
Facing Down Violence

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Introduction

School violence once again shocks the nation--and the world--this time in Littleton, Colorado, on Tuesday, April 20. Two disaffected boys took revenge on schoolmates who had made fun of them. Witnesses stated that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris targeted athletes and students of color and laughed after they fired their deadly shots. When 13 students were dead and more than 20 wounded, Eric and Dylan apparently killed themselves.

For 20 years, I've done research on violence. For 15 years, I've done in-depth life history interviews with perpetrators of violence. Over the years, I've learned that people tend to deny the horror of violence, either through turning or glorifying it. When we do either, we are complicit. We are doing just what perpetrators want. Turning away and glorification create the space in which perpetrators victimize other people. We must see violence for what it is.

The research I've done has shown me that violence is not what I thought it was and perpetrators are not who I think they are. The following are some of my findings on the meanings of violence to perpetrators.

Violence as Emotional Gratification

Violence means many things to perpetrators. Perhaps most shocking to me were perpetrators' statements that violence brings immense thrills and emotional gratification. Thus, Eric and Dylan, the Littleton school murderers, seemed to enjoy themselves as they shot classmates. Crystal Woodman, a junior, said, "every time they'd shoot someone, they'd holler, like it was, like, exciting." Nick Foss, another student, reported, "They were laughing after they shot. It was like they were having the time of their lives." Another boy said, they seemed "orgasmic."

In 1996, 14 year-old Barry Loukatis, killed a boy who had teased him. He also killed two other boys. He said "It sure beats algebra, doesn't it?" as he stood over a dying boy who was choking on his own blood.

Countless times perpetrators have talked to me about the thrills and gratification that violence brings them. Only a few avow that they got no emotional satisfaction out of their violence--they committed

the violence to achieve some other end, such as teaching a lesson, enforcing their wills, and getting money for drugs.

Violence as Revenge, Just Desserts

For youth who kill and wound, school violence is a way of redressing wrongs and giving people their just desserts. They may seek out the people whom they perceive as hurting them, as well as taking out their hurt and rage on others. Many schoolmates have said that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were taunted and teased for years, particularly by athletes. Friends of the two boys said they expressed hatred toward athletes for this treatment. One of the two boys who perpetrated the Littleton, CO, murders had once pulled a gun on schoolmates. Tenth grader Mindy Pollock, said, "The one with the handgun today pulled a shotgun on my friends once. He said he was sick of being made fun of," she said. "He said, 'I'll shoot you. I'll shoot you.'"

Last year, Kip Kinkel, 15, who killed his parents and two classmates, and wounded 22 others told a classmate the day before the killings that he was probably going to do something stupid on the day of the killings. His reason? He wanted to get back at the people who had expelled him from school.

Kip had a stockpile of homemade bombs that his parents knew about. Kip's father bought Kip the rifle Kip used to kill his parents. His parents paid for shooting lessons. Kip's parents were distraught, but his father gave in when Kip begged first for a rifle and then for an automatic handgun. He thought guns for Kip were forbidden fruit. Giving him guns might solve the problem. Kip's parents had sought help from juvenile authorities. No one obviously had sensible solutions.

Violence and Deserving Victims

Some perpetrators see other people as so terrible that they think these people deserve to die. These are the deserving victims, in perpetrators' eyes. Barry Loukaitis wrote a poem about murder and read it in class. The poem ended this way.

I look at his body on the floor, Killing a bastard that deserves to die, Ain't nothing like it in the world, But he sure did bleed a lot.

This poem was a warning sign that should have been investigated.

Luke Woodham, 17, was convicted of stabbing his mother to death, shooting two schoolmates, and wounding seven others in 1998. Luke had good reason to be angry at his mother. In his own words, "She said I was the reason my father left. She said I wouldn't amount to anything. She told me I as fat, stupid, and lazy. She was always against me."

Though emotionally abusive, Mrs. Woodham certainly didn't deserve to die.

Racism and sexism can play a part in violence. Racist skinheads dehumanize and sometimes demonize persons of color to the point where some are convinced that violence against them is justified.

Some men dehumanize women to the point where they are objects of rape and physical violence. The youth who murdered schoolmates in Littleton were alleged to be skinheads.

Violence and Restoring Honor

For some perpetrators, violence is a way to restore honor, a way to restore a sense of self-efficacy or power. Youth--and adults--may get puffed up thinking about blowing people up, beating them, ramming them with cars, and bawing them with baseball bats.

Persons who think this way have a supersensitivity to slights, which can be real or imagined, but real to the affected person. The following are the words of a schoolyard bully:

I didn't want to really hurt them bad, but I just wanted them to be afraid, you know. That's what felt good is them being afraid, like I was afraid. That was a good feeling I got, is that they were afraid. And embarrass them in front of other, the other kids around. This one kid, Peter Mack [not his real name], he used to beat me up. And at, at sixth grade what I did is I took his shoes and I threw them over this fence, and I had it planned out, when he was going to go get his shoes I was going to go over there and beat him up. And all the kids on the playground playing kickball were there. He went over there. BAM, BAM, BAM, BAM. Blasted him about three, four times. He was on the ground. He started crying. I kind of kicked him. And, you know, he was just crying. He was just embarrassed. And that felt good for me. To have the other kids see that. And then I started liking it, I think. I, I think I liked that because then I kind of turned into a bully. Then I started picking on kids when I went to junior high school. I was tough.

Violence as Proof of Manhood

The overwhelming majority of child killers, including school murderers, are boys. Teasing, bullying, and emotional abuse might be particularly difficult for some boys to handle. Often, their tormentors also are boys who degrade others by calling them "faggot" and "sissy.". The feelings of powerless and emotional pain that result from such abuse are the very definition of sissy. No boy wants to be a sissy. Schoolmates called Eric Harris and Dylan "fag," "sissy," and other names that attacked their manhood.

Luke Woodham attached himself to an older boy named Grant Boyette, 19, who played on Luke's fears about himself. Luke said:

"I remember I woke up that morning and I'd seen demons that I always saw when Grant told me to do something. They said I was nothing and I would never be anything if I didn't get to that school and kill those people."

Many boys see violence as a way of being cool. Barry Loukatis had told a friend it would be pretty cool to go on a killing spree just like the two male characters in *Natural Born Killers*.

Violence and Emotional Disturbance

A very small number of youthful murderers have a mental illness or are emotionally disturbed. Those who appear to be influenced by their own auditory and visual hallucinations. Luke Woodham saw demons when he thought of the violent acts Grant Boyette urged on him, as discussed above.

Death from Violence as Temporary

Many youthful murders go into shock when they realize what they've done. Andrew Golden, 13, who killed several girls in a Jonesboro, AK, middle school, was in shock for days after his murderous spree. Most perpetrators would be thrilled if the people they'd killed came back to life. Mary Bell, at age 11, killed two boys, ages 3 and 4. In her adulthood, she recalled, "I didn't know I had intended for them to be. Though not involved in school violence, Mary's sense the meaning of her act is similar to other children who kill.

Discussion

We can no longer turn away from violence as too repulsive and disgusting in "real" life and then be fascinated by it in the mass media. When we squarely face the horror of violence, then we will have the will to do something about it. Each of the above dimensions of violence provides direction for prevention. What would happen if, instead of standing by while a few boys taunt and tease other boys, their classmates spoke up and told them to stop it. What if those who spoke up were boys and girls? What if by-standers no longer cheered bullies and instead showed strong disapproval? What if all of us showed by word and example that degrading others using is never justified?

Boys commit most violent acts. It's time to examine how we teach boys what it means to be male. We are so used to equating violence with men that we cannot see that understandings of what constitutes masculinity is a major component of violent acts.

About the Author

Jane Gilgun is a professor, School of Social Work, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Phone: 612/925-3569; e-mail: jgilgun@tc.umn.edu [mailto:jgilgun@tc.umn.edu]. Her research areas are how persons overcome adversities, the development of violent behaviors, and the meanings of violence to perpetrators. She currently is planning a book entitled *In Their Own Words: Men Talk About Their Violence*.

She won the Excellence in Research Award from the College of Human Ecology, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and two awards from the Silberman Foundation. She co-developed the core courses of the Child Abuse Prevention Studies Program, University of Minnesota, and was the developer and faculty director of the Violence and its Prevention series at the University of Minnesota. This series won an Outstanding program award from Continuing Education and Conferences, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

She has a Ph.D. from Syracuse University and other graduate degrees from the University of Chicago in social service administration and from the University of Louvain, Belgium, in family studies and sexuality. She also has a bachelor's and master's degree in English literature.