Mass Shootings:
The Result of Toxic Masculinity
By Clara Ure

  In the wake of mass shootings, after grief and righteous anger have set in, two topics become the focal point of all conversations as the public grapples with understanding the events: gun control and mental health. While these two factors certainly contribute to such events, they do not offer a complete explanation as to the motive that drives individuals to commit such violent acts. In fact, the mass media's focus on the individual's psychological dysfunctions – that shootings are the result of "crazy people" – is not only a futile explanation, but also works against positive intentions, by associating mental health with acts of extreme violence (Blum & Jaworski, 2016). This creates a negative perception of mental health, which further stigmatizes the field and in turn prevents people from seeking out the help they need for fear of being even remotely associated with "crazy" acts of egregious violence. Additionally, blaming mental health issues places the onus squarely on the individual and ignores broader social implications. A comprehensive explanation for the cause of mass shootings must take into account the universal understanding that individuals are the result of both nature and nurture; therefore, the social context (or sociological factors) of mass violence must also be examined (Blum & Jaworski, 2016). The concept of toxic masculinity has surfaced among the literature and research of criminologists, psychologists, and sociologists as the primary social factor responsible for influencing the behavior of perpetrators of mass shootings (and for that matter, mass violence), leading most experts, professionals, and academics to the assumption that these events are part of a larger systematic, societal failure (Blum & Jaworski, 2016; Duwe, 2004; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Oliffe et al., 2015).

  Toxic masculinity has not been objectively defined by researchers, but rather, is conceptually understood as a social performance invented to reinforce real, natural, and biological masculinity by

way of overcompensating or exaggerating aspects of masculinity to the extent in which masculinity becomes dysfunctional for the individual and for the society at large. This rigid, narrow-focussed sub-definition of masculinity socializes males to be physically strong, socially dominant, assertive, tough, and always in control (which translates into avoidance of emotions and/or emotional expression). Toxic masculinity teaches males to act rather than talk, and react rather than reason – a message which condones violence as a way to enact masculinity or respond to any threats against one's manhood (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Oliffe et al., 2015). Sociologist Steven Barkan writes that the emotional problems that result from socialization into this mutation of masculinity sometimes build up and explode (as indicated by mass shootings) or the problems express themselves in other ways (as indicated by disproportional rates of suicide and violence among males). Careful examination of social and psychological factors surrounding each event of mass shooting create a compelling explanation based on the assumption that these extreme acts of violence are simply an adherence to cultural expectations of masculinity (Oliffe et al., 2015).

An incident of mass shootings is often defined by criminologists and researchers as any incident in which four or more victims are killed with a firearm, within a 24-hour period at a public location, in the absence of other criminal activity (robberies, drug deals, gang "turf wars"), military conflict or collective violence (Blum & Jaworski, 2016; Duwe, 2007). Media coverage of mass shootings in the U.S. within the past decade has led the American public to believe these events are becoming more frequent, when in fact data proves otherwise. After the uproar caused by the Las Vegas massacre in October 2017, researcher and criminologist Grant Duwe published an article in Politico Magazine stating that mass shooting rates over the past 10 years are no higher now than in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With that in mind, studies show there have been a changes both in the demographics and the pattern of violence over the decades.

A study conducted by Kalish and Kimmel (2010) revealed that shootings which occurred prior to the early 1980s were typically carried out on school campuses by young black males who, using a handgun, killed specific targets in order to avenge a specific event. This micro social pattern, plus the decline of the crack epidemic, and the increase of mass public shootings led to the creation of policies designed to address and prevent violence in schools and workplaces. However, post-1982, shootings shifted from inner-cities to the suburbs and rural areas, and perpetrators became white males who, with semi-automatic rifles or assault weapons, opened fire seemingly at random. The premise of Duwe's Politico Magazine article was that mass shootings haven't become more frequent but instead have become more lethal, and the research by Kalish and Kimmel (2010) also confirms this.

It's worthwhile to consider the media's role in framing the issue of mass shootings – in the same 2010 study, Kalish and Kimmel noted that only when white boys began to open fire in their schools did psychologists and the media rush to assert that mental illness was at the root of the action. The media's inconsistency in the portrayal of relatively similar events posits that the violence of urban black youth is rational, while the violence of suburban white boys requires significant psychological analysis. Social constructionism, a micro theory of symbolic interactionism, theorizes that an individual's reality is shaped through experiences and interactions with others. Therefore, the way in which media covered mass shootings post-1982 may have had a role to play in the widespread public acceptance of labels that portrayed black males as being dangerous and more prone to violence than their white counterparts. The media's misleading way of framing mass shootings and perpetrators ultimately informed the public's interaction with and experience of African American males.

A study conducted by Oliffe et al. (2015) analyzed hundreds of incidents of mass shootings in the U.S. spanning three decades and revealed a number of psychological and sociological commonalities surrounding perpetrators. First and foremost, all perpetrators were males and a majority were white, indicating this issue is not only gendered, but also racial. The perpetrators lacked

what Durkheim referred to as social integration – the degree of connection between an individual and a social network. Perpetrators were socially marginalized, leading to feelings of humiliation, hopelessness, loss of control, and ultimately, emasculation. Additional research by Kalish and Kimmel (2010) revealed that all (if not most) perpetrators were heterosexual males who did not strongly adhere to stereotypical male behavior in that they were shy, bookish, non-athletic, or artistically, theatrically, or musically inclined and because of this they had been mercilessly teased, bullied, and 'gay-baited'. Patterns of violence and retaliation among homosexual and heterosexual individuals has been extensively studied and reveals that while homosexual men usually resort to suicide in order to cope with social disintegration, heterosexual men resort to violence (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). Mass shooting perpetrators chose to combat their emasculating marginalization in a predictable, and decidedly heteronormative way. And because the perpetrators had all been socialized in a culture in which toxic masculinity serves as the primary definition of masculinity, their retaliation against others was not only violent, but violent in its most extreme form: murder, by mass shooting. Furthermore, the shooters, in an effort to assert their masculinity in an even more pronounced manner and fashion, deliberately chose to end their display in suicide as a way to assert masculinity and dominance over others in a permanent way – essentially sending the message that they, and only they would have the final word over those who, they felt, stripped them of their masculinity.

Mass shootings resulting in suicide may be better understood if interpreted through a functionalist lens using Durkheim's sociological theories of suicide, which fall under his work on social regulation – the degree of influence that society has over an individual; in this case the degree of influence toxic masculinity has over males. Social regulation can provide a framework for understanding the suicidality of the aggrieved shooters. According to Durkheim, two types of suicide fall within the dimension of social regulation: fatalistic and anomic suicides. Those who commit fatalistic suicides do so because they have been rejected by society; meanwhile, anomic suicides are

committed by those attempting to deviate from social expectations in their deaths (Durkheim, 1951). The decision of each perpetrator to commit suicide by mass murder could be categorized as an act of both fatalistic and anomic suicide that, as was previously established, resulted from a severe lack of social integration and heightened social regulation.

Years of research on this and closely related topics can be summarized by just one phrase: American men don't get mad, they get even (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). When toxic and aggrieved masculinity is given access to lethal weapons, massive destruction is most assuredly slated to follow and this is why gun control is at the forefront of conversations and media attention at the outset of every mass shooting. According to 2017 statistics from National Public Radio, the U.S. currently has the 31st highest rate of gun violence in the world. Gun-related deaths in the U.S. are eight times higher than in Canada, and 27 times higher than in Denmark, and according to Sociologist Stanley Eitzen, the U.S. is the world's most heavily armed society with a ratio of 90 guns per every 100 people. The U.S. would do well to follow in the footsteps of Canada, which implemented a number of restrictions on the licensing, carrying, and transportation of firearms and has since reduced its ratio to 30 guns for every 100 people. Kalish and Kimmel (2010) noted that in cross-country comparisons, reduced rates of murder-suicides (usually the result of mass shootings) are correlated with reduced rates of civilian gun ownership. While eliminating guns all-together would be the ideal solution and has proven successful in Australia, enacting strict restrictions on the purchase of guns appears to be the most viable solution in the U.S. at the moment. However, improved gun control only addresses the lethality of the issue while leaving toxic masculinity unaddressed. As long as masculinity is associated with guns and violence, fatal events will continue to transpire; therefore psychosocial preventative measures must also be taken in conjunction so as to address influential factors at the macro (social) and micro (psychological) levels.

Men and women experience psychological distress differently and therefore exhibit symptoms in markedly different ways. Whereas a depressed female might exhibit sadness and sorrow, a male is more likely to react with anger and violence. Considering the ways in which the expression of psychological disturbances vary between the sexes, mental health support efforts should take a gendered approach. The study by Oliffe et al. (2015) noted that men's reluctance to seek help for depression, in combination with the fact that men's depression may not be identified with generic depression screening tools have contributed to poor mental health outcomes. The researchers suggest that equipping and educating service providers to better identify and treat men's mental illness may help address the gender disparities within the psychological field. Additionally, recommendations for reaching distressed men include removing mental illness language, inspiring hope and recovery through the use of testimonials, teaching men to draw connections between emotional and physical symptoms. Also given the fact that the perpetrators who commit murder-suicide crimes are usually marginalized and socially disintegrated males, mental health professionals should initially focus on targeting these groups of high-risk individuals.

Finally, legislative measures and psychological improvement efforts *must* be underscored by a comprehensive redefinition of the American gender culture. Studies have unequivocally shown that toxic (hegemonic) masculinity is central to understanding events of murder-suicide like mass shootings, therefore the dismantling of toxic masculinity will be central to reducing and preventing these tragedies in years to come. Introducing broader definitions of masculinity, definitions with fewer restrictions that normalize the different expressions masculinity, must be operationalized. Furthermore, these multiple masculinities need to be accepted by society at large and conveyed by all agents of socialization as perfectly acceptable ways of being a man. American gender culture needs to grant males the permission to be human again.

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