

George Mason University COURSE RESERVES - ARTICLE

**Article/Chapter Title:**  
*"The Bully Economy"*

**Article/Chapter Author:**  
*Jessie Klein*

**Journal/Book Title:**  
*The Bully Society*

Volume:  
Issue:  
Month/Year: 2012  
Pages: 155-178

**Course Dept/Num.:** ENGH302  
**Course Section:** A5M  
**Course Location:** Summer - Fairfax  
Campus  
**CRN:** 40105

**Call #:** BF637.B85 K584 2012  
**Library:** Fenwick Stacks  
**TN:** 452698

NOTICE: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S.C.). **Further electronic distribution of "All rights reserved" copyrighted material is prohibited without permission of the copyright holder.**

## The Bully Economy

Schools are microcosms of American society where students are told that financial wealth and superficial gender markers are compulsory for social acceptance. They learn these lessons from each other but also from grown-ups—parents, teachers, and the wider culture they inhabit. As they prepare to enter the adult workforce and social life, children come to understand that being perceived as the richest or prettiest, or the most powerful or confident, could dramatically enhance their futures—and that without these marks of American success they may become lifelong outcasts. They also learn to see life as a zero-sum game, where they can win only if someone else loses, rise only by ensuring that someone else falls. These values are at the core of bullying behavior, and they are also the foundation upon which much of the economic, political, and social life of our nation is built.

Not all cultures are so obsessively focused on winning. In the Southwest, for instance, coaches say that teams of Hopi Indians want to win but that they often try not to win because they don't want to embarrass their opponents. In some traditional cultures, the game isn't over until the two sides are tied. They work hard to make sure no one loses.<sup>1</sup> Even in Europe, as T. R. Reid writes in "The European Social Model," some core human needs are seen as everyone's birthright rather than as something to be "won" through competition with one's compatriots. "To Americans," Reid writes, "it is simply a matter of common sense that rich families get better medical care and education than the poor; the rich can afford the doctors at the fancy clinics and the tutors to get their kids into Harvard. But this piece of common sense does not apply in most of Europe. The corporate executive in the back seat of the limo, her chauffeur up front, and the guy who pumps the gas for them all go to the same doctor and the same hospitals and send their children to the same (largely free) universities."<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, however, hard-core competition and striving to be the best are generally considered vital to keeping people motivated and

functioning at optimal levels. Harsh inequalities are considered, at best, an unfortunate consequence. Yet gender pressures—and especially the expectation to embrace hypermasculine values and behaviors—are seldom examined in the context of the larger socioeconomic forces that shape them. In one of my criminal justice classes, I asked students to tell me what words they associated with capitalism. What qualities do you need to be successful in our society? The board filled up quickly: *competitive, aggressive, and powerful* were some of the first suggestions. At that point, we were discussing white-collar crime and the unprincipled behavior that had produced both the Enron scandal and the economic meltdown of recent years. Later in the course we discussed school shootings and their relationship to gender, and I asked my students to list some words they associated with masculinity. The same list emerged—*competitive, aggressive, and powerful*. Without intending to, my students had highlighted the link between the values of masculinity and capitalism.

The school shooters, for the most part, grew up in the 1980s or later. The rise in school shootings roughly coincides with the Reagan administration's restructuring of the American economic, political, and cultural landscape—a period that glorified unrestrained capitalism and reemphasized an "up by your own bootstraps" ethos. Following a landslide reelection in 1984, Reagan promised an America rich with freedom, individualism, and financial reward for those who skillfully met the standard, coupled with a lower degree of support for those who did not. Increasingly, success was defined in terms of power, economic attainment, and social status—the same barometers increasingly used, at the high school level, to assess masculinity.

Capitalism is hardly new to the United States, nor is the system's relationship to core American values. But as former labor secretary Robert Reich observed in his book *Supercapitalism*, in recent decades the power of unregulated, unrestrained capital has increased to such an extent that it has outstripped democracy as a primary foundation of our society. According to Reich, Americans became identified more as investors and consumers and less as citizens and members of a community.<sup>3</sup>

Further, in this same period, a slew of books documenting America's increasing social problems hit the shelves. The titles alone explain why Americans are more stressed, broke, unhappy, and doing whatever they can to survive: *The Overworked American* (1993), *The Overspent American* (1998), *The Cheating Culture* (2000), and *The Lonely American* (2009). Another set of recent titles document the new plagues with which our chil-

dren are grappling—increased anxiety, depression, materialism, and even narcissistic personality diagnosis: *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (2004); *The Road to Whatever: Middle-Class Culture and The Crisis of Adolescence* (2004); *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* (2006); and *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (2007).<sup>4</sup> Couple these telling titles with the alarming statistics depicting the United States as scoring highest on almost all of the worst social problems in the industrialized world (including murder, rape, and infant mortality), and it becomes less surprising that school bullying is so common here, or that its vicious and fatal retaliations in the form of shootings are more prevalent in the United States than in the rest of the world combined.<sup>5</sup>

### *What is a Compassionate Economy?*

Competitive and punishment-oriented schools mirror the combative workforce. In the larger world, adults are given little support if they meet hard times and are unable at some point to work at their best, or work at all. Similarly, as adolescents struggle to find their identities and their place in the world, the emotional ups and downs of their journey can undermine academic performance. Even students who tend to do well risk failure, and their confrontations with widespread cliques and bullying only add to the stress. Children's understanding of this antagonistic culture feeds their fury and fear as they find that their every move in school so profoundly affects their future prospects.

In his book *Going Postal: Rage, Murder, and Rebellion: From Reagan's Workplaces to Clinton's Columbine and Beyond*, Mark Ames writes: "The kids are stressed out not only by their own pressure at school, but by the stress their parents endure in order to earn enough money to live in [a prestigious] school district. . . . Everyone is terrified of not 'making it' in a country where the safety net has been torn to shreds."<sup>6</sup> Children who might otherwise look forward to a life after high school see, in the model of their parents and the larger society around them, a similarly brutal environment.

While their safety nets are weakening as well, in most European countries the government still takes some responsibility for ensuring that everyone has basic health care, education, housing, food, child care, elder care, and even indefinite unemployment if necessary. There are real limits

on work hours (in Finland, for instance, a six-hour workday), and mandatory paid vacation and holiday time is often four to six weeks.

In contrast, even before the start of the latest recession, workers in twentieth-century America were losing some of the gains they had fought for in the earlier part of that century. The eight-hour day (forty-hour week) that Americans finally won in 1938, under President Roosevelt's New Deal Fair Labor Standards Act, is a dim memory for most Americans today, who tend to toil more often at fifty to seventy or more hours per week.<sup>7</sup> Americans once hoped to achieve the demands made by the Welsh social reformer Robert Owen for eight hours of work, eight hours of leisure, and eight hours of sleep, but most now have little if any leisure and much less sleep. We are working much longer hours than our counterparts in other industrialized countries. John P. Walsh and Anne Zacharias-Walsh write in "Working Longer, Living Less" that the average American works seventy more hours per year than his or her Japanese counterpart and 350 hours or nine more weeks per year than Europeans.<sup>8</sup> Americans tend to work more hours and then spend money paying others to do the services they don't have time to do because they are working.

Because we Americans work so much, it becomes more difficult to take care of our children and our homes. In many European countries, the government pays mothers as well as fathers to stay home with their young children so they can return to work when the children are older. In the United States, middle- and upper-class adults make money and often pay other people to do these tasks; many small children in the United States are under the care of nannies or some other form of child care worker. Rather than a system designed to meet human needs, our economy prioritizes profit. Instead of opportunities to nurture ourselves, and our friends and family, and larger community, our time is managed by someone else's drive to make money. Walsh and Zacharias-Walsh write that "to argue that an expensive factory should be left idle because workers are tired or that production should be organized using a less efficient but more comfortable process—is considered absurd."<sup>9</sup> Yet the "overworked American," to use Juliet Schor's term, does not necessarily generate more profit. As Anders Hayden notes, "Several shorter-hours innovators in Europe—Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Norway—are actually more productive *per hour* of labor than is the United States. Higher hourly productivity in these countries is almost certainly due, in part, to shorter work-time's beneficial effects on employee morale, less fatigue and burnout, lower absenteeism, higher quality of work, and better health."<sup>10</sup>

European economies tend to prioritize family and community as a primary value. The notion of "time affluence," not just "material affluence," is important—a concept that is less common in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Instead, Americans work longer and live with their family less. Walsh and Zacharias-Walsh write about one mother of two young children who summed up this collective quandary: "This is the only job I could get that paid enough for me to take care of them, but it never lets me be home when they need me. I can either feed them or be with them, never both."<sup>12</sup> The increased workday also prevents participation in community life—political organizations, social clubs, sports leagues, religious institutions—as well as family life, leading to what Robert Putnam called the "Bowling Alone" phenomenon; other research also notes a related plummeting of social connections and increased loneliness and isolation among Americans.<sup>13</sup>

In recent decades, the U.S. government has taken less responsibility for people's basic human needs. Life has become a struggle for many working parents, especially single working parents. In addition to lacking the government-supported universal health care that is available to citizens in virtually all European countries, the United States does less than any other industrialized country to support parents, who receive no legally mandated paid leave when a child is born or adopted. Among the 168 nations surveyed in a 2004 Harvard University study, 163 have paid maternity leave, while the United States stands in a category with Lesotho, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of economic support for American citizens means adults are under more pressure and stress to keep their jobs and succeed in them in order to support themselves and their families. Driven to succeed, with dwindling access to community, adults end up forming similar social cliques to those that fester in children's schools. Workplace massacres, then, tend to have causes that parallel those found in school shootings.

### *Workplace Shootings*

Some workplace killers were persistently harassed, intimidated, and ostracized by co-workers, while others felt unfairly treated by their bosses. Some sought revenge when they were fired or found their position or salary considerably reduced. Still others felt rejected by women

at home or at work. Just as in the school shootings, many seemed to be seeking to recover a lost sense of manhood.

"Real" men, we are told, must achieve power and wealth, yet at many turns men (and women) are undermined and humiliated at their jobs instead; for all kinds of reasons, men (and women) are let go or not well compensated for their labor. Thus perpetrators in workplace shootings sought instead to acquire masculine power through brutal means, proving their manhood by expressing what has been socially defined as "manly" rage.

In some cases, workplace shooters' difficulty with work mixed with a history of being bullied as a child. Nineteen-year-old James William Wilson, who killed an eight-year old girl, eight other students, and two teachers in an elementary school in Greenwood, South Carolina, in September of 1988, didn't have a job—but he was also ruminating about the ridicule he had endured during his own school years for being overweight and "dressing funny."

Workplace homicides increased significantly since the 1970s when they were virtually unheard of—and now average over 500 per year.<sup>15</sup> Some other statistics are also familiar: in one study, 91.6 percent of workplace shooters were male; at least 13.4 percent of the incidents reviewed involved some type of domestic violence as the motive; and 31.7 percent of workplace shootings occurred in a white-collar job setting.<sup>16</sup> Recall that in school shootings, which also took place in mostly white and wealthy suburban schools, masculinity pressures—including the presence of dating violence—were similarly frequent factors.

In Signal Hill, California, in 2007, three employees at a menu-printing company were injured when a gunman fired on the premises. The gunman was an employee of the company, and his hours at the plant had recently been reduced to zero. Before the SWAT team reached him inside the building, the shooter killed himself with a semiautomatic pistol.<sup>17</sup> In Indianapolis, Indiana, also in 2007, an employee brought a semiautomatic handgun into Crossroads Industrial Services, a company employing mostly people with disabilities, and shot three people in the cafeteria and one in an office. The gunman, who was on medication for bipolar disorder, said that his shooting of the three production workers and an office manager was "over respect."<sup>18</sup> In Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 2006, two weeks after Tyson Foods suspended him from his job, Julian English returned to Tyson's poultry processing plant with two pistols and shot and seriously wounded a co-worker.

The list goes on and on, and the same themes recur. In a broader sense, workplaces reflect the imperatives of our supercapitalist society, which is driving both adults and youth to extreme lengths as they struggle to compete. In *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, David Callahan writes that winner-take-all values and harsh economic conditions have increased the pressure to succeed so much that Americans are cutting corners and cheating to get ahead. This contemporary phenomenon is represented by high-profile cases in sports, finances, newspapers, and corporate law firms, as well as in everyday life, from students cheating on exams to music piracy, cable theft, and income tax fraud.

Callahan argues that "economic inequality has led to striking changes in our society."<sup>19</sup> As a result, people feel driven to survive and be successful by any means necessary. Then as they struggle to fend for themselves, American ideals and values are undermined. "Individualism and self-reliance have morphed into selfishness and self-absorption; competitiveness has become Social Darwinism; desire for the good life has turned into materialism; aspiration has become envy."<sup>20</sup>

Callahan documents how a cheating culture then pervades every kind of work environment. Sears auto workers, for example, were once paid a steady salary regardless of how many cars they fixed; today they are paid for each car they fix. Thus mechanics feel forced to make up new problems for their customers' cars so that they can meet their quotas and support their families.<sup>21</sup>

Callahan also observes that in some corporate law firms lawyers know that they place their bonuses at risk and are likely to be downsized in hard times if they don't meet their billing requirements. "Everyone knows who's billing the most," said Lisa Lerman, one of the nation's leading experts on corruption in law according to Callahan, "and it is not always the one who's working the most. The ones who are willing to play with the numbers are most likely to achieve their goals."<sup>22</sup>

Henry Blodget, the Wall Street star who worked for Prudential and then Merrill Lynch and was later accused of securities fraud, urged people to hold on to stock that privately he confessed was "a piece of junk," causing investors to lose billions in the tech stock crash. "The system was sordid," one analyst at Prudential said. "But because everyone knew it was sordid, it no longer seemed sordid anymore."<sup>23</sup>

These values figured prominently in the subprime mortgage crisis and subsequent financial meltdown and recession. Regulators like Alan

Greenspan, who for decades cavalierly insisted that the financial firms would “police themselves,” then expressed “shock” that short-term profit motives proved a more powerful motive on Wall Street than long-term sustainability.<sup>24</sup> Such motivations were the bedrock of the cutthroat culture on Wall Street, and anyone who failed to embrace them was unlikely to succeed. Workplaces, like schools, are in desperate need of structural change. These environments often make young and old alike feel invisible, alone, and insignificant, pressured to succeed at great costs to their own psyche and well-being. Collapsed with related strangulating gender pressures, competitive and alienating schools and workplaces do much to trigger the anger and self-hate that has motivated so many rampage shootings by children and adults alike.

### *Adult Status Wars*

Economic, political, and social pressures work together to produce harmful values, which in turn fuel destructive gender identities and incite conflicts and violence. The pressure to conform to these distorted ways of being starts early.

Children and adults alike need to be accepted, respected, and loved and will go to great lengths “to be seen.” While the status wars that go on in schools are often particularly blatant, the extreme competition and social exclusion found among adults, as well as the similarly ruthless dynamics modeled on TV, are the images students reflect in their schools.

More than ever before, Americans buy cars, clothes, homes, wine, and other commodities merely to create a particular image. Traditional gender norms still drive these purchases—cars that appear manly and fast; clothes that seem feminine and sexy, or masculine and tough; homes that reflect success and power. Even since the women’s rights movement and feminism became part of the public discourse, many men feel pressured to acquire “trophy wives” as evidence of both their monetary success and their sexual potency (which are often equated with one another), while many women—once again in a double bind—are expected to measure their own worth by some combination of their own achievements and their husband’s. Women are encouraged to believe that love—and their own worth as women—can be measured by the size of their diamond engagement rings, and men in turn are told that these same rings reflect their own success and power as a man.

By many accounts, the drive to acquire possessions as a means to achieve status and recognition has gotten much worse. "Seventies consumerism was manageable," writes Schor in *The Overspent American*. "The real problems started in the 1980s as an economic shift sent seismic shocks through the nation's consumer mentality. Competitive spending intensified."<sup>25</sup> The size of houses has doubled in less than fifty years, and the "right" home, neighborhood, and furniture are seen as the most important expressions of status in a given community; these possessions are used primarily by those on the higher rungs of the ladder to devalue those below. Such pressures, in fact, helped to create the housing bubble that has now burst, plunging the nation into recession. Those suffering most are the less affluent Americans who—longing to feel successful according to the external markers demanded of them, and lured by lenders who saw profits to be made, often through deceptive measures—took out mortgages and loans they could not afford and have now lost everything.

Just as status markers determine the treatment students receive from their peers in school, Schor notes that for adults "what you wear and drive affects how people treat you. In the past, researchers have found that if you delay at a green light, you are less likely to be honked at if you are in a prestige automobile.... In experiments, subjects characterize more favorably people pictured in front of upper-middle-class homes than those in front of lower-class homes. And studies have demonstrated what most people know already: the way you dress affects how salespeople treat you, even the price you are asked to pay in some contexts."<sup>26</sup>

Of course, status markers can also have a more profound effect on adults' lives, just as they do among teenagers. They help determine who will get a desirable job, who will be admitted to an elite club that in turn offers access to more wealth and influence, and who will be stopped by police while walking or driving down the street. Just as it does in school, lack of status in adult life can be emotionally devastating. Schor notes that lacking money to buy symbols of status results often in "feelings of deprivation, personal failure and deep psychic pain."<sup>27</sup>

I heard plenty of stories related to adult status wars in the United States when I talked to parents. Anna, a mother of three children aged seventeen, thirteen, and eleven, in a northeastern wealthy suburb, said that in her experiences she found that "all bullying comes from parents." The children who bully usually have bullies for parents. "You can hear the moms talking badly about other people with their girlfriends— 'She's weird,' or 'She's divorced.' Then they make fun of other drivers in road rage. Kids

will exhibit this same behavior when they see their parents talking badly about others," Anna explained. "It's so apparent at the football and soccer games. The parents are critical, envious, and gossipy, tightly run, high-strung, and intolerant; the kids take it on and become bullies."

Anna explained that there is tremendous pressure to fit in and conform in their town. The rules are palpable: "Just like the children get teased if they don't fit in: 'It makes me cooler by pointing out you are different,'" said Anna. The same culture is evident among the adults. "Everyone talks about the same news on television. You have to wear pastel when you go to a PTA meeting. If you're against the war, don't talk about it when new people are around. Try to blend in. Don't swear. Criticize people who don't look right. Don't take a stand against or for anything." In fact, Anna exclaimed, often the parents make fun of kids, too, in the same way kids do. "I heard a group of mothers at a luncheon talking about a fourth-grade boy. 'That kid is gay,' they said. I had a fit. I said: 'How could we know, he's a little baby. Don't label him,' and finally, 'So what if he's gay, or different? We're supposed to be a good influence on our kids—at minimum we shouldn't pick on them.'"

In a less affluent but also wealthy suburban community, I heard people feeling sorry for a neighbor because of his car—a twenty-year-old Volvo. Anna, in the wealthier suburb, pointed out that people distinguish themselves from others through class comparisons. "Affluence is a big deal here. They talk about the poor families who can't buy the Ugg pink boots or go on vacation on the holidays. We're Stepford wives. Like Dante's Inferno, compare and contrast—the social and financial status of each family permeates the lives of our children." When adults feel they have to conform to be accepted in social groups, children are likely to feel the same way.

Veronica, also from an affluent suburb, talked about how insecure her mother was about the amount of money they had. She was always encouraging Veronica to feel sorry for kids who had less money than they did and went on seemingly less wonderful vacations. The attitude seeped into Veronica's peer group, where fierce competitions were waged about who went on the best vacations and had the coolest "stuff." "You should feel bad for Tina," Veronica's mother would say: "They envy you. Their home is a mess; they don't have as nice a home as we do." Veronica's mother's concerns defined the way Veronica related to people at school in terms of status and hierarchies. A common concern among the girls in her school became who was wealthier—and therefore "better"—than whom.

Tommy came from a wealthy suburb too. "It's a tough town if you're middle class," he explained. Tommy said his family wasn't able to go to many of the village activities because they were less wealthy and therefore outcasts. When the village had a seventy-fifth anniversary party, Tommy's parents and some of his other more middle- and working-class friends' families signed up to come. They were dismayed when they got there and found that an extra table had been created for them "in the back corner by the kitchen door. It was noticeable that we were excluded from certain activities." Even in church functions, Tommy said, "the pastor would schmooze with the upper class; unless you donate a significant amount to the church, he acts like he doesn't know who you are. The wealthy people give a lot to the church and then they are very picky about who they allow to be their friends."

Beverly, from another wealthy community, concurred. She and her husband, who raised their children in the area, used to be board members for a number of charities; they often went to their gala fund-raising events. Now gala tickets can run \$1,200 a person, says Beverly. "We can't afford it anymore; the establishment is being forced out."

Appearance is another factor that can either contribute to or lower status. Parents of girls are often as obsessed with their daughters' appearance and popularity as the girls themselves are, and children of both sexes learn from their parents and from the larger society to value looks above deeper qualities. A 1998 study by economists Daniel Hamermesh and Jeff Biddle used survey data to examine the impact of appearance on a person's earnings. In each survey, the interviewer who asked the questions also rated the respondent's physical appearance. Respondents were classified into one of the following groups: below average, average, or above average. Hamermesh and Biddle found that the "plainness penalty" was 9 percent and that the "beauty premium" was 5 percent after controlling for other variables, such as education and experience. In other words, a person perceived to look below average tended to earn 9 percent less per hour, and a person perceived to look above average tended to earn 5 percent more per hour than a person perceived to look "average." Hamermesh and Biddle found that the "plainness penalty" and the "beauty premium" existed across all occupations.<sup>28</sup> Such prejudice, or lookism, as Chancer describes it, could well be ameliorated if adults and children alike were encouraged to be more accepting and appreciative of themselves and one another independent of their looks.<sup>29</sup>

Instead, our competitive, status-focused culture pressures adults to become part of the gender police for both boys and girls. "Parents as well as kids refer to girls as *slutty*," Anna said. "But where is the parenting? Who is buying them the clothes?" Anna despaired about eight-year-old girls who had words like *juicy*, *precious*, and *princess* "plastered on their butts . . . They come from affluent, seemingly cultured homes. Aren't they concerned about the message they are giving their children? We're not just instilling in the girls a sense that they should see themselves as a sexual object, we actually spell it out in plain old English."

Parents are not only compelled to encourage status seeking in their children but they are also made to feel a need to acquire status on behalf of their children. The *New York Times* reports that competition for private preschools has "propelled to such a frenzy . . . it could be mistaken for a kid-die version of *The Apprentice*."<sup>30</sup> Parents are told that if their four-year-olds don't make it into a top preschool, their chances of getting into an excellent college are seriously diminished—which in turn means less chance for success, economic and otherwise, in a society where winning feels like the only option. A child's admittance to a prestigious school, a sought-after dance program, or a varsity team confers status on the parents as well.

Parents often tell me about the bully environments in some of these schools. One of my neighbors told me that there were parents at her child's school who had parties for their three-year-olds that excluded certain children, even though there was a policy that all children in the class must be invited to all parties. "I felt hurt," my neighbor confided. "Who made the decision not to invite Russell, and why weren't we invited?" Another neighbor told me about a girl who was hitting other children at a party she went to with her four-year-old child. "The parent is a bully," my neighbor said. "I can see where she learned this behavior."

These social cultures contrast significantly with the environments in Denmark's schools, according to Richard Morrill. Morrill writes about the community focus of schools there, where the same children, teachers, and parents are with each other through sixth grade. Then

each child has a ready-made group to rely on and interact with during his or her developing years. Traditionally in Denmark, birthday parties, class parties, trips, and so on are arranged at the level of the school class. A child may well have good friends outside the class, but many of a child's social activities will be focused on the class. It is considered extremely bad form not to invite a classmate to a social

event. Consequently, no child has to worry about being excluded or being a social outcast. There is a peer group that will include him or her as a matter of course.<sup>31</sup>

Just as children need more supportive communities, adults are recognizing that they may need more welcoming programs too. In wealthy areas in Connecticut, so many new families said they felt excluded from the social life of their towns that dozens of "newcomer clubs" were created by those who felt shunned and isolated.<sup>32</sup> When adults feel belittled, disrespected, alienated, and disconnected, it is also harder for them to get children the help they need. No wonder, then, that bullying becomes accepted as a normal aspect of both adults' and children's lives.

Further, parents are at the mercy of the now ubiquitous advertisements their children are bombarded by at every turn. We are often quick to say that children's problems are their parents' fault, but parents are up against multi-billion-dollar industries that are putting all their stock into getting children hooked on their status-conferring commodities. Parents sometimes can't imagine why their daughters, for instance, are obsessed with princesses and the related clothes and other purchases their girls now demand. Disney, on the other hand, has worked hard to make sure it is Disney values these girls aspire toward, rather than any individual family's particular preferences.

Advertisements that equate particular purchases with social survival increasingly target boys too. One colleague described his childhood aptly: "As boys we felt pressured to look cool in a particular way, and we were terribly self-conscious about our shortcomings in a society focused on looks and presentation of self." Now that he is an adult, he says, it's much the same, only "now it's more expensive, because there is the illusion that you can buy the clothes or other products you need to perfect that image and thus become acceptable."

### *Cradle to Grave*

The messages adults receive as they battle through the status wars are transmitted wholesale to children and teens. As part of their strategy to boost sales and profits, corporations have increasingly directed their efforts toward the "youth market." In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein discusses the rise of "branding," in which companies seek to "sell" not just

products but also the illusion of a status, identity, and lifestyle that go along with them. Although the power of the brand now extends to all age groups, it is most prevalent among teenagers—no accident, according to Klein and Alissa Quart in her book *Branded*, who documents a concerted shift toward marketing to teens and even younger children, beginning in the 1980s.<sup>33</sup> The companies believed—rightly, as it turned out—that youth, with their fragile identities and susceptibility to peer pressure, would do anything to possess the “right” brands. It is worth noting that Klein chose to subtitle her book *Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*.

In 1998, Western International Media Century City and Lieberman Research Worldwide conducted a study on nagging to help companies figure out how to get children to nag their parents most effectively so that parents would yield to their wishes. The study was created to help companies increase their profit margins rather than to help parents cope with nagging or to improve family dynamics, says Susan Linn, professor of psychiatry at Harvard’s Baker Children’s Center. Lucy Hughs, vice president of Initiative Media and Co-Creator of this study, “The Nag Factor,” explained that children “are tomorrow’s adult consumers, so start talking with them now, build that relationship when they’re younger . . . and you’ve got them as an adult.” Hughs continued: “Somebody asked me, ‘Lucy, is that ethical? You’re essentially manipulating these children.’ Well, yeah, is it ethical? I don’t know. But our role at Initiative is to move products. And if we know you move products with a certain creative execution, placed in a certain type of media vehicle, then we’ve done our job.”<sup>34</sup>

Given this new trend to spend billions marketing to children, parents are up against powerful campaigns intent on getting children and teens to think they “need” expensive products. Parents are expected to provide these products and are told to handle the bullying that often takes place if children don’t have the “right” status items in school. Parents are also often blamed for capitulating to children’s demands either too much or not enough. They may want their children to have less brand-oriented values, but they also feel pressured by the need to buy certain things so that their children will be treated well in school. Even if they are inclined to resist the consumer culture, parents must battle these industries that profit from promoting brand-oriented values among children and teens. The fact that advertising is now allowed in schools, museums, and other previously off-limits children’s spaces makes it even more likely that children will be manipulated by these larger forces. Dr. Linn says: “One family

cannot combat an industry that spends 12 billion dollars a year trying to get their children. They can't do it."<sup>35</sup>

Marketing firms try to hook children on products from "cradle to grave." This is a distinctly different use of the term from Sweden's use—a country that provides for numerous and generous "cradle-to-grave" public support programs for the entire population in the interests of increasing economic equality.

The U.S. cradle-to-grave marketing trend epitomizes the bully society. Companies push us to buy particular items with direct or more subtle advertisements cautioning that *not* purchasing will contribute to one's social or economic demise. People often feel they must have all sorts of consumer items that have contributed to the increased debt among Americans. In *The Overspent American*, Schor writes that Americans have more debt and save less than any industrialized country in the world.<sup>36</sup>

Cradle-to-grave marketing strategies then tend to try to micromanage the minutiae of social life to maximize profits. George Ritzer shows in his article "The 'New' Means of Consumption" that consumers have become a primary object of twenty-first century exploitation. Instead of exploiting only workers, companies devise ways to make profits by manipulating consumers.<sup>37</sup>

Companies still make money by ensuring that workers are paid as little as possible, and they still expect them to work long hours, but the new emphasis is on getting consumers to work so that fewer workers are needed in the first place. In fast-food restaurants, for instance, consumers are expected to bus their own food so that waiters are unnecessary, and to throw away their own debris so that sanitation workers become dispensable. Consumers now even scan their own products for price checks at superstores and do their own checkouts at self-service counters in markets and gas stations.

In addition to getting consumers to work, companies try to control communication between salespeople and customers in order to maximize profits; they manufacture scripted conversations to replace what could otherwise be a more spontaneous moment between these individuals. Such simulated conversations replace authentic self-expression and interactions. In earlier days, people were more likely to ask about each other's day and care about the answer to someone's "How are you?" Instead we have "Can I get you anything else? Did you find everything you need?" Consumers respond in kind, "Yes, thank you," and move quickly out of the store. Sales conversations are meant to increase the amount of money a

given customer will spend and to move each customer through the doors quickly so as to make way for the next potential sale. People who work at registers are often penalized (i.e., docked in pay) if they spend too much time between rings—an indication that they may be having a conversation, rather than moving things along toward increasing sales. Then our conversations and interactions become merely copies, or simulations, as Ritzer explains—using the notion of “*simulacra*,” a theoretical contribution from postmodern French sociologist Jean Baudrillard—of what could otherwise be authentic connections.<sup>38</sup> These scripted conversations bear little resemblance to the human interaction that might otherwise develop if people were allowed to freely interact in the given moment.

The profit-oriented conversations we are expected to engage in while shopping pervade our other social relationships as well. Corporate focus groups work to create a “buzz” so that their products are the main topic of conversation among potential customers: “What is that? Where did you get that?” are examples of the consumer conversations that replace more meaningful discourses with one another as a result of carefully planned advertisements and other marketing strategies. Many of our social interactions focus on our looks and consumer purchases—using up opportunities in which people might otherwise speak about their experiences and the feelings and community concerns that matter to them.

In the absence of meaningful exchanges and honest and intimate sharing, people focus on buying accoutrements that they believe will win friends, popularity, status, and the envy of others. Human relationships are reduced to instruments for maximizing profit and status. In schools (and among adults), some popular discussions are “I like (or don’t like) what you’re wearing,” “This is how to lose weight (or gain muscle),” “How much did you have to pay for that bag (or car)?” “Is it real?” and “Are you invited to this or that exclusive party (where you will wear such and such)?”

The thoughts and actions of consumers are manipulated when companies get people to consume a greater variety of things that they don’t necessarily need and that may even cause them harm, writes Ritzer. Businesses tend to get consumers to buy in ways that help the sellers rather than the consumer. Ritzer includes a short list of such disadvantageous effects, which have escalated since supercapitalism took off in the eighties. For instance, fast-food restaurants lead people to eat foods that are harmful to their health because they are high in cholesterol, sugar, and salt. The rise of the fast-food industry parallels the rise in obesity rates, diabetes, and related heart troubles. Businesses work to get people to pay all the

money they have on hand and all the money they might get in the future, since credit cards have become a financial staple in American families. Credit card companies encourage "debt purchases" by offering new credit cards to pay off older ones. This keeps the money coming while crippling American families' savings and security. Elaborate shopping malls entice people to buy things they do not need, rest and eat at a restaurant, or participate in some other mall activity and then buy some more. TV shopping networks and cybermalls permit people to shop twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, making it more likely that people will make impulsive and unnecessary purchases.<sup>39</sup> Where historically imperialism was more focused on colonizing and controlling other countries, Jürgen Habermas writes that "colonization of the lifeworld" is a feature of advanced capitalism.<sup>40</sup> People become unable, not just unwilling, to question the status quo. We are seduced into purchasing products and persuaded that these items or services will boost our confidence and social standing. Then we ended up viewing these commodities as essential to our identities.

Convinced, then, that we are too fat or that we need to drive a sexier car, or that we embody any related social deficiency, we become anxious and unfulfilled on a daily basis. Buying expensive products rarely relieves the stress, as new insecurities created by advertisements promoting other products that promise to relieve even more inadequacies. Anxiety levels in the United States are extremely high and have increased markedly since the 1970s.<sup>41</sup>

We have become easy prey to new forms of entertainment—the preoccupying sounds and sights of video games, 3-D films, and other hyperlit and fast-moving virtual realities, amusement parks, superstores, and advertisements. These promise to distract us from the loneliness and anxiety that have become so common in the United States and allow us to withstand our distraught feelings longer. We develop a higher tolerance for our discontent—and look forward instead to the next "high." At the same time young and old alike are increasingly receiving diagnoses like attention deficit disorders.

Further, Americans suffer not just from typical addictions to alcohol and related substances but also from dependence on overspending, debting, shopping, sex, and food, as well as sexting and other Internet activities. Many people are unaware that they are engaged in compulsive behaviors in their own desperate efforts to find some sense of comfort in a social, economic, and political environment that prospers (in both its legitimate and its underground forms) from people's anxiety and stress. Consumed by unease and malaise, and distanced from the deeper happier

ness that comes from having meaningful relationships with oneself and others, people often look for momentary joy in various forms of obsessive behaviors and inadvertently treat themselves, as well as others, badly.

Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) articulates this phenomenon, as does Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).<sup>42</sup> Huxley predicted in his classic dystopia that Americans would be hooked on "soma" or happy pills and desperate for entertainment as a distraction from their banal lives. Postman argues effectively that this time has come, writing that Americans are intent on "amusing themselves to death." We are addicted to all sorts of entertainment, and the proportion of people on antidepressant and antianxiety medications increases exponentially every year. One in ten American women takes antidepressants, and the use of such drugs by all adults has nearly tripled between 1994 and 2004; between 1994 and 2002, the number of children taking antidepressants also tripled.<sup>43</sup> Americans convey in many different ways that they are desperately trying to manage their increased depression, anxiety, and isolation. But rather than change the social conditions that breeds this discontent, more of us are taking different forms of "soma" to just get by.

Yet these distraught feelings are directly connected to an economy that thrives on anxiety. Without the gender pressures and status wars that incite relentless consumption, capitalism as it is today could well implode. People would no longer be vulnerable to feeling not man or woman enough—or need to purchase everything and anything that might prove they had achieved related status. Americans spend more on beauty products each year than they do on education and social services combined.<sup>44</sup> Industries that profit from persuading people that they are unattractive and need to be somehow "fixed" would surely crumble if people appreciated themselves and others more independent of anyone's ability to replicate Barbie and GI Joe faces and figures. We would then be unmoved by products that promise to improve the self, attract a partner, or otherwise elevate our social positions.

The pressure to look right, rather than develop internally strong and centered selves and relationships, drives young and old alike to work to purchase more, and converse less. A century ago, labor activists sacrificed their lives to protest excessive child labor, and in 1938 President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which placed limits on many forms of such work so that youth could instead pursue their education. Nonetheless, young people are now demanding to work long hours during the school year so they can buy the stuff they need to be accepted at school. One study showed that 150,000 minors were illegally employed

each week; the result is not just decreased time to do homework but also increased depression and substance abuse.<sup>45</sup> Far from demonstrating an important work ethic, many youth are forsaking their education on behalf of menial jobs to buy themselves superficial brand markers.

Barbara says that in her rural town they work at McDonalds, Hanaford, and the local ice cream parlor. "Kids do whatever they can to get the 'new cool thing,'" she says. "They work for it so they can buy it themselves or their parents buy it for them." This occurs even though many in her area live in or on the verge of poverty. Allison Pugh writes about the "symbolic indulgence" some parents engage in—buying children status objects even when they can't afford them, to make sure their children have the right artillery for school.<sup>46</sup>

Lola, from a middle- to upper-class suburban school, talked about how she started working to keep up with the other kids, most of whom came from families wealthier than hers. "There was a difference between those who had money and those who didn't. I felt bad about it. My mother had two jobs and couldn't always give me money for lunch. I started working. The things I wanted I had to buy myself." Children are getting on the treadmill early, working in order to consume. They are also running up debt: according to a 2006 report, almost a third of high school seniors had their own credit card or one signed by a parent, and the average credit card debt for college freshmen was over \$1,500.<sup>47</sup>

Marketers exploit youths' desperate desire for status and social capital, but also their deep wish for connections with others, by equating those connections with the purchase of the right clothing or cell phone. "Kids want things they never wanted before," writes Quart, in *Branded*, "because non-salable objects like friendship are routinely juxtaposed with goods for sale."<sup>48</sup> This creates a mood of anxiety that can be dispelled only by buying. Brand marketers have a lock on teens' insecurity and their desperation to buy what they think they need to acquire human connection and support. Rebecca recalled working madly to keep up with the rich students at her school—making sure to brand herself as a popular girl with the right clothes. She couldn't afford most of the products the other girls had, but she struggled to fit in by devising ways to look as if she fit the bill. She managed to survive by joining the bullying of others girls and by acting as if she were wealthy too. But nowhere did she get the support she needed and the friendship she craved. At home she had to deal with her schizophrenic mother and absentee father, and she was teased mercilessly in her neighborhood for these perceived defi-

cieties. Rebecca told me she was grateful that she got teased only about her weight at school and that no one there knew about her mother. She was able to buy some brand-name clothes to minimize her social difficulties—something from Louis Vuitton or Prada as was expected in her school. But Prada in the end was a poor substitute for the compassion and love she craved.

Wendy admits that even as an adult she still feels a desperate need to acquire the prestigious objects that will win her acceptance. "I shop a lot now. I spend all my money on bags, clothing, jewelry, and makeup because I almost feel like me all by myself isn't good enough, and this is reinforced when I show someone my car and they want to be my best friend." Wendy told me that she longed for a particular Louis Vuitton bag:

I'm obsessed with this bag. Two or three years ago it was \$500, now it is \$700. I've been so close to getting that bag. I figure if I own this bag, people will know I'm well off and it is crucial that people know that I'm well off, but I'm not, but I try. But as long as people think that, I'm happy. I work for all my money. I'm a waitress. I've been a waitress for too long. Everyone has that bag. I'm taunted by it. The scary thing is that everyone has it. Is a bag this size worth \$700?

Wendy drew the bag for me on my notepad and continued: "I think I need it to fit in. But there's no way I would fit in." She sighed. "In elementary school, it was the Tiffany bracelet; in middle school it was the Kate Spade backpack; in high school it was the couture sunglasses. But this bag is the prettiest thing on the planet. I'm still stuck in high school. I need that item to be cool."

Wendy's lack of self-acceptance is in part created and encouraged by the status-seeking culture around her, and thus she is convinced that purchasing the right status markers will at least marginally improve her sense of self as well as her social position. Yet it is a vicious, expensive, and lonely cycle.

### *Looking for Authentic Connections*

In 2008, the consequences of such values became clearer as an economy of overconsumption, fueled by debt, collapsed. Less obvious are the huge social and emotional costs. We suffer from what Richard Ryan calls "time poverty."

Ryan said in a 2008 interview: "People work more because they want more stuff, but it costs psychologically and it doesn't make them happy. It costs people a lot of happiness in the time it takes to acquire these things." Ryan explained that material goods are promoted as capable of fulfilling needs but they instead amplify insecurities. The drive to acquire things, he said, "crowds out love and community and things that do matter. These values get pushed to the periphery while we chase things that end up hurting us." Ryan suggests that chasing material goods also contributes to more fragmented families. "People go where their jobs take them and they don't have built-in supports as much with people we are biologically related to. And as we become more fragmented socially, marketers exploit those insecurities."<sup>49</sup>

We are not just disconnected from one another, as Ryan and Ritzer suggest; in many ways we are distanced from our more classic relationships to reality too. Baudrillard's concept of *simulacra*—simulated worlds—applies to the extent to which we live our lives alone in front of computers rather than in active relationships with other people. Online is where we shop and socialize, where many adults do most of their work, and where many children play. Meanwhile we are alone and becoming increasingly lonely.<sup>50</sup>

Psychiatrists, therapists, social workers, life coaches, and other such paid professionals have replaced old-fashioned friendships. One of my college students explained: "Why would you confide in someone who could easily be competing for something you want? You don't want to give them any inside information on you or anything you want to achieve." It is safer to pay someone who is not involved in your daily struggles for status and achievement.

Further, as the psychiatrists Jacqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz lament: "Our culture currently views isolating behaviors as marks of high status."<sup>51</sup> They continue: "There is the rising status of being too busy to chat or even to answer the telephone; it is so much more efficient to have the machine take a message and then respond in one's own good time, or resort to the silence of email." Ironically, they add: "People sometimes answer their cell phones no matter what else they might be doing, sacrificing the connections of the moment to prove that they have even more important connections in their lives."<sup>52</sup>

Olds and Schwartz blame the "overscheduled, hyper-networked intensity of modern life" in the United States as well as the "American pantheon of self-reliant heroes who stand apart from the crowd. As a culture, we all romanticize standing apart and long to have destiny in our

own hands. But as individuals, each of us hates feeling left out."<sup>53</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich refers to the "cult of busyness," with "its vicious cycle of staying busy to avoid seeming lonely and feeling lonely because there seems to be no time to cultivate relationships."<sup>54</sup> Men especially are seduced into living an isolating, unhappy life or risk being tormented and teased for expressing emotion or depending too much on others—a mark against their masculinity even though it might nourish their psyches.

While intimate relationships have decreased, "friends" have increased. On Facebook a person may sport thousands of "friends," but this number has little resemblance to the intimate connections on decline. Facebook friends tend to confer popularity status or demerits similar to the more superficial indicators seen in so many schools. We become objects with exchange value: certain friends are sought after because they might increase one's social capital or lead to more professional or economic capital, or because they have gossip or other forms of information capital that might increase someone's status; others are shunned because they might be seen as threatening a person's social position; still others are bullied in order to demonstrate how superior the abuser is to the abused. Isolating one another is commonplace, even as such exclusion—exile—is acknowledged to be the greatest punishment we can mete out to our crudest criminals.

School shooters, derided for their lack of masculinity and bullied relentlessly, yearned for human connection; they repeatedly raged against the lack of support in their lives, their social isolation, and the expectation that they handle so much on their own. Adrian Stone's novel *Intertwined* (2005), about a school shooting, reflects his more than ten years of experience as a physical education teacher and football coach at Bucksport High School in Maine. The character who commits the shooting and then kills himself leaves behind a video to explain his actions, which contains these words:

For the rest of the world, I can't really say I'm going to miss you. You did this to me. You know, a simple kind word or even a smile and hello on my walk home last night would have kept me from doing this, but I realized last night that there is no hope. Even one of my favorite teachers, who I thought understood and maybe even cared for me, blew me off when I just needed someone to talk to. If I can't even get a smile from someone I pass on the street or a kind word from a classmate what use is there?<sup>55</sup>

The fictional note in some ways echoes the writings left behind by real-life shooter Luke Woodham: "I did this to show society, push us and we will push back. . . . All throughout my life, I was ridiculed, always beaten, always hated. Can you, society, truly blame me for what I do? . . . It was not a cry for attention, it was not a cry for help. It was a scream in sheer agony saying that if you can't pry your eyes open, if I can't do it through pacifism, if I can't show you through the displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet."<sup>56</sup>

As heinous as school shootings are, they expose some of the most devastating social ills of our time—cruel schools reflect our less compassionate, less empathic larger society, as documented further in Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz's book *Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential—and Endangered*.<sup>57</sup> People see each other less, confide in each other less, and even smile at each other less. Our fast-paced twenty-first century is characterized by bottom-line social relations—a form of a "How can you help me succeed or I'm not interested" kind of attitude toward one another—or worse, the pervasive "Perhaps putting you down will make me look better." People's relationships, even friendships, are largely instrumental—"How can I get something" rather than "How can we connect and appreciate one another."

Ritzer argues that to combat the related alienation, isolation, loneliness, and mechanized communication that supercapitalism breeds we need to value and prioritize authentic communication with one another. There is an opportunity for political, social, and economic change in every opportunity for conversation. As part of a social movement, following Baudrillard, Ritzer suggests, for instance, that instead of merely discussing money and goods in stores and fast-food restaurants (and with one another generally), we should exchange "emotions, feelings, experiences, knowledge, insight, and so on."<sup>58</sup> Insist on treating clerks in stores like real people, and refuse to participate in the script. Instead of "Yes, I have everything I need," make the effort to share something meaningful with this person. Such seemingly little efforts could topple the whole system, Ritzer writes.<sup>59</sup> Many people don't want to have a meaningful connection with the random store clerk—we've bought into the rushing, fast-paced lifestyle that characterizes our economic and social realities. Conversation with others just slows us down. But not slowing and stopping leaves an increasing void, and most of us are harried by all the rushing—and we are ultimately unsatisfied when we ignore the people next to us, spending "quality time" instead with our technological devices.

Resistance to the mechanization of human communication and the objectification of human relationships entails authentic and meaningful

appreciation of one another. Today, connecting with other human beings and ourselves, valuing other people as priorities in one's life, caring for others, and living with compassion and empathy are unusual; in fact, true friendship based on love, trust, and support of one another is literally revolutionary.

To address these debilitating social ills, which contribute to so much despair in (and out of) schools, we can begin by working to transform schools into safe spaces, rather than harsh social environments. Ideally, schools can spearhead powerful social change. Young people need a reprieve from the cutthroat competition in the larger society. To combat school bullying and related violence, we can start with policies that focus on helping schools create the kinds of communities that support caring relationships. Current U.S. education policies tend instead to emphasize punishment, policing, and more security. The difference in these methods is, to borrow from John Gray's 1992 bestseller, as huge as the distance between Venus and Mars.<sup>60</sup>

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY  
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

# The Bully Society

*School Shootings and the Crisis  
of Bullying in America's Schools*

Jessie Klein



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS  
New York and London

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS  
New York and London  
[www.nyupress.org](http://www.nyupress.org)

© 2012 by New York University  
All rights reserved

References to Internet websites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing.  
Neither the author nor New York University Press is responsible for URLs that  
may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Klein, Jessie.

The bully society : school shootings and  
the crisis of bullying in America's schools / Jessie Klein.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8147-4888-6 (cl : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8147-7149-5 (ebook)

ISBN 978-0-8147-6371-1 (ebook)

1. Bullying—United States. 2. Bullying in schools—United States.  
3. School shootings—United States. 4. School discipline—United States. I. Title.  
BF637.B85K584 2011  
302.34'30973—dc23 2011039377

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,  
and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability.  
We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials  
to the greatest extent possible in publishing our books.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1