What Have We Learned from Columbine: The Impact of the Self-System on Suicidal and Violent Ideation Among Adolescents

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ABSTRACT. This study first examined a model of the predictors and mediators of both suicidal ideation and violent ideation, particularly since both types of ideation were highly correlated ($r = .55$) among our young adolescent participants. The variables in the model were those...
identified in media accounts of the histories of the 10 high-profile school shooting cases, and that have also been included in our earlier model of the predictors of suicidal ideation, which we expanded to include violent ideation. Perceptions of competence or adequacy and social support from peers and parents predicted two mediators in the model, an adjustment/depression composite (self-esteem, hope to hopelessness, and affect, along a continuum from cheerful to depressed) and anger-induced physical aggression. These variables, in turn, predicted both suicidal and violent ideation. Secondly, we examined adolescents’ reactions to vignettes that described harassing events, at the hands of peers and teachers simulating the type of audience-observed ridicule experienced by the school shooters. We were particularly interested in the emotional reaction of humiliation, an effect that has received surprisingly little attention in the emotion literature. Humiliation was related to other emotions such as anger and depression, consistent with the co-occurrence of internalizing and externalizing symptoms demonstrated in the overall model. Next we compared those who reported that they would respond violently to the events in vignettes compared to those reporting nonviolent reactions. Examining the variables in the general model, those who reported violent ideation reported markedly lower perceptions of adequacy, lower levels of social support, lower self-esteem, greater hopelessness, depressed affect, and anger-induced aggression. The violent ideators also reported higher levels of both homicidal and suicidal ideation. Discussion focused on the fact that thoughts of violence toward others as well as toward the self have similar psychosocial origins that should be considered in prevention and intervention efforts.

KEYWORDS. Suicide, violent ideation, adolescents, Columbine, self-esteem, hopelessness

Columbine has become a metaphor for the now ten high-profile school shootings to occur in the past six years, where white, male adolescents have fired into crowds of classmates, killing some and wounding others (see Table 1 for a list of these cases). Our own interest in this topic stems from the fact that many of the predictors in our theoretically-driven model of self-esteem and depressive reactions, leading to suicidal ideation, could be identi-
fied in the media accounts of these boys’ histories. In this paper, we will first describe that model. We will then give examples from the accounts of the school shooters’ own lives. Attention will then shift to evidence on the co-occurrence of violence against others and violence toward the self. As a result, we have expanded our model to include not only depressive reactions and suicidal ideation but also aggressive reactions and violent ideation. Evidence for this revised model will be presented.

A common feature in the histories of the school shooters has been that they each had a history of being humiliated by peers, a romantic other, or a teacher. In certain cases, the actual precipitating event was such victimization, leading to revenge. To address this issue, we crafted hypothetical

TABLE 1. List of the Ten Major School Shootings Since 1996


3. Oct. 1, 1997. Pearl, Mississippi. 16-year old LUKE WOODMAN stabs his mother, and then goes to his high school parking lot killing a classmate who was dating his ex-girlfriend.


5. March 24, 1998. Jonesboro, Arkansas. Two boys, ANDREW GOLDEN, age 11, and MITCHELL JOHNSON, age 13, shoot and kill one teacher and four girls, wounding 10 others, during a false fire alarm at their middle school.


8. May 29, 1998. Fayetteville, Tennessee. Three days before graduation, an 18-year-old opens fire in his high school parking lot, killing a classmate who was dating his ex-girlfriend.

9. April 20, 1999. Littleton, Colorado. ERIC HARRIS and DYLAN KLEBOLD kill 1 teacher and 11 students, wounding many others, after a history of being teased and rejected by peers, and then kill themselves.

10. May 20, 1999. Conyers, Georgia. 16-year old T.J. SOLOMON shoots and wounds six Heritage High School students, after having been spurned by a girlfriend. He threatened to take his own life but was disarmed by a teacher.
events that simulated the types of humiliation that the school shooters experienced. Young adolescents from a normative sample were asked to put themselves in the position of the victim and indicate what emotional and cognitive reactions they would experience, as well as what action they would take, along a continuum from doing nothing to planning serious harm or violence. Finally, we have identified violent and non-violent ideators based on the hypothetical actions they would take. These two groups were compared with regard to potential differences in the predictors of our general model, predictors that represent predisposing factors in their background. Moreover, we have documented differences that represent more behavioral causes of violence that have been hypothesized, namely, interest in violent media (movies, TV, music), in violent video games, as well as in weapons and bombs. Through these efforts, we have identified a profile of characteristics that differentiate violent from nonviolent ideators. We explore the implications for identifying those at risk for violent and suicidal ideation, including suggestions for appropriate prevention and intervention efforts.

A MODEL OF THE CAUSES, CORRELATES, AND CONSEQUENCES OF GLOBAL SELF-ESTEEM

A major goal of our past program of research (see Harter, 1999) has been the construction of a theoretically-driven model of the causes, correlates, and consequences of self-esteem, defined as perceptions of one’s global worth as a person. The primary correlates have been self-reported depressed affect and hopelessness. In the original model, we focused on one particular outcome, suicidal ideation. In identifying potential causes of self-esteem, we drew upon the historical formulations of James (1892) and Cooley (1902). For James, self-esteem was a product of the relationship between one’s successes and one’s aspirations for success. Thus, success in domains deemed important would lead to high self-esteem. Conversely, if one falls short of one’s ideals, low self-esteem would ensue. In contrast to James, symbolic interactionists such as Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) considered the self to be a social construction, crafted through linguistic exchanges with significant others (e.g., parents and peers). In Cooley’s construct of the “looking glass self” and Mead’s concept of the “generalized other,” one looked to the opinions that such others held about the self, gradually incorporating or internalizing these judgments into a sense of one’s self-esteem.
Considerable evidence from participants ages eight and older (see Harter, 1999; Harter, Marold, & Whitesell, 1992; Harter & Marold, 1993) provides support for a model in which competence or inadequacy in domains judged important, where the potential domains are perceived physical appearance, peer likability, and athletic competence (which form a higher-order factor), not only impacts self-esteem directly but is partially mediated by peer approval. Thus, those who value these domains but express their inadequacy, will also report lower levels of peer support that, in turn, leads to lower self-esteem. Two additional domains, perceived scholastic competence and behavioral conduct (that also form a second higher-order factor) not only directly impact self-esteem but also have an indirect effect on self-esteem that is mediated by parental approval. Those who report weaknesses in these latter two domains will not garner the support of parents, and both these perceived inadequacies and associated lack of parental approval will erode one’s self-esteem.

With regard to the correlates of global self-esteem, we have demonstrated (see Harter, 1999) that it bears strong empirical relationships ($r$’s from .70 to .82) to two other constructs, affect (along a continuum of cheerful to depressed) and hope (hopeful to hopeless) about one’s future (see also Kovacs & Beck, 1977; 1978). These three constructs that have been combined into an adjustment/depression composite, in turn, are highly predictive of suicidal ideation, the initial outcome in our model.

There are limitations of this earlier model, however. First, it focuses on only one outcome, suicidal ideation. Secondly, it identifies only one mediator, represented by the adjustment/depression composite. The psychological literature, as well as the media accounts of the school shooters, informs us that feelings of inadequacy or lack of competence as well as the media accounts of the school shooters, informs us that feelings of inadequacy or lack of competence as well as perceived lack of peer and parental approval can also resort in angry and aggressive responses, and in violent ideation, namely, the intent to harm others. Antecedents in our model, specifically, feelings of inadequacy and lack of peer and parental support, have been found to be associated with physical aggression (Dubow & Reid, 1994; Leamy, Shreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995; Simons, Paternite, & Shore, 2001), and with externalizing problems (Booth, Rosen-Krasnor, McKinnon, & Rubin, 1994; Hawkins & Lishner, 1987; Patterson & Bank, 1989). Moreover, within the clinical literature, increasing attention has been paid to the co-occurrence of profound sadness or depression and anger (Bridewell & Chang, 1997; Capaldi & Stoolmiller, 1999; Boergers, Spirato, & Donaldson, 1998; Curran, 1987; Deffebacher & Swaim, 1999; Gispert, Davis, Marsh, & Wheeler, 1987; Khan, 1987; Renouf & Harter, 1990; Rutter, 1987).
addition to the fact that depression has been found to be predictive of suicidal ideation (Carlson & Cantwell, 1982; Harter, 1999; Hillbrand, 2001; Pfeffer, Zuckerman, Plutchik, & Mizruchi, 1984; Pfeffer, Solomon, Plutchik, Miruchi, & Weiner, 1982; Velaz & Cohen, 1988), suicidal behavior has also been linked to aggression (Bach-Y-Rita & Veno, 1985; Inamdar, Lewis, Siomopolous, Shanok, & Lamelea, 1982; Shafi, Carrigan, Willinghil, & Derrick, 1995). This pattern of findings is consistent with the literature revealing that on symptom checklists, internalizing and externalizing symptoms are highly correlated (see Achenbach & Edlebrock, 1983).

Given these relationships, we expanded our model adding anger-driven aggression and violent ideation, retaining the adjustment/depression composite and suicidal ideation. The revised model is particularly timely, given an analysis of the media accounts of the histories of the white, male adolescents who have been responsible for the major school shootings since 1996. Many of these boys were described as inadequate in terms of their social skills, physical appearance, or athletic ability, those domains most likely to impact peer approval in our model. In fact, many were teased, taunted, or harassed by peers whose active rejection was very distressing to the eventual school shooters. “I killed because people like me are mistreated everyday,” said pudgy, bespectacled Luke Woodham, age 16, from Pearl, Mississippi, who murdered two students, injuring seven others. “My whole life I felt outcasted, alone.” In Peducah, Kentucky, 15-year-old Michael Carneal was tired of being teased and picked on by his schoolmates. Another shooter, Mitchell Johnson, observed that “Everyone that hates me, everyone I don’t like, is going to die.” In his internet manifesto, Eric Harris, age 18, from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado described how classmates, primarily the jocks, “ridiculed me, chose not to accept me, and treated me like I am not worth their time.” A surviving member of the Trenchcoat Mafia (the name given to Harris, Klebold, and friends by the jocks at Columbine), described how he, as well as Harris and Klebold—the second shooter—were constantly “cornered, pushed day after day, being ridiculed or bashed against lockers.”

From the media accounts, there has also been evidence that many of the shooters felt abandoned, rejected, or neglected by their parents. Andrew Golden, age 11, from Jonesboro, Arkansas, who shot down one teacher and numerous students, was raised primarily by his grandparents since his parents worked long hours. In Moses Lake, Washington, 14-year-old Barry Loukaitis fired on his middle school Algebra class after learning that his mother announced that she was divorcing his father. Others had parents who made them feel inadequate, often in comparison to other siblings. Kip
Kinkel, the 15-year-old school shooter from Springfield, Oregon, felt rejected by his parents who compared him to his “perfect” older sister. Michael Carneal, from Paducah, Kentucky, was also made to feel incompetent in comparison to his successful sister. In other cases, the neglect was more benign, as unknowing parents did not monitor their son’s activities (e.g., bomb-making in the garage, long amounts of time engaged in violent computer games). As Garbarino (1999), author of Lost boys: Why our sons turn violent, observes, such rejection and neglect leads to anger as well as depression, culminating in acts of violence towards peers, parents, or both.

The media accounts also describe how feelings of inadequacy and lack of support led to low self-esteem, depression, hopelessness and helplessness, and in some cases suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors. With regard to depression, several of the boys were actually on medication. (Both Michael Carneal and Kip Kinkel had clinical diagnoses of depression, prior to their attacks on their classmates.) Eric Harris (from Columbine) was described as depressed and was on medication. T. J. Solomon (the 15-year-old from Conyers, Georgia, who shot and wounded six classmates and then threatened to take his own life) was described by an examining psychiatrist as suffering from “major depression with severe psychotic features.” Two of the boys, when apprehended, pleaded that they be shot. Of course, Harris and Klebold successfully suicided.

With regard to helplessness, Garbarino has described how, with the exception of their violent acts, many of these boys were quite passive, reacting as victims of the system, the objects of harassment and ridicule. Michael Carneal’s principal found journal entries that revealed a child who felt “weak and powerless,” with an angry desire to lash out at the world. That their anger fueled their violent acts is also evident in the reports of many. For example, Luke Woodham, in his last will and testament recorded on cassette, claimed; “I do this to show society, push us and we will push back.”

Although all of the variables in our expanded model could be identified in the lives of some if not many of these boys, those involving paths to and from peer rejection seem to be present in all cases. These boys were the loners, the outcasts, the neglected and rejected, victims of a peer system in which popularity and membership in the cliques with status would appear to be increasingly critical in the contemporary school culture (Harris, 1998; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). The inability to perform adequately in the domains most highly related to peer acceptance or rejection, namely, failure to meet punishing peer standards in the areas of physical attractiveness, athletic prowess, and social skills, seem to be particularly evident in the cases of many of the school shooters, all of whom obviously acted vio-
lently. Thus, it seemed appropriate to add anger-induced aggression and violent ideation to the model, given that many of the predictors in the original model would appear to lead directly to these outcomes as well as to depressive features and suicidal ideation.

Evidence for an expanded model. To examine the fit of our expanded model, we administered our original battery of measures, plus two new measures that tapped anger-caused physical aggression and violent ideation in the form of homicidal thoughts about killing others. The original battery of measures consisted of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985), the Social Support Scale for Children (Harter, 1988), and the Dimensions of Depression Scale (Harter, Nowakowski, and Marold, 1985). From the Self-Perception Profile, we included four self-concept subscales, Physical Appearance, Peer Social Likeability, Behavioral Conduct, and Scholastic Competence. From the Social Support Scale, two subscales were administered, Peer/Support (to which was added an additional four peer rejection items, given its relevance to school violence) and Parent Support. From the Dimensions of Depression instrument, four subscales were administered, the three that comprise the depression/adjustment composite, Global Self-Esteem (how much one values one’s worth as a person), Affect (along a continuum of depressed to cheerful), and Hope (hopeless to hopeful), as well as Suicidal Ideation. All of these instruments and their respective subscales have been demonstrated to show excellent psychometric properties in numerous past studies as well as the current study. The anger-induced physical aggression scale was adapted from items contained in the Past Feelings and Acts of Violence Scale (Plutchik and van Pragg, 1989). Items tapped the extent to which one attempts to “physically injure people whom they are angry with,” “get in fights and hurt people whom they are angry with,” “get angry at people and physically attack them.” A new homicidal ideation subscale was designed for the purpose of this study and was embedded in the Dimensions of Depression Scale. Items tapped “thoughts about killing someone else,” “time spent thinking about killing another person,” harboring thoughts “about ending another person’s life.” Reliabilities for these two new subscales were .81, and .74, respectively.

The model was tested employing a sample of 313 6th, 7th, and 8th grade middle school students (175 males, 138 females). The school is approximately 1/3 European-American, 1/3 Hispanic, and 1/3 African-American, from lower middle-class to lower-class families. The self-report battery was group-administered in participants’ classrooms.

Figure 1 presents the model that was examined through path modeling techniques employing Lisrel VIII (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993). Preliminary
analyses found no differences in the model for males and females and thus their results have been combined in Figure 1 which provides path coefficients for the entire sample. Consistent with the original modeling, the domains of Physical Appearance and Peer Likeability contributed to the Depression/Adjustment Composite through a direct path. However, their impact on this composite was also partially mediated by Peer Support/Rejection. Findings similar to the original modeling were also obtained given a direct path from the combination of Scholastic Competence and Behavioral Conduct to the Depression and Adjustment Composite, as well as an indirect route that was mediated by Parent Support. Thus, young adolescents who feel that they have inadequacies with regard to their appearance and their peer likeability report both low peer approval as well as depressive reactions in the form of low self-esteem, depressed affect, and hopelessness. Those acknowledging low scholastic competence, and poor behavioral conduct also reported both low parent support as well as depressive reactions. The path from the Depression/Adjustment composite to Suicidal Ideation is also consistent with the original modeling. There are also direct paths from peer and from parent support to suicidal ideation, revealing that those adolescents who lack supportive social relationships are more likely to engage in suicidal thinking.

What is novel about the extended model are links to and from anger-induced physical aggression as well as to and from homicidal ideation, the two new constructs added in light of our interest in thoughts of violence among adolescents. Physical aggression was predicted by perceptions of behavioral conduct and scholastic performance, as well as by parental approval. Thus, those evaluating their conduct and school performance negatively were more likely to report that they were physically aggressive and that they lacked parental support. Homicidal ideation, not surprisingly, was predicted by anger-induced physical aggression and by peer support/rejection. Thus, those adolescents who report high levels of physical aggression toward those that provoke their anger are more likely to have thoughts of killing others, as do those adolescents who experience rejection at the hands of peers. Interestingly, the depression/adjustment composite was also predictive of homicidal ideation. Adolescents who experience the combination of low self-esteem, depressed affect, and hopelessness are more likely to turn their thoughts not only to suicide but to killing others. Moreover, the fact that homicidal ideation and suicidal ideation were correlated at .55, also attests to the co-occurrence of ideation directed at harming others and harming the self.

Troubled adolescents, therefore, with a history of perceived inadequacies as well as low peer and parent support, not only experience depressive
and aggressive reactions but become introspective about terminating both their own lives and those of others, putting them in double jeopardy. There is obvious value, therefore, in developing models that address the predictors of both homicidal and suicidal ideation, given the common pathways to each of these outcomes. The findings represented in this model give credence to the challenges expressed by experienced clinicians who often, in treating adolescents with such histories, find it difficult to predict whether they will become violent toward others, violent toward the self, or toward both, as we saw in the case of the Columbine shootings.

VIOLENT REACTIONS TO HARASSMENT AND THE ROLE OF HUMILIATION

The model presented identifies psychosocial factors in the histories of youth that may predispose them to violent or homicidal ideation. However, what events in the day-to-day lives of adolescents may provoke violent behavior? An analysis of the media accounts of the ten high-profile school
shootings since 1996 reveals that in every case, the shooters described how they had been ridiculed, taunted, teased, harassed or bullied by peers (because of their inadequate appearance, social or athletic behavior), spurned by someone in whom they were romantically interested, or put down, in front of other students, by a teacher or school administrator, all events that led to profound humiliation. In certain cases (e.g., Harris and Klebold from Columbine), such a history culminated in violent revenge. In Harris’ manifesto, written days before the shooting incident, he described how peers constantly ridiculed him. As one of the members of the Trenchcoat Mafia told reporters, “Tell people that we were harassed and sometimes it was impossible to take; eventually someone was going to snap.” He noted that the torment often became vicious. He described waking on school days with a knot in his stomach, dreading to face the continual humiliation. Central to the events that the boys described was the presence of an audience who witnessed the harassment, often laughing or joining in the mockery.

Given these observations, we sought to determine what the literature offered in terms of an understanding of humiliation. Surprisingly, in the literature on emotion, in general, and in the literature on adolescence, in particular, there is scant attention to humiliation. In two excellent edited volumes on contemporary emotion research (see Lewis and Haviland, 1993; Tangney and Fischer, 1995) and in a more recent volume by Tangney and Dearing (in press), humiliation does not appear in the index nor is it discussed at any length in the chapters. This is especially surprising given the fact that adolescence is a psychologically fragile period of development, where youth have heightened levels of self-consciousness and a vulnerable sense of self (see Harter, 1999), making them prone to reactions of humiliation. Garbarino (1999), in his analysis of violence, based on interviews with incarcerated youth, is one of the few to mention the humiliation of boys who have committed violent acts. However, it is always linked directly with shame, as if the two emotions were synonymous. Pollack (1998), in his book Real Boys, also discusses the role of shame in a slightly different context, namely, the active socialization of boys who are shamed into not crying or expressing fear, in the service of hardening boys to become men that meet traditional standards of masculinity. Pollack also observed that boys are made to feel guilty about feelings of weakness, vulnerability, fear, and despair.

It is curious that in these treatments of the emotions experienced by boys in our culture, as well as in the more theoretical and empirical literature (see Tangney & Fischer, 1995), attention has not been devoted to humiliation, despite the fact that it seems so prevalent in the lives of children and adolescents. The closest emotional reaction to appear in the literature is a
shame-rage cycle (see Tangney & Dearing, in press) where the experience of being shamed can lead to angry revenge. However, humiliation itself has not been explored in any depth, either from a theoretical or an empirical perspective. Moreover, our own recent research (Harter, Kiang, Whitesell, & Anderson, 2002) has revealed that young adults, link humiliation to anger and embarrassment, not to shame. It should be noted that there is a growing literature on the topic of bullying (see Olweus, 1997; Ross, 2002) that can clearly be inferred to be a cause of humiliation given threats to the self. However, bullying constitutes an event that is inflicted on someone, it does not capture the emotional reaction of the victim in the face of such harassment or abuse.

Thus, in the second phase of our research, we explored young adolescents’ reactions to hypothetical events that simulated the types of harassment experienced by the school shooters, albeit in somewhat milder form. We constructed vignettes that portrayed incidents in which the target character (same gender as the study participant) is ridiculed or put down by peers, in two cases, by a teacher, or by someone in whom they were romantically interested. A sample peer vignette reads as follows: “Jason is coming to school and is walking toward the school building. A small group of kids come toward him and start to tease him about what he is wearing and how he looks. As he tries to get away, they shove him and make loud insulting comments that all of the other kids can hear. (This wasn’t the first time something like this had happened to Jason). Imagine you are Jason.”

In the second peer vignette, Brian is the only one who doesn’t get a party invitation that is being passed out in class. The distributor insults Brian by calling him a loser and all of the kids in the class start laughing. In a third vignette, the teacher intercepts a note that the target adolescent is passing and reads it out loud to the entire class, provoking the students to laugh. In the fourth vignette, the target adolescent is at a dance, where his (or her) dance partner, one of the most popular kids at school, tells him (her) that he (she) dances like a dweeb, in front of everyone who laugh and comment “Looks like you got dissed!” as the popular adolescent leaves the target adolescent standing alone on the dance floor.

Two features about these vignettes are notable. First, there is a peer audience who either laughs at the victim or perpetuates the harassment. Secondly, each vignette ends with a statement to the effect that this is not the first time something like this has happened to the target child, thus building in the implication of a history of insult. These features characterized the harassment experienced by the actual school shooters. With regard to the role of the audience, our most recent research examines a prototype approach to humiliation with college students as participants, addressing commonali-
ties (or prototypic features) of humiliation (Harter, Kiang, Whitesell, & Anderson, 2002). Findings reveal that every student reported that an audience was an important contributor to the humiliation experience. Moreover, 89% indicated that the more people that observed the humiliating event, the greater the level of humiliation. In addition, 61% spontaneously mentioned that the onlookers would laugh at the victim. Thus, the vignettes appear to capture some of the key causes leading one to feel humiliated.

**Emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions.** At the end of each vignette, the participant was asked to imagine that he were victim. What followed were questions, all on a four-point scale, about (a) emotional reactions (how humiliated you would feel in front of others; how angry at the perpetrator, how angry toward the self, and how sad or depressed); (b) cognitive reactions (how unfair was the act, and how difficult would it be to get the incident out of your mind); and (c) behavioral reactions (along a continuum from doing nothing to, at the extreme, planning a way to get back at the perpetrator by seriously harming him/her and thoughts of harming anyone, it wouldn’t matter who they were. This second form of harm was included given the fact that the school shooters engaged in firing into a crowd of students, randomly.

We were first interested in the level of humiliation reported as well as the relationships among the initial emotional and cognitive reactions to the vignettes, combined. (Preliminary analyses revealed that both emotional reactions and cognitive reactions were highly correlated across the four vignettes.) As anticipated, the mean level of humiliation was 3.0 (on a four-point scale) indicating that for the sample as a whole, the harassing events did provoke a relatively high level of humiliation. The entire range of emotional and cognitive reactions, as can be seen in Table 2, were found to be highly related to each other, forming a constellation of psychological responses to potentially humiliating events. Noteworthy is the fact that humiliation is significantly associated with feelings of anger, both toward the perpetrator \(r = .41\) as well as toward the self \(r = .28\), and with depression \(r = .51\). Moreover, anger at the perpetrator (an externalizing reaction) is also significantly associated with two internalizing reactions, anger at the self \(r = .41\) and depression \(r = .51\). These findings are consistent with those in the general model and with the literature on the co-morbidity of externalizing and internalizing reactions.

Humiliation is also related to the two more cognitive reactions, namely how unfair the harassment is \(r = .40\) and how difficult it is to get the event out of one’s mind \(r = .51\). In fact, each of the emotions associated with humiliation, anger at the perpetrator, anger at self, as depression are also predictive of judgments of unfairness \(r’s\ of .46, .21, \text{ and } .38, \text{ respectively}\)
and the difficulty of getting the event out of one’s mind (r’s of .49, .45, and .48, respectively). Thus, there would appear to be a network of understandable correlates of humiliation that reflect the complexity of reactions to harassment that is consistent with the research on multiple emotions (see Harter, 1999) and the attribution literature (see Dodge, 1980, 1986).

**Violent versus non-violent ideators.** A major goal of this research was to develop a profile of those who, in response to hypothetical humiliating events, indicated that they would respond violently (plan a way to get back at the perpetrator by seriously harming him/her in some way and think of seriously harming anyone, it wouldn’t matter who they were) versus those who would not respond violently (rather, they reported that they would do nothing or would attempt a constructive solution (e.g., try to talk to the person). Among the violent group, we identified 22 males and 11 females. Among the non-violent group, we identified 43 males and 65 females. One goal was to determine how these groups differed on the potential predisposing factors included in the general model, described earlier.

Because the vignettes described events that were specifically designed to provoke feelings of humiliation (put-downs, harassment, threats to the self, in front of an audience) we did not anticipate that the two groups would differ significantly on humiliation, nor did they. However, the violent ideators, compared to the nonviolent ideators, reported greater anger at the perpetrator (M$s = 3.40$ versus 3.15), greater anger at the self ($M$s = 2.45 versus 2.12), more blame toward the perpetrator ($M$s = 3.33 versus 2.86) and more blame toward the self ($M$s = 1.98 versus 1.69), all of which were significant at $p < .05$. These findings further address the co-occurrence of internalizing and externalizing reactions.

Of particular interest was the finding that the violent ideators reported that if the event had happened to them, they would have greater difficulty

| TABLE 2. Correlations Among Emotional and Cognitive Reactions to Vignette Scenarios |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Anger/Other                     | .41             | Anger/Other     | .41             | Anger/Self      | .41             |
| Anger/Self                      | .28             | .40             | .38             | .41             | .40             |
| Depressed                       | .56             | .40             | .38             | .41             | .40             |
| Unfair                          | .40             | .46             | .21             | .47             | .46             |
| Difficulty/Out of mind          | .51             | .49             | .45             | .48             | .47             |

All correlations significant at $p < .01$ or higher
getting the event “out of their mind,” compared to the nonviolent ideators ($M_s = 2.8$ versus $2.3$, respectively, $p < .01$). Moreover, an additional question at the end of each vignette asked how often has such an event actually happened to them, in their own life. The violent ideators reported that such events were experienced more frequently ($M_s$ of $2.0$ versus $1.4$, respectively, $p < .01$). It could be inferred, therefore, that if such events occurred more often in one’s life, coupled with the fact that one was ruminating more about these experiences, one would be more likely to react violently. To examine this hypothesis directly among the majority of the entire sample (77%) who viewed the event as highly humiliating, we conducted a 2 (frequency of the event) $\times$ 2 (level of rumination) ANOVA where level of violence was the dependent measure. Consistent with our expectation, we found that those high on the frequency of the event in their own lives who also had high levels of rumination reported significantly ($p < .001$) higher levels of violence ($M = 2.6$) than those low on the frequency of the event coupled with a low level of rumination ($M = 1.3$). The other two groups fell in between.

**Group differences for the predisposing factors identified in the model.** We were also interested in whether the violent ideators differed from the nonviolent ideators on the predisposing factors identified in the original model. Figure 2 presents significant differences ($p$'s $< .01$ or better) associated with components of the depression composite, as well as suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, and physical aggression, where lower scores represent more negative reactions. The violent ideators reported greater depressed affect, lower self-worth, and greater hopelessness. In addition, the violent ideators reported greater suicidal ideation, greater homicidal ideation, and higher levels of anger-induced physical aggression. Thus, the pattern is consistent with our framework emphasizing the co-occurrence of internalizing and externalizing reactions, where violent ideators report higher levels of both.

With regard to the *predictors* of these reactions, drawn from the model, we compared perceptions of competence/adequacy as well as social support across the violent and nonviolent ideators. On our four-point scales, we found marked and highly significant ($p$’s between .01 and .001) differences between the violent and nonviolent ideators for the self-concept domains of peer likeability ($M’$’s = 2.49 versus 3.24), physical appearance ($M’$’s = 2.22 versus 2.86), and scholastic competence ($M’$’s = 2.40 versus 2.85). With regard to social support, the other key predictor in the model, the violent ideators also showed significantly less ($p$’s between .01 and .001) support than the nonviolent ideators from both parents ($M’$’s = 2.66 versus 2.85) and from peers ($M’$’s = 2.62 versus 3.12). A separate measure
of peer rejection also markedly differentiated the two groups where the lower score reflects more negativity or, in this case, greater rejection (M’s = 2.32 versus 3.19). Thus, the factors that predispose young adolescents to depression, aggression, homicidal ideation and suicidal ideation in the general model also discriminate between those who report violent ideation in reaction to the hypothetical events in the vignettes involving harassment and humiliation.

**MORE BEHAVIORAL PREDICTORS OF VIOLENT IDEATION**

In addition to those predisposing factors identified in our general model, media analyses and the psychological research literature suggest two other variables that contribute to violence, (a) preoccupation with violent media (movies, TV, music, video games) and (b) interest in and access to weapons and bombs. Many of the school shooters were attracted to violent media. All, obviously, had access to weapons and many were preoccupied with guns, some with bomb-making.
With regard to interest in violent media, there is a growing body of data suggesting significant relationships between violent film viewing and aggressive behaviors (Huessman & Eron, 1986; Livingstone, 1996; Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998). A meta-analysis (Redecki, 1990) revealed that 75% of 1,000 research studies found that there were negative consequences associated with exposure to violent TV. Possible explanations for the influence of violent TV on behavior include desensitization or disinhibition of aggressive tendencies as well as the incorporation of violence into one’s psyche (Rutter et al., 1998). The link between desensitization and violent media exposure is not new. The military has long been employing violent video games as training devices to desensitize soldiers to killing. There has been less research on the effects of violent video games, per se. However, there is accumulating evidence that exposure to violent video games is followed by more negative and violent behavior in both children (see Silvern & Williamson, 1987) and adolescents (Dominick, 1984). Others have analyzed the content of popular video games for boys. For example, a recent study by Dietz (1998) found that 79% of the games involved some type of aggression or violence and 21% portrayed aggression or violence directed specifically at women. However, there are caveats in terms of the role of preoccupation with violence in the media. Does such an interest fuel violence or, conversely, do violent boys express a special interest in violent media? Regardless of the directionality of effects, interest in violent media would appear to be a risk factor in developing a profile of predictors of adolescent violent ideation.

With regard to interest in and access to weapons, recent treatments of school violence have pointed out that our youth have ample access to weapons (see Garbarino, 1999; Pollack, 1998). Statistics indicate that approximately 40% of households in this country have guns of some type (Kingery, Coggeshall, & Alford, 1998). In addition, young males, in particular, indicate that there is easy access to getting guns on the street, including legally. ( Shortly after the Columbine killings, adolescents interviewed by reporters of the Denver Post claimed that you could get a gun faster than you could have a pizza delivered.) Thus, those boys preoccupied with violence who entertain thoughts of violent actions against others typically have the means to act on their intentions.

Based on these potential predictors, we developed an instrument (what I do in my spare time) where we included items that tapped interest in violent media, asking, on a four-point scale, how much do they engage in activities such as watching violent movies, violent TV shows, listening to gangster rap, heavy metal, and playing violent video games. To assess access/interest in weapons, items tapped time spent playing with guns or
other weapons, hunting or practice shooting, and making or playing with explosives and/or bombs. The alpha for items tapping engagement in violent media was .82; for interest in/access to weapons, .73. (The complete scale included non-violent activities for balance, such as “hanging with friends,” “working at a job,” “watching comedy or family TV shows,” “watching comedy movies,” “listening to popular music,” and so forth).

A comparison of violent and nonviolent ideators (based on their self-reported responses to what they would do in response to harassment) revealed that the violent ideators were significantly ($p < .01$) more likely to be engaged in violent media ($M = 3.12$) compared to the nonviolent ideators ($M = 2.49$). The two groups also differed significantly ($p < .01$) on interest in and access to weapons and bombs. Thus, these two variables are risk indicators for violent ideation. What we do not know from this study is the extent to which violent ideation will translate into violent behavior. Moreover, since the incidence of actual school violence is relatively low, evidence of violent ideation cannot directly predict this type of violent action. Yet the identification of violent ideation among children and adolescents can alert responsible adults (teachers, mental health workers, parents) to the fact that those harboring violent or suicidal thoughts are at risk for a variety of psychological adjustment problems. They are obviously unhappy, for good reason according to their own self-reported life experiences, and the depressive and aggressive content in their introspections undoubtedly interferes with more constructive energies devoted toward school success, extra-curricular activities, positive social interactions, and rewarding family life in which they can be validated for who they are as people. It is unlikely that many adolescents, harboring suicidal or homicidal ideation, are sharing these thoughts with the significant adults in their lives, an important question for further research. While they may be sharing such thoughts with close friends, pacts of secrecy and loyalty will typically prevent peers from bringing such ideation to the attention of responsible adults.

**CAN SCHOOL OFFICIALS IDENTIFY THOSE AT RISK FOR POTENTIAL VIOLENT BEHAVIOR?**

School officials have become increasingly sensitive to the need to deal with issues of both suicide and violence, and there is a growing literature on just what actions schools can take to deal with these growing problems (see Elliot, Hamberg, & Williams, 1998). Our own research has specifically dealt with ideation, both about suicide and more recently violent aggres-
sion toward others, and the fact that each of these forms of thinking about harming the self and others does co-occur. School officials typically have access to records documenting overt behavior, for example, evidence of delinquency, conduct problems, acting out at school, gang behavior, aggressiveness with peers, and involvement with the law. However, in the case of the ten school shooters, most had no such history and a few had minor, normative scrapes with the law but nothing that would identify serious violent tendencies. This suggests that educators and clinicians need to think differently about the potential violent acts of those secretly harboring fantasies that they may or may not act on, those who have not come to the attention of school personnel or community officials, those who do not fit the profile of the delinquent, the diagnosed conduct-disordered youth, the known gang member. The next school shooter may have never come to the attention of responsive school officials because he does not, overtly, manifest any signs of his intentions to such officials.

In our study, we asked teachers to rate students’ behavioral conduct (acting out, getting in trouble, misbehaving). Teachers are relatively accurate in making such judgments. However, we found that of those whom teachers rated as well-behaved, 92% were low on violent ideation. However, 8% reported high levels of violent ideation. While this percentage is low, it suggests that there is a small percentage of adolescents who are harboring very serious violent thoughts but who have gone unrecognized because their manifest behavioral conduct is commendable in the eyes of observing adults.

Self-report measures have come under increasing criticism in recent years. Yet our findings suggest that adolescents can and do report on both suicidal and violent ideation, and that school officials cannot necessarily detect these pernicious forms of thought, nor should that necessarily be their job. We feel that psychologists, such as our own team, and others, can, through sensitive self-report screening devices, help to identify students that report on these debilitating thoughts, toward the goal of referring them to professionals that may help to improve the quality of their lives, and perhaps prevent incidents of suicide and homicide.

There also needs to be research on different pathways to violent ideation and action. The research on school and community violence tends to focus on a “one model fits all” (see Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). The school shooters did not seem to be cast out of the same mold as delinquents, gang members, or those with clinical diagnoses of conduct-disordered behavior. They were not inner-city youth. They were all white males from suburban America, from middle class families. They did not target a single victim to eliminate, nor did they do a drive-by shooting or a
school-yard extermination of one particular individual. Rather, they splayed bullets into crowds of students, seemingly randomly in many cases. This would appear to be a very different population of killers than those who have populated the landscape of violent youth in the literature. Our own research to date cannot make these discriminations. It only alerts us to the need to think about different pathways to violent and suicidal ideation, and to move to strategies to identify those who are not at obvious risk, given the observations of responsible adults.

CONCLUSIONS

Our efforts, based on a theoretically-derived model of global self-esteem, its predictors, correlates, and consequences has revealed that perceived competence or adequacy in domains of importance to the self, as well as perceived social support from peers and parents, represent predisposing factors leading to both depressive and anger-induced aggressive reactions. These, in turn, predict both homicidal and suicidal ideation, revealing that far from being independent reactions to psychosocial factors in one’s history, thoughts of violence against others as well as against the self co-occur in the minds of those with a negative history.

Our findings, based on responses to vignettes simulating the harassing events in the lives of the school shooters, have also illuminated our understanding of the role of humiliation within the school context and how it can provoke a complex constellation of related reactions, including anger toward the perpetrator, anger at self, and depression. For a small percentage of adolescents, humiliation and its related effects fuels thoughts of violent revenge. Those entertaining such thoughts, in turn, report general histories characterized by perceptions of inadequacy, lack of peer and parental support, low self-esteem, depressed affect, hopelessness and anger-induced aggression. Such individuals also report higher levels of both suicidal and homicidal ideation. Attempts to identify students at risk, particularly given that a minority are unlikely to have come to the attention of school officials, is critical. Self-report measures would appear to be a useful tool for the identification of such students.

Current school violence programs reveal a range of approaches from institutional safety precautions, for example, gun safety, increased police presence, metal detectors (Mercy & Rosenberg, 1998; Northrup & Hamrick, 1990), to anti-bullying curricula (Olewus, 1996), to the development of prosocial skills, conflict management, and anger control (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998). While these are
worthy efforts, our own findings suggest that prevention programs should also attend to the psychosocial factors we have illuminated, namely, perceptions of inadequacy (and their causes), lack of social support, low self-esteem, depressed affect, hopelessness, homicidal and suicidal ideation, as well as the emotional concomitants of harassment and bullying, including humiliation. The challenges are legion, but well worth the effort in our attempts to protect and promote a valuable societal commodity, our youth.

REFERENCES


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