MEN AND MASCULINITIES: A CASE STUDY OF MASS SHOOTINGS IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT: Research suggests there may be a link between mass shootings and the values imposed by hegemonic masculinity. The vast majority of the men who commit mass murder adhere to strict gender norms that prove to be unsustainable. Consequently, the men in this study resort to violence as a way to reassert their masculinity and prove their status. While hegemonic masculinity does not directly cause mass murder, studies have proposed it is present within the factors that exacerbate it. Primarily rape culture's willingness to dismiss violence against women. While many of the mass shooters in the US fit this pattern, this paper explores the cases of Seung Hui-Cho, Robert Dear and Elliot Rodger; focusing on how hegemonic masculinity can lead men to commit gratuitous acts of violence. Since mass shootings in the United States have become more common, it is important to explore what may be causing them so as a society, we can become more equipped to prevent them.

Warning: the following essay contains some explicit language and potentially sensitive and/or disturbing ideology. These elements are inherent to the original sources referenced, however, and are <u>not</u> reflective of the author's own words or views. The Editors have made the decision to not exclude these expletives in order to preserve the reality of such a difficult subject. Please know that the following material is not intended to be triggering or exclusive.

Introduction

As a society, we are currently at a loss in that no one can definitively say what is causing mass shootings. In fact, the only thing we know for certain is that this is a complex issue with no simple answer. However, this is also why it's so important to begin researching and thinking about the differing patterns that emerge from the data behind mass shootings. Primarily as understanding why they have become such an epidemic within society will help us become more equipped to prevent and minimize their occurrence in the future. Research suggests that there may be a connection between the values imposed by hegemonic masculinity and the mass shooters' constructed identities. In other words, many of the men that commit mass shootings adhere to strict gender norms and uphold the values imposed by hegemonic masculinity. The purpose of this paper, then, is to further examine hegemonic masculinity within the case studies of Sueng Hui Cho, Robert Dear and Elliot Rodger so that we can better understand not just how we move forward, but what we begin to do now.

In order to interpret the case studies, it is important to have a basic understanding of what hegemonic masculinity and rape culture consist of and represent. The first part of the paper will outline these concepts while the second part will work to frame them in relation to mass shootings by drawing on previous scholars' studies as well as an analysis of previous men who have perpetrated mass shootings. A pattern seemed to emerge between the stressors that trigger mass shootings and hegemonic masculinities characterized by power, authority, and physical strength. However, the most striking feature of this study, was that each of the mass shooters had a documented history of violence or violent ideation against women before

they committed their crime. Consequently, the studies suggest that patterns of domestic violence or hatred towards women may serve as indicators of larger, homicidal crimes in the future.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Rape Culture: Framing Mass Murder

Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was formulated two decades ago and has significantly influenced current academic thought surrounding men, gender and social hierarchy. When the term was created, it was understood as the pattern of practice that allowed men's dominance over women to continue. Furthermore, it represented the most honored way of being a man and required all other men to position themselves in relation to it (Connell and Messerschmidt 829).

There is considerable evidence to sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men, as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women (Connell and Messerschmidt 844). Based on this, some scholars argue that there are two versions of hegemony, external and internal. Demetrious (2001) defines "external hegemony" as the institutionalization of men's dominance over women, whereas "internal hegemony" refers to the social ascendance of one group of men over all other men. This becomes problematic as hegemonic masculinity is a structure built upon the subordination of women. As a result, men who reject it remain at risk of losing power and status, placing them at the bottom of the social hierarchy with women. Jefferson (1994) argues that this can lead boys and men to instead choose discursive positions of masculinity to ward off anxiety and avoid feelings of powerlessness (in Connell and Messerschmidt 842). A good example is Lea and Auburns (2001) study of the story told by a convicted rapist in a sex offender program which illustrated how the offender moved between conflicting ideologies of sexual interaction to justify and reduce his responsibility for the rape (in Connell and Mersserschmidt 842).

Moreover, research in criminology demonstrates how patriarchal patterns of aggression can be linked with hegemonic masculinity, not as a mechanical effort for which hegemonic masculinity was a cause, but through the pursuit of hegemony. In fact, most data reflects that men and boys perpetrate more of the conventional and serious crimes than do women and girls (Connell and Messerschmidt 833). McMahon's (1993) analysis demonstrates how through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, men's behavior becomes refined in a concept of masculinity that then, in a circular argument becomes the explanation and the excuse for the behavior (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). In this way, it can be manifested as an institutionalized problem rather than an individual's fault.

A study done by scholars Denise Kennedy-Kollar and Christopher A.D. Charles illustrates how hegemonic masculinity influences mass murder. By gathering biographical information for 28 men who have committed mass murder in the US since 1970, the scholars found a pattern emerging between the perceived affronts that triggered the mass murders and a hegemonic construction of the perpetrators' masculine identities. One component of the hegemonic masculine identity was the ability to maintain gainful employment and economic independence, infringement upon which prompted a significant number of the men in these studies to go on a rampage. In fact, 71% of the men in Kennedy-Kollar and Charles' sample experienced financial stressors in the form of unemployment, debt, financial loss and poor job performance or a work-related reprimand (Issa 689). While financial strain is largely unavoidable for both men and women, it is important to acknowledge the relationship between income and masculinity to help frame these findings. Historically, men are expected to be the sole providers for their families. Considering that income largely dictates a person's status, men may feel pressured to reach a certain level of financial success in order to demonstrate their masculinity. Consequently, if they are unable to do so they may experience a heightened sense of shame. When taking these perspectives into consideration, it is easier to acknowledge how failing to reach a certain level of economic success could be especially challenging for men. In this light, mass shootings

could be "shows of status, a way to tell the world that they are still important, authoritative and accomplished" (Issa 689), especially if hegemonic masculinity is teaching men that violence is an effective way to affirm masculinity.

Rape Culture

Hegemonic masculinity may also be linked to rape culture. In order to illustrate this, it's important to look at how sexuality impacts men at a young age. While the preferred signifiers of masculinity may vary by subgroup and context, many groups of men in our culture signal masculinity through demonstrations of heterosexuality. Not doing so puts boys and men at risk of being viewed as unmanly, feminine or homosexual (Sweeney 370). Pascoe (2007) used the term "compulsive heterosexuality" to refer to a range of pretentious displays of heterosexuality and male dominance that she observed in an ethnographic study of U.S. high school students (in Sweeney 370). She found that most of these "compulsive behaviors" represented boys' attempts to starve off threats to their manhood, largely from other boys, and their attempts to dominate girls and control their bodies (Sweeney 371). Similarly, Richardson (2010) argues that dominant cultural discourse and male peer group networks compel young men to adopt restricted masculinities founded upon the sexual objectification of women, often in contradiction to their private feelings and preferences (in Sweeney 371). In this way, boys can be taught that sexual assault or rape is an appropriate display of manhood. Since society tends to uphold male dominance, even at the expense of a woman's wellbeing, men may not see rape the same way women experience it.

For men in college, the social pressures are similar. Sociologist Michael Kimmel refers to this as "guy land" a period in which boys want to be men but only have each other to follow so they teach one another the "guy code." This enforces a sense of entitlement amongst these men; that they deserve women, jobs to dominate and the campus space (Essig 2). These often become the men who create rape culture, even if they themselves don't rape. They don't stop it; don't report it. While the

rapists ought to be held accountable for their actions, it's also important to call out the institutions that are aware of the epidemic yet chose to turn a blind eye in fear of alienating donors, sports fans and frat alums. In doing so, they are allowing hegemonic masculinity to damage the cultures and ideals that most students of today and alumni of tomorrow cherish. For as a result, rape culture continues to spread at a national level.

Rather than looking at the larger factors that may be supporting rape culture, such as hegemonic masculinity, the focus often shifts towards women. Primarily, what women can do to avoid it; don't drink, travel in groups, dress wisely. Not only does this teach men that rape is excusable but it also perpetuates rape culture by blaming women for men's assaults. One common trait among rapists is that they do not think that they are the problem. They provide excuses such as acting under pressure to have sex, or giving into their naturally overwhelming desires, or being young and not knowing what they are doing or are confused because they think the woman made herself available (Sheffield 2017), all of which exhibit the fact that they are avoiding personal blame. Ultimately, this toxic version of manhood suggests sexual conquest is tied to masculinity, that male sexual desire is stronger than females, and obtaining it is more important than a woman's well-being (Sheffield 2017). Posadas (2017) suggests that rape culture is the mechanism that channels hegemonic masculinity into specific, socially-legitimized practices of sexual violence. Therefore, if we want to eradicate sexual violence, we must transform the structures which subjectify boys into toxically masculine men.

Interestingly recent studies based on mass shootings in the US have found a link between mass shootings and domestic violence, indicating there may be a connection between rape culture and mass murder. Everytown for Gun Safety conducted a comprehensive analysis of FBI data and media reports of every mass shooting that took place between January 2009 and December 2016 in the United States. It revealed that in the nearly 8-year period there have been 156 mass shootings. In at least 85 of the cases (54%), the perpetrator's victims

included a current or intimate female partner or other family member (Isa 678).

Everytown for Gun Safety's findings are further corroborated by a study performed by Mayors Against Illegal Guns. The study reviewed the mass shootings in the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports and scoured the media for additional details about those incidents. The result was a comprehensive analysis of every mass shooting that occurred in the US between January 2009 to January 2013. The report covered 43 mass shootings and in at least 17 of the cases the perpetrators killed a current or former intimate partner. Furthermore, at least 6 of those perpetrators had a prior domestic violence charge (Issa 679). The translation of these statistics implies that a majority of the men who commit mass murder also have a history of violence towards women.

This ties into the second component of the hegemonic masculine identity in that 61% of the men within the sample of mass shooters experienced social stressors such as bullying, social isolation and racial or ethnic harassment (Issa 689). Again, varying degrees of oppression exist within every subset of society meaning one cannot claim that any one of these factors could directly cause someone to commit mass murder. However, if studies continue to find patterns amongst mass shooters it remains imperative that they not only be examined but taken seriously. Perhaps if men are not able to gain respect from fellow men or gain a sense of authority amongst their peers, they will demand it from women.

Methods

In order to examine the men within the case studies, I first reviewed secondary literature on hegemonic masculinity and rape culture. Next, I selected the men with whom to include within the case studies based upon the amount of reliable information made available to the general public. In order to analyze these men and substantiate my claims, I examined their manifestos (for the men who had written them) as well as watched the Youtube videos that detailed their manifestos. The case studies are largely framed in relation

to the scholarly articles that were previously reviewed. They are my own analysis shaped by the information I have gathered surrounding hegemonic masculinity and rape culture. Additional scholarly articles and the opinions of sociologists were also incorporated. However, the intent is to not bring up new information but rather to apply the theories to actual mass shootings.

Case Evidence

In this section I present three of the mass murderers of the past two decades to illustrate the connection between hegemonic masculinity, rape culture and mass shootings. The cases are presented in chronological order.

Seung- Hui Cho

Seung-Hui Cho perpetrated the Virginia Tech shooting, killing 32 people and wounding 17 others with two semi-automatic pistols on April 16, 2007.

The language Cho used when writing his manifesto parallels the belief system that supports rape culture. Cho stated, "You [women] could be at home right now eating your fucking caviar and your fucking cognac, had you not ravenously raped my soul (page 2)." The first part of this sentence reflects the internalized values of hegemony. He is speaking to women with the presumption they have wealth. This implies that he views them as superior within the gendered hierarchy. Additionally, by choosing the world "rape" to describe the effect women had on his soul, Cho is emphasizing that he feels powerless. Generally rape is associated with female victims and those who experience it often carry a sense of shame. As a result, the implication is that Cho feels dominated by women and consequently, emasculated.

Moreover, Cho's language also displays how entitlement and revenge impact men. For instance he goes on to state, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Can you [women] feel the pain that you fucked us in, you Descendants of Satan? Well, can you feel it?" (page 3). This statement connects to what scholars believe transforms the aggrieved into mass murderers, a sense of entitlement, a sense of using violence

against others, making others hurt as you might hurt. Aggrieved entitlement inspires revenge for those who have wronged you. It is the compensation for humiliation (Kalish and Kimmel 454). In this way, aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliation that stems from a perceived loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back.

Furthermore, Cho's commentary regarding women reveals how he conflates women who are sexually liberated to be rapists. He remarks, "It's grand for you to fuck us 24/7 for fun, but we can't have a single minute of harmless playtime, only suffer. It's dandy for you to rape us, but we're not allowed to even speak, only be raped? Fuck you… You fucked us, now we fuck you, now we kill you." In this way, Cho is completely brainwashed by rape culture and is intimidated by women's sexuality. His language speaks to how oblivious he is to the gendered power imbalance within society as he views women as perpetrators and men such as himself, as victims. Research recognizes that many mass shooters suffer from deep seated frustration stemming from victimhood that results in a desire to gain power and control (Kimmel, 2013, 2014). Rather than extending empathy to women who have actually been raped, Cho labels women as rapists and men who aren't further pursued by women after sex as victims. By creating his own narrative and labeling himself as a victim, Cho likely felt entitled to violence.

Robert Dear

On November 27, 2015, a mass shooting occurred in a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado, resulting in the deaths of three people and injuries to nine. A police officer and two civilians were killed; five police officers and four civilians were injured.

In November 2015, Robert Dear arrived at a Planned Parenthood facility wearing a homemade ballistic vest crafted of silver coins and duct tape, carrying four Soviet-style SKS semi-automatic rifles where he shot from inside the clinic at propane tanks he planned to use as improvised bombs. Inside of his car, he had an additional two handguns, a rifle and a shotgun (Fausset 2015). By the time he was finished, he had killed three people and wounded nine others. The victims included a police officer, an army veteran and a mother, all of whom left behind grieving families. However, what is most horrific is that this tragedy likely could have been prevented.

Dear had a detailed history of violence that clearly outlines a hatred towards women. Two decades before the attack in 1992, Dear was arrested for raping a woman at knifepoint. Just one year later in 1993, his second wife came forward with allegations stating that he once "threw her around the room by her hair" and "beat her head against the ground" (Issa 682). Then in 1997, the pattern repeated itself as police responded to a domestic violence call from Dear's third wife. She reported that Dear had taken her keys and locked her outside of the home. Once she gained entry back into the residence, he hit her and pushed her through a window (Issa 682). However, despite this he was a free man. He had the freedom to shoot upwards of nine people at a Planned Parenthood facility. Dear went unpunished for sexually and physically abusing multiple women, however it wasn't until he posed a threat to the larger, male based society that he was convicted of a crime.

Elliot Rodger

On the evening of May 23, 2014, in Isla Vista, California, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen others near the campus of University of California, Santa Barbara, before killing himself inside his vehicle.

Elliot Rodger's manifesto illustrates that he experienced lifelong resentment towards women. He writes, "My six year old self was playing with girls, unbeknownst to the horror and misery the female gender would inflict upon me later in life. In the present day, these girls would treat me like the scum of the earth; but at the time, we were all equals. Such bitter irony" (7). This connects back to external hegemony which states that men should be superior to women. In adulthood, Rodger feels like he is beneath women because he is a virgin at 22.

Desperate to restore the hierarchy, he constructed a plan to punish and kill women for the "crime" of depriving him of the love and sex he "deserves." The following is what I consider to be the thesis of his plan:

> As the phrase that I coined goes: If I cannot join them I will rise above them; if I cannot rise above them I will destroy them. I have been trying to join and be accepted among the beautiful, popular people all of my life, but it was to no avail. They have always treated me like scum. Girls have always deemed me unworthy of their love and sex... At this point, the thought of overthrowing them seemed hopeless. The final solution to triumph over my enemies was to destroy them, to carry out my Day of Retribution, to exact my ultimate and devastating vengeance on all of the popular people who never accepted me, and against all women for rejecting me and starving me of love and sex (112).

This provides a disturbingly clear demonstration of rape culture as Rodger plots to kill women for not having sex with him. Prior to this, in the Spring of 2013 Rodger came across an INCEL [Involuntary Celibate] site on the dark web. He stated that "it was a forum full of men who were starved of sex, just like me… Many of them share my hatred of women.. Reading the posts on the website only confirmed many of the theories I had about how wicked and degenerate women really are… it shows how bleak and cruel the world is due to the evilness of women" (117). This ties into what was discussed earlier, the toxic version of manhood that suggests that having sex elevates masculinity, that male sexual desire is stronger than females, and obtaining sex is more important than a woman's wellbeing. Since Rodger is a virgin he feels like less of a man and believes the only way to compensate for that is to kill women.

Rape culture is further displayed when he claims, "Women should not have the right to choose who to mate and breed with. That decision should be made for them by rational men of intelligence... Women have more power in human society than they deserve, all because of sex. There is no creature more evil and depraved than the human female. Women are like a plague. They don't deserve any

rights. Their wickedness must be contained in order to prevent future generations from falling to degeneracy. Women are vicious, evil, barbaric animals, and they need to be treated as such" (117). Clearly, Rodger has manifested an extreme hatred towards women. Inside he feels so inadequate that he is desperate to make himself and others see that he can be powerful. Through punishing women, making them less than human, stripping them of their rights and exposing their "evilness," he is trying to make the world believe that it's not his fault that he is a virgin, that there is instead something wrong with women. If he could convince himself and others of this, he wouldn't be inferior rather he would be the enlightened, superior man. This illustrates his internal battle against conforming to rape culture and hegemonic masculinity. He hates women because they wouldn't have sex with him and at the same time, he feels like there is nothing he can do to change that. What he thinks he can change, is how that is perceived. He believes killing women and writing this manifesto is the only way he can become an "alpha male" without having sex.

Rodger concludes his 141-page manifesto by proposing a new government to completely abolish sex and women. He recommends that women be quarantined in concentration camps where they would be starved to death. While he would oversee this, he would imagine thinking to himself, "If I can't have them, no one will" (137).

Conclusion

Despite having histories of violence against women, many men are still able to acquire weapons and maintain their freedom to function within society. This gap within the system seems to dismiss women's safety and right to justice while also leaving the larger population susceptible to violence. My hope for this paper is that it advances the conversation surrounding masculinity and male violence. When such a pattern emerges from decades of data, it is time to reflect on what may be causing this so we can learn from our mistakes and take appropriate and useful measures to intervene.

Moving forward, it is important to additionally look at the roles race, religion, mental health and

gun laws have in perpetuating mass shootings. However, no matter what personal beliefs or opinions an individual occupies, the hope is that this paper, at the very least, could help expand one's thinking and simply encourage alternative explanations to this epidemic. Ultimately, the goal is for new and diverse perspectives to continue to grow until we can fully understand what is causing mass shootings and how we can stop them, ensuring the safety of all those who live in our country and occupy the public space.

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