

The Deadliest School Shooting in American History:
A Dramatistic Analysis of the Virginia Tech Massacre

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Introduction

April 16, 2007, marks the day of the deadliest school shooting in American history. Seung-Hui Cho murdered 32 people, wounded 17 others, and took his life at Virginia Polytechnic Institute that day. Although many critical details surrounding the event were unknown or unclear immediately after it took place, local and national media outlets published as much information as possible, even at the risk of inaccurate reporting. For example, one of the first reports published by the media after the rampage described “unimaginable horror as some students were lined up against a wall and shot” by the gunman, who was supposedly not a student and was looking for his girlfriend (Hauser & O’Connor). It was later confirmed that the shooter was 23-year-old Virginia Tech student Seung-Hui Cho, who was not only classified as mentally ill, but was also deemed “an imminent danger to self and others” by a district court in Montgomery County, Virginia, in December of 2005 (Effron). As details surrounding the event emerged, blame for the tragedy shifted from America’s gun rights policies to the rights given to Cho and the mentally ill in general.

This paper will examine local and national media coverage of the Virginia Tech massacre and the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho. Critically analyzing how the media initially displayed different groups of people involved in the tragedy, as well as the policies that permitted Cho to purchase semiautomatic weapons and allowed his court-ordered mental health treatment to slip through the cracks is crucial to understanding how blame shifted from specific social systems to Cho as a single entity. What is published and highlighted by media outlets heavily influences how the American public perceives events, policies, individuals, and groups. For example, a study published that analyzed the perceived effects of the Virginia Tech news coverage about gun control illustrated this media influence. The results of the study demonstrated support that “for

gun owners, exposure to gun-related news coverage would be positively related to the perceived effect on others, but not the perceived effect on self” (Seate, Cohen, Fujioka & Hoffner). These results validated that individuals believed that media coverage concerning gun control would have more significant influence on others’ opinions about gun control than on their own perceptions. In the case of the Virginia Tech massacre, the primary media focus impacted public opinion concerning mass shootings, gun control, and mental illness. The immediate coverage concerning the event focused primarily on event details and provided clarification for what actually happened after initial accounts were published. Once the shooter was identified, the focus of the news shifted to Cho, featuring him as a Virginia Tech student, a South Korean immigrant, a socially isolated depressive, and finally as a murderer, which was attributed to his history of mental illness. While various aspects of the shooting were published, the stories that dominated the news when the event occurred and are still most highlighted today are about Cho, mental illness, and gun control. This is significant because only the most newsworthy aspects of the massacre, as determined by the media, will make lasting or critical impressions on readers and viewers nationwide.

While victims, families of victims, and even those not directly involved in the massacre scapegoated gun rights as the primary vehicle facilitating tragic shootings like Virginia Tech, the NRA, gun rights advocates, and others used Cho and mental illness as scapegoats for why the rampage happened. The mental illness frame began dominating the news and even influenced gun control advocates to take the stance that the reason that these tragedies are able to happen is because we allow people with mental illnesses to purchase and possess firearms. This shift in public opinion is significant because it illustrates the media’s power to encourage Americans to adopt the filters they create through major news outlets. The media also impacts which policies

Americans adopt or reject and can stir the pot in terms of rallying support or generating opposition for a policy change or an entire cause. Rhetorical critic Kenneth Burke would explain this focus on a flawed individual and an imperfect society as rhetoric dominated by a scene-agent ratio. In the case of Virginia Tech, gun control supporters argued that our society, or the scene, allows individuals, or agents, to gain possession of semiautomatic weapons, making shootings a result of defective systems, or an imperfect gun rights scene. On the other hand, gun rights advocates argue by using the mental illness frame that the issue is with a different type of imperfect society, which allows mentally ill individuals like Cho, who are considered flawed agents, to slip through the cracks of a faulty mental health system and should be restricted from purchasing guns in the first place. In Burkean terms, the Virginia Tech shooting is an instance where the agent in the rhetoric starts to trump the initially perceived imperfect scene because the primary focus is on Cho as a mentally ill murderer, until another shift occurred, highlighting the mental health system that allowed him to go unnoticed as a threat to himself and others throughout his academic career. Although Cho suffered from mental illness his entire life, he represents an extreme case, which cannot be used to generalize or stereotype every individual with a mental illness. This flawed agent viewpoint portrayed by the media not only encourages the American public to perceive mental illness as an evil and believe that every mentally ill person is capable of murder, but also stigmatizes individuals who need mental health support, preventing them from getting the courage to seek that necessary help. Using Burkean rhetorical criticism, I will identify and analyze the five parts of his dramatic pentad relating to the Virginia Tech shooting and argue that the media coverage surrounding the event facilitates a shift from a gun rights dominated scene, to an agent-oriented rhetoric, and finally advances the development of a counter-scene focusing on our faulty mental health system in America today.

This transition discourages changes to gun rights policies while consequently promoting negative perceptions of the mentally ill.

Kenneth Burke and the Dramatistic Pentad

Kenneth Burke's dramatism "invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of action" (*Grammar* xv). According to Burke, rhetoric falls in the realm of action because meaning is symbolically attached to the rhetorical situation. An action differs from his concept of motion because motion is more biological, and therefore is unintentional. Burke developed the five terms that make up the Dramatistic Pentad in order to attach symbolic meaning to discourse, including the act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose. These terms answer the essential questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how surrounding a rhetorical event. The act is what happens or what was done within the rhetoric; the agent is who does the act; agency is how the agent does the act or what means were used to do so; the scene is where the act is done or the situation in which it occurred; and the purpose is why the agent does the act (*Grammar* xv). While the agent is who does the act, this does not necessarily mean that the agent is the rhetor, but the agent may be the rhetor in certain cases. The purpose is why the agent does the act, not to be confused with why the rhetor is telling the story. The motive of the discourse applies to the rhetor, whereas the purpose applies to the agent within the story. As Blakesley explains in "The Elements of Dramatism," "Whether it be in 'philosophy, literature, speech, or in more general philosophies of human motivation, such as capitalism, communism, or psychoanalysis,' applying these five terms and mapping their pairings in 'ratios' can reveal how language both enables or constrains our interpretations of human action" (qtd in Anderson 415).

In Burkean criticism, ratios are applied between the terms to determine what the dominant focus is within a particular artifact. Burke describes ratios as “principles of determination” (*Grammar* 15). In many cases, all five terms may be highlighted within a single artifact, but eventually there will be a dominant few that emerge. For example, one would analyze how much emphasis is put on act and agent to conclude which one dominates the other in the rhetoric. Identifying the central terms typically allows readers to understand the motive of the rhetor. Burke explains that both the act and agent require scenes that “contain” them: “one may deflect attention from scenic matters by situating the motives of an act in the agent, or conversely, one may deflect attention from the criticism of personal motives by deriving an act or attitude not from the traits of the agent but from the nature of the situation” (*Grammar* 17). This drawing or deflection of attention to scene, act, and agent can be determined by identifying the central term within the rhetorical situation. Each of the terms correspond with a particular philosophy, including agent with idealism, act with realism, agency with pragmatism, scene with materialism, and purpose with mysticism. Depending upon which terms dominate the discourse, a particular type of worldview or philosophy emerges.

Burke distinguishes humans from other animals because humans use symbols in a unique way to communicate with each other. Rhetoric can be differentiated as action or motion oriented. In comparing an action to a motion, a motion is considered a natural occurrence that happens accidentally or unintentionally, like the wind blowing and the leaves on a tree rustling as a result. An action, on the other hand, is not natural and is therefore considered more intentional. Burke describes this concept using behaviorist metaphysics: “you radically truncate the possibilities of drama by eliminating action, reducing action to sheer motion” (*Grammar* 10). Burke believes

that it is possible for an action to be rhetorically turned into a motion and vice versa, but a motion cannot become an action unless one attaches meaning to it:

As for 'act,' any verb, no matter how specific or how general, that has connotations of consciousness or purpose falls under this category. If one happened to stumble over an obstruction, that would be not an act, but a mere motion. However, one could convert even this sheer accident into something of an act if, in the course of falling, one suddenly *willed* his fall (as a rebuke, for instance, to the negligence of the person who had left the obstruction in the way). (*Grammar* 14)

This attachment of meaning can cause people to perceive discourse in different lights due to the symbols used. For example, it is easier to hold someone accountable for an action rather than a motion, but it is difficult to discriminate when rhetoric is perceived as one and when it shifts to the other.

The article "Hunting and Heritage on Trial" analyzes the trial of Donald Rogerson, avid deer-hunter and Maine native, who was deer hunting and shot Karen Wood, who had recently moved to Maine around the time of her death. In accounts that came out after Rogerson fatally shot Wood on her own property, "Rogerson was reduced from a moral, thinking agent to an organism who merely responded to external stimuli much as animals, for example, salivate in the presence of food" (Tonn, Endress & Diamond 173). These reports claimed that Rogerson did not engage in an action, but engaged in a motion and could not be blamed for her murder for that reason. It was framed as a motion because he did not have the intent or make the conscious choice to kill her, whereas it would have been considered an action if he had pulled the trigger and had been trying to end her life. Another example involves the rhetoric surrounding the Duke Lacrosse rape case of an African American woman:

Of course, those who rhetorically attacked the Duke Lacrosse team and the university could have portrayed the accuser as an immoral exotic dancer who willfully entered a house of rowdy young men. Instead, they “absolved” her by articulating a scenic perspective, in which she was portrayed as just another community member trying to make ends meet and who eventually became a victim of Duke student “outsiders.” (Turnage 147)

This example directly relates to the “Hunting and Heritage on Trial” article because in this instance as well, one could argue in Burkean terms that the African American dancer engaged in motion instead of action because she was unaware of what she was getting herself into before attending the party.

Burke analyzed rhetorical elements in religious systems, which he defined as one of the most powerful ways of using rhetoric, to develop his guilt and redemption cycle. These cycles allow individuals or groups assigned blame for committing a sin or for allowing a tragic event to occur to either take on that guilt or adopt a scapegoat to rid them of that guilt. Burke explains “It is profoundly consubstantial with those who, looking upon it as a chosen vessel, would ritualistically cleanse themselves by loading the burden of their own inquiries upon it. Thus, the scapegoat represents the principle of division in that its persecutors would alienate from themselves to it their own uncleanness” (*Grammar* 406). For example, religious systems centuries ago sacrificed and killed chickens to symbolically kill the sin and liberate them of their guilt. These victimage rituals are closely related to the process of scapegoating, or assigning guilt to another entity, making them responsible for whatever that individual or group is blamed for. Burke cautions readers that, although this scapegoating mechanism allows for the resolution of guilt, it is not truly a curative method for the persecutors (*Grammar* 406). In “Hunting and

Heritage on Trial,” although Wood was initially perceived as the victim, hunters did not want to give up hunting and instead assigned all blame to Wood for going outside of her house during hunting season, being unaware of cultural norms, and not taking other precautionary efforts to ensure her safety (Tonn, Endress & Diamond 169). This example of the guilt and redemption cycle allowed hunters in Maine to alleviate themselves of the blame they were initially assigned by scapegoating Wood as an outsider who should have known better.

Burke developed the concept of terministic screens, which says that the kind of terminology we use to describe something is a way of screening reality or the perceptions of reality of that particular thing. He cites an instance where he viewed different photos of the same object, and the only difference between the photos were that they were each made with a different color filter: “Here something so ‘factual’ as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded” (*Language* 45). This example demonstrates how the terms we use to give meaning to an event also have the potential to determine what an individual sees as reality or as fiction. Another example is when “Blakesley turns to Bryan Singer’s film *The Usual Suspects*, where a police investigator’s terministic ‘lens...for interpreting experience’ blinds him to the fact that the criminal he hunts is sitting right in front of him” (Anderson 415). Burke also believed that, “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (*Language* 45). This statement relates to the notion of terministic screens because he is claiming that every time we engage in certain kinds of selection, we also engage in specific deflections. The dramatic pentad and other Burkean terms highlighted in this section

can be used to analyze the media coverage and resulting public perception concerning the Virginia Tech shooting and issues surrounding the tragedy.

Context of the Shooting

The massacre on April 16, 2007, occurred on the 2,600 acre Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, Virginia, where 25,000 full-time students were enrolled. The first shooting began around 7:15 am when Cho entered the West Ambler Johnston Hall student dorms and shot and killed Ryan Clark and Emily Hilscher on the fourth floor (“Deadly Rampage”). Initially, campus police at Virginia Tech believed that the shooting was a purely domestic case, so they reacted by pursuing a shooter thought to be the boyfriend of Hilscher; they isolated the dormitory, secured the crime scene, and had just began a university meeting to discuss the shooting that had occurred earlier that morning when they heard news that a second shooting was occurring at a different location on campus. The second attack occurred in an academic building at around 9:40 am. Cho shot and killed five teachers and 25 students in the classrooms and hallway of the second floor of Norris Hall. He attempted to attack students and professors in five classrooms on the second floor, and although the order that he entered the rooms is unclear, survivors reported that he tried to break back into several of the classrooms at least once after the first time. According to survivors, Cho entered the Advanced Hydrology class in Room 206, which was thought to be the first class attacked because students did not report hearing gunshots previous to this room. In Room 207, the Elementary German class, students reported seeing Cho look into the classroom twice through the door window previous to entering. Survivors reported hearing shooting in a class across the hall and Cho entered moments later and shot and killed the professor and students sitting in the front row (“Deadly Rampage”). After Cho left for the first time, multiple students attempted to barricade the door so that he could not break back in, and he

instead shot at the door and injured two students. They reported hearing shots in a nearby classroom and Cho returned two minutes later and shot at the door two more times. The Intermediate French class in Room 211 heard the shots, so Professor Jocelyn Couture-Nowak put a desk in front of the door, but Cho was able to get into the classroom and murder her. Multiple other students were shot dead and Cho returned to the classroom again to repeatedly shoot at the wounded students. Professor Kevin Granata, who had an office on the second floor, went into the hallway to inspect the sounds of gunshots and was immediately murdered. Room 205, Issues in Scientific Computing class, heard gunshots and saw Cho in the hallway. They attempted to keep him out of the classroom by creating a barrier with a table and were successful. Cho was unable to break into the classroom, shot twice at the door and moved on. Survivors in the Solid Mechanics class in Room 204 reported hearing shots and screams through the walls of the building and Professor Liviu Librescu encouraged students to escape to safety by jumping out of the windows. Professor Librescu attempted to block the door to allow students to escape but was overpowered and was shot and killed (“Deadly Rampage”). Cho shot at two students trying to jump out of the windows, but they were able to get away. Although most of the students had escaped out of the windows once Cho had broken in, a few of the students that remained retreated to the back of the classroom and after shooting at each of them, Cho left the room.

When the police arrived at Norris Hall, the doors were chained shut, and by the time they entered the building, Cho had shot himself in the head. Initial reports were unable to identify Cho as the shooter because he did not have identification on him at the time and his self-inflicted head wound was too severe to determine who he was (Hauser & O’Connor). The university students and families were outraged that the entire campus had not been secured after the first shooting and that students were not notified about a shooter on campus until hours after Cho had

killed two students in West Ambler Johnston Hall. The campus police chief, Wendell Flinchum, tried explaining that officials initially believed that the shooter had fled the campus and had maybe even left the state after the first shooting, which is why they did not immediately react by shutting down the entire campus. Seventeen students were treated for injuries at Montgomery Regional Hospital, Lewis-Gale Medical Center, and other facilities (Hauser & O'Connor). University officials did not send out an email warning students of the shooter on campus until just before 10 am classes began. Although the purpose of the bulletin was to inform students that there was a dangerous person on their campus, most students did not realize the peril they were in or the severity of the situation and left their dorms for classes like a normal school day. Many students did not realize how serious the threat had been until they saw at least 10 guards with rifles aimed and ready at the entrance to Norris Hall (Hauser & O'Connor).

During the period of time between the first and second shootings, Cho mailed a package to NBC news that included numerous self-taken photos and videos of him ranting about the people who made him kill. In one of the photos, he was posed wearing a black hat backwards and black gloves holding two guns outstretched toward the camera: "It is chilling that we recognize this pose, it is so deeply a part of our society that a profoundly disaffected young man reached for its simple form – a mixture of arms spread to menace and arms spread as if in expectation of crucifixion" (Kennicott). In certain photos, his facial expressions were angry and cold and his eyes were emotionless and dark. It fascinated authorities that he decided to mail his videos, photos, and computer files by surface mail when they easily could have been posted on the Internet. Every photo and video displayed Cho by himself, isolated from the world around him, which characterized much of his life and his experiences throughout his academic career. In other photos, he aimed the gun he was holding directly at the camera, he posed holding a

hammer above his head as if he was about to strike someone with it, and in another he was wearing a black shirt and gloves with a gun aimed at his head. The videos he sent were of him angrily and ambiguously ranting about the people who drove him to do what he did: “You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off” (“A Killer’s Rant”). He also victimized himself by making statements that accused others of not being able to understand the pain he had felt throughout his life: “Do you know what it feels like to be spit on your face and have trash shoved down your throat? Do you know what it feels like to dig your own grave?” (“A Killer’s Rant”). Parts of the videos display Cho ranting about wealthy and privileged Americans and also highlight the Columbine High School shooting. Although it is unclear whom exactly he wanted as his audience, it would make sense that he hoped the photos and videos would air on national news, which NBC did after receiving the surface-mailed package.

While news of the Virginia Tech rampage rocked the nation on various levels, this was not the first major school shooting to shock and horrify Americans. On April 20, 1999, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, had planned to bomb the high school, aiming to kill at least 500 people, but instead shot and killed 12 classmates and a professor before they took their own lives: “At the time, it was dubbed the most deadly school shooting in American history, and it changed the way many communities across the country thought about school safety” (Efron). Several Virginia Tech students and other sources saw similarities between the Virginia Tech rampage and the Columbine High School shooting that had occurred in the same week eight years previous. There were several other school shootings that occurred in the years between Columbine and Virginia Tech, including one on March 21, 2005, when a 16-year-old boy killed his grandfather and grandfather’s friend before he arrived at a high school

on the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota, where he shot and killed five other students, a professor, and an unarmed guard (Effron). Another shooting occurred on October 2, 2006, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania at an Amish school where a gunman took 12 female students hostage and murdered three before killing himself. The number of people murdered was not as high in these instances, so these cases were much more low profile in the media compared to Columbine and Virginia Tech. Until the Virginia Tech massacre, the deadliest American school shooting had occurred at the University of Texas in 1966. The killer, Charles Whitman, had climbed to the top of a clock tower and shot and killed 16 people (Hauser & O'Connor). Once the high profile massacres at Columbine and Virginia Tech hit the news, the cultural understanding of school shootings in America was altered forever.

The change in societal understanding of school shootings around the time of Virginia Tech led to Congress and President George W. Bush “to sign the first major change to US gun laws in more than 10 years – it expanded the federal background check database – and overhauled how many campuses handle crime and security alerts” (Effron). Although this seemed like a major step at the time, this was primarily due to the National Rifle Association (NRA) advocating for new laws that would require a national registry of the mentally ill to help curb gun violence and massacres like Virginia Tech to avoid major gun rights policy changes nationwide. As of December 2012, 38 states required background checks that review mental health records before granting the purchase of a firearm. Although the Gun Control Act of 1968 “prohibits gun sales to individuals who have been committed to a mental institution or ‘adjudicated as a mental defective,’” this is nearly impossible to enforce because of strict privacy laws that apply even during a federal background check of a mental health status report (Kliff). For this reason, the expanded federal background check requirement did not have a truly

significant impact on gun control nationwide at the time, which was considered a win for the NRA. Former NRA president Charlton Heston stressed that the association's members are responsible for protecting gun rights, gun culture, and ultimately saving America because "Losing any gun rights is the first step along the path to losing all rights and freedoms and the country itself. This is why the gun-rights movement will not compromise on gun control" (Melzer). As similar reports continued to be published, the mental illness frame became more heavily emphasized in media coverage regarding the tragedy.

Analysis of Media Coverage

The discourse surrounding the Virginia Tech massacre is dominated by a scene-agent ratio because the primary focus of the media coverage is between person and place (*Grammar 7*). Initial media reports focused much more on flaws in our society, or scene, rather than on Cho as an agent. In the context of the Virginia Tech shooting, Cho is the agent. The act is Cho murdering 32 people, injuring 17 others, and killing himself. The act also involves him sending the photos and videos to NBC news via snail mail, hoping that they would get highlighted on national television, which was the result. Cho secured a sense of agency in the act because he was able to purchase semiautomatic weapons, allowing him to murder his fellow classmates and professors. The scene consists of the Virginia Tech campus and the entire background of the event, including what was going on in America at the time, such as gun culture, education, court, and mental illness policies. The place would include other aspects of the scene, including society as a whole, survivors of the shooting who observed the act, and other individuals and groups involved in the backdrop of the event. Although coverage of the massacre and the shooter attempted to explain the purpose of the act, or why Cho decided to go on a shooting rampage on Virginia Tech campus that day, the true purpose will probably never be verified because the

agent killed himself after completing the act. Sources cite that “Cho left a note in his dorm room and sent material to NBC railing against the rich and privileged and comparing himself to the downtrodden, but officials said the material does not explain his actions” (Markon & Horwitz). After reviewing cell phone and email records, as well as all of the material sent to NBC, it was still entirely unclear what drove Cho to murder his classmates and teachers.

Initial Perceptions of an Imperfect Gun Rights Dominated Scene

Families of victims, survivors, and many others began scapegoating gun rights as the primary reason that the Virginia Tech massacre was able to happen. These groups of people focused on American gun culture facilitating national tragedies, as well as the NRA for allowing and encouraging the purchase and possession of firearms by the general public, including semiautomatic weapons like the ones Cho used to murder his classmates and teachers. For example, Colin Goddard, who survived after being shot four times, spoke out against gun rights and began advocating for harsher regulations for the sale of guns and tighter gun control overall. His main argument involved a project he completed: “After he recovered from his wounds, Goddard went to work for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, going undercover to gun shows, where he was able to buy guns with little or no identification or background checks” (Lambeck). He created a documentary called “Living for 32” in honor of the victims of the Virginia Tech shooting and to attempt to rally support for the passing of a bill in Congress that would make it much more difficult for potentially dangerous people to purchase weapons.

A mere 12 hours after the shooting, Clara Jeffery, co-editor of *Mother Jones*, criticized an article posted three days previous on the National Rifle Association (NRA) website by the CEO, Wayne LaPierre. The article highlighted the start of the NRA Annual Meetings in St. Louis, as “both a celebration of freedom and a rally for the Second Amendment, but it’s also a show of

force by gun owners to the enemies of freedom everywhere” (Jeffery). LaPierre cited an arms trade treaty that was being hard-pressed by Congress at the time, and encouraged gun rights advocates in St. Louis to “show them we won’t be pushed around.” After the shooting occurred, the NRA released an official statement: “The NRA joins the entire country in expressing our deepest condolences to the families of Virginia Tech University and everyone else affected by this horrible tragedy. Our thoughts and prayers are with families” (Weigel). As cited within the same article, this is a very typical response to national tragedy published by the NRA, consistently recognizing that there will eventually be an “appropriate time” after shootings have taken place to discuss gun control and gun policies.

A week after the massacre, an article discussing how other nations have attempted to stop or decrease the number of shootings that occur in their respective countries highlighted differences in gun culture in America. A criminologist from Britain’s University of Brighton, Peter Squires explained the differences in perceptions between Britain and America: ““We are very much a paternalistic, collective society...American society is ‘more individual’ and has a deeply ingrained sense of ‘a right and duty to self-defense’” (Associated Press). Regardless of this argument, many Americans desire tougher gun control laws to try and cure the world of such evils, but the results from other countries changing laws have been mixed. The NRA reacted to criticism of current policies and blame for allowing mass shootings to take place in America by proposing to post armed guards at every school in America. While many gun rights advocates supported this notion, critics pointed out that the cost would be unrealistic and it would not necessarily be effective. At this point, media coverage was still dominated by criticisms of an imperfect gun rights dominated scene, specifically targeted at gun rights advocates, but further

national reports helped transfer the focus from American gun culture overall to Cho as a single responsible agent.

The Shift in Focus from a Gun Rights Scene to a Flawed Agent

By analyzing the media coverage surrounding the Virginia Tech massacre, there is evidence of the idea of a flawed agent taking attention away from an imperfect gun rights scene. This is apparent throughout the discourse because various groups, especially the National Rifle Association (NRA), attempted to shift the focus away from an ineffective society with loose gun rights policies to Cho as a mentally unstable individual who could be assigned full blame for the tragedy being possible. Within days following the shooting, numerous articles about the event were published, including background information about Cho's life, his history of mental illness, and attempts at understanding the motives behind the rampage. *The Washington Post* published full coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings within a few days and weeks after the event, including one section with 14 articles titled "Seung Hui Cho – The Struggle to Understand a Killer." These articles included quotes from peers and school officials who had dealt with Cho's unnerving behavior throughout his college career, as well as initial autopsy results demonstrating that there were no abnormalities found in Cho's brain, information about the how and where he purchased the semiautomatic weapons he used to murder his classmates and teachers, and excerpts from his disturbing plays, poems, and other writings from his English classes at Virginia Tech which were "like something out of a nightmare." For example, his 10-page play called "Richard McBeef" features "an 'aging balding overweight pedophile' stepdad named Dick who puts his hands on the lap of his stepson, a 13-year-old who appears driven to kill and a wife who beats her husband with her shoe" (O'Harrow Jr.). Many of these articles provided further insight into instances that could have clued school officials and campus psychologists in to what

Cho was capable of. A month later, more information was released that discussed Cho's court-ordered treatment that he never received, highlighting flaws we have in our mental health and court systems (Schulte & Jenkins). It was not until August 2009 that Cho's full mental health records were released to the public by the university, which cited medical evaluations that had not been previously published by media outlets.

At the same time, the Burkean terms of action and motion can be applied to argue against the legitimacy of the mental illness frame. In the case of Virginia Tech, Cho as an agent could fall into the realm of motion because his mental illness is a biological issue that he had dealt with since birth. By assigning meaning to this motion, such as Cho's mental illness being the cause of the massacre or characterizing him as an evil person because of his sickness, it facilitates a shift from motion to more action-oriented, which makes it easier for the public to blame him entirely for the tragedy. According to various sources, Cho displayed warning signs early in childhood: "Cho was unusually quiet as a child, relatives said. He did not respond to greetings. He did not want to be hugged. But when Cho fought with his older sister, he would punch her with shocking violence" (Cho & Gardner). His parents did not worry about him until later in his life because he did so well in school growing up, but he was socially isolative and never spoke or responded to questions from teachers or peers. Another source compared Cho's case to other "loners" who committed mass murder in the past. By comparing Cho's behavior as cited by school officials and classmates, as well as his rampage on Virginia Tech campus, which ended with him taking his own life, researchers stated that, "It is very likely this was a case of amok. Amok is the end product of mental disorder where you get homicidal-suicidal behavior" (qtd. in Vedantam). Typically, these individuals are angry, sorrowful, and usually also depressed. They eventually snap and want to cause harm to others and end their own lives. This evidence could suggest that

he engaged in a motion instead of an action because it is attributed to mental illness and he was not in control of his mental health status. He did not intentionally inherit genes causing his mental instability, but other accounts argue that his rampage was attributed to different problems. The same article suggested that Cho might have been suffering from “culture-bound syndrome,” which, “Besides the problem of stereotyping that that raises, they argued that using the construct might suggest Cho was not suffering from a mental illness, when in fact he seemed deeply disturbed” (Vedantam). Crediting the rampage to an acculturation issue would again shift the focus back to an imperfect scene, where society as a whole, especially school officials, community members and peers, should sincerely attempt to make every individual who immigrates to the United States feel as welcome and a part of American society as possible.

The Development of a Counter-Scene: Gun Rights vs. Mental Illness

After the Virginia Tech shooting, guilt was initially assigned to school officials for not alerting students of the shooter on campus, but this was because authorities believed it was an isolated case. From there, blame was assigned to the school system in general for not taking measures to track Cho’s progress after being referred to school psychologists. These individuals blamed the court system for not providing them with more information about his required outpatient treatment, “Seung Hui Cho never received the treatment ordered by a judge who declared him dangerously mentally ill less than two years before his rampage at Virginia Tech, law enforcement officials said, exposing flaws in Virginia’s labyrinthine mental health system, including confusion about the law, spotty enforcement, and inadequate funding” (Schulte & Jenkins). According to various sources, the court, university and community officials did not make sure that Cho actually received his treatment, which was an “involuntary outpatient commitment.” This failure to ensure the proper follow-up on such an extreme case is further

evidence that Cho lived in an imperfect mental health dominated scene, which did not facilitate him receiving the necessary mental health support. The judge who ordered this treatment claimed that he had no way of following up with cases after they leave the courtroom (Schulte & Jenkins). Although it is impossible to know if treatment would have helped prevent the rampage from happening, the lack of communication between officials within the education and court systems allowed Cho's case to slip through the cracks.

At this point, school and court officials began scapegoating gun rights and the NRA as the primary reason that the Virginia Tech massacre was able to happen. This allowed them to take the attention away from the immediate education and court systems in Virginia, and focus on a more nationally controversial topic that other individuals, especially gun control advocates, would latch onto and support. As Burke reminded us, this scapegoating method does not actually cure the core problem, but helps these groups of people to feel more at ease once the blame has shifted away from them for a particular occurrence (*Grammar* 406). Once the NRA and gun rights supporters had the finger pointed at them, they began using the mental illness frame as a scapegoat to prevent any policy changes and to avoid potential limitations to gun rights. Sources cite that "At moments, the NRA and supporters almost sounded like liberal gun-control advocates. 'We have a mental health system in this country that has completely and totally collapsed' Mr. LaPierre told NBC television" (Lexington). The NRA and other gun rights advocates felt the blame imposed by the majority of society in terms of allowing national tragedies, like school shootings, to occur. They wanted to absolve themselves of this guilt by shifting the attention from problems with gun rights policies, to problems that directly involved Cho as an agent and other individuals who suffer from mental illness and do not get the necessary treatment "as the 'true' cause of such massacres" (Lexington). This way, they were

able to shift the guilt from a gun-infested scene to a poorly handled mental health scene, allowing a flawed agent to go unnoticed, lessening the wrath of gun control supporters, survivors of the shooting, and families of victims.

By selecting gun rights as the reason that school shootings like Virginia Tech are able to happen, we are deflecting attention from the possibility that there are other issues that could explain why these tragedies occur. For example, we could be deflecting that our education and legal systems and their lack of communication in dealing with cases of mental illness has an impact on school shootings. If we select mental illness as the primary reason for why school shootings happen, we are deflecting issues involving gun rights and other problems within our society that allow extreme cases of mental illness, like Cho, to go under the radar. This is similar to the concept of terministic screens because the terms we use to describe an object or event select and simultaneously deflect attention from other possible terms, impacting the perceptions of reality held by the public. Gun control advocates imposed a screen for gun control issues because they claimed that our loose gun rights enabled Cho and other people who should not have possession of a firearm to purchase these weapons. When talking about Cho and his mental health problems, gun rights supporters began attaching the term mental illness to other inappropriate terms like “monster” or “murderer.” While Cho was a murderer, every case of mental illness is different and he represents an extreme case that was not given sufficient attention by school and legal officials. Associating mental illness with being evil or capable of murder causes individuals who are not educated about mental illness to adopt these filters and fear or hate people who suffer from these disorders because they may assume that every individual is similar to Cho. These terms cannot and should not be attached to mental illness because they generalize and stigmatize individuals who need mental health support.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, the rhetoric surrounding the Virginia Tech shooting is dominated by a scene-agent ratio. Initially, it seemed as though the focus in the media was from the overall society or scene to Cho as an individual agent. Further analysis allows readers and viewers to distinguish the various shifts in focus that occurred immediately after the massacre took place, throughout the years since that tragic day in 2007, and what is still most highlighted in the news today. The major finding in this research is that there is not purely one scene fighting for dominance in the news with a flawed agent. Instead, media coverage facilitated the development of competing scenes, or different ways that groups and individuals were able to filter and perceive the event. The initial blame was placed on a gun rights dominated society, where the NRA and gun rights advocates felt the backlash of those directly and indirectly involved in the massacre for allowing it to occur. From there, the news began featuring more about Cho as an individual or agent, providing background about his life, previously unreleased medical information, interviews from peers who had read his chilling writings, poems, and plays, and professors who recounted the disturbing interactions they had with him during his academic career, especially in college at Virginia Tech. The Burkean term of agent seemed to take the stage, until the NRA and gun rights advocates began scapegoating Cho as a flawed agent, and shifted the focus in the news to our inadequate mental health system in American society. This new frame advanced the notion of competing scenes in a society where those who support or are involved on each side do not want to admit their wrongs and imperfections.

Other high profile school shootings can also be analyzed using the dramatic pentad and other Burkean terms to determine the primary foci of the news coverage and evaluate similarities between previous shootings in history and the Virginia Tech massacre. In the case of the

Columbine shooting, the rhetoric was also dominated by a scene-agent ratio, but issues within the scene were most published by news outlets after the massacre occurred. It was initially thought that our imperfect system, which allows high school age kids to play extremely violent video games and put up with bullying with no help or support throughout their education, was the primary cause of the shooting. After extensive analysis that did not surface in the media until years after the shooting, there was evidence that documented that Harris was a “cold-blooded psychopath” and that Klebold was extremely depressed, “summing up his life at one point in his journal as ‘the most miserable existence in the history of time’” (Toppo). Once this information reached the news, the focus once again shifted from the initially perceived imperfect scene to the flawed agents, facilitating the frame used about mental illness rather than gun rights to explain why these national tragedies occur. This also allows for the imperfect mental health system scene to be used to argue that it was not entirely agent-dominated rhetoric, but that our mental health support in America is faulty and needs attention to attempt to help these extreme cases of mentally ill individuals before they hurt themselves or others.

Since Virginia Tech and Columbine, there have been other major school shootings that bring to light similar issues highlighted during this tragedy. Gun rights and mental illness have also been focused on more in the news concerning recent shootings in America. For example, the shooting that took place in the small town of Newtown, Connecticut, at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012, focused on the controversial issues also involved in the Virginia Tech shooting. The 20-year-old shooter, Adam Lanza, shot his mother before grabbing three guns and heading to the school, where he shot and killed 20 elementary school students and six adults before taking his own life. Six weeks after the massacre, the main focus in the media and goal of those individuals involved in the tragedy was to oppose gun rights in our society today:

“hundreds filled the local high school auditorium, nearly all raising their voices for tougher gun control laws before a state task force. For six hours, they poured out their hearts, their losses and their tears” (Harlow & Payne). At the same time, the NRA used a similar tactic during this national tragedy by shifting the media focus to the mental illness frame as a scapegoat to avoid major gun control policy changes. This shift is evidenced in articles discussing gun rights and mental illness at the same time, where individuals used the mental illness frame as a filter to understanding the event. For example, at a demonstration outside of Connecticut’s state capitol on March 11, 2013, a gun-owning pensioner declared, “We don’t go around shooting people, the sick people do. They need to be fixed” (Lexington). Using mental illness as a scapegoat for why national tragedies occur cause people who are not educated to believe that every “sick person” is grotesquely wrong and is capable of evil or murder, like Cho or Lanza. This is not the case and is one of the primary reasons why the media should not facilitate demonizing individuals with mental illness, and should instead encourage more effective gun control policies, education, court, and mental health systems in American society today.

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