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Teaching her a lesson: Media misses boys' rage relating to girls in school shootings

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Abstract

An analysis of media coverage of 12 United States school shootings, which took place between 1997 and 2002, shows a previously unnoticed pattern: nearly all the boys who killed in these shootings specifically targeted girls who rejected them, or minimally implied that they acted due to a perceived rejection by a girl. This research highlights the media's blindness to significant social problems that are hidden behind society's 'boys-will-be-boys' attitude toward harassment of and violence against teenage girls.

Key words

dating violence; masculinity; school shooting; sexual harassment

Popular discourse addresses school shootings almost obsessively, yet continues to leave out the role of gender in these crimes. New research, however, suggests that this omission ignores a key element: a significant number of the boys' own stated reasons for this violence clearly point to premeditated violence specifically involving girls. These findings call to account cultural attitudes, reflected in and perpetuated by media accounts, which at best ignore and at worst encourage such violence. A systematic analysis of hundreds of media accounts of 12 school shootings, which took place between 1997 and 2002, reveals a high incidence of dating violence and sexual harassment as precursors to school shootings (see Table 1). Also significantly, this analysis shows a pattern of overt threats and warnings accompanied by the repeated failure of faculty, parents, peers or other members of the school community to respond. The lack of response parallels the media's failure to identify the significance of the role of gender-based violence. This shortcoming, rooted in society and reinforced by the media, lies in the effective invisibility of the problems of dating violence, sexual harassment, and threats of gun violence, which often are perceived not as deviant, but rather as 'normal' behavior.

Reports of such peer abuse prior to school shootings appeared repeatedly in the same articles, yet other explanations absorbed the bulk of the blame: lax gun control, poor

TABLE 1 School shootings and relevant aspects of violence against girls

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Injured</i>	<i>Relationship with girls</i>
02/19/97	Bethel, Alaska	Evan Ramsey	16	*S: 1 Principal: 1	S: 2	Girlfriend broke up with him.
10/01/97	Pearl, Mississippi	Luke Woodham	16	S: 2F Mother: 1	S: 7	Killed former girlfriend, Christina Menefee, and killed her best friend.
12/01/97	W. Paducah, Kentucky	Michael Carneal	14	S: 3F	S: 5	Killed a girl who rejected him and a second girl who wouldn't go out with him.
03/24/98	Jonesboro, Arkansas	Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden	13 and 11	S: 4F Teacher: 1F/ pregnant; 14 of 15 victims F	S: 10/9F and 1M Teacher: 1	Johnson shot ex-girlfriend, vowed to kill all girls who broke up with him, threatened to kill others for speaking of break-up; shot 2 other girls who refused advances; 11-year old Golden killed ex-girlfriend.
04/24/98	Edinboro, Pennsylvania	Andrew Wurst	14	Teacher: 1M Popular science teacher	S: 2; Teacher: 1	Targeted ex-girlfriend whom he threatened when she broke up with him: 'Then I'll have to kill you.' Also targeted girl who laughed at him for inviting her to a dance.
05/19/98	Fayetteville, Tennessee	Jacob Davis	18	S: 1M		Victim dating ex-girlfriend.
05/21/98	Springfield, Oregon	Kipland Kinkel	15	S: 2M Parents: 2	S: 22	Reported considerable disturbance over rejection by girl he 'loved' before crime.
04/20/99	Littleton, Colorado	Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold	17 and 18	S: 12/8F-4M Teacher: 1M Self: 2	S: 23	Both boys complained about relentless rejection by girls.

TABLE 1 Continued

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Injured</i>	<i>Relationship with girls</i>
05/20/99	Conyers, Georgia	Thomas Solomon	15	0	S: 6	Harassed by other students; girlfriend 'turned charms on' the jock who teased him and whom subject shot twice; depressed after break-up with girlfriend.
02/29/00	Mt. Morris Township, Michigan	Under age; no name available	6	S: 1F		Fight with girl.
03/05/01	Santee, California	Charles Andrew Williams	15	S: 2M	S: 13	
01/15/02	New York, New York	Vincent Rodriguez	17	0	S: 2M	'Wanted revenge on two boys who had harassed his girlfriend'; humiliated by the victims when he backed down from their challenge to fight for girl's honor.

Key: *S = Student; M = Male; F = Female

parenting, and media violence, for example (Klein and Chancer, 2000). Invariably, though, these articles failed to identify pertinent gender issues. Why?

Part of the media's blindness can be blamed on the approach to crime reporting that Websdale and Alvarez (1998) have termed 'forensic journalism'. Highlighting the individual anomalies and minute details of a given crime, forensic journalism focuses in so much detail on what makes a crime unusual – in other words sensational and newsworthy – that it obscures systemic patterns of violence against women (p. 126). As a result, it is all too common that 'readers are left with the impression that sex crimes against women are aberrant features of social life rather than criminal events endemic to patriarchal society' (p. 125).

As analysis of media coverage of the school shootings shows, gender-based factors rooted in normalized masculinity were all too common precursors. Many of the boys' main stated motives were manifestations of gender relationship stresses: rejection, jealousy/protection, and frustration. In total, eleven shootings involved boys' lethal rage at or about girls.

REJECTION

In five shootings, boys targeted and shot girls who had just rejected them (Blank, 1998; Cloud, 1998; Popyk, 1998a; 1998b; Barboza, 2000). In Mississippi (1997), when asked why he killed his ex-girlfriend and her best friend, 16-year-old Luke Woodham answered that he was distraught over his breakup with the girlfriend (Barboza, 2000). In Kentucky in 1997, 14-year-old Michael Carneal's first shot killed a girl who was the object of his unrequited love (Blank, 1998) and a second girl who also wouldn't go out with him (Newman et al., 2004). In Arkansas in 1998, 13-year old Mitchell Johnson vowed to kill all the girls who had broken up with him and specifically targeted 11-year-old Candace Porter, who had just 'dumped' him (*New York Times*, 1998). He worried about the effect the rejection would have on his reputation and threatened to kill another girl if she told anyone about the breakup (Newman et al., 2004). Johnson also shot two other girls who had refused his advances (Newman et al., 2004). Andrew Golden, aged 11, had been recently rejected by his girlfriend, who was wounded (*New York Times*, 1998; Angel, 1999). All five people Johnson and Golden killed were female: four girls and a pregnant teacher. Of the wounded students, nine out of ten were girls (Bragg, 1998; Klein and Chancer, 2000).

Students believed that 14-year-old Andrew Wurst was targeting his former girlfriend when he came to a school dance with a gun (Edinboro, Pennsylvania, 1998). Three months before the shooting she had broken up with him. Wurst had replied: 'then I'll have to kill you' (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2003: 87). Still, he asked her to the dance, but she declined. Wurst also targeted a second girl who had laughed at him for inviting her to the dance.

JEALOUSY/PROTECTION

In three other cases, which involved a combination of jealousy and territorial behavior, boys 'protected' their girlfriends by shooting other boys who threatened the relationships (Blank, 1998; Bragg, 1998; Cloud, 1999; Hartocollis, 2002). In Tennessee in 1998, 18-year-old Jacob Davis killed the teenage boy who was dating his ex-girlfriend. In Georgia in 1999, 15-year-old Thomas Solomon, shot Jason Cheeks, a three-lettered 'jock' who teased Solomon relentlessly; Thomas believed his girlfriend had 'turned her charms on Jason' (Cloud, 1999). In 2002, the student shooter in New York City also killed for revenge after two boys harassed his girlfriend (Baker, 2002).

DIFFICULTIES WITH GIRLS

In three other cases, reports conveyed that part of the boys' motivation to kill was their general unhappiness related to difficulties with girls. Two boys said they picked up guns partly because they were upset about a break-up, though they did not specifically target the girls involved (Fainaru, 1998; Associated Press, 1999). In Alaska in 1997 Evan Ramsey's girlfriend broke up with him just before the shooting (Fainaru, 1998). Kipland Kinkel (Oregon, 1998) despaired over unrequited infatuations. Dylan Klebold (Colorado, 1999) was so shy with girls that his parents paid him \$250 to attend the Columbine High School Prom (Belluck and Wilgoren, 1999). The other shooter, Eric Harris, unsuccessfully invited three different girls to the Prom (Belluck and Wilgoren, 1999). In Georgia in 1999, Thomas Solomon stated that he committed the shooting partly because he was angry that his girlfriend had broken up with him after two years (Associated Press, 1999).

Seen through the lens of masculinity theory, the killings of girls who rejected their assailants can be explained as an effort to reverse the effects of subordination and inadequacy the assailants experienced as a result of their rejection. The other half of this story, however, is the widespread tacit – sometimes even open – acknowledgement that at least some level of gender violence is 'okay'.

When Woodham shot and killed his ex-girlfriend, a group of approving peers egged him on. The leader of his peer group allegedly told him to stop whining and 'just kill the bitch' (Egan, 1998). In Jonesboro, Arkansas, student after student reported Johnson's threat to shoot former girlfriends, including his claim that 'I got a lot of killing to do' (Angel, 1999). Porter ended her relationship with Johnson after three days, telling him: 'boys don't hit girls' (Angel, 1999). Her cousin said: 'Candace had sought out her teachers, telling them that Mitchell seemed upset and violent. She was really worried . . . but I don't think the school took any notice of it' (Angel, 1999). Golden, Johnson's accomplice, was known to 'hit little girls on the arms' and intimidate them by walking around with a knife strapped to his side (Newman et al., 2004). Significantly, neither school officials nor parents nor other students tried to intervene regarding Johnson's or his accomplice's threats (Angel, 1999).

This kind of see-no-evil is typical of the manner in which public discourse has denied

the existence of gender issues in school shootings, as well as with dating violence and sexual harassment more generally. Boys in many cases may believe that peers support their right to inflict abuse (Lobel, 1986; US Dept. of Justice, 1999; Huss and Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2000). The 'boys will be boys' assumptions that 'excuse' sexual harassment and dating violence have been documented (Reese, 1997; Bowman and Morgan, 1998; Johnson and Johnson, 2000; Messerschmidt, 2000; Scully, 2001; Carlson, 2003). Signs of imminent violence are hidden in normalized masculinity expectations in two ways: first, that boys are expected to manifest a certain level of aggression; and second, that boys should dominate girls (Adler and Adler, 1995; Adler, Kless and Adler, 1992; Connell, 1995; Klein and Chancer, 2000). These attitudes allow dating violence and sexual harassment to escape the untrained eye (Reese, 1997; Bowman and Morgan, 1998; Johnson and Johnson, 2000; Scully, 2001; Carlson, 2003).

Media reports tend to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, which normalizes the subordination of women, and heterosexuality while simultaneously featuring an 'emphasized femininity' for woman as a fragile crime victim (Chesney-Lind, 1999). When these identities are adopted as a societal norm, systemic violence against women recedes as a perceived social problem. As Chesney-Lind writes: 'typically, patriarchal interests are served when women's violence is denied, minimized, pathologized, or ignored' (p. 133).

The media feed into this cycle, internalizing the cultural attitude that 'boys will be boys,' which they then perpetuate when their reporting fails to identify gender relations problems as part of a larger pattern, not just an element of isolated 'deviant' cases. Yet the media are not alone in failing to see the extent of the problem; the scholarly community also has kept the problems of adolescent gender violence all but invisible. Teen dating violence receives very little research attention – less attention than domestic violence, juvenile crime, or date rape (Howard and Wang, 2003). This lack of awareness may explain in part how a glaring pattern of violence related to girls in schools could go unnoticed for so long.

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