Theoretical Article

The Elephant in the Room: Toward an Integrated, Feminist Analysis of Mass Murder

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Abstract

This article argues for a new approach to making sense of mass murder, emphasizing the urgency of recognizing the proliferation and significance of misogyny and domestic violence among perpetrators of this type of homicide. It is vital that scholarship recognizes the political economy of neoliberal patriarchy and seeks to better understand how harmful subjectivity develops in this context. We propose a new multilevel framework for the analysis of mass murder and issue a call to action for a global program of independent qualitative research and activism to tackle its drivers, prevent further harm, and save lives.

Keywords

mass murder, misogyny, neoliberalism, domestic abuse, patriarchy

Introduction

In recent years, journalists have begun to draw attention to a link between mass murder and domestic abuse (see, e.g., Alter, 2017; Chemaly, 2016; Jeltsen, 2015).

> The untold story of mass shootings in America is one of domestic violence. It is one of men (yes, mostly men) targeting and killing their wives or ex-girlfriends or families. The victims are intimately familiar to the shooters, not random strangers. This kind of violence is not indiscriminate – although friends, neighbours and bystanders are often killed alongside the intended targets. (Jeltsen, 2015)

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Marganski (2019), in what appears to be the sole contribution to the academic literature in this area, identifies violence against women as a common factor in 15 (83.3%) of the 18 mass murders in the United States in 2018. These cases included the killer of five people in Annapolis who had previously stalked and threatened a woman he met online and the killer of 49 people in the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando who regularly engaged in coercive, controlling, violent, and abusive behavior toward his wife—for example, he held her hostage and dictated who she was allowed to communicate with (Marganski, 2019). The perpetrator of the April 2020 mass shooting in Portapique, Nova Scotia, had an extensive history of abusive behavior toward his female partner, whom he assaulted prior to killing 22 people (Baxter, 2020). Over half (54%) of US mass murders analyzed by Everytown for Gun Safety (EGS, 2020), an organization campaigning for the prevention of gun violence, involved domestic violence. These figures are likely to be an underestimate given the "dark figure" of unreported and unrecorded domestic abuse: the lack of a documented history of violence and abuse does not imply an absence (Monckton-Smith et al., 2014). While only recently recognized, misogyny and domestic abuse in mass homicide are nothing new. Dietz (1986) describes the 1982 killing of 13 people by a former prison guard. Ten of the victims were his children and female partners or ex-partners. He had children with four women and lived with three of them "on a rotating basis" (Dietz, 1986, p. 480). On the day of the killings, he "drank alcohol at a party, napped, awakened and ordered the two women with whom he was then living to retrieve his AR-15 magazine and ammunition from the two locations at which they were stored" (Dietz, 1986, pp. 481–482, emphasis added). In perhaps one of the most cited mass shootings at the University of Texas in 1966, the perpetrator killed his wife and mother before shooting 16 people dead and injuring 31 others (Marganski, 2019).

The family has long been "shored up by both metaphoric and literal walls" (Wykes & Welsh, 2009, p. 92), creating barriers behind which coercion, violence and sometimes homicide can thrive. The second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s highlighted the nature and scale of male domination and power throughout society, which fundamentally disadvantaged women on the grounds of their sex and made them vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence (Brownmiller, 1975; Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Despite the efforts of women's liberation in turning violence against women from a private matter to public issue, and the development of feminist research into the state's response, the contemporary neoliberal context has given its patriarchal foundations a new lease of life.

As with the popular notion of the "terrorist," these domestic terrorists are ideologically motivated—that ideology being patriarchy. Their violence continues to be framed within a *crime of passion* discourse (Monckton-Smith, 2020), as men driven to kill in response to how women have behaved toward them, examples of nagging and infidelity commonly appear in such narratives. Women's conduct, in failing to live up to rigid, gendered expectations, is interpreted as the trigger, causing an otherwise normal man to snap and lose control, precluding a consideration of their past histories of violent and controlling behavior as a key factor in these killings (Adams, 2007; Dobash et al., 2009). Their actions are the embodiment of male entitlement

within a misogynistic value system advocating proprietorial notions of women and children and expectations of their subservience (Smith, 2020).

There can be no doubt—patriarchy, misogyny, domestic abuse and mass murder are associated and have been for a long time. That these links were identified not by criminologists but by activists and female journalists suggests that popular criminology (Rafter, 2007) is surging ahead of academic research and the latter needs to catch up. Marganski's (2019) contribution is the exception—the contemporary academic understandings of mass murder have yet to acknowledge and engage with these themes. This neglect is a symptom of the historic and persistent low status of these harms (Monckton-Smith et al., 2014; Stark, 2007). In late capitalism, this is even more pronounced. Neoliberal tropes of individualism, non-dependency and personal responsibility fuse with patriarchal domination over and contempt for women, serving to revictimize female survivors of male violence.

The neoliberal state idealizes the nuclear family as a cornerstone institution, enshrining it in law as the way to raise children and vehemently defending it through family court systems, despite a growing awareness among judges and professionals of the nature and scale of domestic abuse (Barnett, 2015). This is clear within post-separation proceedings, emphasizing a "contact at all costs" approach, "the desire to keep even violent men in positions of power in the nuclear family frequently overrode other considerations and allowed abuse to continue" (Harrison, 2008, p. 401).

The personal responsibility mantra has stigmatized dependence upon institutions other than the family, leaving many women dependent upon their abusers. For those who do leave, they trade one form of traditional patriarchal authority for another as they become subject to the surveillance of the state. Through marketization, state services have been contracted out to voluntary sector organizations: those who once protected women independently of the state have become complicit in perpetuating neoliberal patriarchy. Constrained by funding models and dependent upon state finance for survival, these organizations now carry out the surveillance and control that props up patriarchy, survivors become clients, spoken of in terms of their readiness for and susceptibility toward help. This "help" often focuses on creating "successful survivors" through managing victims—addressing their deficiencies in choosing a partner, as opposed to changing the perpetrator's behavior (Bumiller, 2008, p. 64). This reinforces men's power and dominance by distraction—avoiding an interrogation of the political-economic context in which the harmful subjectivities of domestic abuse perpetration emerge (Bumiller, 2008; Fraser, 2013; Hall & Winlow, 2015; Kelly, 1988).

In making women responsible for protecting themselves from harm via safety work (Kelly, 1988), victimization is interpreted as a failure in a society where success is premised on the demise of others. In this climate of hostile competitiveness, aggression is valorized as a symbol of strength while vulnerability is demonized and an indicator of weakness. Questions like *Why doesn't she just leave?* assume that formal sex equality created a level playing field where all women have the necessary power and resources to separate from their abusers. This fundamentally distorts the liberty-denying nature of domestic abuse (Stark, 2007), which creates dependency upon the abuser and

reinforces the gendered stereotypes of female irrationality and hysteria. The academy has replaced the politics of redistribution—which once challenged the structural inequalities that fuelled male violence—with a politics of recognition, which dovetails neatly with free market thinking and hyper-individualism (Fraser, 2013).

Capitalism's commodification of women, first identified by Marxist feminists (see, e.g., Delphy, 1984; Delphy & Leonard, 1992), has intensified under neoliberalism. While women have entered the labor market in large numbers, their concentration in part-time, casual employment does not provide the economic security required for true emancipation from patriarchal control. The potential of collectivism and the awareness of common oppressors has been clouded by individualistic identity politics, promising autonomy and uniqueness through consumerism (Winlow & Hall, 2017). On-paper formal progress does not equate to lived experiences of sex equality. Feminism's cultural turn and adoption of postmodernist perspectives, constraining it within individualist identity politics, has served as a distraction from the bigger picture. This is even truer in an era of hyper visibility, in which narcissistic performances of self on platforms like social media distract from the structural drivers of inequality (Yardley, 2017). Against this backdrop, misogyny thrives. No one is interrogating the political-economic frameworks that enable its continuation. As Fraser (2013) argues, feminism has entered a dangerous liaison with neoliberalism. Against this backdrop, one in three women continue to be victimized by intimate partners or ex partners (World Health Organization, 2017) and domestic abuse predominates in the biographies of mass killers.

We begin this article with definitions of mass murder, highlighting how current approaches serve to deny and marginalize gendered violence through a focus on public mass shootings. Thereafter, we examine the nature and scale of mass murder, identifying perpetrator sex and history of domestic abuse as significant factors that have received little in the way of further analysis or critique. We then interrogate explanations for mass murder, noting a marked absence of theorizing around sex and gender. Following on from this, we examine the small body of mass murder scholarship exploring masculinity, considering the value of these approaches. We conclude by arguing for a feminist, multilevel analytical framework of mass murder and issuing a call to action for a global network of independent research and grassroots activism to begin to better understand and prevent it.

Defining Mass Murder, Denying Gendered Violence

There is no single and universally accepted definition of mass murder. There is variation in terms of the range of importance attached to criteria such as victim count, location and time period. The FBI defines it as "a number of murders (four or more) occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders. These events typically involved a single location, where the killer murdered a number of victims in an ongoing incident" (Morton, 2008, p. 8). This distinguishes mass from serial and spree killing, mass featuring less spatial and temporal variation, victims killed in the same area during the same time period. Dietz (1986) excludes

location and distance to define mass murder as the intentional killing of multiple victims by one offender in one incident. The parameters applied by US Congress to define mass murder are the killing of three or more victims in a single, public location (Investigative Assistance of Violent Crimes Act, 2012).

Given that these definitions do not specify the nature of the relationship between the perpetrator and victims, in theory, they encompass mass killings in which the perpetrator kills family members. As such, these definitions include familicides, the killing of multiple family members, most commonly one's intimate partner and at least one child (Wilson et al., 1995). Familicides are more common than mass killings in which the victims do not have an intimate or familial relationship with the perpetrator (Fox & Levin, 2015). However, despite the prominence of familicides, another scenario is often at the forefront of the popular imaginary of mass killings—the mass *shooting*. The change in language has been accompanied by two key shifts in focus: firstly, toward violence perpetrated in public spaces, and secondly toward incidents in which the killer uses a firearm to perpetrate the murders. Mass shootings, argues Duwe, are merely "a new name … for an older crime problem – mass murder" (2020, 17).

Mainstream media focus upon mass murderers who kill many victims unknown to them, using assault rifles, in public locations (Duwe, 2000, 2020). Mass shootings in public places targeting victims seemingly at random appear to be inherently more newsworthy than those carried out behind the doors of family homes, appealing to key news values of extreme violence, graphic imagery and risk (Duwe, 2020; Jewkes, 2015). Incidents in which the perpetrator is young, of Asian or Middle Eastern descent and ideologically motivated through links to right wing extremism or religious fundamentalism are particularly likely to be covered by mainstream media, as are events which happen in schools (Schildkraut et al., 2018; Silva & Capellan, 2019). Xenophobic demonization of *the other* is a distraction from domestic, structural inequalities and the vulnerability of the innocent. Anyone could be a victim through no fault of their own, simply through being in the wrong place at the wrong time, targeted by a rogue *outsider*. Discourses of mental ill health and extremism lead to interpretations of perpetrators as aberrations. Their crimes are presented as freak occurrences, part of the fabric of the precarity of late capitalism alongside extreme weather events or global pandemics. In contrast, cases of mass murder in which family members are killed in the context of domestic abuse tend to go unseen, the female victims' apparent failure to safeguard themselves and their children rendering them less newsworthy and tarnishing their ideal victimhood (Christie, 1986; Van Wijk, 2013). Consistent with the neoliberal emphasis upon the privacy of the family, these cases remain in the dark, "I think they are regarded as family business. They are too close for comfort" (Dietz, 1986, 481). This simply serves to reinforce the low status of domestic abuse as the poor relation in criminal justice (Monckton-Smith et al., 2014).

Media representations impact upon perceptions of the problem and policy responses to it, which influence academic definitions (Duwe, 2020). The academy's entanglement with the neoliberal state has become a part of the problem (Winlow & Hall, 2019). Mass murders, presented as mass shootings, are now framed as problems revolving

around guns, workplaces, and schools. As such, they are inherently individualized, the focus on perpetrator pathology rather than the neoliberal values and ideologies, which fuel harmful subjectivities in the first place. Schildkraut and Elsass (2016) argue that an incident must occur in a public location to meet the criteria for a mass shooting. Such definitional fragmentation serves to further individualize and atomize mass murder and distract us from structural forces. They side-line domestic violence and leave it at the margins. However, it is not simply another variable but an important signpost to the values and ideologies which legitimize such behavior. Whether by accident, design, or a messy combination of both, current academic framing of mass murder takes the structural status quo for granted and as such precludes analyses which may identify political economy as a part of the problem and bring it into academic discussions of this phenomenon. As Fox and Levin argue, "widening the net by including mass shootings in all forms can only add to our understanding of extreme killing" (Fox & Levin, 2015, p. 162). Within the following section, we explore evidence relating to the nature and scale of mass murder, highlighting the extent to which it is disproportionately gendered and identifying links between this type of homicide and domestic violence.

Describing Mass Murder—The Elephant in the Room

The literature on mass murder has identified multiple patterns, changes, and continuities in recent years. In relation to prevalence, Fox and Levin (2015) analysed 927 mass murders in the United States between 1976 and 2011 and concluded that neither mass murders in general nor mass shootings in particular were increasing. However, Duwe's (2020) study, which encompassed mass shootings in a broader time period, 1976–2018, claimed that mass shootings have increased and that these incidents are more severe than those of the past. This supports other research pertaining to an exacerbation in recent years (see, e.g., Blair & Schweit, 2014). Duwe identified the most recent 3-year and 10-year periods as featuring the highest average rates of mass public shootings and those same time periods (along with the most recent 5-year period) have seen the highest average rates for victims killed and shot. The trends in mass murder, including mass shootings, indicate that this form of fatal violence is following a different trajectory from homicide in general, which has been on the decline since a peak in the mid-1990s (Fox & Levin, 2015). In addition, while single homicides appear to be concentrated in cities and urban areas, mass murder is more evenly distributed throughout the landscape of the United States (Fox & Levin, 2015). In terms of method, mass murder is more likely to be perpetrated by firearm (77.8% of cases) than single homicide (67.4%) (Fox & Levin, 2015). Regarding the relationship between victims and offenders, Fox and Levin's (2015) research discovered that strangers unfortunate enough to be in the area where a shooter is carrying out a rampage are not typical victims. Indeed, nearly four in 10 (38.2%) victims are related to the perpetrator—compared to around three in 10 (29.2%) victims of single homicides. This resonates with the research by Taylor (2018), which found that 42% of mass murder victims were the family members of the perpetrator. As such, the killing of family members is more prominent in mass murder than in single

homicides "the indiscriminate slaughter of strangers by a crazed killer is the exception to the rule" (Fox & Levin, 2015, p. 170).

The typical mass murderer is a white, middle-aged male (Fox & Levin, 2015). Those who kill their families tend to be in their mid to late 30s and 40s, slightly older than mass murderers who target other victims (Fridel, 2021; Liem & Reichelmann, 2014; Taylor, 2018). Despite these facts being well established in the literature, there has been little in the way of critical discussion of them—particularly offender sex. As is the case with crime in general and violent crime in particular, men are over-represented as perpetrators (Fox & Levin, 2015; Huff-Corzine et al., 2014; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016; Taylor, 2018). Huff-Corzine et al. (2014) discovered that only 8% of perpetrators were female in mass shootings between 2001 and 2010. Duwe (2020) discovered that only three mass shootings since 2006 had been perpetrated by women. Fox and Levin (2015) argue men's over-representation as perpetrators is more pronounced in mass than single homicide: men comprising 94.1% of mass murderers and 88.4% of all homicide offenders. Typical of early criminological work around violent crime, a male default is assumed but never interrogated (Ellis, 2017).

Fox and Levin (2015) discovered distinct patterns in terms of victim sex, with women more prominent as victims of mass murder (43.4%) than for homicide in general (23.3%). The overwhelming majority (76.7%) of victims of homicide in general are male (Fox & Levin, 2015). More recent analysis of mass shootings suggests that the disparity is more pronounced, with nearly two-thirds (64%) of victims 2009–2015 being women and children (Jeltsen, 2015). Compared to gun homicide victims as a whole, where only 15% are women and 7% are children, these groups appear to be targeted disproportionately by mass shooters (Jeltsen, 2015). Given that mass murderers are more likely to kill those with whom they have an existing close connection—notably a familial link—victim socio-demographic characteristics are closely linked to those of perpetrators. Over two-thirds (68.5%) of mass murder victims are white, compared to just over half (50.5%) of single homicide victims. Fox and Levin suggest that the reason for over one-third (34.6%) of mass murder victims being under the age of 20 (compared to 16.2% of single homicide victims) and women's overrepresentation as mass murder victims compared to single homicides "stem from the fact that the typical mass killing involves the breadwinner of the household, who annihilates the entire family—his wife and children" (2015, p. 169).

The disproportionate focus upon newsworthy massacres of strangers in public places has obscured and minimized the mass murders occurring in the private realm of the family. Perceptions of "young White males with mental health issues" (Taylor, 2018, p. 429), crazed, shooters on the rampage, indiscriminately taking out people on the street, misrepresent mass murder and feed into ill placed policy responses. In reality, mass murders are well planned, premeditated, and domestic in nature. That mass murderers are no more likely than single homicide offenders to have previous convictions (Fox & Levin, 2015) further reinforces the dominant narrative of otherwise *normal* men *snapping* and engaging in behavior over which they have no control. However, contrary to popular perceptions, mass murder is rarely committed by offenders with mental health issues (Taylor, 2018).

In the same way that domestic homicides do not come out of the blue and are preceded by clear patterns of abusive and controlling behavior (Dobash et al., 2009; Monckton-Smith, 2020), there is considerable evidence that mass murderers do not simply "lose it" either. Men do not turn from prosocial individuals into perpetrators of mass homicide overnight. There is often a history of domestic abuse among familicide perpetrators—sometimes formally recorded and documented, but more often not (Liem et al., 2013). Mass murderers who kill their partners, children, and/or other family members are much less likely to be mentally ill than those who target other victims (Taylor, 2018). As has been demonstrated in scholarship around persistently violent men, these individuals have been socialized into a culture which encourages the valuing of violence, the distrust of others and the privileging of their own interests above all else (Ellis et al., 2017).

Duwe (2020) notes that mass shootings are planned and deliberate, the culmination of weeks or months of organizing, fuelled by rumination and feelings of vengeance, ultimately precipitated by a significant so-called "trigger" event such as the loss of a job or the end of an intimate relationship. Taylor (2018) found that what she called "domestic issues" or "relationship issues" preceded 40% of the mass murders in her dataset, which encompassed killings in the US during 2007–2011. "Relationship loss" has clear resonance with the research evidence on domestic homicide. Separation is widely recognized as one of—if not the—leading risk factors for these acts (Monckton-Smith et al., 2014; Stark, 2007). When a victim leaves their abuser—or expresses an intention to do so—this compromises the abuser's feelings of control. In an effort to regain this control, the abuser changes the project from trying to control her through keeping her in the relationship to exerting control through destroying her for leaving it (Dobash & Dobash, 2015).

In recognizing the ending of a relationship as a significant precursor to mass murder, the literature nods toward the importance of domestic abuse but goes little further than this. The entitlement, ownership, and the stripping away of another person's autonomy that characterizes domestic abuse (Stark, 2007) are clear to see in the biographies of mass murderers but few scholars are currently making these connections. Furthermore, the low status of domestic abuse appears to infiltrate academic works on mass murder, with one recent contribution stating that the "most serious and fear inducing" crimes were "those committed by strangers with high victim counts" (Taylor, 2018, p. 428). This serves to lessen the importance of familicide mass murders and does little to honour the victims.

Linked to this, the framing of the circumstances around familicide mass murders as "relationship issues" serves to switch the focus from the perpetrator's decisions and choices to the relationship he is in at the time of the killings, indirectly projecting the blame onto the victims for his behavior. This dilutes perpetrator accountability and holds women responsible for men's behavior. This individualization presents domestic violence as a "woman's problem," the outcome of her failure to fulfill the feminine ideals of the effective nurturer and caregiver leading to dysfunctional behavior in *her man*. It blurs the structural scenery of patriarchy in which women came to be held accountable for men's behavior in the first place. In reality, domestic

abuse behaviors are not particular to a specific relationship with a specific woman—perpetrators are frequently serial abusers who carry a set of misogynistic and patriarchal values and beliefs from one relationship to the next (Horley, 2017; Richards, 2020). It is the perpetrator's acceptance of these values and their ideological roots that should be the focus.

Research by Marganski (2019) documents 15 cases of mass murder in 2018 in which perpetrators were implicated in violence against women, had a history of violence against women, or behaved in ways that reflected such courses of conduct. This violence was directed toward current or former intimate partners, women they were pursuing, female family members, other women and girls as well as other people they encounter. However, some of the most authoritative sources on mass murder omit abuse and violence against women in their profiles of offenders. Fox and Levin's (2015) often-cited five key characteristics—failure, externalization of blame, self-isolation, catastrophizing, and access to weapons—do not reference misogyny. Marganski (2019) stresses that violence against women frequently precedes and is directly connected to mass murder:

> As a society, we must ask why the mistreatment of women is so commonplace yet frequently overlooked and dismissed.… The same feelings of failure, status deficiency and shame that lead some emasculated men to commit intimate partner violence are also the driving forces behind mass murder, and the violence we witness in public mass shootings is often related to 'private' violence, as found in copious cases. (Marganski, 2019, 10)

Explaining Mass Murder—Continued Myopia

The lack of acknowledgment of misogyny and domestic abuse in the academic literature describing mass murder are echoed in scholarly contributions attempting to explain it. Dietz (1986), Fox and Levin (1998), and Petee et al. (1997) all proposed typologies of mass murder. These typologies applied different criteria such as motive, psychological states and specific circumstances in assigning mass murderers to categories. While some of the typologies recognized the family as the institutional location within which some mass murders take place – for instance, Dietz's (1986) *family annihilators* – they did not explore such killings as the culmination of established patterns of abuse within the family. Instead these killings are presented as the outcome of strain upon the family unit, for instance that which results from the breakdown of an intimate relationship. Fox and Levin explain the benefits of strain theory in terms the contemporary gap between expectations and achievements and its association with relative deprivation in contemporary society.

> …chronic strain may play a major role in encouraging mass killings at school, at work, or in the family. When life's disappointments become intolerable, an individual may seek vengeance, restoration of control or infamy through the barrel of a gun. (2015, p. 181)

While this alludes to the precarity, anxiety, and hostile competition of life in late capitalism – and as such raises important contextual factors – it does not explain

why it is that men are overrepresented as mass murderers nor why very few men react to strain or rejection in such a way when many men will have experienced "life's disappointments." The intimate relationship is taken as a given, an unproblematic cornerstone of neoliberal society – women blamed for its breakdown and the breakdown blamed for men's violence. Nowhere are the dynamics within the intimate relationship interrogated or found to be wanting. Feminist observations about the dark side of the family, in which the abuse of women and children occur, are wholly absent from this debate. Nowhere does this scholarship consider the extent to which relationship breakdown was preceded by entrenched patterns of coercive, controlling, or abusive behavior. Nor does it acknowledge that what might be considered a "disappointment" to a perpetrator may be built on inherently misogynistic, sexist expectations and male entitlement. Stanko asserts that violence in public spaces garners considerable attention, while there remains a denial of violence within the home, "to the extent that it is acknowledged at all, we assume that this private violence is normal. Real violence, that committed by strangers, is abnormal, an affront to public safety" (Stanko, 1990, p. 9). Despite the neoliberal onus upon personal responsibility, one type of behavior for which people are not held accountable for their own decisions and choices is male violence against women within the private sphere, which is part and parcel of mass murder.

Familicides are commonly separated from two other types of mass murder in the literature: killings in public locations which are motivated by personal vendettas against individuals or groups, and felony killings which occur during the course of other crimes like robberies or gang related attacks to eliminate witnesses (Fridel, 2021). As such, not only does the literature omit the domestic abuse context of most familicides, it also precludes the possibility of examining the values, attitudes, and beliefs that mass murder perpetrators may have in common. In addition, such typologies fail to explain mass murders in which an offender has killed or harmed their intimate partner and/or children and then gone on to kill strangers in a public location – as was the case for the majority of killings noted in the introduction to this article.

Familicides are tucked away in the corners of academia, echoing the neoliberal state's devaluing of domestic abuse in general. Heralding the traditional nuclear family as a cornerstone institution, the neoliberal state has done little to ensure women and children's safety within it, instead contracting out this function to voluntary sector organizations who engage in individualized "treatment" of survivors. Focusing on the survivor's decision-making in choosing an intimate partner, this sustains victim-blaming and fails to address the root causes of male violence (Bumiller, 2008). Feminist perspectives remain niche and side-lined from mainstream debate (Carrington & Death, 2014). Perpetrators are men who feel a sense of entitlement to harm and/or kill their female intimate partners, children and relatives and murder other people outside of their family circle. Fridel's observations that "family and public offenders exhibit no significant differences for any offender characteristics" Fridel (2021, p. 16) and "family and public killers may suffer from similar levels of strain" in relation to what she terms *romantic* and *financial stressor* variables (2021, p. 17, emphasis added) suggests that continuities and similarities may be fruitful

avenues for research. The literature exploring the links between contemporary masculinity and violence may be a valuable starting point, offering insights into why some men feel they have the right to engage in such behavior. This is examined in the following section.

Questions of Gender – Masculinity and Mass Murder

Differing social and cultural expectations of the social roles of men and women are key to understanding why and how mass murder is so heavily gendered. For many years, criminologists acknowledged that men commit most crime. However, while the sex differential was recognized, gender was absent from the debates. Scholars failed to see men's experiences through the gendered lens that had been so fruitful for feminist criminologists in understanding women's victimization within patriarchal value frameworks (Ellis, 2017). Only in the 1990s did scholars began to shed light on men's experiences of crime from a gendered perspective, challenging biological determinism to argue that violence was more than simply a "natural" urge – it was a choice and a gendered performance of masculinity that served to reproduce dominance (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Connell (2005) identified the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, which valorizes white, heterosexual, middle class men while denigrating women and men whose social characteristics are not consistent with these "ideals." Toughness, stoicism, aggression, competitiveness, and a readiness for violence are key traits and behaviors which came to be associated with hegemonic masculinity (Whitehead, 2002). It is important to examine mass murder through the lens of the masculinities literature given the over-representation of men as offenders and the overlap between characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and profiles of mass murderers – white men with a history of violence and abuse against women. A critical discussion around this profile of the mass murderer holds significant potential to shed light on the structural backdrop of mass murder and begin a meaningful debate around the development of harmful subjectivity within this context.

Focusing on school shootings, Kalish and Kimmel (2010) identify the roots of mass murder in feelings of shame and humiliation at challenges to a perpetrator's masculinity. While school shooters might not have the long histories of violence and abuse of women that characterize other perpetrators of mass murder, their misogynistic value systems are already well established. They feel that the virility that they hold so vital to obtaining masculinity has been thwarted by gender equality, preventing them from "having sex with as many women as possible, as frequently as possible" (Kimmell, 2008, p. 172). In the contemporary context, the incel movement further reinforces these beliefs (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). Studies of the Santa Barbara mass shooting (Myketiak, 2016; Vito et al., 2018) expand upon Kalish and Kimmel's notion of *aggrieved entitlement* in highlighting the perpetrator's incredulity at his failure to access the privilege he believed he had a right to – sexual activity with women. Vito et al., 2018 argue that the perpetrator's efforts in attaining masculinity via non-physical attributes failed, as did his efforts to belong within his peer group.

This, they argue, resulted in a crisis of masculinity, after which, "he adopted a violent masculinity and executed a violent retribution as a way of demonstrating his manhood" (Vito et al., 2018, p. 14).

Fox and Levin have also alluded to masculinity crisis amongst the perpetrators of mass murder. Commenting upon the over-representation of male offenders, they suggest that this:

> …may stem in part from the fact that men are more likely to suffer the kind of catastrophic losses in self-esteem and social support associated with mass murder. Following a separation or divorce, it is generally the husband / father who is ousted from the family home and, therefore, is the one who is left alone. Job loss also affects men and women differently. Despite advances in the status of women in America, males more than females continue to define themselves in terms of their occupational role (what they do defines who they are) and therefore tend to suffer more psychologically from unemployment. Finally, men do not tend to maintain close relationships away from the family and the workplace; thus, they are less likely to have the benefits of support and encouragement when they lose a relationship or a job. (2015, pp. 176–177)

These insights are valuable in drawing attention to individual subjectivity in the social structure – and as such resonating with strain theory (Fox & Levin, 2015) as an explanatory theoretical tool. However, this does not help determine why, when there are likely to be many thousands of men experiencing crises of masculinity, only some choose to resort to extreme fatal violence. In addition, it fails to acknowledge – let alone interrogate – the presence of misogyny in the perpetrator's words and actions. Misogyny is central in understanding events such as the Santa Barbara shooting. The perpetrator's entitlement to sex encapsulates proprietorial notions of women, an inherently patriarchal idea. His belief that "females truly have something mentally wrong with them" (Rodger, 2014, p. 84) evokes biologically determinist views of women as irrational and hysterical by nature (D'Cruze & Jackson, 2009).

Analyses of mass murder through a masculinized lens have been valuable in emphasizing the gendered nature of this harm, offering insights into the biographies of offenders who feel they have the right to engage in mass murder. However, it is still limited in failing to acknowledge the patriarchal power structures that form the backdrop to mass murder. The broader forces which facilitate and condone such beliefs are under explored. As such, the emphasis remains largely upon the individual perpetrator. Margankasi (2019) begins to join up the dots, arguing that that sexist beliefs and norms rooted in patriarchal value systems are perpetuated by male peer support and institutional failures, which in turn, fuel violence against women and mass murder. This helps to move the focus beyond the psychopathology of the individual perpetrator and identify the structures and ecosystems which facilitate male violence and misogyny.

However, the question of why, when all men will be subjected to varying degrees of misogynistic ideology, only some choose to engage in domestic abuse and fewer still go on to commit mass murder remains unanswered. It is clear that aggrieved

entitlement, hegemonic masculinity, misogyny, and patriarchy are highly relevant and significant to contemporary mass murder. However, if we are to use these concepts to contribute toward a more comprehensive understanding and discern why some choose to abuse women while others do not, we must situate them within broader social, cultural, and political-economic context in which they operate. There are multiple features of this landscape that have hitherto escaped acknowledgment and critique within the literature. These are considered within the following section.

Mass Murder in Neoliberal Patriarchy—Toward Integrated Analysis

If we are to push the scholarship of mass murder forward, it is important to acknowledge the political-economic, social, and cultural context within which these harms occur. The massacres noted within this article did not emerge in a vacuum. They were not simply the product of individual pathology. Nor were they the inevitable outcome of structural forces. Both played a role. It is important that we adopt a new perspective that enables both agency and structure to form part of our understanding. If we are to identify and tackle the drivers of mass murder, we must explore how harmful subjectivity develops within the context of neoliberal consumer capitalism. We must also recognize the importance of a middle "meso" layer, consisting of the situations and locales within which individuals create meaning. This level of analysis has been neglected in the study of homicide and multiple homicide but has the potential to provide important insights into the ways in which social environments reinforce or challenge ideological phenomena (Hall & Wilson, 2014). While this ultra-realist approach has yet to engage with violence against women, its multilevel framework offers considerable potential for pushing the boundaries of scholarship within this area. Within this section, we highlight what we consider to be important – but hitherto neglected – features of the structural context, present a micro-meso-macro approach to analysis and identify future directions for research with potential to inform more meaningful and realistic policy interventions.

With reference to the structural context, it is crucial to recognize neoliberal patriarchy as the scenery within which mass murder occurs. While mass murder predates neoliberalism, neoliberal tenets have intensified perpetrator entitlement to inflict fatal harm. Proprietorial notions of women, gendered expectations of them as caregivers and nurturers, and the sense in which their value is premised on the "success" of their relationships with men are key pillars of patriarchy. In the neoliberal era, patriarchy has not just survived but thrived. It has pedalled a myth of formal equality which distracts from the ongoing victimization of women. It has advanced an ethos of personal responsibility which lays the blame for male violence at the hands of the female victim. Legislative reforms like equal pay and anti-discrimination policies have led to the assumption that women and men are now on an equal footing. They are not. New legal measures have done nothing to tackle the structural inequalities and prompt the systemic change that is needed to overcome them. Family courts

continue to value the preservation of the nuclear family over the safety of women and children. The contracting out of state services and subsequent dependency upon government contracts has quietened the voluntary sector's previous critique of the androcentric state, becoming an unwitting accomplice in the preservation of patriarchy under neoliberalism. Piecemeal policy change simply suppresses calls for radical structural changes while upholding neoliberal ideals and denying gendered violence. For example, the new offence of controlling or coercive behavior in an intimate or family relationship created under the Serious Crime Act 2015 in England and Wales was framed in gender neutral terms, obscuring the misogynistic value systems from which such courses of conduct emerge.

Neoliberal tropes of consumerist instant gratification, the desire to win, and have power over others have spilled over from the economy to personal lives and the family, reinforcing male entitlement to women's subservience and subordination embodied clearly in the musings of the Santa Barbara killer discussed earlier. Neoliberal patriarchy has further commodified women. Misogyny is a vehicle to achieve the status that some men feel entitled to. Neoliberal forces of deindustrialization and globalization have compromised the male breadwinner role as the source of men's power within the family. Stable, secure employment in industrial and professional "jobs for life" has given way to impermanent, precarious work in the flexible labor market. The visceral habitus (Hall, 1997) in which physical strength and toughness were economic assets in productive work and manual labor is long gone. Visceral habitus is no longer grounded in the industrial economy, but toughness, aggression, and "not taking any shit" (Winlow, 2012) continue to be valorized characteristics of contemporary masculinity. Men's physicality no longer serves an economic purpose. However, the value attached to the capacity for violence lives on and the institution within which the legacy of industrial patriarchy flourishes most is the family.

As the economies of the west have transformed from producer to consumer nations, consumer logic has led to shifts in human subjectivity that have significant implications for violence against women. Consumerism has been sold to us as the means through which we can build autonomous identities and be "an individual" (Winlow & Hall, 2017). The social acceptability of egocentrism and cult of the individual is oxygen for abusers. They exercise special liberty in pursuit of their own wants regardless of the wellbeing of others in a socioeconomic context which encourages a narcissistic preoccupation with the self, disguised as a legitimate project in identity building and the pursuit of self-efficacy. This neoliberal narcissism and the obsession with standing apart from and above others is clear in the performances of contemporary mass murderers. It is not sufficient to harm and kill but to be seen to harm and kill. As Hall (2012, p. 172) notes, "the terror of insignificance, of remaining unrecognized by others, might now reign supreme as the most potent and extractable source of human energy." The desire for an increased body count, to be the *best* of the worst and to be recognized as such are consistent themes. We argue that the availability of firearms in countries like the USA does not in and of itself *cause* mass murder, but enables perpetrators to achieve the high body counts that they desire within a political economic context that encourages competitiveness, narcissism, and the desire to win.

Multiple murder still occurs in other countries where firearms are not as readily available, but perpetrators kill fewer people and deploy different methods (Liem et al., 2011). The right to bear arms in the USA sits well with other personal freedoms that have become sacrosanct under neoliberalism, for example freedom of speech. Free speech is presented by mainstream social media platforms as a justification for failing to remove the posts of misogynistic incel groups, many of whom hero-worship mass murderers like the Columbine and Santa Barbara perpetrators.

The neoliberal state conspires with perpetrators to deny the existence of their gendered violence and indulge their narcissism. Mainstream media further reinforces the neoliberal validation of patriarchy through reporting practices which victim-blame, frame domestic abuse as a "relationship" problem, and present homicides as one-off, isolated incidents, failing to hold perpetrators to account for the violence they choose to engage in (Bullock, 2007; Dowler et al., 2006; Monckton-Smith, 2012). Domestic abuse is fetishistically disavowed – "'I know but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know.' I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it" (Žižek, 2009, pp. 45–46). The way in which the family and the intimate relationship are treated differently from other social relations is testament to the perpetuation of patriarchy under neoliberalism. In few other contexts are individuals excused from the neoliberal dogma of personal responsibility. Contemporary feminism's cultural turn, the rise of identity politics and a burgeoning consumer culture serve to distract us from systemic change which could recognize and challenge structural inequalities.

The above provides important insights into the structural context of both domestic violence and mass murder – or what we term the *macro*-level of analysis. Understanding the ideological framework of neoliberal patriarchy is crucial in developing new insights into mass murder, enabling an appreciation of the ways in which misogyny is sewn into the fabric of late capitalism. It reveals that perpetrators, rather than being the antithesis of contemporary social values, are the *extreme embodiment* of them. The esteemed neoliberal principles of hyper-individualism, instant gratification, hostile competitiveness, hedonism, narcissism, and success premised on the failure of others are clear in the behavior of mass murderers. However, this alone is not sufficient to explain their actions. Millions of men live in neoliberal states championing such values, yet a minority engage in domestic abuse and even fewer in mass murder. Insights into individual mass murderers – or *micro-level* analysis – is not particularly helpful either, limiting the scope of study to the perpetrator's biography and psychology. While such analyses may identify harmful subjectivity, it does not address how this has developed, and more importantly – why one man chooses to engage in a massacre while another man does not. While Marganski's (2019, p. 10) work is a step in the right direction in identifying "the collision of individual, relational, community, and cultural forces" in perpetrators, we need a theoretical framework within which to examine the contextually rooted process through which some men decide to engage in mass murder.

It is our view that further insights can be generated via *meso-level* analysis. Sitting in between the individual and the social structure, the meso-level of analysis is concerned

with the locales and situations in which individuals generate meanings. These are the spaces within which values are formed and manifest in norms and behaviors. Social institutions like the family, economy, religion, and education are key areas in which subjectivity is formed. Homes, workplaces and industries, religious organizations, leisure clubs and groups, gyms and bars, schools, and colleges are important local level manifestations of these social institutions. Understanding how the cultures and belief systems within and around such places reinforce or undermine the ideology of neoliberal patriarchy is a crucial piece in the jigsaw.

In addition, virtual communities form another block in the meso layer, which are deserving of scrutiny alongside the aforementioned environments. Significant work is being done investigating the online spaces of the incel movement and the misogynistic nature of the spaceless virtual world (see, e.g., Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Moonshot, 2020; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Misogynistic discourse within these spaces is often protected and encouraged through the freedoms of speech and expression – providing further evidence of the patriarchal blood that runs through the veins of contemporary neoliberalism (Yardley, 2021). However, this work is yet to be integrated into a multilevel analysis which acknowledges the ideological frameworks of neoliberal patriarchy, understands the forces which create individual psychopathology, and identifies meso-level spaces in which harmful subjectivities are nurtured.

Future research in this area must engage in multi-level analysis with a particular emphasis upon the meso-level. In-depth, qualitative ethnographic research in the communities and places from which mass murderers emerge is an important step in understanding this phenomenon after the event but may also prove valuable in preventing mass murder in the first place. Journalists and scholars have in recent years identified domestic abuse and misogynistic value systems as common threads in the biographies of mass murderers. It is now time to act on this knowledge and begin exploring how beliefs become thoughts, and how thoughts become actions. How is misogyny perpetuated or subverted in meso spaces? What factors influence the extent to which it is internalized? What protective factors exist to mitigate against the acceptance of misogyny? How might these be harnessed in preventative work, both around domestic abuse and mass murder?

This necessitates an international network of feminist researchers – of all genders – conducting immersive, long-term, on-the-ground ethnography in their local areas. This global research community would enable the academy to build the critical mass of in-depth case studies from which new insights can be generated. This also holds potential for the development of a grassroots anti-misogyny movement to begin to challenge the taken for granted, gendered expectations of men and women, who they are and how they should behave. If such a project is to succeed, it must avoid falling into the traps that hampered second wave feminism and resist the temptation to enter into relationships of dependency – financial or otherwise – with the neoliberal state. Tackling misogyny requires systemic change, therefore independence from the neoliberal patriarchal state which perpetuates it is a fundamental prerequisite to its success.

Conclusions

Many academic studies on mass murder conclude that its prevention is at best challenging and at worst, impossible. We dispute this. Misogyny and domestic violence are significant red flags for femicide and mass murder – these factors are not invisible; they are simply denied. As long as these ghosts of patriarchy continue to haunt contemporary social life, they enable violence against women and its various manifestations, from domestic violence and abuse to multiple homicide. Feminist academics, campaigners, and advocates have long argued – and are still arguing – that domestic homicide is the most preventable type of homicide (see, e.g., Monckton-Smith, 2020; Richards, 2003, 2004). It is our view that mass murder too is highly preventable. Despite a wealth of feminist scholarship on the killing of women by men within patriarchal social structures, this literature remains absent from the study of mass murder. What is now required is the acknowledgment of the significance of misogyny and domestic abuse as key indicators of risk and a comprehensive, multilevel research framework enabling us to understand how individual psychopathology and misogynistic values develop within local and socio-cultural contexts. This will help tackle the question that previous scholarship has left unanswered: why do some men abuse and kill while others do not? Historically, misogynistic patriarchal ideology has been accorded less danger and immediacy than ideology associated with other forms of hatred. This needs to change urgently. Only through recognizing its significance as contemporary driver of harm, challenging the social structures that enable it and committing to an independent research agenda might we begin to fully understand – and prevent – mass murder.

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