

A Cross-National Assessment of Media Reactions and Blame Finding of Student Perpetrated School Shootings

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Abstract In order to better understand the role that local and national concerns have in our understanding of and response to school shooting events, a content analysis of media coverage of school shootings perpetrated in the United States and Germany was conducted. Definitions of what constitutes a problem in need of policy responses vary between countries and across incidents, which becomes evident as cultural differences are examined. Six school shootings in two countries – the United States and Germany – were selected for comparison based on similarities in degree of violence and severity. News articles of the incidents were then examined for differences in thematic responses and reactions to the events between the two countries. Findings suggest that while media in both countries focused on individual related factors as the cause of school shootings, German reactions were more likely to call for state sponsored changes when compared to American media. Implications for understanding the role that media reaction has in affecting policy and areas for future research are discussed.

Keywords School violence · School shooting · Cultural comparison · Content analysis

Introduction

Secondary school shootings are a relatively low occurrence event (Bliss, Emshoff, Buck, & Cook, 2006); adolescents are more likely to experience serious or fatal injury off school property or as the result of hereditary and congenital defects than to be injured during a school shooting, despite media portrayals to the contrary. Media reports suggesting that such incidents are epidemic have generated much debate on numerous issues surrounding school safety, school violence, and gun control (Larkin, 2009). While

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school shootings are rare, they generate a disproportionate amount of attention from the media, likely due to the multi-victim outcomes seen from recent shootings. The fact that these events tend to defy explanation only fuels panic, increases media coverage, and leads to questions for school and policy officials as parents and community members look for assurances that their children will be safe (Thompson & Kyle, 2005).

In an examination of the most extreme acts of student perpetrated violence between 1990 and 2012, two incidents stand out.¹ Here in the United States, the shootings at Columbine High School, perpetrated by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, tend to be synonymous with school violence. Similarly, events that unfolded in Winnenden, Germany at the hands of student Tim Kretschmer (Tim K.) left the German public confused and frightened (Dougherty, 2009). On March 11, 2009, Tim K.² opened fire at Albertville Secondary School, from where he had graduated the previous year. By the time the shooting was over, Tim K. had killed nine students, three teachers, and one janitor before hijacking a car in an attempt to escape to a nearby town. In town, Tim K. then engaged in a brief shoot-out with local police, fatally wounded two bystanders, and eventually taking his own life (Pidd, 2009).

Seven years before the Tim K. incident, on April 26, 2002, Robert Steinhauser calmly walked into the high school from which he had been expelled 2 months earlier and began shooting his former peers and teachers in the head at close range (Muriel, 2002). By midday, Steinhauser had killed 12 teachers, two students, a police officer, and a school administrator before turning the gun on himself (Dougherty, 2009). While this incident had been ranked the worst school shooting in German history (Dougherty, 2009), this incident did not receive nearly as much coverage as the Tim K. shooting. In between these two devastating events fell the Emsdetten school shootings perpetrated by 18-year-old Sebastian Bosse. He armed himself with homemade smoke bombs, two rifles, and a pistol before entering the high school from which he had just graduated and seriously injured 22 before taking his own life.

Back home in the United States shootings were perpetrated by middle school students Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson, and high school student Jeffrey Weise. Weise shot and killed his grandfather and his grandfather's girlfriend before heading to his high school. There, he shot and killed seven before engaging in a shootout with the responding police officers and then ultimately taking his own life. Golden and Johnson, the youngest perpetrators in this study, stole three rifles and four handguns from Golden's grandfather and staked out their middle school. Andrew Golden pulled the fire alarm and then they waited in the fencing woods. Ten individuals were wounded and five were fatally shot.

Such events left political leaders and citizens shaken by the realization that these tragedies were not part of the ubiquitous "other," but rather could take place in quiet and seemingly sheltered places (Lemonick, 2002). Indeed, Germans have long considered their country a more peaceful place than the U.S.; the shootings perpetrated by

¹ The Winnenden school shooting in Germany was the most covered (by mass media outlets) shooting in the country, similar to the coverage Columbine received. The number of news articles these two events received in the year following their occurrence significantly outnumbered other comparable incidents, including the other four in this study.

² On initial press release, many of the German perpetrator's names were not cited, or printed in full, to ensure privacy for their families. Tim Kretschmer was almost exclusively referred to as "Tim K." in the news media, so the authors continue this convention.

Tim K. are viewed as one of the more shocking incidents to have occurred in Germany to this day and point to the disturbing fact that no one country has domain over violence (Dougherty, 2009).

The Columbine shooting and Tim K. are identified as focusing events based on Birkland's (1998) definitions as summarized in *Public Policymaking* (Anderson, 2011). Birkland states that focusing events are those that are "sudden, relatively uncommon; can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms; has harms that are concentrated in a particular geographical area or community of interest; and ... known to policy makers and the public simultaneously" (Anderson, 2011, 97). Furthermore, their visibility, as well as the number of victims, and, less traditionally, their novelty, criminality, unpredictability, and intended violence typically characterize focusing events (Worrall, 1999).

Utilizing these variables as set forth by Worrall (1999), and Birkland (1998), the Columbine and Tim K. shootings can be defined as focusing events due to the suddenness of the incident, unpredictability, number of victims, visibility and, inferentially, by their intended violence. Furthermore, the coverage that Tim K. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold received far exceeded what the other school shooting events in this sample received. While these adolescents cannot attest to their intentions, they all spoke of great rage towards and hatred of, humanity so an assumption can be made that the violence caused by these events were intended to be great (Father helped buy bullets, 2009; Shepard n.d.).

While both of these incidents can be categorized as focusing events, the similarities end there. The responses to these two events ultimately diverge on two very different paths. In the United States, the media was heavy-handed in their coverage and quest to find out exactly *why* these events happened. As soon as local police SWAT teams arrived at Columbine High School, local news networks were on the scene, relaying hours of uninterrupted, live coverage of the unfolding events, coverage that was soon picked up by national channels such as MSNBC and CNN (Frymer, 2009). In their mission to find the "why," many possible causes were suggested. From the negative influences of the "Goth" subculture, the music of Marilyn Manson and German industrial rock, a hate towards "jocks" and minorities to an unhealthy obsession with violent video games and the film *Natural Both Killers* were all presented as explanations for Harris and Klebold's actions (Frymer, 2009).

Germany, on the other hand, has some of the strictest weapons laws in the world and contemplated complete disarmament following the Tim K. shooting (Hawley, 2009). These differences will be discussed, as will the reactions to other school shootings in both the United States and Germany, the effect that these different events had in garnering national, if not universal, attention, and the varying media coverage in response to the incidents.

This paper will examine the differences in media reactions and calls for policy changes in response to secondary school shootings between two countries: the United States and Germany. Media reactions to three school shootings in each country will be analyzed with respect to how these incidents were portrayed in light of the greater community goals. As school violence in general, and school shootings in particular, become more common in Westernized countries, it becomes important to examine the ways in which media continues to shape responses to these incidents, in hopes of determining the best course of action to call for effective and meaningful intervention strategies.

To do this, we examine six school violence events in two countries; three each in the United States and in Germany. An investigation into the international incidence of school shooting events indicated that these two countries were more likely to have experienced an incident between 1990 and 2012 than other Westernized countries³; furthermore, in each country, one polarizing school shooting stood out as a focusing event utilized by media and politicians alike to advocate for, and eventually institute, policy changes. It is important to note how Germany came about as the country of comparison. School shootings were researched across the entirety of Europe, with no preferred country in mind. A list of all international school shootings was compiled, and any events perpetrated by non-students, those that were gang-related, or revenge against a specific person(s) were removed for reasons detailed in the [methodology](#) section. It was at this time Germany emerged as a candidate; no other European country had the selection of school shootings seen in the United States by ways of comparable violence, methods, and media responses/reactions.

Utilizing a qualitative approach consisting of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to construct a content analysis of media reactions, the substantive nature of the media inquiry will be discussed in detail, as will the reactions to other school shootings in both the United States and Germany, and the effect that these events had in garnering national, if not global, attention. A historical and sociological perspective will be used to examine the different stance these two countries took during the immediate aftermath to prominent school shootings.

Literature Review

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), youth aged 12–19 account for less than 1 % of all deaths occurring in the United States (CDC, 2010). Of this one percent, which represents roughly 16,000 adolescents per year, the leading cause of death for teenage youth is accidental and unintentional injury, with close to 50 % to the result of vehicular injuries (CDC, 2010). Homicide, on the other hand, accounts for only 13 % of adolescent deaths (2,000 adolescent murders per year, with black males being at a significantly higher risk. The homicide rate for black youth is 94.1 per 100,000) (CDC, 2010). Since 1993, school-related crime has decreased; during the past 20 years, the number of high school seniors reporting intentional violence has remained stable, but the number of school related deaths has decreased, as has the overall homicide rates for youth aged 14–17 (Redding & Shalf, 2001). What has increased, however, is the number of multiple-victim homicides on school campuses due to gun violence (Redding & Shalf, 2001), and more specific to this study, “targeted school shootings” have increased over the past 40 years (Warnick, Johnson, & Rocha, 2010). These numbers underscore the importance of effective and meaningful intervention and prevention strategies aimed at school violence.

³ During this period, Germany experienced five separate gun related incidents perpetrated by students in secondary school settings, two were excluded from this paper as not enough media coverage was available to thoroughly examine the incident. The Netherlands experienced two gun related school violence events, Finland had two incidents, France, Albania, the Ukraine, and Bosnia-Herzegovina all experienced one student perpetrated school shooting.

In an October 2006 Gallup poll, 35 % of U.S. parents said they feared their child's safety at school (Jones, 2006). Following the Columbine shooting specifically, parental fear reached as high as 55 % in the remaining days of April 1999. Altheide (2009) contributes this rising fear of parents, as well as the public at large, to extensive media coverage of incidents related to school violence. The shooting at Columbine High School occupied a special place in news reports, covered to an extent that no other school shooting has yet to receive (Altheide, 2009). CNN tripled their typical Tuesday ratings while Fox and MSNBC both doubled their average number of viewers during their Columbine coverage (Frymer, 2009, p. 1392). Subsequent school shootings were compared to Columbine in terms of their violence, extent of victimization, and unpredictability.

Because news and media sources are the most common form of information dispersion to the public, they are also the most powerful in terms of shaping public definitions (Muschert, 2002). The ensuing post Columbine news coverage, in attempts to address why such a school shooting could occur, painted a picture of alienated youth gone horribly astray (Frymer, 2009). The reactionary content found in the majority of the news stories narrated tales of possible motivations or causations that included but were not limited to: movies; music; computer and video games; availability of guns; lax parenting; and, bullying (Strauss, 2007). A closer examination of these sources of blame suggests a division into two categories: indirect and direct sources. Next, we examine the extent to which media coverage has embraced these two themes.

Indirect Sources of Blame for School Shootings

The search for causation of school shootings extends to that beyond the motivations of the perpetrators. An attitude of collective responsibility has developed that implies that in addition to the shooters, parents, school officials, and friends share blame for the wrongdoing. Lickel, Schmader, and Hamilton (2003) state that individuals are held liable for partial responsibility in one of two ways: acts of commission, where encouraging or facilitating occurs; or, acts of omission, where there is failure to prevent the incident. This is cause for an examination of the indirect sources of blame for such incidents; indeed, the very nature of the age of the perpetrators often leads the public to be uncomfortable with assigning sole responsibility for such tragedies to mere children.

These types of concerns are borne out in the media coverage of the prescription of antidepressants for the perpetrators (Hong, Cho, Allen-Meares, & Espelage, 2011; Davey & Harris, 2005). The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (2009) warns that antidepressants can increase suicidal thinking or suicidal attempts, but to date there has been no increase in the reported number of suicides.

Examination into many school violence events also suggests that many perpetrators had been the victims of bullying (Schaefer, 2007). This is not so far-fetched; in 2005, nearly 30 % of 9th graders and 20 % of 12th graders reported having been the victim of bullying in school (Schaefer, 2007). Victims of bullying are often anxious, suffer from low self-esteem, partake in avoidant behaviors, and are insecure. Furthermore, victims are more likely to resort to weaponized violence in retaliation for their bullying (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008).

Yet in contrast to these explanations, there have been circumstances where adolescents who were well received by their peers were responsible for school violence.

Robert Steinhauser, the perpetrator of the 2002 “Erfurt Massacre,” was described by friends as being jolly, ordinary, and the center of attention (The Erfurt Terminator, [n.d.](#)). Such discrepancies point to the limitations of these indirect explanations in fully understanding these situations; we next examine the importance of the role of direct sources of blame in media coverage.

Direct Sources of Blame

Other research suggests that different forces may explain student behavior. Essau ([2004](#)) conducted a study of German adolescents aged 12–17 to understand the frequency and rationale for risk-taking behaviors. The author states that there is a gap in the research looking at German youth. The findings suggested that males were more likely than females to engage in risky behaviors, with the exception of thrill seeking, and adolescents that engaged in one type of risk-taking behavior tended to also engage in other risk-taking behaviors. Those found to be exhibiting risk-taking behaviors such as retreatism, antisocialism, or impulsivity are more likely to engage in potentially far more dangerous behaviors (Essau, [2004](#)). These various risky behaviors could also be risk factors for school violence engagement.

Jessor ([1991](#)) found that covariation among risk-taking behaviors is strong. Specifically, covariation appears to exist between risk-taking behaviors considered especially problematic for development, such as drug use, delinquency, impulsivity, and rebelliousness. The acting out of these behaviors serves as an affirmation of personal growth and recognition (Jessor, [1991](#)). Nevertheless, these behaviors may also cause an adolescent to be rejected and ostracized by their peers, which suggests a possible interaction between these types of behaviors and being victimized in school.

Finally, consideration should be given to the fact that all of our perpetrators are male. Research has found that males were more likely to report feelings of anger and violence against others than females (Sadeh, Javdani, Finy, & Verona, [2011](#)). This is consistent with research conducted by Piquero and Sealock ([2004](#)) which argued that females are more likely to internalize negative emotions rather than act out. Finnish researchers have contended that the gendered nature of school shootings, occurring both within and outside of the U.S., is invisible and often purposively ignored (Kantola, Norocel, & Repo, [2011](#)). Understanding the cognitive and emotional differences of males and females would be instrumental in the development of anger management programs (Sadeh et al., [2011](#)), but that implication is beyond the scope of this research.

Noting the lack of literature examining student-perpetrated secondary school shootings, specifically the lack of research examining school shootings on comparative international scale, this study seeks to add a broader and more encompassing understanding of this type of incident. Additionally, underscoring the need to examine the role of the media and how they shape perceptions of school shootings and their perpetrators, and the possible relation media coverage may have with ensuing policy changes and recommendations for changes. The most comparable research is that from Finland which focused almost exclusively on within country school shootings and community cohesiveness, but did not touch on wide-range reactionary differences. This exploratory study will seek to flesh out the different ways school shootings are responded to in hopes of better understanding the phenomenon; with better understanding comes effective intervention strategies and policies.

Methodology

This study utilizes content analysis of news, media, and scholarly coverage of public opinion and calls for policy responses to school violence events in the both the United States and Germany. These two countries were chosen due to similarities in school violence events, particularly school shootings. Minimal research has examined how cultural responses to such incidents vary; as school violence becomes prominent in news media, policy implications as a result of secondary school shootings need to be better understood.

The decision to compare international school shooting incidents to the U.S. events was made to add a comparison point so that coverage, reactions, and policy implications could be analyzed within a global context. Germany was selected as the comparison point for a variety of reasons. First, an examination into international school shootings in Westernized countries showed comparable events during the time period of interest. Furthermore, Germany is similar in national structure to the United States. Both countries have a federal government where the enactment of laws or policies are often created at the federal level and then implemented at the constituent state level. The two countries are also similar in terms of being federal and representative democracies. These forms of government characterize a union of partially self-governing states that are joined under the ruling of a national power and both Germany and the U.S. follow constitutional law, both on a federal and state level. Also important is that many German news sources do publish articles in English, allowing for a comparison of media coverage that did not require intensive translation procedures.

Prior to the beginning of this investigation, pilot research was conducted to determine which type of school violence events would be appropriate for inclusion. Online databases such as EBSCOhost, Sage Publications, New York Times, Lexis-Nexis, Gale Times Literary Supplement, and The Sunday Times were examined for discussions of school violence events perpetrated in and outside of the United States. Further investigation suggested that, several violent school shootings had occurred internationally, but in-depth discussions of these events were severely lacking. The decision was then made to examine student-perpetrated school shootings exclusively. A set of criteria for the shooting incidents to be included in the investigation was created; student precipitated; took place in secondary school; were identified as random acts of violence (no evidence of being retaliatory or drug/gang related); serious or fatal injuries were committed exclusively with firearms,⁴ and all occurred around the same approximate time-frame (1998 through 2009).⁵

Any school shooting that occurred in the United States or Germany that did not fit into all of the aforementioned criteria was excluded from this paper. School violence events that were retaliatory or gang related, perpetrated by a teacher or stranger, or committed by methods other than firearms were too dissimilar to compare. Since this type of cross-national reaction comparison research is in its infancy, an assumption had

⁴ In two separate incidents, perpetrators did arm themselves with homemade bombs as well as firearms; however, serious and fatal injuries were the result of the firearms. Furthermore, the three youth's mode of suicide was a gunshot to the head.

⁵ Initial time-range searches spanned from 1990 to 2012. The final time-span for the shootings included in this study spanned 1998–2009

to be made that causation factors may be exclusive to each type of event, and different themes would be too extensive to cover in one study. These types of school violence events have received a great deal of interest in the scholarly community, yet international comparisons of the reactions to them are much more limited. In an attempt to begin the understanding of the different ways media and policy makers respond to school shootings, the decision was made to select a very concise and limited number of events in order to begin the discourse on blame attributions and underlying causal attributions on an international scale. A determination can then be made if further research should be conducted where a more encompassing approach would be appropriate or necessary Table 1.

Content Analysis of Media Reports

With the final selection of school shooting incidents identified, a content analysis of media coverage began. A content analysis was chosen for this investigation, as opposed to other more quantitative approaches, due to the small but growing emergence of literature examining the role of mass media in the creation of moral panic over juvenile superpredators (Muschert, 2007; Titus, 2005). Furthermore, more discussions are needed examining the role mass media plays in the issue-attention cycle of school violence events. Coverage and ensuing discussions following school violence incidents are not evenly distributed (see Table 2), although why some incidents garner more media attention than others, and the role they play in public and political agenda creation is not always clear (Muschert, 2007). The hope of this investigation is to add to the limited body of discussion pertaining not only to disparate media coverage in the United States., but also on a global scale.

New articles for inclusion were gathered from local and national newspapers. Sources such as The New York Times, Spiegel Online, Zeit Online, and BBC News were selected as they provide a broad coverage of events topically and geographically.⁶ From these national sources, local newsprint were found and included in the study. Saturation sampling was employed when available, meaning all the available news articles were included in analysis when reasonable. Since German news availability is limited as a result of it being an international probe, the decision was made to limit in size the number of U.S. based articles for comparison after an exhaustive compilation of German news articles in order to ensure approximate equal sample sizes. Since the preponderance of school shooting based media coverage is pursuant with the Columbine shooting coverage of the Weise shooting as well as the shootings perpetrated by Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, Sebastian Bosse, Robert Steinhauser, and Tim. K., were exhaustively represented in our selection of articles. Columbine articles were limited to those that provided rich detailed descriptions; “remembrance” pieces, op-eds, abstracts, or articles that did not include any of the selected themes were not included in order to ensure thematic outcomes that were not overly swayed by Columbine responses. The resulting number of articles gathered from German news sources was 40, and the U.S. news articles totaled 48.

⁶ For a complete list of news sources, see bibliography. All articles used in the content analysis are listed and denoted with an asterisk (*).

Table 1 Final selection of school shootings

| | Date of incident | Location | Age of perpetrator(s) | Number of victims wounded | Number of victims fatally injured | Number of victims injured | Result |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Mitchell Johnson & Andrew Golden | March 24, 1998 | Jonesboro, Arkansas | 13, 11 | 5 | 10 | 10 | Incarceration until aged 21 |
| Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold | April 20, 1999 | Columbine, Colorado | 18, 17 | 13 | 21 | 21 | Suicide |
| Jeffrey Weise | March 21, 2005 | Red Lake, Minnesota | 16 | 9 | 5 | 5 | Suicide |
| Robert Steinhäuser | April 26, 2002 | Erfurt, Germany | 19 | 16 | 1 | 1 | Suicide |
| Sebastian Bosse | November 20, 2006 | Emsdetten, Germany | 18 | 0 | 6 | 6 | Suicide |
| Tim Kretschmer | March 11, 2009 | Winnenden, Germany | 17 | 15 | 11 | 11 | Suicide |

Table 2 Distribution of coverage per shooting event

| Event | Number of news articles included |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Mitchell Johnson & Andrew Golden | 10 |
| Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold | 19 |
| Jeffrey Weise | 16 |
| Non-specific American articles* | 3 |
| Robert Steinhäuser | 7 |
| Sebastian Bosse | 7 |
| Tim Kretschmer | 20 |
| Non-specific German articles* | 6 |

*These did not focus on one of the selected school shootings specifically, instead each article discussed more than one event equally

The creation of a coding scheme emerged after thorough immersion in the research prior to the methodologically investigation. As first detailed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) a constant comparison approach was conducted in which expected themes were compared to existing literature. General categories were identified based on patterns in the literature, specifically with regard to how the media presents sources of blame and calls for action. Furthermore, the use of grounded theory helped the construction of categories and was able to inform thematic distinction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The selected categories are detailed in Table 3, along with the criteria used to determine the presence of the theme. The unit of analysis was themes present within each news article. As defined by (Berg & Lune, 2012), a theme is the most useful unit to count, and is made up of a simple sentence or string of words throughout an entire written document, in this case the entire news article. Identification of thematic presence was not confined to explicit statements of term(s), but also a broad reference to a theme within the article.

Axial coding was conducted where the units of analysis (news articles and themes) were coded under a series of related categories. The resulting categories identified were: *school related factors*, *family related factors*, *social factors*, *individual factors*, and *policy responses*. Any discussions included in the news articles, whether were direct quotes from others or personal reflections of the author, were considered to be indicative of these themes and the articles were therefore coded as having a theme present. For example, articles that discussed how easily a student snuck in a weapon, how his being teased went undetected or unresolved, or if he had poor attendance or grades, were all coded as discussing school related factors. Below are excerpts from a variety of the selected news articles that exemplify the presence of the general themes:

School related factors:

Everything was laid out, right there, for the school or the authorities in Red Lake to see it coming. I don't want to blame Red Lake, but did they not put two and two together? This kid was crying out, and those guys chose to ignore it. They need to start focusing on their kids... Weise, who had been held back in school,

was teased because he was larger than most of the other sophomores, because he dressed in Goth style... (Davey, & Wilgoren, 2005)

Family related factor:

Is it possible to hold a parent criminally responsible if their child commits a school shooting? And can parents predict in some cases that their child might perpetrate a crime of that nature... the court said yes on both counts, convicting [Tim K's father] on charges of manslaughter and bodily injury... Prosecutors argued that Jörg K. had concrete reasons to keep weapons away from his son after Tim K. confided in his parents around a year before the crime that he might be manic depressive. His parents reacted quickly, taking their son to a youth psychiatrist...(Father convicted for son's school massacre in Germany, 2011).

Table 3 Thematic coding of media coverage

| General categories | Specific categories | Criteria |
|------------------------|--|--|
| School related factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying/teasing • Trouble at school • Alienation/isolation • School safety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did perpetrator report bullying or teasing by peers • Poor attendance or grades, suspension, expulsion • Few friends, shy, introverted • On-premise security, CCTV monitoring, involved teachers, staff, and faculty |
| Family related factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family disruption • Financial issues • Parenting style | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divorce, physical/sexual/emotional abuse, arguments • Economic strain • Lax, uninvolved or unaware parents, too strict, over-indulged |
| Social factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mention of previous school shootings • Gun availability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison to previous school shooting • Laidback national gun laws, presence of guns in house, easy access to firearms, environment of gun use-hunting, practice/target shooting |
| Individual factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health • Medication • Gothic subculture • Aggression/hate • History of violence • Video game use | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression, anxiety or other psychological disorders, visitation of mental health experts- therapists, counselor, psychologist etc. • Was the perpetrator prescribed medication for mental illness • Self-identification or suspected identification with subculture, black clothing, make-up • Fascination with Nazism, racism, contempt towards "jocks", disdain for others • Run-ins with the law, arrest record, suspected for previous offenses • Players of violent video or computer games, listener of rock or alternative music, specifically Marilyn Manson, violent or action movies |
| Policy responses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-bullying programs • Gun laws • Video games | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was there a request to create or implement school-based programs • Sought amendments to existing gun laws, or sought new bans on unregulated weapons such as paintball guns • Demand to ban violent video/computer games, changes made to regulate age requirements for video/computer games |

Social factors:

Do young people playing sports with guns, [know] their penetrating power is greater than that of police weapons? Does the state not allowed to review suspicion regardless of whether gun owners store their guns safely in the apartment? And should a sport such as paintball, in which people are “ mark with paint balls ” [not be] forbidden... Because so a culture of violence is encouraged, the unstable young men can become perpetrators... (Denso, 2009).

The shooting at Virginia Tech is the result of America’s woeful lack of serious gun control laws... German cable news broadcaster NTV flashed an image of the former head of the National Rifle Association... In other words, blame rifle-wielding Charlton Heston for the 33 dead... Now we will probably begin discussing the overly lax gun laws in the United States. There, buying a submachine gun is often easier than getting a driver’s license. And a new ban on violent games and killer videos will also be put back on the agenda. But in the end, nothing is likely to happen (Henninger, 2007).

Individual factors:

[Sebastian Bosse] is certain that ‘the media’ are to blame for the poor state of the world... drugs, consumption and fun are the only values conveyed by pop and television stars. Brutal computer games and video films tell young people that you win quickly if you’re strong. They don’t offer solutions for losers (Crossland & Hawley, 2006).

Jeff Weise was rarely noticed... [h]e was a loner... with few friends, a peculiar attraction to Nazism... frustration at the lack of racial purity and authentic racial pride in his community, [and] several residents said they believed Mr. Weise had received medication for emotional problems (Davey, 2005 *Behind the why of a rampage*).

Policy responses:

Bavaria’s interior minister Günther Beckstein...wants an outright ban of games with realistic killing scenes – dubbed “Killerspiele” (“killer games”) in Germany – on the Internet... Beckstein wants to take the case to the Bundesrat, the upper house of German parliament... the possession and distribution of games with realistic killing scenarios could become a criminal offence punishable by prison or fines (Cracking down on ‘killer’ games, 2007).

...the revolution turns out once again . In the reform of weapons legislation the prohibition of large caliber, limiting the number of guns in private households and the duty to storage of ammunition only in police stations are missing (Denso, 2009).

Findings

Perceived causation factors or topics of concern present in the selection of news articles were examined per general theme. The discussion that follows examines how each country's media uniquely focused on the various thematic factors, and illustrates the differences between the general themes, the amount of discussion and the dominance, or lack thereof, of discussion pertaining to a specific theme between the two countries. Final tabulations of the coding are presented below.

School Related Factors

One area of concern for both the United States and Germany is school related factors, primarily alienation and isolation of the adolescent perpetrators. The media coverage often times described the adolescents as loners, as having few close friends, or being described by their peers as odd or unusual. In the U.S., bullying, school safety, and any troubles at school the perpetrator received relatively equal press time, in approximately 10–12 (21 %) of the articles. Media reports in Germany, however, were less likely to discuss bullying (6 articles) and school safety issues (3 articles) as in the U.S.

Overall, school related factors were a larger area of concern in the U.S. news coverage with regard to this sample of school shootings. In fact, the three German articles that discussed school safety issues were more concerned with the fear that an increase in school safety measures, such as the placement of security guards or security cameras, would have a negative impact on students and decrease perceptions of school safety. The general theme of school related factors manifested itself 54 times in the sample of news articles, as opposed to the 37 times school related factors discussed in the German based articles.

Family Related Factors

Again, the U.S. discussed this theme more often than Germany, with familial disruptions a major concern showing up in 25 articles, which is nearly 63 % of the news selection. Issues of family finances were discussed almost exclusively in the U.S. in response to the shooting of Jeffrey Weise, who lived on a Native American reservation that was extremely poor. Sexual abuse was mentioned in the case of Mitchell Johnson, one of the students responsible for the shootings in Jonesboro, AR. However, whether the abuse had been investigated or was founded was never mentioned in that or any follow up article.

Family factors were the least mentioned theme among German news articles. There was no mention of any of the families of the perpetrators suffering financial woes; in fact, there were statements that many came from financially stable, if not wealthy, households. Critiques of parents were reserved almost exclusively for Tim K. His father was later held criminally liable for the improper storage of his pistol and ammunition, and sentenced to 1 year and 9 months of probation for violating Germany's gun laws. Incidentally, Tim K. was the only German perpetrator to obtain his weapons from a family source; Steinhauser and Bosse both purchased their guns legally. However, it is speculated that Steinhauser amassed a stockpile of ammunition via the black market.

Social Factors

German media sources reflected heavily on previous school shootings, both national and international (Columbine was often mentioned). Concerns about gun availability were covered to a similar extent; 80 % of the German news articles discussed other school violence events occurring nationally as well as internationally, and 20 critiqued the ease of access the perpetrators had to weapons. This perception of easy access to firearms caused many community members and policymakers to question whether further gun restrictions were needed. There was even a call to ban paintball guns and laser tag after the Tim K. shootings in Winnenden as they were viewed as dangerous weapons too akin to a gun to be ignored. Indeed, social factors like these were the second leading topic of discussion in German news articles being discussed 43 times.

In stark contrast to the findings in Germany, social factors were the second *least* discussed theme in U.S. media coverage. Discussions of previous school shootings (15 articles) were limited exclusively to the events of Columbine and were discussed at equal levels as concerns of gun availability (13 articles). In the United States, discussions of gun availability were more focused on analyzing cultures where having and using firearms was a regular part of life. For instance, Golden and Mitchell, the two middle-school students from Jonesboro, AR, would often go hunting and to target practice at a very young age. After the shooting, a majority of articles covering the event drew attention to this fact and suggested that the boys had somehow been desensitized to firearms, making it easier for them to commit their crimes (Table 4).

Individual Factors

This was the most prevalent theme evident in both the German and U.S. news articles. Individual factors were discussed 87 times across 25 different articles in the U.S. More than half of these articles expressed concern about factors pertaining to the perpetrator. In the U.S., the most commonly discussed specific theme was that of aggression and hatred, which appeared in 25 news articles. The theme was broadly used to encompass racial prejudice and Nazism. Harris and Klebold, the perpetrators of Columbine, and Jeffery Weise of Minnesota, all expressed a fascination with Adolf Hitler, Nazism and racism; Weise also expressed concerns over what he termed “racial mixing” (Davey & Reuthling, 2005). Sebastian Bosse was the only German perpetrator to express relatable concerns; he discussed, with evident animosity, non-Germans or immigrants. His suicide letter, available online, includes the term “muchels” when describing those not German, a term synonymous with mussels or bottom-feeders.

Depression and other mental illnesses were the next most common topic discussed in U.S. articles, appearing in 18 articles, followed by video game use (14 articles), a history of violence (13), and the Gothic subculture (12). The least discussed area of concern was that of prescription drug use for mental health issues, which was only discussed in five articles. One article went so far as to state that Harris had stopped taking his anti-psychotic medication before the shooting, a statement that later proved to be untrue and slightly misleading. To hear a shooting perpetrator was taking an “anti-psychotic” medication carries an indifferent tone regarding mental health as opposed to identifying the medication by name. Furthermore, during the post-mortem autopsy of Harris, his prescription for Luvox, an antidepressant commonly prescribed to treat

Table 4 Thematic presence in news articles

| | United States <i>N</i> =48 articles | Germany <i>N</i> =40 articles |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Times theme present | Times theme present |
| School related factors | | |
| Bullying/teasing | 12 | 6 |
| Trouble at school | 10 | 10 |
| Alienated/isolated | 22 | 12 |
| School safety | 10 | 3 |
| Family related factors | | |
| Family disruption | 25 | 5 |
| Financial issues | 2 | 0 |
| Parenting style | 11 | 6 |
| Social factors | | |
| Previous school shooting | 15 | 32 |
| Gun availability | 13 | 20 |
| Individual factors | | |
| Goth subculture | 12 | 0 |
| Aggression/hate | 25 | 10 |
| Depression | 18 | 13 |
| Prescriptions | 5 | 1 |
| History of violence | 13 | 6 |
| Video game use | 14 | 15 |
| Policy responses | | |
| Anti-bullying programs | 3 | 0 |
| Gun laws | 4 | 14 |
| Video games | 2 | 13 |

obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and social anxiety, was found in his system (Warner, 2007). Calling Harris' medication "anti-psychotic" carries a connotation very different from its intended treatment of OCD and social anxiety, and to call Harris' otherwise is misleading at best.

Among German news articles, the leading theme specific to individual responsibility was the fact that the perpetrators played violent video games, to the point where this topic dominated all discussions, appearing in 15 of the news articles. A related analysis of the number of times "violent video games" appeared in print in the German media showed that in 2005, references to video games eclipsed all other topics concerning adolescent violence and school shootings.⁷ The trailing topics within this theme included aggression (10 articles) and depression (13). Sebastian Bosse, responsible for the shootings in Emsdetten, was the perpetrator most often depicted as aggressive and hateful. Bosse had published videos and internet blogs in which he described his

⁷ Results available from authors.

intense hatred for those around him, those who made him feel like an outcast, and for immigrants newly arrived to Germany.

Tim K. received the majority of news coverage about depression, as he had recently stated to his parents that he feared he was suffering from a mental disorder. His parents brought him to six therapy sessions where it was determined Tim K. was not a danger to himself nor society; no further treatment or prescriptions were suggested. Only one German article expressed any concern over antidepressant medication, and unlike in the U.S., it was regarding the *lack* of medical intervention in the case of Tim K. In a 2012 study of depression among German adolescents, it was found that more than half (63 %) of youth aged 12–19 diagnosed with depression, had at least one comorbid diagnosis, likely anxiety, somatoform disorders, hyperkinetic disorders, or posttraumatic stress disorders (Hoffmann, Petermann, Glaeske, & Bachmann, 2012). Furthermore, among these youth diagnosed with depression, 60 % of them were treated with psychotherapy, approximately 11 % received a combination treatment of therapy and prescription medication, while 28.8 % of them received no treatment whatsoever (Hoffmann, Glaeske, & Bachmann 2012).

Policy Responses

Policy responses were the least discussed theme in U.S. news articles, with the topic broached in only four articles. Three of these four articles discussed the need for anti-bullying programs, and two suggested either an increase of age requirements for violent video games or an outright ban. All four of the articles mentioned the need for a tightening of gun laws to limit the accessibility of deadly weapons.

While the second least discussed thematic topic among German news sources, policy factors were covered substantially more than they were by the U.S. press. However, no article called for the implementation of anti-bullying programs. Perhaps this could be related to the fact that only six articles even mention bullying or teasing as a factor in the shootings. While Germany already has some of the strictest gun laws in the world, 14 articles suggested further restrictions, such as; an increase in age requirements; new nationwide gun registries; and, random, unannounced home inspections of gun owners in order to ensure the proper and safe storage of munitions.

As mentioned previously, playing violent video games was a topic of concern among the German media. The primary response to this was to suggest the complete ban of all violent video games. German public perception of video games tended towards the belief they provided no value to their players. Video games were not educational tools, but instead just another means of violence depiction. While many articles noted that there has yet to be scientific link between violent video games and violent acts, the association between the perpetrator and their playing of violent video games was enough of a connection to bring attention to this entertainment medium (Cracking down on ‘killer’ games: EU targets violent video games, 2007).

Conclusion

While the inclusion of only three school shootings per country may seem small, it is important to note that this type of incident is not a common one. In the time period examined (1990–2012), 12 school shootings meeting the aforementioned criteria

occurred in the U.S.; in Germany, there were four⁸ student-perpetrated shootings. The six events discussed here are representative of large-scale secondary school shooting events. In Germany and the United States, the similarities of the events and subsequent media reactions to the shootings are evident. Following the Winnenden shooting perpetrated by Tim K., and the Columbine shooting by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, television and news print media flourished. Coverage at this level was the first of its kind for such incidents. This intense and rapid coverage caused community members to become so heavily distressed that policymakers intervened after just 1 month in order to ease community fears (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). Birkland and Lawrence (2009) argue that the Columbine shooting was framed as an example of school violence. The focus from the media, and ultimately the public, perpetrated the belief that school violence and school shootings go hand-in-hand; in other words, Columbine was not viewed as an extreme example of school shootings, but as evidence of school violence.

These agenda setters and policy makers began discussing legal remedies much more quickly than with other public issues, primarily due to the sheer amount of media attention Columbine received. It is such rapid policy responses that underscore the need for a closer examination of media reactions, as they have clearly shaped change in the wake of these events. Causation factors may be unique to each violent act, and likewise to each perpetrator. Furthermore, the rarity of these types of school violence events make thorough and generalizable factors near impossible to determine. Yet policymakers and Congress focus primarily on increasing school security and implementing school based bullying and tolerance programs, while the media and public concern themselves with popular culture (i.e. video games, music, and movies) (Larkin, 2009). Despite the increase in such legislation, these approaches have yet to suggest efficacy. Conducting a cultural comparison study of how these events were cast in by the media allows for a more nuanced understanding of the role that community standards have in shaping our understanding of school violence; by examining media reactions, we have a better sense of why policy makers have reacted in the various ways. And as globalization becomes the norm rather than the exception, reactions from across the world have the potential to sway events here. Recent coverage of a school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut are indicative of just how global such reactions truly are (Knafo, 2013) We must constantly re-examine our understanding of how events shape policy and policy shapes events.

The key importance may lie within our cultural differences as opposed to our similarities, as we attempt to explain the different courses of action that countries have taken in response to large-scale acts of violence, such as school shootings. Löfstedt and Vogel (2001) state that the U.S. government system is one based on distrust, whereas the European system places great trust and respect in political authorities. Following World War II, the German government was the only institution strong enough to reunify the country. This historical reliance on government interventions during times of crisis could perhaps explain why the German news articles heavily reflect on policy implications while the U.S. media focuses on individual level factors. From there we

⁸ The fourth German school shooting, excluded from this paper, was done so as it appeared the perpetrator targeted his teachers as opposed to being more randomized as the incidents included in the paper. Furthermore, this incident revealed extremely limited media coverage and obtaining sufficient and comparable information seemed unlikely.

note that policy changes have reflected the media reactions and calls for change; in the U.S., policy responses tend to be focused on target hardening (such as installing metal detectors in schools) whereas German responses are more likely to include overarching changes in law.

Limitations

The primary limitation was the ability to access a wide variety of German news sources. While there was some ease of access to German news sources via online websites, neither author is a native German speaker and at times, had to rely on translation services. These translations may have caused errors unknown to the researchers; while the use of translation services ensures technically correct translations, colloquialisms, idiomatic phrases, and syntactic patterns may be lost. Analysis of thematic patterns maybe affected because of language barriers. Furthermore, one main national German news source, Spiegel, had server errors and large sections of their article archives were unreachable. Attempts to contact Spiegel's webmaster went unanswered. Therefore, it is possible additional news articles not published elsewhere were missed and therefore not included in this study. Additionally, when the preliminary news stories were published following the German school shootings, identifying information was severely limited. Almost no articles were found during the first year following the Steinhäuser and Bosse events that stated their names or discussed the occurrence of a school shooting. Articles were limited almost exclusively for the two events through the searches of their city name. This may have further hindered the ability to find additional articles covering these two incidents.

Any Internet and print media search is also limited by the possibility that additional news articles, not published in accessible archives, were not included in this study. While every attempt was made to access all searchable archives, it is possible that articles from small local sources may not have been included, especially for earlier events. Furthermore, when the preliminary news stories were published following the German school shootings, identifying information was severely limited. German news sources often did not list the names of the perpetrators and searches on other criteria, such as city, had to be utilized. This may have further hindered the ability to find additional articles.

Generalizability is limited due to the nature of event inclusion; only student perpetrated shooting events in which people died were included in this study. Furthermore, school shootings are a rare event and even those with similarities have just as many differences. Also, we worked off of the assumption that shootings perpetrated by non-students and those taking place in college settings would too dissimilar to secondary school shootings to be included in this study; media reactions to such different events cannot be compared. This exclusion further limited the ability to examine a larger selection of school violence events in general and limits our discussion just to those events described here. Finally, this content analysis lacks inter-rater reliability as the first author was the sole reader and coder of the news articles.

Future Research

This framework should also be applied to the examination of student perpetrated school shootings taking place in countries other than the United States and Germany. Analysis

of supplementary countries will provide a more comprehensive and conclusive understanding of how media reactions shape policy and other types of responses to such difficult situations. A broader understanding of school shootings as well as the analysis of a larger number of incidents would allow a more generalizable understanding of these types of school violence events. As of late, culturally comparative studies are lacking and there is much to gain from examining how the media shapes policy around the world, especially with respect to events that cause fear and panic but do not speak of easy solutions. Countries around the world struggle with issues related to school violence but have responded in various ways; to date, however, research has not been able to determine which ways are best. In addition, while individual solutions may differ by place, the fact is that globalization is creating a world that is smaller than ever before. The answers, therefore, may lie in examining our similarities, not our differences.

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