor
  • Lack of emphasis upon political ideology (Parkland & Umqua shootings)

• Male dominance of mass violence is readily apparent
Policy Recommendations

- Toxic masculinity cannot be "solved"

- Schools serve as one of the primary institutions of gender socialization (Pascoe 2007)
  - Interactions with other students
  - School itself can send messages

- Schools can be a de-gendered institution
  - "It is not a matter of doing more in this instance, it is in fact a call to do less – less gendering." (Mackay 2017)
  - When educators refrain from needlessly gendering an activity or a lesson plan, they avoid strengthening the firmament of gender inequality
  - Banning of militaristic toys, toy guns, etc.

- Dramatic shortage of mental health care workers in schools (National Education Association 2017)

- Culture competence professional development for educators with respect to gender, sexism, bullying, and toxic masculinity

- However: public education spending "well below historic levels" (Mitchell, Leachman, Masterson 2017)
Policy Recommendations (Inclusivity)

• Efforts to combat mass violence in schools must be sensitive to the issues of the mentally ill and for people of color

• March For Our Lives recommendations:
  • Amendment of privacy laws to give police more access to mental health records
    • Further stigmatizes mentally ill
    • Empowers an already too powerful, too well-armed police force
    • Does nothing to stop mass shootings (Jaffe 2018)

• Increased police presence in schools
  • Only further entrenches school to prison pipeline that targets black students (Williams 2018)
Conclusion

- There is a need for the creation of a new type of authentic, stable, and non-violent masculinity

- There are forces at work—beyond gun control, beyond mental health, beyond political ideology—that forge young boys into killers

- There is no "quick fix" for toxic masculinity or homophobic bullying—but awareness is key and there are steps that can be taken
Questions?