

When the school and medical care professionals fail to prevent bullying of students with a personality disorder syndrome and depression: the case of the Columbine High School shooting, 20 April 1999

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Abstract

The objective of the paper is to posit that family care, educational systems, institutions, such as healthcare and law enforcement, when they fail to act in unison, may, in fact, contribute indirectly to a volatile school crisis, which in turn may evolve into disasters, such as school shootings and/or suicide. The 1999 Columbine High School massacre, compiled into a case study, has served as the empirical source for the study. Next to the poorly synchronised family and institutional efforts to correctly diagnose psychopathic traits in one perpetrator and depression in the other, and failure to recognise their acute emotional crisis, two other variables contributing to the Columbine High shooting have been proposed. It is hypothesised that bullying (largely undermined and underestimated) to which Harris and Klebold had been exposed for at least four years, during the milestone 12 to 17 life stage, and the dysfunctional relationship between them, might have been the other massacre driving agents. Several negative repercussions of the Columbine shooting, such as worldwide copycat school shootings, resulting from a cult status of the Columbine murderers as well as their massive presence on the Internet and in pop culture, have been enumerated. Follow-up and further research studies have been proposed, including some quantitative projects, on bullying and cyber bullying among adolescents. Recommendations for decision makers have been listed.

Keywords: bullying at school, depression, psychopathy, revenge pact, school shootings, school care failure, Columbine murder cult

Introduction

One of the fundamental concepts to be clarified here is bullying (sometimes misnamed 'mobbing' in Polish) at school, as an act/process of victimising students who are perceived as different from their peers. Bullying, i.e., a continuous and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm in its objects (National Centre Against Bullying [NCAB], 2021), was for the first time described in the 19th century, when Burk (1897) addressed harassment and victimisation among young people. The features which are likely to distinguish a young person in a group can stem from unusual physical characteristics, such as protruding ears, physical deformities, obesity or unhealthily skinny look, or unique psychological traits, such as excessive shyness as well as emotional or personality disorders (Fox & Boulton, 2005; Koo, 2007; NCAB, 2021). Those children and adolescents who deviate from the

norm in regard of their unusual shyness, introversion – which can themselves be depression-linked – or, conversely, those, whose excessive anger outbursts and aggression or otherwise disturbing behaviour exclude them from peer play or social interactions, such as sleepovers, also because they may be unable – through poverty or other impairing circumstances – to reciprocate other children's invitations, have been described in the relevant literature as exceptionally prone to bullying (Fox & Boulton, 2005; Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016).

Several grave negative consequences resulting from bullying have been identified, especially when ignored by school authorities, such as dysfunctional, aggressive acting out, which might end up in disasters, such as a school killing, or self-harming behaviour, in extreme cases ending in suicide (Fox & Boulton, 2005; Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016). Some more recent research has found a definite link between bullying and school shootings. According to Lee (2013), bullying

directed at the perpetrators, prior to school shootings, has been the leading cause in 87% of such incidents in the United States. A five-stage model for a process leading to an act of school killing committed by bullied youngsters has been developed by Levin & Madfis (2009): chronic strain, uncontrolled strain, acute strain, planning stage and enacting the murder at a school. As revealed by the subsequent investigation, the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre had also been subjected to long-term bullying and went through the stages identified by Levin & Madfis (2009), which is further elucidated.

After 2008, i.e., after the first iPhone was introduced, followed by the smart phone revolution, which included the development of social media and new forms of public display of approval or disapproval, such as 'likes', 'thumbs up/down', hate speech, as well as viral dissemination of content in the net, including photos, memes, You Tube shorts and films, a new form of bullying among young people has developed, namely 'cyber bullying'. The scope and volume of bullying has increased manifold, largely thanks to anonymity in the net (Görzig & Frumkin, 2013). Cyber bullying became particularly prevalent in the years 2020-2022, when the lockdown policies mandated schooling from home (McBride, 2021). During that period, many students felt alienated and helpless when faced with cyber bullying, and experienced other mental health issues, which had been reflected in the rising suicide rates among children and teenagers, i.e., one of the many problems left by the lockdown legacy (Manzar, 2021; Mourou-vaye et al., 2021). Undeniably, the lockdown-related adolescent mental health deterioration deserves a collective, comprehensive and multi-layered research effort, well beyond the scope of this paper.

Here, in line with Lee's (2013) findings, bullying has been regarded as a variable in the chain of other, directly, or indirectly linked inopportune circumstances, which has resulted from the failure of the school authorities to respond appropriately and promptly to school aggression. Such unfortunate circumstances might occur when the actual victims of bullying have not been diagnosed correctly as suffering from mental health and personality disorder problems. As already indicated, children and adolescents with mental health issues may display psychological and emotional traits constituting a kind of bait for bullies to initiate their aggressive actions. Simultaneously, both the family and teachers may be ignorant of the compounding emotional or psychological crisis in the bullied students, which may then lead to a serious acting out incident. The concept of a psychological crisis is understood here as an acute state of emotional distress, which destabilises an individual's psychological balance, and is caused, as in the case of the Columbine duo, by the ongoing process of undermining their self-perception and self-worth, leading to the feelings of pent-up frustration, anger, resentment, while seeking revenge and

media exposure (Lindemann, 1944; Rapoport, 1962; Fox & Levin, 2005; Levin & Madfis, 2009).

The 1999 Columbine High shooting has been selected as the most relevant empirical evidence for the study since it has demonstrated the reciprocal double bind of mental health issues and bullying, as strongly supported by the relevant post 1999 literature input. The case-relevant documentation has been assembled and processed into a case study, while a case study analysis has been recognised as the most relevant research method, especially in view of the interdisciplinary nature of the crime in question. Information has been arranged after both the secondary sources, such as academic and research literature, and the accessible primary sources, have been analysed. The latter have been comprised by the police documentation, including the school's CCTV and the perpetrators' homemade video tapes together with the transcripts of their dialogues (Gibbs & Roche, 1999), as well as witnesses' reports and the transcripts of Harris's and Klebold's (2019) diaries, footnoted by a psychiatrist. Both the diaries and the recordings have become a unique 'disease evolution' record which witnessed the gradual degradation of their mental welfare, in a classic five-stage progression, from chronic, uncontrolled and acute strain, respectively, to the planning stage and massacre enactment (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

As evidenced by the primary and secondary sources, Harris (18) and Klebold (17), both Columbine High School students, entered the school campus at 11:14 AM on 20 April 1999, armed with semi-automatic weapons, guns and several explosive materials. After they had placed the explosives as planned, they started the shooting. In the course of approximately 20 minutes, they shot and killed 12 students and a teacher, gravely wounded 21 other persons and, at 12:08 PM, they killed themselves by shooting in the head (Fox & Levin, 2005).

Since the Columbine High massacre was an act of terror which occurred at a place deemed as a particularly vulnerable public location, i.e., a school, it was scrutinously investigated by the state and federal authorities, police forensics, independent experts, as well as a plethora of crime science researchers (Paolini, 2015; Sanchez, 2018). During the investigation, numerous law enforcement errors, committed both prior to and during the shooting, had been revealed (Muschert, Larkin & Muschert, 2007). In the aftermath, school security measures, such as policing and increased guard presence, surveillance technologies and emergency response training increased in schools (Muschert et al., 2007; Paolini, 2015). In the long term, stakeholders, i.e., parents, teachers, counsellors, administrators, and students as well as crime science experts have gained more insight into bullying, especially when it remains undiagnosed and ignored (Koo, 2007). Nevertheless, according to some estimates, it seems that most bullying incidents are not

disclosed or followed (Paolini, 2015), and in view of some scholars (Lee, 2013), the research conducted in the area of school shootings has been insufficient, although it needs to be pointed out that, in the USA alone, a significant number of mental health and anti-bullying associations, state and non-governmental bodies have been founded in the last four decades, such as The National Alliance on Mental Illness (2020) or the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus & Limber, 2010), both established in the 1970s. Despite the improvements in school safety and security standards and a growing public awareness of bullying and its consequences, statistics have indicated that in the 21st century, school violence in the USA has increased by 19% (Paolini, 2015).

This paper follows the standard research paper outline and the APA style.

Literature review

The rationale for the research has been grounded in the psychology of personality and the constraints in human development, with a particular focus on disorders and irregularities in the personality formation process, such as negative socialisation patterns as well as certain genetic antisocial traits. The paper's science background has included some insights from psychiatry, such as the diagnostic tools used to determine mental and personality disorders. The fundamental reasoning is predicated on the recognition that mental health disorders contribute to the increased likelihood of the sufferer's proneness to commit criminal offence, including felony (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Fox & Boulton, 2005; Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016).

Diagnosing mental health disorders

The fundamental medical diagnostic tool referred to here has been *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (commonly known as DSM), in its 2022 edition, i.e., DSM-5-TR, the work of the American Psychiatric Association, universally applied in the American psychiatry practice (APA, 2022). DSM recognises depression as a neuropsychiatric disease while psychopathy has not been identified there as a clearly defined and coded medical dysfunction although both psychopathy and sociopathy have been abundantly referred to.

Depression

Depression is defined as an observable gradable mood deterioration affecting both the body and the psyche (Clark, Beck & Beck, 1994), which, in its extreme form, might lead to suicide (Seligman, Walker & Rosenhan, 2017). It can occur in all ages, including young people. The findings of a study conducted by Albert & Beck (1975) showed that approximately one third of the study adolescent participants suffered from depressive tendencies, while more than one third had experienced suicidal ideation. A comparison of means

test revealed that the critical age at which the illness would manifest itself in an adolescent depression sufferer was during the ages of 13 and 14. The authors recommended that 13- to 15-year-olds, i.e., students undergoing a milestone age in the human lifecycle in regard of mental health, be thoroughly and astutely observed in view of the increased likelihood that mental health issues might manifest themselves precisely at that age.

Psychopathy versus antisocial personality disorder

Psychopathy is not tantamount to antisocial personality disorder. Psychopathy is a voluminous term which encompasses numerous traits and behaviours, while antisocial personality disorder is determined by the grade and frequency of antisocial acts (Weiner & Freedheim, 2003; Seligman, Walker & Rosenhan, 2017). Antisocial personality may manifest itself both in psychopaths and in offenders who have committed an opportunity spurred criminal act (Huchzermeier et al., 2007).

Psychopathy has been examined since the beginning of the 19th century (Pinel, 1801; Koch, 1893). Psychopathy research entered the grounded body of knowledge in psychology for good in mid-20th century, when Cleckley (1941; 1964) compiled a list of characteristics in the psychopathic personality disorder, formulated its definition and identified a link between psychopathy and personality defects in juvenile and adult criminals. An individual with a psychopathic personality is typically characterised by deficient emotional responses, does not experience empathy, guilt or remorse and is driven by impulsivity, while displaying erratic decision making and poor planning skills (Cleckley, 1941; 1964; Kiehl & Hoffman, 2011).

After quantitative methods became to be widely applied in the humanities in the late 20th century, the advantage of measurability also benefitted the psychology of personality. A Revised Psychopathy Checklist, (PCL-R), i.e., a standardised gradable questionnaire allowing to identify psychopathic traits in individuals was produced in the 1990s (Hare, 1993; Seligman, Walker & Rosenhan, 2017).

Additionally, discoveries in concurrent medical research into brain functioning have allowed psychologists to gain more insight into the aetiology of psychopathic personality disorder. New research indicated that psychopathy in some individuals was probably biologically conditioned and most likely stemmed from amygdala dysfunction and/or abnormalities in the area of the frontal lobe activity, thus causing impairment of their behavioural patterns (Blair et al., 2006; Koenigs, 2012). The discovery allowed to differentiate between the genetic or family (socialising) origin of the disorder and its neurological causes resulting from molecular abnormalities leading to synaptic dysfunction. According to Blair et al. (2006), the onset of the disorder is more likely to be initiated by genetic predispositions

than a dysfunctional socialising environment. There also exists strong evidence that traumatic childhood, including violence and sexual abuse of a minor, which – ostensibly – should impair and diminish the abused child's compassion capacity or empathy, i.e., the very traits absent in psychopaths, does not necessarily correlate with the development of psychopathic personality disorder (Fallon, 2013). The conclusion that a difficult childhood, in a disadvantaged, dysfunctional environment and exposure to violence and fear, does not unequivocally induce anti-social behaviour in children, has been reiterated by other sources, although the likelihood of acquiring anti-social traits does tend to rise the more time they are exposed to the influence of criminal patterns (Dishion & Patterson, 1997; Lewinsohn et al., 1999; Dodge & Pettit, 2003).

Since the Columbine High shooting perpetrators had both experienced mental health issues, the subsequent investigation undertook to identify which and how their respective mental disorders had contributed to the tragedy. However, in view of overwhelming yet conflicting evidence, this particular task seemed extremely challenging both during the investigation and in follow-up analytical projects. The differences of opinion among experts, also those regarding the role of bullying, have been prevalent. There is, however, no doubt, that Harris's and Klebold's respective psychological disorders played a contributing role in the subsequent emotional crisis they experienced.

Mass murder determinants. The Fox and Levin model (1996)

Next to the ongoing contributions into the aetiology and variety of personality disorders, which have correspondingly been applied in crime science and forensics, research of mass and serial murder has been conducted. Those two types of murder are perceived as distinct from each other (Jenkins, 1989). According to Fox & Levin (1996), mass murder incidents are motivated by vengeance, while the revenge act is directed at specifically targeted persons or the society as a whole. Serial murder, on the other hand, involves several victims as well (at least three), but it is enacted at intervals, while the pauses between the killings serve to release the murderer's emotional tension. According to other criminologists, their motivation arises primarily from sexual frustration (Dowden, 2005).

Mass murder is likely to be driven by long-term frustration, externalised guilt, and failure to resolve family relationship issues, problems in the perpetrator's school or work environment. The killer is very likely entangled in a serious psychological crisis (Czerwiński & Gradoń, 2001; Piotrowicz, 2015).

American sources indicate that the typical serial killer is a young (20-30), white male (Fox & Levin, 1996). He is likely to target random, unknown to him persons. In most cases, the perpetrator is a psychopath, who tends to satisfy their needs through an act of

brutal killing. On the other hand, a typical mass killer, demographically similar, i.e., a young white male in the same age bracket, usually chooses the victims in their direct environment, applying logical, methodical and fully premeditated thinking, with the intention to kill. His modus operandi involves an execution-like plan, which he carries out using the most useful and effective tool, i.e., a firearm. It seems that the most striking difference between the two types of killers is their choice of the time and place of murder. According to Fox & Levin (1996; 1998), the underlying motivational factors driving both types of killers are alike: power seeking (media exposure), revenge, personal gain as well as striking fear and horror. It needs to be added, however, that the Fox & Levin (1996) model has not been unequivocally shared by all criminologists nor forensic practitioners, such as profilers (Harbort & Mokros, 2001).

After considering the definitions and differences between the serial and mass killer, the authors have classified Harris and Klebold as mass killers, while the literature and evidence presented here have produced sufficient grounds to formulate three research hypotheses, as follows.

Hypotheses

1. A long-term and very close relationship between Harris (a psychopath) and Klebold (a depression sufferer) should be regarded as one of the factors contributing to the massacre. If a relationship between a person with a psychopathic personality disorder and his school-friend suffering from depression had never evolved and morphed into a revenge pact with the aim to destroy their bullies, the disaster could have never occurred or could have been pre-empted.
2. A cabal of teenagers going through a vulnerable milestone phase in their development had been displaying symptoms of mental health issues, but they had not been monitored and guided by a team, comprised of school representatives and medical care specialists, who should all devote their collective efforts to the adequate problem resolution.
3. Bullying, though widespread, has failed to receive the attention it deserves, while its prevention and management have been neglected.

Case study – background

Columbine is a town spreading over two counties: Arapahoe and Jefferson in Colorado, on the outskirts of Denver, with a resident count of 24 280. The local state high school, Columbine High, first opened in 1973 and could accommodate up to 1652 students. After the shooting, the town started to enjoy a type of bleak notoriety and became an object of deranged tourist attraction, while the perpetrators have gradually gained a pop culture icon status and a certain kind of cult following with a growing fanbase on the Internet.

Numerous local residents have expressed an opinion that Columbine High should be razed to the ground and a new high school be built in another location (Coffman, 2019).

Dylan Bennet Klebold was born on 11 September 1981 in Lakewood, Colorado (Jefferson County Police Report, 2019). His parents, Tom and Susan, née Yasenoff, met while they were both art undergraduates at Ohio State University. His father's background was Protestant, while his mother had been brought up in a wealthy and reputable Jewish family. Their conspicuously different backgrounds contributed to a rather vague and unstable family status without a clear ethnic and religious identity. The unclear and vacillating family identity could have contributed to Dylan's confusion during the vital developmental stage when he was seeking to establish his own cultural belonging (Larkin, 2007). In 1990, the Klebolds settled in Deer Creek Canyon. Some sources stated that the family did not appear to be happy. Dylan and his older by two years brother, Byron Jacob, seemed to be involved in constant and excessive arguing, while the family did not appear to exude warmth or supportive atmosphere. His primary school had recognised Dylan's above average intelligence, which gave him access to an early gifted children programme, but, at the same time, excluded him from the neighbourhood peer play.

His emotional and mental health issues manifested themselves mildly. He was generally perceived by peers and adults as being painfully shy and quiet, fidgety when spoken to and extremely nervous in the presence of girls. In 1997, Dylan started journaling in a hand-written diary, where he wrote about his depression and suicidal thoughts. His depression, diagnosed post factum, was probably only alleviated by his friendship with Harris. His life history provides evidence that the first symptoms of a depressive disorder were triggered precisely when he reached the age identified as critical by Albert and Beck (1975), which coincided with puberty and commencement of middle school. Since then, his grades went down and he seemed no longer interested in studying. However, his gradual change did not cause alarm in the immediate surroundings.

Eric Harris was born on 9 April 1981 in Wichita, Kansas (Muschert et al., 2007). His father, Wayne Harris, worked as a transport pilot for the United States Air Force, while his mother, Margaret, née Poole, was a home maker. They had two children, Kevin and Eric. Before they settled in Littleton in 1993, the family, following Wayne's assignments, had moved several times between various air bases in Ohio, Kansas, Michigan and New York, respectively, while Eric had attended five different schools. As a result, he experienced a great deal of instability and few, if any, stable peer relationships. He was clearly and acutely aware of those social handicaps, whose negative impact he referred to in some of his school essays. It could be inferred from the neighbours' accounts that the Harrises

seemed like a friendly, albeit reserved family, while the children appeared to be normal, average next-door teenagers (Larkin, 2007). After they settled in Littleton in 1993, Eric was enrolled in a local school, where he met a boy his age, Dylan Klebold. Subsequently, in 1995, both boys commenced study at Columbine High School. Soon after that, Eric started to display disciplinary problems and anti-social behaviour. From 1997 onwards, his father decided to journal his son's misdemeanours in a notebook, called "Eric". The diary documented Eric's school warnings, reprimands, fights with school-friends, antisocial acts as well as descriptions of his son's emotional instability. In 1995, during his junior year at Columbine High, Eric staged and documented with a photograph a suicide attempt after allegedly being rejected by a girl he had asked out to a homecoming (Gibbs & Roche, 1999).

Both Harris and Klebold's physique did not make them natural athletes and they were not interested in sports activities, which made them socially unattractive among other students at Columbine High. Eric's skinny physique seemed to particularly attract his school-mates' attention and made him easy prey for their ridicule and bullying (Larkin, 2007). Despite his lack of physical predispositions, in 1999, Harris decided to apply to join the United States Marine Corps, trying to follow in the footsteps of his father and older brother, however, his application was rejected.

After Harris and Klebold broke into a van and attempted to steal its contents in 1998, the subsequent enquiry and court procedures included a psychological assessment of Harris. He was diagnosed with an obsessive-compulsive disorder and prescribed Luvox (fluvoxamine) as part of the mandatory psychiatric treatment, included in the sentence. At the time, Luvox was routinely applied in cases such as Harris's (Larkin, 2007). The diagnosis, however, was later deemed as incorrect. More recent research also revealed that fluvoxamine could, in fact, have aggravated his psychopathy (Moore, Glenmullen & Furberg, 2010).

Dylan and Eric's friendship

Eric and Dylan, schoolmates during the period 1995-1999, first built their friendship on a mutually shared feature: they were both outsiders. They were both initially stellar students. Both shared a passion for videogames (packed with violence Doom and Quake), computers and an obsession with firearms.

Eric was fascinated by Hitler, especially with *Endlösung*. He was entirely unaware of Dylan's ethnic roots until Klebold happened to mention his Jewishness in the final weeks when they were perfecting their revenge plan against the school, which got recorded on the Basement Tapes. Gradually they became close. In the seventh grade there were perceived as inseparable (Larkin, 2007). At that time, they also reached the bottom in the hierarchy of social peer attractiveness.

Klebold and Harris's first serious legal offence took place in January 1998: they broke into a parked van and attempted to steal the contents of its trunk. The police stopped them, they were subsequently charged with several criminal offences, among them breaking and entering and theft. After the trial they had to undergo several corrective programmes, such as Juvenile Diversion, psychiatric treatment (Harris) and community service.

Bullying against both Klebold and, more intensively, Harris had been pervasive. Their peers found their physical appearance, psychological traits and social handicaps unacceptable (Fox & Levin, 2005; Muschert et al., 2007). While at Columbine High they experienced various forms of abuse, varied in intensity but never-ending, in every form possible: physical and verbal bullying as well social exclusion. Their peers did not accept them and perceived them as outcasts and homosexuals whose relationship deserved ridicule (Muschert et al., 2007). In 1998, the senior year, Klebold and Harris reached an ultimate state of unjust and unfair rejection, frustration, anger and feelings of revenge against the outside world. In other words, they reached phase four in the Levin & Madfis (2009) model: the revenge plot.

Planning and execution

Harris and Klebold spent the year from April 1998 until the massacre putting together, modifying and practising a retaliation plan against their bullies, which they documented in their respective diaries (Muschert et al., 2007; Klebold & Harris, 2019). Since January 1999, they also started to record their executive meetings on homemade video tapes, which were later named the Basement Tapes after their meeting location (Gibbs & Roche, 1999).

The work carried out during those meetings included listing their bullies in a kind of hit list, to which Harris added the names of all the girls who had refused to go out with him. They also created a model of the school campus and a simulation, in a computer game form, of possible crossfire trajectories, their respective positions and the optimal locations for the explosives. They speculated on the potential number of casualties (250). They did not forget to mention with gratitude those who had helped them to carry out the plot, and, finally, they attempted to secure a contingency plan in case their original plan was exposed prematurely. The tapes also chronicled their speculations on the shooting aftermath and the likely film industry interest in making a movie about them. The revenge act was to be comprehensive, and it meant to harm the whole school, not merely their bullies, hence the addition of the explosives (Cullen, 2004; Larkin, 2007).

The acquisition of firearms and explosive materials was meticulously planned and carried out (The Jefferson County Police Report, 1999; Muschert et al., 2007). This part of the plot could have been stopped on

several occasions at various stages, had the adult individuals in Harris's and Klebold's respective homes, at school, workplace and in the neighbourhood observed and interpreted the symptoms of an ever more acute psychological crisis brewing in the two teenagers. They carefully chose the date to execute their plan, 20 April, which had a symbolic meaning, as it was Hitler's birthday (Cullen, 2004; Fox & Levin, 2005; Muschert et al., 2007).

Psychological analysis of Klebold and Harris

After the massacre, the investigation covered, among others, a thorough examination of the perpetrators' personalities, their mental and emotional health as well as diagnostics of their respective disorders and analysis of their psychological crisis. The investigators found beyond any doubt that they were not just ordinary boys from the neighbourhood. There was also no doubt that Harris was the leader.

Dylan seemed uncertain of his ethnic, religious and sexual identity. He introduced himself in Internet chatrooms as bisexual (Larkin, 2007). According to some researchers, Harris and Klebold's friendship could have been homoerotic (Cullen, 2004; Muschert et al., 2007).

Dylan admired Eric for many reasons: his ironic sense of humour and self-confidence, his eloquently presented vision of the world which justified his rage against the surroundings and his anger with the bullies. The Basement Tapes revealed that both teenagers perceived themselves as possessing a higher consciousness level than other people (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). Harris was obsessed with his anger, hatred and resentment. He deeply resented the fact that others failed to appreciate his ostensibly unique qualities and talents. The Basement Tapes and Harris's and Klebold's respective diaries (2019) have been a both a 'disease evolution' record and a testimony to their extreme feelings of distress, resentment, injustice, helplessness as well as fury and desire for revenge in the four months before the tragedy. As previously indicated, such a massive negative emotional build-up might gradually lead to an aggression enactment, ending in extreme violence against others or self (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

Also listed previously was the finding that mass murderers are frequently pushed to an extremely acute emotional crisis (Czerwiński & Gradoń, 2001; Piotrowicz, 2015). Unquestionably, Harris and Klebold displayed its symptoms, though their primary motivations might have been as different as the radically different nature of their respective mental health disorders. Their friendship compensated for what they were missing in life: it made them feel exceptional, gave them a sense of belonging and unified them against injustice in life. Their reciprocal support also confirmed the shared acceptance for the revenge mass murder plot they came up with (Cullen, 2004; Fox & Levin, 2005).

As previously indicated, the extent and time-span of bullying against them was fully disclosed only after the massacre, while the investigation and psychiatric assessment progressed. The immediate post-factum analysis, especially local and national media accounts, tended to present the human-interest victim stories, the crisis of Christianity and adolescent moral decay in the USA (Muschert et al., 2007). After the testimonies of the Columbine High school-friends and teachers had been examined and compared, a general picture of disbelief among the people from non-metropolitan America, including Littleton residents, emerged. Bullying, in their opinion, could only be symptomatic of dysfunctional inner-city schools. An idea that such a horrific crime could have been committed by 'our boys from the neighbourhood' seemed inconceivable (The Jefferson County Police Report, 1999; Fox & Levin, 2005).

Findings

The authors have hypothesised that the mass shooting at Columbine High could have been carried out thanks to the 'work in tandem', conceived and executed by two individuals with mental health problems, who shared the same experience of being bullied and rejected. As indicated, the evidence identified Harris, the psychopath, as the instigator and leader. He was worshipped by Klebold, the weaker of the duo, who suffered from low self-esteem, had wavering identity issues and weak family support. He never questioned Harris's destructive and distorted vision of the world. It is possible that should Harris have acted solo, he would not have been able to enact his revenge plot without the support of his loyal 'disciple', in whose eyes he was God. Klebold, on his own, would have rather gone the self-destructive way if the circumstances became unbearable. After all, his diary was full of suicide-related thoughts and rantings (Klebold & Harris, 2019).

In regard to Hypothesis II, the paper has evidenced that several stakeholders, such as the family, teachers, psychiatrists and law enforcement who had witnessed Harris's and Klebold's problems, failed to respond appropriately. Eric's father kept a diary dedicated to his son's misdemeanours, while the 1998 investigation involved his mental health assessment and a subsequent order of psychiatric treatment. The post-shooting investigation revealed that the Jefferson County police documentation included two police notes on calls to the Jefferson County police, which reported Eric's violent acts on two separate occasions, and which had been ignored by the police at the time (Muschert et al., 2007). Several teachers had witnessed various forms of bullying directed against the boys, to which they failed to respond adequately. Eric mentioned some of his problems in school essays, which was left unanswered. No adult who had witnessed the duo's numerous issues got alarmed by them, while the local

law enforcement institutions had neglected to respond to them (Fox & Levin, 2005). Several other symptoms of mental health issues have manifested themselves throughout the boys' adolescence: their interest in studying had dissipated, they got into computer games to the point of obsession, Harris never ceased to get into trouble, finally both committed a criminal act and got caught. It seems that the adults in their surroundings never managed to get together and act in a concerted way to unravel the emotional crisis and stop the chain of events in time.

Referring to Hypothesis III, namely bullying as one of the decisive factors motivating Harris and Klebold to plot and carry out revenge, the body of documentation collected after the massacre: the diaries, the Basement Tapes, witnesses' accounts etc., corroborated that bullying had occurred. Humiliation, contempt, derision and being rejected by the other students over several years had undermined their self-worth and distorted their self-perception. Multiple acting out incidents had not been discerned adequately. Personal failures (e.g., rejection of Harris by girls, and later by the Marine Corps) as well as poor school performance (low grades, inability to compete in sports) added to the miserable perception of himself and uncertainty about his identity in Klebold, while, in contrast, they inflated Harris's grandiose and delusional self-worth perception. Long-term gradual swelling of chaotic and negative emotions culminated in a formation of their own, imaginary and dysfunctional world, which justified the concoction of a deadly final solution aimed at annihilating both the hostile environment and themselves.

Conclusions

A multitude of repercussions followed the Columbine High massacre. Several seem to carry a valid message despite the lapse of time. The efforts on the part of Littleton and Jefferson authorities as well as the federal government, to disable a process of glorifying the Columbine High murderers, prevent copycat murders and stop their Internet presence and exposure have been to no avail, both at home and abroad. Several copycat murders have occurred, both in the United States as in other countries: Brazil (Martins, 2019), Canada (CTVNews, 2007), Germany (Caistor, 2002), Finland (Naughton, 2008; Oksanen, Nurmi, Vuori & Räsänen, 2013) as well as in Poland (Zasada, 2020; Zakrzewski, 2020a; 2020b), which attests to the fact that the Columbine High shooting has entered the history of crime for good, regrettably also as a model for revengeful psychopaths. Any executive orders from decision makers intending to censor or curtail the Columbine High murder net exposure would seem to be as naive and futile as the Greek edict which mandated to never mention Herostratus' name. If, therefore, Harris and Klebold's cult status cannot be erased, have other useful lessons been learned from the shooting and investigation?

The statistics cited in the Introduction are implying that bullying, despite being extensively researched and documented, and despite stricter punitive measures is on the rise. Police investigative efforts will tend to focus on identifying paedophile activity on the Internet rather than on tracing IP addresses of potential cyber bullies. As stated before, it is estimated that bullying remains predominantly undisclosed and unpunished. It seems therefore that the society can only place trust in the wisdom of its decision makers and relevant institutions, who, equipped with the knowledge on bullying and its consequences, will show resolve to implement effective prevention and penalising measures. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that trust based on the invariability of science and its progress, may be relatively easily chipped away.

An external crisis may interfere out of the blue, as in the case of a lockdown-related mandatory schooling from home policy, which can only add to the challenges faced by educators. As alluded before, the lower statistics of reported bullying incidents during the 2020-2022 period, which substantially reduced peer face-to-face contact, could only mask the actual number of bullying incidents, while seemingly improving the statistics. Undeniably, as also indicated previously, lockdown-related mental health issues in children and adolescents have been on the rise, while cyber bullying has become more prevalent.

Research limitations

The primary constraint has resulted from the requisite to limit the paper's page count. Resources in this particular case are voluminous and amassing with time. They have covered so many layers of the atrocity that is has become imperative to select only hypothesis-related literature and resources while excluding several other aspects, such as the ensuing lawsuits, civil litigation and damages, as well as – undoubtedly enlightening – differences in juvenile law between the USA and Poland and other issues.

Recommendations for decision makers

It seems that educators in Poland have a limited choice of punitive tools applied in case of school misdemeanours and anti-social behaviour, including bullying. Polish teachers are also fully aware that cyber bullying prevention could be beyond their capacities. It is certainly worthy of consideration whether to follow the Western countries' practices of linking school and a relevant local police department's work to preempt harmful content on the Internet and to trace and promptly punish the perpetrators of cyber bullying.

Recommendations for further studies

It is the authors' opinion that it is possible to design several follow-up research studies after selecting some threads in this paper.

An exceptionally challenging project could embark on designing and testing some methods to effectively deal with the growing cult of school shootings. A similarly challenging study could be a proposal to gather all evidence available on the Columbine High copycat shootings worldwide. It is possible that both projects would require an interdisciplinary and international team approach.

Limiting the research scope to Poland, a study which would document all attempts at school mass murder could produce interesting insights, especially if it offered extensive analytical work on the crime background.

It is finally possible to envisage a project contributing to the existing body of knowledge on bullying in Poland, in a case study format, which would aim to document, *ex post facto*, a scenario or crime investigation involving bullying in a Polish school. Additionally, such a qualitative project could be followed by a quantitative study based on statistical data on bullying in Polish schools, attempting to analyse it in regard to demographic variability, e.g., whether in rural or urban environment.

Conclusion

It is disturbing to observe the Columbine High massacre reaching a cult status. Growing swathes of young fans are following the pages devoted to the shooting, as proven by the IT statistics. The cult and process of glorifying Harris and Klebold have been observed with dread and shock by educators, mental health experts and law enforcement alike, yet their cult seems to evoke most concern among parents. Many people still seem incapable of envisaging what led to the Columbine High atrocity, though they may have come to terms with the reports, preventive measures, safety, detection and emergency training as well as anti-bullying strategies applied in schools. It seems therefore that awareness raising efforts should be above all directed at parents. As shown here, mere documenting of the son's anti-social behaviour, as was the case of Eric's father, may not be tantamount to understanding the child by the parent. The primary source of the duo's issues may have been indeed situated in their families. Dylan and Eric felt they could not trust their primary caretakers, i.e., the parents. No wonder no other adult in their surroundings seemed capable and willing to win their trust while they were growing up and offer help while they were struggling with overwhelming emotional and mental health issues. Therefore, the authors feel that the most relevant conclusion they have presented in this paper is the recommendation that parents, the school and healthcare specialists should work together when necessary and beneficial for the children.

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