

Assaults on the Ivory Tower

Representations of Madness in the
Discourse of U.S. School Shootings

Margaret Price, Spelman College
price.spelman@gmail.com

Overview of Project (*The Rhetoric of Madness*)

What does it mean for persons with psychosocial disabilities to work in academic discourses? By *discourses* I mean not only written spaces, which are important, but also social spaces such as classrooms, conference panels, talks like this one, job interviews, and so on. How can we re-design such spaces so they become more accessible for all?

Terminology

I use *psychosocial disability* to incorporate mental health service users, neuroatypicals, psychiatric survivors, those who self-identify as having “mental illness” or “mental disability,” and in general persons with disabilities that affect the mind.

A more expanded discussion of this issue is available upon request – just let me know.

Why school shootings?

Although school shootings are rare, they play an influential role in public consciousness. Everyday policies and attitudes regarding madness in academe are deeply inflected by what is said, and what is done, in the wake of school shootings.

Sample Headlines

- “From Disturbed High Schooler to College Killer” (Golden)
- “Inside Cho’s Mind” (Moran)
- “Bright Daughter, Brooding Son: Enigma in the Cho Household” (Kang, Drogin & Fiore)
- “Steve Kazmierczak: The Secret Life” (Fast)
- “Who Was the Illinois School Shooter?” (Friedman)
- “Portrait of a Killer” (*Guardian*)

Peter Beresford (CDS talk)

“Psychiatry has helped us become confused about what bad and mad mean. Increasingly when some terrible crime is committed, there is some awful act of violence, abuse or assault, then we are encouraged to feel the person must be mad to do such a thing. ... While psychiatry may say it cannot treat the people so identified, it will be happy to attach labels to them. So they are included as mentally ill and increasingly shape public and personal understandings of madness and distress and couple it more and more closely with crime, violence and threat.” (4-5)

My main argument today

In these representations, madness is generally assumed to be the *cause* of the shooters' actions. My re-reading makes an alternative argument: that in fact, madness operates in the representations as a *mechanism* through which the shooters are placed in a space of unrecoverable deviance. This move enables such accounts to separate Cho and Kazmierczak — and by extension, madness itself — from everyone else.

Use of minute detail

“From the beginning, he did not talk. Not to other children, not to his own family. Everyone saw this. In Seoul, South Korea, where Seung-Hui Cho grew up, his mother agonized over his sullen, brooding behavior and empty face. Talk, she just wanted him to talk. ...

“[On Monday morning] Mr. Cho dabbed moisturizer on his eyes and slid in contact lenses. He brushed his teeth.”

(Kleinfeld, *New York Times*)

Juxtaposition

“Stephen [sic] Kazmierczak, the 27-year-old who opened fire on a crowded Northern Illinois University lecture hall, killing five, and then himself on Thursday, was discharged from the United States Army in February 2002 for unknown reasons, ABC News has learned.

“Kazmierczak enlisted in September 2001, and was separated before he completed basic training, a defense official told ABC News.

“Reasons for his separation include not revealing a condition during initial screening, or not adapting to military life.

“The Privacy Act forbids the Army from characterizing the reason for Kazmierczak’s discharge.

“Kazmierczak had most recently been studying mental health issues at the University of Illinois, and had taken a job at a prison, according to his academic advisor.”

(Friedman, ABC News)

Dramatizing the “revelation”

DEKALB, Illinois (CNN) – Northern Illinois University on Friday identified the man in a classroom as Steven P. Kazmierczak, whom police described as an award-winning sociology student and a leader of a campus criminal justice group, accused of shooting and killing himself.

Kazmierczak, 27, who police said shot 21 people before shooting and killing himself, was a winning sociology student and a leader of a campus criminal justice group, accused of shooting and killing himself.

Concealing a shotgun in a guitar case, and tucking three other guns under his coat into a geology class in an NIU lecture hall Thursday afternoon, Kazmierczak began firing, and the student stopped to reload his shotgun before he took his own life, police said.

Kazmierczak was a student about 175 miles away at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, police said, and there “were no red flags” warning of any violent behavior.

One of Kazmierczak’s advisers said that she enjoyed having him as a student and as a person; he was a nice kid.

“I found Steven to be a very committed student, extremely respectful of me as an adviser,” said Jan Carter-Black, an assistant professor in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Social Work department. [Watch Carter-Black deal with painful news »](#)

Carter-Black was assigned to be Kazmierczak’s faculty adviser when he enrolled in the fall summer of 2007, and he was a student in her human behavior and social environment class, she said.

Marking Deviance: Kazmierczak

- Horror movies, darkness.
- Mother is “fleshy, enormous.”
- Mother is “not mentally right.”
- Fundamentalist religious beliefs.
- Alcoholic relative.
- Tattoo.
- Looked at “porno.”
- Dressed up as Jigsaw from “Saw” movies.

Orlando Patterson (*New York Times*)

“What is at issue here is the principle of infrangibility: our conception of normalcy and of what groups constitute our social body – those from whom we cannot be separated without losing our identity, so that their achievements become our own and their pathologies our failures.”

Marking Deviance: Cho

- Race
- Ethnicity
- Immigration status
- Class
- “Darkness”

Diagnosis and Blame

- “Early warning signs”
- Failure to go to therapy
- Refusal to take medication

The supposition underlying this narrative is that madness can be overcome, and that the key to overcoming is control or containment of the mad person by means of medical treatment and/or incarceration.



Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech

April 16, 2007

Report of the Review Panel

Presented to

**Governor Kaine
Commonwealth of Virginia**



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Report on “selective mutism”

“Selective mutism is a type of an anxiety disorder that is characterized by **a consistent failure** to speak in specific social situations where there is an expectation of speaking. The **unwillingness** to speak is not secondary to speech/communication problems, but, rather, is based on painful shyness. Children with selective mutism are usually inhibited, withdrawn, and anxious with an obsessive fear of hearing their own voice. Sometimes they show **passive-aggressive, stubborn and controlling** traits. The association between this disorder and **autism** is unclear.” (35)

Care versus control

According to school records, Cho made several attempts to obtain counseling from Virginia Tech's Cook Counseling Center and was not successful. However, the *Report* does not mention the effects this might have had upon him, focusing instead on the failure of the counseling centers to take adequate notes or follow up on the case. The incidents are framed as a failure of *control* rather than a failure of *care*.

Harassment of Cho

- Classmates laughed at and ridiculed him.
- Classmates offered him dollar bills if he would speak.
- Classmates told Cho to “go back to China.”
- Sister claimed harassment was “neither particularly threatening nor ongoing” (*Report 37*).
- *Report* places onus of harassment on Cho himself: he “isolated himself” and “drew derision.”

Professor Giovanni on Cho (1)

“For the first 6 weeks of class, the professor **put up with** Cho’s **lack of cooperation and disruptive behavior**. He wore reflector glasses and a hat pulled down to obscure his face. Dr. Giovanni reported to the panel that she **would have to** take time away from teaching at the beginning of each class to ask him to please take off his hat and please take off his glasses. She **would have to** stand beside his desk until he complied. Then he started wearing a scarf wrapped around his head, “Bedouin-style” according to Professor Giovanni. She felt that he was **trying to bully her**.”

Professor Giovanni on Cho (2)

“Cho also was **uncooperative** in presenting and changing the pieces that he wrote. He would read from his desk in a voice that could not be heard. When Dr. Giovanni would ask him to make changes, he would present the same thing the following week.” (*Report 42*)

Professor Bean on Cho

[Bean] told the panel that Cho was always very quiet, always wore his cap pulled down, and spoke extremely softly. Bean opined that “this was his power.” By speaking so softly, he **manipulated** people into **feeling sorry for him** and his fellow students would allow him to get credit for group projects without having worked on them. Bean noted that Cho **derived satisfaction** from learning “how to play the game – do as little as he needed to do to get by.”
(*Report 50*)

Pitiable or Murderous

“This [Bean’s] profile of Cho stands in contrast to the profile of a pitiable, emotionally disabled young man, but it may in fact represent a true picture of the other side of Cho – the one that murdered 32 people” (*Report 50*).

Further discourse analysis

- “Public safety” = “disaster preparedness.”
- Madness = violence.
- Calls for sharing of information about psychosocially disabled people without our knowledge or consent.
- “Nutters” are bad writers anyway.

Professor Falco on Cho

There was violence in Cho's writing – but there is a huge difference between writing about violence and behaving violently. We could not have known what he would do. We treated him like a fellow student, which is what he was. I believe the English department behaved responsibly in response to him. And please hear me when I say this: It was our responsibility, not yours. All you could have done was come to me, or some other administration or faculty member, with your concerns – and you would have been told that we were aware of Seung-Hui Cho, we were concerned about him, and we were doing what we believed was appropriate. Look, all our hearts are broken. There's no need to add to the pain with guilt. (“Creative Writing” 60)