

Narratives of Harm:

How Reports of Mass Shootings Privilege White Identities and Perpetuate Black Pathology

By

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For my family

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Introduction

In October 2019, Kyrzstof Marek, a 66 year old white male, opened fire in a Chicago condo. Marek intruded on family dinner with a .40 caliber handgun, opened fire and left 4 people dead before proceeding to walk upstairs to another condo to kill another person. Instead of expounding on the grotesque nature of this crime, *The Chicago Times* news article somehow managed to shift the narrative from vilification to one closer to vindication. The article of the Marek shooting included a picture of him, but the background of the photo looked nothing like the characteristics of a mugshot— it was a plain white wall. The picture of Marek that was included in the article had very few characteristics of a mugshot. It looked more like a driver's license picture than that of a violent criminal. In addition, the article also began to discuss his financial hardships and included various testimonials from neighbors speaking to his good character.

On September 2, 2019 Deeangelo Parnell, a 17 year old Black teen injured nine people when he opened fire at a high school football game in Mobile, Alabama. (Fox News, 2019) In the news article, Fox had no mention of a potential financial hardship, familial issues, or testament to Parnell's prior good character. Instead, the article only mentioned the price of his bond, the court's order for electric monitoring, and the need to tighten security measures at high school football games. In addition, the article also included a mugshot of Deeangelo. However, the mugshot that was included in this article appeared with grainy quality and a height chart in the background.

Both of these events fall under the category of mass shooting. However, in one scene the perpetrator is white and in the other there is a Black perpetrator. These types of narratives are all

too pervasive in the media. That is, having discrepancies in the ways in which mass shootings are interpreted based on race.

The scenarios previously mentioned, depict larger societal issues revolving around mass shootings, mental illness, and race. While neither of the articles explicitly mentioned mental illness, they still speak to differences in the way that Black violent acts are rendered in comparison to white violent acts. They allude to a pattern in which Black male shooters become pathologized and white male shooters, no matter how gruesome the act, still have the privilege to be seen as benevolent human beings. Moreover, these events also suggest that there are critiques to be made about whiteness, Americanness, and gun ownership.

Gun ownership is viewed through two different lenses in this country. For white people, white men in particular, a gun symbolizes freedom and self-defense; but for Black men, owning a gun often leads to criminalization. This thesis uses three key terms to unpack societal implications in mass shooting discourses. They include: mental illness, whiteness, and Black pathology. Each of these provide valuable contributions to better understand how the media utilizes racially-charged narratives to either harm or protect the subjects of the events that they are reporting.

Literature Review

Black Pathology

While not a popular term, Black pathology remains integral to understanding missing concepts in the conversation on gun violence and mass shootings. Black pathology, or the idea that something is inherently wrong with Black people is a component that I included in this literature review because the term helps to illustrate how blackness is constructed in opposition to whiteness. Specifically, the term helps underscore which individuals benefit from a more

benevolent treatment during reports of mass shootings and gun violence. The inclusion of Black pathology alongside whiteness and mental illness reframes Black gun violence as a societal issue and not just a Black issue. Moreover, the concept of Black pathology was also incorporated because concepts of Whiteness and mental illness could not be fully understood unless it was included.

Recent research has shown that the race of a shooter remains a vital contributing factor in what types of mass shootings a person commits and how that shooting is reported in a news journal. With the guideline for defining a mass shooting equating to four or more victims being shot, Adam Lankford (2016) suggests that there are clear differences in the types of mass murders that men commit based upon their race. Black and Latino men are more prone to mass shootings involving burglaries and robberies while white men commit public killings at higher rates. Lankford defined public killings as ones that occurred in public settings such as “‘rampage shootings,’ ‘active shootings,’ or ‘public mass shootings’” (Lankford, 2016, p. 476). His work highlights the findings of other researchers that show how structural social inequities, which are disproportionately experienced by some racial and ethnic groups, can lead to criminal activity (Khetni, 2013; Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007).

However, the findings of Lankford fail to discuss how white men are most likely to be presumed mentally ill, while research by Metzl & MacLeish (2015) and Duxbury (2018) show how white shooters often receive a more sympathetic treatment. The work of these scholars forces us to question whether the inability to exhibit sympathy for Black mass shootings can be attributed to the ways that the label of mental illness has been socially constructed, or if there are other societal forces at play. It is possible that racial distinctions in the public articulations of gun violence can be attributed, in part, to ways in which Black masculinity has been defined in an

American context. Misrepresentations of Black gun violence and mass shootings can largely be attributed to a shortage of studies that discuss the implications of mass shootings by a Black perpetrator (Lewis, 2008; Khenti, 2013). The lack of studies on Black shooters could be due to the already violent and thug-like constructions of Black masculinity. With so many pathological representations, it is possible that the label Black male mass shooter is the expected role and label for Black men that is often assumed by white Americans.

News reporting of mass shootings contribute to Black pathology through their inclusion of mugshots. In “How to humiliate and shame”, Paul Lashmar (2014) highlights the power that images have in shaping public perceptions. While news journal articles alone have enough influence to channel the general public’s reactions to news stories, Lashmar reveals that mugshots are employed to accomplish political and racial agendas. News reporting of mass shootings, like other crimes, use mugshots to illustrate the perpetrator. However, the use of mugshots serves different purposes other than strictly providing insight as to the identity of a suspect who committed a crime. Mugshots often are incorporated as a means of either alienating or empathizing (Lashmar, 2014). News journal articles have stakes in making subjective decisions on which perpetrators they want their audience to view as criminals and who they desire to sympathize.

Both mugshots and descriptive words have a lot in common within the context of news reports of mass shootings. As news reports employ mugshots as a way to invoke visceral responses of fear and hatred towards Black mass shooters, similar tactics are used through their choice of words in the article. Language in this way becomes a gateway to how Black mass shooters become perceived by the public. Through the word choice of news reports, Black crime is rarely talked about through a lens of sympathy understanding the larger societal obstacles

taking its toll on racial minorities. In Akwatu A. Khenti's "Homicide among young Black Men in Toronto", Khenti brings underdiscussed statistics into the gun violence conversation. There, Khenti examines Black violence and articulates it as a result of socio-economic factors rather than a condemnation of Black people as inherently bad people. The authors of this article use three key terms – homicide, race relations, and violence – to critique the reasons why Black men are committing violent crimes at such high rates. The mainstream argument implies that Black men are committing these crimes because something is wrong with them as human beings. However, this article reasons that inequality, poverty, poor quality of life, and mental health risks are all contributing factors to homicide rates. Mainstream arguments often overlook the impact that socioeconomic factors contribute to the well-being, or lack thereof, of Black people.

Social constructions of Black masculinity certainly contribute to the lack of coverage of dying Black men. In "Revisiting Masculinity: Shorthand for Marginalized Masculinities," Richard N. Pitt and George Sanders (2010) discuss the implications and connotations of certain words. In this article, Pitt and Sanders unpack the distinctions between hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity. Hegemonic masculinity deals with national and cultural performances of masculinity (typically that of white men) whereas hypermasculinity is often a label that is disproportionately ascribed to men from minority or marginalized communities as a way to describe their behaviors. In order to understand hypermasculinity, one must understand the various relationships that "hyper" is dependent upon (Pitts and George, 2010). For example, if "hyper" means greater than or beyond, then there are greater racial implications in considering that these terms are generally used to describe men of color. The term hypermasculinity assumes that there is a masculinity that is acceptable. And for men of color, hypermasculinity is another

way to separate them from the white men whose behaviors are socially acceptable forms of masculinity.

One way to understand black violence is to unpack the ways in which it has become normalized within certain communities. Specifically, in gang life there is a process of socialization that occurs over a time period for those seeking to become members (Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007). Studying the socialization of violent behavior is critical in order to understand the myth that black men are inherently violent and naturally more prone to be involved in illegal activities (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). One useful theory that Stretesky and Pogrebin mentioned is the social facilitation perspective. In this perspective, gang members are not viewed as inherently evil or violent persons, but instead, the cause of their violent behaviors is believed to derive from the norms associated with gang activity. Through this perspective, it is assumed that when men join a gang there is a level of social conditioning that occurs via feelings of inclusivity with other gang members. While violent behavior may seem detrimental to the outside, criminal behavior in their circles signify loyalty and belonging in ways that promote and foster self-esteem and identity. The intentions of this study are premised on similar ideas and concepts as that of Akwatu A. Khenti. However, while Khenti uses socioeconomic factors to disprove the myth of black pathology, Stretesky and Pogrebin use the concept of socialization to essentially do the same thing. Both studies suggest that there are larger social factors at play that determine Black health outcomes (mortality) and violent behaviors.

Whiteness

For some, diverging from that of which we assume to be the default, or the status quo can be a challenge. Often, it is the things that have become the default that we overlook or do not

speaking up against. In essence, we accept them and treat them as another quotidian component of life. Within the context of male gun violence and mass shootings, whiteness operates in this very way (McIntosh, 2016). For white people, in particularly white men, their whiteness aids them in gaining the benefit of doubt when trying to find a rationale or an explanation for toxic gun behavior. To clarify, I define whiteness more so as a concept rather than simply skin color. While the concept obviously does refer to white people, “Whiteness” as a concept is more about the sociological and psychological implications and privileges that being white in America provides (Baldwin, 1963; Ioanide, 2015; Wise, 2004).

For white people, living an entire lifetime without having to deal with racism and other challenges that minorities face often results in a different understanding of how race operates in various contexts. Whiteness is a large piece of the conversation on gun violence that is often not talked about. Whiteness as a concept directly impacts the ways in which white male gun owners are perceived in comparison to their black counterparts.

While there is a persistent stereotype that Black men are more accepting and tolerant of violence, some scholars suggest that it is white men who are the most ardent supporters of violence (Hayes & Lee, 2005). What they found was that even white men were more accepting of violent behavior even when the general public was not. The study blamed it on a culture of honor. Hayes and Lee’s article discuss one of the two contrasting schools of thought on honor and American identity. The tension of this article mainly stems from two contrasting schools of thought. The first mainstream school of thought comes from the American ideals and notions of what it means to be white in this country. The culture of honor is a badge that many white people (mostly men) have the privilege of wearing. The alternate viewpoint is seeing this culture of

honor as a problem and a societal issue. Although not a very popular viewpoint, the articles discuss a white culture of honor and in a way that's beneficial to unpacking gun violence.

The mainstream belief and justification for owning a gun among Americans stem from ideals regarding self-defense (Cao, 1997; Kautzer, 2015). However, these American ideal of self-defense also heavily coincide with societal constructions of race. This notion of self-defense has less to do with defending oneself from criminal activity than it does defending oneself from a racialized form of autonomy (Kautzer, 2015). These purported rational fears of many white Americans are often a response to the perceived failure of government to accurately maintain the boundaries between white and Black people (Kautzer, 2015; Tyson & Wilson, 1999).

In many ways, one major boundary separating Blackness from whiteness is freedom, something that American history has often proven to be synonymous with gun ownership. With so many gun laws in history created with the intent of placing restrictions on Black men owning guns, in many ways, firearms serve as one type of legislative barrier differentiating white men from Black men (Kautzer, 2015; Tyson & Wilson, 1999; Haley, 1992).

In "Good guys with Guns", Chad Kautzer analyzes gun culture in America from a unique perspective that is different from others in the existing body of literature. Kautzer's critique uniquely differs from that of a sociologist in that he uses abstract features of the world to explain race rather than relying on specifically the social lives of people. For example, throughout his article he discusses guns as a source of autonomy and metaphysical domination. By doing so, Kautzer is able to use the abstract as a model for real world scenarios. The author uses several keywords in this article that include: *Gun Culture*, *Self-Defense*, *Second Amendment*, *Social pathology*, *Whiteness*, and last but not least *Masculinity*.

The decision to include the *Second Amendment* as a key word in this article is undergirded by various assumptions. In an article about self-defense, using the second amendment as a critique of whiteness is a step in the right direction of adequately talking about race and guns. While the Second Amendment does grant the right to bear arms, what is forgotten is how often that amendment has protected white males but ceased to do the same for Black men (Kessler, 1983; Kautzer, 2015; Cao et al, 1997). The general assumption that readers can make of Kautzer and his work is that he is for change in regard to how Americans view gun ownership. With perceptions of gun ownership certainly having a racialized component, it is clear from the information in the article that Kautzer believes that this white self-defense complex is irrational.

The racialization of gun violence extends beyond Black and white person dichotomies. There are clear double standards that exist between white people and various non-Black minority communities such among Arabic Islamic populations. Khaled A. Beydoun, explains the impact that whiteness has on non-black minority communities in “Lone Wolf Terrorism: Types, Stripes and Double Standards.” There, Beydoun discusses the ways in which “Lone Wolf” or single person acts of mass violence of terrorism is undoubtedly racialized in America. Although Beydoun does not specifically look at mass violence with Black perpetrators he does highlight overall discrepancies in how white acts of violence are perceived differently than those committed by racial minorities. Beydoun discusses the terms “Homegrown” and “Lone” and their distinct connotations within the context of mass shootings. Homegrown is a term used to assess violent acts committed by racial minorities in ways that vilify their communities and cultures. However, “Lone” is used to suggest that white culprits of violence are insane (Beydoun, 2018). Beydoun focuses on the dichotomy between white mass shooters and other mass shooters who identify as Muslim. As many other scholars have alluded to, Beydoun found that white male

acts of violence are perceived to be only a reflection of the individual, while the actions of minorities reflect negative constructions of their entire race (Stroud, 2012; Kautzer, 2015; Dixon & Maddox, 2005). Beydoun posits that there are larger societal factors that contribute to this aforementioned phenomenon. The concept of whiteness as it relates to this article is explained in this passage: “Whatever the language used, it is clear that White identity is tied inextricably to non-White identity as its positive mirror, its superior opposite, 113 a binary that persists today” (Beydoun, 2018). Whiteness needs an antithesis to be capable of thriving in society; it needs a subordinate to use as a pedestal. (Bell, 1992; Anderson, 2016) In this context, the Lone Wolf Complex does just that. It essentially acts as a sociological marker to say that racial minorities are not deserving of being seen for their individual actions while white people are.

Mental Illness

Mental illness is the last subsection included in my literature review to highlight and allow other subsections—Black pathology and whiteness—to first show their importance within conversations on mass shootings. However, there is still much that can be discussed relating to mental illness and the ways in which its ties to whiteness and Black pathology maintain existing boundaries of privilege.

While mental illness has become an epidemic in America, the label of mental illness is much more complex than simply a psychiatric diagnostic. The label of mental illness has evolved to become undergirded by already existing sociological issues and tensions such as whiteness and Black pathology. What is important to note in this subsection is that some groups of people are privileged to be given the label of mental illness when other groups or racial minorities are not. More specifically, I am referring to the phenomenon of prematurely labeling or assuming

that mental illness is a sufficient explanation for a man's toxic behaviors based on the color of his skin. While the label of mental illness is on the rise for describing white male mass shooters in America, the same cannot be said for Black men who commit gun violence.

One key study on the topic of mental illness was written by Johnathan Metzler and Kenneth MacLeish (2015). In "Mental Illness, Mass Shootings and the Politics of Firearms," Metzler and MacLeish add new findings to the literature on mental health and gun violence. The principle question being asked was: does having a mental illness increase a person's chances of committing a violent gun crime? In this study, Metzler and MacLeish use various methods such as key literature in major fields, online comprehensive searches (i.e. Pubmed), and historical analysis of race, violence, and mental illness to investigate that question. They found that diagnoses of mental illness were not indicative of a person's likelihood of committing a violent crime. The findings of this study fail to provide an alternate viewpoint on the topic of mental health. The mainstream argument or perspective of this topic is that mental illness is a predictor of mass gun violence. In the early part of this article Metzler and MacLeish briefly mention the public perception that "Guns don't kill people—the mentally ill do." This article can be defined as an alternative viewpoint as its findings suggest that the logic of these public perceptions is flawed.

Metzler's and MacLeish's findings are paramount in discourses surrounding mental illness. Having statistical evidence to prove that the mentally ill population has not been responsible for crimes of mass shooting, suggests that there may be other factors at play as to why the label of mental illness is still given to white male mass shooters.

Emma McGinty, Daniel Webster, Marian Jarlenski, and Colleen L. Barry also address the issues surrounding mental illness labels and gun violence in their article titled, "News Media

Framing of Serious Mental Illness and Gun Violence in the United States 1997-2012.” In the study, McGinty et al use quantitative methods to investigate whether discourse following a mass shooting have been centered around the actions of the so called “mentally ill” or focusing more heavily on the dangerous weapons that were used. McGinty et al revealed that 70 percent of news articles attributing gun violence to mental illness involved shootings allegedly by persons who were thought to have a mental illness. This study accurately depicts how mental illness is assumed to be the culprit of gun violence. McGinty highlights the belief that people kill people, while guns alone do not. Or said differently, the idea that addressing gun policy issues is not the best option to stop gun violence (McGinty et al,2014; Metzl & MacLeish, 2015). Instead, the label of mental illness can continue to be used to describe mass shooters. The study mentions how of the news articles that suggest mental illness to be the cause of gun violence, only 16 percent of them mention the statistical evidence to suggest that most of the mentally ill population are law abiding citizens.

The findings of Emma et al and Metzl and MacLeish certainly remain in conversation with each other, but they leave many holes in the mental illness and gun violence literature that need to be filled. In this thesis, I seek to fill these holes by unpacking racialized practices employed by news journals through reporting of mass shootings. How many non-white mass shooters do news articles label mentally ill? What different types of narratives are used to describe the actions of white mass shooters from that of Black mass shooters?

Methods

For a long period of time it was assumed that mass shootings were a public health crisis mostly affecting white Americans. That assumption eventually became rebutted as researchers

began to account for the fact that a mass shooting is defined as 4 or more people being injured or killed in an event. With this guideline, people could no longer only look at mass shootings that included 20 or more victims, but instead had to think about the mass shootings that occur in low income areas. With a mass shooting equating to 4 or more injuries or deaths, mass shootings occurring in low income minority communities such as Chicago and L.A in L.A. can no longer be overlooked. Even with that being said, the media has not covered them in the same way. To be clear, my use of the phrase “the media” refers to news article journal reports of mass shootings at the local, national, or international level. There are clear racial implications embedded in the media outlets cover and describe mass shootings that are directly impacted by the race of the shooter. From the use of mental illness labels to focusing on gang violence, race plays a large role.

With such stark differences in the way that the media covers white mass shooters in comparison to their Black counterparts, I decided to use several measures to quantify these differences. To collect data, I first used the Gun Violence Archive to gain access to new journals and articles containing stories about mass shootings that have occurred in America. I assessed 5 mass shootings for every year dating from 2015-2019. I ended up with a random sample of 25 mass shootings over the course of a 5 year period. From there, I came up with a preliminary 4 point analysis.

4 point analysis:

1. Mental illness mention: Yes/No
2. Gang Related/Drive by/ Dispute: Yes/No
3. Number injured:
4. Deaths:

In addition to these four points of analysis, I used the articles to assess the race of the shooter. Either through the news articles inclusion of a mugshot or a quick search of the perpetrators name, I was able to accurately pin down the race of the shooter for 17 of the 25 shootings in my sample. There were eight articles in my total sample where the race of the shooter was not mentioned. While these four points of analysis provide some insight on the racial implications of news media reports, alone, they failed to provide any insight into the racial narratives that were used. To better serve this study, I decided to pair the quantitative methods of this study with a more in depth analysis of the specific types of words that each news article included in their coverage of white, Black, and unknown race mass shootings. To achieve this, I created text files of each news article and pasted them into “Voyant”, a web-based digital analysis tool that allowed me to determine word counts, word and phrase frequencies, and build word clouds. Through this approach, I was able to accurately access racially-coded language and whether or not there was a relationship between the race of a mass shooter and benevolent or pathological representations by the media.

News Media Examples

This section serves to highlight excerpts from various news articles that were used for this study. Each included example situates two mass shootings—white vs. Black perpetrator—to critique media reporting practices. In addition to the qualitative methods of this project, this section provides visibility to the various racial narratives circulating throughout the media. As this project seeks to illuminate the “narratives of harm” in the portrayal of mass shooters, specific attention must be given to language, words, and the power of picture choices.

Example 1: Marek vs Parnell



FIGURE 1. Photos included in news articles about Krzysztof Marek (left) and Deeangelo Parnell (Right) Sources: <https://chicago.suntimes.com/crime/2019/10/14/20913488/krysztof-marek-murder-charges-dunning-apartment-shooting>

Examining specific news articles are needed to contextualize the results from this study. In November 2019, a Chicago shooting by a white man named Krzysztof Marek resulted in 5 deaths. On that November night a family of four patiently awaiting its fifth guest were caught off guard by a neighbor who barged through their household opening fire with a .40 caliber gun. After Marek turned himself into police that night, police officers found a note that said: “No Mercy!!! Remember, whatever s--- they do to you, you control it yourself not them!! Enough!! They have to pay for it!!” (Chicago Sun Times, 2019). Even with the above quote stated, the article did not fail to mention Marek’s lack of criminal record, his financial hardships, the number of children and grandchildren that he has, and a testimonial of his good character. In this

scenario, Marek immensely benefitted from his whiteness and the subsequent privileges that followed.

If we take the details of the Marek shooting and compare it with other shootings where there was a Black perpetrator, it is easy to notice the stark differences in how the two shooters are described. On September 2, 2019 Deeangelo Parnell, a 17 year old Black teen opened fire at a high school football game in Mobile, Alabama. (Fox News, 2019) In the news article, Fox had no mention of a potential financial hardship, familial issues, or testament to Parnell's prior good character. Instead, the article only mentions the price of his bond, the court's order for electric monitoring, and the need to tighten security measures at high school football games. In addition, the article also included a mug shot of Deeangelo. The article of the Marek shooting included a picture of him, but the background of the photo looked nothing like the characteristics of a mugshot— It was a plain white wall. Deeangelo's mugshot appeared with grainy quality and a height chart in the background. Deeangelo's mugshot had a criminalizing effect, while Marek's portrayed his humanity. Marek's decision to not smile in his photo, still had no impact on his representation in the article. Even with not smiling, Marek still becomes situated as an older white man assumed to be confused or mentally unstable. The news report of the Marek shooting included no mention of the phrase mental illness, but somehow because of the way that the event has been framed in the news, Marek is characterized as a person with poor mental health.

Example 2: Long vs. Slade et al

On November 7th, 2018 a war veteran named Ian David Long opened fire at a bar and grill in Ventura County, California, killing 12 people and injuring 1. Due to the nature of this mass shooting, and the way that Long used smoke grenades to ambush police, the article heavily

focused on the well-being of the police officers who were shot by Long. A substantial portion of this article was dedicated to attempting to make sense of Long's actions. Mental illness was the first assumption made, but the article could not fully capitalize on mental illness due largely because of the negative results of a previous screening of Long's mental state. Although the label of mental illness could not be employed to humanize Long's actions, this article found other methods to attempt to do so. With a lack of evidence to support claims of Long's poor mental health, the article subsequently chose to include his mother's testimony of Long's history of financial crisis and disputes as a way to partially explain his actions.

On July 18th, 2017 Vandell Slade, James Echois, Micheal Sanon, Roshawn Bishop, all Black men, were involved in a shooting that left 8 people injured and one person dead. The article mentioned that authorities believed the shooting to be drug-related. However, Autumn Garnett, the 22 year old white woman who was killed that night was not involved in any drug-related activities. The article failed to mention any back story for any of the four Black men charged in this case. In addition, the photograph of Vandell Slade is placed near the photo of Autumn Garrett (see figure below). Here, we see the media's tactic of juxtaposing an image of a what is portrayed as "criminal" with what is portrayed as innocent through placing a Black man's photo in succession to a white woman. Through the juxtaposition of these two mass shootings (Long vs Slade et al), we are able to see clear racial differences in news portrayals of white and Black shooters.



FIGURE 2. The figure above are pictures of Autumn Garrett (left) and Vandell Slade (Right) Source: <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2019/08/14/fourth-man-indicted-colerain-fake-gender-reveal-shooting-killed-1/2010456001/>

Findings

Out of my random sample of 25 mass shootings over the last five years, I had a small sample of white mass shooters. Out of 25 mass shootings there were only five white perpetrators in comparison to 12 Black perpetrators. An additional 8 shooters did not have their race or ethnicity identified in the news article. My findings remain in conversation with the findings of Fridel (2017) that found that Black people commit felony mass murder at higher rates than white people. While those findings do not take into consideration the larger societal contributions to Black violence such as those found by Dixon and Maddox (2005) and Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007), they do validate the data from my sample. There were 8 news article reports of mass shootings that I analyzed where the race of the shooter was unknown. That is, articles that did not include a mugshot or have any explicit mentioning of race.

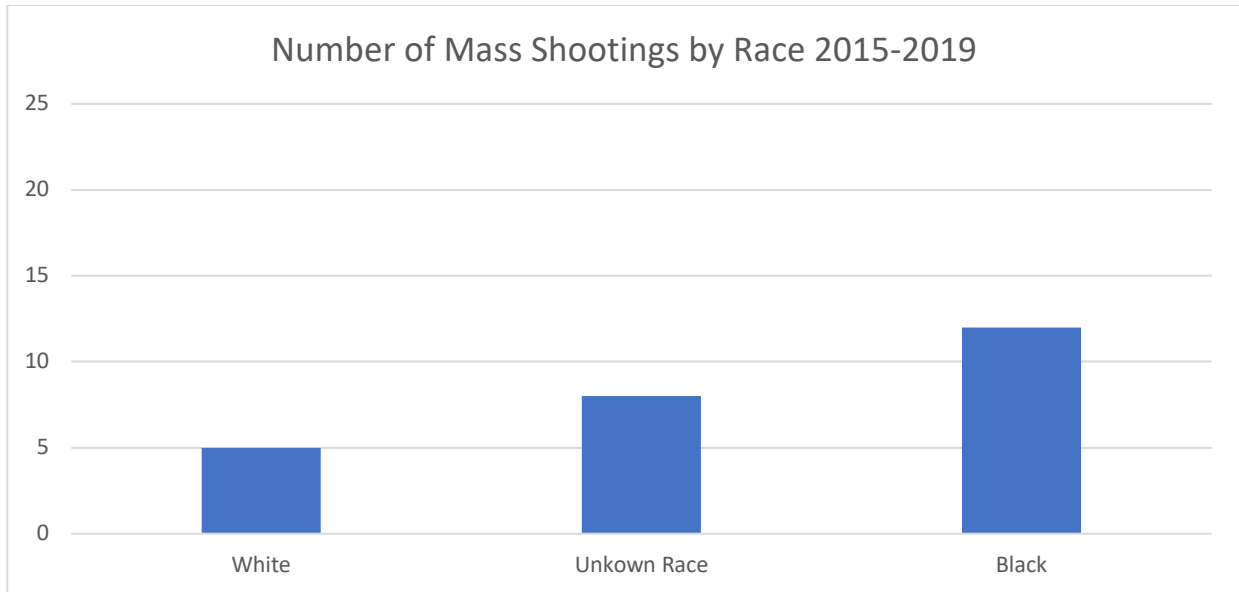


FIGURE 3. (Number of Mass Shooting by Race in Thesis Sample) Graph comparing the number of mass shootings committed by white, Black and unknown race shooters from 2015-2019. Of the 25 mass shootings in this period from my random sample, 12 were committed by Black perpetrators, eight shooters race was undisclosed, and five were white.

News media outlets have the power to frame events through their own lens and perspective. From the five white shootings that were included in this study, one shooting was attributed to mental illness and each of the other four were framed in ways that emphasized the humanity and benevolence of white shooters despite them having just committed a crime. The other two categories that are listed in the graphs below are “Pathologizing Narrative” and Objective/ Factual, none of which any white shootings fell into. The four news articles that emphasized the humanity and benevolence of the white shooters remain in conversation with the findings Beydoun (2018). Through Beydoun’s work in “Lone Wolf Terrorism”, he suggested that acts of violence committed by White men are more likely to be viewed as a reflection of

themselves than their entire race. The specific word choices that were included in these articles are further discussed in the word cloud section of this thesis.

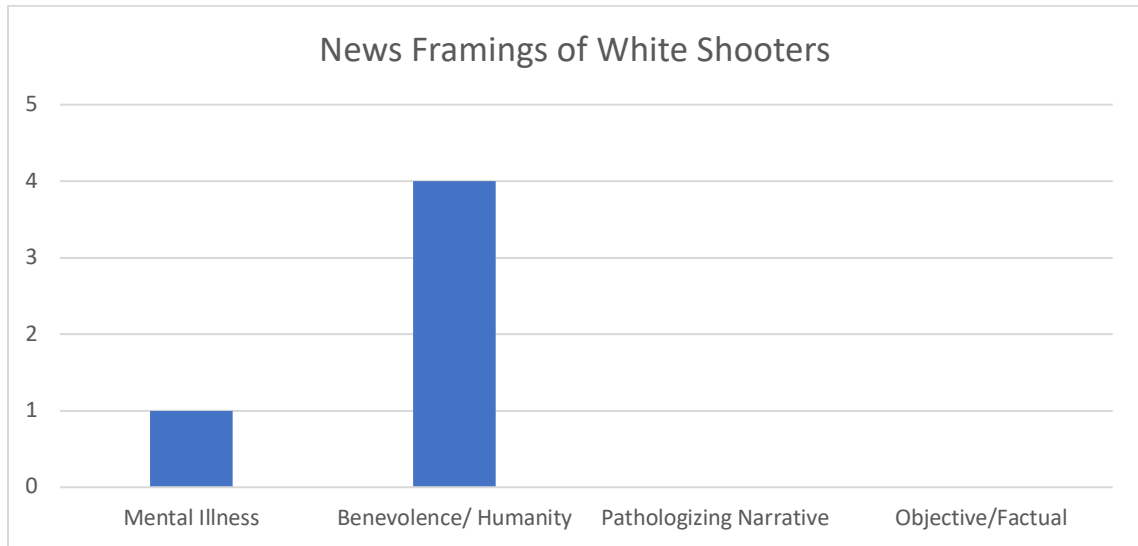


FIGURE 4. (News Framings of White Shooters) Graph highlighting the causes that white mass shootings were attributed to. The graph shows that there was only 1 article explicitly citing mental illness. The four shootings listed under the “Other” category represented news articles that portrayed white mass shooters through the use of benevolent language.

In the news reports of Black mass shootings that this study analyzed, 11 out of 12 of them fell into the category of “Pathologizing Narrative”. They were classified as such due to the way that they were framed in the reports of the shooting. Many articles attributed the mass shootings to gang violence without having the evidence to back that claim. Moreover, unlike many of the articles of white shooters, there was no mentioning of Black shooter’s family circumstances or financial hardships. Instead the topic of discussion in many of the Black mass shooting articles were the criminal background of the perpetrator. However, one news reporting of a Black mass

shooting was successfully able to refrain from using a pathologizing narrative to describe the details of the shooting. The article was found in the Black owned entertainment and news magazine, *Essence*. In the article the author made sure to recognize Moseley (the Black perpetrator) as a human first, and that although he had made a mistake, his mistake was a reflection of himself and not his entire race.

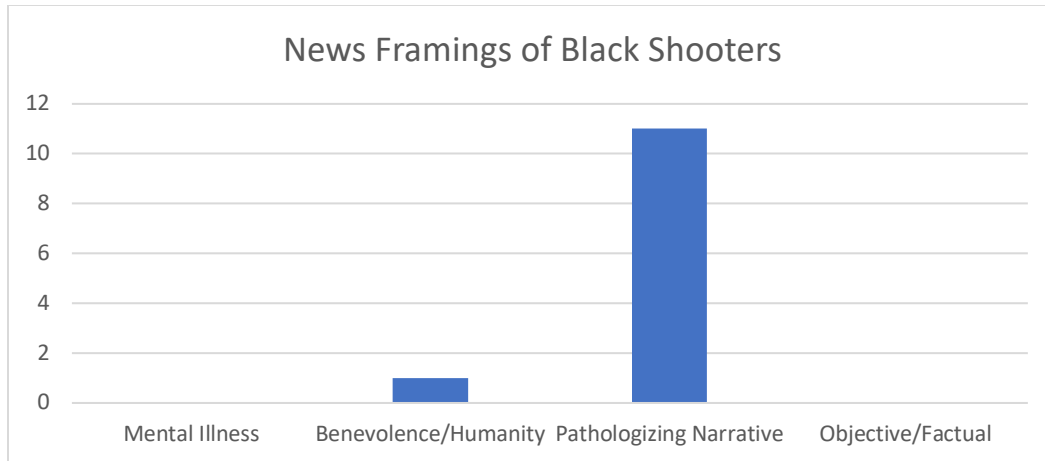


FIGURE 5. (News Framings of Black Shooters) Of the 12 Black shootings, 11 were framed through a pathologizing lens while one article recognized the humanity that still exists amongst Black shooters.

In eight of the shootings that I analyzed the race of the shooter was unknown. With no mugshots or explicit mentioning in the article it was seemingly impossible to determine race. However, as I will analyze in my “word cloud” section, these shootings listed in the Objective/Factual category were not as objective as they would like their audience to believe. Many of these articles were short in length but included words that were racially coded. For example, the use of club (i.e. gentleman’s club) as a description of the scene has a very different connotation than using the term bar.

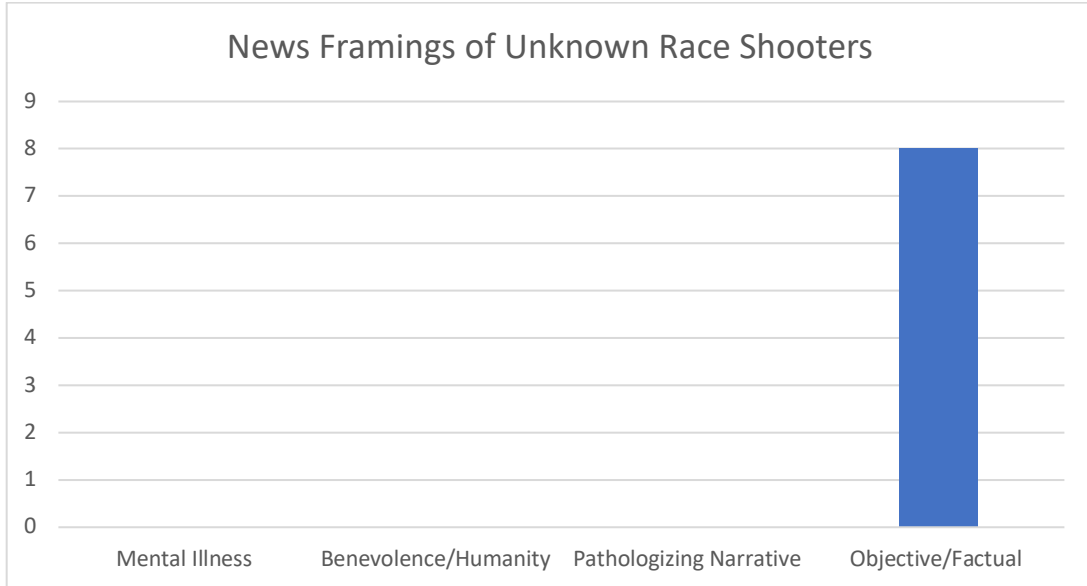


FIGURE 6. (News Framings of Unknown Race Shooters) A graph of the ways that shooters whose race are not explicitly defines are framed by news articles. The graph above shows how when the race of the shooter is not explicitly stated, articles tend to be brief and succinct.

did not show up in reports of white mass shootings or were cited in a different context, were terms such as: “murder”, “guilty”, “convicted”, “criminal” and “family”. Within the context of new articles, word choice heavily influences readers perceptions the information that is being reported. Just as Richard N. Pitt and George Sanders (2010) discussed the etymological and racialized implications of framing some behaviors as hypermasculine as opposed to framing them as hegemonic, most of the terms that I mention above have a similar effect on public perceptions of perpetrators. The term “murder” is mentioned 18 times in my sample of news reports on Black mass shootings compared to the four times that it is mentioned in news reports of white mass shootings. While a percentage of the news reports that do use the this term may be accurately describing the events that took place, the frequency at which it was used to describe Black perpetrators does remain consistent with the findings of Metzl & MacLeish (2015) and Duxbury (2018) that found that white shooters are more prone to be afforded more sympathy.

Terms such as “guilty”, “convicted”, and “criminal” all fall under the umbrella of pathologizing narratives employed by news articles of Black mass shooters. “Guilty” was found three times, “convicted” twice, and “criminal” was cited six times. While articles reporting on white shooters included zero citations of the terms “guilty” and “convicted” and only one inclusion of the word “criminal”.

Inclusions of the word “family” in news reports of Black mass shootings can be very misleading looking strictly at the frequency at which they are cited. For example, family is cited 10 times in reports of Black mass shootings; however, upon looking at the word use in its proper context, the use of this term is used differently for Black perpetrators than it is for white ones. One report of a Black shooting cited that that the perpetrator “opened fire on a block party filled with family members and children,” while another stated that the victim was celebrating her

“54th birthday with her family and was fatally shot along with her 17 month old grandson.” In many of the white shootings that I will analyze in my later section on white mass shooters, familial relations are included as a way to humanize white shooters through efforts of sanitizing them for readers. This approach to familial relations is not consistent in many of the Black shootings, as such terms are employed as a way to make the perpetrator appear more aggressive or the crime be interpreted as an immensely grotesque act.

These statistics are illuminating and reveal much about racialized news framing practices of mass shootings, but what implications do they have for larger conversations of race extending outside the framework of the topic of mass shootings? In Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander unpacks the racialized practices of American court and prison system that disproportionately traps Black men into a cycle of arrests and harsher sentencing. (Alexander, 2010) My statistical findings on the use of terms “criminal”, “guilty”, and “convicted” in news reports of Black mass shootings are heavily supported by Alexander’s work. These terms are included in many news reports as a way to explain the actions of Black mass shooters through the lens of viewing them as repeat offenders for crimes. As Alexander says, “This caste system extends far beyond prison walls and governs millions of people who are on probation and parole, primarily for nonviolent offenses.” (Alexander, 2010) Although many of the Black mass shooters considered to be repeat offenders, many of their past run ins with the law could have very well have been a nonviolent offense. Emphasizing criminal backgrounds and past convictions enables readers to divorce Black perpetrators from their humanity and plays into pathologizing narratives suggesting Black crime to be inherently imbued within black communities. Doing so also highlights the dire need for studies such as Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) and Khenti (2013)

news reports of white mass shooters, the frequent mentioning of white perpetrator names has layered meaning. For example, in articles taken within their proper context, name inclusions were largely associated with humanizing explanations of the mass shootings. Included are three quotes that from news reports of “Marek”, “Ritchie”, and “Long” shootings.

- 1.) *“Court records show that **Marek** was in **deep debt**, and that his finances had grown dire in recent years.”*
- 2.) *“The information that we’ve obtained in regards to **Ritchie** is that he was a **loner**. He didn’t have friends, employment was sparse he didn’t go anywhere.”*
- 3.) *...Sheriff’s deputies responded after neighbors called about a disturbance. They heard loud noises and believed **Long** suffered a **mental breakdown**. Deputies contacted Long, who said he was upset over a **financial dispute** with his **mother**. She confirmed the dispute was related to money.*

This association between news article name inclusions and logical explanations for white mass shooting, remain consistent with the findings of various scholars that have interrogated whiteness. Peggy McIntosh (1989) and Tim Wise (2004) each highlight the privileges and social currencies fostered by socializations processes embedded in being born White in America. White privilege has the ability to colonize all spaces especially in spaces where gun use is involved. As Hayes and Lee (2007) allude to in their work, there is a culture of honor that is intertwined with the concept of white male gun ownership and gun use. So much so that White American’s will go to great lengths to defend and justify white male gun owners even at the expense of their own lives (e.g. mass shootings as a public health crisis). Comparing word choices in news reports of white shooters with Black shooters, we see that there is a stark difference between using the words such as “shooting” or “shot” (white mass shooters) in comparison to “murder” (Black

mass shooters). “Shooting” and “shot” become more digestible words for white readers in comparison to use of the term “murder”. This phenomenon is very similar to that which Jonathan Metzl (2019) discusses in his book “Dying of Whiteness” except here we trade political parties for justifications and scapegoats of White mass shooters that are slowly killing White people without them even realizing.

Articles discussing the background information of White perpetrator’s through phrases such as “deep debt”, “he was a loner”, mental breakdown, and “financial dispute” highlight strategies that are used in an effort to individualize and separate White mass shooters from other White gun owners. White gun cultures of honor are largely linked to the ability for White people to prune out crazy, dangerous White gun owners. However, as Beydoun (2018) illuminates, the ability to maintain such an individualized meritorious evaluation of gun ownership is largely rooted in White privilege. Especially when coupled with the fact that the actions of a minority reflect that of their entire race. (Wise, 2004; Beydoun, 2018; Khenti, 2018) The ability to separate good White gun owners from bad White owners is a boundary that is a nonexistent option for many Black communities in America.

through the use of various words. That is, there are particular words and phrases that while not explicitly overt terms of racism, still imply race due to the racial ideologies that they hinge on. These dog whistle methods of talking about race show up in my data set through words such as “club” and “gang”. Generally, it is White people that attend bars, a more upscale and classy place of socialization, while many Black People or racial minorities are expected to attend a “club”. The attendants of each of those two places both seek a good time of fun and socialization, however, the latter of the two is often framed as a violence-ridden scene bolstering gangsterous behavior. A very similar phenomenon takes place through inclusions of the word gang in news reports where the race of the shooter is unknown. There is an etymological currency linking gangs to minority communities. To see the term “gang” in a news report signals to readers that there is a high unlikelihood that the perpetrator is White. Which is to say that there is a strong possibility that a large amount of the news stories on mass shootings who did not mention the race of the shooter could actually be written about Black shooters. The question then becomes, why are each of articles with unknown race shooters classified in the Objective/Factual category?

Word Counts

Despite using some racially coded language, an analysis of the word counts of each article provide insight as to why unknown race articles were considered to be Objective/Factual. Among the eight news articles that did not explicitly mention race, six articles had word counts around 300 words or less, three of which were about 200 words. These numbers have meaning when placed in consideration with the news reports on white shooters that included much longer word counts. Reports on white shootings mostly hovered around the range of 400-500 words.

The lowest in my sample of white shootings consisted of an article with 310 words compared to the lowest unknown race article having a word count of 152. A very similar pattern to that of unknown raced shooters was seen in the word counts of articles of Black shooters. With several Black shooter articles under the 300 word count, it is easy to begin to think that many of the articles of unknown race shooters may in fact be Black. One question that these numbers does make us ask is: what do these word count disparities mean within the context of racial narratives in news articles?

As my quantitative methods have shown White shooters to be portrayed through more humanistic and benevolent approaches, my analysis of word counts coincides with those findings. There are several potential explanations for this discrepancy one of which includes the relationship between Black pathology, dehumanization, and desensitization. There remains a dehumanizing and pathologizing effect when White Americans are overexposed to poor representations of Black people. So much so that Black crime and violence begins to become an expected quotidian occurrence to the point where people get desensitized to it. Desensitization coupled with ever-evolving societal constructions of Black masculinity can lead to lackadaisical attitudes towards Black people killing others (Lewis and Whiting, 2008). News articles are more prone to get straight to the point and maintain low word counts when there are few people in the American society actively seeking an explanation as to why a Black person killed someone. Or better yet, even care about the fact that race is not mentioned in certain news reporting. Whether a news article explicitly mentions race or uses racially coded words, there is no pressure to provide in depth analysis of the shooting such as that of White perpetrators who need to uphold a culture of honor.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to highlight racialized reporting practices in news reports of American mass shootings. This study offers an in depth analysis of the distinct labels and narratives that are employed to describe Black and White mass shooters through a combination of several methods. Quantitative methods were used to quantify and categorize the specific types of narratives used by news journals to describe Black and White shooters, while word clouds from a digital text analyzing tool were used to further unpack each of those categories. The findings of this study revealed that the act of presuming white shooters to be mentally ill is a phenomenon that, while a salient issue in mass shooting conversations, fails to accurately describe the full complex racialized practices by the news. That is, while the findings of Metzler and MacLeish (2015) and McGinty et al (2014) provide field breaking information regarding the dangers of presuming every White mass shooter to be mentally ill, my work extends to highlight how these narratives of harm extend beyond the scope mental illness. Specifically, my study reveals how narratives of harm in the media are not just whether or not a shooter is framed as a mentally ill schizophrenic or not, but rather are the underreported and undervalued mass shootings in minority communities talked about with the same verbiage and adjectives as reports of White mass shootings.

Due to the complex nature of this research, it was important to underscore the relationship between mental illness, whiteness, and Black pathology in order to highlight the need for a shift away from solely mental illness in gun violence conversations. As our society grapples with ways to acknowledge racism and strive for anti-racist actions, it is important to be aware of the ways that harmful stereotypes equating being Black with being criminal continue to persist. Any instance where this relationship between Black and criminal can be purported to be truth reinforces the notion that race is associated with violent behaviors.

This thesis contributes new knowledge to scholarly conversations regarding mass shootings and the use of mental illness. The inclusion of statistical data on mass shootings is most useful when understood within the context of a federal ban on gun violence research. (Metzl, 2019) The information that this research provides is valuable in the way that it allows readers to be exposed to how assumptions contribute to purported racial narratives by the media.

Future research on this topic of mass shootings could include analyzing the authors and writers of various new journal articles. Doing so may be useful in understanding the roots of the underlying racial motives within news frameworks. Were the writers white? Do they have a history of writing racially insensitive content? Where does the news station align politically? In an ideal world, readers of this thesis will become more aware of the racial implications in the reporting of a mass shooting. This utopian reader would think critically about questions of race—in particularly those about Blackness, Whiteness, and privilege. What does it mean for White readers to consume news content where there are clear racial disparities in the way that mass shooters are portrayed? Is there a point to which White readers can no longer be rely on their privilege as a pass to ever having to think about such difficult topics? In many ways a culturally and racially aware White person is a form of allyship, which could be seen as one step in the right direction of shifting away from current racialized tactics by the news.

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