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The Columbine Shootings and the Discourse of Fear

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The tragic events on April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, provide an opportunity to reflect on the nature and consequences of not just the shootings but also the meanings that were ascribed to various facets of those events, including an emergent definition of the "Columbine Syndrome." Based on a qualitative media analysis, this article examines part of the public presentations and news accounts of the "meanings of Columbine," with particular emphasis on violence, crime, youth, popular culture, surveillance, social control, and terrorism. Analysis suggests that Columbine was merged with terrorism as part of the broader frame of fear and national security.

Keywords: *school shootings; fear; terrorism; propaganda; social control*

> Eric Harris wanted to bomb his high school out of a desire "to terrorize the entire nation by attacking a symbol of American life." In this pseudo-political grandiosity, he is of a piece with Mohamed Atta. We see him far differently now than we did when he was widely (and inaccurately) characterized as a crazed loner striking out at jocks in 1999.
>
> *—Cullen quoted in Rich (2004, p. 1)*

The above statement joining Columbine with terrorism and the 9/11 attacks is an artful construction with important consequences for social control. This article examines how the shootings at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, fit into the expanding discourse of fear and terrorism in the United States, which may be defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of the physical and symbolic environment as people define and experience it in everyday life. One of the lessons of Columbine is that news coverage of a tragic event can be incorporated into a more expansive discourse such as terrorism, which can distort the nature of the tragic event. This article suggests that elements of Columbine were combined with terrorism as part of a control narrative that helped to anchor terrorism to schools in communities throughout the United States and increased more fear, security measures, and surveillance (see Addington, 2009 [this issue]).

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School shootings are very rare, but fear is very common. And parents' fear for their children's safety shoots up whenever school violence receives mass media attention. For example, after a deadly attack at an Amish school in 2006, opinion polls showed that parental fear increased, especially for those with a child in school (J. Jones, 2006). Parental fear was highest (55%), according to this same poll, the day after the shootings at Columbine High School. This tragic event took on expansive symbolic and policy importance in the years to follow. Just as the "falling trade towers" in New York City came to symbolize the 9/11 attacks, Columbine enshrined fear for children at school. No other shooting of students by students would receive the same extent of news coverage (Muschert, 2007b). Most important, however, Columbine came to be associated with virtually every act of gun violence that would occur on school grounds throughout the United States and, in many cases, throughout the world. One author (Warner, 2007) referred to the "Columbine Syndrome" after a vicious shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007, in which the assailant utilized mass media and popular culture imagery in his screed, while also sending media materials to several outlets. This article addresses the relevance of the mass media for Columbine and a national preoccupation with fear.

Social Definitions, Fear, and the Mass Media

My approach to understanding how Columbine fit into a broader perspective and discourse about fear is to see how it pertains to the definition of the situation, or how social actors make sense of their lived experience. I argue that the extensive coverage and framing of the Columbine shootings contributed to the broad discourse of fear as well as a more specific context for worrying about and protecting children, legitimating the war on terror, and expanding social control. The capacity to shape our view of the world and the words that we use to describe it are significant for future actions. Thus, one definition of power is that it is the ability to define a situation (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Fear becomes a matter of discourse (van Dijk, 1988) and, an institutional construction of knowledge that is reflexive of "territories, material objects, people, rules, formats, and technologies," the discourse stands for its own foundation and interpretive framework (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997, p. 84).

News is the most powerful resource for public definitions in our age. News reports and social control work have become joined through mass communication organizations (Best, 1995; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987, 1989; Fishman & Cavender, 1998). Print and electronic news media use entertaining news formats that make their work more predictable and manageable while also delivering entertaining information that news consumers have come to expect. The narrative structure of news reports reflects information technology, commercialism, and entertainment values, as well as official news sources that provide the majority of information (Altheide & Snow, 1991). News sources provide content that journalists slip into entertaining story sequences and formats. Key components are formal agents of social

control (FASC), such as police departments, that provide the security measures that have emerged during a particular event and soon become institutionalized and taken for granted as part of the social fabric of life (Altheide, 1995; Ericson et al., 1989). The combination of entertaining news formats with these news sources has forged a fear-generating machine that trades on fostering a common public definition of fear, danger, and dread.

Fear and Children

A key element in the contemporary discourse of fear is children. There is a substantial literature about fear and children (Beisel, 1997; Best, 1990, 1994; Gilbert, 1986; Hill & Tisdall, 1997; Jamrozik & Sweeney, 1996; Nelson, 1984; Platt, 1969). Children are a powerful symbol for "protection" as well as "punishment" of not only those who would hurt children, but also the children who are blamed for other social ills (Altheide, 2002b). As powerful symbols, children have been joined with fear in entertainment as both victims and victimizers (Altheide, 2002a). The former may be recognized as "child abuse," whereas the latter appears as "juvenile crime," "gangs," and the threat of students shooting students.

Topics for public interest are creatively manipulated by various claims-makers with self-serving interests. The role of claims-makers, especially government officials, who serve as important news sources and spokespersons for this work, must also be considered (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991). All played a part in transforming Columbine from another tragic shooting to an act of terrorism with great repercussions. The symbolic value of children has risen dramatically in public life. The news media's emphasis of fear with children is consistent with work by Warr (see Warr, 1992) and others on the significance of "third-person fear" or "altruistic fear"—the concern for those whom you love or are responsible for. The Columbine shootings have been transformed within the iconography of violence and fear (Altheide, 2002b). As noted, Columbine is the most cited school shooting in the United States; is widely referred to throughout the world; and has for some become a synonym for several crises, including gangs, youthful rebellion, institutional failure of schools, as well as crises in families and government (Stein, 2000). Such transformations are symbolic in nature and are shaped by the culture industry that massages and shapes images and meanings as features of mass mediated formats and templates (Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998; S. Hall, 1977; Kellner, 1995).

The mass media coverage of the Columbine shootings has been widely studied by Muschert (Muschert, 2007a, 2007b; Muschert & Carr, 2006) and others. My focus is on the way in which the mass media coverage helped to frame and define Columbine as something other than a school shooting and as consistent with a terrorist act. Journalists, working with entertainment formats, tend to accept the rhetoric and definitions of news sources, regardless of how illogical, distorting, and

deceptive. Qualitative document analysis of news reports focuses on the use of terms in context, identifiable discourses, themes, and frames. I argue that the terrorism frame was a powerful "mega frame" that captured angst, fear, and governmental legitimacy within "frame changing," becoming a national and international dimension (Muschert & Carr, 2006) that transcended initial community and local frames. The aim, then, is to clarify how other school shootings were connected with Columbine, how Columbine was discursively situated with terrorism and expanding social control, and how the discourse and politics of fear were implicated in the framing.

Data and Method

I approached these questions by a qualitative examination of news documents. All news reports can be regarded as accounts, but there is a wide range from descriptions of what occurred, to interpretations and characterizations of events, which entail discourses, frames, narratives, and cultural scripts. The emphasis is not on whether the report is true but, rather, the symbolic meanings, especially of certain words or phrases that may be repeated over time (Altheide, 1996). News reports are useful as a resource to investigate framing and thematic emphases. Comparison and contrast permits identification of different frames and themes.

Data collection and analysis were conducted using an approach described elsewhere as "tracking discourse," or following certain issues, words, themes, and frames over a period of time, across different issues, and across different news media. Tracking discourse is a qualitative document analysis technique that applies an ethnographic approach to content analysis to new information bases that are accessible through computer technology, for example, NEXIS (Altheide, 1996). This is primarily a qualitative document analysis approach that relies on analysis of numerous documents to become familiar with formats and emphases, while suggesting topics and themes. Constant comparison and theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) are employed to identify key thematic shifts, and then to focus on trends over time. Initial manifest coding of fear and related topics then incorporate emergent coding and theoretical sampling to monitor changes in coverage and emphasis over time and across topics. Involving 12 steps, tracking discourse entails initial familiarity with a sample of relevant documents before drafting a protocol, which is then checked for reliability and validity with additional documents.

A preliminary examination was made of several hundred newspapers, magazines, and television transcripts that referred to Columbine in conjunction with other shootings, for example, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, and so on in the United States as well as abroad, for example, in Europe or Australia. I examined documents across several media and settled on print media accounts to illustrate the thematic changes that had occurred. All of these data informed an in-depth examination of a theoretical sample of 15 documents that emerged from materials in four

countries: *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, *Globe and Mail* (Canada), *The Observer* (England), *Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, *New Zealand Herald*, *The Gazette* (Montreal), and *Birmingham Evening Mail*. A protocol was constructed to obtain data from 15 news reports about date, location, author, format, topic, sources, theme, emphasis, and grammatical use of fear (as noun, verb, adverb); items about connections to other school shootings and surveillance; as well as accounts and neutralization techniques. Findings from these data informed additional comparative searches. For example, *The New York Times*, the most prestigious U.S. newspaper, was searched for key terms (e.g., *Columbine* and *terrorism*) to document changing thematic emphasis over time. Where appropriate, materials were also enumerated and charted. The materials were placed in an information base and analyzed qualitatively using Word 2003 and QSR NUD*IST 6, a qualitative data analysis program.

Defining Columbine in the News

A review of TV and newspaper reports using various search terms indicates that the meaning of "Columbine" was emergent, partly joined to previous shootings, future school violence, as well as international terrorism. The mass media were key for each phase or moment in the ongoing career of "Columbine." As Columbine entered news parlance and was soon institutionalized—and shortened—from the "Columbine school shooting" to "Columbine," it came to refer to not only school shootings, but also youth problems, discipline concerns at schools, and even lax school and governmental oversight and policies concerned with protecting children. The meaning of Columbine was expanded to warrant melding school disciplinary problems and students' pranks and hoaxes with criminal justice agencies as well as the Department of Homeland Security. Offending students would no longer be charged with disorderly conduct, trespassing, or even involuntary manslaughter, but were increasingly charged with terrorism. Most important, Columbine became entrenched within the discourse of fear, especially as it was linked to terrorism and stepped-up efforts at social control of schools, including expanding surveillance.

The qualitative analysis of news coverage of Columbine included an enumerative overview of comparative emphases in major media. A summary of items from *The New York Times* will be presented, followed by a discussion of the subsequent theoretical sample. Some materials from *The New York Times* are illustrative of the changing thematic emphasis over time of school shootings and especially Columbine. Tracking discourse revealed that school shootings were rarely linked with terrorism prior to April 1999, when the Columbine shootings occurred. Rather, urban gang concerns were more likely to be associated with terrorism to that time, that is, as terrorizing neighborhoods. Examining the use of Columbine with terrorism after the shootings, but before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, shows that

Columbine and other school shootings were linked with terrorism in 14 articles. Students were not closely linked to terrorists, notwithstanding a school administrator's statement in August 1999: "That's the worst kind of terrorism you can have: an intelligent teen-ager" (C. Jones, 1999). The power of the discursive frame of terrorism became most apparent after September 11, 2001. School shootings were linked with terrorism in 25 articles, whereas Columbine increased by nearly as much ($N = 21$).

One of the first links of Columbine and school shootings to terrorism occurred in a reflective piece just five days after the 9/11 attacks. The author noted the irony of how a handful of men with primitive tools (i.e., box cutters) had seemingly outdueled nuclear weapons, but went on to note how difficult it was to make sense out of this, suggesting that our initial urge to compare it to "another school shooting" was not adequate and that the TV clichés and entertainment formats that accompanied such reports seemed a bit trivial:

> Television, with its crisp logos, only diminished the event—"America Under Attack," "Attack on America," as though this was another school shooting or forest fire, something that could be packaged with room to melodramatize. (Johnson, 2001, p. 3)

The meaning and significance of Columbine changed as popular culture and politicians constructed it for their own purposes. Columbine was at times linked with other school shootings, but it frequently appeared without mention of other spectacular shootings, whereas the converse was rare. Popular culture pursued profits disguised as punditry in reflecting on Columbine and other school shootings. Examining movie reviews, plays (e.g., *Columbinus*) (Rich, 2004), book titles, and so on affirms the market discourse for tragedy and reflections of dominant cultural narratives about lost youth, inept organizations (e.g., schools and police), and even pop culture opportunism. Here is one example of a spectacular title that links Columbine to youth and popular culture, including computer technology. The focus is on a Finnish "shooter," Auvinen, but reference is also made to Cho, the Virginia Tech murderer, both of whom sent materials to the mass media and the Internet:

> Misfits on a mission to delete us all: The Young Finn who last month slaughtered eight people, having first boast of his plans on YouTube, is the latest of a new breed of killer. Armed with a gun, a camera and a computer, they use dehumanizing technology to turn bedroom cyber fantasies into blood reality. (Conrad, 2007, p. 8)

The diabolical character attributed to those engaged in school shootings is consistent with a dystopic narrative: Technological progress and computer wonders are mere tools for misfits, who play with media in terrorism, as a way of creating a mediated legacy, a ghost that will outlive them (Giroux, 2003).

Other titles in this theoretical sample of articles about the use of Columbine shootings focused on violence (e.g., "In Tense Time, Prank Can Look Like a Bomb Scare"), social control responses (e.g., lockdowns, metal detectors, etc.), parents' fear, and terrorism. These charges were less likely immediately after the shootings in 1999 than they were after the 9/11 attacks—28 months later—when terrorism pervaded media messages and were shaped to fit an expanding discourse of control, which cast many criminal events as terrorism.

Columbine as Terrorism

Officials played a prominent role in making statements about Columbine, especially following 9/11, when various policy makers sought to find similarities in the two events, including charging actual or would-be school shooters with terrorism. Fear is the common link or symbolic glue. Terrorism was associated with school shootings in several ways: first, as a connection with guns and violence. One author stated, "Al Qaeda, Hizbullah, and IRA terrorists have exploited this loophole in US gun laws to purchase military-style weapons from 'private sellers' at gun shows" (Rosenthal, 2008, n.p.). The inference is that there is a common factor amongst school shootings and terrorism. Second, they are also linked by promoting fear, including taking hostages. For example,

> Macomb County prosecutor Eric Smith acknowledges that some people would view terrorism charges as extreme, but he says people would think differently if they saw "the sheer fear of the parents" and others in his community. And, 'TERRIFIED children were today said to be in fear of returning to their classrooms after a gunman opened fire outside their Birmingham junior school.' (Topo, 2006, p. 7D)

Terrorism was used as a symbolic wedge to gain more support for policies and strategies to combat school violence, but paradoxically, some proponents of stronger measures also derided the seriousness of terrorism. Again, we see the common thread of fear. A New Jersey freeholder (education governing board) commented on the need to focus more on school safety: "Since Sept. 11, more people have been killed in school buildings than in terrorist attacks in this country. We need to improve the security level" (Kelley, 2008, p. 1). Indeed, police departments throughout the United States are chagrined that more emphasis is being placed on terrorism and homeland security than crime. Providence, Rhode Island, police chief Col. Dean Esserman commented,

> The support we had from the federal government for crime fighting seems like it is being diverted to homeland defense. . . . It may be time to reassess, not how to dampen one for the other, but how not to lose support for one as we address the other. (Johnston, 2008)

The president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police added,

> Unfortunately, funding federal homeland security efforts at the expense of state, tribal and local law enforcement agencies weakens rather than enhances our nation's security. (Johnston, 2008)

Several articles connected school shootings or the threat of a shooting with terrorism. The context of fear played an important role in shaping perceptions and discourse. In a few instances, the common link was the availability of guns that could be exploited by terrorists and disturbed children alike. One article about a shooting in Montreal (2006) made an explicit case for shootings as terrorist events:

> Plante said that for about 45 minutes after Gill began his rampage, there was fear that the shooting was part of a coordinated terrorist attack on the city. (Wilton & Cherry, 2007, p. 1)

We shall see below how this usage of "rampage" with "terrorist attack" is strange in view of Muschert's (2007b) systematic typology of school shootings.

Defining school shootings as terrorist acts implies that there is a political context. Most school shootings are not treated as political acts, although, as noted, they may still be regarded as terrorism. This separation, particularly in the United States, suggests the terrorism discourse trumps political elements. A unique event in our sample was a school shooting in Israel. Here the political and terrorist frames can be seen as complimentary:

> While the motivation for the attack wasn't immediately clear, the school may have been targeted because of its historic status as a cornerstone for the religious settlement movement that opposes giving up land in the West Bank as part of a peace deal with the Palestinians. . . . Frustrated and emotional Israelis gathered outside the school, chanting "Death to Arabs" and "Olmert's to blame." ("School Attack Kills 8," 2008)

Terrorism, gangs, and school shootings, particularly Columbine, became linked through the discourse of fear, as writers reflected on the chilling effects of uncertainty when our taken-for-granted world becomes challenged. One columnist opined how a range of attackers challenge the trust in an assumed order that we all share. He argued that the attacks disrupt our everyday world and that we all suffer from this. The grouping of incidents illustrates the commonality of diverse sources of fear:

> Marc Lépine brought this terror to Montreal 17 years ago; others brought it to Columbine and Taber, Alta., and Oklahoma City, and on and on. Gang members violated the civic trust in downtown Toronto, last Boxing Day. Nineteen men vented their rage on New York and Washington almost five years ago to the day. Suicide bombers bring hell to the innocent too often to count. (Ibbitson, 2006, p. A9)

The discourse of terrorism encompasses other attackers and knocks off any disparaging edges in favor of a smoother cultural narrative about blame, responsibility, and

moral order. The target is unabashedly youth (Giroux, 2003), but youth removed from a school and peer group context into a more expansive and frightening discourse of fear encompassed by the evil psychopathology attributed to those who engage in acts of terrorism, in a crazy world. One pundit—the same who wrote the opening quote of this article—writing some 3 years after the 9/11 attacks, sought to redefine Columbine as not just a "school shooting," but as something much more. His comment is a classic example of the "superpredator" (Muschert, 2007a) as well as retrospective interpretation, in which past events are redefined in view of present meanings and interpretations (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1963; Rosenhan, 1973):

> Harris and Klebold would have been dismayed that Columbine was dubbed the "worst *school* shooting in American history." They set their sights on eclipsing the world's greatest mass murderers, but the media never saw past the choice of venue. The school setting drove analysis in precisely the wrong direction. (Cullen, 2004)

The redefinition of Columbine and associated school shootings would continue through several years of press reports about incidents in which students threatened, planned, and engaged in school related threats.

Students who threaten school violence and other disruptions are increasingly being charged with terrorism. This has happened in New Jersey, Kansas, Michigan, and Arizona (Topo, 2006). Several Arizona students have been arrested and charged with terrorism because they threatened to harm students and hold others hostage, including one student who actually put a knife to the throat of another student. Fifteen-year-old Brent Clark was charged with kidnapping, aggravated assault, and terrorism. Having already served 8 months in jail, he faced a 25-year prison sentence on the terrorism charge. A county attorney explained the problem with this kind of case. After noting that police and prosecutors have become more focused (and trained) in assessing charges for alleged threats, she added,

> "You can't just label every teen who makes a dark or Goth drawing a threat," Wells said. Police and prosecutors first try to determine how credible and serious a threat is and whether a youth has the resources, intent and motivation to pull it off. Authorities will look at the family, school and social dynamics as well, Wells said. "It's not by any means an exact science or check list," she said. (Grado, 2008, p. A7)

A Michigan prosecutor agreed, citing not just a threatening note, but the possession of weapons at a student's home:

> You would see that this was clearly an act of terrorism. . . . It wasn't a fight between two kids. It was, essentially, one kid holding a school hostage. (Topo, 2006, p. 7D)

A law professor who directs the University of Maryland Center for Health and Homeland Security noted that treating all domestic attacks as terrorism and charging

troubled teenagers as terrorists "cheapens the war on terror." He speculated on another organizational reason that such charges might be filed:

> "I don't know what they achieve except [that] it looks like a prosecutor is doing a wonderful job," Greenberger says. "In the end of the year, when they tote up what they've done for terrorism, they include these kinds of cases in it." (Topo, 2006, p. 7D)

Defining school shootings as terrorism is an incredible act of power by officials who are adding their discursive slant to a complex problem. Muschert's (2007a, p. 62) typology of types of school shootings is informed by an exceptional analysis of the characteristics of school shootings since 1968. His typology suggests that Columbine was a "rampage shooting"—defined as one in which a member or former member such as a student, employee, or former employee engages in the shooting. Four other types include mass murders, targeted shootings, government shootings, and terrorist attacks—with the latter category defined as individuals or groups engaging in violent acts to advance political or ideological goals. There is little in the Columbine shootings that would justify defining it as "terrorist," according to these criteria, but such definitions are less data-driven than politically charged. As suggested throughout this article, there are good organizational reasons to pursue the terrorism label. It is more entertaining for the mass media, as well as being potentially more politically expedient for politicians.

Funding is a contributing reason for defining Columbine as a terrorist act, but that did not emerge until after 9/11. Columbine was grotesque enough to attract police and security funding, including the federal government's expansion of its Community Oriented Police Services (COPS) program. However, the emphasis on fighting terrorism resulted in reducing the funding for this program from $180 million in 2002 to $8.5 million in 2005 (Cauchon, 2005). Much of this funding was for security at schools. An assistant superintendent in Liberty, Missouri, noted that they had applied for a $3.4 million federal grant for metal detectors, surveillance systems, and counseling programs (C. Jones, 1999).

Security remained a concern after 9/11, but there was a shift toward preparing for terrorism. These policy actions helped shift the discourse and definition of Columbine and school shootings. The Department of Homeland Security provided cities, police departments, and schools with tens of millions of dollars to pursue terrorism security issues, although some officials questioned whether there was adequate funding for other school monitoring (Kelley, 2008).

Security and safety are part of the subtext of fear that is displayed in news reports and political action. Politicians have helped construct the aftermath of Columbine and terrorism as a mandate to not only protect children, but to attack others (opponents) for not doing enough to tighten security. New Jersey's acting governor stressed how important the safety of students in some 2,400 schools was to him and suggested in his State of the State address that others were not doing enough: "I will

leave no stone unturned in my effort to keep our children safe from the horrors of terrorism" (James, 2005). A Republican opponent called it a "political ploy" and a "disgraceful use of fear tactics," adding,

> "To single out schools, is in essence to make them a target," Mr. Lonegan said. "What about shopping centers? What about sporting events? What about synagogues on Saturday, churches on Sunday? There is no reason to believe that schools are subject to terrorist attacks more than these other places. And our local police can do the job." (James, 2005)

Columbine as terrorism has been institutionalized in schools throughout the country as many require evacuation and lockdown drills (Addington, 2009). The significance of lockdowns changed after the 9/11 attacks, when government warnings were issued routinely about likely terrorist threats. Tom Ridge, head of Homeland Security, issued one early in February 2003 and suggested that homes could be protected from a bio terror attack with duct tape and plastic sheeting. Connecticut residents took the warning seriously. Paul West of Winchester, Connecticut, completely wrapped his 1800s farm house in plastic sheeting, and many residents of New Canaan stocked up on food and water. The school system's adjustment to reports about Columbine, and then 9/11, organizationally joined these events through bureaucratic requirements, particularly communication equipment and protocols, including drills:

> "We're in much better shape than we were a year or so ago," Thomas Murphy, a spokesman, said. "*Columbine opened our eyes* [italics added], and crisis-management plans then focused on if there was an intruder. Since 9/11, we had to take another look." (Gordon, 2003, p. 14CN)

The lockdown drills changed and became more sophisticated over time. One format was that when the drill commences, an "intruder"—often a school official—plays the role of a terrorist or shooter, who stalks the hall, checking classroom doors, listening for any noise that may indicate the presence of students. Of course, the drills did not always work out as planned, because some police officers would text their children at school and warn them about the coming raid (Kelley, 2008).

The use of cameras and surveillance in schools increased after Columbine and was further reinforced following 9/11. The sense of discipline and precaution pervades many of the news accounts, especially when Columbine "copycats" occurred on its various anniversaries. But this surveillance also led to more control of students (Marx & Muschert, 2007), serving as a warning that they were being watched (C. Jones, 1999).

The emphasis on the language of terrorism rather than, say, "mixed-up kids," is part of the discourse of fear. The language of school shootings and terrorism were joined in news reports about New Jersey teacher training and orientation (James, 2005). The concern with safety in a context of fear orients school administrators and

teachers to ascribe motives to all would-be student shooters as terrorists, while guiding interaction and discourse that constitutes the teaching environment as a place of discipline and surveillance to prevent violent acts, including those that are "prankish" and harmless pseudo-copycat ploys for attention. Such an environment and fear-prevention discourse fundamentally changes the school environment and the relationship between teachers and students. One reflective teacher noted,

> "The number of fatalities has been quite low since Columbine," says Marsha Levick, legal director of the Juvenile Law Center in Philadelphia. "Fear shouldn't cause us to lose our way in handling discipline problems at school." (Cauchon, 2005)

Conclusion

An important lesson of Columbine is that a horrible event can be cast within an expansive discourse such as terrorism. The Columbine shootings in 1999 were neither the first nor the last violent incident on school grounds, but they were the most important in shaping a cultural narrative about school, youth, and popular culture. These shootings and terrorism were reflexively connected through the discourse of fear and expanded social control and policies that helped legitimate the war on terror. Despite their rare occurrence, such events were cast within the discourse of fear as a threat to the safety of all children, who were under the protection of school organizations and administrators. It fell to the latter to help make sense of such events and to "do something," to take steps to find the causes and prevent their recurrence. This was a similar logic that guided discourse and official actions following the 9/11 attacks, which not only contributed to the terrorism dimension of the discourse of fear but also expanded the news space to encompass school violence.

News reports and analyses about Columbine offered fresh frames, transforming it from local to national and even international relevance. The quest to make sense out of this and other shootings, including even more brutal shootings in later years at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois Universities, led claims-makers moral entrepreneurs, and journalists to retrospectively connect the most recent event with previous ones but particularly the rhetoric and organizational responses that followed from Columbine. It was after Columbine that official national attention, (e.g., the FBI analyzed data) was brought to bear on the search for causative factors in the events that unfolded at Littleton, Colorado, as well as other schools (Cullen, 2004). Those efforts received a lot of media attention, and most important, discourse used in Columbine was recirculated, reinforced, and amplified.

Officials at all levels of government, including school boards, opted for more surveillance, lockdown drills, and efforts to prevent more of the same, including programs to offset the ubiquitous exclusiveness and cruelty (e.g., bullying) of school subcultures. One example was "Jocks Against Bullies," initiated in 2008. Its aim was

to sensitize school leaders to the concerns of "outsider" students (Roberts, 2008). These programs stressed intervention and prevention within the culture of the schools (e.g., peer groups), whereas the terrorism emphasis imposed an external order and logic on schools. The school culture emphasis on estranged, lonely, and misdirected youth reached out to community, familial, and school social structures. Indeed, even when police officers were included on campuses to deal initially with "gangs" and violence, they were incorporated into the school culture, often assuming the role of mentors. Armed police became more common on campuses after Columbine and 9/11, as "suburbs are calling police in to deal with problems that used to be handled by teachers and parents" (CBSNewsTranscripts, 2004).

The 9/11 attacks were defined as part of a terrorism world, a condition and state of affairs rather than a strategy by our enemies (Altheide, 2004). School shootings were only occasionally linked to the terrorism of gangs prior to 9/11. Columbine and other school shootings were referred to as terrorist activities after the 2001 attacks. This connection was manifested in plays and literature, but especially journalistic accounts. The perpetrators of Columbine and 9/11 were even linked in some analyses, as motives were easily ascribed to attacks on susceptible innocents. Governmental action to prevent terrorism—and to arouse national concerns for impending wars—cautioned citizens about imminent danger, including targeting of schools. These programs, plus funding opportunities to increase surveillance and profiling, were based on the notion that school violence is also terrorism. Youth suspected of planning, talking about, or engaging in such activities were more likely to be charged with terrorism. There was more talk about safe schools, avoiding fear, and cooperating with school officials and others to heighten surveillance and discipline and to have "zero tolerance" for all forms of terrorism.

The Bush administration's manipulation of language and use of illogic in constructing terrorism as a rationale for war is apparent in the transformation of Columbine from a school shooting to an act of terrorism. Analysis of the rhetoric and reasoning in justifying the Iraq war illustrates the power of logic and framing:

> And instead of adhering to linguistic conventions to invoke empirical facts to legitimate claims, the Bush administration used creative syntactical forms to convolute the phenomena and the discourse enacting it. All these practices—ranging from ignoring contradictory data and dismissing alternative perspectives to oversimplifying issues and applying circular reasoning—tamper with the fragility of political conventions aimed at a stable order. (Chang & Mehan, 2008, p. 479)

Aspects of media coverage of "the Iraq war and terrorism" and "Columbine and school shootings" emphasized evil and pathological character traits, as well as the necessity to take strong action. With Iraq and terrorism, this meant attacking without provocation, whereas students implicated in the planning, discussion of, or conduct of school shootings would be charged with terrorism.

There is scant evidence that the redefinition of school shootings as terrorism has made any impact on reducing shootings, other than expanding the purview of social control agencies that are involved in the effervescent war on terror and, prior to that, the war on drugs. The focus on terrorism does promote taking direct action "before it is too late," even when the "it" is not clear. Actions taken to curtail drug use and weapons on campus have restricted students' rights while legitimating untoward use of force. For example, the principal of Stratford High School in Goose Creek, South Carolina, suspected that drugs were being sold on campus. He had previously installed 76 security cameras so he could watch the students' every move, including what he thought were drug transactions. He ordered an armed police raid that did not turn up any drugs but did frighten students and their parents. In the morning of November 5, 2003, 17 armed officers with dogs descended on the students when they arrived in the morning, ordering them to get down, and putting several in handcuffs. That it was early in the morning (6:35 a.m.) when only 107 students of more than 2,000 had arrived at school—two thirds of them Black—suggested that it was racially informed. One student said he felt like he was in a crack house that had been busted, while another observed,

> I assumed that they were trying to protect us, that it was like Columbine, that somebody got in the school that was crazy or dangerous. . . . But then a police officer pointed a gun at me. It was really scary. (Lewin, 2003)

Another added, "I thought it was, like, a terrorist attack or something like—or somebody had a gun in the school." Reverend Jessie Jackson opined, "They thought it was a *terrorist* attack. It was" (CBSNewsTranscripts, 2004). A federal court ruled 3 years later that the students involved in the raid were entitled to a $1.2 million settlement (see http://www.feedsfarm.com/article/71851f30afa8baff3a74622ca8d5239caf9e7d1b.html).

Notwithstanding the horror stories like Stratford High School, we do not know the consequences on schools of such protective efforts, although it is likely that the recalcitrant school cultures will find ways to resist many intrusions and bureaucratic directives (Altheide, 1998; P. M. Hall, 1997; Spencer, 1996). Nevertheless, the discourse of fear is strengthened as more public discussion invokes terrorism threats and implores citizens to cooperate with the new world order to keep us all safe. Future research will clarify the consequences of such definitions.

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