Title of Thesis: Attributing Blame: A Content Analysis of the Media's Portrayal of School Shootings

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Attributing Blame: A Content Analysis of the Media's Portrayal of School Shootings

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Abstract: The current research employs a content analysis of newspaper media coverage of eight school shooting incidents from 2008 to 2011 in the United States. Media frames are analyzed utilizing attribution theory to examine what attributions are given to school shooting incidents. Specifically, the ultimate attribution error is applied which finds that external attributions (e.g., parental neglect, bullying, or mental illness), are given to white shooters and internal attributions (e.g., personal flaws/issues) are assigned to nonwhite shooters particularly in mainstream media.
Introduction

School shootings have garnered increased attention as these incidents continue to shock the public and leave policy leaders in search of resolutions. Media coverage of school shootings is of interest across disciplines as the content of news stories vary from citing causes of the violence to the need for policy reform. The FBI's report, "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective," (n.d.) explains that information spread through the media is typically done quickly without true knowledge of the circumstance, which can lead to misinformation. Some of the details in media coverage include details on the shooter's history and why the shooting may have occurred, as was seen in the Columbine shooting with references to Goth culture's influence on the shooters via music and the "Trench Coat Mafia." Prior research has acknowledged the fact that these blame assignments for shootings occur but little to no research has examined how the media creates these attributions of blame and what impact they have. This study focuses on how the media utilizes media frames that draw salience on characteristics of the shooters. Media frames are then analyzed via attribution theory which states that social perceivers assign internal or external attributions to behavior. Internal attributions refer to flaws in personhood whereas external attributions include societal causes, such as Goth culture in media coverage of the Columbine shooting. Attribution patterns are analyzed with specific consideration of the race of the shooter and the implications of race-patterned attributions are discussed in light of policy implications and future research recommendations.
Literature Review

Prior Research

Content analyses of media coverage of school shootings are popular within school shooting literature. For example, Leary et al. (2003) employed a content analysis of fifteen school shootings and found social rejection mentioned in all but two of the news articles studied. These findings indicate a trend toward blame assignment of others (external attributions), specifically bullying, as a motive of the shooting. In a similar content analysis, Menifield et al. (2001) sought to examine differences in coverage of urban versus rural school shootings. They found that urban shootings were less likely to be covered and hypothesized that rural shootings break stereotypical ideals and thus make for more interesting news coverage. The researchers were surprised to find that the news media attempted to offer insights as to why the shootings occurred, citing reasons such as psychological problems, abuse, parental neglect or bullying. Furthermore, these insights were most commonly offered for white shooters. Menifield et al. (2001: 460) state, "they [the media] did attempt to explain and, in some cases, justify why White teens committed violent acts in rural schools." The researchers found that this racial divide in media coverage followed a pattern wherein societal causes were most often stated for white shooters in the sample. However, the authors were not able to fully investigate this surprise racially patterned finding in news coverage. Therefore, the current study focuses on race as assessed through skin color of the shooter (see methods section for a discussion of the limitations of this approach) and situates this topic in a specific theoretical framework, outlined below.
Media Frames

Media framing has become a widely studied component of school shooting literature as well as crime in general (Coleman and Thorson 2002; Howells 2012; McManus and Dorfman 2002; Muschert and Sumiala 2012; Muschert and Carr 2006). Media frames are the central stories and the way in which the media highlights aspects of the story to maintain salience (Howells 2012; Muschert and Carr 2006; McManus and Dorfman 2002). In this manner, the media can highlight what they believe the audience should be paying attention to (Howells 2012) and help the public to make sense of a given situation (Coleman and Thorson 2002). Applied to school shooting literature, Muschert and Carr (2006) examined media salience and frame changing across news coverage of nine school shootings. Their research focused on the manner in which different types of media frames have changed over the years of school shooting coverage. Further research on media frames and school shootings has found that newspaper media utilize media frame techniques to focus on the unique characteristics of each school shooting (Howells 2012).

Media framing is a complex construction, as it encompasses not only what the media chooses to highlight but also details that are obscured or left out contribute to the media frame (Coleman and Thorson 2002; McManus and Dorfman 2002). On a study of violence in the media, Coleman and Thorson (2002) found that inserting phrases that implicate environmental causes of crime into news stories led to a change in readers attributions of crime. Instead of focusing on internal attributions (the individual's role in the crime), readers were more likely to cite societal causes. Including and excluding information or quotes can lead to different assignments of blame (attributions). In this manner, the media exerts a great amount of power.
The Media

The media is a known agent of socialization that critically shapes an individual's perceptions and beliefs (Barber 2013; Moschis and Churchill 1978; Uznienie 2012). Socialization agents; such as the family, peers, school and media- assist in assigning social norms of behavior, transmitting attitudes and behaviors to individuals via modeling, reinforcement and social interaction (Moschis and Churchill 1978).

In this study, “the media” refers to the primary means of mass communication in a given society. Specifically, this analysis focuses on newspaper communications. Therefore, “the media” does not refer to one mass conglomerate, but rather the persons who are integral to placing the news stories into society such as journalists and editors. However, it should be noted that while the media should not be thought of as one overarching idea or thing through reification, the media monopoly is a reality with fifty corporations owning the majority of daily newspapers (Bagdikian 2000). Therefore, the media is increasingly becoming a widespread, pervasive influence in society and media framing both reflects and impacts societal perceptions.

The increasing influence of the media is demonstrated in media frames, which create public perceptions that influence ideas of social change (Coleman and Thorson 2002; Lickel et al. 2003). However, the media's power and authority is also problematic due to the fact that the news media reflects the values and judgments of editors who are typically white males (Newkirk 2000). According to the 2013 American Society of News Editor Census, only 12.37% of minorities hold any position in the newsroom (ASNE 2013). Due to the lack of representation of minorities in deciding what information becomes news and how to frame news stories, mass media often reflects the ideas and judgments of the majority--white America. As the Kerner Report states, "The white press repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the biases, the paternalism,
the indifference of white America" (as cited in Newkirk 2000: 17). This inequality in the newsroom becomes reflected in news coverage choices and priorities. For example, Newkirk (2000) argues that the media is highly concerned with white suffering and that whites are afforded more sympathetic coverage.

Despite the Kerner Report being released decades ago, racial patterns in media framing still exist. Hurricane Katrina coverage, for example, followed a clear pattern of racialized media coverage (Ben-Portah and Shaker 2010; Voorhees, Vick and Perkins 2007). An example of the Katrina coverage patterns is portrayed in media clips of looting which showed almost exclusively African Americans (Voorhees et al. 2007). Although Katrina represents an event that affected a large number of individuals, racialized media patterns may also exist in national disasters with smaller numbers of people affected, such as school shootings.

The Kerner Report and Katrina coverage, as well as potentially school shootings, fit with the "man-bites-dog" analysis of crime coverage (Lawrence and Mueller 2003; Newkirk 2000). The man-bites-dog criterion of crime coverage states that the story of dog-bites-man will receive no coverage, as it is a typical scenario in that we expect dogs to bite. However, if a man is to bite a dog there is a story because it is so unusual. The concept is explained in context of the Central Park jogger rape in 1989 (Newkirk 2000). A white, female jogger was raped in Central Park and received a plethora of news coverage, arguably due to her status. Critics at the time began speaking out against the uneven news coverage. For example, there were seven murders and eight shootings in the same city on the same night, yet these cases did not make coverage, potentially due to the sociodemographic status of the victims. In addition, a black woman was brutally raped the same week in New York and the instance was covered in only one tabloid, underscoring racial patterning in news coverage and the tolerance/acceptance of violence against
minorities. Stories that are covered as man-bites-dog, such as the Central Park jogger, are more likely to be depicted as the result of external attributions, such as flaws in society, and are coupled with calls to policy makers in correcting these ‘injustices.’ A dog-bites-man story, on the other hand, are considered more common behavior and may be more likely to receive a media frame of internal attribution, such as a flaw unique to the individual. The "man-bites-dog" criterion of newsworthiness and its resulting racial pattern may also be applicable to school shootings. For example, a black student would be expected to shoot up a school (dog-bites-man) whereas a white student (despite a harsh trending normalcy) would exhibit man-bites-dog coverage.

School shooter attribution patterns may be further complicated by the fact that school shooters are often thought of as white males. Although the Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education analyzed past incidences of school shootings and concluded there to be no “accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence” (United States Secret Service 2002:28), 100% of their sample was male and 75% white. Considering the overwhelming involvement of white males in school shootings combined with the attribution pattern of treating white crime as shocking and atypical, school shootings create a unique circumstance of media framing that deserves further attention. Additional reasons for studying school shooting and the specific connection of attribution theory to school shooting are discussed below.

Youth in Media

The phenomenon of school shootings offers a unique opportunity for the study of media and crime due to the ages of the criminals. School shooters are often juveniles and thus their role
is controversial to the norm. Typically, children are cast as the victims of crime, but in school shootings they become the perpetrators of violence (Spencer 2005). The new role of youth as victimizers requires a new construction of youth by the media. Generally, the media has a negative perception on youth with a heavy emphasis on crime (Frameworks Institute 2005; Wayne et al. 2008; Wyn 2005). The Framework Institute (2005) found that 46% of youth television news stories focus on crime. Among those stories focusing on crime, the majority of cases involved nonwhite youth. In a similar study, Wayne et al. (2008) found 47% of television news stories to focus on youth crime and again nonwhite, specifically black youth, were overrepresented in the sample.

Moving beyond general perceptions, youths who are perpetrators of crime face a multifaceted media frame. In one aspect, they are violent youth and labeled with the stigma and associations that are assigned to adult criminals. However, the youth are framed in a way that adults are not—with the label of victim. In this sense, violent youth are both the victims and victimizer (Spencer 2005). As Spencer states, "the news stories suggests that social problems—child abuse, drugs, and family breakdown—robbed the violent youth of their innocence and turned them into killers." The assignment of violent youth as victims of societal causes can be understood through attribution theory.

**Attribution Theory**

Attribution theory is a concept in social psychology that deals with how social perceivers attempt to explain behavior. According to theory, once a behavior is observed it is then assigned to internal or external attributions. Internal attributions refer to dispositional factors within an individual, such as personality traits, and external attributions refer to situational factors outside
of an individual, such as environmental factors (Taylor, Peplau and Sears 2005). Attribution theory is not concerned with the reasons behind the behavior but rather the causes (Weiner 2006). An example, given by Weiner (2006), is that of being blind. One does not look for the reason someone is blind but rather the causes of blindness be them intentional such as due to drug taking behavior or unintentional such as a birth defect.

In relation to school shootings and media framing, attributions are vitally important due to the fact that media frames can impact how responsibility is attributed and where blame is placed (Coleman and Thorson 2002). External attributions frequently cited in school shooting media frames include bullying, parental neglect/abuse or mental illness. Mental illness could be argued to be either an internal or external attribution. Since previous studies have not applied attribution theory to school shooting research, there is little background on mental illness as an attribution. The current research argues for the consideration of mental illness as an external attribution due to the fact that children, and persons in general, do not willingly take on the status of mentally ill. Internal attributions such as character flaws are a direct reflection of chosen behaviors whereas mental illness is argued to be uncontrollable attributes. The premise that mental illness negates responsibility in a court of law due to the fact that the person cannot distinguish right from wrong (Weiner 2006) is more in accordance with external than internal attributions. Strauss (2007:815) refers to mental illness as an "individualistic but not voluntarist explanation" for school shootings stating that it is a characteristic of the individual but not voluntary in the same way a physical disease would be involuntary. The idea that an act is involuntary tends to negate blame.

Assigning external attributions for school shootings is in conflict to U.S. society where according to such cultural ideas as identified by Williams (1970) include individualism which
emphasizes personal rights and responsibilities. Part of Williams work, however, shows how U.S. values often contradict one another and school shootings are yet another example. In blame research for the Columbine school shooting, Strauss (2007: 812) highlights an article titled, "Blame society first: Individual responsibility is the truly unthinkable." This story headline offers a summary of the application of attribution theory as it intersects with school shootings. As Strauss (2007) found, much of the media coverage of school shooting incidents have offered explanations of external attributions including blaming guns, popular culture, the moral climate and school social structures. Other studies of school shootings have found responsibility to be attributed to parents (Lickel et al. 2003; Strauss 2007) including parental neglect or abuse (Muschert 2007; Newman et al. 2004), access to guns (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Newman et al. 2004; Midlarsky and Klain 2005; Väliverronen et al. 2012), peer groups and bullying (Leary et al 2003; Newman et al. 2004; Strauss 2007), masculinity (Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Kellner 2012; Newman et al. 2004; Schildkraut 2012), and a culture of violence (Leary et al 2003; Midlarsky and Klain 2005; Strauss 2007).

The Ultimate Attribution Error

Why are attributions mentioned for some but not all incidences of school shootings? The difference may be explained by the ultimate attribution error. Complementary to the man-bites-dog and dog-bites-man analogy of media coverage, the concept of the ultimate attribution error suggests that there is a tendency to assign internal attributions to problematic out-group members (such as minorities) but external attributions for the problematic behavior of in-group members (Coleman and Thorson 2002; Strauss 2007). Since the media not only represents the majority but is constituted of the majority, in-group members would include whites whereas out-group
members would be nonwhites. In this model, the media would be more likely to frame a story giving external attributions for white shooters and internal attributions for nonwhite shooters.

When the ultimate attribution error occurs due to media framing it yields broader societal implications by impacting who people hold responsible for incidents and what resolutions will be chosen (Coleman and Thorson 2002). Within youth violence, recent work has suggested that media construction has led to important changes in juvenile and/or criminal policies (Colomy and Greiner 2000; Ogle, Eckman and Leslie 2003; Spencer 2005), such as strong as handgun laws and million dollar youth offender systems (Colomy and Greiner 2000).

**Research Question**

The current research seeks to determine if the media explains why white school shooters commit crimes by shifting responsibility to external attributions (societal causes) as opposed to internal attributions (personal flaws/issues) as explained by the ultimate attribution error. Following on the surprise findings of Menifield et al. (2001), this study investigates if newspaper coverage cites external attributions (e.g., parental neglect, bullying, or mental illness) more often for white shooters and cites internal attributions (e.g., personal flaws) more often for nonwhite shooters.

**Methods**

*Data*

A content analysis of eight school shootings, which occurred from 2008-2011, was conducted. A total of 142 newspaper articles were included in qualitative coding analysis. A
single researcher was utilized to code the data. Content analyses were the sole methodology of similar studies (Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Leary et al. 2003; Menifield et al. 2001).

**Inclusion Criteria**

Previous studies have varied in their inclusion of cases for school violence studies. The most commonly studied cases include "rampage" school shootings which are defined as shootings that "take place on a school-related public stage before an audience; involve multiple victims, some of whom are shot for their symbolic significance or at random; and involve one or more shooters who are students or former students of the school" (Newman et al. 2004). Not all school shooting literature has elected to look solely at rampage shootings. For example, Leary et al. (2003) examined cases only perpetrated by students that occurred during the school day, excluding after hour events, where at least one student was injured or killed.

Adapting some of Leary's et al. (2003) criteria, the current research includes only those shootings that occurred on school grounds during the school day by a current student. As previously discussed, it is believed that youth will be portrayed differently than a deranged adult employee who returns to his or her workplace and goes on a shooting rampage. Further criteria include shootings that occur in K12 institutions, thus excluding higher education institutions. This is also due to the age of the shooters as college shooters would be older and may not follow the patterns of youth media portrayal. No criteria were placed on number of deaths or injuries, thus not adhering strictly to rampage criteria. The number of victims is believed to not have an impact on how the media frames shooting incidences.

**Sample**
An outstanding issue in school shooting research is that no qualitative database exists that comprehensively lists shootings by school names. Databases exist that relay quantitative information on how many school homicides occurred and in which states, however, they do not help for the purposes of this study, which bases searches on the names of the schools. More qualitative lists exist, but are not comprehensive and often vary in the criteria of cases documented (Klein 2012b; Newman et al. 2004; NYPD 2012).

To avoid biases that may arise due to the way that certain shooting lists were created, the research used a single list of cases known as "The Bully Society: U.S School Shootings data, 1979-2011" (Klein 2012b). In her work, Klein (2012a) analyzed all school shootings with a focus on targeted and rampage school shootings. Targeted shootings are defined as those that focus on an individual or group of people and are thus less symbolic than rampage shootings. Klein (2012a) argues that there is no distinction in motives among the types of shootings. The idea offers validation to the current inclusion of cases. If the motives are not different, media frames may not be different.

The Bully Society list was created by gathering over forty news, police and online reports of school shootings. Klein (2012a:246) is aware of the possibility of cases being missed due to lack of coverage but believes that, "the cases that I may have missed are few and unlikely to affect the validity of the conclusions based on these most highly profiled cases."

Applying the inclusion criteria to the Bully Society data set, cases were selected from a four year time period of 2008-2011 yielding a set of eight cases. Klein's list included Carolina Forest High School, but this was excluded from the current sample. Despite initially appearing to meet inclusion criteria, further investigation determined that a knife was used instead of a gun. The difference of weapon compared to the other eight included cases of guns made the Carolina
Forest case an outlier. It did not seem to fit properly in the sample and after analysis it was removed.

The following cases were examined:

**E O Green:** On February 12, 2008, a 14 year old eighth grader shot and killed his classmate. The shooter fled the school and was caught by police nearby. The shooter, Brandon McInerney, was charged as an adult and sentenced to 21 years.

**Central High School:** On August 21, 2008, 15 year old sophomore, Jamar Siler, shot and killed a classmate. He was taken into custody nearby and later charged as an adult and sentenced to 30 years.

**Dillard High School:** On November 12, 2008, 15 year old Teah Wimberly shot and killed a friend and fellow classmate. She was taken into custody after calling police from a nearby restaurant. She was sentenced to 25 years.

**Davidson High School:** On March 6, 2008, 18 year old Jajuan Holmes shot and killed himself in front of his classmates during a school assembly. No others were harmed.

**Larose-Cut Off Middle School:** On May 18, 2008, 15 year old middle school student, Justin Doucet entered a classroom and shot over the head of a teacher. He then entered a bathroom and shot himself. He later died from his wounds.

**Discovery Middle School:** On February 5, 2010, 14 year old Hamman Memon shot and killed a fellow student. He was arrested inside the school and later sentenced to 30 years.

**Marinette High School:** On November 29, 2010, a 15 year old sophomore student Samuel Hengel shot and killed himself after holding his social studies class hostage for several hours. No one else was wounded.
Millard High School: On January 8, 2011, 17 year old Robert Butler shot his principal and vice principal. The vice principal was killed while the principal was seriously injured. The senior student was found dead in his car from a self-inflicted gunshot wound nearby.

After the eight cases were selected, the sample was pulled using ProQuest and LexisNexis Academic Newspaper search engines. The ProQuest sample constituted what is referred to as the mainstream media sample which contained three major news media outlets: New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal. These newspaper are the most frequently utilized in similar content analysis of school shootings (Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Leary et al. 2003; Menifield et al. 2001; Muschert and Carr 2006) with New York Times being the most popular. The sample of newspaper articles was not as large as desired so to increase the size, LexisNexis Academic was used. LexisNexis Academic search engine includes smaller newspapers such as The Bismarck Tribune, a local newspaper to Bismarck, North Dakota. The database also searches international news such as The New Zealand Herald. While internet searches can tell how large of a population is served by the international newspapers, there is a cultural divide as far as identity of a paper as mainstream versus local media. In the United States, it is part of our culture to recognize USA Today or the New York Times as mainstream media. However, it can be argued that unless one is a part of the culture there is no simple way of recognizing mainstream and local media of the international news included in the current sample. Quantitative methods such as distribution numbers can be examined, but this is beyond the scope of the current research.

Each of the eight high school names were entered into ProQuest and LexisNexis with an additional search engine filter of date. The date parameters began the day of the shooting, as
noted on the Bully Society data set up to thirty days after. A thirty day time period was chosen
due to its acceptance in similar school shooting content analyses (Menifield et al. 2001;
Muschert and Carr 2006). Any articles that were brought up in the search were then exported
into a word document to be included in the sample. LexisNexis searches did pull up ProQuest
articles such as New York Times articles and in these instances the LexisNexis duplicate article
was not counted in the final count or re-analyzed.

The article sample was saved by school and search engine. In this manner all ProQuest
searches for Millard High School were saved in a document together and a separate document
stored all of the Millard LexisNexis newspaper articles. Millard High School represents a unique
case as sometimes the school is referred to as "Millard South High School" and other times
simply "Millard High School." Thus it was searched in both engines with both names. This
increased the Lexis Nexis count of newspaper articles for the Millard sample. A total of 142
newspaper articles were collected and analyzed for the eight school shooting cases. For a more
specific account of articles per case, see Table 1.

Articles were additionally coded to determine if they were news or editorial pieces as
attributions may vary due to context and intent of the writer. Only six of the 142 articles were
editorial as determined by their placement in the "Editorial" or "Column" section and/or first
person writing. Further analysis was conducted to compare the content of these six pieces to the
rest of the articles in the sample. No differences were found in attributions between the six
editorial pieces and the news sample. Editorial pieces appeared to pick up cues from attributions
in the news articles and provide first-person opinions on the matter which did not impact
attributions. For example, in Larose-Cut Off Middle School news pieces mention the shooter's
suicide journal as well as his mention of Marilyn Manson before the shooting. In an editorial
piece these facts were highlighted with an opinion added; "Doesn't it seem possible disturbed people are attracted to "disturbing" music, rather than the latter causing the former?" (Kratina 2009). Due to the limited amount of editorial pieces, attribution differences are not affected in the current sample which aides in furthering the validity of attributions in the current study.

Data Analysis Procedures

The articles were coded to pull out both quantitative and qualitative information. Quantitative information was changed into red text and included such items as age, grade and gender of student shooter. Additionally, the number of shooters was coded among quantitative information and the number of persons injured and/or killed during the incident. All of the mainstream media sample was coded for quantitative information whereas the Lexis Nexis (small newspaper) sample was coded for only a few articles to ensure reliability of information and to exhaustion of new information.

Unfortunately, neither shooter’s race nor skin color was mentioned in any of the articles in the sample. This created a unique challenge for assessing treatment and perception of the shooter based on this important trait. Therefore, the only available option for coding race was through skin color of the shooter. This approach is, in many ways, conceptually problematic, because it conflates skin color (a biological phenotype) with the socially constructed concept of race and more accurately captures colorism (Hochschild and Weaver 2007). However, race is quickly assigned by others via physical features such as skin tone, hair and facial features (Colarelli et al. 2010). When in-group and out-group distinctions are made on the basis of race, physical characteristics become most salient to determine membership (Colarelli et al. 2010).
There are cases in which skin color may be more predictive of discrimination from society compared to self identification of race, due to the concept of master status. Master statuses are social labels placed on an individual by others in a social group (Hughes 1945). In a recent study on this concept, respondents of mixed race/ethnicity as well as black and white respondents reported that racial identification is imposed on them, despite their dominant racial self-identity (Aspinall and Song 2013). Some respondents stated they had to self-identify as black as members of society would not permit them to pass for white due to their darker skin color. In this respect, perceptions of racial background are imposed upon members of society despite self-identification of race and individuals in society are treated differently based on skin tone. Therefore, despite the clear conceptual problems associated with coding race visually from skin tone, skin tone may in some cases more accurately represent how an individual is treated by members society (such as agents of the media) compared to an individual’s personal self-identification of race (Colarelli et al. 2010). Considering these various advantages and disadvantages, it is ideal to have data on an individual’s self identification as well as skin color whenever possible.

While coding race from skin color alone remains problematic for the reasons described previously, this approach is relatively common in sociological research when alternative means of identifying race are unavailable. For example, several major sociological works use skin color appearance rather than self-identified race as a proxy of race. Until 2002, the most widely used example of this method is the General Social Survey (GSS), the most frequently analyzed source of social science date aside from the Census (GSS n.d.). Although the GSS changed to self-identification of race in 2002, there are situations in which interviewer or photograph coding of skin color is the only option (Colarelli et al. 2010; Fernandez and Fernandez-Mato 2006; Jiobu
In these circumstances, there appears to be high inter-rater reliability and high rates of concurrence (96.8%) between coder’s identification of respondent’s race and the respondent's self-identified race, especially with samples of white and black individuals (Fernandez and Fernandez-Mato 2006). Racial concordance of whites and blacks was high between interviewer observation and self-identification on the Census (97-98%) and GSS (90-93.5%) as well when these methods were used (Smith 2001).

Therefore, in this study, because no data were available on a shooter’s self-identification of race, a Google search was performed to find an article with a photo of the shooter. In order to minimize false conclusions and enhance photo coding reliability, shooters’ race was categorized simply as white and nonwhite. Photos were then coded by a second source. The sample received 100% inter-rater reliability between the two coders.

Thematic qualitative coding of the content of the articles was also completed for every article as applicable. Some articles, such as short press releases, did not contain attributional qualitative ideas. Articles that contained duplicate sentences, mostly those articles which quoted Associated Press reports, were not double coded due to exhaustion. To differentiate the codes, qualitative information related to attribution was coded by highlighting the words and/or sentences in yellow.

There were six qualitative coding categories for attributions; bullying, parental neglect/abuse, mental illness, other external, internal and other uncategorized. Internal attributions were categorized as one general ‘internal’ category. External attributions were broken into smaller categories that were chosen as they are the most common societal causes mentioned in previous research. Specifically, for school shooting research, diversifying categories of external attributions allow the research to discover what the media frames are pointing to as the
cause of the current shooting and to identify how these external attributions of a shooter impact policy (e.g., gun laws or mental illness reform).

Bullying, an external attribution code, did not receive enough qualitative evidence from the articles and was thus dropped from analysis. Parental neglect/abuse codes included any information that pertained to the shooter's parents in a negative light. Additionally, overarching ideas of "good parenting" that were mentioned when explaining the shooting were included in this category due to inference of attribution. A sample parental neglect/abuse code (external attribution) is illustrated in the following article in regards to the Dillard High School shooting: "Her problems started when her father, Jevon Wimberly, was sentenced to 25 years in prison for attempted second-degree murder" (Nolin, Bushouse, and Santana 2008).

Mental illness codes (external attribution) included those that referred to the psychological well being or behavioral problems of the shooter. A New York Times article covering the Marinette shooting provides an example by calling on a specific mental illness of the shooter; "One of the students taken hostage said that the gunman had appeared depressed..." (Davey 2010). The final external attribution category was a catch-all category of other. These codes included items such as reference to violent society, pop culture and any other item that did not appropriately fit into the aforementioned external categories.

The category of internal attributions refers to any codes that pertain to the individual shooter themselves and their motives or the shooting in general. An example of an internal attribution is illustrated in coverage of the Millard High School shooting; "[the shooter] had been suspended from class and removed from the building hours earlier for driving on an athletic field" (Associated Press 2011). This quote refers to a personal (internal attribute) issue that was occurring in the shooter's life. The final coding category was “other uncategorized,” which
included codes that did not neatly fit any external or internal attribution categories. These were not critical in analysis, but at the time of coding their importance could not be supposed.

An Excel spreadsheet was created, with separate worksheets for the mainstream media sample and the Lexis Nexis sample. Each subset then had two worksheets; one for quantitative codes and the other for qualitative. Further broken down were Marinette and Millard High School. These cases received a substantial amount of media coverage and were given their own qualitative table to place excerpts. All information is clearly labeled by school shooting case, newspaper title, date of publication, and link to hard copy of the article on the password protected computer of the researcher. Table 2 contains a condensed version that highlights important qualitative codes and is somewhat similar to the data analysis format.

Findings

Mainstream Media Attributions: Internal for Nonwhites, External or None for Whites

As previously stated, mainstream media provided only limited coverage of the shootings, which limited analysis. In addition, there was no mainstream media coverage of Davidson High School, Larose Cut-Off Middle School, or Discovery Middle School. Both Davidson and Discovery were nonwhite shooters and the white shooter at Larose Cut-Off was a suicide only shooter (no victims). These crimes may not have been sensational enough to gain coverage however there is no obvious reason as to why these stories were not covered.

Of the remaining covered stories, white shooters were the perpetrators for E O Green and Marinette High School. In a New York Times story of the E O Green shooting, which was referred to as a hate crime, the Transgender Law Center is quoted as stating the shooter, "is just as much a victim as [the victim]...He's a victim of homophobia and hate" (Cathcart 2008). This
idea of the shooter as a "victim" suggests that homophobia and hate are a product of the societal
and external forces that the shooter was subjected to. Marinette High School coverage did not
offer as much explanation and stories often cited that no motive for the shooting had been
discovered. One article made slight references to mental illness stating, "One of the students
taken hostage said that the gunman had appeared depressed..." (Davey 2010). Overall, the
pattern of attributions was not prominent for white shooters. While the articles did not state
internal attributions, the trend was more towards no attributions and factual details of the event.

The nonwhite shooters had a more pronounced tendency for coverage to cite internal
attributions. Three of the remaining shootings perpetrated by nonwhite shooters were covered by
the mainstream media. Central High School coverage included quotes which cited the idea that
the shooting was due to a conflict between two students (see Table 2). In this manner, the school
becomes no more than a location for the incident. The Dillard High School shooter was a female,
which is unusual for school shootings so the media could have taken the shooter's status as a
female and portrayed more "victimizer as the victim" role (Spencer 2005). However, for
mainstream media the status as nonwhite dominated as indicated by internal attributions. The
incident was described as "an isolated incident between the two girls" (Almanzar 2008) and
possibly due to "an unrequited crush involving" the two. Again, in this incident as in Central
High, the school is shown to be no more than the unfortunate location of the incident.

The final nonwhite incident, Millard High School, was more difficult to classify. Two of
the three news stories state that the shooter was the son of a police detective. In any other
shooting incident the parent's profession is not framed, so there is salience on the profession of
the father as a police detective. This frame is further analyzed after more discussion of the
Millard High School case representation in the small newspaper sample. The third article
covering the shooting did not state the fact that the shooter was a police detective's son, but rather included information on the shooting situated in an article about gun lobbying stating that the shooting, “is a horrifying reminder that politicians must stop cowering before the gun lobby and its reckless agenda to make it easier for volatile young people and troubled adults to obtain guns” (New York Times 2011). This follows an external attribution pattern, but was only mentioned in one article.

Small Newspaper Attributions: External Attributions Pervasive

As previously stated, the purpose of the small newspaper sample was to increase the sample size. However, once analyzed, it became clear that the small newspapers followed a different trend than mainstream media. Overall, the small newspaper sample was more likely to cite external attributions for school shooting incidents. There was a tendency for incident explanations to be more detailed and this involvement allowed for more external causes to be revealed. The Dillard High School shooting provides a clear example of this pattern. In the mainstream media sample, the nonwhite female shooter was given internal attributions and the shooting was referred to as an isolated incident purported to be due to unrequited emotions the shooter felt for the victim. While this internal attribution of romance gone awry was still mentioned in the small newspaper sample, there were external attributions given for the incident in the same articles, and sometimes the romantic feelings were not even mentioned. The most prominent external attribution cited for Teah Wimberly's behavior falls into the category of parental neglect. Wimberly's troubled home life was frequently mentioned. Often her father's criminal history was mentioned; "her father, Jevon Wimberly, who was raising her alone, was sentenced to 25 years for attempted murder" (Alanez, Johnson and Nolin 2008). By placing
salience on her father's troubled past and absent mother, the articles shift blame away from the internal to the parental neglect and difficult background of the shooter. A few articles mentioned Wimberly had undergone counseling in her past for problems and was going to receive a psychological evaluation prior to her court date.

The Millard High School incident received more clarification which aided to the analysis of the mainstream media's attribution of Robert Butler being the son of a police detective. Of the thirty-six articles covering the incident (three of which were from the mainstream media sample), twenty-five (two mainstream) mentioned the status of the shooter as the son of a police detective. Often this fact is included in the first sentence of the articles. This fact could be indicative of an external attribution of parental neglect, which is particularly hard for people to understand given the occupation of Butler's father. One article states that Butler "gained access to a Glock .40-caliber semi-automatic handgun that is believed to be his father's police service weapon" (Matteson 2011). This would fall into the category of external parental neglect—a police officer being negligent with his weapon. On the other hand, the mention of being the son of a police detective could be internal. The fact the shooting occurred despite the law enforcement home offers the idea of a flawed personhood unique to Butler. It was also mentioned that Butler was having problems at his mother's home, which was why he was sent to live with his father, and this media frame highlights the idea of a troubled child. Butler's father’s position is mentioned so frequently that this media frame offers the idea of a troubled child despite having all of the (presumed) resources to not be troubled. Therefore, reflecting on the mainstream media sample and the small newspaper sample, the media frame of Butler as a police detective is not the same attribution of parental neglect as Wimberly's in Dillard High School. Rather, the status of son of a police detective points out the flawed personhood and offers an internal attribution of Butler.
Analyzing a white shooter incident from the small newspaper sample, external attributions were more likely to be prevalent. An example is the case of Larose Cut-off Middle School, which was not covered in mainstream media. The shooter's journal and statements offered much for the media to cite including the fact that the student, "apparently asked the teacher to praise shock-rocker Marilyn Manson" (Kratina 2009). This was the only shooting that referenced pop culture. The student's plans to "gear up" and go on a rampage shooting were frequently mentioned. The student did not die immediately yet his later death was not covered by media despite occurring during the thirty day sample period (only five days later).

Overall, the trend for external attributions for shooters was prevalent among the small newspaper sample. This trend of external attributions was more pervasive for white shooters, with external attributions prevalent in the nonwhite sample but mixed with internal attributions such as those found in the mainstream media. This trend is indicative of internal attributions (personal flaws/issues) being offered for nonwhite shooters more often in both the large and small newspaper samples.

Similar Cases: Depressed and Harmless White Shooter versus the Nonwhite 'Isolated' Criminal

Comparisons of similar, paired cases demonstrate differences in media framing and attributions. Consider the case of Marinette and Davidson High School where the shooters did not take any victims beyond committing suicide in front of audiences at school. In the Marinette case, the white shooter Sam Hegel held his social studies class hostage for several hours before killing himself when police finally entered the room. At Davidson High School, the nonwhite shooter, Jajuan Holmes, shot himself in front of classmates during a school assembly. Both shooters fired their guns before committing suicide. Holmes fired his gun into the ceiling of the
gym while Hegel fired multiple shots into the wall and a film projector in the classroom. The difference in coverage and framing of the news stories is distinct. The amount of coverage was skewed with Marinette (white shooter) receiving a combined sample total of sixty one articles and Davidson (nonwhite shooter) receiving no mainstream media coverage and only four news stories in the small newspaper sample. However, this difference in coverage could be possibly explained by the years the story were covered, as Marinette occurred in 2010 and communication speed and transmission has continued to increase every year.

Coverage of the Davidson (nonwhite) shooting state Holmes was recently charged in a robbery as the first sentence of the article. Instead of identifying Holmes by name (as he was eighteen) or his grade status in school, he is "a student who was recently charged in a robbery." Two of the articles mention that Holmes was recently suspended from school. One article specifically mentioned these incidents "may have been a factor leading to the shooting" (The Bismarck Tribune 2008). These frames offer confusing inferences about the shooter, such as the idea that because one commits a crime as a youth committing suicide in front of classmates is a plausible outcome. The robbery reference as a media frame posits the idea for readers that the student was disturbed enough to commit a robbery so his suicide should not be surprising.

Coverage of the Marinette (white) school shooting is vastly different. Common thematic ideas include idea of "unknown" and "being at a loss" as to the situation's occurrence. Some articles highlight the fact that there were 200 rounds of ammunition found--this is a subtle reminder that Hegel could have killed everyone but did not. Ironically, despite this fact being printed in some press, multiple sources indicated that he "did not seem like he wanted to hurt anyone." This dismissal of harm was overlooked in this instance and one may argue that the shooter has become the victim. In fact, the shooter has become so much the victim rather than
the victimizer, that stories highlight his memorial service; "Hundreds of people showed up Sunday for a memorial...setting aside the terrifying standoff to remember him as a quiet, helpful leader who loved the outdoors" (The Bismarck Tribune 2010). One article mentioned that the shooter's organs will be saving lives. The attributions of the Marinette case do not fall neatly into any categories of external attribution. There are some mentions of mental illness, specifically depression, as noted by those who were held as hostages. Further, media frames that suggest there is no explanation for the shooting and everyone is at such a loss as to explain the event appear to be more external than internal. Almost all of the articles include flattering quotes and thoughts about Hegel's personality indicating there are no internal flaws to blame. Many articles state that "no motivation" has been discovered indicating that the search for answers is very real. While Hegel's cause for shooting may not follow the external attribution pattern that some other examples have (e.g., parental neglect or popular culture), the media frames that revolve around him as "harmless" despite the very real threat, have excused his personhood (internal attributions) as a deviant shooter.

The Davidson (nonwhite) shooter was not granted this outpouring of support, nor were his motives repeatedly publicly questioned. No national news outlets covered the incident and local ones did not once question Holmes' motive. Holmes entered his school gym with a gun and could have easily shot others just as Hegel could have--and yet also shot only himself. However, there were no articles highlighting an outpouring of grief. Rather, the Davidson articles mention that the student had recent criminal problems and was charged with robbery. An act of white school violence received international coverage whereas a similar nonwhite incident was barely covered by local news media.
Unexpected Findings and Areas for Future Research

During the analysis, areas for future research emerged. First, attribution differences between national and small newspaper samples were striking. As previously noted, small newspapers cited more external attributions, regardless of race of the shooter compared to mainstream samples. This pattern begs further exploration and the ultimate attribution error could help to explain these findings by comparing national versus local papers. Small newspapers in this situation may be attempting to explain the behavior of their in-group members regardless of perceived race. In-group members for small newspapers would instead be based on location and community of the shooter. Understood through the ultimate attribution error, small newspapers would have a tendency to assign external attributions for the problematic behavior of in-group members (those in their community regardless as to race). This trend appears to occur, but further exploration in future studies is necessary.

Second, there was a general lack of coverage of school shooting incidents in the mainstream media. Perhaps school shootings are no longer sensational enough to receive news coverage but are unfortunately becoming a normalized crime in American society. Third, there was an increase over time of the incidents of international coverage. The idea of American school shootings as more intriguing to international than domestic newspapers offers an additional area of future study.

Implications for Social Policy

Due to the limited sample size, particularly for mainstream media, as well as the necessary limited method of assessing race via skin color in this study, conclusions must be
treated with caution. The ultimate attribution error appears to be occurring, with the white controlled mainstream media citing external attributions for those of their in-group (white shooters) and internal attributions for out-group (nonwhite shooters). The tendency of mainstream media to not cite attributions and instead more factual details for white shooters should be considered. More often nonwhite shooters are given internal attributions which still follows the ultimate attribution error idea of assigning out-group blame.

These findings are important for several reasons. When Columbine occurred, media attributions to the shooters' actions were rampant. Stories of the 'Trench Coat Mafia' and of two boys who were bullied due to their status as outsiders pervaded the news. The release of The Columbine Report by the local Sheriff's office denounced these and other media tales (Cullen 2009; Ogle et al. 2003). The time lapse between the shooting and the report's release coupled with the fact that not all media printed these clarifications, caused difficulty for select groups of youth. For example, media frames focusing on the 'Trench Coat Mafia' and Goth culture led to the targeting of students who participated in these subcultures (Ogle et al. 2003). Further, competition among journalists to be the first source to report may lead to incorrect attributions of shooters. As these attributions tend to external for white shooters, youth in their peer groups (in instances of bullying) or their parents can become public targets. The FBI's "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective" (n.d.) states that the media's rush to publish information such as qualities that create a profile of shooters and can result in unfair labeling of nonviolent youth. Other incidents include stigmatization of the mentally ill community as was seen in the recent Newton school shooting.

Finally, media attributions, whether external or internal, may affect policy. Gun control laws are a common outcry of policy reform after school shooting incidents (Birkland and
Other policies involve youth directly such as metal detectors in schools and zero tolerance policies (Birkland and Lawrence 2009). Media frames and attributions could have impacts on sentencing for shooters who survive (see Table 1). In the current sample, the nonwhite males received the harshest sentences, followed by the female nonwhite shooter, and the surviving white shooter received the least amount of time. Other issues, such as racial biases in the criminal justice system, play a role but future research would aide in determining if media frames are used at all in the trials and how this impacts sentencing for those school shooters.

Limitations and Conclusion

The most outstanding limitation of the current research is due to the coding of race based on photographs of the shooters. If data was available on the self-identified race of the shooters, more direct correlations could be made particularly in terms of opportunities to analyze the sentencing outcomes of surviving shooters. Further, the limited sample size of articles in the mainstream media sample leads to cautious interpretations in regards to attributions of this group. Finally, while race was coded by two researchers the attributions in articles were coded by a sole researcher which places limitations on the strength of the current research as compared to that of dual or multi-coder research.

In conclusion, the current research has indicated a trend towards the ultimate attribution error in school shooting coverage. Media framing gives external attributions to in-group members who share the same majority, white status as the mainstream media. As groups such as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) work against media bias and seek to expand the
representation of minorities in the newsroom, the implications for nonwhite shooters and school shootings in general may shift.
References


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Nolin, Robert, Kathy Bushouse and Sofia Santana. 2008. "Popular sophomore gunned down in hall: Suspect is said to have been a longtime friend who lured the victim with a text message," *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. November 13.


Table 1: Summary of Selected School Shootings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Incident Date</th>
<th>Location^</th>
<th>Shooter's Race **</th>
<th>Number of Articles</th>
<th>Killed/Injured (bold indicates shooter death counted in total)</th>
<th>Sentencing (N/A cases due to suicide of shooter)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E O Green</td>
<td>2/12/2008</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>8/21/2008</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dillard</td>
<td>11/12/2008</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davidson</td>
<td>3/6/2008</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>1/0</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larose-Cut Off*</td>
<td>5/18/2009</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>1/0</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery*</td>
<td>2/5/2010</td>
<td>UC</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marinette</td>
<td>11/29/2010</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>61</td>
<td><strong>1/0</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millard</td>
<td>1/5/2011</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>37</td>
<td><strong>2/1</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates Middle School

^Location was determined by utilizing the Census Bureau guideline definitions for Urbanized Areas (UA), Urban Clusters (UC), and Rural (United States Census Bureau 2013). **Shooter's race was not available in articles. Further, photos were not included in database. Therefore, Google engine searches of other news coverage of the shootings were conducted to locate photos of the shooters. Race was determined based on appearance and was categorized only into white versus nonwhite.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Shooting Incident</th>
<th>Shooter's Race</th>
<th>Internal Attributions</th>
<th>Parental Neglect</th>
<th>External Attributions</th>
<th>Other External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E O Green</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>&quot;This wasn't a shooting that was a random act,&quot; Deputy Roehl said. 'It was an individual directing his aggression toward another individual, not the school or the students inside the school.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>&quot;...a possible motive for the shooting was an unrequited crush involving the victim and the suspect.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dillard</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>&quot;Wimberly was deeply affected when her father was imprisoned last year on an attempted murder charge, according to her grandparents. Her mother lives in another state.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davidson</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>&quot;....the suspect[Wimberly] in their daughter's murder was being held for psychological evaluation...&quot; &quot;[she] had undergone counseling for behavioral problems over the past year&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larose-Cut Off Middle School</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Upon entering the classroom with a gun &quot;He then said, 'Hail Marilyn Manson!' referencing the alternative metal rock star&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Shooting Incident</td>
<td>Shooter's Race</td>
<td>Internal Attributions</td>
<td>External Attributions</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery Middle School</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;10 students at the Madison school wanted to affiliate with a national gang. The students 'went online and learned how to walk, how to talk and how to dress (like a gang member)&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marinette</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>&quot;He said the gunman seemed depressed. 'But he didn't really seem like he wanted to hurt anybody.'&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Millard                  | Nonwhite       | "'He was getting in trouble and his mom was tired of dealing with his trouble. His mom thought, 'Robert's dad was a cop; he could hold him in line.'"

4 Bushouse, Kathy, Tonya Alanez and Mike Clary. 2008. "Student may have told Dillard High officials about gun: District looking into whether Dillard shooting was avoidable," *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. November 14.
7 Jervis, Rick. "Sheriff: Teen fires at teacher, shoots self; La. student hospitalized with head wound," *USA Today*. May 19, p.3A.