Chapter 3
Adolescent Culture and the Tragedy of Rampage Shootings

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The 1997–1998 academic year left a bloody trail of multiple-victim homicides in communities that imagined themselves violence free. Rampage school shootings had actually erupted before, but in the late 1990s, a string of six incidents created a sense that an epidemic was under way. On October 1, 1997, 16-year-old Luke Woodham of Pearl, Mississippi, killed his mother, then went to school and shot nine students, killing two. One month later, Michael Carneal, a student at Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky, killed three and wounded five. Fourteen-year-old Joseph Todd shot two students in Stamps, Arkansas, 2 weeks after Michael's rampage. Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden left four students and a teacher dead and wounded ten others at the Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas. A few weeks later, 14-year-old Andrew Wurst of Edinboro, Pennsylvania, killed a teacher and wounded three students at a school dance. The killing season for that year ended on May 21 when 15-year-old Kip Kinkel murdered his parents and then went on a shooting spree in his Springfield, Oregon, school cafeteria, killing two students and wounding 25.

The next year brought us "Columbine." The sheer scale of the Littleton, Colorado, rampage was so enormous that this one word will, for years to come, conjure up horrific images of dead and wounded children. Eric Harris, age 17, and Dylan Klebold, 18, invaded the school with an arsenal of guns and bombs, killing 12 students and a teacher, wounding 23 others, and finally ending their own lives. One month later, T. J. Solomon injured six students in a school shooting in Conyers, Georgia.

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A banner headline blazed across the front page of the *Paducah Sun* on the day after the shooting there: "Why?" That nagging question still hung in the air when we arrived in Heath and Westside more than 3 years later. By then, though, confidence that an answer could be found had drained right out of the townspeople. "Everyone who has been through this has looked for a magic bullet," Dan Orazine, the Judge Executive in Paducah, told us, "and I don't think there is one."

Based on research conducted in the aftermath of school shootings carried out at Heath High School by 14-year-old Michael Carneal, and at Westside Middle School by 13-year-old Mitchell Johnson and 11-year-old Andrew Golden, this chapter will attempt to provide a "why." Indeed, rather than locating the roots of this violence in bad parenting or broken families, our research has found its impetus in the social and cultural milieu in which these school shooters lived. In this chapter, we hope to demonstrate that both adolescent and adult status concerns, as well as the small town environment, helped to create conditions conducive to this kind of behavior. We also consider the importance of notions of masculinity and cultural scripts to the actions of these school shooters.

This research was supported by a grant from the National Research Council and carried out between 2000 and 2002. It involved interviews with 163 people in Heath and Westside, including families of the victims, students who were in the schools at the time of the shootings and those who were not, teachers, administrators, court officials, psychologists, news reporters, family, and fellow congregation members of the shooters.

3.1 Social Failure in Adolescent Society

"Popular" kids are at the top of the heap in adolescent culture and any understanding of how the hierarchy is experienced by those who are outside this charmed circle must still begin with them. Although, ironically, the "popular" kids are often disliked or even disdained by their less trendy classmates, they are the most powerful actors in this social system. People pay attention to the clothes they wear, the activities they value, the kids they favor (and those they despise). How do young people enter the winners' circle? Looks are paramount; it is virtually impossible to be a popular kid without being physically attractive. Money matters too—partly because it can buy the other things that count, like the right clothes or cars. Unlike physical attributes, the elements of popularity that are tied to consumption link rank ordering among teens to their parents' status. We asked teenagers in Heath and Westside, "What makes people popular?"

> A lot of the times it's like basically what your parents do. Well, that's how a lot of kids base it on—if you have money or if you don't or if you just shop at Gap. That's . . . [what] the kids in our school base popularity on (Stephanie Holder, Heath High School sophomore).

> If you're wearing really nice clothes and your mom drops you off in a nice car and you have a lot of money in your pocket, or if you're skinny and pretty and have really good hair. . . .

And if you're a guy and you're built or you're popular or whatever, the football players are going to go for you (Stacey Hunt, Westside High School sophomore).

The in-crowd in these high schools is set apart because its members have more active social lives. They go out on dates and throw wild parties, opportunities made possible by their—or their parents'—greater affluence. The critical factors were similar among middle schoolers. Even for those too young to drive or throw parties, the social hierarchies—based on clothes, looks, and athletic prowess—are much the same. In a small community, cliques and social labels acquired in middle school feed directly into high school social position.

Cultural ideals that rule the rest of society play a key role in this milieu as well. Entire industries are built on (and reinforce) women's desires to "look skinny" or have "good hair" and men's desires to build their biceps or drive luxury cars. Ironically, though, adolescents tend to valorize these superficial qualities at the expense of traits that make a real difference in their fate as adults.[1] This is particularly true where achievement in school is concerned. It is hard to get anywhere important in the adult world without completing college and, increasingly, graduate or professional school.

Yet this plain truth is rarely recognized by youths. At a time when kids are trying to grow up and differentiate themselves from adults, the easiest way to make the difference between the generations clear is to resist what all those adults are pushing: doing well in school. Time horizons matter as well. Getting better grades in ninth grade may result in a higher class rank, which may lead to admission in a better college, which may eventually provide more occupational options. Yet these considerations are abstract in comparison with the more immediate and pressing problem of getting a date or making enough spending money to show a girl a good time.[2] In a postindustrial economy where an ever-lengthening training period is needed before young people can enter the adult world, adolescents spend many years in a kind of status limbo.[3] They cannot forecast whether they will be successful adults until they are well into their twenties, and that is too long a time to wait to

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[1] James Coleman was among the first to explore this puzzle in his classic work *The Adolescent Society* (1961). Coleman argued that the movement from a primarily agricultural economy in the nineteenth century to an industrial economy in the twentieth century brought about a decisive shift in relations between youth and adults. Whereas before, youths were essentially apprenticed to their parents and education was an extension of the process of socialization; in an industrial (and now postindustrial) society students engage in ever longer periods of general training intended to prepare them for the much more differentiated and unpredictable occupational sphere. The result is that adolescents become more dependent on the opinions of their peers (hence the "adolescent society"), and this adult influence on adolescent behavior is greatly diminished. For a less functional explanation of the same shift, see John Boli's *New Citizens for a New Society* (1989).

[2] As students got older and college seemed like a more immediate prospect, the status of those who did well in school rose, although never to the level of the really popular kids, like the athletes and the cheerleaders.

[3] Sociologist Stephanie Coontz has labeled this product of the modern economy "rolelessness," because it is a length of time during which youths are too old to listen mindlessly to the dictums of adults, but not yet old enough to have firm identities rooted in established work and family patterns (1997, esp. pp. 12–18).

establish a meaningful place in the pecking order. In the interim, they tend to substitute the most superficial values of the broader culture, reinforced by an extensive advertising industry.

By these adolescent standards, all three of the shooters in our cases were "losers." None of them qualified for the kind of respect they craved. They also lacked what would have been crucial buffers: a sense of personal identity and a like-minded group of peers who valued them for it.

Adolescence is not made up solely of rivalries and social tournaments. It is also the period when kids begin to define what they value, what they hope to achieve, and what kind of people they hope to become (Erikson, 1994). Despite the overarching pressures for conformity, teens do manage to differentiate themselves, but only with the help of supportive peer groups. Belonging to cliques and clubs diminishes the need to perform and provides insulation against teasing, bullying, or negative status comparisons from the larger group.

Early adolescence is toughest for those who are not at the top of the status totem pole precisely because they cannot measure themselves in any way other than how they fare in comparison to those who are. The lack of organized groups—clubs, debate teams, theater groups—means that jockeying for position is a lonely, fraught, individual effort, with kids clawing at one another to move up and down the rungs of a single status ladder. The most pointed teasing, the most excruciating attention to flaws in performance, and the most private disappointment cascade on middle school students. The pain is deeper and the resources, in terms of group support, are weaker than they will be in high school. These observations are confirmed by research that consistently shows junior high school students have lower self-esteem and less positive self-evaluations than high school students (Kinney, 1993, esp. p. 34; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998).[4]

During early adolescence, youths have not yet developed a firmly established sense of their personal identity and, hence, tend to see themselves through the lenses of their peers.[5] Students are often unable to differentiate their own sense of self from the social identity imputed to them by others. They lack that protective coating that comes with some sense of individual purpose. When Michael Carneal was publicly labeled as gay, he worried a lot that he might actually be homosexual even though, as he told psychiatrists later, he had never experienced sexual feelings for other boys or men. Mitchell was obsessed with winning compliments from teachers or other students to validate his persona. For Mitchell and Michael, lacking an internal way to rebuff their insecurities, the shootings provided a very public way to demonstrate to themselves and others that they were who they wanted to be.

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[4]There is also considerable evidence that sometimes individuals or groups are able not to internalize stigma and have a variety of protective responses to avoid doing so (Crocker & Major, 1989). Why junior high adolescents are less able to do this is not clear. Kinney suggests that there are developmental reasons, but it is also possible that within a closed social system with a single source of status resistance is very difficult.

[5]This is similar to what Charles Cooley described as the "looking glass self." See Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and Social Order* (New York: Scribner's, 1902).

Given his age, Michael at least had the opportunity to find a social group that he could have called home. If middle school is a social ladder, high school is more like a social pyramid. The basic ordering of the hierarchy is unchanged—preps at the top, band kids in the middle, other assorted people at the bottom—but the middle groups have specialized on the basis of their interests and activities and not just where they fall in relation to the top group. Student life becomes differentiated horizontally and vertically as students become involved with more varied extracurricular activities such as the student newspaper, the drama club, and the choir, and form friendships around these interests. Instead of viewing life as a class-wide popularity contest, students become more concerned with defining their own identities and seeking to find a peer group that will support them in these efforts (Epps, 2002). Jenny Peterson, a Westside senior who seeks her center in the high school band, knows full well that she has not made the cut with the inner circle of athletes and cheerleaders:

> My whole goal of high school is not to be popular. It was to have fun and have friends. My good friends were in band with me. . . . I don't feel like I fit in really well with the more popular athletes and the richer people but . . . I have fun going on the church retreats, and the church camp, and all those things. And those are the people I want to hang out with.

Students we got to know in these middling high school groups echoed her sentiments, and they were not just handing us sour grapes. Those who were shut out of the in-crowd still feel a degree of envy and resentment about what they have been denied: social recognition, invitations to parties, and more options for dates. Yet they also embrace an alternative value system that is genuinely, if not always completely, satisfying.

Michael had started down this road, but he had not gone far. The oppositional, contrarian identity he was in the process of crafting might well have insulated him from the adolescent standards by which he had been found wanting (particularly in comparison with his sister). In his school papers, stories, and e-mails, Michael delineated the kind of teenager he wanted to be. For example:

> My name is Michael Carneal. . . . I really hate sports I have low self esteem and I play guitar. . . . I have an over achieving sister Kelly who is a senior. I hate being even compared to her. this explains my respning (?) behind being odd and strange and dressing the same way I act. . . .Sometimes I make buttons . . . expressing my opinions. I don't take stuff from teenagers or parents and I am seriously mad at the world. I like Gwar [a rock band] and Atari Teenage Riot [another band].[6]

Unfortunately, Michael did not succeed in getting other kids to accept his alternate game. He grasped the basics of adolescence—that kids who were too square were not popular—but his poor intuitions about which minor transgressions would be rewarded and which would mark him as a jerk were faulty. Trying to buy his way into the Goth group did not do the trick. Drinking salad dressing in the cafeteria brought him more mockery than friendly laughs. Wearing a cape to school was another unsuccessful gambit.

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[6]This story was on Michael's computer hard drive. It appears to have been submitted to a teacher because it says, "sorry, messy writing."

Mental illness made it hard for Michael to calibrate the impact of his efforts. For example, he thought he had no friends, even though there were quite a few kids who claimed, even after the fact, that they were his friends. When kids tried to get close to Michael he would "pull away" in a way that was different from other teens, leaving him psychologically isolated. This loneliness also led to a deep depression, which in turn increased isolation from others.

All in all, Michael had not yet found the social niche that was so sustaining to people like Jenny Peterson, whose status was less than they might have liked. Michael came from a high-achieving family and seems to have remained ambivalent about his middling academic performance. Although he tried to move into the Goth group, he also retained his friends in the band, many of whom fit the goody-goody stereotype that he derided when among the "freaks." He flunked out in all of these contexts: he was not the student his sister was; he was the youngest, newest, and least accepted member of the Goth group; and he was one of two band students asked to sit out because of a shortage of uniforms. Instead of providing him with the security of an identity group, Michael's marginal position in various cliques exacerbated his sense of failure.

3.2 Parents and Pecking Orders

Although much of the pain that motivated these shootings came at the hands of other teenagers, adolescent social hierarchies gain much of their force by the way they are reinforced by adults. Indeed, adult investment in adolescent lives can actually exacerbate the feelings of marginality for those who do not succeed by mainstream standards.

If school were just one of many places adolescents spent their time, social failures within them might not take on such enormous significance. Indeed, in big cities school is less important because there are other proving grounds: the streets, the clubs, and summer camps. In communities like Heath and Westside, by contrast, the school is the undisputed focal point of community life for everyone. This aspect of school shootings was noted by a former Jonesboro resident who works for the state police.

> In a lot of these small towns, [school] is the center point of the community. It is the one point that draws the community together. While they may all have churches, they're subdivided among Methodists, Presbyterians. This [school] is where moms and dads and children come to participate in sporting events, Parents' Night. It is the focal point of the community. It's almost sacred ground.

Parental involvement in children's activities at the Heath and Westside schools is ubiquitous. Parents run sports teams when the school budgets cannot pay for coaches. They help lead the drug-free schools programs. Extracurricular activities could not function without the parents who accompany teams and performance groups all over the state. The marching band that Michael played in, for example, has trips every Saturday from September until Christmas break. Parents chaperone the buses, haul instruments, and make sets. The former principal, Bill Bond, estimates

that there are 20 parents who do nothing else every Saturday for months. But Bond said that after a while it did not even seem like an obligation:

> You can't believe the number of parents that are involved with band. And I mean drive a hundred of miles to stand there and hold balloons and give to the kids. It doesn't matter. . . . They don't consider it work when you show up at band contest on Saturday, because they love it, it's part of their lives.

As the focus of community life, the school becomes as central a part of the parents' lives as it is for their kids. Their presence dissolves the boundaries between school and community.

What are the consequences of living in a town where adults are so heavily invested in the social scene of the younger generation? Social capital can be stifling when parental involvement conflicts with the natural teenage desire for independence. "A lot of parents really struggle with letting go," a church pastor remarked.

> Kids don't want their parents to be around them at this time, because they want to spread their own wings. . . . [But] they want to have the support of their parents. . . . If it's a school activity, they want their parents in the stands. They want to be cheered or applauded. . . . [It's] a difficult balance.

Community involvement in schools means that successes and failures are magnified beyond school boundaries. Kids who distinguish themselves on the playing field or the stage are well known around town. When Mitchell was cut from the basketball team, he not only lost the opportunity to play, he also lost the chance to shine in a public arena. When Michael was asked to stand down from the marching band, his parents' regular presence in the concession stand compounded his embarrassment. His sister Kelly offered to give up her spot so that her brother could play; her generosity probably did not ease Michael's situation.

A bad reputation sticks, especially in a small community. Multiplex ties may not be an ironclad source of social control, but they do ensure that no-one gets a second chance to make a first impression. Under these conditions, a community can resemble a jail or an asylum, what Erving Goffman called a "total institution," in which efforts to craft a particular public identity can easily be foiled. Reputations once established can prove unshakable, because they are telegraphed through overlapping networks.

Teenagers from cities or suburbs who fall afoul of school pecking orders may be able to escape to clubs that are off campus. Children at the bottom of the school hierarchy may rest at the top of another social system in summer camp, a welcome refuge from the misery of teasing. But this is typically possible only when there is no-one common to both groups who can spread a negative reputation to the new circle. In Heath and Westside, distinct social spheres were nonexistent.

The task of continuously projecting even a minimally respectable front before all of these audiences was overwhelming for Michael, especially in the face of a deepening mental illness. Wherever he went—school, church, or a friend's house—Michael was apt to embarrass his well-respected family and give himself yet another chance to lower his social standing. Goffman reminds us that being an actor on the "front stage"—at work, at church, at a party—is hard work; putting forward a character

portrait that is socially acceptable requires energy and attention. Performance is draining, especially for someone who can barely hold his wilder thoughts in check. It is particularly debilitating when the person knows full well that his thoughts are not normal, as Michael did. "He realized he couldn't function in society," Dr. O'Connor remembered. "At one point he told me he thought he'd be safe in jail. He wouldn't have to make a pretext of functioning where he didn't think he could." The shooting provided an exit from, what was for him, a nearly overwhelming task of constant social performance.

Adults magnify the trials and tribulations of adolescence and reinforce the status metrics that govern it. Football and basketball games are big events in these small towns; they are gathering points for everyone in the community (Bissinger, 2000). Upcoming games and those that have just passed are the centerpiece of gossip in the local hangouts. In communities where people stay put through the generations, the fans in the stands are both parents and alumni (and often former players themselves). They care about how the team does on the field and have done so for perhaps as long as 30 years. Parents know the players, the local merchants recognize them, and—much to the dismay of those who do not play the glamour sports—they are known and respected around town. "In a small town there's not a whole lot to do," Eddy Gorman, a Westside staff member, explained. "[Sports provide] a kind of social center. On Friday night, if there's a home football game, it'll just [be packed]." Eddy thinks that high school athletics even overshadow the much larger sports program at Arkansas State University.

School athletes, especially football players, were also favored within the schools, which led to some resentment among other students.[7] Christine Olson, an academically inclined Westside High School student, looked on with frustration at the privileged world of football players.

> The football team is so glorified. . . . All of our subjects are supposed to be educational. And they get out of class to go eat lunch and go to watch Remember the Titans on one of their game days. . . . I mean my schedule was like college algebra and pre-calc, history, and all this stuff. And we don't get any privileges like that. . . . We bust our tails and we don't get anything for it.

Non-athletes at Heath were particularly upset about the lack of recognition extended to their accomplishments. "The football team was awful," one student complained, "but they got a whole lot of attention."

> Our band was good. You know we'd win a competition and nobody would say a thing about it. Our choir was really good. We sent the most people to all state, and higher state, nobody said a word about it. Smart kids, they didn't care about the smart kids. . . . But they definitely paid the most attention to the sports kids, like recognizing accomplishment. You know, like pep rallies—they had pep rallies for our constantly losing football team. They would make

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[7]Coleman (1961) argued that sports are accorded special respect in high schools because they bring status and esteem to the whole community, as opposed to academics, which are primarily a competition among individuals. The fact that academic *teams* still are much less well-respected than sports teams, particularly football and basketball, suggests that cultural notions of what activities are desirable are playing an important role as well.

announcements, "Oh, the football team went and got beat by so and so," or "The basketball team went and got beat by so and so." But they never recognized anything else that anybody [else] did.

Students at Westside High School alleged that the football team was sometimes exempted from the random drug tests that are, in theory, administered to all students. We have no way of independently verifying this charge, nor do we think it should be taken at face value. Yet whether or not it was actually the case, some Westside High students thought it was; for them, this belief provides one more example of responsible adults supporting a key pillar of the social hierarchy among students: athletes rule.

These examples are drawn from Westside High School, but the sorting machine begins to operate in middle school. Middle school students are offered few organized activities, but sports are an exception. Football and cheerleading begin as early as fifth grade in Westside and are an important source of status even for middle school students. Parents who had been through the system before realized that these accomplishments would become important and coached their children about what activities they should join in middle school if they wanted to make the grade down the line.

Columbine High School embroidered this culture of athletic admiration beyond anything we saw in Arkansas or Kentucky. The Colorado state wrestling champion was allowed to park his $100,000 Hummer all day in a 15-min spot, and a football player was allowed to tease a girl about her breasts in class without sanction from his teacher. Sports trophies were the only ones displayed in the front lobby; sports pages in the yearbook were in color, whereas photos of the debate team and other clubs were in black and white (Adams & Russakoff, 1999). Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were subjected to unfettered bullying—physical and verbal—at the hands of athletes at Columbine (Katz & Jhally, 1999). Not surprisingly, when Harris and Klebold exacted their revenge, they began by barking "All the jocks stand up!" The shooters asked people "if they were jocks. If they were wearing a sports hat, they would shoot them" (Obmascik, 1999). In a school where athletes were granted special privileges, they were also first in the shooters' gun sights.

Michael had some similar sentiments. According to one of his psychiatrists, he "believed that his school favored 'sports people' and that no-one would do anything if he complained and that the kids would just come down harder on him" (Schetky, 1998, p. 16). He was not simply expressing his own anger at jocks or preps. The superior position of athletes was ratified by the school itself, and this bothered Michael as well.

Administrators at Heath were not unaware of the potential for favoritism, and they consciously worked to honor the achievements of students who were artistically or intellectually inclined. A special recognition ceremony for students with the highest academic achievement was held annually. Parents were invited as a matter of course. When the academic team won the state championship in Kentucky, Heath High held a post-competition pep rally. The team's defiant pride suggests their pleasure at this recognition and their awareness that they were bucking the tide. "This year our academic team won the Kentucky State 1A school tournament," a senior reminded us:

> So we had a big pep rally, and me and the other senior on the team, we were standing with
> the trophy between us in front of the entire school, heads cocked back defiantly. Come get
> me. And so from then on, people have actually known my name.

The community at Heath also showed its support for activities other than football
and basketball; the band had boosters and a banquet night, just like the football and
basketball teams, and participated in interscholastic marching band competitions.
Parents put their time where their values lie; by doing so, they give a lot more than
lip service to the idea that there is a life beyond football.[8]

These valiant attempts to be more even-handed did not level the playing field:
undue favoritism toward athletes and popular kids remained an informal norm. In
part, the practice reflects the cultural continuity and normative closure that devel-
ops when generations stay put. By some local estimates, 50–75% of the staff
attended the local schools and, therefore, grew up with the same pecking order.
The favoritism cuts deep, according to Westside students like Ralph
Montgomery:

> [Popular kids] will [truss] you up more, and physically just push you around, just because
> they don't stand as big of a chance to get attention, or whatever. School officials are less
> likely to be hard on them. If somebody like me, that don't have a lot of friends [and wasn't]
> popular . . . went to the more popular kids and started pushing them around or something,
> [school authorities] wouldn't have no problem throwing me in detention.

Teachers who gave special treatment to popular kids or kids from "good" fami-
lies sent the message to the rest that the adolescent pecking order would be
reinforced.

Michael Carneal thought that popular kids had special privileges in his school,
and he resented the double standard, as he explained in this essay:

> Recently there was a petition going around concerning the expulsion of several stu-
> dents because they were in the possession of alcohol. . . . If I got caught with alcohol
> would the accused have a petition for me? I don't think they would. . . . [T]he year
> before last the school incorporated a "zero tolerance policy" meaning you would be
> expelled. A lot of people have gotten caught since then, and some were put on proba-
> tion and some were expelled. . . . Normally the people caught are not as popular as they
> are in this case. So why bend the rules this time? If they do, they better bend the rules
> for me on down the road.

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[8]Coleman (1961) argued that the reason that sports has such high status in schools is that the teams
represent the school in competition against other schools, whereas academic competition took
place within schools and, hence, tended to set kids against each other. He suggested that by having
debating teams and the like compete against other schools, it would raise the social status of these
activities. Our evidence suggests that these assumptions, while plausible, do not take into account
the powerful forces that valorize athletic talent in our society. In a world where even poor kids in
Africa are wearing Michael Jordan jerseys and band camp is the subject of never-ending sarcasm
in movies like *American Pie*, there is little chance that band members will be on a par with athletes
in the adolescent social tournament.

3.3 High School Now and Forever

How does the future appear to a marginalized young adolescent? Matt Stone, creator of the popular cartoon show *South Park* and a 1989 graduate of Columbine High School, appeared in Michael Moores celebrated film *Bowling for Columbine*, where he offered a blunt account of the lessons he learned as a nonconformist oddball in the middle of Littleton. Stone noted how hard it was for outcasts to realize that high school is not forever, that the losers in adolescence often turn into the more interesting and respected adults while the football heroes sink into obscurity. "You just wish someone could have just have grabbed them and gone, 'Dude, high school is not the end of [life],'" Stone lamented. Harris and Klebold thought it was.[9]

For students at Columbine, this may be more of a perception than a reality. Littleton is a growing suburb with many newcomers moving in and few lifelong residents. In Heath and Westside, where people really are rooted for generations, it is common for kids to finish high school with the same cast of characters they knew in kindergarten. Most young people from Heath and Westside ultimately settle down in the same community where they grew up, and some never move away at all. The main avenue of escape is to leave for college, but few pursue it. Even the kids who are bright and highly motivated tend to stay local. Courtney Walsh, a friend of Michael's, saw this inertia plainly. "So many kids will say that they hate Paducah and can't wait till they graduate so they can get out," she remarked, "and they'll end up going to [Paducah Community College] just for lack of trying to get into another school."[10] The McCracken County School District estimates that 60% of Heath students go to college, and students estimated that less than 5% would go to school out of state. Students in the junior college live at home while studying. Heath teachers said that it was rare for students to have a career and goals in mind at a young age or to have serious college ambitions. Most students seem to follow the crowd, and the normative pattern is to stay local, for college and afterward.[11]

Even as adolescents grow into adults, the small-town views, habits, and patterns do not change, and neither do most of the friendship groups. "This is a fairly provincial place . . . in a lot of ways," remarked Ron Kilgore, a Heath social studies teacher:

> We're West Kentucky and damn proud of it is sort of the attitude. A lot of the people, even a lot of the teachers—and I don't mean this critically, although I don't think it's terribly healthy—commute to college and they never leave their home. They never leave their

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[9]Eric Harris, one of the two shooters in the Columbine massacre, was stuck: He had no college plans and had been rejected by the military when he tried to enlist. The social rejections he suffered in high school looked like they would become a staple of his reality for some time to come. By contrast, Dylan Klebold had already been accepted at the University of Arizona and he knew that he had a way out of Littleton.

[10]Taken from a letter she wrote to Nicole Hadley after Nicole's death.

[11]Even those who leave often find their way back when they are ready to settle down. There are no exact figures available, but many residents told us that a common pattern was to return either after college or, more rarely, to retire after spending one's career years in a bigger city.

community, and so the ideas . . . that they're exposed to in college are seen still as outsider notions. And there's sort of a safety net or safety screen pulled around.

When people remain in the community for work or school, their high school personas remain with them. Friends made at Heath or Westside High stay with them for life, and the past is hard to escape. Of course, there are countercurrents to this stability. As "smart" kids who might have been in an out-crowd in high school move on to more prestigious white-collar jobs, the pecking order can be inverted. But from the vantage point of a marginalized teen like Michael Carneal, it can appear that the loser tag will stick for life.

3.4   On the Outside Looking in

Small-town environments work well for people who are accepted and can participate fully. But for an oddball nonconformist like Michael Carneal, the idea of growing old in Heath must have looked like a fate worse than death. Michael absolutely disdained much of what the town stood for. Consider his views on the quilting festival; an annual celebration that epitomized much of what older residents thought was best about the town. In an e-mail written shortly before he began his freshman year at the high school, Michael wrote:

> . .. Our town really SUCK.
>   We have this big QUILT FESTIVAL.... 50,000 old bags in snitty cars that drive an amazing 20 miles an hour come to town for a week and we all go Downtown and freak out the old lady quilters. .. . I asked (one] for some spare change and she said she didn't have any but "good luck." I said "Good luck I've already got your wallet.... IT WAS COOL. Ok my point is that there is nothing here.

A point of pride among adults, the quilting festival seemed like an anachronism to a disaffected teen. Michael's band of choice is Ween, a group that released an album that parodied the country music that many locals enjoyed.

Michael detested what he saw as hypocrisy, particularly when it revolved around religion. He joined the Goth group in denouncing popular kids who publicly preached abstinence but had sex anyway, and downloaded on his computer a document that points to a series of inconsistencies in the Bible. In an essay ostensibly about gays in the military, Michael argued that one cannot follow the teachings of the Good Book one day and ignore them the next:

> And if your still using the Bible as an excuse than your pitiful. … These twins from school. . . are always interpreting the Bible. They say … it says that "men are the best" and "women should just stay home…
>   NO
>   Some of the women are bungee jumping, record setting, T.V. staring and some are even running our government.... These people who interpret the Bible that way look at girls in their bathing suits and look at dirty magazines. Nope. None of that if women had to stay home. So look at the big picture when you interpret the Bible and the consequences.

Michael's resentment at small-town strictures surfaced in his attraction to rebellion. He downloaded material that explicitly called for students to rise up and challenge the conformity imposed on them by the schools. "The School Stopper's Textbook: A Guide to Disruptive Revolutionary Tactics, revised edition for junior high/high school dissidents" offers 100 suggestions for disrupting the classroom and "trash[ing] your school." The text admonishes students to resist the conventional practices forced on them in schools on the grounds that they are being forced into rigid molds that stifle individuality. Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, wrote essays that resemble this piece; indeed, Michael may have taken some of his inspiration from Kaczynski, since his work was sitting on Michael's hard drive. Although it is impossible to know how seriously Michael took these writings, they seem at a minimum to capture his own response to small-town life.

Social capital works well for those who are included, but those dense social ties seem oppressive or hypocritical to boys like Michael who do not fit in neatly.[12] When the future looks as if it will be no different from the present, a boy like Michael, who feels depressed, unwelcome, and a complete misfit, may conclude there is no exit.

3.5 Failing at Manhood

Seeking status, performing for peers, finding an identity, and dealing with meddle-some adults—these are tasks that face all adolescents. But it is a gendered process too. The challenges play out differently for boys and girls. We will not engage in the fruitless debate over whether it is easier or harder for boys (Summers, 2000) or girls (Pipher, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). The point here is simply that the process of finding a workable niche is distinctive along gender lines. All of the rampage shooters are boys. We argue that this is no accident, for in addition to failing at adolescence, they were—at least in their own eyes—failing at manhood.

Masculinity is central to what makes a popular boy the king of the mountain (Pollack, 1998). To be a man is to be physically dominant, competitive, and powerful in the eyes of others. Real men exert control and never admit weakness. They act more and talk less. If this sounds like the Marlboro Man, it is because adolescent ideals of manliness are unoriginal. They derive from cultural projections

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[12]Because our focus is rampage school violence, our discussion of the negative consequences of social capital has been directed toward its implications for Michael Carneal. But even for those who do not take such drastic actions, there can be downsides to social capital, the most obvious of which is a lack of privacy and autonomy (Boissevain, 1974; Portes, 1998; Portes & Landolt, 1996; Simmel, 1950, particularly "The Metropolis and Mental Life," pp. 409–426). Morgan and Sorenson (1999) argue that the kind of norm-enforcing social capital that is so pervasive in Paducah and Westside can also inhibit academic achievement, perhaps by promoting a more parochial or insular mind-set. This would explain why so few students leave either of the towns to go to college, and why the few students we talked to who had said that they needed to make a clear break from their home communities (Morgan & Sorenson).

found in film, video, magazines, and the back of comic books. In-your-face basketball players, ruthless Wall Street robber barons, and presidents who revel in being "doers" and not "talkers" all partake of and then reinforce this stereotype. Twenty years ago, action figures like Superman were muscled, but within the range of a normal man's physique. Over time, they have morphed into exaggerated body-builders, with extremely thick necks, impossibly puffed out chests, narrow waists, bulging thighs. To the extent that these toys stand as idealized versions of the male body, it seems that something in the culture is pushing toward a vision of manhood that is just about as impossible to achieve as Barbie doll figures are for girls. Evidence that this pressure is having a negative effect on boys is piling up as study after study shows increased steroid use among boys as young as 12 (Egan, 2002).

Of course, high school boys are not able to claim the mantle of the tycoon, and few of them look like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Their closest approximation focuses on the arena to which they do have access: sports. On the playing field, they live out myths of what men should be like that go back at least as far as the Greek and Roman gods. Girls also play a key role in intramural competition, by serving as trophies that validate a boy's sexual appeal.

Bullying is one violent way that boys try to demonstrate their masculinity. Smaller, physically ineffectual boys are often singled out as targets of bullying by older boys. The captain of the debate team at Heath told us how he had his head knocked into the lockers on one occasion, and was beaten up by a bigger kid on the bus on another. One (not small) freshman told us that for months he would dodge behind a teacher when he saw an older bully coming, to avoid receiving hard punches on the shoulder that "really physically hurt." Another senior told us that he witnessed a group of 12 older boys chase and tackle younger and smaller ones for fun. Students described bullying and harassment as an everyday occurrence in the hallways, in "flex time," and in the bathrooms and said that despite its prevalence, teachers were either unaware of it or unable to stop it.

Bullying makes it possible for more powerful students to call attention to their superiority on grounds that favor them. Scholarly students told us that bullying was often initiated by farm boys who had been held back at least one grade and often two and resented the brighter futures of the college-bound kids. Pushing others around was a means for these kids to draw attention to the ways that they were strong and others weak (literally).

In addition to physical bullying, teasing that degraded the victim's masculinity was also common. Bullying experts have suggested that in recent decades, as teachers have become more aware of the importance of cracking down on physical bullying, teasing with the explicit intention of lowering the victim's self-worth is on the rise, and it has even been given a name: shaming. While the purpose of physical bullying is to control the victim (in the classic case, such as to make him turn over his lunch money), the purpose of shaming is to make the victim feel worse about himself (Newberger, 1999).

There is probably no more powerful source of stigma for an adolescent boy than being labeled gay. The risk to a boy's reputation is immeasurable, and his place on

the social ladder is utterly compromised if even a smidgeon of it sticks. Jim Jacobs, a Heath sophomore, has heard these rumblings in the hallway:

> I've heard so many people talking about people that are . . . gay. They call them names and . . . I have heard twice somebody threatened somebody just cause they're that way. And [being labeled gay] . . . would be the worst thing, because everybody would be against you. And some people are cool with it, you know, but most people in this school are not cool with that. Right after school, outside by the buses there. And they were making fun of [one boy] and then they said they were going to, you know, "We're going to beat you up," for no reason. He wasn't even doing anything to them. He didn't even say anything. And he was like walking by and they said that.

How does being labeled gay compare with other stigmatized identities? We asked students which of the following it would be worst to be socially: gay, poor, not white, not religious, or overweight and unattractive. In Heath, almost uniformly they responded that it would be worst to be gay. In Westside, students were divided about whether it would be worse to be gay or black.[13] The racial tolerance message had penetrated the culture in Paducah, but a similar sentiment did not seem to apply to gays (somewhat similar to the nation as a whole; Wolfe, 1998).

Why is being gay such a stain on one's reputation? The most common response was that gays violated traditional standards of what it means to be masculine. Said one student: "Guys aren't supposed to act feminine and stuff like that. They are not supposed to be gay, I guess." Another girl, now 1 year out of high school, said that gay people were "dirty":

> Like me and my boyfriend now we share a lot of those common thoughts about it. We just think it's gross. I mean, we still talk to the people; we still hang out with them. Not so much hang out with them but we talk to them at school and when we see them in public. And now I don't talk to them about it either.

The power of this epithet has grown so much that it now covers a much wider range of behavior than the purely sexual reference that it connoted in the past. The term "gay" is now used as a slang term for any form of social or athletic incompetence. Students routinely say to one another "that's gay" when they are talking about a wide array of mistakes or social failures. If someone fails to make the right move on a soccer field or drops a lunch tray in the cafeteria, the kid behind him is quite likely to say, "That's really gay." Why? One 15-year-old girl provided an explanation: "Boys have a fascination with not being gay. They want to be manly, and put each other down by saying 'that's gay.'"

Thus for boys, the struggle for status is, in large part, competition for the rank of alpha male and any kind of failure by another boy can be an opportunity to insult the other's masculinity and enhance one's own. It is a winner-take-all society, and any loss one boy can inflict on another opens up a new rung on the ladder that he might move into.

For Michael, who already had severe doubts about how well he was navigating these gender waters, being labeled gay, beginning with the "Rumor Has It" column and con-

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[13]The KKK had a noticeable presence at Westside. In Heath, on the Future Farmers of America, a relatively small group of rural students were thought by their peers to be racist.

tinuing because of the teasing that followed, was torture. He told the psychologists that this was a primary reason for his academic slide in the second part of eighth grade. Michael said boys would call him gay in part because he refused to be mean to girls. He added that he had always felt more comfortable around girls than boys because girls did not tease him, and because with girls he did not have to compete to demonstrate his masculinity. For a boy who already had an extremely fragile self-esteem, who had repeatedly been picked on, and was unwilling or unable to fight back, being labeled "gay" or "pussy" explicitly underscored one key source of his social failure.

Andrew Golden's central experiences with status and power centered on his abilities as a wielder of weapons. As we have noted, starting at a young age, Andrew was fascinated and perhaps obsessed with guns and all they represented, beginning with when, as a little boy, he posed for photographs dressed in camouflage with a rifle. As a first-rate hunter, he had proved his ability to master nature with a weapon in his hand, and his experiences riding around the neighborhood with a knife strapped to his leg showed that he could similarly make other kids bow before him. Despite his small size, he was described as a menace, someone who cursed and yelled at other children, saying that if they came over to his yard he would shoot them with his BB gun. These sources of status translated poorly to school, where he was so invisible as almost to be forgotten. Not surprisingly, when he sought to rewrite the rules of the adolescent society on his terms, he did so with a gun in his hands.

Mitchell Johnson's social failures were caught up in his attempt to be masculine, although his problems were different. The influence of dominant ideals of masculinity on Mitchell's behavior is even more transparent than it was for Michael and Andrew: he was a tough guy wannabe. He liked lifting weights and, given a choice, would opt to play games that involved guns over other types of games. Mitchell was also a fan of gory and violent movies. While these are interests common to many boys (and some girls), he was particularly invested in living out the macho image of his fictional heroes in real life, as Westside teacher Emily Levitt recalled:

> [Mitchell] thought he was being bad. His image of himself was big and bad, because [his brother] Monte was just a teddy bear. One day, Mitchell, he said, "I feel sorry for [Monte]." "Why do you feel sorry for Monte? Everybody loves Monte." "Yes, but he's not very tough." [Mitchell's] idea of himself was he's got to be big and bad.

Mitchell's excessive concern with masculinity was likely intensified by having been a sexual assault victim earlier. His bravado, faux gang affiliation and his molestation of another child were simultaneously attempts to erase the deep shame of abuse, to assert a masculine identity, and to stave off future attack. To ensure his safety, Mitchell even found himself a protector, making quick friends with the biggest boy in his class. The extreme seriousness with which he took his relationships with girls, the need for a long-term commitment from them, and his inability to handle female rejection could also be interpreted as insecurities derived from past abuse.

Unfortunately, Mitchell could not persuade peers that he really was a hard guy. And if kids at Westside could see through these false claims, Mitchell was positively a laughingstock when he tried his stories of gang exploits in jail in the company of

kids who knew the real article. An employee of the county jail where Mitchell was held for 4 months before his trial remembered his ludicrous performance:

> He tried to talk gang. He tried to flash gang signs. He would take his comb and try to carve gang signs on the paint, on the door, on the bunk, on the table. . . . He would tell the boys that . . . he was originally from Chicago. He was a gang member from such and such a group. These other boys would laugh at him because they were gang people. They would ask him [questions] and he wouldn't be able to answer them and that would embarrass him. And that would make him very angry. He did not want to be laughed at.

For Mitchell, image really was everything. One of Mitchells female friends reported that he threatened to kill her the day before the shooting if she ever told anyone that his girlfriend had dumped him. He was more enraged by the possibility that others would find out that he had been rejected than he was about the end of the relationship. In a period of life where one's "rep" is central, Mitchell was consistently unsuccessful at getting others to believe the manly image that he was trying to project, a failure that helped provoke even more desperate actions.

3.6 Cultural Scripts

How do socially marginal, psychologically distressed youths manage the crosspressures they experience? We argue that adolescents have a limited repertoire of "cultural scripts" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Quinn & Holland, 1987) or "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986, 2001) that they can draw on to resolve their social problems.[14]

Cultural scripts do not provide the ends toward which action should be oriented but rather the "tools" that people have at their disposal as they try to solve problems. Consider the television campaign in the late 1990s that advised kids to "squash it" when challenged to a fight. The campaign showed teens walking away from tense encounters by saying "squash it," and by using a hand signal, bringing the palm of a flat hand down onto a vertically clenched fist. These encounters were often combined with a voice-over from a celebrity validating the idea that walking away was the more difficult (and manly) thing to do. The goal here was not to change teen values: The campaign began from the assumption that most kids already wanted to avoid fighting but could not figure out how to get out of the situation when challenged in public arena. By introducing a new script—"squash it"—adults were hoping to give kids a new tool that they could use to extricate themselves without losing face.[15] Where school shootings are concerned, our task is to figure out what scripts the shooters have in their repertoire.

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[14]Powell and DiMaggio's primary context is organizational analysis, but their discussion of different notions of culture, particularly the primacy given to scripts and schema, is useful for our analysis.

[15]The campaign was created by the Harvard School of Public Health. The "squash it" script was featured on a variety of popular teen television shows, and a national survey in 1997 of high school junior and seniors revealed that 60% of African-American youth had used the phrase, and 39% had used the hand signal. Report available at http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/squashir.html.

More specifically, we want to know what model of "problem solving" Michael, Andrew, and Mitchell employed to address the fact that they suffered from low social status, flawed social interaction, marginality with respect to social groups, and weak claims to a masculine identity. The moderate, even typical, scripts they employed did not do the trick. That breakdown pushed them in the direction of taking more radical steps, culminating in rampage shootings. They did not "snap" so much as build toward their crime as the less violent options failed to produce the results they wanted.

The first strategy, which all three employed, was to try to change their social position through performance. Michael and Andrew played class clown. Michael was notorious for his antics (stink bombs, stomping on fish); teachers and students recalled that Andrew liked to imitate characters from South Park and Beavis and Butthead. It did not work. Playing the class clown might prevent a kid from being labeled a square, but it does nothing to ensure that he will no longer be ignored, or in Michael's case, to insulate him from being teased. While a skilled stand-up comedian can make headway with the in-crowd, an awkward, goofy kid is not going to get anywhere.

Michael also tried desperately to find an identity group that would be willing to take him. He floated between the academic achievers, the band, and the Goths, but he never got beyond the fringe of any of these groups. Mitchell, too, was trying to solve his social problems by trying to "act" his way into higher social status. Whether he was trying to get girls to wear his ring at a party or boasting about his latest gang exploits, Mitchell was always on stage. But because he overstepped, others delighted in skewering his performance. Mitchell would, in turn, respond with more of the same, which only made matters worse.

Another option might be to ask for adult help in reversing social marginality. Unfortunately, such a move runs headlong into two primary cultural scripts—one about how adolescents should behave and another about how men should act. The adolescent script requires that teenagers display independence from adults in coping with disputes, failures, and pressures. The masculinity script follows suit, requiring that men solve their problems and avoid appearing weak by turning to others for help (Pollack, 1998).

Michael Carneal did occasionally confide in his mother, the person to whom he was closest, about the harassment he faced. But as he got older, he understood that running to mama is a sign of weakness. Instead, he would hit the steel drum in his backyard to let it out. Mitchell never talked to anyone about his sexual abuse. With the cultural script of masculinity firmly in hand, neither Mitchell nor Michael was able to lean on an adult about problems that were devastating to them.

Mitchell did manage to talk to at least one of his teachers about the fact that he had been bullied. But adults are not always responsive to complaints about bullying since they are inclined to think of it as a normal part of adolescence or something kids should just laugh off. Even if teachers had come to his aid, they would not have been able to solve his real problem: being perceived by other kids as a socially unsuccessful wannabe.

Another option available to Michael, Mitchell, and Andrew was simply to live with it. Millions of adolescents choose this path as a response to social marginality, teasing, and even bullying, convinced that there is nothing they can do to change the situation. Michael took this option for what felt like an eternity. Although he endured bullying from elementary school on, he laughed on the outside even though he was distraught on the inside. Eventually, this strategy became untenable. The teasing got worse, and so did his mental illness. He had to find an exit, a way to end the unrelenting social and psychological pressures. Mitchell was also locked in a downward spiral. Having been caught making sextalk phone calls, his father was threatening to move him back to Minnesota, a very scary prospect. We know less about Andrew's mental state, but for at least two of the three shooters, simply "taking it" would not work any longer.

At this point, they had a number of more drastic options available to them, including running away or even suicide. Suicide is an idea that many school shooters entertain. Michael considered suicide a number of times during middle school and had thoughts of jumping off a building or slitting his wrists. In the months before the shooting he became, in Dr. O'Connor's words, "seriously suicidal," taking his father's handgun and contemplating killing himself. For a week immediately after the shooting, he begged the leader of the prayer group to, "Please, just kill me." A school official reported that Andrew had threatened to kill himself. A friend of Mitchell's reported to the police that Mitchell had also contemplated suicide.

But suicide is a weak way to die, one at odds with the script of masculinity. School shooters are looking for status-winning, manhood-enhancing departures. Rampage school violence can lead in this direction if desperate individuals enter a public space and threaten others in a way that leaves the police no choice but to shoot. Such shooters prefer to be shot—suicide by cop—than simply to kill themselves, because it is in closer concordance·with a machismo code. Bethel, Alaska, school shooter Evan Ramsey said that his original plan was to bring a gun to school "to scare the hell out of everybody and kill myself" but that ultimately he decided, after being egged on by friends, that he wanted to "go out with a bang" (Fainaru, 1998a, p. A1).

The script of masculinity helps us understand why the boys, despite their suicidal tendencies, ultimately decided to turn their anger outward toward others.[16] Another option the boys explored was to fantasize, by themselves and with like-minded others, about violent things they could do to change their status. Michael began to write elaborate fantasies, drawing in part on available cultural scripts in which boys like him used weapons to take power over the hated preps. Even if it was only in a fantasy world, for once Michael would not be the weakling who could never fight back, but rather the man who caused others to quake in their boots.

Mitchell and Andrew were in much the same boat. Police concluded that the two had fantasized back and forth for months, on the bus and over the phone. In

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[16]When girls experience this kind of psychological distress, by contrast, they seem to turn their anger inward, sometimes cutting themselves or developing eating disorders. Thus far, a "feminine script" does not provide for a lashing out violently toward others as much as an inward-turning self-destruction.

their minds, Andrew would no longer be the small boy "put upon" by bigger boys, and Mitchell would no longer be the one who talked big but could never back it up. In real life, however, their situation was unchanged and for Mitchell, it was getting worse—cut from the basketball team and dumped by his girlfriend. No amount of fantasizing could rearrange what he considered to be an unbearable reality.

The boys were seeking to establish themselves as people to be respected, not excluded, by showing that they were men capable of doing big things they were not accustomed to. Unlike adult assassins, who want to work in secret, Mitchell and Andrew told virtually everyone in sight, hoping to redefine themselves through their threats, which might have obviated the need for the shooting itself.[17] But they were unsuccessful: no-one took what they said seriously.

Issuing threats creates intense pressures to follow through. Michael's example is a case in point. When that fateful Monday came, Michael had committed himself to making something big happen. Failing to follow through would have been the ultimate example of "wimping out." Although they were not sure what he planned to do, several of his friends had gathered at the prayer circle in anticipation of something. When it appeared that he was not going to do anything, they went back ignoring him, increasing his frustration.

Perhaps one reason that peer involvement is so common in school shootings is that boys, in particular, escalate from inchoate threats to action in an effort to avoid the loss of face that would come with backing out. Police have speculated that such a dynamic was present between Andrew and Mitchell, with neither willing to be the one to back down from the big talk that they had concocted together. This was clearly the case in the shooting in Bethel, Alaska, where the shooter Evan Ramsey (who was also teased mercilessly about his nerd status by more popular boys) made his plans known and then wavered. Evan's friend James admonished him, "You can't go back, everybody would think you're nothing. Everybody would just have one more reason to mess with you" (Fainaru, 1998b).

Having exhausted their other options, the boys came up with a dramatic solution: the indiscriminate shooting of their classmates and teachers. This would solve their social problems in a way that the other strategies had not. No longer would they try to accommodate themselves by scraping and bowing before the lords of the adolescent society; instead they would show who was really in charge and stake their claim to a notorious reputation. The performance was a public one, and their prior threats guaranteed that no-one would doubt who was responsible for these dramatic actions.

For Mitchell, who was always claiming more than he could actually back up, the shooting provided irrefutable proof that he was the man he always advertised himself to be. No longer would the popular group be able to reject him as someone not quite worthy of inclusion; now they would see that he should have been a "top dog"

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[17] Again, the purpose of school shootings is to make a public statement. The other killers who commonly take public credit for their actions are terrorist groups, who similarly want to be known so that their killings carry a symbolic message.

all along. At the same time, it provided a manly exit from his impending clash with his father. Finally, the shooting provided a highly public way of telling the world that this victim of sexual abuse could no longer be messed with: he would protect himself, violently if necessary.

The shooting was also a statement of Andrew's power; he would be invisible no longer. He would be respected and feared. The shooting allowed him to superimpose this image of himself onto a community that valued strengths that he did not have (size, athletic talent). Andrew was trying to forcibly rewrite the adolescent scorebook, to show that the boy with the best shot rules.[18]

For Michael, the shooting provided a way to invert the social hierarchy—to move himself at once from his position close to the bottom to the very top. And he could now release all the pent-up anger from years of teasing and bullying in one public burst of aggression. ln his mind, it refuted the claims that he was weak or gay and provided definitive evidence to the kids who had thrown him into lockers that he could be every bit the man. As Michael put it: "I thought maybe they would be scared and then no-one would mess with Michael."

The seemingly random choice of targets also speaks to the boys' need to send a message, rather than simply to exact revenge. Random firing has been the most distinctive aspect of rampage school shootings, and the most frightening. As former principal Bill Bond pointed out, if Michael had wanted to shoot the preps, he would have gone upstairs to where the preps hang out. But when Michael shot randomly into the prayer circle, and when Mitchell and Andrew fired at their fellow students from across a field, they were demonstrating their anger with an entire social system that had rejected them rather than trying to take out particular tormentors. For this purpose, any target would do just as well as any other, so long as the shootings occurred on a public stage for all to see.

Finally, it is no coincidence that the boys used the school as the outlet for their anger. Schools are both the location of their adolescent social failures and the center of community life, not just for students but for everyone in these small towns. For Michael, seeking to reverse years of negative perceptions that had accumulated in his family, church, and community, what better place to do it than in the school, the one institution that links all these spheres? It is the only public stage with strong connections to the entire community, and by opening fire randomly at school shooters issue a public expression about how they have been treated in their communities and about the way they want to be remembered.

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[18]Both Mitchell and Andrew also somehow thought that after a time away, they were going to be able to come back to enjoy their newfound status. Mitchell told a friend, "I'm gonna be running from the cops for a while," but that he planned to return in the not-too-distant future. This suggests that they thought they were going to be able to cash in on their changing social status.

3.7 Conclusion

As this research shows, the impetus for the shootings did not come from bad parenting or broken families, the Internet or music videos. Rather, the rage that fuels school shooters emerges as the last act in a long and bitter drama that is central to the cultural confines of the adolescent world. American teenagers are ruthless arbiters of one another's social worth. Anyone who falls short will "feel it where it hurts." To fail the "test of cool" is to be subjected to withering attacks on one's self-worth.

If the adolescent world were completely self-contained, a hermetically sealed chapter in the life cycle, it would be hard enough to live through. But it is not. The teenage pressure cooker is created and sustained by youths, but its power derives from the way the surrounding adult society reinforces its central messages. Grown-ups are party to the status-seeking, ridicule-laden social system of youth culture. Their participation, tacit and explicit, in these status games reinforces the worst aspects of teenage life. In homogeneous small towns where adults are heavily invested in the activities of their kids, reputations made in high school can last into adulthood. Under these circumstances, adolescent social failures are magnified and can seem more like a life sentence than a rite of passage.

Although the impetus for rampage school shootings is rooted in adolescent status competition, reinforced by adults, broader cultural scripts of masculinity also play an important role. Status competition among boys often centers on fulfilling a narrow notion of manliness. Andrew Mitchell and Michael Johnson not only failed to become respected social actors, but also failed to become powerful males. The shootings provided an important way for them to defy the labels they had been assigned and to demonstrate publicly that they were the men-in-themaking that they claimed to be.

When students go to school and shoot randomly at their classmates, they are, more than anything, trying to send a message to everyone about how they want to be seen. In rural and suburban America, school is often the community's most central institution for adults as well as kids. The shootings provided a way for these boys to redefine their identities and assert their masculinity on the community's most public stage. By randomly targeting their classmates, they showed that they were less interested in revenge against particular individuals than in broadcasting their message to the peer and community social structure that had rejected them.

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