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Appendix -- Methodology

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Appendix

Methodology

I became interested in studying school shootings when I heard the school shooters explain the motives for their crimes. Their complaints were no different from those of average American students across the nation. They were upset about their peers calling them gay, girls that rejected them, teachers who they felt punished them unjustly, and related issues prevalent in most school cultures. So I set out to make more visible the comments the perpetrators made alongside the stories of ordinary youth who raised almost identical concerns. In doing so, I conducted a content analysis of the shootings; I drew on existing statistical research, and I shared my own observations working in high schools and universities over the last twenty years. I also interviewed students, parents, and faculty from schools in disparate demographics—and brought all this information to bear under the scrutinizing light of some of the most powerful and insightful sociological theories available. My methodologies are elaborated below.

Content Analysis

In an effort to systematically analyze factors identified as causing extreme school violence, I have carried out a content analysis of press and scholarly reports of 166 school shootings that took place in the three decades between 1979 and 2009. In a chart, accessible on *The Bully Society* website, I have categorized the motives and contexts of each school shooting—where information is available: http://www.nyupress.org/bullysociety/dataonschoolshootings.pdf.

At this time, at least 73 of the cases have inadequate information on motives. Of the 166, 7 relate to drugs, money, or political protests unre-

lated to this study. The remaining shootings are discussed in *The Bully Society* and/or highlighted on the website chart.

In choosing relevant cases to analyze, I combined rampages, targeted attacks, and gang wars. Glenn Muschert categorizes school shootings as follows: rampages, mass murders, terrorist attacks, targeted shootings, and government shootings. In this study, I look most closely at rampages as well as targeted shootings, as they are the types that occur in schools. According to Muschert, rampages are "expressive, non-targeted attacks on a school institution . . . and involve(s) multiple victims, some chosen for their symbolic significance or at random." Targeted shootings, on the other hand, are more directly focused at an individual or group of people—and are less symbolic in nature.[1] Past studies on school shootings tended to focus on rampages and excluded targeted shootings where the shooter specifically attacked and killed individual(s); they also avoided examining gang wars.[2]

In my research I found less distinction between rampages and targeted shootings, or even gang warfare. Most of these crimes are incited by similar masculinity challenges. Therefore, I included high-profile cases of different kinds in my study sample. I gathered public discourse and research (television, radio, newspapers, online news sources, scholarly journals, and books) on school shooting cases, which included indiscriminate murder as well as cases where people were specifically targeted.

I have been studying school shootings since 1997 and I have examined over forty lists of shootings accessible through news, police, and online reports. I conflated this information to compile as complete a list as possible for this part of the study. Nonetheless, some school shootings are not widely reported—either because schools were reticent about attracting publicity or because lack of injuries failed to make these less tragic incidents register as strongly on the national radar. My study sample therefore is not exhaustive—but the cases that I may have missed are few and are unlikely to affect the validity of the conclusions based on these most highly profiled cases.

To identify common themes, I focused on comments by perpetrators, victims, and community members related to "trigger" factors and motivations in the shootings. I also analyzed the importance and depth of treatment that media sources accorded various motivating factors. According to Zipf's law, the most frequent words and phrases mentioned reflect important concerns in every communication. Therefore, quantitative content analysis starts with word frequencies and extends to synonyms and homonyms. In many of these cases, the perpetrators left manifestos—on the web, in dia-

ries, in videos, and in school notebooks—that directly conveyed why they committed their acts. In other cases, others who knew the perpetrators well (students, parents, teachers) or police investigators tried to fill in the missing pieces on the basis of their knowledge of the perpetrator's grievances. The perpetrators' notes or others' perceptions of the crime were then repeated in the media as well as in scholarly sources. Comments that were repeatedly made either verbatim or with similar intent I considered evidence of "trigger" factors. As much as possible I let the perpetrators speak for themselves when they tried to explain why they committed their crimes.

Analysis of hundreds of reports related to these cases reveals twelve themes that have not been sufficiently identified or adequately addressed in previous studies of school shootings and related violence:

1. Perpetrators lashed out against those they perceived to be at the top of their schools' status hierarchies; they targeted those who tried to increase their status by assaulting, harassing, and threatening the perpetrators.
2. Gender issues, including gay and perceived-gay bashing against the perpetrators (almost all of whom identified as heterosexual), played a role in catalyzing the violence.
3. A pattern of sexual harassment and and/or dating violence and perceived rejections characterized many of the perpetrators' relationships with the girls they targeted and/or killed.
4. Perpetrators tried to defeat the boys whom they perceived as threatening their relationships with girls.
5. Perpetrators acted because they felt humiliated after "being dumped" by girls.
6. Perpetrators saught revenge against their school when they believed that no one was willing and/or able to stop the bullying they experienced.
7. White supremacy, related to efforts to demonstrate masculinity, motivated some of the perpetrators to commit their crimes.
8. As a way to retaliate, some perpetrators targeted those who had hurled racist epithets at them.
9. When girls committed violence, they did so for similar reasons to those attributed predominantly to boys.
10. In some cases perpetrators raged against high-stakes tests or low grades which were perceived as creating overwhelming obstacles to future opportunities.

11. Adults too often turned a blind eye to warning signs about imminent violence as a result of deep-seated beliefs that "boys will be boys," "girls will be girls," "school bullying is part of typical adolescence," or "school bullying is a normal way of being in a competitive culture"; adults were sometimes targeted as a result of their perceived "complicity" in related shootings.
12. Community-oriented programs related to preventing bullying, which have been widely practiced in European schools, have been more successful in reducing school violence than the more common zero-tolerance policies practiced in the United States.

The chart on *The Bully Society* website provides a map of the school shootings and predominant motivations. Elsewhere in the book, the perpetrators speak more elaborately about their motivations, and other students, school faculty, and families make corroborating comments. This analysis exposes the link between the school shootings and the shooters' efforts to accrue social prestige by demonstrating typical indicators of masculinity. Further, this work reveals that the perpetrators made direct threats that were repeatedly missed and/or ignored by faculty, parents, peers, or other members of the school community. The lack of response parallels the media's failure to identify the significance of the role of gender-based violence. This shortcoming, rooted in society and reinforced by the media, lies in the effective invisibility of dating violence, sexual harassment, gay bashing, and other prejudiced behaviors, which are often perceived to be normal.

The lack of media attention to gender can be partly blamed on the approach to crime reporting that Neil Websdale and Alexander Alvarez term "forensic journalism" and Chancer refers to as "individualistic journalism."[3] This occurs, for instance, when reporters highlight crime anomalies perceived as being sensational and newsworthy rather than the more common but perhaps less shocking crime that more often takes place. When the perpetrators said they were tired of being called "gay" or "faggot" or that they were enraged that a girl had rejected them, such comments were, until quite recently, seen as commonplace and therefore not attributable factors in understanding the crime. The media repeatedly missed the "mundane" violence that took place in schools every day to such an extent that when there was a significant retaliatory response to such violence they continued to react with surprise.

To find policy and practice responses to school shootings, I conducted an analysis of hundreds of media accounts of a handful of international school shootings that took place between 1996 and 2002; I examined the most popular responses to high-profile school shootings in the United States and elsewhere. I studied predominantly European and U.S. newspapers and wire services, academic journals, law reviews, magazines, and documentaries. Through online searches in Lexis Nexis, Academic Premier, ProQuest, and other electronic resources, I culled information from every European bureau, including Agence France-Presse, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, and Scottish, Irish, and British news sources.

I have categorized these results in a sample of international school shootings and related policy responses in tables 1 and 2 in chapter 9. For the most part, this research exposes different types of policy responses to school shootings in the United States and Europe. The results are striking, as two clear patterns emerge: U.S. responses tends toward increasing security and punishment, while European responses tend toward adding more school social workers, building community, and creating other forms of social support. The differences in responses fall clearly along the lines of the linguist George Lakoff's famous typology articulated in his book *Moral Politics*: the conservative strict-father (U.S.) model and the liberal nurturant-parent (European) model, respectively.[4] As detailed in chapter 9, these distinctions have implications for school faculty and other community members, and they draw attention to the need for fresh and more nuanced approaches.

Statistical Research

The Bully Society uncovers the antecedents to school shooting massacres in the violence that students experience every day, including the aforementioned: status wars, sexual harassment, dating violence, gay bashing (of both students who identify as gay and students who identify as straight), girl bashing, racism, and rage related to high-stakes tests that are perceived as foreclosing future success. Not surprisingly, prior research indicates that social problems are significant issues in our nation's schools. The daily violence in schools reveals that children respond to the same problems to which the school shooters retaliated, with a host of other destructive, though perhaps less visible, reactions.

Research addressed in *The Bully Society* includes the following topics:

1. *Bullying.* Over the last decade, studies demonstrate that a bully culture dominates our schools. In one 2005 national survey, 65 percent of teens reported having been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted during the past year. Students bullied other students' physical appearance (39 percent), actual or perceived sexual orientation (33 percent), and gender expression (28 percent).[5]
2. *Sexual Harassment.* According to *Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School* (2001), based on a study conducted by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 83 percent of girls said they had been subject to sexual harassment at some point in their school lives, while 30 percent said they experienced it often.[6]
3. *Dating Violence.* In a 2001 study, 20 percent of girls from fourteen to eighteen years old experienced physical or sexual abuse by a boyfriend, partner, or date; in a 2006 survey by the Liz Claiborne Foundation, almost a third of girls said they worried about being hurt by a partner, and nearly one in four said they had gone further sexually than they wanted to because of pressure from their partner.[7]
4. *Gay Bashing.* The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) released its most recent National School Climate Survey in 2003. Four out of five lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students reported being verbally, sexually, or physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation. Heterosexual students are similarly gay-bashed if they are perceived as deviating from gender expectations.[8]

Arguably, school shootings are the most extreme symptom of these persistent problems, but high rates of suicide, truancy, dropping out, self-cutting and other forms of self-mutilation, eating disorders, and severe depression and anxiety are among the devastating reactions students consistently display because of the social problems listed above and are also empirically noted in the text of this book.

Participant-Observation Ethnography

Following the tradition of Clifford Geertz and Paul Rabinov known for "reflexive" ethnography, which emphasizes the effect a particular culture has on the ethnographer, I include in my comprehensive descriptions of

U.S. school cultures my own experiences as a student in private and public elementary, middle, and high schools as well as my twenty years working in U.S. schools and higher education.

I have six file boxes documenting time I experienced with students whom I worked with in high schools for eleven years as a conflict resolution coordinator, substance abuse prevention and intervention counselor, social studies teacher, school social worker, guidance counselor, college advisor, and school administrator; these include mediation agreements, college personal statements, social work process recordings, and my own notes documenting my experiences as a faculty member immersed in school cultures. As with my more recent interviews with students, parents, school faculty, and other school professionals, I have received written permission according to human subject research regulations to include the specific file excerpts regarding each student's story included in the book.

Over the last decade, I've worked in public and private universities as a sociology, social work, and criminal justice professor. I've had the opportunity to talk with students from all over the country about their experiences in public, private, and religious schools. My work experiences in these schools and universities help inform and bring to life the U.S. school culture analyzed further in *The Bully Society.* I also share in the preceding pages many of the stories students raised in the criminal justice, sociology, and social work courses I've taught. Issues related to bullying come up organically in many of these courses. Social work students who intern in schools find themselves comforting bullied targets and working to resolve conflicts related to complex and entrenched bully cultures. Students share these challenges in the many social work practice classes they take as they pursue their degrees. In sociology and criminal justice classes violence is a common topic, and many students have experienced or witnessed violence in their prior secondary, middle, and elementary schools. Various topics lend themselves to students sharing their own experiences, since sociology covers many of the social problems that take root in schools, including rape, dating violence, sexual harassment, homophobia, and prejudice related to sexuality, gender, ability, race, and class. Students also tend to share their own experiences when discussing violence in schools, the workplace, and in the family—including their own responses to various education policies. When I included stories my students shared in classes, the students often elaborated on their comments in follow-up official interviews after the course concluded.

I included many of my students' stories since they helped make more visible the school settings from which so many of them had recently graduated. In the early part of the twenty-first century I taught social work in a public, largely working-class, urban university and more recently in a suburban, mostly middle-class university. Student experiences from suburban high schools in the last part of this decade were often similar to the experiences inner-city students had raised in the earlier part of the decade. In both cases students discussed their experiences both before and after they knew that I was involved in school bullying research. There were always some students who said they had not experienced or witnessed bullying; yet in these cases, interestingly enough, there were often other students in the class from the same school who insisted that bullying did indeed persist there. When students told their stories, their specificity was at times even corroborated by other students from the same schools. This precluded concerns that students might be exaggerating their stories or telling me what they thought I might want to hear—though of course it is possible that this was at least sometimes the case.

I've seen a lot of bullying. I've worked intimately with students in conflicts with other students from boyfriend-girlfriend difficulties to gang wars. I've seen students bully other students, boys bully boys, boys bully girls, girls bully boys, girls bully girls, teachers bully students, students bully teachers, parents bully children and adolescents, and children and adolescents bully parents, as well as parents bully teachers and school administrators and the reverse. Where relevant, and where confidentiality and human subject research regulations permit, I share some of these experiences to further illustrate the bully cultures described by the statistics above.

Snowball Sample Interviews

From March 2006 to March 2008 I conducted more than sixty interviews with children and adults in the United States. Since I had worked in schools for over twenty years, I had access to students and other members of school communities that I might not have had otherwise. I shared their stories in *The Bully Society* to bring to life the common landscape our children experience and to show the similarities between the school shooters' complaints and those of average American children

and adults from our schools. My interviews were conducted according to the International Review Board's human subjects' research standards and expectations.

In the current climate of high-profile negative press coverage for schools and the understandable fear that surrounds school bullying and related shootings, principals were reluctant to let me enter schools to conduct "official interviews." Nonetheless, I had many contacts to begin my interviewing process. Principals, teachers, students, and parents that I knew from working in schools for two decades helped me contact others from schools in disparate parts of the country. Each person with whom I spoke connected me to other people who were interested in telling me their stories. Such a snowball sample was ideal for recruiting a snapshot of school cultures across the nation. In sociology and other statistical research, snowball sampling is a technique for developing a research sample where interviewees recruit others among their acquaintances until the sample group grows like a rolling snowball. As the sample builds up, enough data are gathered to be useful for research. This kind of sampling technique is often used to reveal hidden populations that are difficult for researchers to access. Given the current school climate, I found the snowball sample offered a helpful framework for illustrating the texture of schools from where the perpetrators came. Indeed, many students I interviewed discussed school shooting plots that had been revealed and averted in their schools. The school shooting perpetrators came from average schools across America just like the schools many of the students I interviewed attended.

My interviews included approximately fifteen from working-class environments, fifteen from wealthy environments, and thirty from middle-class environments; there were also approximately fifteen from rural areas, fifteen from inner cities, and thirty from suburban communities. Most of the people I interviewed were white, about thirty; fifteen were at least partly Latino; and fifteen were at least partly African American. I conducted slightly more interviews with white middle-class students from suburbs, since most of the school shootings took place within this demographic. I also interviewed more people from the Northeast. Fewer school shootings took place in this demographic, yet the same bully cultures that led to so many shootings in midwestern and southern states persisted there. Students ranged in age from approximately eleven to twenty-six years. They either were currently in middle school or high school or had recently graduated secondary school and thus discussed

their experiences in high school, middle school, and elementary school, as well as their more immediate college experiences where relevant. I also interviewed some teachers and related professionals in their thirties and forties who reflected on the bully cultures in their schools when they had been younger. Sixty percent of my respondents were female; 40 percent were male. Most of my respondents identified as straight, and about 5 percent identified as gay; as explained in *The Bully Society*, straight and gay respondents had equally disturbing stories related to their experiences of being gay-bashed or otherwise bullied. My respondents came from the inner city of Manhattan and the Bronx, working-class rural Maine, wealthy areas in Connecticut, poor parts of North Carolina, and middle-class and wealthy areas in Texas and New York State, especially Long Island and Westchester.

When first names only are used in the text, this indicates an original interview, with a parent or student, conducted for this book (one last name is used for teachers and other school faculty). These names have been changed, and the interviewees are described merely by their most general demographics. Actual first and last names are used only for those individuals whose stories have been reported in the media and for individuals who wanted to be named directly.

Theoretical Analysis

Using the insights of classic and contemporary sociologists and other scholars—including Hannah Arendt, Stanley Aronowitz, Jean Baudrillard, Lynn Chancer, R. W. Connell, Michel Foucault, Paulo Friere, Jurgen Habermas, Michael Kimmel, Karl Marx, J. W. Messerschmidt, and George Ritzer—I examine the cultures in contemporary schools and reveal a "hidden curriculum" informed by our larger society, including dominant values and principles that school young and old alike away from prioritizing relationships in favor of winning and obtaining status and power; these tenets often manifest in school social hierarchies that reify different forms of prejudices related to status characteristics, including gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability. The insights gleaned from these thinkers further corroborate the concerns revealed by the above data and point to the possibility for real change.

In sum: The school shooting perpetrators' statements regarding why they committed school shootings parallel the research, which indicates

that their concerns are shared by millions of American children. The interviews I conducted further corroborate related despair statistics as well as the high level of violence students experience daily; my own work experiences further illustrate this crisis in American schools. Finally, the theoretical analysis reveals the hidden mechanisms by which so many of these social problems persist and suggests paths for building more compassionate communities.

The Bully Society

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

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