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**The Bullying-School Shooting Nexus:  
Bridging master narratives of mass violence with personal narratives of social exclusion**

**Abstract**

This study examines the narratives that people who are deeply interested in school shootings tell about school shootings and their interest in the subject. Data come from 22 qualitative online interviews with individuals from 12 countries across the world, and the study is based on a framework of narrative criminology. We find that the theme of bullying weaves together personal narratives and the master narrative of school shootings. We discuss how deep interest in school shootings does not equal a desire to commit a massacre; rather, the circulation and recreation of the bullying story can reinforce scripts about responding to bullying with mass violence.

**Keywords:** School shootings, fandom and deep interest, narrative criminology, master narrative, personal narrative

**Introduction**

School shootings have attracted massive public and academic interest since the Columbine massacre in 1999 (Agnich 2015; Böckler and Seeger 2010; Larkin 2009; Newman et al. 2004; Robertz and Wickenhäuser 2010). Currently school shootings are considered a global phenomenon as they have been taken place for example in Germany, Finland, Canada, Brazil and Australia during the 2000s (Böckler et al. 2013; Sandberg et al. 2014). Despite being statistically rare incidents (Borum et al. 2010), school shootings are often described as unexpected because they occur in places that are thought to be safe and because the victims and perpetrators are both young (Newman et al. 2004). Due to these characteristics, school shootings are sometimes portrayed as simply “evil” (Nurmi and Oksanen 2013).

School shootings are not only direct violence, but also a form of symbolic violence; their intention is to send a message to a broad audience, not only to the victims (Malkki 2014). Thus, understanding school shootings requires understanding the symbols the shootings embody and the stories that accompany the violence. School shootings have often involved potent narratives, as the offenders have planned and committed their acts within a general framework in which young victims take revenge against their bullies (Newman et al. 2004; Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011; Sandberg et al. 2014). The cultural stock fueling such narratives is considerable because school shootings are present in a variety of films and documentaries starting in the 1960s but especially since the 1990s (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011).

The use of web resources by school shooters and their fans has been documented in previous research. School shooters around the world have used social media to upload videos and pictures prior committing the massacres (Böckler and Seeger 2013; Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011; Paton 2012). Videos on Columbine, Virginia Tech, Jokela and Kauhajoki shootings are widely discussed and commented on YouTube (Lindgren 2011). There are also web pages and online communities where members express admiration for and sympathy with school shooters (Böckler and Seeger 2013; Oksanen, Hawdon & Räsänen, 2014; Oksanen, Räsänen, and Hawdon 2014; Paton and Figeac 2015). Thus, school shooters, like other infamous mass murderers and serial killers, have fans and admirers.

Our aim in this study is to examine the stories told by people who are deeply interested in school shootings. We emphasize the interwoven relationships between the life stories told about school shooters and the life stories of those who admire or sympathize with the shooters. School shooting ‘fan sites’ have existed online ever since the Columbine shootings, but there is little research on this deep interest in school shootings. With this study, we will contribute to the understanding of online communities focusing on school shootings and also apply new perspectives to the already-numerous causes of school shootings.

### *Bullying and school shootings*

School bullying has been widely discussed in studies of school shootings. Reviews of school bullying show that shooters experience high rates of victimization and that school shooters have often felt excluded or rejected (Leary et al. 2003; Verlinden, Hersen, and Thomas 2000; Newman et al. 2004). Yet, studies have typically focused on perpetrators but not on the wider communities that follow school shootings and school shooters. Public discussion has frequently focused on bullying as a major causative factor in school shootings. School shooters are often seen as loners who have experienced constant bullying until they “snap” (Ferguson, Coulson and Barnett 2011: 150). The commonly held perception is that school shootings can be understood as a process of “get mad, get guns, get revenge” (Tonso 2009:1266–1267). Despite this commonly held perception, bullying has not been central in all school shooting cases (Borum et al. 2010), and many leading studies consider bullying as only one factor among many (Bondü and Scheithauer 2011a; Böckler et al. 2013; Ioannou, Hammond and Simpson 2015; Langman 2009; Newman et al. 2004; Newman and Fox 2009).

Other relevant factors include, for example, symptoms of narcissistic personality traits, depression, and lack of empathy (Bondü and Scheithauer 2011a, 2011b; Böckler, Seeger, and Heitmeyer 2011; Newman et al. 2004; Robertz and Wickenhäuser 2010). Sociocultural problems, such as crises of masculinity (Kellner 2013), homophobia (Kimmel and Mahler 2003) and cultures that promote aggressive and competitive behavior (Klein 2012) have also been proposed to explain school shootings. Another important factor in school shootings is the cultural script with which they are associated. According to Newman et al. (2004:230), the cultural script of school shootings provides an example of how to solve problems. The school shooter must believe that an attack on the school will solve his problems, such as bullying. However, the concept of bullying must be used with caution in the context of school shootings. It can be defined in a variety of ways, and accounts of school shooters being bullied often come from third-party accounts that may not be accurate (Ioannou et al. 2015:197). Ferguson et al. (2011:151) also note that perpetrators’ feelings of being persecuted do not necessarily reflect reality. Most importantly, many young people have experiences of social exclusion without

engaging in violence; therefore, social problems alone do not adequately explain school shootings.

In sum, existing evidence shows that a combination of psychological and social problems plays a crucial role in school shootings. As Newman and colleagues argue, boys who suffer from the most severe bullying are not necessarily the ones who become school shooters, instead,

*it's the boys for whom a range of unfortunate circumstances come together* – those who are socially marginal, are psychologically vulnerable, are fixated on cultural scripts that fuse violence with masculinity, live in areas where firearms are readily available, and attend schools that cannot identify this constellation (Newman et al. 2004:230, italics in original).

While the roles of social exclusion and harassment in the lives of school shooters are complex, bullying is the main explanation for school shootings presented by the media. The typical media-driven framing of school shootings is a story in which the perpetrators are victims who take revenge against their supposed bullies (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011; Leary et al. 2003). For example, multiple school shooters have referred to the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, as heroes or martyrs (Larkin 2009; Malkki 2014; Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011). This story about school shootings is replicated in news media, television documentaries, films and other cultural products, creating a powerful master narrative about school shootings. School shootings have become dramatic and spectacular acts, and the shooters themselves have understood and partly staged their acts to fit the script of school shootings (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011). Facilitated by the Internet, these stories of school shootings spread globally, with increasing impact on potential school shooters and on those who are fascinated by these events for other reasons.

### *Narrative criminology*

Narrative criminology (Presser and Sandberg 2015; Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016) is a relatively new framework within criminology that emphasizes the role of stories in motivating, mitigating or desisting crime. Narrative criminology is also interested in the impact of stories on the judicial system more generally (e.g. Ugelvik 2016) and in narratives *of* crime, for example in the media (e.g. Katz 2016:233). The emphasis in narrative criminology is not on whether the stories studied are “true” or “false” but on how the myriad stories people tell reflect the multilateral nature of identities, values, communities and cultures (Sandberg 2010:448; Presser 2016).

Narrative criminologists argue that crime and narrative are closely connected and that studying stories can be a way to access the core of the causes of complex crimes (Sandberg 2013:69). The relation between narratives and crime can be analyzed from different viewpoints. Katz (2016), for example, has distinguished between “culture in crime and culture about crime”. Culture in crime refers to how people committing crimes understand them. Culture about crime can be divided into at least three types: descriptions of crimes by the observers, descriptions of the offenders after the crimes, and descriptions of crime in the media. Katz then emphasizes that the focus of cultural criminology is on the interaction between culture about crime and culture in crime.

Narrative criminology offers a new and important way to analyze school shootings and the deep interest in them. It is essential to understand how school shootings are represented among

people who are deeply interested in them. Using Katz's (2016) division, we are interested in how stories told about school shooters are interconnected with the personal narratives of people deeply interested in school shootings and how these stories are connected to school shootings. Thus, we are interested in what types of stories are told about school shootings and how this can impact the stories told by school shooters.

Social knowledge and insights evolve when narratives are shared with others (Mello 2002, 233), and what is written in these Internet forums has an impact on the speaker as well as on others (Presser 2012:5). The Internet's significance in constructing and sharing narratives cannot be overestimated. As Hoffman (2010:12) argues: "--- the Internet can no longer be regarded as a practical means for information retrieval but rather as a global communication hub which is fused by various local groups of users on a daily basis." For example, although experts disagree about the impact of school bullying on school shootings, bullying *becomes* important if it is cited as the main factor in explaining school shootings by online communities of people deeply interested in school shootings. The meanings of school bullying must thus be understood from wider cultural and narrative perspectives. Narrative environments such as Internet forums do not fully dictate how narratives are constructed or the situations where narratives are told, but they have great impact on the content, form and role of the narrative in that context (Gubrium and Holstein 2012).

To understand different forms of narratives, Loseke (2007) distinguishes among personal, institutional and cultural narratives. Cultural narratives are at the macro-level and include abstract types of actors that simplify the world, closely resembling what has been described as master narratives elsewhere. For the sake of clarity, we refer to these and other narratives that are synonymous as master narratives throughout the study. These narratives usually have particular authors, storylines and forms (Loseke 2007). They are dominant and socially acceptable narratives (Perrier, Smith, and Latimer-Cheung 2013:2090) that reveal relatively fixed common viewpoints in a specific culture (Thommesen 2010:2). A master narrative is a schema that is totalizing; it not only explains reality and knowledge but also orders them (Yu 2010). Master narratives become, or try to become, standard views (Snajdr 2013). Yet all master narratives are not equally relevant to everyone (Kölbl 2004:28), and they are constantly created, changed, challenged and rejected (Loseke 2007:664). Master narratives affect the way we comprehend the world and the stories we tell about ourselves. They are internalized as part of individual and social identity (McLean, Shucard, and Syed 2016:2), and they contribute to shaping personal narratives and identities (Hammack 2008; Esteban-Guitart 2012). Master narratives are a way for us to discuss and to present our identities and perceptions of ourselves (Brookman, Copes, and Hochstetler 2011:399), and they are reproduced because we become stories that we know (Andrews 2004:1).

Master narratives are closely connected to personal narratives, or stories we tell about ourselves. Personal narratives are linked to collectives, and people create their own personal narratives using master narratives as resources (Rowe, Wertsch, and Kosyaeva 2002). Master narratives also limit what can be told in personal stories. Stories that we hear and tell "are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue" (Brooks 1984:3). With personal narratives, we create consistency and coherent identities in a confusing world (Loseke 2007: 672).

The first aim of our study is to analyze how our interviewees described the impact of bullying and social problems on school shooters: What is the role of school bullying in master narratives

of school shootings? The second aim is to analyze how individuals with deep interests in school shootings link their personal experiences to the school shooting master narrative: How are the master stories of school shooters intertwined with the personal narratives of those drawn towards these events? Our goal is to understand how personal narratives and master narratives are combined in the composition of these stories. Finally, because stories are inspirational to their audiences (Presser 2016:140), we discuss the potential impact that stories about school shooters may have on future school shootings.

## **Method**

Data for this study come from interviews with 22 people who we describe as having a deep interest in school shootings. By using the broad concept of “deep interest,” we differ from previous research in which the term “fans” has commonly been used. We do this because people who spend substantial amounts of time on the websites related to school shooters do not form a homogenous group in terms of interests or reasons for being on those sites. Moreover, while some of the interviewees described themselves as fans, others did not want to be labeled as such. We believe the broader “deep interest” term reflects this phenomenon well.

Interviews were conducted from July 2015 to September 2016. A blog was created in Tumblr and used as a way to contact possible interviewees. The blog also served as a place where people interested in being interviewed were able to read about the research and about the interviews. The interviewees were recruited from social media profiles related to school shootings, especially from Tumblr and DeviantArt. Some participants also contacted the researcher by themselves after hearing about the study. Out of 22 interviews, 21 were conducted in writing using Skype and one was conducted by sending the interviewee questions via e-mail due to that person’s wishes.

The interviewees ranged from 15 to 32 years of age. The medium age was 20.2 years old. Fifteen of the interviewees told us they were female, four of them told us they were male, and three defined their genders as follows: one as female-to-male transsexual, one as genderqueer and one as genderfluid. Six interviewees were from the United States, three were from Germany, two were from Australia, two were from Mexico, two were from the United Kingdom, and one participant each was from, respectively, Portugal, Argentina, Hungary, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Poland and Singapore. Interviews were semi-structured. There were common questions that we asked all the interviewees, but there was no other structure to limit the conversation. The questions we asked addressed issues related to the interviewees’ interest in school shootings and to how they saw the online (fan)communities of school shootings.

Based on the functional scale of internet anonymity, the anonymity of the interviewees varied from visual anonymity to full anonymity (see Keipi and Oksanen 2014). The amount of anonymity varied because the interviewees gave different types and amounts of personal information. Of course, when interviews are conducted online, interviewees’ “true” identities are never certain. We cannot know for sure that the interviewees are who they say they are. Thus, the most appropriate method of understanding collective understanding in virtual words is to conduct research from participants’ own points of view (Boellstorff 2008:61).

Data used in this study also come from online ethnographic research conducted from February 2015 to February 2016. Ethnographies done online have been described as virtual ethnography,

online ethnography, cyberanthropology and netnography (Tunçalp and Lê 2014:61). Kozinets (2010:1) uses the term netnography to describe “a specialized form of ethnography adopted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today’s social worlds”. While we do not refer directly to data from the netnography in this study, it has provided us with important background information that we have used to understand this phenomenon and to conduct the interviews. As a result of our netnography, we collected ample information on deep interest in school shootings, which helped us to ask better questions and to understand the answers that the interviewees gave us.

### *Ethics, limitations and analysis*

The interviewees were not asked at any point for identifiable personal details except age, gender and country of residence. In the analysis, we have omitted this information because there is only a relatively small community of fans and people deeply interested in school shootings. Although the general public would not be able to identify the interviewees, there is a possibility that the interviewees could be recognized by other members of these online communities. The first author was responsible for the interviews and the netnography. The second and third authors viewed only the parts of the data that were made anonymous, and none of the data were traceable back to the real identities of the interviewees.

Despite the considerable strength of having global data, our study is limited to 22 interviewees, and the analysis could only focus on the qualitative investigation of this phenomenon. As this study focused on a group of people who are difficult to access, the interviews were conducted over a moderately long period of time (14 months). Some limitations also involve the analysis of the data. When analyzing the interviews, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish whether the interviewees were discussing specific school shooters or school shooters in general. Yet, we did not find this particularly problematic because perceptions of single events contribute to the creation of the common view of school shootings.

There are different ways to generalize narrative data. In our study, we have used ethnographic generalization, in which personal narratives are used to unveil otherwise hidden meanings, motivations, social practices, interactions and mythologies. (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008:129–130). Bullying was a common theme in the interviews, and thus the analysis was constructed around the stories the interviewees told about bullying. As a starting point for the analysis, we used Gubrium and Holstein’s (2012) argument that all varieties of accounts can reflexively be connected to prior written or unwritten narratives. Thus, we did not approach the narratives the interviewees constructed as merely individual stories but rather as narratives that were intertwined with other narratives and constructed in a specific social context. Because stories are shaped by context and social interaction (Gubrium and Holstein 2012), the interviewing context impacted the narratives interviewees constructed by focusing the narratives around certain topics.

## **Results**

The stories that interviewees from around the world told about school shootings were strikingly similar. In particular, the bullying theme stood out as a widely shared narrative. Our interviewees talked extensively about school shooters’ bullying experiences and other social problems school shooters had endured. Interviewees also talked extensively about how they had been bullied themselves. We found one or both of these narratives in 21 out of 22

interviews. In the following analysis, we first present how the partly media-driven master narrative of bullied school shooters was present in the accounts of people deeply interested in school shootings. Second, we present how this master narrative was woven into their personal narratives.

### *Bullying of school shooters: the master narrative*

Master narratives impact the way we understand the world and the incidents that we encounter. They provide a framework that we use to make sense of our experiences, and they help us to create a coherent identity (Kerrick and Henry 2017:1). Master narratives are circulated widely and unveil what we know and value, as well as how we should act (Brookman et al. 2011:398).

When analyzing our data, we found that our interviewees saw school shootings in a strikingly uniform way. Out of 22 interviews, 15 interviewees brought up bullying or other social problems school shooters have had. Six interviewees brought the subject up indirectly, and only one interviewee did not bring it up at all. The stories about how school shooters had been bullied were so dominant and similar that we argue they reflect a master narrative: a simplified and uniform way of seeing the shootings. The master narrative of bullied school shooters is constructed as follows:

- 1) School shooters have been victims of bullying or have suffered from other social problems
- 2) Bullying and other social problems that the shooters have suffered from are an important cause of school shootings

Although there was some variation, bullying was generally understood to be one of the main reasons for school shootings. Many claimed it was the most important reason for attacks. Our interviewees then emplotted bullying with school shootings. Stories are constructed from multiple occasions that are joined together with a plot (Ahmed 2012:235), and in emplotting, events are translated into episodes and significance is attributed to instances that are independent (Somers 1994:616). One of the interviewees, for example, described the connection between bullying and school shootings as follows: “politicians blame gun laws and the parents but no one cares about why they really did it: because they were bullied.” (Interviewee 9). Another interviewee recalled assuming, upon first hearing about the Columbine massacre, that the shooting was a reaction to bullying: “Regarding Dylan and Eric, I just remember that when it happened I was first shocked but immediately thought “Badass! They probably got bullied too!” (Interviewee 5).

Generally, there was a tendency to see bullying as one of the main themes across cases of school shootings and similar episodes: “In my opinion, school shooters felt threatened by others (like bullies) or disappointed with the society, I could mention the most 'famous' like kip kinkel, Anders Bierviek [Breivik]<sup>1</sup> (not a school shooter but still), Adam lanza, Seung-Hui Cho, and others” (Interviewee 20). One of the interviewees described the Columbine perpetrators’ endeavors and reasons for the attack in more depth:

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<sup>1</sup> Square brackets are used by the writers to clarify the interviewees’ words due to typing errors, etc.

School shooters to me are people who want to let their true self out and by doing so they use violence take Eric harris and Dylan klebold for example the was [they were] rejec[ted]

They both were rejected and one day they let there [their] frustrations out

They didn't care w[h]ether the punishment was death or not they just wanted their message out  
(Interviewee 2)

Only one interviewee did not bring up bullying or the social problems of the shooters at all. In 6 interviews, these problems were brought up indirectly. Yet even in these indirect discussions, the interviewees' perceptions of the school-related social problems of school shooters came across. For example, when asked why they thought they were so interested in the subject, one replied as follows: "Mainly because I was bullied a lot throughout my life in school & now at work.. I've always been into much darker things, or topics that don't seem to interest the general public. But mainly because I relate. I've read Dylan's journal , & I've read Eric's I just understand where they're coming from in a sense". (Interviewee 6). Thus, the interviewee implied that the Columbine shooters were bullied.

Master narratives usually involve one-dimensional characters and portraits of life that are less complex than reality (Loseke 2007:666). Defining the shooters as victims was common due to their perceived experiences. One interviewee described how the massacre could have been prevented if the shooters had been treated differently: "I feel that if they have been given more help or have someone to understand them, the chances of them committing school shootings would be lesser. I feel that everyone is a victim in school shootings, even the perpetrator." (Interviewee 1). Another interviewee similarly called for understanding of the sufferings of the Columbine shooters: "because it's always about things like "Let's honour the 13 angels that died that day" and completely disregard the two depressed kids that were bullied and abused to the point of insanity." (Interviewee 3). One interviewee described one of the Columbine shooters as follows: "I feel the strongest towards Dylan Klebold. People have said that Dylan was a nice guy and the last person they would even imagine doing something like that. He was also bullied and I think that really had a big effect on him and his choices." (Interviewee 21).

Stories that connect bullying and school shootings are common in the media (see Leary et al. 2003) and entertainment industry (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011). As our data show, this master narrative of bullied school shooters is also shared among people deeply interested in school shootings. Many of our interviewees portrayed school shooters as victims, and they emplotted bullying with school shootings. What is significant, therefore, is the similar use of characters (school shooters as victims) and similar plotlines (bullying linked to shootings). This is not to say that the bullying experiences of school shooters are not "real" but that stories always simplify and reconstruct reality. Thus, when the master narrative of bullied school shooters is repeated, reconstructed and circulated, it becomes "the reality". Master narratives are powerful stories because they offer us a way to identify with experiences that are thought to be normative. Story plots in master narratives serve as models for all stories; through these stories, we understand the stories of other people as well as of ourselves. (Andrews 2004:1). The master narrative of bullied school shooters impacts the stories told about school shootings and the stories that are connected to school shootings.

### *Personal narratives of bullying*

Personal narratives are both based on and selectively drawn from experiences people have (Presser 2009:179). The criterion for selection is often familiarity. Master narratives are



therefore a great resource for personal narratives, as they can be used to identify relevant experiences for inclusion in personal narratives. As opposed to master narratives, personal narratives occur at the micro-level, “producing *personal identities*, the self-understandings of unique, embodied selves about their selves” (Loseke 2007:662, italics in original). Through personal narratives, we construct our identities and plot our experiences to establish who we are (Presser 2016).

Our interviewees composed stories that were very similar to each other. Out of 22 interviewees, 19 reported experiences of bullying or other social problems. The severity of bullying experiences varied from severe bullying and social alienation to less severe social problems, such as loneliness or difficulties of being with others. The personal narratives were often constructed as follows:

- 1) Person has suffered from bullying or other social problems such as loneliness
- 2) Due to these experiences, the person understands the perceived similar experiences of the shooters

Usually, these experiences came up when the interviewees were asked about their reasons for being interested in school shootings or when they were asked whether their own experiences had an impact on their interest in school shootings. In almost all of the interviews, the interviewees brought up their bullying-related experiences by themselves. This indicates that the interviewees saw stories about their bullying-related experiences as meaningful with respect to the topic of deep interest in school shootings.

In personal narratives, interviewees connected their traumatic experiences to the perceived experiences of school shooters. One explained, “Another important reason is that I've been severely bullied and beaten in School. Plus Problems at home. And my own psychological Problems. I can totally relate to what drives them to do something like that.” (Interviewee 5). Similarly, another stated, “i got in touch with the topic when I was heavily bullied in school and I therefore I suffered from depression and social anxiety. (Interviewee 9). One told us that “---but unlike Eric and Dylan, I choose not to fight with the bully and just ignore them.” (Interviewee 19). One described how the experience had changed how they view the world: “I guess it has being bullied definitely changed my views on society and I became this misanthropic because I had nothing else and Columbine was my escape it was what I see as a really great story and a sad one too because someone like you did this.” (Interviewee 2)

Those who had experienced less severe problems with bullying also connected their own experiences to their interest in school shootings. One wrote that “I felt very uncomfortable with myself and others growing up” (Interviewee 3), and another that “I struggled socially in school. Like...I wasn't exactly bullied, but not very popular either” (Interviewee 13). In personal narratives, interviewees described how being considered an outsider had changed who they were and how they perceived life. Here is one such description in more depth:

I was bullied when I first started primary school too by some year 6's, I was 4 years old I think, and it was just name calling and being pushed around and stuff. There were a few times in secondary school too where I was bullied for my hair again, but all these experiences haven't affected me as such, its just given me thicker skin and more respect to victims and dislike to bullies. (Interviewee 18)

Experiences of being bullied or socially excluded were important for the personal narratives and life-stories of most of those deeply interested in school shootings. Life stories integrate incidents in life, thus linking the past to the present. They give meaning and direction to one's life (Sandberg 2016:159). Our interviewees told that they could understand what the shooters had gone through because of their own experiences of bullying. Interviewees also explained that they started to understand the shooters when they studied their life. One of our interviewees told, "I only saw them as these two monsters that did this horrible thing, and as my research progressed, I saw they were just kids like me, who were bullied and isolated to the brink, and they snapped." (Interviewee 14).

Many interviewees weaved their own experiences together with what they perceived to be the lives of school shooters. They made frequent comparisons between their own lives, feelings, and experiences and those of the shooters. In this way, they used the master narrative of bullied school shooters when constructing their own personal narratives. One interviewee described relating to one of the Columbine massacre shooters: "I can really relate to Dylan Klebold. Aside from the homicidal thoughts I have a lot of the same feelings that he wrote about having (depression, low self-esteem, wanting to find love, not feeling accepted, etc.)" (Interviewee 22). Speaking on behalf of a community of "columbiners," one interviewee tried to generalize:

most columbiners have one thing in common: we have felt like outsiders or victims at some point in our lives. we have felt like absolutely NObody could understand how alone we have felt, and that experience is exactly what Eric and Dylan lived. knowing that there were even just two boys out there who felt the same way as we feel now gives us comfort. (Interviewee 4).

Consistent with this theme, another pointed to the differences between those interested in school shootings and others:

I feel like if a person went through their lives being good-looking, popular with a decent home life and a happy disposition they wouldn't be interested in school shooters (...) I feel like people like me that went through some terrible stuff can relate to it because it's dark and unhappy but we can understand it (Interviewee 3)

Because of their experiences, many interviewees said they were able to relate or to identify with specific school shooters. Relation and identification with the shooters had a broad impact on some of the interviewees' lives. They described how specific shooters had made them feel less alone and helped them to cope with hardships. According to one interviewee, "I have had a very traumatic upbringing, and I guess they make me feel less alone" (Interviewee 4). Another wrote: "i wanted to get to know them. and it was the only thing i cared about, it became a part of my life. i could identify with it and keep a distance to the events at my school." (Interviewee 9). This identification with school shooters is similar to how people relate to other celebrities: They adopt their beliefs, values, attitudes and behavior, which are sometimes similar to their own, or which they are predisposed to endorse (Brown 2015:264). Such identification relies on narrative imagination, or the ability to understand someone else's hopes, desires and emotions (Nussbaum 2006:390).

Even though many were able to relate to or identify with the shooters, we found that most of the interviewees emphasized that they did not relate to the shooters' violent aspirations. As one explained:

I'm not a fan of murder and violence on that aspect. I grew up with violence and I despise it. When I think about the massacres, the blood, the dead bodies and pain they caused I feel ill. But the persons they have been before those massacres (At least when it Comes to Kip, Eric and Dylan) I do like because I can relate and see similarities between me and them (just as persons and not regarding the crimes). (Interviewee 5).

Most of our interviewees described their interests similarly. Wanting to commit a school shooting of their own or idolizing the violence of school shootings was not the reason they were interested in school shootings. Many explained that they liked school shooters because they perceived themselves as having had similar experiences, not because of the shooters' violent acts. Other reasons for interviewees' deep interest in school shootings also came up, such as romantic interest in school shooters. Still, a few described how they could also relate to the desire to commit a violent act. One wrote: "A lot of these people had tough times in their lives, at school, at home, mental health issues, I can relate to all those things. I know what it feels like to be angry and hurt enough to feel like suicide or homicide, or both, is the only way out." (Interviewee 15). In these narratives, social problems were again connected to school shootings.

Narratives that circulate socially offer us a model for making sense of ourselves and must be used as resources when composing life stories and personal narratives (Loseke 2007:673). As our data shows our interviewees reflected the master narrative of bullied school shooters in their personal narratives. They repeatedly brought up personal experiences that were similar to the perceived experiences of the shooters, and they made comparisons between their lives and the lives of school shooters.

Narratives are used to give meaning to one's life, and by telling stories, one becomes who one is (Andrews 2000:77). For many of our interviewees, the master narrative of bullied school shooters made their lives more meaningful: because of their perceived common experiences with school shooters, our interviewees felt they were not alone with their painful experiences. They saw their painful experiences reflected in the experiences of school shooters and thus constructed their identities by comparing their lives to those of the shooters and to those who had not suffered the way they and the shooters had. In these personal narratives, the lives and the stories of school shooters and people deeply interested in them were interwoven.

## **Discussion**

Our aim in this study was to examine the stories that 22 people deeply interested in school shootings told about bullying. Because our analysis was grounded in narrative criminology, we were interested in studying stories about school shootings and their potential consequences (see Presser 2012; Sandberg 2013). We were interested in how the stories told about school shooters are interconnected with the personal narratives of people deeply interested in school shootings and how these stories are connected to school shootings. Thus, we have sought to investigate the interaction between culture about crime and culture in crime (Katz 2016).

The master narrative of bullied school shooters makes a strong connection between bullying experiences and school shootings. This master narrative is common in the media (see Leary et al. 2003) and entertainment industry (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011) and, according to our data, it is also shared among people deeply interested in school shootings. Many of our interviewees composed their stories by using similar characters (school shooters as victims) and similar

plotlines (bullying linked to shootings). Our results about master narrative and its impacts are related to other studies that see master narratives as a common way to see and explain reality (see Loseke 2007; Thommesen 2010; Yo 2010; Snajdr 2013).

We have emphasized the intertwined relationship between the life stories of school shooters and the life stories of those who admire or sympathize with them. The personal narratives that our interviewees composed often described their own bullying experiences. Our interviewees used the master narrative of bullied school shooters in their personal narratives and thus in their identity construction. We found that interviewees often constructed their identities in opposition to those who had not suffered the way they had. They categorized themselves together with school shooters and, due to their perceived shared experiences, discussed themselves and the shooters as “us”. This type of division or “othering” can be used as part of identity construction (Rødner 2005; Kerley, Copes and Griffin 2015; Loseke 2007; Hammack 2008; Lavin 2017). As Rødner (2005:343) writes, “Indeed, the Other is a special kind of category as it allows a distinction between positive and negative identities.” It is not surprising that our interviewees categorized themselves the way they did in the narratives they composed, as the division between a moral “us” and a deviant “them” is grounded in storytelling itself. Telling stories is a powerful tool to communicate norms and values and to draw boundaries between “us” and “them” (Sandberg 2016:154). Our results support the research of Paton (2012), who has argued that for people who are marginalized or for those who are different and pushed aside, school shootings have become a message. For these people, participation in the subculture of school shootings is a way to rebel against “normality”.

As master narratives serve as models for all stories (Andrews 2004:1), we argue that bullying becomes an important factor in the shootings if it is constantly cited as such. People learn from stories, and they adapt their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors based on what they have heard or read (Hoeken, Kolthoff, and Sanders 2016:292). Offenders, for example, frequently imitate stories told about crimes; sometimes, committing a crime is seen as a way to have a life worthy of narrating (Sandberg 2016:157). At the same time, the master narrative our interviewees reproduced also reconstructs reality: bullying becomes an important factor if it is constantly cited as such. As Holstein and Miller (1990:105, italics in original) argue: “Describing someone as a victim is more than merely reporting *about* a feature of the social world; it *constitutes* that world.”

Because the master narrative of bullied school shooters is recreated and circulated online globally, its potential audience is enormous. Our results thus intersect with the ideas of Newman et al. (2004) about the cultural script of school shootings by showing that online communities also provide an example of how to solve problems by connecting shootings to bullying. In this context, it is not meaningful to discuss whether school shooters have been bullied or not, as is so often done in the discussion about school shootings (see, for example, Cullen 27.4.2012). Understanding these narratives and their implications for people’s behavior is more significant. As Hammack (2008:224) argues: “--- the relationship between a “master” narrative and a personal narrative of identity provides direct access to the process of social reproduction and change.” Although their responses might have been influenced by the interview guide and research context, most of our interviewees connected the master narrative of school shooters to their own experiences of social exclusion.

Our results suggest that also societies that are less organized and coherent share and participate in the reconstruction and circulation of master narratives. This is noteworthy, especially because our interviewees who came from different parts of the world composed such

distinctively uniform narratives. Based on our data, most people deeply interested in school shootings do not idolize the violence in school shootings or wish to commit a massacre by themselves. Yet, at the same time, the stories they tell can have an impact on school shootings. The results also shed light on the importance of online communities and the stories told by their members online. These results have practical implications. Online communities have become places where people are encouraged to use violence, for example in the name of different terrorist groups (Sandberg et al. 2014). Stories thus count, and especially stories told online because their audiences are worldwide and potentially number in the millions.

### *Conclusion*

Our data suggest that many people deeply interested in school shootings see school shooters as bullied and perceive shootings to have been caused by the bullying. Our interviewees thus reflected the master narrative – already familiar from the media and entertainment industry – of bullied school shooters. This master narrative was intertwined with interviewees’ personal narratives of bullying because many of them had suffered from bullying-related problems themselves. Based on the interviews, deep interest in school shootings does not mean that a person wishes to commit a massacre or that the person even idolizes violence. Yet, the online recreation and circulation of the master narrative of bullied school shooters may have an impact on school shootings because it can reinforce scripts that emphasize the relation between bullying and school shootings. This can further inspire a tendency to solve personal problems with mass violence.

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