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Trends. Reactions to Serial Shootings

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There are at least two classes of reactions when the mass media promulgate stories of serial shootings. The first is personal and too often sensationalized. The second is social and too often having less to do with the shootings than--ironically--some ideological ax to grind.

As an example of the personal without the sensationalization is a letter published in The Los Angeles Times (July 9, 1999) by an IBPP reader, Ms. Patsy Rahn. "My response...was visceral; my stomach tightened up and I felt nauseated. I felt anger and fear and disgust and sadness at the ability of people to still be so hateful and destructive, with so little sense of their own selves that they project all their hate and fear onto others. We all do this to some extent, most of us on small, everyday levels of making ourselves feel better by finding fault with someone else, or not understanding why someone makes us so angry. We all house pain within and all unconsciously project it out onto others. But we are responsible for our actions, and pain is no excuse for immoral, destructive and often evil behavior.

(The) behavior was evil. In the face of such hate from one young man, what can I do? I can speak out. I can respond, I can act by trying to relate to others in my life as free of this unconsciousness as I can. I can act by trying to be aware of what is in the dark corners of my soul. I can express my feelings to those I love and to those I wish to communicate with."

This personal reaction is noteworthy not only for emotional expression and catharsis, but for its cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral prescriptions that allow constructive action for the self and others.

The social reactions are usually less helpful. Shootings are employed to further pre-existing ideologies and their components and expressions. Positions--e.g., on gun control, the effects of television and movies with graphic or non-graphic violence, the role of ethical and moral training in public education, or the bitter seeds of racism--are salient, shootings but the magic bullets to achieve political advantage.

Stories of serial shootings, then, describe the personal tragedies of victims and describe and induce tragedies of those who become aware of the victims' tragedies--thus becoming victims as well. As tragically, social discourses that are contaminated and subverted make victims of us all. (See FBI searches home of supremacist's parents. (September 1, 1999). Chicago Tribune, <http://chicagotribune.com/news/metro/chicago/article/0,2669,ART-33824,FF.html>; Loving a hater (July 8, 1999). ABC News.com, http://abcnews.go.com/onair/DailyNews/lizsahr070899_chat.html; Parents of racist killer say they taught diversity. (August 31, 1999). The Dallas Morning News, <http://www.dallasnews.com/national/0831nat4hate.htm>; Price, H. (August 20, 1999). Anger over shootings fades too quickly. detnews.com, <http://www.detnews.com/EDITPAGE/9908/20/1oped/1oped.htm>.) (Keywords: Serial Shootings.)