

The National Conversation in the Wake of Littleton is Missing the Mark

By Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally

First published in
The Boston Globe
May 2, 1999, Sunday, City Edition
Focus Section; Pg. E1

The events at Columbine High School 12 days ago have plunged us into a national conversation about "youth violence" and how to stop it. Proposals came last week from all corners - the Oval Office, Congress, living rooms across America. That we are talking about the problem is good; but the way we are talking about it is misdirected.

It is tempting to look at the murderous attack in Littleton as a manifestation of individual pathologies, an isolated incident involving deeply disturbed teenagers who watched one too many video games. That explanation ignores larger social and historical forces, and is dangerously shortsighted. Littleton is an extreme case, but if we examine critically the cultural environment in which boys are being socialized and trained to become men, such events might not appear so surprising.

Political debate and media coverage keep repeating the muddled thinking of the past. Headlines and stories focus on youth violence, "kids killing kids," or as in the title of a CBS "48 Hours" special, "Young Guns." This is entirely the wrong framework to use in trying to understand what happened in Littleton - or in Jonesboro, Ark., Peducah, Ky., Pearl, Miss., or Springfield, Ore.

This is not a case of kids killing kids. This is boys killing boys and boys killing girls.

What these school shootings reveal is not a crisis in youth culture but a crisis in masculinity. The shootings - all by white adolescent males - are telling us something about how we are doing as a society, much like the canaries in coal mines, whose deaths were a warning to the miners that the caves were unsafe.

Consider what the reaction would have been if the perpetrators in Littleton had been girls. The first thing everyone would have wanted to talk about would have been: Why are girls - not kids - acting out violently? What is

going on in the lives of girls that would lead them to commit such atrocities? All of the explanations would follow from the basic premise that being female was the dominant variable.

But when the perpetrators are boys, we talk in a gender-neutral way about kids or children, and few (with the exception of some feminist scholars) delve into the forces - be they cultural, historical, or institutional - that produce hundreds of thousands of physically abusive and violent boys every year. Instead, we call upon the same tired specialists who harp about the easy accessibility of guns, the lack of parental supervision, the culture of peer-group exclusion and teasing, or the prevalence of media violence.

All of these factors are of course relevant, but if they were the primary answers, then why are girls, who live in the same environment, not responding in the same way? The fact that violence - whether of the spectacular kind represented in the school shootings or the more routine murder, assault, and rape - is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon should indicate to us that gender is a vital factor, perhaps the vital factor.

Looking at violence as gender-neutral has the effect of blinding us as we desperately search for clues about how to respond.

The issue is not just violence in the media but the construction of violent masculinity as a cultural norm. From rock and rap music and videos, Hollywood action films, professional and college sports, the culture produces a stream of images of violent, abusive men and promotes characteristics such as dominance, power, and control as means of establishing or maintaining manhood.

Consider professional wrestling, with its mixing of sports and entertainment and its glamorization of the culture of dominance. It represents, in a microcosm, the broader cultural environment in which boys mature. Some of the core values of the wrestling subculture - dominant displays of power and control, ridicule of lesser opponents, respect equated with physical fear and deference - are factors in the social system of Columbine High, where the shooters were ridiculed, marginalized, harassed, and bullied.

These same values infuse the Hollywood action-adventure genre that is so popular with boys and young men. In numerous films starring iconic hypermasculine figures like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Wesley Snipes, Bruce Willis, and Mel Gibson, the cartoonish story lines convey the message that masculine power is embodied in muscle,

firepower, and physical authority.

Numerous other media targeting boys convey similar themes. Thrash metal and gangsta rap, both popular among suburban white males, often express boys' angst and anger at personal problems and social injustice, with a call to violence to redress the grievances. The male sports culture features regular displays of dominance and one-upsmanship, as when a basketball player dunks "in your face," or a defensive end sacks a quarterback, lingers over his fallen adversary, and then, in a scene reminiscent of ancient Rome, struts around to a stadium full of cheering fans.

How do you respond if you are being victimized by this dominant system of masculinity? The lessons from Columbine High - a typical suburban "jockocracy," where the dominant male athletes did not hide their disdain for those who did not fit in - are pretty clear. The 17- and 18-year-old shooters, tired of being ridiculed or marginalized, weren't big and strong and so they used the great equalizer: weapons. Any discussion about guns in our society needs to include a discussion of their function as equalizers. In Littleton, the availability of weapons gave the shooters the opportunity to exact a twisted and tragic revenge: 15 dead, including themselves, and 23 wounded.

What this case reinforces is our crying need for a national conversation about what it means to be a man, since cultural definitions of manhood and masculinity are ever-shifting and are particularly volatile in the contemporary era.

Such a discussion must examine the mass media in which boys (and girls) are immersed, including violent, interactive video games, but also mass media as part of a larger cultural environment that helps to shape the masculine identities of young boys in ways that equate strength in males with power and the ability to instill fear - fear in other males as well as in females.

But the way in which we neuter these discussions makes it hard to frame such questions, for there is a wrong way and a right way of asking them. The wrong way: "Did the media (video games, Marilyn Manson, 'The Basketball Diaries') make them do it?" One of the few things that we know for certain after 50 years of sustained research on these issues is that behavior is too complex a phenomenon to pin down to exposure to individual and isolated media messages. The evidence strongly supports that behavior is linked to attitudes and attitudes are formed in a much more complex cultural environment.

The right way to ask the question is: "How does the cultural environment, including media images, contribute to definitions of manhood that are picked up by adolescents?" Or, "How does repeated exposure to violent masculinity normalize and naturalize this violence?"

There may indeed be no simple explanation as to why certain boys in particular circumstances act out in violent, sometimes lethal, ways. But leaving aside the specifics of this latest case, the fact that the overwhelming majority of such violence is perpetrated by males suggests that part of the answer lies in how we define such intertwined concepts as "respect," "power" and "manhood." When you add on the easy accessibility of guns and other weapons, you have all the ingredients for the next deadly attack.