

School shootings: Some Columbine myths resurface

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WESTWORD

There's no coherent explanation yet for seventeen-year-old T.J. Lane's attack on Chardon High School in Ohio on Monday, which killed three students and injured two others -- and the "why" may prove elusive for some time to come. The shootings have been treated as utterly random, although recent reports suggest one of the victims may have been dating Lane's ex-girlfriend.

Actually, a high number of school shootings involve dating issues, failed romances -- or, in a more general sense, loners who feel rejected by their peers and embark on some form of score-settling or murder-suicide mission. By some counts, more than half the fatalities in school violence over the past three decades can be attributed to shooters, predominantly males, who faced some perceived "challenge" to their sexuality, from female rejection to persecution by school bullies.

That's one of the tenets of *The Bully Society: School Shootings and the Crisis of Bullying in America's Schools*, a new book by sociologist Jessie Klein that seeks to find a pattern to the violence. The book is receiving some approving notices in light of the Ohio tragedy, in part because of its impressive compilation of data on nearly 200 school shootings stretching back to 1979.

By Klein's figures, the annual pace of the shootings continues to increase, with 43 in the past three years alone.

But there's reason to be wary of Klein's efforts to fit every incident into her bullying model. Her treatment of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the shooters in the 1999 attack on Columbine, for example, is a curious -- and, to a great extent, discredited -- interpretation of one of the most studied and scrutinized school tragedies of all time.

According to Klein's capsule summary, "Eric and Dylan were made fun of for being smart, and wearing Goth clothing; the kids called jocks at school called them the 'Trench Coat Mafia;' Eric was considered the smartest boy in the class.... Eric's father was an Air Force pilot, and Eric might have tried to emulate the violence endemic to his father's position."

Klein also detects a "gay-bashing" undercurrent in the Columbine attack: "Both were enraged by the ridicule they endured by students...who called them homosexual."

Klein seems to be relying on some of the lurid and ludicrously inaccurate rumor-mongering that passed unfiltered into early press coverage of the shooting. She even quotes a note supposedly from Harris's diary, blaming the massacre on teachers and parents: "You have taught these kids to not accept what is different."

As someone all too familiar with the rantings found in Harris's actual journal, let me point out that Klein is quoting from a bogus "suicide note" that showed up on the Internet shortly after the shootings and was soon debunked. (Her footnoted source, weirdly enough, is a Dan Savage column from May 1999.) Harris didn't write any such thing.

And Klein's other assertions? They didn't dress Goth. The so-called Trenchcoat Mafia was a red herring from day one. There's nothing in the official record that suggests anyone regarded Eric Harris as the smartest boy in school -- other than Eric Harris.

As for other myths -- about the two killers being outcasts, persecuted, more gay-bashed than gay-bashing -- they were all exploded years ago, [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#), among other places. Although bullying certainly existed at Columbine, just like at other schools, and Harris and Klebold may have been targets long before they became tolerated albeit not widely popular seniors (and quasi-bullies themselves), it's alarmingly simplistic to make the kind of cause-effect argument Klein presents for what happened at Columbine.

Since that terrible day thirteen years ago, considerable money and labor have been poured into the effort to prevent such tragedies. But each school shooting has its own shocking elements, its own brand of senselessness. That's one of the reasons they're so difficult to stop.