

FINAL PAPER
**“AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO EXPLAINING SCHOOL SHOOTINGS
FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE”**

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PROFESSOR: D. Kudla

STUDENT NAME: Jamie-Lee Bossenberry

STUDENT NUMBER: 250765476

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Introduction

Occurring in the 1990's was an endemic display of school violence; one in which left Americans feeling as though schools no longer symbolized the safe havens they were once believed to be. That is, several landmark cases of school shootings traumatized the United States, not only because of their brutality, but also because of the comparatively suburban, middle class locations in which they transpired. As stated by Schmallegger (2006), the typical school shooter does not fit the standard profile of the usual juvenile offender who is, more often than not, a young, African American male residing in a disadvantaged and socially disorganized inner city community that is laden with interpersonal violence. Rather, according to the National School Safety Center (2006), the average American school shooter is a young, Caucasian male from a middle class neighbourhood who attends an affluent suburban high school and who has essentially no background of violent behaviour prior to the incident itself. For decades now researchers have struggled to formulate plausible explanations as to why seemingly "normal" teenagers would resort to such terrorizing behaviours at the expense of the lives of, not only many innocent victims, but commonly alongside the sacrifice of their own lives as well. For the most part, *single* causal variables have been isolated and examined to the exclusion of other important factors (Rocque, 2012). When dealing with something as complex as human behaviour, however, a single theory will likely never be enough to explain a phenomenon as perplexing as that of school shootings. With this in mind, this paper will serve to shed light on a more *integrative* approach to explaining school shootings – a tragedy so many wish to better understand; particularly for the reason that they are sadly not unfamiliar to us in the twenty-first century. Specifically, this paper will focus on sociological theories that are prominent in the field

of criminology, ultimately incorporating them into a more comprehensive framework than is generally employed in research pertaining to school shootings.

Anomie

French sociologist Emile Durkheim emphasized the importance of social order and social solidarity in the maintenance of a harmonious society. Durkheim stated that pre-modern societies provided individuals with a well-defined place within the world; one that was created and strengthened by values concerning morality, religion, and patriotism. As time progressed, however, Durkheim began to observe the social solidarity of societies begin to weaken. This was largely attributable to the increased importance placed upon individual monetary success and status as determined by the collective conscience. With the creation of large cities and the like, the resultant decline in social cohesion came to be defined as a state of “anomie” (or normlessness) by Durkheim. According to Durkheim, such a state contributes to the diminished connection between individuals to one another, and to society as a whole. For Durkheim, this lack of group solidarity ultimately contributes to the generation of deviant activity. As an example, Durkheim himself found that suicides were much more frequent in societies that were characterized by a lower degree of social integration.

Modernity has thus resulted in a trend towards individualistic societies over the collectivism of the past. Such societies are characterized by the tapering away of morality and of the collective values that guide individuals in their behaviour towards each other; subsequently, people do not know what to expect from one another (Isaksen, 2013). “The trend towards excessive individualism is considered to be intolerable to many people, who react by seeking a sacred bonding through commitment to movements or groups which offer ways of ‘keeping warm together’ against the cold winds of modernity and the alienating experience of the

economic-political order. Of course, the emotional warmth of sacred bonds can also be generated by violence and deviance, whether it be in gangs or extreme political groups” (Thompson, 2002, pg. 7). This passage by Kenneth Thompson corresponds to the work of Joachim Vogt Isaksen (2013), who states that mass shootings are more frequent in individualistic societies in comparison to collectivistic ones. He adds that the lower degree of social integration in individualistic societies increases potential for the social isolation of citizens (Isaksen, 2013). In the most extreme of cases, this social isolation may intensify a potential mass murderer’s perception of being a loner in a world chockfull of enemies, so to speak (Isaksen, 2013). These individuals may then use violence as a conduit for releasing their pent up aggression towards a society that they feel has betrayed them (Isaksen, 2013).

Social Disorganization and Anomie

The social disorganization theory of Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay greatly parallels Durkheim’s anomie in the sense that the term “social disorganization” itself refers to the failure of a community to fulfill common goals and resolve recurrent problems. That is, weak social networks within a community (be it a neighbourhood, a school, etc.) decrease the capability of the population to control the behaviour of individuals, and consequently the probability of crime is increased. This paper will return to a discussion of social disorganization as it relates to the school environment in particular.

Social Control Theory

American criminologist Travis Hirschi’s social control theory proposes that without strong bonds to society, particularly to the family institution, crime is an inevitable outcome (Taylor, 2001). In other words, unlike other theories that strive to explain why people engage in deviant

behaviour, control theories take the reverse approach; examining why people abstain from offending (Taylor, 2001). Therefore, according to social control theory, criminality is regarded as a prospect for all individuals within society; evaded only by those who seek to establish and preserve familial and social bonds.

Hirschi's social control theory views delinquents as being deficient of close attachments, ambitions, and moral convictions that compel most people into a life within the law (Taylor, 2001). That is, bearing in mind why individuals conform, Hirschi underscores the influence of the social bond (characterized by attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) (Taylor, 2001). Hirschi asserts that so long as attachment between parent and child is strong, and social bonds to individuals and society remain in place throughout the life course, the likelihood of delinquency on behalf of the child is greatly reduced. In other words, according to social control theory, attachment can be understood as variable over persons and over time and hence; propensity for delinquency is liable to change over time (Taylor, 2001).

The discussion in the previous two sections pertaining to Durkheim's anomie and Shaw and McKay's social disorganization alluded to this notion of weak social ties. In reference to school shootings, Isaksen (2013) asserts that mass shootings occur when the perpetrator's bond to society becomes weakened; the outcome of which is the shooter's self-perception becomes one of being socially marginalized. Isaksen (2013) contends that, in general, school shooters often have low social skills and are as follows poorly socially integrated. A wealth of other research bears resemblance to these findings.

To begin with, Michael L. Pittaro argues that "[o]ne cannot discuss the behavioural manifestations and psychosocial influences of school violence without addressing the topic of bullying, a pervasive social problem that is often dismissed as a customary rite of passage that

students must unfortunately endure and hopefully overcome” (Pittaro, 2007, pg. 3). For instance, Greene (2005) (as cited in Pittaro, 2007) found that the majority of school shooters are the victims of assorted degrees of bullying occurring within their schools. Likewise, research by Vossekuil, Reddy, and Fein (2000) (as cited in Pittaro, 2007) reached similar conclusions; that approximately two-thirds of the offenders studied were bullied preceding the actual incident. Similarly, Leary, Kowalski, Smith, and Phillips (2003) (as cited in Rocque, 2012) determined that in a study of 15 school shootings; “social rejection”, including bullying, was a key factor in 13 of the episodes. It is thereby of great possibility that a substantial number of school shootings take place because of the offender’s desire to seek retaliation. In fact, Reddy *et al.* (2001) (as cited in Pittaro, 2007) declare that 93% of the past 41 school shooters planned the attack at least two days prior to the commission of the murders with revenge being the prime motivation in 61% of the attacks.

In line with weak social bonds, Berry-Fletcher and Fletcher (2003) as well as Meadows (2007) (as cited in Pittaro, 2007) establish that particular family characteristics, such as inappropriate, inconsistent, or exceedingly harsh child rearing practices, in addition to parental neglect or abandonment; constitute risk factors associated with school violence. Meadows (2007) exclaims that it is common for anger originating from within the home or the community to be displaced or projected into the school environment. Berry-Fletcher and Fletcher (2003) go on to state that the quality of one’s child rearing environment is extremely instrumental in shaping developmental outcomes of psychiatric disorders such as ADHD as well as oppositional-defiant disorder.

General Strain Theory

General strain theory is a criminological theory formulated by American criminologist Robert Agnew (Levin & Madfis, 2009). It was developed by Agnew out of a realization that the original strain theory set forth by Robert Merton (1938, 1968), which concentrated upon social structural and class concerns; failed to adequately conceptualize the expansive range of conceivable sources of strain a person may encounter within society (Levin & Madfis, 2009). Agnew's general strain theory therefore expanded upon Merton's strain theory to include a breadth of negative experiences in which could plausibly occur within one's life in the context of the home, school, work, their community, etc. (Levin & Madfis, 2009). "In Agnew's theory, strain is regarded as a range of difficulties that lead to anger, frustration, disappointment, depression, fear, and ultimately, crime. When strain intensifies and persists across a lengthy period of time, it becomes chronic. Adults who go on a rampage at work or in the family are typically victimized by one or more sources of chronic strain" (Levin & Madfis, 2009, pg. 1230).

As touched on above by Levin and Madfis (2009), crime can potentially result from the presence of chronic strain within one's life. As this relates to school shooters, experiences of normlessness provoked by modernity and its ensuing individualistic societies, deteriorated social bonds with family and peers, as well as the challenges that accompany the presence of mental disorders such as ADHD and oppositional-defiant disorder mentioned earlier; can all donate to feelings of strain within one's life. The question then becomes, why is it that they use violence as a channel for discharging their amassed frustration caused by this general strain?

Cultural Criminology

"Cultural criminology is a distinct theoretical, methodological, and interventionist approach to the study of crime that places criminality and its control squarely in the context of culture; that is, it views crime and the agencies and institutions of crime control as cultural products or as

creative constructs” (Hayward, 2012, para. 1). Interestingly, “[a] simple Google search using the terms “school violence” will result in a number of articles that pertain mostly to school violence within the United States. When one compares the most recent school shootings across the globe, one will quickly notice that the vast majority of school shootings continue to occur within the United States” (Pittaro, 2007, pg. 4). So what is it about the United States in particular that causes it to spawn more school violence than most other countries worldwide?

Larson (1995) (as cited in Rocque, 2012) persuasively suggests that the cultural attitude that “guns solve problems” in America may very well be linked to school shootings. Relatedly, United States culture on the whole largely celebrates violence, as is evidenced by the abundance of physical force in the country’s entertainment industry (in film, on television, in music, in video games, etc.). Berry-Fletcher and Fletcher (2003) demonstrate that children exposed to high levels of violence on television are at an elevated risk of recognizing violence as acceptable in that exposure to such barbarity desensitizes children and is markedly influential on those with a predisposition towards hostility. Anderson and Bushman (2001), Browne and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2005), and Reiner (2007) (as cited in Rocque, 2012) put forward that many social commentators maintain that the proliferation of violence within the media gives rise to sadistic fantasies on the part of children; and that studies have demonstrated that violent media does prompt an increase in aggression. Anderson and Murphy (2003), Cullen (2009), Langman (2009), Larkin (2007), and Newman *et al.* (2004) (as cited in Rocque, 2012) add that case studies of school rampage shooters have discovered that the perpetrators of such attacks often indulged in violent movies and video games. Berry-Fletcher and Fletcher (2003) provide alarming data gathered from a 1993 study conducted by the American Psychological Association in which

estimated that the average child witnesses in the region of 33,000 murders on television by the time they are 18 years of age.

Another important point to include here is that the media breeds copycat criminals. That is, with the media's tendency to capitalize off of school shootings, it has in essence become a platform for merciless individuals seeking to intimidate society to achieve infamy. As cited by Rocque (2012) on page 308 of "Exploring School Rampage Shootings: Research, Theory, and Policy", "[n]ot only are children and adolescents exposed to the idea of getting even for perceived injustices through violence, but they are taught that such violence can earn them celebrity status. Indeed, more than the media coverage itself, the notoriety that popular culture showers upon school shooters teaches our youth – especially alienated and marginalized teenagers – a lesson about how to get attention and how to be in the spotlight" (Fox & Burstein, 2010, pg. 81).

On the topic of cultural criminology, it is also imperative to bring up the notion of hegemonic masculinity. "Hegemonic masculinity is the socially supported and dominant masculinity, which informs normative male behaviour" (Kennedy-Kollar & Charles, 2013, pg. 65). "This dominant masculinity...is associated with [such qualities as] power, high status, authority, heterosexism and physical toughness" (Kennedy-Kollar & Charles, 2013, pg. 65). According to Kimmel (2008) and Kimmel and Mahler (2003) (as cited in Rocque, 2012), school shooters express their hegemonic masculinity through violence; often after having been denied traditional male status, perhaps by having had their sexuality called into question. Intriguingly, Rocque (2012) cites Kimmel (2008) in noting that the majority of school rampage shootings that have taken place within the United States have happened in conservative states wherein there exists a particular emphasis that is placed upon masculinity and gun culture.

In other words, in North American culture at the very least, a certain degree of aggression is in large part an expected aspect of the male gender role. In childhood, boys are conditioned so as to believe that a select measure of roughness is inherent to their biology. This brings us to how it is that boys are taught such in the first place, as well as to, more broadly; how mass shooters come to internalize this cultural acceptance towards violence within the United States.

Social Learning Theory

In the social learning perspective of American criminologist Ronald L. Akers, criminal behaviour is conceived to be the product of normal learning. Henceforth, “[e]ven if a person is attracted to the use of violence, he does not necessarily become violent” (Isaksen, 2013, para. 9). Correspondingly, Sternheimer (2003) (as cited in Isaksen, 2013) asserts that violence is learned via social contexts and personal life experiences; thereby even if some people are more aggressive by nature, the learning factor is nonetheless essential. Violence can thus be learned, and often times this occurs by way of imitation of others.

It is along these lines, then, that the cultural toleration for and celebration of violence comes to be internalized by individuals; including school shooters, and arguably all mass shooters alike. That is, through persistent exposure to pugnaciousness within all media forums, rampage shooters come to view acts of large-scale murder as viable options for the release of bottled-up vexation.

In terms of acclimatizing young boys to the properties of the male gender role, Serriere (2008) (as cited in Kennedy-Kollar & Charles, 2013, pg. 65) writes; “[t]he ways of man making, which starts before the pre-K level and goes up to manhood, supports and approves subtle and

physical expressions of violence. Therefore, the hegemonic masculinity taught in American schools jeopardises the safety of students and the society.”

The absorption of pro-violent attitudes can also take place by way of being taught, directly or indirectly, destructive ideologies by individuals within one’s home environment. It can also come about through association with violent peers. As stated by Rocque (2012), social learning theory “appears to be particularly relevant to school rampage shootings as ... [many] cases involved ... pairs of individuals who may have played a role in convincing each other to engage in the act” (Rocque, 2012, pg. 309). An example of this is the case of Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who incited one another to take the lives of 12 students and 1 teacher, seriously injuring several others; on April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (Pittaro, 2007, pg. 5).

Social Disorganization within the School Environment and Routine Activity Theory

Meadows (2007) (as cited in Pittaro, 2007) declares that today’s students perceive the schools within the United States to be afflicted by drugs, gangs, and weapons; leading to what has been coined a “toxic” school environment. As this relates to social disorganization, it is clear that there is a failure on behalf of educational institutions to resolve recurrent problems occurring within them. Moreover, Meadows (2007) also states that schools themselves are at least partially to blame for habitually acting as contributing sources to violence in light of their overcrowding, high student-to-teacher ratios, generally lax curriculum, overall inferior student performance in the domain of academics, and in terms of their poorly designed facilities in which are uncomplimentary to student learning and comprehension. By the same token, Rocque (2012) alludes to the typically poor surveillance systems in place within primary, secondary, and post-

secondary schools; of which do little to ward off potential shooters. Such physical characteristics of the school environment evoke a conversation of routine activity theory.

In regards to crime causation, Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson's routine activity approach stresses the convergence in space and time of three necessary elements: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians against crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Cohen and Felson claim that a lack of any one of the aforesaid elements is sufficient to prevent the successful completion of a direct-contact predatory crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979). As follows, it can be argued that school environments represent the convergence in space and time of suitable targets (students) as well as of a lack of capable guardianship against the commission of crime (poor surveillance). As is also worthy of noting is that students may, to school shooters, represent the idyllic victims; for they may, to a great extent, be representative of the precise category of individuals in which the perpetrator feels most alienated by. As stated by Newman *et al.* (2004) (as cited in Rocque, 2012), one of the foremost features of school shootings is that the target is commonly symbolic in nature.

Additionally, in relation to routine activity theory and the availability of opportunity, "[r]esearchers, experts, and media outlets suggest that the availability of guns is a contributing factor to school rampage shootings" (Rocque, 2012, pg. 308). In fact, "it is unquestionable that the ease with which guns can be acquired by youths contributes to the increase in school shootings" (Rocque, 2012, pg. 308).

Why Caucasian and Middle Class?

As mentioned previously, the vast majority of school shooters are young, Caucasian males from middle class backgrounds (National School Safety Center, 2006); inverse to that of the

social position of the preponderance of juvenile delinquents, who again are young, African American males from impoverished upbringings (Schmalleger, 2006). As determined by Adolphe Quetelet, criminal propensity tends to peak in adolescence or early adulthood; ultimately declining with age (McLaughlin & Munice, 2013). Thereby the overall heightened criminal inclination of youth is not all that surprising. Secondly, the notion of hegemonic masculinity was touched on in previous sections of this paper, as were its coinciding expectations of aggression in the performance of the male gender role; therefore the gender gap in offending is in this way not all that surprising either. What is it, however, that accounts for the disparity in terms of race and class amongst school shooters and the “standard” juvenile offender?

In thinking of what it is that is intrinsic to the middle-class lifestyle, and arguably even to being Caucasian; privilege is something that comes to mind. Within North American culture, particularly amongst those of higher socioeconomic status and those who are in possession of greater amounts of social and cultural capital; there is this expectation to be happy. That is, there is largely a sense of entitlement that exists amongst people who fall within this classification in North American society; believing that they should not have to feel emotions like that of anger, frustration, disappointment, depression, etc. It is the narcissism that generates from this privileged position that could very well lead emotionally perturbed individuals to project their grief onto others. Inherent within this privilege is the time that can be spent by individuals who fall within this social category to dwell on their trials and tribulations. Contrarily, in underprivileged parts of the world, and even within the lower socioeconomic classes of North America; there is not the same level of expectancy that everything should go one’s own way. Similarly, there is not the same allocation of time afforded to these individuals to ponder over

perceived personal grievances; for these individuals are actively seeking merely to get by. It is with this privilege, sense of entitlement, and resultant narcissism engendered by these forms of capital (middle/upper class, Caucasian) that one within this social location may feel compelled to act out their internal infuriation.

The Problem with Attribution to Mental Illness

Lastly, it is necessary to address the potential for mental illness to play a role in causing school shooters to carry out such atrocities. This paper does not delve deep into this issue for it is beyond the scope of this paper to do so, as it is intended to be a purely sociological/cultural assessment of the phenomenon of school shootings. That being said, it is critical that a distinct point be made in relation to this topic: there exists a trend within society, chiefly within the media, to attribute school shootings (and other mass killings) to the psychiatric conditions of the perpetrators. This ascription, however, omits acknowledgement of the fact that mental illness seldom leads to violent behaviour (Isaksen, 2013). That is, “[a]n unintended effect of making a too strong link between psychiatry and mass murdering is that it could lead to a negative labeling of the overwhelmingly majority of non-violent people with mental illness” (Isaksen, 2013, para. 10). In other words, such claims can lead to the stigmatization of people with mental illness, the majority of whom are non-violent individuals.

Furthermore, to consistently attribute school shootings strictly to psychological factors overlooks the reality that the majority of the perpetrators are in the same social location - young, male, Caucasian, and middle-class; a correlation in which cannot be explained purely psychologically.

Conclusion

“The data that exists is suggestive that school rampage shootings arise due to a complex interplay of individual and community level factors” (Rocque, 2012, pg. 311). Therefore, while the question as to whether these incidents are attributable to individual or societal origins is posed time and time again; the response that this paper is submitting is that “mass killings should [and arguably *must*] rather be understood as the result of both individual *and* societal factors” (Isaksen, 2013, para. 1). In other words, reality is complex, as are human beings; thereby it is not enough to carry on with one-dimensional research into the phenomenon that single-handedly considers psychological explanations while completely discounting sociological/structural triggers. Accordingly, “[p]olicies that intend to make schools safer must equally attend to all of these factors” (Rocque, 2012, g. 311). This means that policies are needed in which address not only the mental health of citizens and particularly youth in regards to school shootings, but also strategies in which seek to eradicate bullying and counteract its detrimental effects on the human psyche. Moreover, programs designed to address problems occurring within the family unit are required, as is a serious investigation into the social disorganization of the school environment. Lastly, and perhaps most challenging of all; a hard look needs to be taken into United States’ culture in terms of its toleration for and celebration of violence, particularly in regards to the disastrous effects it can yield. Moreover, attention needs to be given to issues such as that of gun control immediately and linger within the minds of policy makers; in contrast to the tendency of officials to forget about the problem until another school massacre makes headlines. Additionally, more research is needed into the remaining ambiguity as to why it is that the characteristics of the perpetrators of school shootings consistently contradict on many levels that of general offender trends. It is crucial to end with one last point: while there is a tendency within the media to capitalize off of the occurrence of school shootings, thus creating to some

extent a moral panic; it is still important that we take care so as to not trivialize the concern, for the loss of *any* life within any educational institution is enough to warrant a serious inquiry into such events.

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