

# Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence

## Random School Shootings, 1982-2001

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*Since 1982, there have been 28 cases of random school shootings in American high schools and middle schools. The authors find (a) that the shootings were not a national problem but a series of local problems that occurred in "red states" or counties (places that voted Republican in the 2000 election); (b) that most of the boys who opened fire were mercilessly and routinely teased and bullied and that their violence was retaliatory against the threats to manhood; (c) that White boys in particular might be more likely than African American boys to randomly open fire; and (d) that the specific content of the teasing and bullying is homophobia. A link between adolescent masculinity, homophobia, and violence is proposed. Finally, the authors offer a few possible explanations as to how most boys who are teased and bullied achieve the psychological resilience that enables them to weather adolescence without recourse to random school violence.*

**Keywords:** *masculinity; homophobia; violence; school shootings; adolescence*

Generally speaking, violence always arises out of impotence.  
It is the hope of those who have no power.

—Hannah Arendt

**Violence is one of the most urgent issues** facing our nation's schools. All over the country, Americans are asking why some young people open fire, apparently randomly, killing or wounding other students and their teachers. Are these teenagers emotionally disturbed? Are they held in the thrall of media-generated violence—in video games, the Internet, rock or rap music? Are their parents to blame?

Indeed, school violence is an issue that weighs heavily on our nation's consciousness. Students report being increasingly afraid to go to school; among

young people aged 12 to 24, 3 in 10 say violence has increased in their schools in the past year and nearly two-fifths have worried that a classmate was potentially violent (“Fear of Classmates,” 1999). More than half of all teens know somebody who has brought a weapon to school (although more than three-fifths of them did nothing about it), according to a PAX study (“Half of Teens,” 2001). And nearly two thirds (63%) of parents believe a school shooting is somewhat or very likely to occur in their communities (Carlson & Simmons, 2001). The shock, concern, and wrenching anguish shared by both children and parents who fear that our nation’s schools may not be safe demands serious policy discussions. And such discussions demand serious inquiry into the causes of school violence.<sup>1</sup>

We begin our inquiry with an analysis of the extant commentary and literature on school violence. We argue that, unfortunately, there are significant lacunae in all of these accounts—the most significant of which is the fact that they all ignore the one factor that cuts across all cases of random school shootings—masculinity. Thus, we argue that any approach to understanding school shootings must take gender seriously—specifically the constellation of adolescent masculinity, homophobia, and violence.

We go on to argue that in addition to taking gender seriously, a reasoned approach to understanding school shootings must focus not on the *form* of the shootings—not on questions of family history, psychological pathologies, or broad-based cultural explanations (violence in the media, proliferation of guns) but on the *content* of the shootings—the stories and narratives that accompany the violence, the relationships and interactions among students, and local school and gender cultures. Using such an approach to interpret the various events that led up to each of the shootings, we find that a striking similarity emerges between the various cases. All or most of the shooters had tales of being harassed—specifically, gay-baited—for inadequate gender performance; their tales are the tales of boys who did not measure up to the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, in our view, these boys are not psychopathological deviants but rather overconformists to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to a perceived humiliation.

### MISSING THE MARK

The concern over school shootings has prompted intense national debate, in recent years, over who or what is to blame. One need not look hard to find any number of “experts” who are willing to weigh in on the issue. Yet despite the legion of political and scientific commentaries on school shootings, these voices have all singularly and spectacularly missed the point.

At the vanguard of the debates have been politicians. Some have argued that Goth music, Marilyn Manson, and violent video games are the causes of school

shootings. Then-President Clinton argued that it might be the Internet; Newt Gingrich credited the 1960s; and Tom DeLay blamed daycare, the teaching of evolution, and “working mothers who take birth control pills” (“The News of the Week,” 1999, p. 5). Political pundits and media commentators also have offered a host of possible explanations, of which one of the more popular answers has been violence in the media. “Parents don’t realize that taking four year-olds to *True Lies*—a fun movie for adults but excessively violent—is poison to their brain,” notes Michael Gurian (Lacayo, 1998, p. 39). Alvin Poussaint, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, wrote that

in America, violence is considered fun to kids. They play video games where they chop people’s heads off and blood gushes and it’s fun, it’s entertainment. It’s like a game. And I think this is the psychology of these kids—this “Let’s go out there and kill like on television.” (Klein & Chancer, 2000, p. 132)

And Sissela Bok, in her erudite warning on violence, *Mayhem* (1999), suggests that the Internet and violent video games, which “bring into homes depictions of graphic violence . . . never available to children and young people in the past,” undermine kids’ resilience and self-control (p. 78).

For others, the staggering statistics linking youth violence and the availability of guns point to a possible cause. Firearms are the second leading cause of death to children between age 10 and 14 and the eighth leading cause of death to those age 1 to 4 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001). In 1994, 80% of juvenile murders used a firearm; in 1984, only 50% did (Kelleher, 1998). Barry Krisberg, president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, argues that both the media and guns are at fault. He says, “The violence in the media and the easy availability of guns are what is driving the slaughter of innocents” (Lacayo, 1998, p. 39). Or perhaps, if we are to believe National Rifle Association (NRA) president Charlton Heston, the problem is not that there are too many guns but that there are not enough guns. He argues that had there been armed guards in the schools, the shooting would have ended instantly (Lacayo, 1998). These accounts, however, that blame a media purportedly overly saturated by violence and a society infatuated with guns are undercut by two important facts, which are often conveniently forgotten amid the fracas. The first is that whereas the amount of violent media content has ostensibly been increasing, both youth violence, in general, and school violence, in particular, have actually been decreasing since 1980. And second, juvenile violence involving guns has been in decline since 1994 (largely as a result of the decline of the crack epidemic).<sup>2</sup> As Michael Carneal, the boy who shot his classmates in Paducah, Kentucky, said, “I don’t know why it happened, but I know it wasn’t a movie” (Blank, 1998, p. 95).

Finally, some have proposed psychological variables, including a history of childhood abuse, absent fathers, dominant mothers, violence in childhood, unstable family environment, or the mothers’ fear of their children, as possible

explanations (see, e.g., Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998; Garbarino, 1998). Although these explanations are all theoretically possible, empirically, it appears as though none of them holds up. Almost all the shooters came from intact and relatively stable families, with no history of child abuse. If they had psychological problems at all, they were relatively minor, and the boys flew under the radar of any school official or family member who might have noticed something seriously wrong. In a term paper, Eric Harris, of Columbine infamy, quoted Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "Good wombs hath borne bad sons."

This search for causal variables is also misguided because it ignores a crucial component of all the shootings. These childhood variables would apply equally to boys and to girls.<sup>3</sup> Thus, they offer little purchase with which to answer the question of why it is that only boys open fire on their classmates.

Government-supported investigations, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) report (O'Toole, 2000), the Surgeon General's report on youth violence (*Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*, 2001), the Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2000* (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000), as well as the latest study of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001) all concentrate on identifying potential psychological or cultural antecedents of school violence, for example, media influence, drugs and alcohol behavior, Internet usage, father absence, and parental neglect. That is to say, they focus on "form"—who the perpetrators were—not the "content." None examine local cultures, local school cultures, or on gender as an antecedent or risk factor.

Most important for our argument is the fact that these studies have all missed gender. They use such broad terminology as "teen violence," "youth violence," "gang violence," "suburban violence," and "violence in the schools" as though girls are equal participants in this violence. Conspicuously absent is any mention of just who these youth or teens are who have committed the violence. They pay little or no attention to the obvious fact that *all the school shootings were committed by boys*—masculinity is the single greatest risk factor in school violence. This uniformity cuts across all other differences among the shooters: Some came from intact families, others from single-parent homes; some boys had acted violently in the past, others were quiet and unsuspecting; and some boys also expressed rage at their parents (two killed their parents the same morning), whereas others seemed to live in happy families. And yet, if the killers in the schools in Littleton, Pearl, Paducah, Springfield, and Jonesboro had all been girls, gender would undoubtedly be the only story (Kimmel, 2001; see also Klein & Chancer, 2000). Someone might even blame feminism for causing girls to become violent in vain imitation of boys.

But the analytic blindness of these studies runs deeper than gender. We can identify two different waves of school violence since 1980. In the first, from 1982 to 1991, the majority of all the school shootings were nonrandom (i.e., the victims were specifically targeted by the perpetrators). Most were in urban, inner-city schools and involved students of color. Virtually all involved

handguns, all were sparked by disputes over girlfriends or drugs, and all were committed by boys.

These cases have not entirely disappeared, but they have declined dramatically. Since 1992, only 1 of the random school shootings occurred in inner-city schools (it was committed by a Black student), whereas the remaining 22 have been committed by White students in suburban schools. Virtually all involved rifles, not handguns—a symbolic shift from urban to rural weaponry. However, once again, all shootings were committed by boys.

As the race and class of the perpetrators have shifted, so too has the public perception of school violence. No longer do we hear claims about the “inherent” violence of the inner city or, what is even more pernicious, the “inherently” violent tendencies of certain racial or ethnic groups. As the shooters have become White and suburban middle-class boys, the public has shifted the blame away from group characteristics to individual psychological problems, assuming that these boys were deviants who broke away from an otherwise genteel suburban culture—that their aberrant behavior was explainable by some psychopathological factor. Although it is no doubt true that many of the boys who committed these terrible acts did have serious psychological problems, such a framing masks the significant role that race and class, in addition to gender, play in school violence. If all the school shooters had been poor African American boys in inner-city schools, it is much less likely that their acts would have been seen as deviant or pathological. Instead, discussions would have centered on the effects of the culture of poverty or the “normality” of violence among inner-city youth.

### WHO SHOOTS AND WHY?

Still, most students—White or non-White, male or female—are not violent, schools are predominantly safe, and school shootings are aberrations. As a public, we seem concerned with school shootings because its story is not “when children kill” but specifically when suburban White boys kill. To illustrate the distribution of shootings across the country, we have mapped all cases of random school shootings since 1982 (see Figure 1). There were five cases documented between 1982 and 1991; there have been 23 cases since 1992 (see the appendix for a list of the shootings).

Figure 1 reveals that school shootings do not occur uniformly or evenly in the United States, which makes one skeptical of uniform cultural explanations such as violent video games, musical tastes, Internet, television, and movies. School shootings are decidedly *not* a national trend. Of 28 school shootings between 1982 and 2001, all but 1 were in rural or suburban schools (1 in Chicago). All but 2 (Chicago again and Virginia Beach) were committed by a White boy or boys. The Los Angeles school district has had no school shootings since 1984; in 1999, San Francisco, which has several programs to identify potentially violent students, had only two kids bring guns to school.



**Figure 1: Map of the United States, Showing All Cases of Random School Shootings, 1982-2001**

School shootings can be divided even further, along the lines of a deep and familiar division in American society (see Figure 2).

Contrary to Alan Wolfe's assertion that we are "one nation, after all," it appears that we are actually two nations: "red states" (states that voted for George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election) and "blue states" (states that voted for Al Gore in the 2000 election). Of the 28 school shootings, 20 took place in red states (marked with light gray in Figure 2). Of those in the blue states (marked with dark gray in Figure 2), 1 was in suburban Oregon, 1 was in rural (Eastern) Washington, 2 were in Southern California, 1 was in rural and another in suburban Pennsylvania, 1 was in rural New Mexico, and 1 was in Chicago. Of those 8 from blue states, half of the counties in those blue states (Santee, CA; Red Hill, PA; Moses Lake, WA; and Deming, NM) voted Republican in the last election.

What this suggests is that school violence is unevenly distributed and that to understand its causes, we must look locally—both at "gun culture" (percentage of homes owning firearms, gun registrations, NRA memberships), local gender culture, and local school cultures—attitudes about gender nonconformity, tolerance of bullying, and teacher attitudes. We need to focus less on the form of school violence—documenting its prevalence and presenting a demographic profile of the shooters—and more on the *content* of the shootings; instead of asking psychological questions about family dynamics and composition, psychological problems, and pathologies, we need to focus our attention on local school cultures and hierarchies, peer interactions, normative gender ideologies, and the interactions among academics, adolescence, and gender identity.



**Figure 2: Map of the United States, Showing All Cases of Random School Shootings, 1982-2001, Superimposed on Map of State-by-State Voting for President, 2000**

With this as our guiding theoretical framework, we undertook an analysis of secondary media reports on *random school shootings from 1982 to 2001*. Using the shooters' names as our search terms, we gathered articles from six major media sources—the three major weekly news magazines: *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* (in order from greatest circulation to least); and three major daily newspapers: *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>4</sup> In conducting our analysis, we found a striking pattern from the stories about the boys who committed the violence: Nearly all had stories of being constantly bullied, beat up, and, most significantly for this analysis, “gay-baited.” Nearly all had stories of being mercilessly and constantly teased, picked on, and threatened. And most strikingly, it was *not* because they were gay (at least there is no evidence to suggest that any of them were gay) but because they were *different* from the other boys—shy, bookish, honor students, artistic, musical, theatrical, nonathletic, “geekish,” or weird. Theirs are stories of “cultural marginalization” based on criteria for adequate gender performance, specifically the enactment of codes of masculinity.

In a recent interview, the eminent gender theorist Eminem poignantly illustrated the role of “gay-baiting” in peer interactions. In his view, calling someone a “faggot” is not a slur on his sexuality but on his gender. He says,

The lowest degrading thing that you can say to a man . . . is to call him a faggot and try to take away his manhood. Call him a sissy. Call him a punk. “Faggot” to me

doesn't necessarily mean gay people. "Faggot" to me just means taking away your manhood. (Kim, 2001, p. 5)

In this rationalization, Eminem, perhaps unwittingly, speaks to the central connection between gender and sexuality and particularly to the association of gender nonconformity with homosexuality. Here, homophobia is far less about the irrational fears of gay people, or the fears that one might actually be gay or have gay tendencies, and more the fears that *heterosexuals* have that others might (*mis*)perceive them as gay (Kimmel, 1994). Research has indicated that homophobia is one of the organizing principles of heterosexual masculinity, a constitutive element in its construction (see, e.g., Epstein, 1995, 1998; Herek, 1998, 2000; Herek & Capitano, 1999). And as an organizing principle of masculinity, homophobia—the terror that others will see one as gay, as a failed man—underlies a significant amount of men's behavior, including their relationships with other men, women, and violence. One could say that homophobia is the hate that makes men straight.

There is much at stake for boys and, as a result, they engage in a variety of evasive strategies to make sure that no one gets the wrong idea about them (and their manhood). These range from the seemingly comic (although telling), such as two young boys occupying three movie seats by placing their coats on the seat between them, to the truly tragic, such as engaging in homophobic violence, bullying, menacing other boys, masochistic or sadistic games and rituals, excessive risk taking (drunk or aggressive driving), and even sexual predation and assault. The impact of homophobia is felt not only by gay and lesbian students but also by heterosexuals who are targeted by their peers for constant harassment, bullying, and gay-baiting. In many cases, gay-baiting is "misdirected" at heterosexual youth who may be somewhat gender nonconforming. This fact is clearly evidenced in many of the accounts we have gathered of the shootings.

For example, young Andy Williams, recently sentenced to 50 years to life in prison for shooting and killing two classmates in Santee, California, and wounding several others was described as "shy" and was "constantly picked on" by others in school. Like many of the others, bullies stole his clothes, his money, and his food, beat him up regularly, and locked him in his locker, among other daily taunts and humiliations (Green & Lieberman, 2001). One boy's father baited him and called him a "queer" because he was overweight. Classmates described Gary Scott Pennington, who killed his teacher and a custodian in Grayson, Kentucky, in 1993 as a "nerd" and a "loner" who was constantly teased for being smart and wearing glasses (Buckley, 1993). Barry Loukaitas, who killed his algebra teacher and two other students in Moses Lake, Washington, in 1996 was an honor student who especially loved math; he was also constantly teased and bullied and described as a "shy nerd" ("Did Taunts Lead to Killing?" 1996). And Evan Ramsay, who killed one student and the high school principal in Bethel, Alaska, in 1997 was also an honor student who was teased for wearing glasses and having acne (Fainaru, 1998).



Luke Woodham was a bookish and overweight 16-year-old in Pearl, Mississippi. An honor student, he was part of a little group that studied Latin and read Nietzsche. Students teased him constantly for being overweight and a nerd and taunted him as “gay” or “fag.” Even his mother called him fat, stupid, and lazy. Other boys bullied him routinely and, according to one fellow student, he “never fought back when other boys called him names” (Holland, 1997, p. 1). On October 1, 1997, Woodham stabbed his mother to death in her bed before he left for school. He then drove her car to school, carrying a rifle under his coat. He opened fire in the school’s common area, killing two students and wounding seven others. After being subdued, he told the assistant principal, “The world has wronged me” (Lacayo, 1998, p. 38). Later, in a psychiatric interview, he said,

I am not insane. I am angry. . . . I am not spoiled or lazy; for murder is not weak and slow-witted; murder is gutsy and daring. I killed because people like me are mistreated every day. I am malicious because I am miserable. (Chua-Eoan, 1997, p. 54)

Fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal was a shy and frail freshman at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky, barely 5 feet tall, weighing 110 pounds. He wore thick glasses and played in the high school band. He felt alienated, pushed around, and picked on. Boys stole his lunch and constantly teased him. In middle school, someone pulled down his pants in front of his classmates (Adams & Malone, 1999). He was so hypersensitive and afraid that others would see him naked that he covered the air vents in the bathroom. He was devastated when students called him a “faggot” and almost cried when the school gossip sheet labeled him “gay.” On Thanksgiving, 1997, he stole two shotguns, two semiautomatic rifles, a pistol, and 700 rounds of ammunition and after a weekend of showing them off to his classmates, brought them to school hoping that they would bring him some instant recognition. “I just wanted the guys to think I was cool,” he said. When the cool guys ignored him, he opened fire on a morning prayer circle, killing three classmates and wounding five others. Now serving a life sentence in prison, Carneal told psychiatrists weighing his sanity, “People respect me now” (Blank, 1998, p. 94).

At Columbine High School, the site of the nation’s most infamous school shooting, this connection was not lost on Evan Todd, a 255-pound defensive lineman on the Columbine football team, an exemplar of the jock culture that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris found to be such an interminable torment. “Columbine is a clean, good place, except for those rejects,” Todd said.

Sure we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? It’s not just jocks; the whole school’s disgusted with them. They’re a bunch of homos. . . . If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease ’em. So the whole school would call them homos. (Gibbs & Roche, 1999, p. 48)

Ben Oakley, a soccer player, agreed. “Nobody liked them,” he said, “The majority of them were gay. So everyone would make fun of them” (Cullen, 1999). Athletes taunted them: “Nice dress,” they’d say. They would throw rocks and bottles at them from moving cars. The school newspaper had recently published a rumor that Harris and Klebold were lovers.

Both were reasonably well-adjusted kids. Harris’s parents were a retired Army officer and a caterer—decent, well-intentioned people. Klebold’s father was a geophysicist who had recently moved into the mortgage services business and his mother worked in job placement for the disabled. Harris had been rejected by several colleges; Klebold was due to enroll at Arizona in the fall. But the jock culture was relentless. Said one friend,

Every time someone slammed them against a locker and threw a bottle at them, I think they’d go back to Eric or Dylan’s house and plot a little more—at first as a goof, but more and more seriously over time. (Pooley, 1999, p. 30)

The rest is all too familiar. Harris and Klebold brought a variety of weapons to their high school and proceeded to walk through the school, shooting whomever they could find. Students were terrified and tried to hide. Many students who could not hide begged for their lives. The entire school was held under siege until the police secured the building. In all, 23 students and faculty were injured and 15 died, including one teacher and the perpetrators.

In the videotape made the night before the shootings, Harris says, “People constantly make fun of my face, my hair, my shirts.” Klebold adds, “I’m going to kill you all. You’ve been giving us shit for years.” What Klebold said he had been receiving for years apparently included constant gay-baiting, being called “queer,” “faggot,” “homo,” being pushed into lockers, grabbed in hallways, and mimicked and ridiculed with homophobic slurs. For some boys, high school is a constant homophobic gauntlet and they may respond by becoming withdrawn and sullen, using drugs or alcohol, becoming depressed or suicidal, or acting out in a blaze of overcompensating violent “glory” (see Egan, 1998).

The prevalence of this homophobic bullying, teasing, and violence is staggering. According to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, 97% of students in public high school in Massachusetts reported regularly hearing homophobic remarks from their peers in 1993; 53% reported hearing anti-gay remarks by school staff (Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, Massachusetts and Vermont; cited in Bronski, 1999). The recent report *Hatred in the Hallways* paints a bleak picture of anti-gay harassment but pays significant attention to the ways in which gender performance—acting masculine—is perceived as a code for heterosexuality (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

And if we are to believe recent research, the effects of such hectoring should not be underestimated. In a national survey of teenagers’ attitudes, students suggested that peer harassment was the most significant cause of school shootings (Gaughan, Cerio, & Myers, 2001). Nearly 9 of 10 teenagers said that they

believed that the school shootings were motivated by a desire “to get back at those who have hurt them” (87%) and that “other kids picking on them, making fun of them, or bullying them” (86%) were the immediate causes. Other potential causes such as violence on television, movies, computer games, or videos (37%); boredom (18%); mental problems (56%); access to guns (56%); and prior physical victimization at home (61%) were significantly lower on the adolescents’ ratings. “If it’s anyone it’ll be the kids that are ostracized, picked on, and constantly made fun of,” commented one boy (36).

Also interesting is the fact that in all four geographic regions of the country—East, South, Midwest, and West—students in rural high schools rated their schools as most dangerous; in the South and West, students in suburban high schools thought their schools more dangerous than urban schools (Gaughan et al., 2001). Equally interesting is that perceptions of issues related to school shooting varied by race, because Blacks are less likely than other racial groups to believe that getting back at others could be a reason for violence, less likely to see bullying as a significant problem than Whites, and less likely to believe that lack of friends could be blamed for school violence.

Before we continue, let us be completely clear: Our hypotheses are decidedly *not* that gay and lesbian youth are more likely to open fire on their fellow students. In fact, from all available evidence, *none* of the school shooters was gay. But that is our organizing hypothesis: Homophobia—being constantly threatened and bullied *as if you are gay* as well as the homophobic desire to make sure that others know that you are a “real man”—plays a pivotal and understudied role in these school shootings. But more than just taking gender performance and its connections to homosexuality seriously, we argue that we must also carefully investigate the dynamics of gender within these local cultures, especially local school cultures and the typically hegemonic position of jock culture and its influence on normative assumptions of masculinity, to begin to understand what pushes some boys toward such horrific events, what sorts of pressures keep most boys cowed in silence, and what resources enable some boys to resist.

Obviously, some boys—many boys—are picked on, bullied, and gay-baited in schools across the country on a daily, routine basis. How do they cope? What strategies do they use to maintain their composure, their self-esteem, and their sense of themselves as men? Unfortunately, there are few answers to these questions in the existing work that has been done on bullying. When researchers have examined bullying, they have tended to focus on the prevalence of bullying and occasionally the social characteristics of bullies and victims (Ma, 2001; Olweus, 1978, 1991; Salmon, James, & Smith, 1998; see especially Smith & Brain, 2000, and the remainder of that special issue of the journal). But these researchers have yet to address the crucial component of the *content* of bullying. As a result, the important questions have yet to be asked. What do bullies say about their victims? Why are certain students targeted? How do students who are targeted respond? And what are the structural elements to bullying? What kinds of social supports do bullies get from peers? From teachers and administrators? Of

the limited research that does ask these questions, there seems to be initial support for our hypothesis. Ma (2001), for example, suggests that bullies are likely to have at one point been victims and that boys bully more for “indirect compensation,” seeking “revenge on innocent others rather than bullies,” than for “social power.”

To understand the specificity of these events and the continuing power of gender as an analytic category through which to view them and the dynamics they represent, we conclude here with three important questions and suggest some tentative answers.

### WHY BOYS AND NOT GIRLS?

Despite the remarkable similarities between the sexes on most statistical measures, the single most obdurate and intractable gender difference remains violence, both the willingness to see it as a legitimate way to resolve conflict and its actual use. Four times more teenage boys than teenage girls think fighting is appropriate when someone cuts to the front of a line. Half of all teenage boys get into a physical fight each year (Kimmel, 2000). Psychological inventories that measure attitudes and ideologies of masculinity invariably score propensity to violence and legitimacy of violence as “masculine.” Undoubtedly, violence is normative for most boys (see also Lefkowitz, 1997).

This association of violence and virility starts early for boys and takes on particular resonance at around age 7 or 8, according to developmental research conducted by Judy Chu (2000). Unlike girls, boys do not lose their voice, they “gain” a voice, but it is an inauthentic voice of constant posturing, of false bravado, of foolish risk-taking and gratuitous violence—what some have called the “boy code,” the “mask of masculinity.” The once-warm, empathic, communicative boy becomes, very early, a stoic, uncommunicative, armor-plated man. They “ruffle in a manly pose,” as William Butler Yeats once put it, “for all their timid heart.”

Historically, no industrial society other than the United States has developed such a violent “boy culture,” as historian E. Anthony Rotundo (1993) calls it in his book *American Manhood*. It is here where young boys, as late as the 1940s, actually carried little chips of wood on their shoulders daring others to knock it off so that they might have a fight. It is astonishing to think that “carrying a chip on your shoulder” is literally true—a test of manhood for adolescent boys. And it is here in the United States where experts actually *prescribed* fighting for young boys’ healthy masculine development. The celebrated psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who invented the term “adolescence,” believed that a nonfighting boy was a “nonentity” and that it was “better even an occasional nose dented by a fist . . . than stagnation, general cynicism and censoriousness, bodily and psychic cowardice” (cited in Stearns, 1994, p. 31). His disciple, J. Adams Puffer,

was even bold enough to suggest in his successful parental advice book *The Boy and His Gang* (1912) that it is not unreasonable for a boy to fight up to six times a week and maybe even more depending on the circumstances:

There are times when every boy must defend his own rights if he is not to become a coward, and lose the road to independence and true manhood. . . . The strong willed boy needs no inspiration to combat, but often a good deal of guidance and restraint. If he fights more than, let us say, a half-dozen times a week—except of course, during his first week at a new school—he is probably over-quarrelsome and needs to curb. (cited in Kimmel, 1996, p. 161)

It is interesting to note that in a recently thwarted school shooting in New Bedford, Massachusetts, it was a young woman, Amylee Bowman, 17, who could not go through with the plot and decided to reveal the details to the authorities. Eric McKeehan, 17, one of the conspirators, was described in media accounts as constantly angry, especially at being slighted by other students. The mother of a second boy accused in the plot said, “Eric has a temper. He says what’s on his mind. He’s been known to hit walls and lockers, but what teenage boy hasn’t?” (Heslam & Richardson, 2001, p. 6).

Indeed, what teenage boy hasn’t? Eminem had that part right. Calling someone a “faggot” means questioning his manhood. And in this culture, when someone questions your manhood, we do not just get mad, we get even.

### WHY WHITE BOYS?

There may be a single “boy code” but there are also a variety of ways in which different boys and men relate to it, embrace it, and enact it—in short, there are a variety of young masculinities. The deft interplay between generalized normative constructions and local iterations are vital to explore and something that is rarely done by the myriad books that have counseled parents to attend to the needs of their boys. Making gender visible ought not to make other elements of identity—age, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class—invisible. It is for this reason that we have come to use the term “masculinities” to denote these differences. What it means to be a 71-year-old Black, gay man in Cleveland is probably radically different from what it means to be a 19-year-old White, heterosexual farm boy in Iowa.

At the same time, we must also remember that all masculinities are not created equal. All American men also contend with a singular hegemonic vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which we all measure ourselves. We thus come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of subordinated “others”—racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women. As the sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) once wrote,

In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. . . . Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. (p. 128)

It is crucial to listen to those last few words. When we feel that we do not measure up we are likely to feel unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. It is here, from this place of unworthiness, incompleteness, and inferiority, that boys begin their efforts to prove themselves as men. And it is here where violence has its connections to masculinity. As James Gilligan says in his book *Violence* (1996), violence has its origins in “the fear of shame and ridicule, and the overbearing need to prevent others from laughing at oneself by making them weep instead” (p. 77). Shame, inadequacy, vulnerability—all threaten the self; violence, meanwhile, is restorative, compensatory.

By pluralizing the term masculinity, we also make it possible to see places where gender *appears* to be the salient variable but may, in fact, be what sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein calls a “deceptive distinction,” something that looks like gender difference but is in fact a difference based on some other criterion. Thus, for example, we read of how male cadets at Virginia Military Institute (VMI) or the Citadel would be distressed by and uncomfortable with women’s presence on campus. Of course, in reality, there were plenty of women on campus—they cleaned the rooms, made and served the food, taught the classes, and were readily available as counselors and medical personnel. What bothered the men was not gender but class, that is, women’s institutional equality. (Similar analyses can be made about male doctors or corporate executives who are not at all uncomfortable with female nurses or secretaries or male athletes who are not at all uncomfortable about female cheerleaders but seem threatened by female athletes.)

Most important for our current discussion, though, is the fact that failure to see race while looking at gender will cause us to miss the real story. We know that African American boys face a multitude of challenges in schools—racial stereotypes, formal and informal tracking systems, low expectations, and underachievement. But the one thing they do not do is plan and execute random and arbitrary mass shootings. And this is particularly interesting because the dynamics of the classroom and academic achievement have different valences for African American girls and African American boys. In their fascinating ethnographies of two inner-city public high schools, both Signithia Fordham (1996) and Ann Ferguson (2000) discuss these differences. When African American girls do well in school, their friends accuse them of “acting White.” But when African American boys do well in school, their friends accuse them of “acting like girls.”

We might posit that cultural marginalization works itself out differently for subordinates and superordinates. Even if they are silenced or lose their voice,

subordinates—women, gays and lesbians, and students of color—can tap into a collective narrative repertoire of resistance. They can collectivize their anguish so that the personally painful may be subsumed into readily available political rhetorics. White boys who are bullied are supposed to be real men, supposed to be able to embody independence, invulnerability, and manly stoicism. In fact, the very search for such collective rhetorics can be seen as an indication of weakness. Thus, we might hypothesize that the cultural marginalization of the boys who did commit school shootings extended to feelings that they had no other recourse: They felt they had no other friends to validate their fragile and threatened identities, they felt that school authorities and parents would be unresponsive to their plight, and they had no access to other methods of self-affirmation.

### **WHY THESE PARTICULAR BOYS AND NOT OTHERS WHO HAVE HAD SIMILAR EXPERIENCES?**

Walk down any hallway in any middle school or high school in America and the single most common put-down that is heard is “That’s so gay.” It is deployed constantly, casually, unconsciously. Boys hear it if they try out for the school band or orchestra, if they are shy or small, physically weak and unathletic, if they are smart, wear glasses, or work hard in school. They hear it if they are seen to like girls too much or if they are too much “like” girls. They hear it if their body language, their clothing, or their musical preferences do not conform to the norms of their peers. And they hear it not as an assessment of their present or future sexual orientation but as a commentary on their masculinity.

But not all boys who are targeted like that open fire on their classmates and teachers. In fact, very few do. So how is it that some boys—many boys, in fact—resist? As Pedro Noguera writes in “The Trouble With Black Boys” (2001), “We know much less about resilience, perseverance, and the coping strategies employed by individuals whose lives are surrounded by hardships, than we do about those who succumb and become victims of their environment” (p. 25). What is the constellation of factors—the trajectories and relations, individual, social, and institutional—that facilitate resistance?

Perhaps there is what Robert Brooks, of Harvard Medical School, calls the “charismatic adult” who makes a substantial difference in the life of the child. Most often this is one or the other parent, but it can also be a teacher or some other influential figure in the life of the boy. Perhaps the boy develops an alternative substantive pole around which to organize competence. Gay-baiting suggests that he is a failure at the one thing he knows he wants to be and is expected to be—a man. If there is something else that he does well—a private passion, music, art—someplace where he feels valued—he can develop a pocket of resistance.

Similarly, the structures of his interactions also can make a decisive difference. A male friend, particularly one who is not also a target but one who seems

to be successful at masculinity, can validate the boy's sense of himself as a man. But equally important may be the role of a female friend, a potential if not actual "girlfriend." Five of the school shooters had what they felt was serious girl trouble, especially rejection. Luke Woodham was crushed when his girlfriend broke up with him. "I didn't eat, I didn't sleep. It destroyed me," he testified at trial. She was apparently his primary target and was killed. Michael Carneal may have had a crush on one of his victims. Mitchell Johnson was upset that his girlfriend had broken up with him.

Although all the shooters have been boys, that does not mean that girls are inconsequential in boys' cognitive mapping of their social worlds. It may be that the boys who are able to best resist the torments of incessant gay-baiting and bullying are those who have some girls among their friends, and perhaps even a girlfriend, that is, girls who can also validate their sense of masculinity (which other boys do as well) as well as their heterosexuality (which boys alone cannot do). If masculinity is largely a homosocial performance, then at least one male peer, who is himself successful, must approve of the performance. The successful demonstration of *heterosexual* masculinity, which is the foundation, after all, of gay-baiting, requires not only the successful performance for other men but also some forms of "sexual" success with women.<sup>5</sup>

These sorts of questions—the dynamics of local culture, the responsiveness of adults and institutions, and the dynamics of same-sex and cross-sex friendships—will enable us to both understand what led some boys to commit these terrible acts and what enable other boys to develop the resources of resistance to daily homophobic bullying.

## CONCLUSION

In a brilliant passage in *Asylums*, Erving Goffman (1961) touched on the interplay between structure and agency, between repression and resistance:

Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks. (p. 320)

It is our task, as researchers concerned with gender and education, to understand how those structural forces shape and mold young men's identities and to explore the seams of resistance, where they might carve out for themselves a masculinity that is authentic, grounded, and confident.



**APPENDIX**  
**All Cases of Random School Shootings, 1982-2001**

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- March 19, 1982, Las Vegas, Nevada. Patrick Lizotte, age 18.  
March 2, 1987, DeKalb County, Missouri. Nathan Faris, age 12.  
February 11, 1988, Pinellas Park, Florida. Jason Harless, age 16.  
December 16, 1988, Virginia Beach, Virginia. Nicholas Elliott, age 15.  
September 27, 1990, Las Vegas, Nevada. Curtis Collins, age 15.  
November 20, 1992, Edward Tilden High School, Chicago, Illinois. Joseph White, age 15.  
January 18, 1993, East Carter High School, Grayson, Kentucky. Gary Scott Pennington, age 17.  
February 22, 1993, Reseda High School, Reseda, California. Robert Heard, age 15.  
March 18, 1993, Harlem High School, Harlem, Georgia. Edward Gillom.  
May 24, 1993, Upper Perkiomen High School, Red Hill, Pennsylvania. Jason Michael Smith, age 15.  
November 1, 1993, Sullivan High School, Chicago, Illinois. Troy Jones, age 15.  
April 12, 1994, Margaret Leary Elementary School, Butte, Montana. James Osmanson, age 10.  
September 30, 1995, Tavares Middle School, Tavares, Florida. Keith Johnson, age 14.  
November 15, 1995, Richland High School, Lynnville, Tennessee. Jamie Rouse, age 18.  
February 2, 1996, Frontier High School, Moses Lake, Washington. Barry Loukaitas, age 14.  
September 25, 1996, DeKalb Alternative School, Stone Mountain, Georgia. David Debose Jr., age 16.  
January 27, 1997, Conniston Middle School, West Palm Beach, Florida. Tonneal Mangum, age 14.  
February 19, 1997, Bethel Regional High School, Bethel, Alaska. Evan Ramsey, age 16.  
October 1, 1997, Pearl High School, Pearl, Mississippi. Luke Woodham, age 16.  
December 1, 1997, Heath High School, West Paducah, Kentucky. Michael Carneal, age 14.  
March 24, 1998, Westside Middle School, Jonesboro, Arkansas. Andrew Golden, age 11, and Mitchell Johnson, age 13.  
April 24, 1998, Parker Middle School, Edinboro, Pennsylvania. Andrew Wurst, age 14.  
May 19, 1998, Lincoln County High School, Fayetteville, Tennessee. Jacob Davis, age 18.  
May 21, 1998, Thurston High School, Springfield, Oregon. Kipland Philip Kinkel, age 15.  
June 15, 1998, Armstrong High School, Richmond, Virginia. Quinshawn Booker, age 14.  
April 20, 1999, Columbine High School, Littleton, Colorado. Eric Harris, age 18, and Dylan Klebold, age 17.  
May 20, 1999, Heritage High School, Conyers, Georgia. Anthony Solomon, age 15.  
November 19, 1999, Deming Middle School, Deming, New Mexico. Victor Cordova, age 12.  
March 5, 2001, Santana High School, Santee, California. Charles Andrew Williams, age 15.
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## NOTES

1. This despite the fact that school shootings—where a young student opens fire on school grounds, apparently randomly, and shoots teachers and students—are the only type of school violence that has increased since 1980 (Glassner, 1999a, 1999b; see also Anderson et al., 2001). More than 99% of public high schools have never had a homicide. In the 1992-1993 school year, there were 54 violent deaths on high school campuses; in 2000, there were 16 (Cloud, 2001). Less than 1% of all school-associated violent deaths are the result of homicide (Anderson et al., 2001).

2. This is not to entirely dismiss the potential links between school shootings and the availability of guns. Although many boys are frustrated, harassed, and saturated with media violence, not all of them have equal access to guns.

3. This same critique also could be directed at the aforementioned arguments blaming the media and/or the prevalence of guns.

4. These articles were selected because they comprise three of the top four daily newspapers in circulation. *The Wall Street Journal*, which has the highest circulation of any daily newspaper in the United States, was not included in our analysis because its substantive focus is on business-related issues. To extend our analysis to local media outlets, we also selectively sampled from smaller regional newspapers. We recognize that using secondary media reports as indicators of “what really happened” leading up to and during these shootings is a questionable tactic. To further tease out the causes of these shootings, one would have to conduct firsthand interviews with those directly involved in the shootings—the shooters themselves, classmates, teachers, administrators, parents, and so forth. However, we feel that an analysis of media reports is nevertheless a valuable approach in this instance because one of our major points is that although virtually all of these accounts contained some evidence indicating the connections between masculinity, homophobia, and violence, they all somehow overlooked this fact.

5. The word *sexual* is in quotations because this does not necessarily mean actual sexual contact but rather a sexualized affirmation of one’s masculinity by girls and women.

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