



## Hegemonic Masculinity and Mass Murderers in the United States

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### *Abstract*

*This exploratory study examines the act of mass murder as an attempt by the perpetrators to lay claim to a hegemonic masculine identity that has been damaged or denied them, yet that they feel entitled to as males in American culture. Biographical information was gathered for 28 men who have committed mass murder in the United States since 1970 and examined for evidence of stressors to the perpetrators' masculine identities. The majority of the sample demonstrated financial (71%), social (61%), romantic (25%), and psychological stressors (32%) and other stressors (18%) that indicated a failure to attain the hegemonic masculine ideal in American culture. There were co-occurring stressors such as financial-social, financial-psychological and social-psychological. These stressors suggest that the motivations for mass murders are numerous and complex. There is no psychological profile unique to mass murderers and many authors have speculated on their motivations. However, in this study, the range of interrelated stressors experienced by the*

*majority of mass murderers threatened their hegemonic masculine identity and these men engaged in violence to protect their identity.*

### INTRODUCTION

On April 16, 2007 Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people and wounded another 17 during a shooting rampage on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Cho committed suicide before he could be captured by police, so his motivations for his crimes may never be known. However, a note and video manifest left behind by the killer and reports of those who knew him revealed a disturbed young man with little social or coping skills. Reports of Cho's unsettling behavior go back several years prior to the event of April 16. Following the shootings, reports surfaced from both teachers and fellow students who described unsettling classroom behavior and writing assignment themed around acts of violence (Potter, et al, 2007). Cho's peers reported that he was often mocked and bullied in high school and was unable to manage "normal social interactions" (Johnson, et al, 2007). In his videotaped manifesto, mailed to NBC news in New York on the day of the massacre, Cho attributes his actions to the "rich brats" who bullied and picked on him and painted himself as an "avenger for the weak and defenseless" (Biography.com, 2007).

Just after noon on October 16, 1991, George Hennard drove his pickup truck through the front window of a Luby's restaurant in Killeen, Texas. He then proceeded to "calmly and methodically" (Houston Chronicle, 2001) murder 24 of the lunchtime diners. Before the shootings, Hennard had lost his job as a merchant seaman and had sent a letter to two young female neighbors in which he stated that he would "prevail



over the female vipers in those two rinky-dink towns in Texas” (Terry, 1991). It appeared that Hennard may have targeted women in his rampage. Fourteen of the victims were women and one witness reported that during the shooting spree Hennard had shouted “Wait 'til those f---ing women in Belton see this! I wonder if they'll think it was worth it!” (Squitieri & Howlett, 1991, p.1A).

The motivations for mass murders such as those committed by Cho and Hennard are numerous and complex. There is no psychological profile unique to mass murderers and many authors have speculated on their motivations. The intense rage these men must have felt is undeniable, but it remains unclear why they chose to express that rage in rampages against innocent bystanders who never did them any personal wrong. “Mass murderers tend to be frustrated, angry people...(whose) lives have been failures by their standards...(and who tend to select targets that are) symbolic of their discontent...The mass murder is their chance to get even, to dominate others, to take control, to call the shots, and to gain recognition” (Bartol & Bartol, 2005, p. 344-345). This paper examines the act of mass murder as an attempt by the perpetrators to lay claim to a hegemonic masculine identity that has been damaged or denied them, yet one they feel entitled to, as males in American culture.

### **Mass Murderers**

Mass murder is defined as “the sudden, intentional killing of more than one person in the same location and at the same time, usually by a single person” (Palermo & Ross, 1999, p.8). Turvey (2008) notes that the problem of mass murders is not unique to the United States. However, Hamamoto (2002) argues that the United States produce most of the world’s mass murderers because of a “blow back” by civilians scripting

violence in a hyper-militarised America which started with the increasing military adventures after World War II. Research on mass murder is relatively limited when compared to other forms of multiple homicide (Bowers, et al, 2010), yet several authors have identified descriptive characteristics, patterns, and typologies that differentiate mass murder from other forms of multiple murder and from murder in general (Fox & Levin, 2012, Bowers, et al, 2010, Bartol & Bartol, 2011).

Mass murderers tend to differ from murderers in general in a number of ways. They are more likely to be older, male, and white than the typical homicide perpetrator (Fox and Levin, 2012). Their victims are also likely to differ from general homicide victims. According to Fox and Levin (2012) victims of mass murderers are more often white (approximately 70% compared to about 50% of general homicide victims) and female (43% compared to 23%) than general homicide victims. These men tend to have a history of personal and professional failures and tend to externalize the blame for those failures on others or society at large (Fox and Levin, 2012, Bowers et al, 2010).

There are three common types of mass murderers, the pseudocommando, set-and-run or hit-and-run killer, and the family annihilator (Bowers, et al, 2010; Knoll IV, 2010a, 2010b). Family annihilators are often family patriarchs who murder many members of their own families due to mounting feelings of frustration, desperation, and hopelessness stemming from numerous and mounting failures and disappointments (Fox & Levin, 2012, Bowers, et al 2010). The pseudocommando type often have a long-standing fascination with weapons and who plan their mass murders to settle real or imagined grudges with individuals who have harmed them or with society at large (Fox & Levin, 2012, Bowers, et al 2010). A set-and-run mass murderer uses techniques which allow him



to kill many people while avoiding capture, such as product-tampering, bombings, arson fires (Fox & Levin, 2012, Bowers, et al 2010). Fox and Levin (2012) have also offered a typology of mass murderers based upon the killer's primary motivation – power, revenge, loyalty, profit, and terror.

### **The Motivation for Mass Murder**

There are several explanations that accounts for the behavior of mass murderers. One is the strain theory perspective, which argues that a mass murderer goes through several sequential stages. They experience chronic strain, resulting from long term frustrations starting in childhood or adolescence which isolates them. Over time, they experience uncontrolled strain, because of a lack of pro-social support which influences how, a real or imagined devastating and negative major short-term life event, is constructed. Acute strain follows, which leads to the planning stage that involves fantasies to regain control of the situation, through a masculine solution which is then actualized (Levin & Madfis, 2009). Moving beyond the strain theory, it is also believed that mass murderers are motivated by loyalty, terror, profit, power and revenge (Fox & Levin, 2012).

Although there is no profile unique to mass murderers, they display strong paranoid traits (Stone, 2007). This psychopathological explanation is also supported by Melroy, et al (2004) who find that mass murderers are reclusive people who suffer from psychiatric disturbances. They also have personality traits that predispose them to act out. Some of the predisposing factors are a “warrior mentality” and a fascination with war and weapons. Hempel, Meloy and Richards (1999) also find that some mass murderers suffer from depression or paranoia and the death toll is higher when they are psychotic. Similarly, White-Harmon (2001) finds that the majority of

mass murderers were suffering from a mental disorder. The psychopathology perspective is also supported by Palermo (1997) who speaks of a “berserk syndrome.” The underlying factors of this syndrome are hostile feelings towards society, high narcissism, an injured ego with the potential murderer searching for a sense of self through infamy and the assertion of self, that provides catharsis (Palermo, 1997).

There is a contrary view, which sees the crazed killer explanation which depicts the mass murderer as an unemployed loner who is psychotic, as a myth which should be dispelled. Generally, mass murderers are employed with a married or unmarried partner (Turvey, 2008). The psycho-myth occurs because the mass murders break the basic societal norms and rules around which the community coalesces, so they are seen to be abnormal when they are quite normal (Fox & Levin, 2005). Rarely is the mass murderer a crazy killer (Kelleher, 1997). Also, the hypothesis of a subculture of violence that is used to explain criminal behavior should not be applied to mass murderers. A comparison of mass slayings with single-victim homicides reveal that mass murderers are ordinary and rational people who share the same characteristics with the average American (Levin & James, 1983). The foregoing controversy about the mental state of mass murderers, suggest that they should be seen as people who are influenced by a complex set of interrelated factors and have implications for forensic mental health practitioners (Aitken, et al, 2008; Kelleher, 1997). The trigger for the murderous rage is usually deep frustration because of a major personal loss or major rejection such as the loss of a job or a failed intimate partner relationship in a few days or hours before the murders are committed (Hempel, Melroy & Richards, 1999; Melroy, et al, 2004; Palermo, 1997).



### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

Hegemonic masculinity is the socially supported and dominant masculinity, which informs normative male behavior and unequal gender practices seen in the subordination of women in the society. This dominant masculinity which is associated with power, high status, authority, heterosexism and physical toughness, and legitimizes patriarchy, not only subordinates femininities but also other masculinities deemed to be weaker in the society's gendered order (Beasley, 2008; Connell, 1995; Lusher & Robins, 2009). Hegemonic masculine violence is not only confined to the urban milieu in the United States, because the socio-economic and political changes that also take place in rural areas, lead to internal and external male violent expressions which are strategic patriarchal practices used to create an imagined rural gendered hierarchy (Carrington & Scott, 2008).

Some critics of the hegemonic masculinity thesis suggest that it does not take into account the inequalities of class based power, and the political economy that produces and reproduces traditional physical male violence. This conceptual oversight means that hegemonic masculinity, is applied outside of relevant historical contexts and material processes, that make the use of the term hegemony a misnomer and the concept an inadequate explanatory factor for patterns of male violence (Hall, 2002). Moreover, the concept is also used in a monolithic way which ignores plural masculinities that take into account the heterogeneity of masculine identity and power (Beasley, 2008). Despite these criticisms, there is an evolutionary perspective which locates masculine violence in the descent of man. This perspective argues that violent masculinity is an expression of the survival of the fittest and the drive for reproductive success which has its genesis in human ancestral environments (Polk, 1998).

School is one of several social domains in which hegemonic masculinity is created and expressed in the contemporary era. Very few Americans link school shootings to the gender of the shooters (which is male) although criminologists have consistently argued that there is a relationship between masculinity and violence. The masculinity which influences male aggression and violence is socially constructed (Watson, 2007). In other words, the incidences of hate crimes, bullying in schools and school shootings among other violent expressions of masculinities are influenced by the approaches, processes and codes of the societal construction of men. Schools are very much reflections of this social construction as the bullying and school shootings just mentioned suggests. The ways of man making, which starts before the pre-K level and goes up to manhood, supports and approves subtle and physical expressions of violence. Therefore, the hegemonic masculinity taught in American schools jeopardises the safety of students and the society (Serriere, 2008).

The context of the inner city streets is also used by youth to express violent masculinities. Respect is central to male identity where masculine street behavior is driven by a code that regulates norms surrounding how grievances and conflicts are resolved. There is also an interaction driven ecology of danger, which is influenced by perceptions of threatening or deadly social interactions with rival males, whether they have hostile intentions and whether or not they are willing to use violence to hurt others (Wilkinson, 2001). The anatomy of violence is evident in the narrative of a young male, who was constructing his masculine identity which required the projection of a preferred presentation of self. This self presentation was achieved through creating boundaries about the use of violence, the reasons for fighting and whom



one should fight. Masculine characteristics were made salient in the narrative by sorting and positioning the characters of the story. Several varying depictions of other men emerged in the discourse such as non-men, villain and hero. The foregoing discourse of violence, suggests that that masculine identity was constructed and negotiated through the gendered positioning of the negative other (Andersson, 2008). The use of the life history method to understand adolescent male violence, also suggests that boys use the ideals of hegemonic masculinity to construct their emerging manhood. This identity was buttressed in school by the institutionalized bodily and sexual practices that created subordinate masculinity which is linked to sexual violence and an opposition masculinity which is connected to assaultive violence (Messerschmidt, 1999).

The growing body of evidence in the literature that hegemonic masculinity is related to violence was contradicted by the findings of a study of the relationship between masculinity and violent and nonviolent situations. The findings of the study indicate that there is no relationship between violence and masculinity but the presence of a third party is a significant predictor of violence (Krienert, 2000). In keeping with the overall trend of the data on violent masculinity, the positive presence of a father in the life of a son constructing his hegemonic masculine identity is a key means of preventing the emotional problems that triggers male violence (Pope & Englar-Carlson, 2001). The prevalence of male violence suggests that there is a crisis of masculinity which provides opportunities to stop the violence and challenge the masculinities supported by the status quo (Hurst, 2001). However, masculine violence continues unabated in the United States and the most blatant expression of this form of violence is the action of mass murderers.

### **The Present Study**

Numerous authors discuss the importance of personal and economic failure, episodes of personal humiliation, a history of mounting frustration and depression, and the externalization of the blame for those things as important precipitating factors to mass murder (Fox Levin, 2012; Bowers, et al, 2010; Bartol & Bartol, 2011; Ramsland, 2005). However, none have examined the behavior of mass murder as an expression of the cultural meaning of those factors in terms of the perpetrator's masculine identity. The purpose of the present research is to understand the role of hegemonic masculinity in influencing some males to commit mass murders in the United States. There is no specific hypothesis because this an exploratory research article about hegemonic masculinity and mass murderers.

### **METHOD**

#### *Sample and Procedure*

The authors conducted a review of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reputable newspapers, magazines and websites and identified 28 mass murders for inclusion in the study. The criteria for selection were (1) the perpetrator was a male, (2) who committed mass murder<sup>1</sup> in the United States since 1970 and, (3) had been discussed in the media.

The authors conducted a Lexis Nexis search of major U.S. and world publications for newspaper and magazine accounts of each subject in order to gather information about their biographical characteristics. The characteristics of the

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<sup>1</sup> The operational definition of mass murder used herein is the murder of three or more persons in one place and there is no rest period between the murders (Bartol & Bartol, 2010).



killer is operationally defined as the disposition and mental state of the killer that is reflected in his speech or behavior, or in witness reports, that were identified as important in the newspaper and magazine reports, and the websites dealing with the incident.

Each case was reviewed based on the place, and death toll of the incident, the characteristics of the killer, and the stressor(s) that led to the incident. Biographical information was reviewed for evidence of stressors to the perpetrator's hegemonic masculine identity. The stressor is operationally defined as any devastatingly negative experience, real or imagined, that threatened the subject's hegemonic masculine identity and influenced the mass murder incident. Any such evidence was then coded as a financial stressor, a romantic stressor, a social stressor, a psychological stressor or other stressor. Conflicting information received from media accounts about a case was addressed by choosing the information which had the greater triangulation of sources.

Financial stressors included circumstances such as the loss of a job, persistent unemployment or inability to maintain employment, serious debt, financial loss, and poor job performance or work-related reprimand. Romantic stressors included divorce, the breakup of a relationship, and rejection of romantic or sexual overtures. Social stressors included circumstances such as having been the victim of bullying by peers, social ostracism or isolation, ethnic or racial harassment, and the perception of having been wronged by others or society in general. Information was coded as a psychological stressor if it involved evidence of a history of mental illness, past or present treatment for mental illness, or indications of the presence of psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations or delusions at the time of the murders. Stressors that could not be classified as one of the preceding or cases in which no clear

stressors could be identified were classified as "other stressors".

The coded data was then analyzed to look for trends and patterns in the frequency of the occurrence of the various types of stressors. Two coders were used to code the data and the inter-coder agreement is .84 and .85.

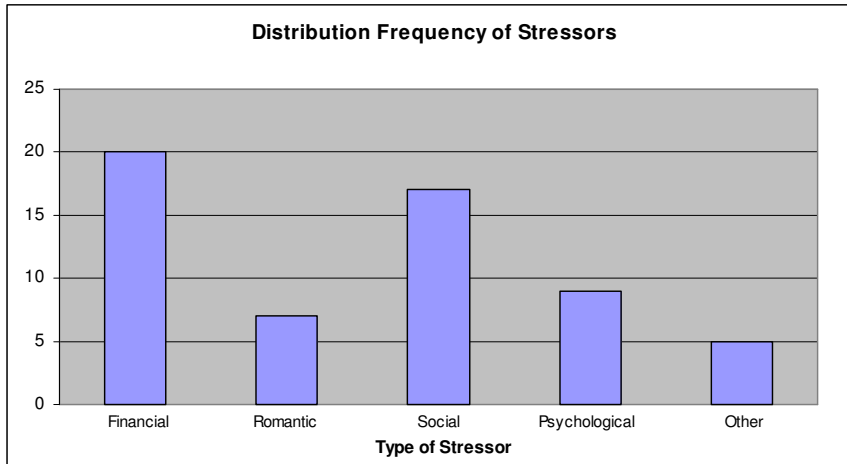
## RESULTS

We identified a total of 28 mass murderers who fit the criteria for inclusion. In all, they were responsible for the murders of 275 people, 48% of whom were female. Most of the sample, 46%, killed people they knew (family, acquaintances, co-workers, or classmates). Another 32% killed strangers and 6% killed some combination of both strangers and people they knew. The average age of the sample was 32 years. 71.4% were White, 14.3% were African American, and another 14.3% were some other race (Asian, Arab, and Native American). Some 46% were unemployed or not currently working (this figure does not include the 29% of the sample who were full time students at the time of their attacks). Also, 54% of the sample committed suicide following the mass murders.

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequently observed stressors were financial (71%) and social (61%) in nature.



**Figure 1: Distribution Frequency of Stressors**



The ability to maintain gainful employment and economic independence is one important element of the hegemonic masculine identity. In 71% of the sample, evidence of a financial stressor in the form of unemployment, serious debt, financial loss, and poor job performance or work-related reprimand was found. For example, George Hennard, who shot and killed 23 people in a Texas restaurant in 1981, had lost his job with the Merchant Marines. His attempts to be reinstated had been denied just six months prior to the shootings.

James Huberty killed 21 people in California in 1984. For several years preceding the massacre, he had been unable to maintain steady employment and had moved his family around several times. After his shooting spree, one witness reported that Huberty had once commented that “if he could not support his family, he would ‘take everyone’ with him” (Reed, 1984). In 1999, Mark Burton went on a rampage and killed 12 people at the office of an Atlanta, Georgia day trading company. Before the shootings, he had lost more than

\$100,000 in the stock market in just eight weeks (Krantz, 1999).

Another important aspect of a hegemonic masculine identity is the ability to exert social dominance, achieve a high social status, command respect and demonstrate authority. Some 61% of the men in the sample experienced social stressors such as bullying by peers, social isolation or ostracism, and racial or ethnic harassment.

In 2007, Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in the worst mass murder in American history. Cho demonstrated his rage with the world in a videotaped statement that he sent to NBC on the day of the shootings (Biography.com, 2007). After the massacre, former classmates of Cho’s gave accounts of the ridicule and ostracism he experienced throughout his school career. He was picked-on for his broken English, made fun of for his shyness and social awkwardness, and physically pushed around by other students (Kennedy, 2007). Other school shooters such as Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, Andrew Golden, and Jeffrey Weise also suffered from bullying and ostracism by peers.

Many subjects in the sample expressed their perceptions of having been wronged or treated unfairly by others or by society in general. Michael McClendon, who killed 11 people in Alabama in 2009, kept a list of people who he felt had “done him wrong” (Bone, 2009). When Colin Ferguson killed 11 people on a commuter train in New York in 1993, he carried with him numerous hand-written notes containing his grievances against various people and social institutions that he felt had wronged him or held him back in some way (Frankel, 1993).

A third important aspect of the hegemonic masculine identity is the ability to demonstrate romantic/sexual success or



dominance. Some 25% of the sample had experienced divorce, the breakup of a relationship, and/or the rejection of romantic or sexual overtures prior to their act of mass murder. In 1988, Richard Farley killed seven and injured five of his former co-workers in a shooting spree in California. One of his victims was a woman who had rejected Farley's numerous romantic overtures (Mathews, 1988). Another man, Bruce Pardo, killed 9 people in California in 2008 following his recent divorce.

In addition to these stressors, many men in the sample (32%) demonstrated some type of psychological distress. This included evidence of a history of mental illness, past or present treatment for mental illness, or indications of the presence of psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations or delusions at the time of the murders. A prime example is George Banks. Banks killed 13 family members and acquaintances in Pennsylvania in 1982. During his trial, defense psychiatrists testified that Banks was a psychotic who suffered from paranoid delusions (International Justice Project, n.d.). Banks' death sentence was later commuted after having been found incompetent to be executed due to mental illness.

Some 18% of the sample evidenced other stressors such as drug abuse, past sexual abuse, terrorism, or whose motives remained unclear or unknown. Christopher Thomas was high on crack cocaine during the 1984 massacre of two women and eight children in Brooklyn, New York. The attack was thought to have been precipitated by Thomas' drug-fueled and incorrect belief that his estranged wife was engaged in an affair with a man living in the house where the killings took place (Associated Press, 1984). Mark Essex's 1972 killing of nine police officers appears to have been primarily motivated by his racial hatred of whites (Hustmyre, n.d.).

Most of the sample (57%) demonstrated evidence of more than one type of stressor. The most frequently occurring

concomitant stressors were financial/social (25%), financial/psychological (21%), and social/psychological (21%). Several men in the sample demonstrated more than two stressors, with the most frequently occurring (18%) being financial/social/psychological.

## DISCUSSION

This exploratory study examined the influence of hegemonic masculinity on the violent behavior of twenty eight mass murderers in the United States since 1970. The majority in the sample 71.4 % were white males and the average age of the men in the sample is 32 years. The foregoing findings corroborate the findings by Fox and Levin (1998, 2012) about the profile of mass murderers. A majority of the men (71%) experienced financial stressors. The hegemonic masculine perspective suggests that it is possible that the men viewed these stressors as threats to the self as providers for themselves and/or their families. A lack of income (46% of the sample were unemployed) or insufficient financial resources reduced the men's autonomy and independence and devalued their manhood so they may have felt they were incompetent providers for themselves and/or their families.

Threats to hegemonic masculinity also occurred through some of the men's inability to exert social dominance and command respect through the demonstration of their authority. These mass murderers (61%) experienced a range of social stressors such as racism and ethnocentrism, social ostracism and bullying. These men earlier in their lives were deviations from the hegemonic masculine norm. Therefore, it is possible that they experienced the taunts, insults and aggressive behavior from their hegemonic masculine peers as socially effacing stressors. These men subsequently reduced their





frustrations by asserting the ideal masculine self through violence. Another threat to men's masculine self came from the affront to their sense of fairness and justice. These men may have blamed society in general and people in particular for the wrongs they suffered rather than themselves in order to protect their masculine identity or their perceived dominance in the gendered hierarchy.

The subordination and control of women are crucial aspects of the hegemonic masculine identity. Mass murder was also triggered by threats to some (25%) of the men's ability to determine and control the outcome of their intimate-partner relationship, start new relationships or succeed in their sexual overtures with women who account for 48% of the victims in the study. The perpetrators may have felt like weak men because of their failures in relationships and sexual overtures so they had to assert themselves. Mental disorder was also prevalent among 32% of the men which influenced their murderous rage. This finding corroborates the findings of Turvey (2008) that the crazed killer explanation is a myth because 68% of our sample did not suffer from a mental disorder. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of people with mental disorders in the United States do not commit mass murders. However, although mental disorders are not apart of the hegemonic masculine self, these disorders may have accentuated the other stressors. Some 18% of the men were also influenced by other known stressors such as drug abuse, past sexual abuse and terrorism and unknown stressors. The range of stressors and the unknown stressors makes it difficult to determine with a very high degree of certainty, the motivations of mass murderers.

The stressors should not be seen in isolation because they operate together in influencing the men's behavior. The most frequently co-occurring stressors were financial-social,

followed by financial-psychological and social-psychological. Some of the murders were influenced by three stressors of which the most frequently co-occurring stressors were social-psychological-financial. The presence of multiple stressors in 57% of the sample suggests that damage to the masculine identity may have a cumulative effect. Overall, our findings, which corroborate the findings of Kelleher (1997) suggests that mass murderers are influenced by a complex set of interrelated factors. Similar to the findings of Stone (2007) the mass murders in the present study do have a unique profile that distinguishes them from other type of murderers and non-violent people.

The majority in our sample (54%) committed suicide after the incident which corroborates the finding of the study by White-Harmon (2001) where the majority of the mass murderers also committed suicide. One possible interpretation of our finding is that the acting out (the mass murders) where violence is turned outward and the acting in (suicide) where violence is turned inward are expressions of male preoccupation with dominance, control and power over people, situations and objects in the society including death. An alternative explanation for the behavior of some of these men is mental disorder because 32% of the men in the sample suffered from mental disorders.

The contribution of this exploratory study to the literature is the explication of the influence of hegemonic masculinity on the behavior of mass murders and how the various stressors threaten the masculine sense of self. Researchers in the future should also look at whether other murderers experience the same configuration of stressors that threatens masculine identity. Another potentially fruitful course of research is looking at whether women who commit mass



murders internalize hegemonic masculinity and if these female mass murderers respond to the stressors the same way men do.

There are some limitations of the present study. The sample of mass murderers that we used in our exploratory study is very small and as such is not a representative sample of the mass murderers in the United States. Therefore, our findings should not be generalised to mass murderers in the United States. In addition, when concomitant stressors were present it was impossible to say what the primary motivator was or how the stressors may have configured, to trigger the behavior of the mass murderers. In dealing with conflicting information from media accounts about a case, we chose the information with the greater triangulation. However, future research may reveal that the information we rejected because it had less triangulation is correct.

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