

**The Anthropology of Violence...Lessons from Virginia Tech  
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Is it just pure rage, depression or detachment and isolation that drives someone to go on a rampage at a University that even as recently as September is in the news again, only this time it is about the promise that because of Virginia's mild climate, switchgrass might grow better there than in Iowa. Researchers across the country believe that switchgrass could help supplant corn as a source for the fast-growing ethanol industry so Virginia Tech professor John Fike is looking into switchgrass as a potential source for biofuels. This is the kind of story that we want to read but had it not been for the blood bath on Monday April 16, 2007, we might not have read any further about the work at a Virginia Tech agricultural research center. What will stay in our minds forever are the tragic deaths of college students and college professors at the hand of a gunman that provoked the proverbial "why" which was depicted in the myriad newspaper headlines in the first 30 days following this tragic event.

The purpose of this paper is to dare to ask "why" through lenses that our own children might best illuminate for us because our children, our grandchildren are likely to be or become entrenched in the tentacles of a mobile society. According to many news reports in the aftermath, violent attacks such as Virginia Tech are more prevalent in the United States, a nation of immigrants. This paper will explore briefly the cultural implications of what happened at Virginia Tech and challenge us not only to appreciate our immigrant

roots but also to understand the importance of cultural assimilation. It is also the purpose of this paper to touch on ways to lay down roots for our own children.

20-year-old sophomore biology major named Derek O'Dell thought Cho Seung-Hui was playing a joke until he opened fire. "I saw his eyes...there was nothing there, just emptiness almost. Like you look in people's eyes and you can see life, their stories. But his, just emptiness." said O'Dell to Newsweek Magazine in a special report in April 2007. Cho had a life but he didn't share it with anyone. He lived in what seemed to be a very bleak and depressed world at Virginia Tech and possibly lived in the same world at home before going away to college. He called himself "Question Mark", slept with the lights on, moaned in his sleep. On the walls of his dorm room were lyrics from a song called "Shine".

Give me a word

Give me a sign

Show me where to look

Tell me what will I find

Oh heaven, let your light shine down

Cho murdered two students a little after 7 a.m. and 30 more after 9:30 a.m. In between that time he went to the post office to mail a package to NBC News in New York City. The package arrived a day late because of the wrong zip code. Inside the package was a note in which Cho described himself as one who was against the "Christian Criminals"

who have raped, sodomized, humiliated and crucified him. He described others as the “Weak and Defenseless”. He appeared to blame the wealthy for all of his suffering. The wording was incoherent but the references to Mercedes, golden necklaces, trust funds, vodka and cognac suggested deep hatred for wealth. Cho referred to himself as an anti-terrorist. He referenced “Eric and Dylan” the video gaming teens who killed 13 students at Columbine High School in 1999. Until Cho at Virginia Tech, Charles Whitman who killed 16 people and wounded 31 others from the top of the University of Texas Tower in Austin topped the list of bloody rampages.

Cho was born in a small apartment in South Korea. In 1992 he and his older sister along with their parents immigrated to the United States to pursue the “American Dream”. They lived in a \$400,000 house in suburban Virginia. Cho was eight at the time. According to experts Korean immigrants place tremendous value on admission to elite colleges and universities. Ivy League is preferred and in fact local Korean television in the United States will even broadcast who got into where. Cho’s older sister went to Princeton and majored in Economics. Cho’s father was a dry cleaner presser working twelve hour days according to newspaper and magazine reports. There were also accounts that Cho was very quiet. He went to a primarily white high school, was thought of as aloof and very quiet. There were also numerous accounts that he had been bullied and made fun of by classmates. He indulged in drinking games at Frat parties, downing vodka and cool-aide. He was adept at playing beer-pong but didn’t seem to play in the spirit of having fun, but rather played almost like a robot, void of any emotion. His dorm room was just a cinder block, no photographs, no posters. He ate alone, road his bicycle

in circles in the parking lot. He frightened his English teachers with his writings about death. The Director of Virginia Tech's creative writing program Lucinda Roy was very concerned about Cho's behavior. She described him as obnoxious and withdrawn when she said, "it was like speaking to a hole". Alone, isolated, but Cho refused to go to counseling.

There are still mixed accounts of the role of the Virginia Tech beauracracy in channeling Cho into counseling services. On November 27, 2005, Cho was interviewed by police because he scared a female student by going to her dorm room. There he introduced himself as "Question Mark" and scared her to death. The matter was referred to the Office of Judicial Affairs, Virginia Tech's disciplinary system. Cho began bothering another female student, again no charges were filed. The incidents were deemed as minor and did not constitute stalking. Cho later threatened to commit suicide which immediately parlayed him into the community mental health system, cries for help, perhaps. He was confined to a behavioral health center based upon a judicial declaration "as an imminent danger to self or others as a result of mental illness", the boiler plate language used by a judge to order a temporary, involuntary commitment.

Sometime before the actual shooting Cho secured doors with chains that essentially blocked escape routes. It is unclear how long Cho was planning the attacks, but the earliest records indicate that one of the two handguns was purchased in February, just two months before the rampage. Nonetheless, a week following the shooting the police were still not able to link Cho to the victims including the first victim. This was based

upon an in-depth review of Cho's email/cell phone history. In addition, the contents in his computer did not provide any clues as to motive.

According to experts, a disturbed mind, social isolation and the "gun culture" that appears to prevail in the United States is not enough. Mass murderers have the individual will to pull the trigger. In most rampages, Virginia Tech included, the gunman takes his own life, so in Cho's case a neuroscientist did not have the opportunity to scan the cortex of Cho's brain for aberrant activity. A sociologist did not have the opportunity to study this young man to determine how the culture in American society might have shaped him into the young man he became during the fifteen years he was in the United States.

It is less complex to conclude that Cho was a crazy person, severely depressed, even pathologically disturbed but the unasked questions and maybe unanswerable questions might at least illuminate the complexity of violence and the evolving sophistication of the research into the etiology of violence. Is there something about the culture in the United States that may act as a trigger for violence?

Such horrific events as Whitman's rampage at the University of Texas's Austin clock tower in 1966; or George Hennard's 23 murder victims at a Killen, Texas diner in 1991; finally the Columbine High School shootings that sent school districts into a political and educational frenzy about keeping schools safe...all were explained by treating the perpetrator as a sociopath. Scientists who now study criminal violence and specifically,

violence that occurs outside the context of wars or civil unrest believe that its roots are planted in the following:

- the biology of an individual
- the psychology of the interaction between innate traits and experiences, and
- the larger culture as a whole

This means that the culture in the United States may indeed have an impact on the horrific events that occur all too often. The economic stresses, the division among classes of people often driven by educational levels and socioeconomic levels and the overall quality of life that appears to be getting further and further away from traditional family values, may in fact lead to a society prone to rage

According to psychologist James Garbarino from Loyola University in Chicago, who has studied school shooters: “It’s like a kid piling up a tower of blocks...eventually it falls over. You could point to the final block and say that one’s the cause, but it is an accumulation of risk factors.” Researchers now contend that if a clone of Cho grew up in Japan just the mere exposure to different experiences would have rendered a different outcome. Garbarino references a study done in 1993 which examined a family of sociopaths. Fourteen men in the family had committed very aggressive crimes. Scientists reported that each man had the identical form of a gene on the X chromosome. It was believed that the gene produced an enzyme called MAOA. When this enzyme was in short supply the brain was predisposed to neurochemicals that produced aggression. The

“violent gene” theory was later challenged by another group of scientists who tracked the behavior of 442 men from New Zealand since birth. What emerged in that study is the the role of MAOA was not so straightforward. In fact while it was determined that low levels of the enzyme put subjects more at risk for engaging in violent behavior as compared with subjects who had high activity of the gene, the contributing risk factor leading to violent behavior was grounded in whether or not the subjects had been neglected or abused as children.

Another theory holds that mass murderers may be trying to exercise control over a world that has them feeling powerless and helpless. According to sociologist Jack Levine from Northeastern, mass murderers reach a state of feeling so estranged from society that they are driven to destructive acts of violence. Research suggests that there is generally a significant history of hardships, bullying or perceived insults and failed relationships.

The culture in the United States is very unique and perhaps one of the elements that most distinguishes it from other cultures is the mobility factor. The United States is a nation of immigrants. Its history is entrenched in this fact and certainly those who choose to come to the United States are often in search of the American Dream or at the very least curious about its existence. According to psychologist John Gardner of Johns Hopkins University a characteristic of people who by choice pull up stakes and come here “have energy and are willing to take risks.” For those immigrants who are successful, it is generally their drive that leads to success. According to Gardner, for a few, the mix of risk-taking coupled with impulsivity, could set the stage for violence. He further noted

that violence permeates immigrant nations on a larger scale. Therefore, anthropologists and sociologists are no longer as surprised with the increase in violence in such nations as Australia and America, both characterized as immigrant nations.

There is a huge lesson for schools who educate large populations of immigrant children because indeed if language and culture prevent an immigrant child from fitting in, it can create the risk that a child will become alienated and given enough factors associated with alienation, resort to violence. An individual such as Cho might not have been able to successfully navigate through the competitive nature of American life. In this country we certainly admire winners and we tend to blame people for their own inadequacies.

Recently at the Tower Theater, “Killer of Sheep”, the work of filmmaker Charles Burnett challenged a local audience to think more deeply about the impact morality and cultural roots have upon our individual actions. The Library of Congress declared the film as a national treasure. The National Society of Film Critics selected the film as one of the “100 essential films of all times.” Nearly 30 years after its creation, UCLA has restored “Killer of Sheep” which was Burnett’s thesis project while at UCLA. Burnett acknowledges that his work was greatly influenced by the Italian neorealist movement and the British Documentary school of thought of the 1930’s. The film was shot on location with hand-held cameras and inexperienced actors. “Killer of Sheep” examines the LA ghetto of Watts in the 1970’s through the eyes of a man named Stan. Stan is depicted as a dreamer of sorts but he works in a slaughter house and over time due to the toll such work has on his psyche, he becomes more and more detached. Although Stan is

frustrated by the many problems he confronts he is still able to find happiness and a sense of relief in the simple things, from the warmth of a cup of tea to his cheek to the feel of his daughter in his arms to a slow dance with his wife in their tiny living room.

“Killer of Sheep” also depicted the cruel reality of how children really fight, play and cry and how sometimes they can be extremely cruel. The film was not intended to offer solutions for the plight of the human condition but the film did indeed suggest one’s plight is best put into perspective by understanding the impact individual assimilation has on accepting and enduring the stresses of American life. Burnett’s thesis was predicated on the fact that Stan survived on the basis of his moral strength. He had a moral compass that gave him the fortitude to understand right from wrong and to behave within those parameters.

Cho and others like him may lack such fortitude and as a result of an inability or lack of opportunity to assimilate in a healthy way to American life, be prone to act inhumanely, without regard for human life, including self.

As “Killer of Sheep” so eloquently suggests, we do indeed tend to blame people for their own inadequacies. Cho blamed “rich kids” for his plight. He went to great lengths to access the media, to put his acts in front of the American public. At Columbine, the shooters defined success in terms of the body count, was it movie worthy. America is a culture that is completely immersed in the media culture. According to a special report in Newsweek magazine following the Virginia Tech tragedy, “In this media-soaked culture,

for Hollywood or even the most demeaning reality show, to care about your story is the ultimate validation”.

Experts contend that rates of criminal violence are higher in mobile and heterogeneous societies. Anthropologists contend that in these kinds of societies it is more difficult to put down roots and according to a special report in Time Magazine on the killings at Virginia Tech, in such societies establishing the “social glue that binds people into a community” is difficult. Perhaps even Fresno is a microcosm of this phenomenon. The United States is highly mobile and has become a “nation of strangers” according to Time Magazine. Murder rates are much higher in countries with the largest inequities in terms of income. In American culture, we must also consider the impact violent video games have on the rage so often expressed in America, even in the streets of neighborhoods. Scientists have studied the effect of videogames and have found that gamers become more aggressive after earning game points for a graphic disembowelment and those video games have a numbing effect. Harvard University psychologist William Pollack states that, “When people stop feeling it’s terrible that someone is getting hurt, that’s dangerous.”

Since the purpose of this paper is to explore the anthropology of violence, I found it particularly insightful to examine Margaret Mead’s work. She reflected on her works as an anthropologist by saying once upon a time, “I have spent most of my life studying the lives of other peoples, faraway peoples, so that Americans might better understand themselves.” Mead appeared to many observers as marked for achievement. There was

no question that she had a privileged childhood, as compared to many, this she shared with the victims Cho eliminated; both parents were well educated successful social scientists. She was an only child and therefore treated as an adult and expected by her parents to accomplish something extraordinary in her life. One of the few times she felt like a “misfit” was as a freshman at De Pauw University in Indiana. Margaret Mead was precocious and an intellectual by nature so she felt totally out of place in the party/sorority like atmosphere and was just not able to cope. But she took a very different pathway than Cho, she transferred to Barnard College in New York and gravitated immediately to a group of like-minded women who shared her spirited and intellectual lease on life...they became known as the “Ash Can Cats”.

Mead traveled all over the world but she always returned to New York City where she felt connected to the artistic and intellectual life realized in Morningside Heights. Mead however, greatly benefited from the experience of feeling so out of place because indeed her life’s work would be that of studying the impact of culture and aspects of American culture that may give way to understanding the maladies that today have given rise to such things as the rampage at Virginia Tech.

In her first book, “Coming of Age in Samoa” she concluded that childhood and adolescence in Pacific Samoa was entirely different. Samoan children don’t grow up in a nuclear family but rather may be brought up by an extended family of as many as fifteen to twenty adults. Relations between children and adults were informal, multiple and diffused rather than focused on one or two nuclear bonds i.e. .”mom and/or dad”. Mead

further observed that Samoans' relations were free of the guilt that often plagues Westerners... (our own kids now refer to it as "drama"). Of special interest to Mead was the data that filled her notebooks as she observed the teenage years in Samoa. She concluded that those years emerged as much more relaxed, playful and there was a noticeable absence of lasting traumas or perplexing issues to resolve.

Mead's work rejected the idea originally put forth by a renowned American psychologist G. Stanley Hall that "adolescence was a biologically programmed period of life with "storm and stress" inherent to puberty". Indeed, Mead did discover that the rebelliousness and romanticism so often observed in Western adolescents was absent from some primitive cultures. Her anthropologic approach to studying the Samoan culture put forth the thesis that adolescence did not have to be a turbulent period because of some biological predisposition. She characterized the Samoan experience as "freer and easier and less complicated." One of the most quoted statements of Mead serves as the basis for attempting to make sense of what happened at Virginia Tech, "We are forced to conclude that human nature is almost unbelievably malleable...Cultures are manmade, they are built of human materials."

Is it conceivable then that the biology that we carry from birth, the brain circuits that are ignited by life experiences and the messages we soak up from the world around us do indeed shape our outlook on life. Cho's outlook somehow forced his hand to pull the trigger.

In a recent editorial, Thomas Friedman, author of “The Flat Earth”, put forth an interesting commentary about American Life. Friedman noted that in China there is almost no mention of Iraq. He also noted that China has spent the last six years training for the Olympics, whereas in America we’ve spent ourselves into debt on iPods. Friedman suggests that it is time for Americans to really begin focusing on “insulating ourselves from the instability of the world by having a real energy policy...protecting our security interests in more sustainable ways and getting back to developing our own house.” It is interesting to note that Dalian University of Technology in China has 100 doctoral students who are focusing their dissertations on different energy issues and furthermore the University is opening a center here in the United States. In the United States we are absorbed in the politics of the war in Iraq. Maybe our compulsion with the violence is contributing to the instability in our nation. In a nation so sought after by immigrants wouldn’t it make more sense to engage its people in the business of keeping America on the cutting edge of technology to support a better quality of life. Friedman believes “we’re wasting our brains...we’re wasting our people...we’re wasting our future...China is not.”

In the closing pages of Mead’s work, “Coming of Age in Samoa” she compares Samoan life to that in twentieth century America. She by no means advocated for a Samoan way of life because she knew it wasn’t exactly practical. But perhaps there are lessons for us as to different ways in which we might rear our children and perhaps even lead our own lives. Mead contended even in the twentieth century that Americans pay a high price for a heterogeneous life that was choice-filled and rapidly changing. She further concluded

that a high price in terms of crime, delinquency among youth, interpersonal conflicts and neuroses may lead to the collapse of coherent traditions that nurture artistic expression. In Samoa there was no hurrying, little evidence of psychological maladjustment, life was informal and “the greatest cause for tears, short of death itself, is a journey of a relative to another island.”

In “Killer of Sheep”, as Stan dances cheek-to-cheek with his wife in the living room, he listens to the lyrics of singer Dinah Washington echo his frustration...

This bitter earth  
Well, what fruit it bears  
What good is love  
That no one shares

Perhaps these lyrics might help to explain the culture of violence and perhaps there is a need to expose a mobile society to a genre that explores the condition of American life and culture. Perhaps the belief that if “Killer of Sheep” were an Italian film from 1953 we would have memorized every word, speaks to the need of creating genres that shed light on the flaws in our culture. If the impact of “Killer of Sheep” was the powerful way in which it caught the lives of children with a true fidelity as to how kids really do fight, play and cry and how they can be really cruel but only because they are really scared...then as parents we need to protect our children from being really scared!

And perhaps one way to do that is to focus on the doing the work in America.

Perhaps examining the use of switchgrass is doing this work.