Chapter 2
Social Disintegration, Loss of Control, and School Shootings

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2.1 The Argument

Premeditated school shootings involving the killing of numerous people are relatively rare events in modern societies. As recurrent phenomena, however, they attract a high degree of public attention and traumatize the societies in which they take place.

Public and political evaluations of such deeds regularly resort to familiar, ritual explanations in order to downplay losses of control. These initial assessments either define such crimes as semi-supernatural events, or else they pathologize them. What both these variants have in common is that they provide interpretations that exonerate society and create detachment in order to downplay the social causes and to return to "normality" as soon as possible: An "affliction" is a fateful thing about which nothing can be done, and pathological criminals can be isolated from an otherwise supposedly intact society. Both interpretations disregard the constitutive criteria of violence, as violence is a highly effective resource that is available to everyone. It always has a history, and regardless of the persons against which it is directed, it is invariably an exercise of power. Equally disconcerting is the insight that violent acts can happen at any time and can scarcely be prevented—in other

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words, that they generate losses of control. To avoid having to engage with the causes of structural loss of control and to provide reassurance, the dominant public discourse aims to disassociate such phenomena from normal society.

Against these ritual explanation patterns we aim to show that school shootings are related to a *systematic loss of control*.

- On the individual level loss of control relates to the situation of the perpetrators and their loss of control over their own lives. This is (a) evoked through negative recognition and *erosion of recognition* in families, schools, and peer groups as agents of socialization, which (b) raises issues of *social disintegration*.
- Societal loss of control consists in the following factors: (a) *failure* to respond to the *crucial factors influencing* the scientifically known setting of the act; (b) the largely unexplained systematic *interaction* between the processes triggering the act; and (c) insufficient knowledge of the *trigger causes*.

To analyze this theory of double loss of control, we propose a three-part composite theory that builds on the social disintegration theory (SDT) with its recognition elements; *ideas of youth theory* about the conditions under which young people grow up in modern societies; and *considerations of control theory* about the necessity, limitations, and ambivalence of control. Existing empirical studies were analyzed with these factors in mind in order to find corroboration for our overarching theory of double loss of control.

2.2 The Three-Part Composite Theory

2.2.1 Social Disintegration Theory and its Relevance for Explaining School Shootings

The disintegration approach focuses on the interaction between social conditions and individual behavior patterns and thus does not simply assume that young people are maladapted to society.

- Anhut and Heitmeyer (2005) identify the social integration of individuals and groups as a decisive factor that prevents them from manifesting deviant behavior.
- Individuals feel themselves to be part of society when they experience positional, moral, and emotional recognition.
- Disintegration and concomitant recognition deficits, in contrast, result in a loss of positive self-reference; as a result, individuals desire to prevent such deficits, or at the very least compensate for them.

The disintegration approach centers on explaining diverse phenomena of violence. From a conflict theory perspective (Anhut, 2002), violence can be viewed as a specific, problematic pattern of dealing with states of individual or social disintegration. Disintegration marks the failure of social institutions and communities to deliver basic material needs, social recognition, and personal integrity. The disintegration approach

accordingly explains these phenomena as resulting from a society's unsatisfactory integration performance. One basic assumption of the disintegration approach is that the probability and intensity of violent behavior increase in line with experience and fears of disintegration, while the ability to control it decreases. No direct, determinist connection at the individual level is assumed; instead, individual factors, milieu-specific mobilizations, and opportunity structures determine the choice of specific patterns of coping (apathy and resignation also being conceivable "solutions"). SDT (Anhut & Heitmeyer, 2005; Heitmeyer & Anhut, 2008) highlights different kinds of integration and disintegration and expands the idea of goal-means discrepancy into noneconomic areas where lack of recognition plays an important role.

2.2.1.1 Social Recognition: The Basis of SDT

From the disintegration perspective, recognition comes about as a consequence of satisfactorily solving three specific problems of social integration. This means we are dealing with three dimensions.

The social-structural dimension refers to participation in society's material and cultural goods. This kind of integration into the system is guaranteed by sufficient access to work, housing, education, and consumer goods. Its necessary subjective counterpart is the individual's satisfaction with his or her occupational and social position. In this context, it is not only the material situation that is important. The social aspect is also relevant, as are individual satisfaction with one's own activities and the experience of positional recognition regarding one's own position, roles, and field of activities.

The institutional dimension refers to institutional (and political) forms of participation. A balance between conflicting interests has to be struck without wounding personal integrity. From the disintegration perspective, this calls for adherence to basic democratic principles that guarantee the (political) opponent's equal moral status and are accepted as fair and just by those involved. However, the negotiation and formulation of these principles in individual cases also presupposes corresponding opportunities and willingness to participate on the part of those involved. Problems of disintegration arise when individuals perceive a loss of moral recognition because of feelings of powerlessness and insufficient realization of basic norms.

Finally, the socioemotional dimension (cultural-expressive social integration) concerns collective and private aspects of life. Here we are dealing with establishing emotional and expressive relations between people for the purpose of self-realization and making sense of life. This calls for considerable attention and attentiveness, but also for space to be oneself and balancing of emotional support with normative demands so as to avoid crises of meaning, disorientation, lowered self-esteem, loss of values, identity crises, and loss of emotional recognition.

These three forms of integration are required: social-structural integration (e.g., having a job), institutional integration (e.g., voter participation), and socioemotional integration (e.g., social support by family, friends). Clearly the disintegration approach discusses the establishing of social integration as a voluntary matter. The disintegration perspective sees the successful accomplishment of these tasks as

resulting in positional, moral, and emotional recognition and self-definition as belonging to the relevant social group. On the basis of social integration, voluntary acceptance of norms can also be expected. In contrast, in states of disintegration, the effects of one's own action on others no longer have to be taken into account. This encourages the development of antisocial attitudes and creates a risk that violence thresholds will be lowered.

2.2.1.2 Social Processes and the Effect of Disintegration

Which social processes does the disintegration approach consider to be responsible for an increase or decrease in social integration or a loss of recognition, and which effects are associated with the experience of social disintegration or a loss of recognition? An increase or decrease in the degree of social integration and the accompanying changes in recognition options only provisionally expresses the extent to which the potential for dysfunctional ways of coping with disintegration is expanded or reduced.

The forms of coping that individuals choose are determined by the coincidence of their experiences (competencies, patterns of accountability, and so on) with specific opportunity structures such as integration into social milieus (group pressure, compulsion to conform) and the function of the chosen pattern of behavior in compensating for lack of recognition. In order to answer the question as to the functionality of the chosen pattern of behavior in compensating for lack of recognition, we must be clear how losses of recognition work.

Three basic active principles can be identified: (1) avoidance of inferiority and harm to self-esteem, (2) restoration of norms, and (3) lack of alternative learning processes. In the social-structural dimension, social polarizations reduce access opportunities and achievable gratifications in individual-functional system integration. An additional process of individualization propagates the concept of individuals as autonomous, competent, and successful, thereby intensifying the pressure on people to present themselves as successful. Yet despite the pressure to acquire status, the opportunities and risks of social positioning are spread unevenly. This leads increasingly frequently to disappointment for the losers in the modernization process; it unleashes feelings of resignation, impotence, and rage and causes a lack of positional recognition that undermines self-confidence. That is why people tend to endeavor to avoid this kind of harm.

There are several possibilities for coping with this situation. Apathy and resignation are patterns of reaction. Another option for maintaining a positive self-image in the face of ongoing stress is to blame others for one's own fate and to invoke prejudice and hate in order to compensate. Finally, *violence* is a possible outlet to compensate for feelings of weakness or to maintain a sense of self-esteem. There is thus a wide range of possible functional solutions to lack of recognition. Institutionally, ideas of rivalry and competition at school and work, instrumental work and social relationships, and a consumer-oriented lifestyle driven by wealth, status, and prestige encourage self-interested tendencies like having to get one's own way, social climbing, and exclusion.

We find two dominant forms of lack of moral recognition. First, the feeling that one's own life is not of equal value and that one is denied equal rights (refusal of membership in social groups or formal membership of a group or society without acceptance). Second, the impression that basic principles of justice are being violated—for instance, where the individual feels that he or she or his or her own group makes a relevant contribution to the collective social good yet still experiences inferior treatment. In addition to cases where the individual feels he or she has been treated disadvantageously or unjustly, we must also include cases where the person is not disadvantaged but formulates the feeling of injustice on behalf of others. Here, violence may be employed as an option for restoring justice or to regain respect (assertion of identity). Unlike the "avoid inferiority/damage to self-esteem" pattern of motives, however, this is not necessarily done at the cost of persons or groups susceptible to discrimination; rather, it tends to be aimed against persons or groups who appear to be privileged.

In the socio-emotional dimension, ambivalent individualization processes lead to growing instability in relationships between couples, as a result of which family disintegration can have a harmful effect on the conditions in which children are socialized. Emotional stress on parents is caused especially by the combination of individuals increasingly demanding relationships based on equal rights while simultaneously experiencing many forms of inequality. This emotional stress often leads to frustration, insecurity, and a generally higher potential for tension and conflict. Unstable family relationships in turn detract from children's experience of self and the recognition that is required to build a positive self-image. Consequently, aggressive and autoaggressive tendencies and conspicuous behavior in children can be directly connected to the extent of family disintegration. Denial of emotional recognition means experiencing no esteem or attention, or too little, in important intimate social relationships, receiving no emotional support in situations of emotional stress, having nobody to discuss problems with, having no autonomy, and so on.

In relation to the question of how affinity for violence originates, particularly in children and juveniles (and how it is subsequently reproduced in adulthood), two paths appear to be significant. First, direct learning of violence can be observed, including in the form of a repeatedly reinforced cycle of violence in which experiences of violence in childhood and the subsequent use of violence against family members in adulthood are repeated. Alongside this form of direct learning from role models is a second form, which can be labeled as the lack of alternative learning processes. Violence is employed as a pattern of dealing with conflict because other means of coping are unavailable due to the lack of specific social competencies and the existence of development deficits such as lack of empathy, identity disorders, and disorders of self-esteem. In this case children do not learn a constructive model for integrating negative feelings and for being able to deal with them in a constructive way. Development deficits in the shaping of relationships, systematic overtaxing, low tolerance of frustration, a low sense of self-esteem, and vulnerability are the consequence. Children in these situations are relatively helpless in the face of

difficult family and school relationships and may turn to violence to defend themselves, compensate for weakness, or retain vestiges of self-esteem.

It is thus possible to identify three basic principles of the effect of violation of recognition: the quest to avoid injuries to self-esteem, the need to restore norms and assert identity, and the lack of an alternative pattern for dealing with conflict. However, this does not yet say anything about which pattern of reaction will emerge in an individual case. As we have seen, violence can become a pattern of coping with problems regardless of the specific causes of lack of recognition.

This raises the fundamental question as to the nature of specific configurations of effects, for example, whether specific lack of recognition in certain integration dimensions predisposes some people to specific patterns of reaction. In principle, three configurations of effects are conceivable.

2.2.1.3   Configurations of Effects

First, it could be that lack of recognition that stems primarily from one integration dimension also causes one specific pattern of reaction. This would mean that the choice of a particular pattern of coping depends primarily on which promises to most effectively limit or compensate for the recognition deficit that has arisen.

Second, it would be imaginable that in principle every pattern of coping could be a reaction to different prior losses of recognition. In that case, a possible nucleus of loss of recognition would emerge only in the choice of specific variations of a pattern of reaction.

Third, there is much support for the third pattern of interpretation, according to which it seems to be possible to compensate for lack of recognition in individual integration dimensions by recognition gains in other dimensions. In that case, the crucial factor would be the balance of recognition. The choice of a specific pattern of action or a variation of it would then no longer be attributable to a specific lack of recognition in one or more integration dimensions. That would mean that although the chosen pattern of coping was subjectively the one that the person expected to have the biggest effect in a given situation, the person's experiences, competencies, and patterns of accountability, along with individual and social opportunity structures, such as integration into social milieus, were likely to be of crucial significance in deciding which choice was ultimately made.

To sum up, SDT postulates that school shootings are strongly rooted in the need for recognition. According to this theory, school shootings are an extreme—and lethal—way of expressing resistance to experiences of contempt and failure in the battle for recognition. The shooting represents the culmination of unstable recognition relationships and serves as an attempt by the perpetrator to restore his or her injured identity. Against the background of SDT, therefore, it would seem advisable to examine the conditions under which young people grow up.

2.2.2 *The Youth Theory Facet: The Ambivalence of Growing Up*

Growing up in modern societies, where school shootings primarily occur, has two facets (Heitmeyer, Collmann, & Conrads, 1998). Young people now have more options for shaping their lives than they did in the past, but they are also under increasing pressure to do so—without having a clear idea of what opportunities and options they have, nor which they should choose in order to gain status and recognition in society. There are three possibilities for attaining such recognition: through achievement (e.g., at school), through outward attractiveness, and through demonstrations of strength. The socially accepted paradigm holds that recognition and status can be attained only if one is able to "control" others and if one is different from others. Those who are inconspicuous are not noticed, and those who are not noticed are nothing.

The ideology of the upwardly mobile society states that young people must at the very least attain the status of their family of origin, and should ideally advance to a higher one. This, however, is increasingly difficult to achieve, as precarious life-plans and biographies are the rule rather than the exception in today's society. Ambivalence thus becomes the central paradigm of life: There are more opportunities for shaping one's life, but the predictability of individual life-plans is decreasing, and precarious situative processes are becoming the norm.

Normality in modern society means that a person strongly identifies with the core approved values such as achievement, self-assertion, and upward mobility. Young people too have received this message and are under considerable pressure from it. Failure to meet these standards of normality—these fixed and rigid norms—is all the more painful the more intensely individuals assimilate and internalize them, such as when they seek to graduate from high school with the highest grades regardless of the cost. This sense of normality will inevitably be challenged and shaken by lack of success or when status pressure comes into play in situations where few corresponding positions of status are available. One possible consequence is that individuals who have "failed" lose control of their reactions—especially in the case of incidents, such as expulsion from school, that have far-reaching consequences for their future lives. The Erfurt school shooting in 2002 clearly showed the fragile nature of social normalcy and the speed with which it can be fundamentally shaken.[1]

Thus it is necessary to identify the factors that engender violence and examine why individuals may devalue life—including their own—so radically and place so extreme a premium on the demonstration of power. To do so, it is important—following SDT—to examine sources of recognition and the processes by which it erodes.

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[1] Nineteen-year-old Robert Steinhäuser attacked his school, the Johann-Gutenberg-Gymnasium in Erfurt, Germany, on April 26, 2002, during the final examinations from which he had been excluded. He committed suicide after killing 16 and wounding another 7.

2.2.3   The Aspect of Control Theory

Control is a multilayered concept. At its core, control implies mastery over processes and behaviors both on the individual and the social levels. *Control* can be used to mean regulation. This applies in the case of individuals—in the present case, young people—who are expected to have a "grip" on their lives; i.e. to meet specific developmental targets, successfully integrate themselves in different spheres of socialization such as the core areas of the family, the school, and the peer group, and to find recognition there in order to construct a stable identity. Their task is to develop an awareness, to plan out their own lives with some degree of autonomy— or, in the terms of Tittle's control-balance theory (1995), to develop a balanced relationship between control by others and control over others.

The ambivalence of growing up and the dangers of negative recognition balances or the erosion of recognition can trigger considerable problems that cause things to "get out of control." As control itself is an ambivalent construct, there is a danger that loss of control, in conjunction with destructive, violent fantasies stimulated by the media, may result in an over-identification with control-exercising role models. Here the focus shifts from controlling one's own life-plans to controlling other people. The quest for recognition and control causes individuals to redefine themselves in their fantasies in order to regain control over their own damaged social identity by violent means. The personal writings of the school shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold provide numerous indications of this process.[2]

On the level of society, both socializing institutions like family, school, and peer group and specific controlling institutions like the police and the legal system aim to *constrain* behavior according to the normative specifications of society. Various control styles can be employed to this end, from punitive approaches through therapeutic or supportive strategies to measures for identifying perpetrators (Cohen, 1985; Horwitz, 1990). This, however, says nothing about how efficacious these control styles prove to be on closer analysis of the setting (Sect. 2.3) and the processes (Sect. 2.4ff.).

2.3   Action Settings that Promote Violence

The investigation leads us to a theoretical exploration of social disintegration, and thus to the problem of recognition and, in the negative case, erosion of recognition, as a consequence of which adolescents do not receive satisfactory answers to such fundamental questions as: Who needs me? Who listens to me? Where do I belong? Am I worth as much as the others? Am I being treated fairly? Are my feelings accepted?

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[2] The quotes given in the article from the personal writings of Harris and Klebold serve merely to illustrate and should not be taken as systematic empirical proof. Spelling and grammatical mistakes and use of emphasis are as in the originals.

If we accept that nobody can live without recognition in the long term, it may be assumed that young people in particular, growing up under the ambivalent conditions described above, live in a fragile state of normalcy. Thus close attention must be paid to the overall setting of (1) sources of recognition in the social environment; (2) the shooters' decision-making competence and capacity to act; (3) influencing factors such as, most importantly, media consumption; and (4) weapons skills. The *synergy* between these four components must be studied for the purposes of evaluating whether and how escalation processes may develop in a subsequent phase.

Sources of recognition represent the most important point of departure here. Three fields of experience are of paramount relevance for young people.

- The school provides manifold sources of recognition, especially through good performance, in order to achieve the prerequisites for gaining recognition through status in later life. At the same time, however, school is permeated by activities signaling contempt on the part of teachers and especially other students.
- The importance of the family varies with the child's age, but remains a source of recognition through love, in other words, a source of emotional recognition. At the same time, withdrawal is relevant under certain conditions, such as when parents exhibit pronounced status behavior—i.e., when emotional recognition is contingent on performance and ambitions for advancement.
- The peer group is of primary relevance both in single-gender and mixed-gender groups, especially during adolescence. Group affiliation, strength, and attractiveness represent sources of recognition.

From the perspective of disintegration theory, we must now turn to the recognition balance. Is it positive, or does the child have to deal with a subjectively felt recognition deficit?

As we are always dealing with interaction processes between the child/adolescent and their teachers, parents, or peers, these contacts and relationships are always associated with feelings of powerlessness when recognition has eroded. As all people, according to SDT, always strive to counteract the undermining of their own self-worth and to construct or maintain a positive identity, the question arises how they can successfully escape from this powerlessness or inferiority. The competences for coping with such conflicts are widely scattered. In terms of SDT, one problem for socially compatible solutions arises in the absence of alternative conflict-solving patterns—patterns which are primarily developed within the family through emotional recognition, secure social bonds, and the absence of experiences of corporal punishment and other violence. As an "alternative" variant, children may attempt to surmount a negative recognition balance and concomitant powerlessness by means of demonstrations of power. Violence is the most effective variant, preceded by violent fantasies that represent a transitional stage between feelings of powerlessness and the beginning stages of planning violent acts.

Such plans may have a long timeframe. In the case of Columbine High, the perpetrators spent more than a year planning the strategies they believed would be effective. In the case of Emsdetten in Germany, the shooter first reconstructed the

school corridors on a computer (Engels, 2007).[3] Violent computer games provide behavior patterns that help to determine the *modus operandi*. Such influences, therefore, may be able to influence the "strategies" chosen by the perpetrators. In general, however, they are not the crucial factor in prompting the perpetrator's decision to end his or her own life and the lives of others. What is more important for this decision is the fact that the future shooter was unable to find answers to the fundamental questions outlined above.

The decision to commit an act of violence ("whether to act") is prompted not by the availability of violence in the media or by the use of such media, but rather by the unbearable negative recognition balance. This alone, however, is not sufficient to prompt the crime; a justification of violence ("why to act") is necessary for lowering the inhibition threshold for violence. In other words, it is necessary to allocate the blame for the negative recognition balance. The school and the peer group are the core targets in the apportioning of blame. And they are available at predictable times and in predictable places as the field of action for a demonstration of power aiming to maximize the number of victims. The Columbine shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, aimed at a figure of 500 victims. Finally, the setting includes the capacity for acting, i.e., weapons skills ("how to act"), which increases the effectiveness of the action.

2.4 Analytical and Empirical Results: Loss of Control Through Cumulative Erosion of Recognition

2.4.1 Recognition in the Family: Loss of Control by Parents and Children

Young school shooters are primarily the children of white, middle-class families in rural or suburban areas (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; Moore, Petrie, Braga, & McLaughlin, 2003; Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004) whose chances of attaining positional recognition in school are usually good in terms of SDT but may deteriorate in response to internal conditions in their families. At first glance, these families appear "conspicuously inconspicuous" (Hoffmann, 2007, p. 28). The family type may vary, and school shooters grow up in intact nuclear families, single-parent families, and foster families alike (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). In this context, Newman and colleagues (2004) point out that the formal composition of the family is less significant than the way in which people interact within the family on an everyday basis. The emotional quality of interpersonal relationships within the family is a particularly important issue. According to SDT, such interpersonal relationships are of paramount importance for individuals in their quest for recognition.

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[3] On November 20, 2006, 18-year-old Sebastian Bosse injured 37 people at the Geschwister-Scholl-Realschule in Emsdetten, Germany, before committing suicide.

Here the results of the various empirical studies correlate. As a rule, the relationships within a school shooter's family are described as problematic and dysfunctional (Fast, 2008; Kidd & Meyer, 2005; Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; Newman et al., 2004; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). The young people often feel insecure in their families, and in some cases they had suffered physical or sexual abuse (Fast, 2008; Verlinden et al., 2000; Langman, in this volume). However, the dominant factor seems to be a familial atmosphere characterized by emotional indifference and lack of parental involvement (e.g., O'Toole, 1999). Parents frequently know little about their children and take little interest in their lives and personal problems. In this situation, the denial of emotional recognition begins to develop its destructive potential.[4] Parents are unaware of the interests and predilections of their growing children and know nothing about their friends or performance at school. As an exacerbating factor, the family may have moved shortly before the shooting—and/or frequently in the past—which for some adolescents is a cause of regret and resentment.

In addition to these fundamental factors, some researchers also focus on the dynamics in the perpetrators' families. In their analysis of 16 cases, McGee and DeBernardo (1999) conclude that there are often intense conflicts about power and control between the parents and their children. These conflicts are accompanied by constant feelings of anger and hostility that overtly or covertly dominate life within the family. McGee and DeBernardo also discuss the role of the father in the school shooter's life. As a rule, the fathers are largely absent or play only a minimal role in the upbringing of their growing children. Within these family dynamics, adolescent children are treated inconsistently or with hostility: between occasional, severe punishments for alleged misconduct, they are simply ignored most of the time. Empirical studies show that inconsistent child-rearing behavior may have extremely problematic consequences for children's readiness to resort to violence (Heitmeyer et al., 1998).

On the basis of an analysis of 18 cases, O'Toole (1999) notes that the future school shooter has "taken command" in the parental home, with a role reversal taking place in the parent–child relationship because the parents are afraid of their children. For example, the child alone decides about the nature and duration of television watching and internet use and wins all the freedoms it wants to have. In this way, the child successfully eludes parental supervision and control. The parents evidently tolerate or deny their child's sometimes borderline or abnormal behavior. They either ignore the school's notifications about problems or poor performance, or they downplay the issues when talking to teachers. This too is noted by O'Toole as a glaring deficit in parental supervision and control, which may be further exacerbated by the presence in the family home of firearms that are not stored with the

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[4] For example, in one of his videos (the Basement Tapes), Eric Harris complains that he spends hardly any time with his parents or his brother, with the result that there are no deeper emotional bonds between him and his family (JC-001-010377). Similar subjective deficits in emotional recognition are also revealed by the writings of Dylan Klebold: "my parents piss me off & hate me … want me to have fuckin ambition!! How can i when i get screwed and destroyed By everything??!!!" (personal testimony, Dylan Klebold, 1997, JC-001-026400).

required security precautions, but are freely accessible to the child. SDT would suggest that the child's controlling behavior must be understood as an expression of the unfulfilled desire for attention and emotional recognition.

2.4.2 Recognition in the Peer Group: Loss of Control over Social Relationships

School shooters are often described as immature, introverted loners with inadequate social skills and few, if any, close friends (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; Newman et al., 2004; O'Toole, 1999; Verlinden et al., 2000). According to the study by the US Secret Service and the US Department of Education, approximately 75% of school shooters felt harassed, persecuted, threatened, attacked, or hurt by their fellow students prior to the shooting (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Leary and colleagues (2003) conclude that the perpetrators suffered bullying in the run-up to 12 out of 15 school shootings in their study and had been mocked or excluded because of their weight or appearance. Here, too, there are numerous clear indications for the significance of social disintegration and denial of emotional recognition.[5]

While the shooters are described as loners in a majority of the studies, and describe themselves as loners under questioning after the offense (Leary et al., 2003; Newman et al., 2004; Robertz, 2004; Verlinden et al., 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002), Hoffmann (2007) warns against generalizing from these findings and points out that some of the young people were "well integrated" in cliques prior to the shooting. With reference to the relevant literature, however, one must consider the possibility that—as we have seen in the case of the family background—such peer relationships are only superficially unremarkable and are experienced by the young people themselves as inadequate, fragile, and insufficiently functional (Robertz & Wickenhäuser, 2007; Verlinden et al., 2000). In most cases, the available attachment figures were significantly younger than the shooters themselves (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999) or were also loners who shared the shooter's marginalized status in the social hierarchy of the school (Moore et al., 2003; Newman et al., 2004; Robertz & Wickenhäuser, 2007; Verlinden et al., 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002).

According to McGee & DeBernardo (1999), the cohesion of these cliques is characterized primarily by two common features: (a) their members are rejected by the majority at school and in leisure activities, and (b) they often share an interest

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[5] Both Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold expressed the anguish they suffered through being despised by their peers: "Everyone is always making fun of me because of how I look, how fucking weak I am and shit, … people make fun of me … constantly … Therefore I get no respect and therefore I get fucking PISSED" (personal testimony, Eric Harris, 1998, JC-001-026014). "I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things. And no don't fucking say 'well thats your fault' because it isn't, you people had my phone#, and I asked and all, but no. no no don't let the weird looking Eric KID come along, ooh fucking nooo" (personal testimony, Eric Harris, 1999, JC-001-026018). "i HATE my life, i want to die really bad right now … nobody accepting me even though i want be accepted" (personal testimony, Dylan Klebold, 1997, JC-001-026390).

in a rigid, eccentric, and nihilistic worldview. This attitude, which is often colored by political, religious, occult, or militaristic views, grants young people access to social affiliation based on a shared, definite value system and gives them a feeling of dominance over their conventionally minded fellow students and peers. Future shooters frequently display attitudes of intolerance and boredom toward everyday leisure activities such as individual or team sports. They also frequently avoid the times and places of social gatherings (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; O'Toole, 1999). These behavior patterns and attitudes may explain the findings of Hoffmann (2007), who emphatically points out that hardly a single case of extreme, targeted violence at schools in Germany exhibits a purely one-sided incident of bullying in advance of the offense. Rather, the future shooters frequently provoked the anger and contempt of other students through their actively challenging and provocative behavior. Moore and colleagues (2003) come to similar conclusions for the United States.

2.4.3 School Shootings as Indicators of Institutional Losses of Control

The action setting that promotes violence, therefore, has a central location, namely the school. We must now investigate the extent to which the organizational structures of the school contribute to this factor (see also Chap. 19 in this volume).

Fox and Harding (2005) view school shootings as indicators of institutional losses of control ("organizational deviance"). Their case studies at two American educational facilities where school shootings had occurred show that the school's organizational structures are substantially implicated when serious social and emotional problems remain undiscovered and the institution is unable to respond in a timely manner. According to Fox and Harding, such dysfunctional communication structures are largely due to institutional conditions which, in terms of SDT, may also lead to grave violations of recognition.

For one thing, the school represents a formal agency of selection and qualification that assigns status by various means, such as giving grades and allowing students to move up to a higher year, thereby helping to determine both the students' present status and their future social position. For another, the school functions as a social system that is fundamentally marked by the immediate conditions under which its students grow up—and this is reflected in the communicative relationships among the students. Because the school has a social function, which is fed primarily by the functionality of the system, it pays particular attention to the system as such. This culminates in the expectation that social elements should adapt to functionality (Schubarth, 2000, p. 45). Although children spend a large proportion of their time at school and the school thus acquires considerable subjective significance as the scene of personal social relationships, institutional resources are not geared towards identifying or adequately addressing the emotional needs of the students (Fox & Harding, 2005). Rather, schools demand a high degree of

social adaptation and discipline while requiring students to suppress their own needs (Hurrelmann, 2005; Tillmann, 2006).

The result may be deficits of both emotional and moral recognition. Young people's opportunities for participation and codetermination are primarily governed by institutional criteria which are perceived by students largely in the context of their interactions with teachers. Unlike informal social relationships, student–teacher interaction is constrained by a formal framework. There is an imbalance in power in which the opportunities for articulating personal needs and exercising influence according to personal desires are unequally distributed.[6]

The few remaining resources that can be channeled into the students' emotional and social requirements are usually spent exclusively on those students who are obviously in acute danger of failing the year or who exhibit severe dissocial behavior in school and thus create disorder in the institution. However, research to date shows that school shooters generally remain "under the radar" (Newman et al., 2004, p. 77). The academic performance of most was normal to above-average prior to the event (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; Vossekuil et al., 2002). In fact, the empirical study by Vossekuil et al. (2002) shows that 41% of shooters regularly received good or very good grades, while only 5% were failing at school prior to the shooting. In terms of SDT, then, these results show that, objectively at least, the shooters largely had good cumulative positional recognition and opportunities for integration.

Levin and Madfis (2009), however, show that adolescents in particular associate personal success and the value of their own lives not with academic achievement and abilities but with their popularity within the peer group, which becomes their all-important standard in the process of striving for autonomy and independence from their parents. Examination of the social integration of future shooters revealed abnormalities in their behavior within the student body. Only a very small number, however,

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[6] Excerpts from the suicide note of the German school shooter Sebastian Bosse show that this situation gives rise to severe conflict potential. "I want my face to be burned into your brains! I don't want to run away any more! I want to do my part for the revolution of the dispossessed! I want REVENGE! I've been thinking about how most of the students that humiliated me have already left the school. I have two things to say about that: (1) I wasn't only in one class, I went to the school as a whole. No way are the people at the school innocent! Nobody is! They've got the same program running in their heads as the earlier years! I am the virus that wants to destroy these programs, and where I start is totally irrelevant. (2) Most of my revenge will be directed against the teachers, because they are people who intervened in my life against my will and who helped to put me where I now stand: On the battlefield! Almost all these teachers are still at this damn school! Daily life the way it takes place these days must be the most pathetic thing the world has to offer! S.C.J.R.D.—School, college, job, retirement, death. That's the life "normal" people have today. But what does normal even mean? S.C.J.R.D. starts at the age of six here in Germany, when children start school. That's when children start on their personal path of socialization, and in the years to come they are forced to adapt to the majority. If they refuse, they get into trouble with teachers, parents, and finally with the police. Compulsory schooling is just a euphemism for coercive schooling, because they are forced to go to school … Anyone who is forced to do something loses some of his freedom. We are forced to pay taxes, we are forced to observe speed limits, we are forced to do this, we are forced to do that. Therefore there's no freedom!" (Sebastian Bosse's suicide note, translated from Rötzer 2006).

had exhibited criminal activity, disobedience to school authorities, or violence against other students prior to the shooting (Moore et al., 2003; Newman et al., 2004).

The schools thus generally fail to recognize the desperate emotional state of these adolescents prior to the shooting, nor do they notice when they become the victims of attacks by other students that potentially cause considerable harm to their mental and physical integrity. The probability of becoming involved in conflicts with peers is particularly high in school, which simultaneously offers few possibilities for avoiding such conflicts (Klewin & Tillmann, 2006). Bullying, for example, is possible only within social networks such as a school class (Schäfer & Kulis, 2005). Thus victimization experiences are particularly stressful in the school context because it is almost impossible to escape from them. Because of compulsory schooling and the increasing importance of gaining qualifications to further one's future career, victims of bullying find it very difficult to evade aversive treatment by their peers. According to Hayer and Scheithauer (2008), parents and teachers generally hear about episodes of bullying at a very late stage and then frequently attempt to downplay the incidents.[7] Additionally, many students are reluctant to help victims of bullying because victimized adolescents are frequently unpopular and because their fellow students are afraid of becoming victims of verbal or physical attacks themselves. This creates a vicious circle of victimhood, as each new attack typically lowers the victim's status in the peer group still further.

2.5 School Shooting as the Radicalization of Social Norms and Values?

2.5.1 The Battle for Recognition and Control: Adolescents Under (Status) Pressure

One conspicuous feature of school shootings is that they occur primarily in highly developed industrial nations. The two countries with the highest incidence—the United States and Canada—are two of the world's wealthiest nations. In Europe, too, school shootings occur most frequently in countries in the wealthier north-west of the continent, with Finland and Germany leading the field (Böckler & Seeger, 2010).

In countries with a highly developed economy, young people remain in a transitional phase lasting many years in which they must undergo schooling and vocational training before being able to lead independent lives as productive adult

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[7] Thus Sebastian Bosse wrote in his blog: "Most people don't know about it. They thought I was going to school every day. I don't play along, just go back home. The only time that anyone really noticed anything was when they pressed a red-hot key against my hand … the principal reported it to the police. But nothing else happened. All the other things that happened, nobody wanted to see them, or nobody really did see them" (Bosse, blog entry dated May 26, 2005, 1.27 a.m.).

members of society (Newman et al., 2004). The youth theory angle of our composite theory stresses this *ambivalence* of adolescence. During this phase, they cannot predict whether they will one day be successful in their competitive societies. As a result, adolescents sometimes engage in bitter struggles for recognition and status during their school years. Katherine Newman and colleagues (2004) note that young people tend to adopt and follow extreme versions of the values and norms of their surrounding culture.

For American adolescents, this means that interpersonal competition and achievement as a measure of a person's social "worth," which are deeply rooted in their culture, are highly significant factors. The hierarchy in the social system of American high schools is not based primarily on the students' intellectual gifts and achievements, but is overwhelmingly derived from superficial values and characteristics, such as physical attractiveness, athletic prowess, clothing, and ownership of certain status symbols (Newman, in this volume). As youth theory shows, failure has the most traumatic impact on those young people who strongly identify with the system of values and norms.[8] According to SDT, future school shooters do have the hope of attaining positional recognition through academic achievement. However, not all cases are equal. Academic achievement, which was not a problem for the perpetrators of the Columbine shooting, was a core issue in the case of the shooting in Erfurt, Germany.

The findings of Newman and colleagues (2004) correlate with the results of the study by Larkin (2007), who examined social life at Columbine High School. Individuals who rank lower in the social hierarchy have a higher probability of being attacked in some way—either through mocking remarks or through physical violence—by higher-ranking fellow students. In particular, male adolescents who are physically weak and not on any of the school's sports teams are regularly harassed by the "jocks" and sometimes even suffer systematic psychological and physical abuse (for more detail, see the Chaps. 3 and 7 in this volume).

Future school shooters are generally very low down in the social hierarchy of the school and thus have a level of negative cumulative recognition that prevents them from attaining a position of higher status within the "jockocracy" (Katz & Jhally, 1999). The shooting represents a way of exacting retribution and revenge for the perceived unfairness of this system and a means of drawing the attention of the public and the media to their suffering and to what they perceive as a colossal injustice. In the terminology of SDT, there is a lack of *moral recognition*, because the school setting and the social relationships that predominate in schools do not respond to a situation that is perceived as unfair. According to SDT, however, the desire to

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[8] For example, Eric Harris expressed his identification with achievement-based norms and values in a school essay about a year before the shooting. The essay also reveals his need for positional recognition: "Being a leader is a very admirable quality. I respect people who are good strong leaders and know what they are doing, and I do not respect people who are weak, uneducated leaders. This is why I want to be a strong leader. I am hoping team sports and other classes will help me achieve this quality. If I am considering a military career, then leadership is an extremely important quality. I am expecting to learn how to be organized and responsible, how to treat people equally, how to listen attentively and how to solve problems logically. I am hoping my senior classes and experiences will help my goals" (school essay, Eric Harris, 1998, JC-001-026724).

restore norms perceived as just is not linked to the recognition experience of being heard and gaining respect.[9]

The shooters deliberately choose their spectacular act of violence because they can no longer bear to perceive themselves as weak and powerless. Additionally, they aim to demonstrate their "strength" in public and especially in full view of their tormentors—the "higher status peers" (Larkin, 2007; Newman et al., 2004). In the words of Newman and colleagues: "School shooters are looking for status-winning, manhood-enhancing departures" (2004, p. 150). These motives are rooted in a culture that is dominated by competition and by a pronounced masculinity that is associated with violence. In this culture, only a few people belong to the class of "celebrities," of which adolescent school shooters want to be a part, albeit posthumously (Larkin, 2007). Against this background, a student's rampage shooting can be viewed as a desperate attempt to gain or regain control over their own social identity. The shooting turns an erstwhile nobody into a "deviant superstar" (Robertz, 2004, p. 181) and creates hope of achieving the ultimate, historical recognition of their hitherto insignificant personality.

2.5.2 Cultural Scripts of Manly Self-Assertion: Power over Others Equals Control

Adolescent school shooters grow up in Western industrial nations under sociocultural conditions dominated by intense interpersonal competition. They are involved in fierce competition for jobs, status, and prestige, and the risk of "losing" and failure is very high for the individual (Larkin, 2007). This social and cultural climate, backed up by the media, propagates types of behavior that emphasize attributes such as strength and assertiveness. Newman and colleagues (2004) are particularly emphatic in asserting that American society is dominated by a specific, stereotypical image of masculinity according to which being a man means fearlessly and steadfastly facing the challenges of life and of one's surroundings. In their view, the media is one of the main vehicles that propagate this cultural script, as films and sports coverage regularly portray masculinity in connection with aggression, or even with violence involving severe injury to others, as an acceptable means of attaining one's own goals.

Like Newman and colleagues (2004), Katz and Jhally (1999) also identify a significant connection between media portrayals of masculinity and the phenomenon

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[9] Eric Harris viewed his crime as a moral measure for restoring justice. According to his own testimony, the crime could have been prevented if he had received more social recognition. "I'm showing too much of myself, my views and thoughts, people might start to wonder, smart ones will get nosey and something might happen to fuck me over, I might need to put on [a mask] here to fool you all some more. fuck fuck fuck It'll be very hard to hold out until April. If people would give me more compliments all of this might still be avoidable, … but probably not. Whatever I do people make fun of me, and sometimes directly to my face. I'll get revenge soon enough. Fuckers shouldn't have ripped on me so much huh" (personal testimony, Eric Harris, 1998, JC-001-026015).

of rampage school shootings. As the association of masculinity with violence is a cultural norm, a school shooter is, in a sense, acting in accordance with this propagated norm. Shooters are generally male, but are also frequently outsiders at their schools, which means that they are unable to make friends or win favor with the opposite sex (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999).

Not infrequently, too, they lack the physical attributes that are associated with masculinity and thus often become the victims of verbal or physical attacks by other—mostly male—students (Newman et al., 2004). Moreover the shooters' sexual orientation and/or ability to match up to the socially predominant (heterosexual) male image is often aggressively challenged within the peer group (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). In the view of various authors, their powerlessness and their failure to live up to the normative ideas of heterosexual masculinity give rise to severe feelings of inferiority as a consequence of negative moral and emotional recognition (in terms of SDT), which they attempt to compensate by a violent attack on their peers and/or teachers in order to achieve a feeling of power, dominance, and *masculinity* (Katz & Jhally, 1999; Kellner, 2008; Larkin, 2007; Neroni, 2000; Newman et al., 2004).[10]

The aggressive behavior of adolescent boys, who are in the process of actively coming to terms with their gender role identity, is a radical means of conforming to the cultural norm of the violent stereotype of masculinity. Aggression enables them to feel powerful and superior to others and to demonstrate and consolidate their position of status.

2.6 Dynamics of Escalation: Control, Loss of Control, and Violent Quests for Control

The conditions described above are the prerequisites for a superficially unobtrusive, covert escalation Process whose precise thrust is not predetermined in the early stages. The process may result in an addiction to recognition and a quest for superiority. The aim of the school shooting, too, is to restore recognition. Whether the shooter's surroundings react negatively or positively is irrelevant here; in the eyes of the shooters, gaining public notoriety for their crimes is itself a positive outcome, and they perceive a possibility of becoming immortal through massacres like those of Erfurt or Littleton as a grand prospect.

Revenge as an expression of hate is only a superficial motive for violent acts and represents the last link in a long chain of causation. The real cause is the erosion of recognition, which the shooter may dread experiencing or which he or she may have experienced in the past.

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[10] The *leitmotifs* of power, dominance, and masculinity are reflected in Eric Harris' reflections on the planned shooting: "itll be like the LA riots, the oklahoma bombing, WWII, vietnam, duke and doom all mixed together. maybe we will even start a little rebelion or revolution to fuck things up as much as we can. i want to leave a lasting impression on the world" (personal testimony, Eric Harris, 1998, JC-001-026856).

Processes of this kind would drain anyone's resources, but the point where erosion of recognition begins and the point where it becomes "critical" vary from case to case. There is no automatic process that inevitably culminates in violence against others, and so the outside world receives very few warning signs. This is one of the symptoms of society's loss of control, and it is one reason why school shootings, though small in number, trigger so deep a sense of insecurity in society as a whole.

The erosion of recognition, then, is a process and not an event that simply happens out of nowhere. Persons affected by this disintegration will respect core values like the inviolability of human life only if they feel that they are receiving adequate recognition from others. In other words, there is a relationship of reciprocal stabilization between an individual receiving recognition and their respecting norms. This process, however, is extremely vulnerable to interference, for example if teachers or parents violate the child's sense of justice. Such a violation can be interpreted as a violation of moral recognition in terms of SDT if the child's (sometimes articulated) feelings or experiences of injustice are not resolved.[11] As a consequence of such violation, social bonds and emotional support may be lost. Individuals may perceive the prospect of facing loneliness, as the expression of social disintegration, as so threatening that they cease to consider the consequences their actions may have for other people. Other people thus lose their social and emotional significance. Consequently, the norm of inviolability, which protects others from our actions, begins to erode, and the inhibition threshold for violence drops or vanishes completely.

The process of erosion of recognition can be traced in the Columbine shooting. As the two shooters developed fantasies of superiority (nonetheless socially acceptable) they were at the same time forced to realize that they were not receiving recognition. Rather, they were ignored, and so they secretly radicalized their attitude to their lives over a lengthy period. Their hatred erupted into violence directed primarily against students with particularly high recognition levels (athletes), but also against students who were especially despised (Hispanics). During the shooting, the murderers laughed and giggled as they demonstrated, for the first and last time, their superiority to those by whom they had been denied recognition (Larkin, 2007).

Based on the available—albeit not always explicitly empirical—data, various authors have developed models for explaining the interplay between the various risk factors that come into play during the genesis of the crime. These individual attempts at explanation generally focus on different aspects, such as the effects of social marginalization (Leary et al., 2003), the effects of the consumption of violent media

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[11] Eric Harris appears initially to have compensated the recurring violations of moral recognition in his imagination, in which he renounced accepted social ideas of justice and accepted only his own will as the decisive authority. "My belief is that if I say something, it goes. I am the law, if you don't like it, you die. If I don't like you or I don't like what you want me to do, you die. If I do something incorrect, oh fucking well, you die. Dead people cant do many things, like argue, whine, bitch, complain, narc, rat out, criticize, or even fucking talk. So that's the only way to solve arguments with all you fuckheads out there, I just kill! God I can't wait till I can kill you people" (Eric Harris's website, 1998, JC-001-010367).

content (Kidd & Meyer, 2005), the consequences of narcissistic personality traits (Meloy, Hempel, Mohandie, Shiva, & Gray, 2001), and the relevance of violent fantasies (Robertz, 2004). However, they do exhibit distinct parallels in certain areas. Thus it seems helpful to place the different approaches in a logical order.

2.6.1   Social Disintegration and Inadequate Conflict Management Skills: Loss of Control over Life Situation

SDT highlights the dangers of loss of recognition in combination with the absence of socially acceptable opportunities for conflict-solving. According to Hoffmann (2003), an adolescent's shooting spree represents the culmination of a comprehensible sequence of actions and thoughts that result from a continual narrowing of options during the course of a crisis in the adolescent's life (see also Madfis and Levin, in this volume).

Robertz (2004) holds that the origins of the violent dynamic lie in a high degree of biopsychosocial vulnerability that may be caused by a lack of social backing and emotional support (also Fast, 2008; Harding, Fox, & Mehta, 2002). This great vulnerability, which prevents the adolescent from developing adequate problem-solving skills and acquiring a flexible repertoire of responses for interacting with the social environment, results in feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, and these feelings are increasingly intensified by the adolescent's repeated failures in various walks of life (Robertz, 2004; Thompson & Kyle, 2005). Constant humiliation through bullying, social rejection, and marginalization by the peer group are the primary factors that cause adolescents to experience their lives as a torment (Leary et al., 2003).[12] Young people in particular define their identities in terms of their relationship with their peers and their own subjective position within the social hierarchy. Bullying and other forms of social rejection can therefore lead to extreme forms of deprivation and frustration during adolescence (Fast, 2008; Harding et al., 2002; Thompson & Kyle, 2005).

Even adolescents who have a positive emotional climate in their homes to fall back on will gradually cease to experience their home environment as supportive, because adolescence is a phase of life in which their parental bonds typically decrease in strength and the desire for autonomy takes priority (Levin & Madfis, 2009). Experiences of contempt and powerlessness may lead to a narcissistic grievance—a violation of self-esteem that is perceived as an existential threat (Meloy et al., 2001; Hoffmann 2003; Robertz, 2004). One way of responding to this situa-

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[12] For example, Dylan Klebold experienced the consequences of social exclusion as follows: "this is a weird time, weird life, weird existence …I think a lot. Think …Think … that's all my life is, just shitloads of thinking … all the time … my mind never stops … i am in eternal suffering … hoping that people can accept me … that i can accept them" (personal testimony, Dylan Klebold, 1997, JC-001-026388). "i see how different i am (aren't we all you'll say) yet i'm on such a greater scale of difference than everyone else … I see jocks having fun, friends, women, LIVEZ" (personal testimony, Dylan Klebold, 1997, JC-001-026389).

tion is to search for ways to compensate, to escape from the tensions and maintain a positive self-image.

2.6.2   Compensation of Action and Control Deficits: Violent Fantasies

According to Robertz (in this volume), an unendurable inability to take action may be compensated by escaping into a fantasy world in which highly vulnerable adolescents can play the role of strong and powerful personalities that is closed to them in their real-life experience. Meloy and colleagues (2001) provide a similar description of the pre-offense experiences of adolescent mass murderers, who frequently attempt to compensate for social grievances by means of fantasies of omnipotence in which they transform their feelings of shame and self-doubt into extreme anger at their social environment. Future shooters may compensate their narcissistic grievances by assuming the character of a godlike avenger and creating a new world for themselves in which they can play the role of a lord over the highest form of power—that of life and death (Robertz, 2004).[13]

2.6.3   The Quest for Control: The How

Harding et al. (2002), Hoffmann (2003), Robertz (2004), and Kidd and Meyer (2005) suggest that media content glorifying violence plays a significant role in this process. However, while Harding et al., Hoffmann, and Robertz all believe that the media serve as an intermediary between feelings of deprivation and the genesis of violent fantasies (for example, by making available violent films and video games in which susceptible adolescents are repeatedly provided with alternative incentives and ideas for developing new and more intensive power fantasies), Kidd and Meyer describe media consumption as a causative factor that touches off a dynamic of dissocial behavior and thus predisposes the individual for a loss of control. Even young

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[13] Two examples of Eric Harris' pre-delict fantasies: "Well all you people out there can just kiss my ass and die. From now on, i don't give a fuck what almost any of you mutha fackers have to say, unless I respect you which is highly unlikely … for the rest of you, you all better fucking hide in your houses because i'm comin' for EVERYONE soon, and i WILL be armed to the fuckin teeth and I WILL shoot and kill and I WILL fucking KILL EVERYTHING! No I am not crazy … everyone is different, but most of you fuckheads out there in society, going to your everyday fucking jobs and doing your everyday routine shitty things, I say fuck you and die. If you got a problem with my thoughts, come tell me an i'll kill you" (Eric Harris' website, 1998, JC-001-010360). "We of the Trenchcoat Mafia still march around, military-style in our trenchcoats, especially in the school hallways, honing and developing our master plan. We will conquer the entire world once we get a few things straight and make our bombs! … Our master plan is to kill at least 500 people at our high school, besiege the local neighborhood, seize the airport, and then crash a plane full of jocks and cheerleaders into the Pentagon" (Eric Harris' website, undated, quoted from Larkin, 2007, p. 162).

children, in their view, are taught by violent media content that violence is an effective and desirable way of solving problems, and they subsequently resort to violence with increasing frequency when dealing with conflicts in their social relationships. As a consequence, they experience rejection from their peers, with the result that the prosocial behaviors of these children increasingly atrophy in the absence of social learning experiences and the children repeatedly resort to forms of violence in their interactions with others.

While Kidd and Meyer (2005) assert that it is access to weapons that tempts adolescents to use them to gain the respect they long for in their social environment, Robertz (2004) believes that the crucial trigger for rampages is a vicious circle between real failures and fantasies of greatness. In his view, the adolescent must initially withdraw further and further into his or her fantasy world in order to escape from the repeated humiliations in real life and to compensate for them by fantasies of omnipotence, vengeance, and superiority. The adolescent devotes more and more time to these fantasies while reality steadily loses its relevance and his or her ability to cope with reality steadily deteriorates. Access to weapons and violent media images continually supplies new content for his or her fantasies, which become increasingly detailed and refined, until the point is reached where the fantasy alone is no longer a sufficient means of compensation and the perpetrator begins to make real preparations for real action and put parts of them into practice. This may take the form of leaking—of directly or indirectly announcing his intentions. The adolescent increasingly loses control over his or her fantasies, which increasingly become the basis for their existence. After experiencing yet more frustration and humiliation, they increasingly come to believe that putting their violent fantasies of vengeance into practice is a logical thing to do.

Undifferentiated and excessive media coverage of past school shootings frequently enables adolescents to identify with real mass murderers and offers them justifications and choreographies for putting their own plans into practice (Robertz, 2004). According to Leary et al. (2003), following through on these intentions is made easier by the fact that the adolescent's history of dwelling obsessively on issues such as murder and death has desensitized him to such a degree that the idea of putting the murderous actions of his fantasies into practice comes to seem increasingly more normal and less frightening. Additionally, an existing fascination with weapons means that the adolescent is at ease with the idea of handling them.

2.6.4   From Absolute Loss of Control to the Crime: Triggering Causes

Most authors maintain that the violent act is triggered by a final experience of frustration or loss that overtaxes the adolescent's coping ability to the extent that he or she can no longer compensate for their deficits (Harding et al., 2002; Robertz, 2004). In terms of stress theory, the individual is now confronted with demands on their own resources and competences that they perceive as being impossibly high.

The result may be a drastic cumulation of stress when acute aversive situations coincide with existing chronic tensions such as continual denials of recognition in the family, the school, and the peer group. Where these are already present, brief episodes of stress may subjectively be perceived as catastrophic and existentially threatening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Levin & Madfis, 2009).

Prior to a school shooting, the perpetrators frequently faced experiences of loss or social rejection (Hoffmann, 2007; Leary et al., 2003; McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; Moore et al., 2003; Verlinden et al., 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002). These kinds of losses of status and relationships are described in the literature as situative triggering events which the future shooter experiences as severe personal failures and the loss of all hope (Hoffmann, 2007; Robertz, 2004). Moore and colleagues (2003) argue that such experiences overtax the shooter's coping capacity so greatly that a dramatic act of violence comes to seem an attractive option for channeling pent-up feelings of frustration and expressing them at last (so too Harding et al., 2002). McGee and DeBernardo (1999) conclude that the shooters were generally confronted with a large number of such psychosocial stressors within a period of two weeks to 24 h before the shooting. Various studies have identified the following events as specific, situative triggers that lead from the planning of the shooting to its execution:

- Rebukes and punishment by parents or school authorities (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; Meloy et al., 2001; Verlinden et al., 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002).
- Incidents of public mockery or perceived unfair treatment by others (Leary et al., 2003; Meloy et al., 2001; Vossekuil et al., 2002).
- Loss of or rejection by a partner or an idol (Leary et al., 2003; Meloy et al., 2001; Moore et al., 2003; O'Toole, 1999; Vossekuil et al., 2002).
- Repeated rejection or bullying by peers (Meloy et al., 2001; Vossekuil et al., 2002).
- Severe illness diagnosed in the shooter or a person close to him (Harding et al., 2002; Vossekuil et al., 2002).

Vossekuil et al. (2002) were able to identify such events as preceding 71% of the shootings in their study. According to Adler (2000), 50% of the rampage shootings in his study occurred on the same day as such an event, while another 30% took place a few days later.

It must be borne in mind, however, that these *situative* triggering causes, like the *long-term* psychosocial stresses we described above, are not specific to school shootings as risk factors. Rather, they also play a role in other forms of problematic internalizing and externalizing behaviors in adolescents, such as suicidal tendencies and substance abuse (Hurrelmann, 2005). Thus the scope of existing findings and explanations is limited, and researchers face the fundamental problem of providing better theoretical and empirical explanations for the interactions of the various causative factors. This in turn has ramifications for possible control and prevention strategies. A control regime that rests on putative certainties about the acts and their causes is not only doomed to fail, but may also have disastrous consequences for social cooperation.

2.7   Social Control Strategies and Loss of Control

As Newman and colleagues show (2004, p. 50), exaggerated media reporting about the frequency of school shootings creates a "climate of fear" within American society with far-reaching consequences. After the school shooting at Columbine High, parents increasingly feared that their children were no longer safe at school. Although the likelihood of a student dying in an educational facility is approximately one in two million (Addington, 2009), 71% of the parents interviewed by Peterson, Larson, and Skiba (2001) feared that a similar incident could occur in their own town (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000; Donohue, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 1998).

The primary cause for these fears—which, from a statistical perspective at least, are largely unfounded—is believed by many authors to be the way in which such incidents are reported on television and in the print media, though a portion of the responsibility is also ascribed to political vested interests (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Brooks et al., 2000; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Donohue et al., 1998). Media reporting on school shootings has great audience appeal, while politicians can exploit fears of the supposedly ubiquitous danger of school shootings in order to win voters, by demanding demonstrative, high-profile security measures and calling for a zero tolerance policy. In particular, many parents have repeatedly and emphatically called on schools to take visible measures to prevent school shootings. The authorities frequently opted for installing clearly recognizable security measures to demonstrate their willingness and ability to act. For example, government funding was made available for CCTV cameras and private security services to tighten surveillance. Other measures implemented at schools with increasing frequency after the Columbine shooting included video surveillance in schoolyards, hallways, and classrooms, metal detectors, locker inspections, and the logging of traffic through the main entrances (Muschert & Larkin 2007; Addington, 2009). Such demonstrative attempts at control are an expression of the safety imperative prevalent in modern societies, which is coming to rely less and less on socially integrative welfare strategies and is instead casting an ever-widening net of surveillance and monitoring strategies (Keupp, 2011). This is justified by the *illusory* claim to "eliminate all things unpredictable, inconclusive, ambivalent, unfamiliar, disturbing, and to create a clear and predictable world" (ibid., p. 58).

It remains largely unclear, however, whether these security measures achieve their purpose or whether they have negative effects on the schools and their student bodies. While no substantiated evaluations have been performed to date, initial empirical findings suggest that these kinds of demonstrative attempts at control are counterproductive. Studies indicate that there is a link between the use of the security measures described above and increasing levels of victimization and fear among the students (Schreck & Miller, 2003; Schreck, Miller, & Gibson, 2003). According to Addington (2009), negative consequences can be expected above all through the lack of respect for personal freedom that is inherent in random inspections and violations of privacy. These measures, then, represent a control regime

that is itself uncontrolled. Whether this kind of striving for social control over school shootings has the slightest possibility to succeed is very much an open question. Even more restrictive gun laws, which have been the focus of much discussion, are unlikely to be very effective on their own. Newman and colleagues (2004) show that school shootings are typically committed with stolen firearms or weapons procured from friends, and only very rarely with guns purchased by the shooters themselves (see also Kleck, 2009).

Additionally, little attention has been paid to the fact that the two factors discussed in Sect. 2.3 as elements of an action setting conducive to violence: the consumption of violent computer games (as a decision-making aid for improving efficiency) and access to weapons (as a prerequisite for the ability to kill) are regulated by the capitalist market rather than governmental or other restrictions. Illegal markets invariably develop alongside legal ones. The illegal media market in "killer games" and the illegal weapons market are highly efficient—both on the national and international levels—and are accessible at any time to those willing to make the effort. For this reason, they are related to a loss of control on the part of the institutions entrusted by society's to exercise control. Because illegal markets are "learning systems" they will always get around attempts to exercise control in their search for profit—especially in countries like the United States, which take weapons ownership for granted.

2.8 An Interim Conclusion

The background against which school shootings occur is characterized by great ambivalences relating to loss of control. Adolescents growing up in today's society lose control over their own lives under the influence of social pressure and structural insecurity about the possibility of realizing their life-plans. This process is based in social dynamics of integration and disintegration: The thwarted desire for recognition generates an addiction to recognition, and this addiction fosters a desire to exercise control over others. Violence is a means of exercising control.

So there are also dynamics of escalation that are almost impossible to control *systematically*—in other words, they cannot be limited or causally repressed. Thus the empirical findings suggest that school shootings represent the expression of a double loss of control on the following levels:

- On the level of the individual, in the loss of control of adolescent perpetrators over their own lives because the agents of socialization (family, school, peer group) make it impossible to achieve an adequate degree of social integration with a positive recognition balance.
- On the level of society, in a diffuse understanding of the causes underlying the violence. This makes it almost impossible to develop effective methods of prevention and intervention—in other words, to control this form of violence.

To sum up, it appears to be extremely difficult to identify potential school shooters in advance. Even when young people directly or indirectly announce their intentions, it is almost impossible to accurately assess the seriousness of these "warning signs," although there is a growing international effort to improve threat assessment procedures (O'Toole, 1999; Vossekuil et al., 2002; and, for Germany, Scheithauer, Bondü, Meixner, Bull, & Dölitzsch, 2008). However, the risk of stigmatizing a suspect is immensely high and there is a danger of forcing an adolescent into the role of shooter through accusations and disciplinary measures (Lamnek, 1979; also Böhnisch, 2001).

At the same time, focusing on supposedly "dangerous" students places blame on an individual with a complex social problem characterized by insecurity, unequal participation, and disintegration. This reading of the situation imputes the risk of an escalation not to the surrounding social constellations, but rather to the specific personality of the adolescent. It loses sight of the social context and the underlying cultural, institutional, and biographical factors, and this in turn triggers additional processes of marginalization and devaluation which can favor violent responses to stress.

Thus the primary and essential priority is to improve recognition and the general climate in the student body and among the teaching staff of schools and colleges. As a fundamental prerequisite, it is necessary to strive for a new *culture of recognition* and mutual watchfulness both in schools and in the general social context. Such a culture would prevent adolescents from experiencing social disintegration, losing control over their own lives, and taking refuge in extreme violence as an escape from their dramatic situation in order to achieve an illusory immortality.

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