



ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT: MASS SHOOTINGS AND “TOXIC MASCULINITY”¹

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ABSTRACT

Besides the political debates around gun control and mental healthcare, there has also arisen a climate of opinion that seeks to place the responsibility for mass shootings on masculinity or, specifically, “toxic masculinity.” This paper seeks to confute the idea that “toxic masculinity” or masculinity is to blame for these heinous acts of violence. It will also address the motivations informing shooter aggression in the United States—a more accurate description of the problem than gun violence—and how the changing nature of the family has impacted boys. It is hoped that this will give a clearer picture of the issue than simply blaming males.

Keywords: boys, males, mass shootings, shooter aggression, toxic masculinity

¹ **Author’s note:** The following paper was adapted from a presentation given on May 17, 2019 at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology’s Cultural Impact Conference on the mental health implications of gun violence and mass shootings. Several presenters addressed the role of “toxic masculinity” in the supposed proliferation of gun violence in the United States. While the original presentation sought to confute the concept of “toxic masculinity” the paper broadened in aspect to address several oft-repeated myths surrounding mass shootings.

INTRODUCTION

For a brief period, I lived in a small town in Southern Australia. There I made friends with a group of engineers who worked at the local steelworks. When they learned I was American, one of the blokes, Chris, jokingly asked me, “when you were born, did they put your gun in the crib or do they keep it locked up until you can walk?” Guns are seemingly synonymous with America, symbolized by the cultural figure of the gun-toting cowboy. Nearly every day we see some news story involving acts of aggression using guns. By now we are also familiar with the common culprit in these shootings: young men. The most extreme of these public events, the mass shooting, is part of the reason we have gathered here today.

Besides the political debates around gun control and mental healthcare, there has also arisen a climate of opinion that seeks to place the responsibility for these shootings on masculinity or, specifically, “toxic masculinity.” This paper seeks to confute the idea that “toxic masculinity” or *masculinity* is to blame for these heinous acts of violence. It will also address the scope of gun violence in the United States and how the changing nature of the family has impacted boys. It is hoped that this will give a clearer picture of the issue than simply blaming males.

For the sake of clarity, I think we should speak of the issue not as “gun violence” but as “shooter aggression.” If we want to understand the phenomenon we should be as clear in speaking about it as possible. Hence this exercise in semantics. We are chiefly interested in why these shootings are happening, so we must understand the motivations of the shooters. Aggression entails a deliberate act, something which a gun is not capable of as it is essentially a tool. Like a knife or a drug, a gun is only dangerous through the use of its wielder. It is the shooter who commits the act of aggression, not the gun which in its action as a mechanism is violent, though certainly the gun may enable him to make a public spectacle of his aggression.

THE SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

Though, as Mark Twain said, there are “lies, damned lies, and statistics” it might do us well to examine some trends in violent crime to better grasp the scope of the issue we are here discussing. Is it really so that shooter aggression has increased in recent years? A look at the numbers seems to tell a different story.

Through all the endless barrage of media stories about violent crime in the United States it would seem that its citizens are becoming increasingly aggressive. However, it is apparent that only our awareness of violent events has increased, perhaps aided by the now inescapable exposure to news via the Internet. According to Cohn et al. (2013) of the Pew Research Center firearm homicides have decreased by nearly half since their peak in 1993. When the Pew Research Center polled Americans in 2013 they found fifty-six percent believed that the incidence of shootings had increased since the 1990s with only twelve percent saying that it had gone down. While shootings have decreased dramatically most Americans seem to believe that they have increased.

This of course does not mean that shootings are no longer an issue in the United States. The victims of shootings are predominantly male, who make up eighty-four percent of all victims. Fifty-five percent of victims are black despite making up only thirteen percent of the population of the United States. The majority of victims (nearly seventy percent) are between the ages of eighteen and forty. If we were to picture the most common victim of shooting aggression it is a young, black male. Many of these young men die as the result of gang-related or other crime-related shootings. Their deaths rarely capture as much attention than the mass public shooting, though here in Chicago the death toll is staggering and has garnered some national attention. These acts, with only one target, rarely seem to disturb us as much as the mass shooting. It may be the chaotic nature of mass shootings, where victims are often killed indiscriminately², that garners our attention more so than a feud between two people.

While the demographics of shootings in general are easier to determine, mass shootings are more difficult to quantify. One of the difficulties in determining the scope of mass shootings is that they are defined differently by different sources. Whereas some sources may define a mass shooting as when four or more people are hit by bullets, others will consider it a mass shooting only if four or more people are killed by the shooter. In the former case the accidental misfiring

² Contrary to popular belief mass school shooters rarely seek out particular victims, such as those who bullied them, and they are just as likely to be a bully as to have been bullied (Langman, 2015/2016). Some mass public shootings are ideologically based, such as Dylan Roof shooting up a Charleston church in the name of white supremacy, while others seem to be random, such as Stephen Paddock in Las Vegas or James Huberty in San Ysidro.

of a weapon at a shooting range which injures several people could technically be considered a mass shooting whereas in the latter this would not count. The former standard would seem to leave more room for interpretation and may be responsible for certain members of the media making claims about there being a mass shooting in the United States every day.

Those who use a stricter standard such as Krouse and Richardson (2015) of the Congressional Research Service define mass shootings as “as a multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims are murdered with firearms, within one event, and in one or more locations in close proximity.” This standard seems to give a clearer picture of how many mass shootings are actually occurring as well as how many people are killed during the shootings. The CRS further divides mass shootings into the categories of mass public shooting, familicides, and other-felony related. The mass public shooting is usually what grabs the most attention in terms of media coverage as well as eliciting the most horror among the public, but it is also the least frequent kind of mass shooting. Mass public shootings constitute about four out of the twenty-one mass shootings that occur per year in the United States. Most mass shootings occur in private homes or are related to other crimes. Even smaller still are the number of mass school shootings.

As to whether mass shootings are on the rise in the United States the data are fairly clear: there is a somewhat slight increase. Criminologist James Alan Fox using data from the FBI found that the amount of mass shootings per year has remained at a similar rate since the 1970s. From year to year there are slight fluctuations and spikes in incidence are generally attributable to copycat shooters and coincidence (Fox, 2012). The FBI data does not support the idea that mass shootings are on the rise in the United States though data from the CRS and criminologist Grant Duwe³ shows that there has been a slight increase in the amount of victims though these numbers also fluctuate from year to year. While shootings have decreased dramatically since the 1990s, mass shootings have remained relatively stable in number since the 1970s.

³ Duwe (2007) has written a comprehensive history of mass murder in the United States and contributed his data to the Congressional Research Service.

As for school shootings there has also been a dramatic decrease in children killed in schools by firearms. Fox and Fridel (2018) found that four times as many children were killed in schools by shooters during the 1990s. As the general rate of firearm-related homicides decreased so did the rate of children killed in schools. Over the past twenty-five years ten children a year died from shootings in schools. Columbine-style attacks in schools are very rare (though, of course, we hope they'd never happen) with eight⁴ of these events occurring since 1996. As with mass shootings there is no increase in the incidence of school shootings (deaths by firearms in schools not mass school shootings) and they have in fact decreased in incidence.

The statistics seem to bear out that there is no epidemic of mass shootings in the United States. But still we are fascinated by the subject. Shootings in general have declined dramatically while mass shootings have remained somewhat consistent in incidence since the 1970s. Yet a majority of Americans are quite certain that shooter aggression has increased and that the incidence of mass shootings is on the rise. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider why it is that many Americans believe this to be so, it is an interesting topic unto its own. While the mass public shooting rightly horrifies us, you have a much greater chance of being attacked by a shark than of being a victim of a mass shooting. But much like we know the chances of being attacked by a shark are very small, we still may feel some trepidation as we swim in the ocean if our imagination should drift to that fearsome beast. Greater still may be that fear if the beast is instead a man. And who today are we told to fear more than man?

TOXIC MASCULINITY

In the wake of the mass shooting in Las Vegas in 2017, the deadliest in the history of the United States, people responded much as they usually do. Some offered their hopes and prayers, others called for better gun control, still others for better mental health care. However, there was also a somewhat new response calling for the examination of the gender of the shooters. Perhaps for the first time the shooting was seen as an example of toxic masculinity. The Cornell professor Kate Manne was quick to attribute the shooter's berating his girlfriend in public to toxic

⁴ This was written before the recent school shooting in the Denver, Colorado. <https://www.denverpost.com/2019/05/10/stem-school-shooting-colorado-timeline/>

masculinity and then the shooting to the same phenomenon. The comedian Michael Ian Black penned a popular op-ed for the *New York Times* in the wake of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018 to say that “boys are broken.” The culprit: masculinity.

Toxic masculinity has come to be an explanation for everything from sexual assault to global warming (Zahn, 2019). However, toxic masculinity remains ill-defined. To hear its use in popular culture is to get the impression that it means any behavior done by men and boys that is deemed not preferable. It is contrasted with a healthy masculinity that is also ill-defined. The term requires some definition before it can be understood why it is used to explain mass shootings.

The origin of toxic masculinity was with the mythopoetic men’s movement, specifically with Shepherd Bliss (1987) who used the term to denote the darker side of masculinity. Specifically, this meant the industrial man divorced from home and nature. For Bliss healthy masculinity is one that is Romantic in the sense of being connected to nature and the “deep masculine.” The mythopoetic men’s movement sought to get men to connect with their lost feelings and the archetypes of deep masculinity in order to heal themselves from the damage done to them by industrialized, secular life.

Toxic masculinity was later adopted by male feminists such as Michael Kimmel to also denote the dark side of masculinity, though the similarities to the mythopoetic men’s movement end there. The male feminists accuse the mythopoetic group of being “essentialists” for believing there is an inborn nature to males and females. In the hands of the male feminists, toxic masculinity is transformed in meaning. Removed from its “essentialist” and poetic context in mythopoetics, it is appropriated by male feminists into their social constructivist system, most notably that of Raewyn Connell who is perhaps the most influential male feminist, and seen to be an expression of “hegemonic masculinity.”

In Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) Gramscian cultural Marxist analysis hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice that legitimizes powerful men’s dominant position in society and the subordination of the common male population, women, and other marginalized ways of being a man. If one is familiar with Karl Marx’s ideas you may notice that Connell has replaced the bourgeoisies with “powerful men” and the proletariat with the “common male population,

women, and other marginalized men.” In place of a class analysis of society, they present a gendered analysis of society. Toxic masculinity in this context changes from a psychological to a sociological explanation of men and boy’s behavior. Namely it is what is colloquially referred to as “the patriarchy” both in academic and popular feminism.

The term appears in Aronson and Kimmel (2004), first in reference to the culture of men’s prisons and their culture of rape and violence. Kimmel’s (2008; 2013) later work expands this idea to include adolescent and young men as well as most white men. Toxic masculinity then can explain why an inmate would rape another inmate, as well as why a frat boy would binge drink and hookup with coeds. Though Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) stressed hegemonic masculinity as a practice of powerful men, Kimmel seems to inflate the definition to include most men. In order to be good men, men must become more like male feminists and allies of feminism as they dismantle the power structures that have granted them privilege.

However, it isn’t only prison rape and mass shootings that fall under the purview of toxic masculinity. Kupers (2005) further defined it as “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia and wanton violence.” Not only is it behavior but also “socially regressive male traits.” The very character of males is called into question by toxic masculinity. There is also a curious shift from gender (masculine) to sex (male) in this definition. This sort of sleight of hand seems to say that it isn’t only the societal role but the very organism of males that is flawed. While being critical of essentialism, the male feminists seem to employ it when opportune.

Another issue in understanding toxic masculinity is that often it is difficult to define masculinity itself. Gilmore (1990) summarized the masculine role in society as that of the “Impregnator-Protector-Provider.” Most societies around the world have required men to take this role in order to stave off societal entropy. A man must procreate, take care of his wife and children, and protect them from danger. This imperative role usually meant that men put themselves at risk and so men must become accustomed to their own expendability. This role as well as certain embodied ways of being male which entail vulnerability (Groth, 2019) lead to a certain posturing that involves stymying emotional expression and hiding vulnerabilities.

These qualities of emotional inexpressiveness are seen by male feminists as a sign of toxic or hegemonic masculinity. However, Gilmore (1990) offers a more nuanced take on masculinity and the following quote bears reproduction in its entirety:

Men nurture their society by shedding their blood, their sweat, and their semen, by bringing home food for both child and mother, by producing children, and by dying if necessary in faraway places to provide a safe haven for their people. This, too, is nurturing in the sense of endowing or increasing. However, the necessary personal qualities for this male contribution are paradoxically the exact opposite of what we Westerners normally consider the nurturing personality. To support his family, the man has to be distant, away hunting or fighting wars; to be tender, he must be tough enough to fend off enemies. To be generous, he must be selfish enough to amass goods, often by defeating other men; to be gentle, he must first be strong, even ruthless in confronting enemies; to love he must be aggressive enough to court, seduce, and 'win' a wife.

Compare this with Kuper's (2005) definition of toxic masculinity. Whereas these behaviors would seem to be the product of a hegemonic patriarch exercising his power of others, Gilmore is able to see that it is in fact the uniquely masculine way of nurturing others. By lumping these behaviors together with prison rape and mass shootings, male feminists are denigrating masculinity and maleness.

While Kimmel and his ilk may say that there is a healthy form of masculinity apart from toxic masculinity, it often comes off as their saying that men must act like feminist women. Though they accuse the mythopoetic men's movement of being essentialists they themselves seem to be opportunistic essentialists. When it comes to deconstructing hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, gender is a construct, however when it comes to offering a new way for men to act it often sounds like the way a stereotypical woman acts. For the male feminist, women are inherently good and men are either inherently or constructed to be evil depending upon when it is opportune to claim either one. However, idealizations often seem to contain thinly-veiled hatred and we might consider the number of male feminists who have been accused of harming or harassing women (Bovy, 2018). Kimmel can count himself among that group (Flaherty, 2018).

So what is toxic masculinity? In short, it is misandry, a caricatured version of masculinity meant to paint men as violent goons and instill fear and hatred of them in the general populace. By now this hatred has become firmly embedded in the culture of the United States (Nathanson and Young, 2001; 2006; 2010).⁵ While both the male feminists and Gilmore find masculinity to be socially constructed, the male feminists posit that it was created conspiratorially to oppress others while Gilmore shows the environmental and existential conditions out of which masculinity was necessitated for the preservation of society. The male feminist viewpoint is similar to Soviet propaganda used to turn peasants against the kulaks, while Gilmore offers us a chance to understand masculinity and manhood.

So does masculinity have anything to do with mass shootings? Most of the mass shooters are male so it cannot be merely coincidence. One aspect of masculinity that Gilmore (1990) points out may shed some light on the connection between the two. Masculinity is difficult to achieve and it seems that it must necessarily be so because it requires of males that they continue to perform the role in order to preserve society. The generally placid Fox Indians referred to masculinity in their language as “the Big Impossible” seemingly in reference to it being nearly unobtainable. Males striving for manhood is a central pillar of society. But some males fail at this, and it may be greatly shameful. As Langman (2017) has shown in his comprehensive studies of school shooters, nearly all of them experienced some sort of shame in regards to their masculinity. Put another way, I think they had difficulty obtaining “the Big Impossible.” Their violent outbursts are not born out of a malignant masculinity but instead a sure sign of the failure to transition into manhood.

However, we must resist looking at a single factor and using it to explain a complicated phenomenon. Otherwise, we’d be no better than the armchair social critics and pop psychologists who wield toxic masculinity much like Alexander the Great did his blade when faced with the Gordian knot. But we are psychologists and should know better. In order to do so we should look at the actual shooters and try to understand them.

⁵ The emptiness that many young men feel today may be the result of emptiness brought about by the effect of misandry on the ability of young men to form a uniquely masculine identity. See Nathanson and Young, 2012.

THE FAMILIES OF MASS SHOOTERS

One of the only consistent factors among school shooters and mass shooters is that they usually come from a broken home. Langman (2009/2016) found that eighty-two percent of school shooters came from a broken home defined as containing “instability, or dysfunction includ[ing] parental absence, separation, divorce, infidelity, parental alcoholism or drug addiction, criminal behavior, domestic violence, and child abuse.” This would seem to give the lie to the idea that most shooters come from well-to-do middle-class homes. Many shooters are severely traumatized or show symptoms of psychosis and much of the abuse they face begins within their families.

Perhaps one of the defining features of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is the disintegration of the nuclear family. Groth (2019) found this to be the result of certain social changes within the past fifty years that have made the nuclear family an anachronism. Especially important in this regard are that both parents must now work in order to support a family, taking the mother out of the home, complimenting how the Industrial Revolution took the father out of the home in the late 18th century. Many children now also grow up without a father, and their mother must work full-time in order to support them. Day cares and schools, barely able to educate children, must now also serve as surrogate parents to children.

What now exists is a “sibling society” (Bly, 1997) where children raise themselves or one another. Exposure to media through television and the internet sends children strange messages about the world of adults, who seem to be fatuous or imbeciles. I think also of the many people my age who have more vivid memories of the Nickelodeon cartoons of their youth than their own families, or those a bit younger who are still obsessed with the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*, about a wholesome though idiotic sea sponge who probably imparted more life lessons to them than their own parents. Never learning to discern the real from the virtual novelty in which they are awash, children slouch towards adulthood unprepared for its struggles.

As to what will replace the desiccated husk of the nuclear family it is difficult to say. Currently its structure stands but it is like scaffolding without the rest of the building – a skeletal imitation of a home. For now, children, including the boys who will become these shooters, grow within these families of which even the so-called normal ones are a strange

imitation. Already boys will go to great lengths to hide their vulnerabilities. Add to it that many of them are abused or from homes full of dysfunction (though what now can we say is a functional family?) and we may be closer to understanding from where some of the sudden, violent rage of our shooters comes.

The primary consideration for boys in the nearly gone nuclear family is the disappearance of the father. Primarily this has resulted in a prolonged adolescence for boys where they do not make the transition into manhood. This perpetual boy has become an all-too-familiar sight – sitting alone in front of a computer screen or television, perhaps with a college degree though he has moved home with vague plans for leaving. Instead of meeting friends he talks to them through a gaming headset, instead of meeting women he swipes on their picture on his smartphone in the hopes they'll hookup. That is if he doesn't wind up in the criminal justice system filled to the rafters with young men.

Some boys will grow up with fathers in their homes. Many of the shooters actually do have fathers, though many of them are abusive. Still some others come from families that fit the picture of normality. In all this normality the father may be there but is he *there*? Has he rejected his son's overtures for a relationship? Has he buried himself in work to the point where he only sees his family as he wishes them goodnight? Is he emotionally unavailable or afraid to connect with his son? These are all important questions to ask even if we are presented with the picture of the family as "normal." A Fabergé egg may look like an egg but if you were to crack it open you would find it empty. The shooter we look at next comes from one of these normal families.

JAMES HOLMES: A STUDY OF SUPPOSED MADNESS

James Holmes was born in San Diego, California on December 13, 1987. His sister, Chris, was born in the same month in 1992. In 1995 the family moved to Salinas, California but then returned to San Diego a few years later to be closer to the mother's family. James had to make new friends each time the family moved and was unable to connect with old friends when he returned to San Diego in the sixth grade. The family noted that he began to become introverted after the move. He began to spend much of his time playing massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) where he spoke with people online, though his communication with people face-to-face was diminishing.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that middle school is a tough time for many children and that Holmes may have been experiencing the difficulties that come with those years, though they may have been exacerbated by the disruption in his friend groups due to his family's moving. This seems to be a logical conclusion as when Holmes went to high school his parents reported that he seemed much happier as he focused on his studies and developed close friendships with four or five friends. If Holmes was psychotic at this point in his life, as various psychiatric reports suggest, no one seemingly knew it.

While in college at the University of California at Riverside Holmes stayed in contact with his family. He stated that his relationship with his family was good and that he had a sibling rivalry with his sister though they got along after a tumultuous beginning. He characterized his parents' marriage as "excellent" and that there was no history of abuse. Holmes fits into Peter Langman's (2009/2016) shooter typology as a "psychotic shooter" in that there is no indication of abuse or trauma and seemingly comes from a good family. Holmes himself, in admitting that his family was generally placid apart from his sibling rivalry, seems to back this up.

Langman (2010) describes the experience of the mass shooter as alternating between what he terms "existential rage" and "existential anguish." Existential rage refers not to general anger but to rage against the conditions of existence, against their lives and the world. Existential anguish refers not to depression but to a deep despair in the face of existence. Langman points out that most school shooters seem to oscillate between these two states of existential distress. Holmes fits this description as well, as he reported from the age of ten that he had a great rage within him that manifested as fantasies of destroying the world and also anguish in that he was suicidal and attempted to commit suicide at least once in his life. As we will see later on Holmes first attempted to deal with these existential quandaries through scientific and mathematical ventures, only to turn to violence when these avenues were fruitless.

While Langman's work is excellent, especially as it comes to uncovering the motivations behind what he terms psychopathic and traumatized shooters, I think his work has fallen short in trying to understand the psychotic shooter. While he does offer a multifactorial analysis of shooters including their home environment, community, genetics, psychological, biological, etc., often the story he tells of the psychotic shooters is that they were from a good home and were twisted by a pernicious mental malady. I think we can go a step further in the understanding of

Holmes if we adopt a different method.

Is Holmes a psychotic shooter, driven to shoot up that Colorado movie theater by an insidious and unnoticed disease of the mind? The psychiatrist in charge of assessing Holmes' sanity during his trial, Jeffrey L. Metzner, seems to give a conflicting report. While acknowledging that Holmes more than likely has schizoaffective disorder of the bipolar type and had undiagnosed schizotypal personality disorder throughout his youth and that without these conditions he never would have committed the shooting, Metzner (2013) cannot declare him legally insane as throughout the evaluation Holmes proved to be able to differentiate between right and wrong and meticulously planned the shooting. After the shooting he even asked the police whether he had killed any small children, which he had, and expressed remorse for doing so. Metzner's conclusion is somewhat confused: he committed the shooting because he was psychotic and yet he cannot be declared insane. He was out of control due to an illness and yet knew what he was doing. This does not add up.

Metzner (2013) makes many references to Holmes' delusional thinking and awkwardness in social interactions as signs of psychosis, but I think that it becomes clear when looking at his journal as well as his life circumstances that what he did was not an act of a madman but instead something which makes horrifying sense. For although schizophrenia and other forms of psychosis are said to be either genetic or biological in origin, these theories are still unproven.⁶ Nearly half a century ago the psychiatrist R.D. Laing used a method known as social phenomenology to look into the families of those diagnosed with schizophrenia. He found that what most saw as a biological or psychological disturbance, was really a sort of disturbed communication. Eventually he would expand his idea, no longer looking solely at the family and how it creates these disturbed communications but to the larger society. To understand Holmes and to not merely designate his disturbed thinking as delusions we need to use this method.

Metzner (2013) reports that Holmes first received psychological services as an eight-year old when he went to family sessions due to his not getting along with his younger sister. He was

⁶ A widely promoted study (Carey, 2016) was reported to have found the genetic basis behind schizophrenia. The headlines left out that the study was done on mice. I've never met a schizophrenic mouse.

said to be “irritable and not wanting to engage” with her. This was in 1996, a year after the family had moved to Salinas, California. When the family moved to San Diego, Holmes once again went into family treatment as he was having difficulty with the move. Here his “diagnoses were listed as adjustment disorder with mixed disturbance of emotions/conduct and adjustment disorder, depressed mood.” Holmes himself reports that from around the age of ten he was filled with incredible rage which involved fantasies of destroying the world.

In Colorado, a few months before the shooting, Holmes attended sessions with a psychiatrist who mostly prescribed him medication but did occasionally talk to him about his troubles. However, Holmes felt he could not tell his psychiatrist about everything he was thinking because he knew there would be consequences for telling her that he was planning on carrying out the shootings. Once again, we see that Holmes is savvy enough to understand the limits of confidentiality and knows he must hide his intentions. So much for *Tarasoff* preventing harm to others. Everything he could not tell his psychiatrist Holmes wrote in a journal which gives us really remarkable insight into his thinking.

Though it could be seen as the scribbblings of a madman, I think there are several aspects of the journal that make sense when put in their proper context. Holmes stated that the question he is trying to answer in his journal is a question that had troubled him since he was ten years old (interestingly also the time when he became full of rage): to, as Metzner put it, understand “the meaning of life and death.” The first page of his journal contains, apart from a strange symbol he called “ultrareception,” two questions – “What is the meaning of life?” and “What is the meaning of death?” In order to answer these questions, he takes a route through mathematics.

Metzner (2013) attributed Holmes’ psychosis to his delusional belief in “human capital” or that humans have a mathematical value which can be added to and subtracted from by various acts, mostly by adding meaning to their life. Holmes believed that if you kill other people, you take away their value (meaning) and add it to your own. On the surface this seems to be quite mad. However, I ask you to consider this in light of our responses to these shootings. The victims are rarely given any spotlight apart from brief pseudo-sentimental montages on the news. The

shooter is nearly always the one in the spotlight. Holmes put mathematically what we explicitly understand in the United States – fame is a kind of ultimate meaning.⁷ He added this fame and meaning to himself by subtracting the life and meaning from other people.

But why put this mathematically? Is it because he is delusional? Holmes was a very good student throughout high school and his undergraduate education. He studied in the sciences and was dejected when he wasn't accepted into the top neuroscience programs in the country for graduate school. He later struggled in a neuroscience program in Colorado which seemed to coincide with his more intensive focus on killing others. His father had a PhD in statistics and worked for software companies. Mathematics runs in the family.

Also consider what we do as psychological researchers. In quantitative research we are asked to quantify feelings such as with the Beck Depression Inventory or assign someone an IQ number which ostensibly measures their intelligence. In social psychological research we quantify people into groups and subgroups and then make overarching claims about their behavior. Living, breathing people are reduced to data for research. This dehumanized way of looking at humanity, perhaps call it mathematized, is considered a perfectly sane way of trying to understand who people are and what they do. Is what Holmes did in trying mathematically to formulate a meaning to life much different than what psychologists do in their labs?

Holmes stated that he was interested in neuroscience because he wanted to understand why he was different. He wanted to study the brain because he thought he would find the reason for his suffering and rage within its neuronal connections. But Holmes used this knowledge to dehumanize himself further and to become even more mystified to his suffering. From his journal in regards to his mental state: “Anxiety and depression both serotonergic system anyway though.” In another place he writes “Despite my biological shortcomings I have fought and fought. Always defending against pre-determination and the fallibility of man.” He follows the brain disease notion of mental illness to its logical conclusion – hopelessness.

⁷ Langman (2017) has pointed out that many school shooters look to previous shooters as role models, especially in how they obtain fame after their shooting. Other mass public shooters such as the Weis Market shooter also spoke of their admiration for the Columbine shooters.

Holmes was also given the SSRI Zoloft for the first time in March 2012, four months before the shooting. After taking Zoloft he began to exhibit behaviors uncommon to him. Normally socially awkward, he began to text one of his female classmates about how he liked her short shorts and created dating profiles, including on a site for swingers. He told Metzner that when he went into treatment with his psychiatrist in Colorado “he lost the fear.” Specifically, he lost the fear of consequences for killing others. Metzner called this a “dysphoric mania.” Suddenly a subdued and socially awkward man was hitting on a female classmate and using dating sites as well as recording in his journals that he was experiencing mania. The signs seem to point towards Zoloft disinhibiting him, which for someone with more modest fantasies would not be an issue, but for someone with fantasies of mass murder is certainly dangerous.

Most school and mass shooters are not on psychotropic medication of any kind, though they may have previously taken medication. Langman (2016) argued that psychotropic medication has little to do with school shootings and in many cases the shooter had no history of their use or improved while on medication. In his argument against blaming medication Langman points out that Eric Harris of Columbine did not experience a manic episode as a result of his using the SSRI Luvox, but he does not take into account the possibility of SSRIs disinhibiting their users (Breggin, 1991; 2008 and Breggin & Breggin, 1994) and instead blames it on mental illness. Szasz (1961/2010) has convincingly argued that mental illness is a myth, a pseudo-scientific concept used to disguise personal and societal conflicts as medical issues. There is far more evidence for psychiatric medication having negative consequences for its users (Whitaker, 2010) than for mental illness causing violent behavior. In the case of Holmes, it seems that his recent use of Zoloft was at least a contributing factor. The psychiatrist William H. Reid interviewed Holmes before his trial and concluded that Zoloft had nothing to do with the shooting. He details this in his book *A Dark Night in Aurora: Inside James Holmes and the Colorado Mass Shootings* (2018). However, Robert Whitaker and Lisa Cosgrove (2015) have written extensively about how psychiatrists protect their guild interests and profits by

consistently misrepresenting the effectiveness and safety of psychotropic medication.⁸

What to say of masculinity in all of this? I have tried to show that toxic masculinity is not a satisfactory way of understanding why mass shootings happen and that it may be better understood as a failure of obtaining manhood. Langman (2010) also notes that nearly all of the mass shooters he surveyed did not fit the typical picture of masculinity: most were small and scrawny or had birth defects that made them extremely self-conscious of their physicality. Others were unable to have success with women or struggled in school and work. These are not the actions of powerful men carrying out acts of oppression but of impotent and desperately despairing males lost in the twilight lands of unreachable manhood.

However, Holmes was successful in school and even while being socially awkward had a close group of friends in high school and a girlfriend in graduate school. While not getting into a top graduate school he got into a respectable institution for neuroscience, though for the first time in his life he experienced academic struggles there. His relationship was also deteriorating at the same time. Was the shooting then to get back at his better classmates or his ex-girlfriend like other school shooters? No, he didn't shoot up his school but chose a movie theater instead; a place where people go to watch celebrities, the ultimate in fame in America, and opened fire to take the value from the movie patrons to add to his own life.

PSYCHOSIS OR “SOCIOSIS”?

Apart from Holmes' behavior during and around the time of the shooting he was not that different from many young men today. He experienced rivalry with his younger sister and was upset about moving to different towns. He did well in school and played videogames. His existential rage and anguish should be familiar to anyone who has been confronted with some of life's enduring and unanswerable questions. The core of his supposed delusional beliefs are not so strange when considered in light of the modern scientific emphasis on making all things quantifiable. We don't know enough about his family or how he experienced society. Was he, like so many boys, in a family that is only one in name and not in content? Was he, like so many

⁸ A brief overview from Whitaker (2017) can be found here: <https://www.madinamerica.com/2017/09/thou-shall-not-criticize-our-drugs/>.

boys, faced with a society that had already deemed him an irredeemable, violent brute?

But we cannot feel sorry for Holmes. His decision to kill those people in the movie theater was his and his alone. No matter how tortured the soul, the killing of innocent people cannot be excused. However, if we want to understand mass shooters it will do no good to simply label them as evil and then go about feeling superior in our righteousness, nor can we rely on mythological explanations such as mental illness or toxic masculinity. We must look to our already-crumbled institutions, outmoded by the ever-accelerating pace of change and our contemptuous treatment of boys to understand why many are dropping out of society or even opting out of life entirely. For those few who make their dreadful rage so public for us to see, we can either continue to stare on incredulously as each macabre headline scrolls by or learn to be truly there for those consumed by darkness.

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