



Masculinity, aggrieved entitlement, and violence: considering the Isla Vista mass shooting

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ABSTRACT

Mass shootings have become an important topic of scholarly research; however, few studies examine the relationship between masculinity and violence. This study investigates how masculinities are constructed using a thematic content analysis of the Isla Vista mass shooter's manifesto, *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger*. Our analyses reveal how the shooter constructs and 'does' masculinity in adherence to masculine cultural ideals. Rodger reproduces hegemonic gender ideologies through his construction of masculinity in relation to physical embodiment and sexual prowess. Those who displayed these traits are constructed as superior men, characterizing men who lacked them as inferior. Interestingly, Rodger presents himself as lacking in these areas. As such, he draws on alternative masculine presentations to illustrate his manhood. When he does not receive societal confirmation of his masculinity, he experiences a crisis of masculinity and feelings of aggrieved entitlement wherein he directs his anger at racial minorities and women. He eventually adopts a violent masculinity and executes a violent retribution when his experiences do not live up to culturally defined gender expectations. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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Elliot Rodger, a 22-year-old student from UC Santa Barbara, became the center of media attention after a shootout in Isla Vista, California left seven dead (Rodger included) and thirteen injured. Reports indicate that his self-reported 'Day of Retribution' encompassed stabbing three males at his apartment, shooting female students outside a sorority house, shooting at a delicatessen and other pedestrians and bystanders, and hitting bicyclists with his car before taking his own life on 23 May 2014.

As the number of mass shootings has risen in the past decade (FBI, 2013), attempts have been made to understand commonalities amongst shooters. The mass media often emphasizes the potential relationship between cognitive distortions and mass shooting, thereby presenting the shooter as mentally unstable. While important, focusing solely on mental health in relation to violence fails to recognize the sociocultural context within which mass shootings take place (Myketiak, 2016). Also interesting is that while mental health issues may be common among many mass shooters, the most striking commonality is that perpetrators are almost exclusively male (FBI, 2013; Myketiak, 2016).

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In a study of 160 active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2013, only 6 incidents involved a female shooter, with the remaining 96.2% of shooters being men (FBI, 2013). The overrepresentation of male shooters begs the question of the relationship between gender ideals and violence.

This article utilizes a feminist theoretical framework to examine the social construction of masculinity, sexuality, and race, and its complex relationship to violence. Feminist theory has critiqued studies of crime for ignoring issues of gender; however, our study places gender at the center of our framework and analysis. More specifically, we heed Kimmel and Mahler's (2003) call to examine masculinity in relation to violence; particularly in a patriarchal society in which systemic violence against women is normalized. We use a thematic content analysis to examine the narrative written by the Isla Vista shooter in *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger* that outlines the events leading up to the shooting. Guided by past research on hegemonic masculinity and aggrieved entitlement, we aim to determine how the shooter constructs and understands his masculinity, sexuality, and race in conjunction with societal ideals and, further, how this is related to his eventual violence.

Our analyses reveal Rodger constructs and 'does' masculinity in several ways before resorting to violence. In many instances, Rodger reproduces broader societal hegemonic masculine ideals through his emphasis on physical embodiment and sexual prowess. Those who displayed these traits are constructed by the shooter as superior men, characterizing men who lacked them as inferior. Interestingly, Rodger presents himself as lacking in these areas. As such, he draws on alternative masculine presentations to illustrate his manhood. When he does not receive societal confirmation of his masculinity, he experiences a crisis of masculinity and feelings of aggrieved entitlement wherein he directs his anger at racial minorities and women. He eventually adopts a violent masculinity and executes a violent retribution when his experiences do not live up to culturally defined gender expectations.

Constructing masculinities

Masculinities are socially and historically constructed, produced, and reinforced by social expectations and meanings (Tan, Shaw, Cheng, & Kim, 2013). While several different and competing masculinities simultaneously exist, one form is constructed as hegemonic or dominant, rendering other forms of masculinity as marginalized or subordinated (Connell, 1995). Borrowing from Gramsci (1978), Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as 'the configuration of gender practice [...] which guarantees the dominant position of men and subordination of women,' and serves as a tool of oppression in gender relations (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Employing the framework of 'ideological hegemony,' Connell (1992) explicates how hegemonic masculinity serves as an ideological apparatus that constructs a certain subset of men as the dominant group and their power (defined as the ability to influence others) in society as 'natural' or 'common-sense.' Hegemony conveys some form of persuasion, most often subtle and obscured, where the dominant group gains consent from subordinates (Gramsci, 1978). While agency and resistance from below is possible within this structure, it is often limited, reflecting the ubiquitous and assertive power of the dominant group as well as the illusion that the dominant ideology serves everyone – including both men and women.

The theoretical tool of hegemony aptly describes the construction of masculinity in contemporary U.S. society (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Donaldson, 1993; Whitehead, 2002). Hegemonic masculinity constitutes the singular vision of masculinity that symbolizes authority over other forms of masculinity (i.e. marginalized and subordinated masculinities) as well as a collective privilege over women (Connell, 1992; Demetriou, 2001; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). It strategically barricades most men from achieving its normative standard (Donaldson, 1993; Whitehead, 2002), yet is defined as universal and glorified throughout larger society (Connell, 1992; Hunter & Davis, 1992; Whitehead, 2002).

Yet, Hearn (2004) reminds scholars that the term hegemonic masculinity is full of contradictions and tensions. For instance, hegemonic masculinity is difficult to identify because there is little that is counter-hegemonic. Donaldson (1993) questions if men's involvement in parenting is merely an intensification of masculinity. He contends that a thorough understanding of economic class is necessary to explicate the ways in which masculinity is truly hegemonic. Thus, masculinity is not a natural or an inherent condition (i.e. biological given) but rather is constantly socially constructed and thus, an achieved status. Characteristics of hegemonic masculinity carry less significance than the idea that it is the most desired form of masculinity in a given time, history, and space that ultimately upholds gender inequalities (Whitehead, 2002). Hegemonic masculinity within the United States is typically embodied by white, heterosexual, upper and middle-class men, who only represent a small percentage of the population.

Additionally, there is a complex interplay between different types of masculinities. For example, Connell (1995) argues that men of color can accept the aspects of hegemonic masculinity but fail to achieve hegemonic masculinity themselves. Men unwittingly reinforce the existing gender order by striving to achieve hegemonic masculinity or creating an alternative masculinity to maintain their relations of power over other men and women. Men who do not achieve the norms of hegemonic masculinity can also experience social punishment such as stigmatization, particularly by other men (Bird, 1996; Stoudt, 2006). Nonetheless, Butler (1999) adds that hegemonic masculinity is not monolithic as men can resist and subvert hegemonic masculinity and the gender order; for example, through the performance of drag to challenge the gender binary. Ultimately, a thorough understanding of hegemonic masculinity can serve as a useful framework for investigating the structure of the gender order and power relations embedded in society.

Ideals of hegemonic masculinity

Starting from the position that gender is 'done' as opposed to a static role (West & Zimmerman, 1987), hegemonic masculine ideals can manifest themselves as 'attributes' or practices (Myketiak, 2016). Although anyone, regardless of gender, can 'do' masculinity (see Halberstam, 1998 for discussion of masculinity as performed by female bodies), male bodies predominantly perform masculinity in Western societies. Thus, while, theoretically masculinity is not a natural part of maleness, social demands prescribe those wishing to present as masculine to socially validate their manhood. A handful of attributes of hegemonic masculinity appear to persist over time, including aggression, toughness, hardness, ableness, and competitiveness (Whitehead, 2002). More specifically, the physical embodiment of masculinity depends on strength, height and size, with some scholars

suggesting that muscles are the ultimate characteristic of hegemonic masculinity (Light & Kirk, 2000; Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010).

Moreover, the male body is not a biological given, but rather is a socio-cultural and historical construct that requires constant work, management, enhancement, and care to reflect the culturally defined ideal characteristics (Ricciardelli et al., 2010; Whitehead, 2002). While no universal ideal form of body exists across time or space, the dominant discourse produces a norm for which all male bodies are held accountable. Lacking physical traits that society deems ideal has deleterious effects on men who do not uphold these standards, such as fostering negative body image, depression, and eating disorders (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008).

As such, the male body constitutes an instrument of power (Bordo, 1999) and those who depart from the ideal body risk appearing less masculine or feminized. Thus, men's embodiment depends on the self-surveillance of one's own body to conform to dominant discourses of masculinity as well as policing by others (Foucault, 1978; Whitehead, 2002). While most men fail to achieve this ideal body, 'their sense of masculinity is *invested* in such attempts' and the ideal continues to be reinforced and reified throughout society (Whitehead, 2002, p. 191, emphasis added).

Heterosexuality is another fundamental ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Scholars largely agree that the presumed entitlement to women as sexual objects is a key ingredient of hegemonic masculinity (Bird, 1996; Christensen & Jensen, 2014; Gilmartin, 2007; Grazian, 2007; Kennedy-Kollar & Charles, 2013; Kimmel, 2008, 2013; Martin & Hummer, 1989; Quinn, 2002). As heterosexual sex is associated with the 'achievement of compelling gendered [...] identity,' having sex with women ushers men into 'manhood' (Carpenter, 2005, p. 110). Failure to have heterosexual sex signals not only sexual incompetency or virginity, but also raises suspicion of homosexuality (Carpenter, 2005). Publicizing one's sexual activity with women, especially in male-dominated spaces, functions to claim one's heterosexual orientation, but perhaps more importantly, establishes and enhances one's masculine status among other men (Pascoe, 2007; Flood, 2008). That is, one's position in the social hierarchy hinges on his success with women where the sexual marketplace confers higher status to men who have frequent heterosexual sex (Pascoe, 2007), rendering women as sexual objects to validate men's sense of manhood (Bird, 1996; Quinn, 2002). These ritualized performances of sexual objectification serve to socially ostracize men unable to meet this expectation of masculinity (Flood, 2008).

Asian-American men and alternative masculinities

The hegemonic ideal of masculinity is not achievable by most men in society as it upholds Euro-centric, heterosexual, middle-upper class (and privileged) norms (Connell, 1992). This construction precludes racial minorities, homosexual men, and/or feminine-presenting men from attaining its normative standards (Carrigan et al., 1985; Espiritu, 2004; Han, 2006). As such, hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to alternative and subordinated masculinities and femininities, glorifying white masculinity as superior.

The discourse on hegemonic masculinity renders Asian-American men as subordinate (and to an extent, invisible), resulting in the denigration of Asian masculinity (Chon-Smith, 2006; Espiritu, 2004). Central to the construction of Asian-American masculinity in Western imagery is the establishment of Asian-American men as socially awkward and

sexually unattractive (Chou, 2012; Espiritu, 2004). Han (2006) describes this process as ‘gendering’ Asian-American men whereby dominant narratives depict them as non-masculine in relation to white ‘All-American’ (i.e. appropriately masculine) men. These representations erase Asian-American men’s sexuality, portraying them as lacking virility and as undesirable romantic partners (Chon-Smith, 2006). Furthermore, cultural representations, along with their historical participation in ‘feminine’ labor (Espiritu, 2004), produce an image of Asian-American men as ‘nerdy,’ weak, effeminate, and overall, non-threatening across social contexts (Chon-Smith, 2006; Han, 2006). Indeed, the racial assumptions of ‘nerdy’ Asian-American men establishes academic achievement as their defining feature, translating to the ‘model minority’ stereotype, that is mutually exclusive to hegemonic ideals of physicality and athleticism (Chon-Smith, 2006).

To combat these derogatory stereotypes of Asian-American masculinity, some men may engage in ‘compensatory’ masculinities to resist their marginalization in both interpersonal relationships and throughout broader society (Pyke, 1996). One such mechanism of ‘compensatory’ masculinities is engaging in violent behavior to challenge their demeaned status in society (Pyke, 1996).

Masculinity, violence, and aggrieved entitlement

Politicians, media commentators, and the public often attribute mass school shootings to variables such as mental health issues, hyper-violence in media, decline in morality, or lenient gun legislation (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). Some scholars (see Fox & Harding, 2005) fault the organizational structure of school institutions to identify ‘troubled youths’ that engage in rampage shooting due to the fractured information among school staff, teachers, and guidance counselors. However, extraneous factors that attempt to explain why mass school shootings occur ultimately ‘miss the mark’ as masculinity is the most salient ‘risk factor’ in school violence (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1442). In fact, such explanations that rely on mental health or violent depictions in media fail to address why boys, not girls, disproportionately commit violent acts, such as school shootings (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Therefore, recent efforts by scholars have utilized and advanced the connection between hegemonic masculinity, aggrieved entitlement, and mass school shootings (Tonso, 2009; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008).

While society rewards those who meet hegemonic masculine ideals, those who fail to uphold these ideals often feel compelled to prove their masculinity to others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Pyke, 1996). Although there are many ways of demonstrating masculinity, one such way is through violence. Dominant norms of masculinity have been linked to violence (Hong, 2000; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003) in several contexts including domestic violence (Anderson & Umberson, 2001), sexual violence in the military (Alison, 2007; Baaz & Stern, 2009), within sports (Messner, 1990), between men (Whitehead, 2002), and within school settings (Stoudt, 2006). Tonso (2009) extends previous research on mass school shootings by suggesting that the attacks at Columbine and Montréal École Polytechnique, while occurring in different local and cultural contexts, are linked by the shooters’ execution of violence to assert their challenged masculinity. Shooters from both attacks emulated ‘normalized’ hyper-

masculine violent images and valorized the use of violent retaliation in response to their experiences of social marginalization.

Violent behavior is particularly salient for men who feel entitled to certain social privileges. When these expected privileges are thwarted and/or their position of authority threatened (Robinson, 2000), these men often respond with frustration and hatred, which Kimmel (2013) refers to as the 'angry white man' or aggrieved entitlement. Broader social forces, such as the changing economic landscape and greater social equality for marginalized groups, potentially disrupt men from acquiring these perceived rewards, resulting in men feeling 'wounded' or a sense of reduced privilege in society (Robinson, 2000; Whitehead, 2002).

The relationship between hegemonic masculinity, aggrieved entitlement, and mass school shootings is laid out by Kalish and Kimmel (2010, p. 451) who argue, the 'culture of hegemonic masculinity in the US creates a sense of aggrieved entitlement [that is] conducive to violence.' As such, men utilize violence as a means of avenging the threat to their precarious sense of masculinity. Moreover, aggrieved entitlement suggests that perpetrators feel justified, even expected, 'to exact their revenge on all who had hurt them' (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010, p. 463). In other words, violent offenders believe that (1) they were harmed by others, (2) those who harmed them deserved to be punished, and (3) violence is a justified and a legitimate response to the personal harm they experienced. Aggrieved entitlement eventually leads to violent retribution as a means of 'destroy[ing] others to restore the self' (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010, p. 463). Thus, some scholars posit men engage in violence as a coping mechanism when their masculinity is provoked as unchallenged masculinity rarely results in the need for a violent gender performance (Anderson, 2005; Kimmel, 2008; Pyke, 1996).

Men who experience aggrieved entitlement perceive this violence as justified and necessary for 'restoring' their dominance against those who caused humiliation (Kimmel, 2013). Men who feel 'culturally marginalized' (i.e. who do not live up to dominant conceptions of masculinity) are not deviants; instead, they tend to be 'over conformists' to rigid definitions of masculinity and rely on violence as a legitimate response to repair the (perceived) powerlessness they experience (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1440). Furthermore, men whose masculinity is assaulted misdirect their feelings of anger externally towards women, and men with less social status (e.g. men of color and gay men) instead of directing their anger towards men who occupy power in society (read white, upper-class men) (Kimmel, 2013). For example, women's rejection of men's sexual advances threatens men's sense of masculinity, leaving them feeling vulnerable which is antithetical to the 'impermeability' that characterizes hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2013). In fact, men who experience aggrieved entitlement believe women hold the power sexually speaking (i.e. their right to refuse sex), rendering men powerless in the situation (Anderson, 2005; Kimmel, 2008).

Lastly, for men who engage in violence, some direct that violence towards themselves where suicide becomes the ultimate act of proving one's masculinity. Kimmel (2013) refers to shooters who commit suicide as an act that becomes the 'affirmation of self through its annihilation' (p. 77). Therefore, committing suicide serves as the final attempt to reestablish one's masculinity and repair the social weakness or failures the shooter experienced for failing to live up to cultural ideals (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010).

Method

The Isla Vista mass shooter's manifesto, entitled *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger*, provides the data for this article. Manifestos have become increasingly popular forms of communication utilized by school shooters. For example, Seung Hui Cho, a shooter at Virginia Tech sent MSNBC a 23 page 'multimedia manifesto' containing photos and text on the day of his attack. Pekka-Eric Auvinen left behind a short manifesto that was discovered after his 2007 shooting at Jokela High School in Finland. Columbine shooter Eric Harris, George Sodini who went on a shooting rampage at a Pittsburgh fitness center in 2009, and Jared Loughner who shot and injured 13 people in 2011 near Tuscan, Arizona all maintained strong online personas, including manifestos, YouTube channels, and websites.

While leaving behind recorded messages is not unique to Rodger, his manifesto is particularly compelling as it contains 137 pages of in-depth description of his experiences, emotions, and thoughts over twenty-two years. The manifesto contains an introduction, six sections, and an epilogue and depicts Rodger's life from his point of view from beginning to end. As a personal narrative, the manifesto is understood to be hermeneutic in nature, meaning it is recognized to be socially constructed by Rodger. That is, Rodger's experiences and perceptions are socially, culturally, and historically constructed and are not taken to be universal truths. Our aim in this paper is to unpack the 'truth claims' Rodger makes, particularly regarding the construction of masculinities. In other words, how does the shooter construct and (re)produce masculinities in conjunction with societal ideal types of masculinity and, further, how is this related to his eventual violence?

Content analysis is ideal as it understands text as contextual, historically based and mediated through language (Gadamer, 1960). The utilization of content analysis is common among previous studies of mass school shootings (see Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Muschert & Carr, 2006); however, past research analyzed outsider coverage of the event (e.g. news coverage) whereas our analysis uses the shooter's manifesto. This provides a unique perspective in that we do not analyze how the media and/or public discourse depicted Rodger following the shooting. Rather, the manifesto captures how Rodger narrated the construction of his own masculinity in relation to others, thereby providing a more thorough examination of the (re)production of hegemonic ideals of masculinity.

Our unit of analysis is passages, which can range from short phrases to numerous sentences. All passages were coded and input into excel by two authors using deductive, focused coding techniques (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012) to record passages that aligned with the construction of masculinity. The first author coded pages 1–35 of the manifesto and input the passages into excel, by theme. The second author then read through pages 1–35 of the manifesto as well as the first author's codes to verify the codes, making note of any discrepancies and adding passages as needed. This was used as a means of double-checking, verifying the codes, providing consistency across coders, as well as allowing the second author to input anything that was overlooked. The second author then coded pages 36–70 of the manifesto and input the passages into excel, by theme. Similarly, the first author then read through and verified these codes, making note of any discrepancies and adding passages as needed. This process repeated for pages 71–105 and pages 106–137, with the first and second author switching off as the initial and secondary

coder. The first and second author then discussed any coding discrepancies and, once reaching a consensus, recorded those passages in excel accordingly. In total, 548 passages were recorded. The major themes will be discussed in turn.

Findings

The construction of hegemonic masculinity

Our analyses of Rodger's manifesto indicate that he constructed masculinity in accordance with prominent hegemonic cultural ideals in the United States. Notably, he highlighted the physical embodiment of masculinity (Light & Kirk, 2000; Ricciardelli et al., 2010; Whitehead, 2002) and heterosexuality through sexual prowess (Bird, 1996; Carpenter, 2005; Gilmartin, 2007; Kimmel, 2008; Martin & Hummer, 1989; Pascoe, 2007; Quinn, 2002) as key ideals in upholding hegemonic masculinity. In this way, the shooter reproduces prominent norms and discourses on masculinity.

Embodied masculinity

Rodger was aware of the expectations surrounding the physical embodiment of masculinity from a young age. In the early stages of his life, Rodger perceived taller boys as being more respected and expressed his frustration at his small stature (Rodger, 2014, p. 15). Rodger stated that he desperately wanted to be taller and recalls lying on the ground in between basketball sessions at school to try to increase his height (Rodger, 2014, p. 15). The significance of the embodiment of masculinity is particularly visible through sports and physical education (Light & Kirk, 2000). The discourse surrounding sports reflects the celebration of masculinity through the emphasis on physical superiority, skill, competitiveness and ruthlessness, illustrating how bodies are socially (and physically) disciplined to fit a certain mold. Rodger recalled, when playing basketball with other boys:

They were much better at the sport than me. I envied their ability to throw the ball at double the distance than I could. This made me realize that along with being short, I was physically weak compared to other boys my age. Even boys younger than me were stronger. This vexed me to no end. (Rodger, 2014, p. 16)

In accordance with hegemonic cultural ideals, Rodger equated physical size and strength with masculinity. Consequently, he associated his small physical stature with feeling 'small, weak, and above all, worthless' (Rodger, 2014, p. 47). Height and strength are visible representations of masculinity; thus, Rodger cited his body as a site of failed production of embodied masculinity (Bordo, 1999; Ricciardelli et al., 2010) and positioned himself as inferior to other boys who exhibit these ideals of physical masculinity. This ultimately reaffirms the gendered hierarchy (Light & Kirk, 2000).

Sexual prowess

Rodger's manifesto also speaks to another central tenet of hegemonic masculinity which emphasizes the sexual domination of men over women (Christensen & Jensen, 2014; Kennedy-Kollar & Charles, 2013; Pascoe, 2007) and the importance of heterosexuality as affirmed by sexual prowess (Martin & Hummer, 1989). As a defining part of hegemonic masculinity, Rodger was aware of the importance of attracting romantic attention from women. But, he learned early on that he could not uphold this expectation. At the age

of 19, the shooter moved to Isla Vista and enrolled at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). He recalled moving there *'because it was a sexually active place'* (p. 83, emphasis in original) and this provided more opportunities for becoming sexually active himself. During his first year in college, the shooter asked his housemates if they were virgins. After disclosing that they had all lost their virginity years before, Rodger stated, *'I felt so inferior, as it reminded me of how much I have missed out in life'* (p. 84). The shooter believed his virginity was a stigmatized status that challenged his masculine identity. Rodger's status as a virgin was a significant source of tension as he cited being a *'kiss-less virgin,'* a *'lonely virgin,'* and a(n) 18/19/20/21/22 *'year-old virgin'* throughout his manifesto. The importance of sexual conquest is a defining theme and he recalled comparing himself *'to other teenagers'* and becoming *'very angry that they were able to experience all of the things [he] desired, while [he] was left out of it'* (Rodger, 2014, p. 54). Most notable of his desires were sexual relationships with women, which he emphasized as key to demonstrating his masculinity.

In addition to his desire to engage in sexual relationships with women, the shooter's manifesto reaffirmed the notion that women owe men sex and that failure to provide this pleasure is a direct challenge to a man's sense of masculinity. He stated, *'I was desperate to have the life I know I deserve; a life of being wanted by attractive girls, a life of sex and love'* (Rodger, 2014, p. 81). The shooter believed he deserved sex and romantic heterosexual relationships. His inability to engage with women romantically coupled with the notion that he deserved sex led him to conclude, *'It was society's fault for rejecting me. It was women's fault for refusing to have sex with me'* (p. 82). In this way, Rodger obscured personal responsibility for his feelings of *'loneliness and isolation'* and instead blamed society at large and women for not providing him with what hegemonic masculinity suggests he rightly deserved – sex. Thus, Rodger began to justify his forthcoming violent actions by disassociating himself as the perpetrator and, instead, painting himself as a victim.

Attempts to confirm masculinity

The construction of hegemonic masculinity does not occur in isolation, but in relation to other forms of masculinities as well as femininity (Connell, 1992). When an individual's masculine identity is challenged by their subordinate position in relation to other males, they may engage in compensatory masculinity (Pyke, 1996). This involves reconstructing their position as embodying *'true'* masculinity and engaging in practices that they believe compensate for their marginalization (Pyke, 1996). In extreme cases, individuals may resort to violence in response to threats against their manhood (Kimmel, 2008). Violence, then, becomes the ultimate masculine display.

Compensatory masculinity

In his manifesto, the shooter emphasized traits such as intelligence and civility as *'true'* forms of masculinity. He termed these traits *'gentlemen-like,'* thereby establishing them as inherently masculine. Rodger argued that his display of these qualities made him superior to males who exhibited dominant hegemonic ideals of masculinity. For example, he stated that *'I am an intelligent gentleman, and I deserve the love of girls more than obnoxious boys my age'* (p. 82). Rodger also posited that women should be

sexually attracted to men with these ideals, rather than those who demonstrate hegemonic attributes. To understand why ‘All of the hot, beautiful girls walked around with obnoxious, tough jock-type men who partied all the time and acted crazy’ (p. 84), the shooter concluded that ‘Females truly have something mentally wrong with them ... They are attracted to the wrong type of man’ (p. 84). Rodger believed women should be attracted to an intelligent, ‘superior gentleman’ (p. 99) such as himself rather than tough jock-type men who conform to hegemonic ideals of embodied masculinity. He goes on to state,

Everything my father taught me was proven wrong. He raised me to be a polite, kind gentleman. In a decent world, that would be ideal. But the polite, kind gentleman doesn’t win in the real world. The girls don’t flock to the gentlemen. They flock to the alpha male. They flock to the boys who appear to have the most power and status. (Rodger, 2014, p. 28).

The shooter’s juxtaposition of ‘kind gentlemen’ and ‘alpha males’ reproduces prominent discourses surrounding masculinity, power, and sexual aptitude.

Towards the end of his manifesto, his compensatory masculinity is encapsulated in the quote: ‘I am more than human. I am superior to them all ... Magnificent, glorious, supreme, eminent ... Divine! I am the closest thing there is to a living god’ (Rodger, 2014, p. 135). The shooter presents himself as superior and embodying ‘true’ masculinity to compensate for his experiences of marginalization.

Crisis of masculinity

Throughout his manifesto, the shooter described instances where he would attempt to ‘prove’ his masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Coston & Kimmel, 2012) to his peers, only to be ignored or dismissed by them. For instance, the shooter attempted to obtain confirmation of his physical appearance and his potential for sexual engagement from women on several occasions. On his first day of class, after ‘spending a lot of time choosing [a] shirt and doing [his] hair’ (p. 84), Rodger expressed disappointment when the ‘pretty girls’ in class did not acknowledge him. He recalled, ‘I was a bit dismayed that they didn’t pay any attention to me. They didn’t even look at me. I was sure I had an attractive appearance that day, but those girls didn’t seem to notice’ (2014, p. 85). During another encounter, the shooter looked and smiled at ‘two hot blonde girls waiting at the bus stop’ while stopped at a stoplight. The girls looked at him, but ‘they didn’t even deign to smile back. They just looked away’ (2014, p. 100). Their lack of reaction to his gaze was perceived to be a direct insult and infuriated him. In these scenarios, the shooter was hoping for active confirmation of his physical appearance and, by extension, his masculinity.

Rodger’s continual failure to become sexually involved with women and his perception that women engage in relationships with other men whom he deemed unworthy led to feelings of jealousy and anger. He stated, ‘the most meanest and depraved of men come out on top, and women flock to these men ... Their evil acts are rewarded by women; while the good, decent men are laughed at’ (p. 48). In this scenario, Rodger identified men who engage in sexual relationships with women as ‘mean’ and ‘depraved,’ and juxtaposed them with ‘good, decent men’ (like himself) who are unrightfully deprived of heterosexual relationships. He goes on to write that ‘it is sick, twisted, and wrong in every way ... I hated the girls even more than the bullies because of this’ (p. 48). This expressed

hatred for women, more than the men who were in relationships with them, eventually culminated in violent actions intentionally directed towards women. This may be because cultural understandings of masculinity affirm male power over women more so than male power over other males; thus, being denied by women was a more direct challenge to his sense of masculine entitlement.

In addition, his deep seeded jealousy for men who experienced sexual relations with women is demonstrated by his statement: ‘words cannot describe how much hatred and envy I felt for those boys. That hatred would only fester the more I suffer from my sexual starvation’ (p. 47). The shooter presented sex as a zero-sum game. Other men’s sexual relationships with women contributed to his sexual starvation, such that he was losing out on sex because other men were having it. Ultimately, he concluded that women and other men whom he envied are ‘enemies’ (p. 127) to be reviled. Rodger’s anger, distress, and jealousy are demonstrative of a ‘crisis of masculinity.’

Misdirection of anger

Men who believe their masculinity has been challenged usually direct their feelings of angst and anger towards those lower in the social hierarchy (Kimmel, 2013). In Rodger’s case, directing his anger towards lower-status men was a means of expressing his aggrieved entitlement whereby he felt his masculinity being challenged. Alongside this process, he sought to reaffirm his own masculinity by denigrating those who expressed marginalized¹ masculinities, specifically racial minorities.

Rodger upheld the dominant belief that racial minorities, in particular Asian-American men, are undesirable romantic partners (Chon-Smith, 2006) and undeserving of women (Carrigan et al., 1985; Espiritu, 2004; Han, 2006). Interestingly, Rodger had to mediate his own multiracial identity in his interpretation of masculinity. Being of British and Chinese ancestry (p. 1), Rodger wrote, ‘[I felt] that I was different because I am of mixed race. I am half White, half Asian, and this made me different from the *normal* fully-white kids that I was trying to fit in with’ (p. 17, emphasis added). Given the changing racial landscape of the U.S. with a growing multiracial population due to immigration and rise of interracial couplings, race scholars are attentive to how multiracial individuals racially identify as monoracial, multiracial, or another possible racial category (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Brunsma, 2005; Roth, 2016). As Rodger repeatedly claimed his multiracial background as ‘half White and half Asian,’ he may have attempted to enjoy the social benefits given to Whites, yet found his multiracial identity blocked him from achieving White status. This is indicative of Bonilla-Silva’s (2002) prediction of a tri-racial hierarchy where light-skinned Asian-Americans and multiracials are considered ‘honorary whites,’ yet still remain in a subordinated status under Whites.

He negotiated his majority-minority multiracial identity by constructing ‘Eurasian’ (i.e. White/Asian racial background) as superior to monoracial non-whites and in particular monoracial Asian-American men. However, his half Asian racial identity diluted some of the privileges of whiteness, especially in the context of interpersonal romantic relationships. In order to claim a stronger alliance with the dominant group or his White racial identity, Rodger engaged in ‘defensive othering’ by denigrating co-ethnic men (Pyke, 2010). This is demonstrated when Rodger questioned how someone who was half Hawaiian and half Mexican, an individual who occupies a minority-minority status, could sleep with women when he could not (p. 120). Rodger also minimized his ‘Asian-ness’ by

distancing himself from monoracial Asian-American men and by emphasizing his half White racial identity to occupy a higher status in the racial hierarchy. As such, he denied any stereotypes that accompanied Asian-American masculinity, such as the ‘undesirable male partner’ (Chon-Smith, 2006; Chou, 2012; Espiritu, 2004; Han, 2006). Rodger expounded upon this distancing when talking about a ‘full-blooded’ Asian male:

I always felt as if white girls thought less of me because I was half-Asian, but then I see this white girl at the party talking to a full-blooded Asian ... *How could an ugly Asian attract the attention of a white girl, while a beautiful Eurasian like myself never had any attention from them?* (p. 121, emphasis in original)

Ultimately, Rodger contributed to the emasculation of Asian men by constructing them as ‘ugly’ and unworthy of romantic relationships, particularly with White women. This illustrates Rodger’s internalized racism, or when racially subordinated groups believe the stereotypes and myths about their racial group (Pyke, 2010; Pyke & Dang, 2003). That is, as Rodger continued to reaffirm his multiracial status in order to shore up his whiteness, he simultaneously expressed anti-Asian prejudice and denigrated Asian-American men. The shooter maintained this racial hierarchy by directing his anger toward those who expressed marginalized masculinities.

Violent masculinity

Rodger’s manifesto reflects prominent cultural ideals regarding masculinity and gendered interaction. The gendered norms of comradery and male-female romantic relationships were especially prominent; yet, his experiences were in opposition to these norms. Thus, after exhausting other mechanisms aimed at reclaiming his masculine identity, he resorted to violence.

The shooter described specific instances of physical aggression towards other men and women, prior to his Day of Retribution. In one instance where a couple was kissing in public he recalled, ‘I followed them to their car and splashed my coffee all over them.’ As he engaged in additional acts of aggression, his narrative shifted from one of recompense for the injustices done to him (p. 88) to gratification and spiteful satisfaction (p. 100). In a later instance, he came to the realization that ‘they would never accept [him] among them ... [and] he screamed at them with rage as [he] sprayed them with [his] super soaker’ (p. 106).

After these smaller acts of violence, Rodger planned a final killing spree that would culminate in taking his own life. The main goal of his ‘Day of Retribution’ was to retaliate against the injustices he experienced. This is consistent with aggrieved entitlement which argues that perpetrators feel entitled and even expected to punish those that have hurt them, which eventually culminates in the use of violence as a means of reclaiming masculinity (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). In describing his Day of Retribution, the shooter stated,

The First Phase will represent my vengeance against all of the men who have had pleasurable sex lives while I’ve had to suffer. Things will be fair once I make them suffer as I did. I will finally even the score (Rodger, 2014, p. 132).

Rodger expressed an injustice that certain men have (presumably) had ‘pleasurable sex lives’ while he had not. He also equated the physical embodiment of masculinity with

sex and stated, 'I will torture some of the good-looking people before I kill them, assuming that the good-looking ones had the best sex lives' (Rodger, 2014, p. 132). Here, Rodger reaffirmed hegemonic ideals of embodied masculinity and sexual prowess.

The Second Phase of Rodger's retribution represents his 'War on Women,' which he emphasized from the very first sentence of his manifesto: 'Humanity ... All of my suffering on this world has been at the hands of humanity, particularly women' (Rodger, 2014, p. 1). He described how he will 'punish all females for the crime of depriving me of sex' (Rodger, 2014, p. 132). The link between masculinity and sex is so strong, Rodger equated the lack of sex as a crime worth punishing. Rodger's declaration also suggests that he believed women owed him something. Prior to his 'Day of Retribution,' Rodger stated that he 'was giving the female gender one last chance to provide [him] with the pleasures [he] deserved from them' (Rodger, 2014, p. 121). In other words, Rodger understood women to be responsible for providing him with pleasure, and since they failed to do so, he felt his actions of violence were justifiable because women withheld the right to sex. He continued by stating, 'It's all girls' fault for not having any sexual attraction towards me' (Rodger, 2014, p. 127) and in doing so, women denied him of a 'happy life' (Rodger, 2014, p. 135). These statements, in addition to victim-blaming, reiterate the notion that women owe men sex and that a failure to provide pleasure is sufficient justification for violence (Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007; Quinn, 2002).

The Final Phase of Rodger's retribution included killing 'as many of [his] enemies as [he] can' (Rodger, 2014, p. 132) and 'destroying everything and everyone' (p. 133). Rodger believed engaging in violence would cause everyone to fear him and recognize his power (Rodger, 2014, p. 133), which reflects the cultural acceptance of violence as a display of masculinity (Messner, 1990). He also felt that violence was his only option. He stated, 'If I don't do this, then I only have a future filled with more loneliness and rejection ahead of me, devoid of sex, love, and enjoyment. I have to do this. It's the only thing I can do' (Rodger, 2014, p. 134). He had exhausted other mechanisms aimed at confirming his masculinity and still did not experience the comradery and romantic relationships he desired. Thus, violence was used to respond to the disrespect he felt and to restore his dominance, which is in line with the theory of aggrieved entitlement. Against the backdrop of legitimation of violence in U.S. society, his execution of violence against others served to gain power and privilege that he perceived as unduly undermined.

Finally, a key component of violent masculinity is suicide as a final act of retribution (Kimmel, 2013; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Rodger understood suicide as a viable option and stated, 'death is better than living such a miserable, insignificant life' (p. 114). As such, he planned his own death in detail. He wrote:

To end my life, I will quickly swallow all of the Xanax and Vicodin pills I have left, along with an ample amount of hard liquor. Immediately after imbibing this mixture, I will shoot myself in the head with two of my handguns simultaneously (p. 133).

The shooter meticulously planned his actions with the intention of committing suicide before the police arrived as a final act of retribution against those who had challenged his masculinity. This illustrates the pervasive societal belief that men's violence is an acceptable and legitimate mechanism to establish dominance over others.

Conclusion

This paper utilized a feminist theoretical framework to examine the construction and (re)production of masculinity, sexuality, and race in concordance with violence. Drawing on past research on hegemonic masculinity and aggrieved entitlement, we examined the manifesto of Elliot Rodger, a college student turned mass murderer. Our analyses revealed that the shooter was aware of society's hegemonic masculine ideals, including physical embodiment and sexual prowess, and affirmed them as inherently masculine. Yet, he was unable to uphold these ideals and consequently engaged in compensatory masculinity by reconstructing his display of 'gentlemen like' qualities as embodying 'true' masculinity. Despite his best efforts, he did not receive societal confirmation of his masculinity and experienced a crisis of masculinity whereby he misdirected his feelings of anger toward those lower on the social hierarchy, particularly women and men of color. Like many previous school shooters (see Tonso, 2009), Rodger eventually concluded that his use of violence was appropriate for reclaiming his place within the gender hierarchy. As such, he adopted a violent masculinity and executed a violent retribution as a way of demonstrating his manhood. His mass murder suicide is arguably the ultimate act of male violence (Kennedy-Kollar & Charles, 2013). This supports Kalish and Kimmel's (2010) claim that the 'culture of hegemonic masculinity in the US creates a sense of aggrieved entitlement [that is] conducive to violence' (p. 451).

Importantly, Elliot Rodger was not alone in feeling pressure to uphold hegemonic masculinity standards, nor is he the only young man who has experienced feelings of entitlement. In the time leading up to Rodger's murder-suicide, he was an active participant on the website PUAhate.com, which is an online community of men who share and commiserate about their inability to 'pick up' women. Shortly after the shooting in Santa Barbara, the website was removed; however, this was not before various messages were left for Rodger following his rampage. Some comments include: 'Elliot Rodger is a hero,' 'We need more people like you. People that won't take no for an answer... We have to kill, to destroy, all those ugly whores,' and 'Thank you for killing 7 people, however you should have killed more' (Valizadeh, 2014). Considering these comments, it would be foolish to assume that Rodger was an anomaly; a mentally unstable, misunderstood kid whose misogynist and violent beliefs died with him. His actions are not only being positively regarded, they are also being encouraged by other people who feel the same way (read: 'we need more people like you'). Therefore, we must consider the importance of masculine norms and discourses in the study of mass shootings. And as 'masculinity is the single greatest risk factor in school violence' (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1442), we must recognize that the continued dissemination of hegemonic masculine ideals to the younger generations put us all at risk for violence.

Ultimately, there are limits to focusing solely on individuals and individual level issues (e.g. mental illness) as an effective way to address school shootings. Thus, from a policy standpoint, the most pressing issue surrounding mass shootings may be to address the ways in which young men are taught to prove or assert their masculinity through violence (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). In Rodger's case, this had lethal consequences.

Note

1. Vis-a-vis hegemonic masculinity, marginalized masculinity refers to oppression by notions of class and race, affecting working class and racial minority groups (Pascoe, 2007).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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