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SCOM 381: Rhetorical Criticism
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Suicide and mass shootings as mental health problems: A convenient scapegoat

Introduction

April 16, 2007, gunman Sung-Hee Cho shot 57 people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. December 15th, 2012, gunman Adam Lanza fatally shot 20 children and six adults at a local elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. July 20th, 2012, gunman Hames Holmes shot 70 people in a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado. January 8th, 2011, gunman Jared Loughner shot 18 people including U.S. representative Gabrielle Giffords in Tuscan, Arizona.

Media coverage of these shootings adopted thematic frames, one of which being the mental health of the gunmen. According to sociologist Bruce Link and Ann Stueve, “violent crimes committed by people with mental illness tend to receive disproportionate and often flamboyant news coverage” (1995). Within just days of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, news stories regarding the mental state of gunman Adam Lanza exploded across the nation. *Psychology Today* titled one article “Was Adam Lanza an undiagnosed schizophrenic?,” with the *New York Times* reporting, “Lanza’s acts of slaughter...strongly suggest undiagnosed schizophrenia”, and conservative commentator Anne Coulter stating, “guns don’t kill people – the mentally ill do.” Further coverage suggested that all four of these men were similar in at least one way: each appeared to suffer from serious mental illness, consisting of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (McGinty, Webster & Barry, 2013).

Within this paper, I argue that mental health as a focal point and causal explanation of mass shootings works to further stigmatize mental health while supporting pro-gun arguments. I use Kenneth Burke’s theory of the scapegoat and its rhetorical operation to explain how the National Rifle Association misdiagnoses mental illness as the main cause of gun violence within the U.S. The criticism then tracks how the NRA’s rhetoric misdiagnosis to support erroneous claims regarding mental illness as an attempt to maintain national pro-gun related policies and legislation that distinguishes the “good” guys from “bad”.

Method

Ruptures within the social order are not uncommon: natural disaster, economic recessions, and war are just some of the examples of how tension can build within a populace. This social tension – regardless of orientation – produces guilt, which expresses emotions of tension, anxiety and frustration.

According to Kenneth Burke, there are two ways in which a group or individual can rid themselves of this guilt. First, one can engage in mortification. This involves the open confession of ones ‘sins’ and the actual or symbolic punishment of them. The second involves the engagement in victimage or scapegoating. Here, the guilty must find and punish some person or object that can represent their own guilt. In this situation, the “goat” is punished not for what it has done, but for its ability to properly represent what the guilty themselves have done (Brummett, 1980). In other words, scapegoating can be referred to as a “technique of purification”, one that “provides an appetizing fare for a society hungry for agreement and

cohesion” while also “identifying the sources of social problems as external to the group” (Robinson, Garvey & Ferzan, 2009). In the eyes of the perpetrator, public pronouncements provide the opportunity to resolve this sense of guilt and address the apparent issue through the inaccurate identification of the chosen scapegoat (Brummett, 1980).

In the end, when there is order, there is social tension. It is this social tension that produces enemies, ones that requires us to identify with an “us versus them” mentality in order to narrow the range of political thought and imagination. Once identified, the individual or group may experience guilt within a particular context; in this case, the negative factors that follow reckless gun ownership. This is where the conflict begins. To return to a stable system, the process of “scapegoating” needs to be successfully utilized in order to properly dispel an individual or group of this guilt. In this case, the mentally ill are identified as a means of cleansing societies actions of its flaws.

Artifacts

I would now like to introduce the National Rifle Association. Founded in 1871, the NRA stands to protect American’s second amendment right to “keep and bear arms”. However, since 1966, the NRA, whose slogan reads, “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people” has continuously urged the federal government to address the problem of mental illness and gun violence in the U.S. Standing as one of the top three most influential lobbying groups in Washington along with an estimated worth of \$348 million, the NRA has enabled the power to influence legislation and endorse or oppose various candidates in order to protect the means in which the organization is built on (Anchenbach, Higman & Horwitz, 2013). For example, in 2012 the NRA backed Texas Republican Senator John Cornyn in sponsoring a bill that helps states better report individuals known to be mentally ill to the FBI database of individuals prohibited from buying guns (Sreenivasan, 2015). Additionally, the NRA utilizes separate money to influence laws and keep its chosen leaders in power (Ellis & Hicken, 2015). According to OpenSecrets, a site that tracks money in politics, the NRA has spent over \$3 million on lobbying efforts in 2013 and 2014 alone, while spending \$984,152 on campaign contributions during the 2014 election (Opensecrets, 2016).

In regards to maintaining the health of the gun producers, the NRA must take full responsibility of absorbing criticism to protect and maintain the market of the gun industry products. This is when the reliance of such scapegoats becomes necessary, causing the NRA to use multiple rhetorical pronouncements in order to shape public opinion. This will be the focus of my criticism.

Criticism Part 1: The Scapegoating of Millions of Innocent Americans

As I said before, the first step of scapegoating is to isolate a community as an enemy or threat to the rest of the people and in so doing, deflect blame from those who are guilty. The NRA has consistently relied on value statements that attack the mental health of the shooter as a means to isolate murders from the rest of the gun owning population. An early slogan of the NRA reads, “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people”. This is a natural based argument – it isn’t the existence of an object (in this case the gun) that is a problem. The problem is the darkness that resides in all humans; one that has continuously urged the federal government to address the problem of mental illness and gun violence in the U.S. For example, the NRA, specifically the president, Wayne La Pierre, presented a twist on the ‘good guys vs. bad guys’ argument in the aftermath of the Newtown mass shooting. During a 2012 press conference

regarding the horrendous event, he stated: “The truth is, that our society is populated by an unknown number of genuine monsters. People that are so deranged, so evil, so possessed by voices and driven by demons, that no sane person can ever possibly comprehend them.” He further questions, “How many more copycats are waiting in the wings for their moment of fame from a national media machine that rewards them with wall-to-wall attention and a sense of identity that they crave, while provoking others to try to make their mark.”

The second step for La Pierre is to explicitly present this shooting as a mental health problem rather than an access to guns problem. He suggests that these types of attacks are inevitable due to “our nation’s refusal to create an active national database of the mentally ill.”

The third utilization of the scapegoat by La Pierre is to distance his membership from these specific acts of violence. He positions shooters as lone wolves or “violent madmen” and not indicative of the broader gun owning population: Essentially, utilizing arguments about mental health to shield their own members from criticism.

And lastly, the perverse outcome for the NRA is that by utilizing an element of Burke’s method, they are positioned with the opportunity for an even more successful redemption. This method requires a group to tell stories that give the public a sense of direction, orienting them with respect to a system of moral values- often at the expense of innocent victims” (Pyral, 2013). La Pierre explains that in order to keep our most “beloved, innocent, and vulnerable members of the American family, the children, safe” we must stand up to the “monsters and predators” that we leave them utterly defenseless to (La Pierre, 2012). In order to rebound from threats of tighter gun control and decreases in gun purchases, the NRA frames themselves as the moral ones in this situation, allowing the public to see them as a group that cares about the safety of their “beloved” children. La Pierre goes so far as to suggest that the NRA is an essential component of the solution, explaining that if the mentally ill are monsters capable of mass shootings at schools, then more armed guards at these locations are necessary, reminding the audience that the NRA trains the highest number of security personnel in the country. And with that, the move to scapegoat is complete: the mentally ill are monsters capable of committing mass shootings.

However, the most destructive consequence of the NRA’s inaccurate statements, relates to the alienation of an innocent community. The statements made by the NRA as to why such horrific events happen causes those 4.2 million individuals diagnosed with mental illness to be categorized into the unfair group of those Aurora, Newtown and Virginia Tech killers.

According to results from a 1990 nationwide telephone survey showed that 80% of the American public endorse at least one or more of the following statements: (1) Mentally ill people are more likely to commit violent crimes than other people; (2) It’s natural to be afraid of someone who is mentally ill; or (3) It is important to remember that former mental patients may be dangerous (Link, Stueve, Monahan & Steadman, 1994). Such assumptions affect society’s perception of the community as a whole and affect individuals whether they have engaged in violent acts or not.

Paul Nestor, a professor of Psychology at University of Massachusetts, theorizes that serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia actually reduces the risk of violence over time as the illness is marked by social isolation and withdrawal (Nestor, 2002). Furthermore, the risk of individuals diagnosed with serious mental illness being assaulted by others is significantly higher than the other way around (Brekke, Prindle, Bae & Long, 2001). According to extensive research regarding police incident reports, people diagnosed with schizophrenia have victimization rates

65% to 130% higher than those of the general population (Brekke, Prindle, Bae & Long, 2001). With the help of such research, we are able to justify the inaccuracy of the NRA's arguments.

Followed by the arguments introduced by both the NRA and energetically recirculated by the media further project the notion that all individuals diagnosed with a mental illness are a threat to those around them and fall into the same category as the "psychotic" and "deranged" gunmen of the mass shootings our country has faced. The NRA endorses such inaccurate beliefs in order to further separate the organization from the main cause of such horrific shootings, and projects the sins and guilt felt by the members onto an outside community.

Conclusion

To conclude, mass shootings trigger guilt and tension within factions of society precisely because we know steps could be taken to control guns and yet never are. Through a critique of the NRA's use of rhetoric, we are better able to explain how the NRA maintains explanatory power into the causes of mass shootings and why elements of the public are willing to assent to these arguments in order to relieve guilt and tension. According to the NRA, the only solution to prevent such horrific massacres from happening again is to "identify, treat, and temporally isolate" those mentally incompetent individuals that pose a threat to our loved ones. However, the criticism reveals that alienating those 4.2 million diagnosed with mental illness will not prevent innocent lives from being lost, but create even more division between an already separated society.

At a time when more than 30,000 people are killed by firearms each year in this country, we must make a change. In a 2016 press conferences regarding gun control, Obama explained, "We are the only country on Earth that sees mass violence erupt with this kind of frequency. It doesn't happen in other countries. It's not even close. And like I said, somehow, we become numb to it, and we start thinking that this is normal. And instead of thinking about how to solve the problem, this has become one of our most partisan, polarized debates." We must put aside our differences and come together to make a significant change. We must do this in honor of Jonathan Blunk, Charlotte Bacon, Gordon Cowden, Ryan Clark, Daniel Barden, Rachel Hill, Emilie Parker, and all of the other innocent lives that were viciously stolen by these inhumane attacks. Despite your political position, economic class, mental health, race, or gender, we must forget about what separates us as a society and work together in order to prevent future gun related violence from occurring.