

Promoting Violence: Terror Management Theory and Campus Safety Campaigns

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Abstract

A new wave of campus safety campaigns have been implemented on high school and college campuses across the nation since the Virginia Tech shootings. Some of these campaigns are trying to increase awareness that violence can happen anywhere by reducing optimistic bias in students and faculty. This study poses that these campaigns have the potential to increase mortality salience and anxiety in individuals who already feel like cultural outcasts, and that these individuals are more likely to act out because of these feelings. We argue that some safety campaigns have the potential to widen the gap between conflicting cultural worldviews by reducing optimistic bias, and thereby, increase the likelihood of a violent act.

Violent acts on high school and college campuses have increased in the last decade. National statistics show at least 20% of public schools across the nation experience at least one violent crime on their campus (DeVoe et al., 2004). According to a National Crime Survey Report, teens between the ages of 12 to 17 are two times more likely to be victimized by a serious crime than adults and three times more likely to be assaulted. Research suggests 40% of all violent crimes take place on or around school grounds for children between the ages 12 to 19 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

Defining school related violence is difficult because many definitions are broad and not well operationalized (Johnson et al., 2002). Hernandez and Seem (2004) define school violence as any harmful act, which results in a negative impact on the internal school climate. The California Commission of Teacher Credentialing suggests school violence is both a “public health and safety condition . . . including physical and nonphysical harm which causes damage, pain, injury or fear” (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 5).

Some of the most extreme violent acts like the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings have raised awareness of the threat of violence academic settings face. These violent acts have also raised awareness of school safety issues, and in most cases, encouraged much needed changes in policy and warning systems. In addition, public awareness and safety campaigns have been developed and implemented on high school and college campuses across the nation. A goal these campaigns is to reduce the common perception that shootings only happen at other schools.

Optimistic bias is the notion that “bad things happen to other people, but not to me” (Chapin & Coleman, 2006, p. 381). Chapin and Coleman (2006) found that most students believe they are “less likely than others to become victims” of school violence and that the chance of violence occurring at their school is “less likely than other schools around the country” (p. 384). While the awareness campaigns no doubt are trying to increase safety in schools, the outcome of these campaigns can actually have the opposite effect.

This study places rampage school shootings in the context of terrorism and critically examines the promotion of school safety through the lens of terror management theory. School safety campaigns are analyzed to expose the potential for these campaigns to decrease safety as cultural outcasts are further ostracized by the defense of cultural worldviews and self-esteem needed to decrease mortality salience. School violence and terrorism are reviewed, terror management theory is explained, and campaigns aimed at reducing optimistic bias are analyzed to make recommendations for future research and campus safety campaigns.

School Violence

A 2002 study conducted by the University of Arkansas School Violence Resource Center assessed recent quantitative and qualitative research, which placed an emphasis on how school-related violence was perceived and measured “among educators, students, parents, law enforcement officials, local governments, community service organizations, and community leaders” (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 3). Several definitions of school violence emerged from this study with no definitive definition. Some researchers define school-related violence in a broad spectrum, which makes operationalizing laborious. One definition of school violence is a deliberate and negligent act, which results in physical or psychological harm to a person or property on school grounds (Astor & Meyer, 2001). Another researcher suggests “the use or threat of physical force with the intent of causing physical injury, damage or intimidation of another person” is a good way to define school violence (Berg, 2000, p. 18). Still, other researchers define school violence in a more precise and focused way. Danner and Carmody (2001) give more specific examples of what they think should be considered school violence. They suggest any physical threat or force with the deliberate intent of causing intimidation or injury to another person, which includes forcible rape, assault, armed robbery, and homicide, as well as, hitting, shoving, or throwing objects should be considered a violent act and help define school-related violence. Because grade school students’ perception of school violence generally differs from high school students’ perception of school violence, Flannery and Singer (1999) posit that any definition of school violence should advance along a continuum of grade levels.

Violence is often attributed to racial, ethnic, and socio-economic inequalities (Blau & Golden, 2005). Research has found support for a variety of “school violence risk factors” (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 18). Some of these risk factors include not having a good stable family structure with rules, low or no involvement or support from parents, taking personal responsibility, involvement in gangs, violence in the media, personally witnessing violent acts, low self-esteem, and drug and alcohol abuse (Pietrzak, Petersen, & Speaker, 1998; Stetson, Stetson, & Kelly, 1998). Johnson et al. (2002) found that “teachers characterized likely victims of school-related violence as low income, racial minorities, low achievers, social outcasts and those with low parental supervision,” while students saw victims as “outcasts, homosexuals, boys, gang members, and students with low self-esteem” (p. 18).

Despite these extensive profiles of perpetrators and victims, very few characterizations match the perpetrators and victims in major school shootings. In fact, from 1992 – 2001, only one of what have been classified as the large-scale “random” school shootings occurred in an inner-city school by a black student; whereas, the remaining 22 were committed by white students in middle-class, suburban schools (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). In addition, “almost all the shooters came from intact and relatively stable families, with no history of child abuse” (p. 1442). The only characterization listed above that matched the profiles of school shooters was the propensity toward violence. A recent study supports the notion that a “positive relationship

exists between the adolescents' attitude toward violence and the use of violence" (Gellman & Delucia-Waack, 2006, p. 595). Students who had committed a violent act believed violence is a "means to ensure survival by being prepared to take the offensive" (Gellman & Delucia-Waack, 2006, p. 595).

Another commonality among the school shooters was that "All or most of the shooters had tales of being harassed—specifically, gay-baited—for inadequate gender performance...[the shooters] did not measure up to the norms of hegemonic masculinity" (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1440). No reports have concluded that any of the shooters were gay, but that most were teased because they were different from the other boys—shy, bookish, honor students, artistic, musical, theatrical, nonathletic, "geekish," or weird. "Nearly all had stories of being mercilessly and constantly teased, picked on, and threatened" (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1445).

Most of the shooters had no past of committing violent acts. They were not bullies. They were students who had been bullied. A 2003 national report by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids states that bullying affects one in three children in grades six to ten or 6.9 million students. Children who are bullied are five times more likely to be depressed and are far more suicidal than other kids (Fox et al., 2003). Kimmel and Mahler (2003) contend that the shooters were culturally marginalized based on criteria for adequate gender performance, specifically the enactment of codes of masculinity. They view the shooters "not as psychopathological deviants, but rather overconformists to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to a perceived humiliation" (p. 1440).

Even with the movement to broadly define school violence, some violent actions should not be classified together. The seemingly "random" shooting rampages on school campuses need to be categorized differently than school violence. Research has shown the shootings are not random (Reddy et al., 2001). They are meticulously planned to put an end to torment, demonstrate power, and induce fear. Seung-Hui Cho sent his manifesto including photos and 27 videos detailing his plans to CNN in between shootings at Virginia Tech. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold planned their attack on Columbine for more than a year with the ultimate goal to "terrorize the entire nation by attacking a symbol of American life" (Cullen, 2004, para. 4). This study seeks to conceptualize shooting rampages that shock our school and social systems as acts of terrorism.

School Violence as Terrorism

Terrorism is defined as "a conspiratorial style of violence calculated to alter the attitudes and behavior of multitude audiences. It targets the few in a way that claims the attention of the many" (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 4). Viewing school violence as terrorism, O'Hair and Averso (2006) reveal a number of common elements including: 1) fear as the ultimate goal; 2) violence need only be threatened; 3) ultimate targets are not always the victims; and 4) the purpose is to impact political or social change. Specifically, "Terrorism is a response to a social system that the terrorist perceives is indifferent to his/her concerns or needs. The terrorist act is an anger-based, extreme measure intended to force the social system to take notice of the terrorist's ignored concerns or needs" (O'Hair & Averso, 2006, p. 2). Terrorists are individuals with a high mortality salience (thinking of death often) who feel so much aggression toward those with alternative worldviews that they seek to eliminate them (Miller & Landau, 2005). Gaddis (2001) suggests the whole idea behind terrorism is the ability to "accomplish a lot with a little" (p. 10). "What school violence and terrorism have in common is violent behavior that is an outcome of

the interaction between individual development and social settings (e.g., the school) (O'Hair & Averso, 2006, p. 2).

The shootings are attacks on the system that perpetuated the shooters' torment. Furlong and Morrison (2000) contend "Acts of violence that threaten the security of schools attack a core value of our social system" (p. 74). Newman (2004) suggests the shootings are institutional attacks because they take place on a public stage before an audience, are committed by a member or former member of the institution, and involve multiple victims chosen for their symbolic significance or at random. Schools may, in fact, be overestimating their contextual obstacles in managing violence. Studies of juvenile delinquency and high school drop out rates show that "a child is better off in a good neighborhood and a troubled family, than a troubled neighborhood and a good family" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 167-168). A school violence study involving 2,616 high school students found that school climate matters above and beyond any effect of the parent on the child (Grunseit, Weatherburn, & Donnelly, 2005). Tellingly, Columbine shooter Eric Harris quoted Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in a term paper, "Good wombs hath borne bad sons" (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1442). School violence can be conceptualized "as a multifaceted construct that involves both criminal acts and aggression in schools, which inhibit development and learning, as well as harm the school's climate" (Furlong & Morrison, 2000, p. 71). Analyzing the climate and context of the shooters' social systems shows a clear attack on a cultural worldview, indicative of terrorism.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory is based largely on the work of Ernest Becker (1962, 1973, 1975) who posited that human awareness of mortality creates the potential for overwhelming terror. The theory posits that to reduce the anxiety caused by mortality salience, people seek to defend their cultural worldviews and enhance their self-esteem (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Cultural worldviews are "humanly created and transmitted beliefs about the nature of reality shared by groups of individuals" (Greenberg et al., 1997, p. 65). They vary across cultures and may include religious and social values, political and nationalistic beliefs, moral codes, or being a connoisseur of a craft or skill (Greenberg et al., 1997; Shehryar & Hunt, 2005). Belief in one's cultural worldview provides meaning for life while living up to the culturally prescribed standards of that worldview increases self-esteem. A life in which social norms are followed or surpassed produces a legacy, allowing for the symbolic transcendence of death. Thereby, mortality salience is buffered by one's actions in life being more meaningful than death.

Mortality salience is heightened by experiences that remind us of our eminent death. These may be first-hand experiences, or more often, mediated experiences. Messages of death and dying also increase our awareness of death (Greenberg et al., 1997). Reminding people of their mortality has been found to increase the positive evaluation of those who bolster one's cultural worldview and the negative evaluation of those who threaten it (Greenberg et al., 1990).

Cultural worldview is a fragile social construction in need of constant validation...the existence of others who share one's worldview bolsters faith in that worldview...and the existence of others who do not share one's worldview threatens one's faith in it, thereby reducing its effectiveness as an anxiety buffer. (McGregor et al., 1998, p. 591)

To defend our cultural worldview and “alleviate existential anxiety” (Choi, Kwon, & Lee, 2007, p. 1), we embrace cultural symbols and come together to support others who share the same cultural worldview. Evidence of this could be seen in the sea of orange shirts at the Virginia Tech memorials and the U.S. flags outside almost every home and business following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Another way in which one’s cultural worldview is defended is through attacking those who have an alternative worldview. The tendency to reject those who are different is well documented in prejudice literature. Essentially, people prefer similar others over dissimilar others because they validate one’s own beliefs and attitudes (Byrne, 1971; Festinger, 1954; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The most common and extensively documented way of attacking alternative worldviews is derogation, or belittling individuals to depict their world view as deficient (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). By labeling others as “barbarians” or “savages” alternative beliefs can be easily dismissed as inferior (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008).

When mortality salience is high people also rely more on stereotypes to enhance personal value, bolster group identity and preserve the social system by providing a downward comparison with negative out-group stereotypes (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Schimel et al., 1999). This could be seen in the personal attacks on Muslims following September 11. Because alternative worldviews “challenge an individual’s faith in his or her worldview, he or she is likely to respond to those divergent worldviews with disdain and hostility” (Schimel et al., 1999, p. 906). Mortality salience increases aggression against a worldview threatener (McGregor et al., 1998).

While research has shown that messages increasing mortality salience increases hostility toward those with alternative worldviews, studies have also shown that the value of tolerance can counteract the propensity for mortality salience to encourage negative reactions toward those who are different (Greenberg et al., 1992). “When tolerance was either highly important or highly accessible to the individual, the typical mortality salience effect of increased hostility toward those who are different did not occur” (Greenberg et al., 1992, p. 218). Essentially, if an individual’s worldview values tolerance, he or she is less likely to react with aggression or hostility toward individuals who subscribe to an alternative worldview.

Terror management theory and viewing rampage school shootings as terrorist attacks provides a dark lens through which to view the school safety campaign campaigns currently being implemented. Based on the literature, campaigns that increase mortality salience by reminding students that shootings *can happen here* have the potential to cause adverse effects.

Optimistic Bias and School Safety Campaigns

The massacre at Virginia Tech sparked college campus safety evaluations across the nation. Universities and researchers use the shooting as a learning experience as to what could have been done better to protect the people on campus that day. Many universities have implemented new ways of warning faculty, students, and staff when there is a violent incident on campus. This primarily consists of sending text messaging blasts and e-mails, along with some phone calls (for people without a texting option), and of course television and radio announcements. Universities also promote safety on their campuses through brochures distributed in the resident halls. The brochures recommend that students not walk alone after dark and caution students not to stay in academic buildings late at night. Further, the publications

emphasize that “students living in residence halls should lock their doors at all times” (Santucci & Gable, 1997, p. 3).

Despite the propensity of school shootings in recent years and the changes and warnings, students do not see themselves in danger. The Association for Communication Technology Professionals conducted a survey in 2007 after the Virginia Tech shootings and found that 70% of the more than 400 respondents think their institution is well or adequately prepared for natural disaster and 59% think their institution is well or adequately prepared for a major crime on campus (Dufresne & Dorn, 2005). In a 2001 study, college students exhibited optimistic bias when asked about their chance of becoming a victim of a campus crime when comparing themselves to other college students across the U. S. (Chapin, 2001). Again in 2006, Chapin and Coleman found that most students believe they are “less likely than others to become victims” of school violence and that the chance of violence occurring at their school is “less likely than other schools around the country” (p. 384).

Unrealistic optimism is common. According to Weinstein (1980) an individual’s future optimistic expectations may or may not be realistic. He or she may be accurate in believing the prospect that he or she has a less than average chance of encountering a negative event (Weinstein, 1980). Unrealistic optimism, also known as optimistic bias, is the belief that negative occurrences are “less likely to happen to them than to others” and that positive occurrences are “more likely to happen to them than to others” (Weinstein, 1980, p. 807). Weinstein (1980) suggests this belief stems from an inaccurate image people have when comparing themselves to other people. “Optimistic biases arise because people tend not to think carefully about their own and others’ circumstances or because they lack significant information about others” (Weinstein, 1980, p. 817). Unrealistic optimism has also been linked to health and behavioral related issues, including sexually transmitted disease, skin cancer, illness, alcoholism, and abuse (Branstrom, Kristjansson, & Ullen, 2005; Chapin, 2008; Martin et al., 2000; Miller, 1991).

Successful examples of reducing or debiasing unrealistic optimism are rare. There were a series of studies published by Weinstein and Klein (1995) that attempted to reduce optimistic bias, but were unsuccessful. In fact, their study concluded some attempts at debiasing actually “enhanced optimistic bias” (Harris, Middleton, & Joiner, 2000, p. 236; Weinstein & Klein, 1995). Efforts to debias are influenced by a theoretical goal and a desire to better understand optimistic bias (Harris et al., 2000; van der Pligt, 1998). Existing literature provides a few examples of successful attempts to debias, which includes influencing the mindset, accountability, and information provisions (Harris et al., 2000; McKenna & Myers, 1997; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995; Weinstein, 1983).

Specific to this study, Chapin and Coleman (2006) sought to document optimistic bias among middle school and high school students and assess the success of an educational campaign aimed at increasing violence awareness and self-esteem and lowering optimistic bias. They found that as knowledge about school violence increased, optimistic bias decreased but there was not a variance in self-esteem. The study suggests that swift implementation of similar programs is warranted to reduce optimistic bias in conjunction with increasing knowledge. Chapin and Coleman (2006) contend that “heightened media coverage of school fatalities has primed school students for such programs” (p. 385), and that these types of programs may reduce violence by encouraging students to take self-protective measures when threats or warning signs emerge among their peers.

While these campaigns may be well-intentioned, they could have adverse effects. By decreasing optimistic bias the campaigns are encouraging the acceptance that school shootings

can happen here. Essentially, the campaigns remind students they can be shot at school. Terror management studies have repeatedly shown that messages which remind individuals of death cause anxiety. High mortality salience has been shown to increase stereotyping, derogation, hostility, and aggression toward differing others (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008; McGregor et al., 1998; Schimel et al., 1999; Solomon et al., 1991). This study argues that campaigns aimed solely at reducing optimistic bias to encourage self-protective measures could be increasing attacks on alternative worldviews. Those who do not fit the socially constructed norms of the school's climate will be outcast and diminished. These attacks could then encourage a counter attack, potentially to the point at which an individual seeks to eliminate the threatening worldview (Miller & Landau, 2005).

The high-profile cases at high schools in Jonesboro, Arkansas; West Paducah, Kentucky; Pearl, Mississippi; Littleton, Colorado; and Red Lake, Minnesota; and the universities of Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois are examples of what can happen when someone deemed a social outcast seeks to transcend death by instilling fear and shaking the foundation of an alternative worldview. Further research is needed to analyze the effect of school safety campaigns on mortality salience and its impact on the social systems of schools.

Future Research and School Safety Campaigns

Greenberg et al. (1992) found that "When tolerance was either highly important or highly accessible to the individual, the typical mortality salience effect of increased hostility toward those who are different did not occur" (p. 218). Additional research has shown a component in declining violence rates includes the establishment of a strong sense of community and collective responsibility (Noguera, 1995). Some campaigns are already including tolerance as a foundation. The National Youth Violence Prevention Campaign has a five-day violence prevention program and day one focuses on promoting respect and tolerance (NYVPC, 2008). Unfortunately, Armstrong and Webb (2006) note that many schools "lack the resources necessary for the selection and effective implementation of empirically validated violence prevention strategies" (p. 80).

Intuitively we assume that if students are aware of the potential for violence they will be more cautious. However, by conceptualizing rampage school shootings as terrorist activities, literature on terror management theory implies that reminding students about violence in a social culture that does not value tolerance has the potential to increase aggression toward students who are considered different. We suggest that safety campaigns, which do not encourage holistic acceptance of community groups, have the potential to widen the gap between conflicting cultural worldviews. We contend that future awareness campaigns should include tolerance of alternative worldviews as a core component to combat the natural tendency to decrease mortality salience by attacking others. Additionally, this study calls for further research to validate the implications of bridging terror management literature with school violence and a renewed commitment to mitigating attacks on alternative worldviews by bridging research and practice to reduce school violence.

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