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THE DANGER OF 'NO': REJECTION VIOLENCE, TOXIC MASCULINITY AND
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

BY

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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

BY

LILY THACKER

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Eastern Kentucky University
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Abstract

This study illuminates the relationship between toxic masculinity and rejection violence, here defined as instances where men react violently toward women who reject their expressions of romantic or sexual interest. It begins with an analysis of the definition and construction of toxic masculinity and, through the analysis of different cases as reported in the media, expands into a discussion on how toxic masculinity contributes directly to cases of rejection violence. The study analyzes over 40 cases of rejection violence to present a clear picture of the relationship between these occurrences and toxic masculinity.

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Chapter I

Introduction

On May 23, 2014, a young man named Elliot Rodger went on a now-infamous killing spree in California (Potok, 2014). He murdered six people and injured fourteen others on the University of California's Santa Barbara (UCSB) campus, eventually ending the carnage by taking his own life. Shortly after the spree ended, it was revealed that the killer's motivation was his long-standing hatred of women, whom he viewed as consistently rejecting and ignoring him throughout his life. His goal for the day of the murders, he said, was to go to UCSB's campus and "slaughter" (p. 38) as many women as he could. To this point, he left behind a 140-page manifesto on his antipathy for women, accompanied by a YouTube video titled "Elliot Rodger's Retribution." In this video—uploaded mere minutes before the killing began—Rodger laments his lack of sexual and romantic success, stating that his right to have sex with women was denied because women have never found him attractive. He goes on to say, "If I can't have you, girls, I will destroy you" (as cited in Potok, 2014, p. 38). This rhetoric, coupled with the similar discourse found in his manifesto, immediately posited Rodger, 22, as the penultimate example of male violence in reaction to perceived rejection by women.

Male-on-female rejection violence – defined here as instances where men react violently toward women who reject their expressions of romantic or sexual interest – is commonplace. Elliot Rodger's killing spree was not an isolated incident (Potok, 2014). Even the most cursory Google search will summon dozens upon dozens of cases; for this study alone, over 50 cases found in the news media were analyzed, all from within the past six years. There are entire blog sites, some spanning several years and containing

hundreds of entries, which are dedicated as spaces where women anonymously share their own firsthand experiences with rejection violence (“When Women Refuse”, n.d.). In the cases studied, men’s violent reactions to rejection included shooting, stabbing, gang-rape, snapping spinal cords, and acid attacks – to name a few (Dahm, 2016; Paul, 2015; The Times of India, 2017; Robinson, 2017; Bhardwaj, 2014). The violence employed in these cases is often disfiguring at best and lethal at worst (Bhardwaj, 2014; Robinson, 2017).

As is obvious from the previous examples, rejection violence is not a phenomenon to be taken lightly, and its relationship to toxic masculinity cannot be ignored. Toxic masculinity is defined as a form of masculinity which hyperbolizes the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity (Haider, 2016). I argue that toxic masculinity is a primary contributor to rejection violence, because failure to live up to its heteronormative standards (i.e., being sexually rejected) induces feelings of shame and is threatening to male dominance, which toxic masculinity then encourages meeting with violence as a means of redeeming one’s now diminished manhood (Brown, James, & Taylor, 2010; Smith & Lewis, 2009; Messner, 2004).

The primary aim of this study is to examine the ways in which toxic masculinity contributes to rejection violence as reported in cases in the media. The study seeks to test these basic hypotheses: First, that toxic masculinity encourages men to react to sexual or romantic rejection with violence as a means of reclaiming their place as a “real man” who subscribes to and successfully performs masculinity; and second, that cases of rejection violence often exhibit contextual signs which indicate that toxic masculinity is a factor in

their occurrence. In seeking to confirm or reject these hypotheses it is hoped that further knowledge about rejection violence and its causes is revealed.

Chapter II

Literature Review

There has been little attention paid to “rejection violence” in the criminological literature as it is conceptualized here. Rather, it has been addressed indirectly often within broader conversations on masculinity, other gender-based violent crimes (i.e. intimate partner violence) or by scholars working in disciplines outside of criminology (Ayduk, Gyural & Luerssen, 2008). Therefore, in this brief review of the literature I begin with an overview of rejection violence as it relates to behaviors associated with masculinity, before moving into fields external to criminology and criminal justice.

Toxic masculinity

According to Connell (2002) masculinity is socially constructed through a system of social interactions and practices. It does not exist outside of these constraints because it is created and sustained by them alone. Further, there is no singular type of masculinity which is found everywhere; there are many different forms which vary across cultures. The form of masculinity which is dominant in a particular culture is called hegemonic masculinity, and while other masculinities may exist in the same culture, the hegemonic masculinity is the main expression of “the privilege men collectively have over women” (Connell, 2002, p. 17). While hegemonic masculinity may not even be performed by the majority of men within a culture, it is still upheld as the normative way of being a man, requiring all men to position themselves in relation to it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It subordinates “other” masculinities, marginalizing those men who do not align with the hegemonic ideal. Hegemonic masculinity is often linked to a variety of toxic

practices, including physical violence—but because it varies from one setting to another, it is impossible to say that hegemonic masculinity is always synonymous with violence.

Despite this variation, however, hegemonic masculinities are systems which seek to maintain power, and as such are “likely to involve a dehumanizing of other groups and a corresponding withering of empathy” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity in various forms has also been linked to violence (Connell, 2002). For example, a type of masculinity termed hostile masculinity reflects “antagonistic, distrustful, and insecure” ideas about women, which the literature in turn links to animosity and sexual aggression toward women (LeBreton, Baysinger, Abbey, & Jacques-Tiura, 2013, p. 817). Further, Connell writes that “Contemporary masculinities are implicated in a range of toxic effects” (2002, p. 25). These include violence against women, homophobic violence, racism, and a range of other problems (Connell, 2002).

Although no form of masculinity is universal, there are those which share similar harmful traits and result in negative outcomes (Muparamoto, 2012). These we call toxic masculinities, which are further defined as “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (Kupers, 2005, p. 714). Using the term “toxic masculinity” is helpful here in that it identifies those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are destructive, such as misogyny, entitlement, and violent domination (Connell, 2002; Kupers, 2005). Toxic masculinity is implicated in a range of harmful effects including violence against women, which is a result of the hierarchy it perpetuates wherein women are less valuable (Connell, 2002; Kupers, 2005). Further, toxic masculinity awards power and status to men regardless of their treatment of others, meaning that women are often the ones facing

the consequences for male actions—for example, cases in which violent men go unpunished while their female victims are left to navigate the aftermath (Elliot, 2018).

While masculinities across geographies and cultures vary as diverse and intricate systems, the image of masculinity often presented in global media and popular culture is frequently oversimplified and emphasizes toxic masculine behaviors and norms (Elliot, 2018). It is for this reason that the literature on toxic masculinity is important. While the concept of toxic masculinity is not new, it has yet to be applied to rejection violence.

Rejection as a reaction to violence

There is much literature devoted to the concept of rejection sensitivity, defined as “The degree to which an individual is preoccupied with and reacts to perceptions of being rejected in a social relationship or interaction” (Galliher & Bentley, 2010, p. 604).

Rejection sensitivity causes people to anxiously expect rejection and react disproportionately to it (Ayduk, Gyural, & Luerssen, 2008). This fear and anticipation of rejection goes deeper, however; it relates to the human need to belong, where rejection is seen as confirmation that one does not fit in (Ayduk et al., 2008; Ayduk, Medoza-Denton, Mischel, Downey, Peak, & Rodriguez, 2000). People who rate high in rejection sensitivity are more likely to react to rejection with aggression, because they see it as a statement about their self-worth (Ayduk et al., 2000).

Rejection violence has often been discussed in the literature, though it is not often termed as such. Any discussion of intimate partner violence or stalking is also in part a discussion of rejection violence. For example, research on intimate partner violence shows that the most dangerous period for a woman in an abusive relationship is the period in which she attempts to leave; as a reaction to this rejection and loss of power, the

abuser may turn violent (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2005). Further, abusive individuals may turn toward stalking their ex-partner after the termination of the relationship.

Dennison and Stewart write that “much of what is perceived to be stalking occurs with the apparent motive to initiate a relationship or to reinstate a relationship” (2006, p. 325).

Both stalking and post-relationship violence can be construed as rejection violence.

The literature discussing intimate partner violence also takes note of how rejection during a relationship—not just after its termination—can lead to violence. As Brown, James, and Taylor write, “Men’s experience of rejection and shame [are] significant factors in the landscape of men’s violence towards female partners” (2010, p. 281). The authors further write about the rejection-abuse cycle, which is driven by men’s feelings of rejection within the relationship and results in attacks on the perceived source (his partner). In the rejection-abuse cycle, the man perceives his partner’s behavior as rejection, and therefore a threat to his ego and sense of self. This creates a feeling of shame, which the man feels the need to defend against by becoming psychologically or physically violent. This violence serves to soothe the man’s disrupted sense of self and wounded pride. The abuse in such a situation “could also be viewed as his automatic attempt to ‘control’ his own distress by ‘controlling’ what he perceives as the source of rejection, thus triumphing over it” (Brown, James, & Taylor, 2010, p. 287). By becoming violent, the man feels as though he has achieved victory by restoring his sense of self.

Furthermore, there is extensive literature that addresses street harassment and the violence committed against women in public spaces (Adur & Jha, 2018; Bharucha & Khatri, 2018; Bowman, 1993). A significant portion of the rejection violence that women in the current study face is perpetrated by strangers in public spaces, and as such can be

related to street harassment. Street harassment is defined in the literature as “the harassment of women in public places by men who are strangers to them” (Bowman, 1993, p. 519). Street harassment often includes behaviors such as catcalling, groping, and other similar psychologically and/or physically violent behaviors carried out by men which serve to reinforce women’s position in a gendered world via the application of fear (Bharucha & Khatri, 2018). This fear translates into a wariness of public spaces and is common in women throughout the world; however, it has been largely ignored in the “official” discussion of violence against women, and has not received as much attention from lawmaking bodies as other forms of gender-based violence (Adur & Jha, 2018; Bowman, 1993). The United Nations has only recently addressed street harassment, naming it a global pandemic and asserting its place as a form of gender-based violence which is indicative of misogynistic cultures and known as a precursor to violent assaults (Adur & Jha, 2018). In many of the cases studied, what begins as verbal street harassment culminates in violence; the man offers an unsolicited comment or remark (a catcall, for example) and turns violent when his attentions are ignored or rebuffed. According to Adur and Jha (2018), when the woman being targeted shows no intention of satisfying the male harasser’s sexual or romantic desires, the harasser then feels the need to teach their target a lesson. This motivation is also often found in cases of rejection violence, where wounded pride and challenges to male power are met with a desire to punish the offending party.

As is the case with other forms of gender-based violence, much of the literature on street harassment notes how heteronormative relationships between men and women are historically situated as proprietary. It denotes men’s ownership of both women and

public space. When street harassment occurs, women are denied the freedom to be comfortable in public space, which effectively drives them back into the private sphere (Bowman, 1993). This demarcates the public sphere as a male-dominated space, one into which women may not venture without submitting themselves to male surveillance and control. To be in public means also to be vulnerable to unwanted sexualization and, by extension, to violence—it becomes the price women must pay to actively participate in public society (Bowman, 1993). Because many cases of rejection violence occur between strangers in public, male ownership of the public sphere is particularly important to note in discussions of rejection violence.

As this review of the literature shows, there is much research to be found on rejection violence, even if it is not always termed as such. From this brief summary one can conclude that there is indeed a relationship between toxic masculinity and the perpetration of rejection violence—a relationship which the following conceptual framework will more clearly define.

Chapter III

Conceptual Framework

This research is informed by a conceptual framework that draws on concepts of gender, masculinity and toxic masculinity to inform the analysis. While many of these concepts are well-known sociological terms, they provide a lens through which to view and understand the behaviors of focus – i.e. rejection violence. The following section therefore begins with the more basic concept of gender before providing further definitions and discussion of masculinity and toxic masculinity.

From youth, people are socialized to perform gender (Renzetti, 2013). They consistently and unconsciously engage in gender categorization and are likewise aware that others are categorizing them; people “make choices about how we look and act in a given situation based on how we think others might interpret our appearance and behavior” (Muparamoto, 2012, p. 51-2). This process is called accountability and it describes the ways in which individuals are taught to perform gender. Because gender is something alive—something society expects people to act out, not passively accept—it also carries with it rules about how that performance should look (Renzetti, 2013). People are expected to perform gender in very specific ways which will position them as either masculine or feminine members of society. This in and of itself is not necessarily harmful; there is no way of escaping socialization. Rather, it is because the gendered socialization people most often experience promotes the domination of men over women that it is toxic. In toxic masculinity, “what is considered masculine is more highly valued than what is considered female” (Renzetti, 2013, p. 8), and this is where the problem begins. It is widely accepted that people are taught to behave differently depending upon

their gender, and since toxic masculinity is a system in which male power and female subordination must be maintained at all costs, this socialization is conducive to toxic behaviors as a means to that end. To be masculine is to be strong and dominant; to be feminine is to be weak and subordinate. These are the gender norms as governed by toxic masculinity, and we are expected to act out these norms through our everyday interactions with others (Renzetti, 2013).

This expected performance, however, is not only about enacting one's own personal gender identity. Men are expected not only to act out masculinity, but also to actively discard femininity; gender is always relational (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 2004). This expectation illustrates how toxic masculinity views the feminine (and, by extension, women) as lesser. Behaviors which are considered feminine are weak and undesirable, whereas masculine behaviors are indicative of dominance and power. Men are supposed to actively suppress feminine ideas and behaviors, because they are not as good as masculine ones. In a system which encourages the constant oppression of the feminine, the outcome for women can only be negative.

While not all forms of masculinity are inherently toxic, there are many which contain toxic ideologies and traits. A structure is defined as toxic when it promotes negative outcomes, and toxic masculinity certainly achieves this; in particular, it displays its toxicity in the attitudes it promotes about what it means to perform masculinity and in the ways it objectifies and depersonalizes women (Muparamoto, 2012).

Toxic masculinity can be defined as “a specific model of manhood, geared toward dominance and control. . .that views women. . .as inferior, sees sex as an act, not of affection but domination, and which valorizes violence as the way to prove one's self to

the world” (Marcotte, 2016, p. 1). Toxic masculinity is governed by rules about gender norms, such as what it means to be masculine or feminine, and the social behavior such norms promote is ingrained in us from the time we are born (Renzetti, 2013). Further, this heavily gendered socialization is not limited in its geographic scope; the consequences of toxic masculinity “cut across race and ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures” (Haider, 2016, p. 563). The cases of rejection violence enumerated in this thesis are spread out across countries and continents for this reason: the detrimental outcomes associated with toxic masculinities are not isolated to certain areas of the world—they are pervasive (Haider, 2016).

The guidelines for adequately performing masculinity in a heteronormative system largely revolve around sexual and/or romantic success with women (Muparamoto, 2012). Under toxic masculinity, women are considered objects; they are primarily seen as means to an end, whether that end is sex or childbearing. Sleeping with women is a badge of honor, a triumph; failure to do is a mark of shame (Brown, James, & Taylor, 2010). This ideology promotes intolerance toward women and creates a cultural space wherein male violence functions as not only a means of guardianship (i.e., protecting virtue) but also of “policing and enforcing the patriarchal order” (Haider, 2016, p. 559; Muparamoto, 2012).

There are two primary ideologies that toxic masculinity promotes, and those are narcissistic entitlement and masculine honor beliefs (LeBreton, Baysinger, Abbey, & Jacques-Tiura, 2013; Stratmoen, Greer, Martens, & Saucier, 2017). According to LeBreton et al. (2013), narcissistic entitlement in the context of masculinity can be defined as the common belief that men deserve sexual gratification from women. This

view posits not only that men are inherently entitled to sex, but that women are required to provide it. Men who subscribe to this belief may be more exploitative of women and adopt a viewpoint which depersonalizes and objectifies women in the extreme.

Possessing an exploitative view of women has been shown in previous research to be a strong predictor of sexual assault, so it is no stretch to assume that such a viewpoint could be indicative of potential rejection violence as well. Because hegemonic masculinity also promotes hostility toward women as a means of reinforcing male dominance, this creates a situation in which men feel not only that they are sexually entitled to women, but also that it is fair to respond to rejection of sexual advances with violence. Feelings of entitlement to sex create expectations for receiving it whenever it is wished for, which in turn creates a justification for use of violence when it is wished for yet not received (LeBreton et al., 2013). Violent crime is presented as a resource which men can use to accomplish masculinity in a particular setting when other means may have already failed (Renzetti, 2013). In short: “Male power and female subordination are preserved through . . .the threat or actual use of violence” (p. 39, Renzetti, 2013).

Haider (2016) writes that “there is a gap between rage and violence” (p. 560); toxic masculinity bridges this gap, and it does so through masculine honor beliefs. If narcissistic entitlement dictates that men feel that women owe them sexually, then masculine honor beliefs dictate how they should react should that entitlement be called into question (Stratmoen et al., 2017). Masculine honor beliefs state that men must behave aggressively in response to perceived threats or insults (i.e., rejection) to maintain their status as members of the heteronormative masculine hegemony. As Haider writes, “If violence is constitutive of masculinity, then violence becomes the mode by which one

asserts one's masculinity" (Stratmoen et al., 2017, p. 558). In other words, while the rage at being rejected comes from feelings of entitlement, the violence itself comes from the need to restore one's honor. Because romantic and sexual rejection is seen as insulting and threatening to one's masculinity, men who hold strongly internalized masculine honor beliefs see such rejection as an appropriate catalyst for violence. Rejection is viewed as insulting because it deprives men of that which they are supposedly entitled and indicates that the woman may not value them as much as they value themselves, and to fail to respond to such an insult with violence would be to lose one's honor and therefore one's place as a dominant masculine figure – their status in society.

Unsurprisingly, men who hold strong honor beliefs are more likely to respond to threats against their social worth with violence; however, it is interesting to note that these individuals are usually the ones who have the strongest feelings of failure in regard to performing masculinity. Research shows that men who possess (or *feel* like they possess) marginalized masculinities already have feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy, and so they more staunchly defend their social worth and honor than those who feel as if they are already adequately performing masculinity (Smith & Lewis, 2009). The rejection itself is then seen as even more of a threat because of the man's preexisting feelings of inadequacy and is therefore more likely to result in violence (Stratmoen et al., 2017).

The existing literature states that men who fail or refuse to obtain sex with women—men who possess or perform marginalized masculinities--are often left with feelings of inferiority, because they are living in a society with tells them that failure to ascribe to and adequately perform within the bounds of masculinity means one has failed to live up to one's potential (DiMuccio, Yost, & Helweg-Larsen, 2017). They are then

taught that their failure to demonstrate their masculinity is deserving of social punishment and ostracization—essentially, that their status as a man is being revoked, and that they are not welcome members of masculine society. This, the literature shows, can often result in violence, particularly where rejection is a primary catalyst: in the setting of toxic masculinity, female rejection of male advances is viewed as a literal *threat*, because it calls into question the man’s ability to perform his masculine role (Brown et al., 2010; DiMuccio et al., 2017; Messner, 2004; Sinclair, Ladny, & Lyndon, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck, Nesdale, Webb, Khatibi, & Downey, 2016).

If a man’s action fail to adequately posit him as masculine, he may be punished socially, and that threat of ostracization is always looming (DiMuccio, et al., 2017). An illustration of the consequences of this threat is portrayed in an article by Messerschmidt (2017), written about two young men who sexually abused their younger female family members. Both men felt an overpowering need to be considered heteromasculine, which toxic masculinity promotes. Because they were unsuccessful at obtaining sex from women their age—an area in which they perceived their male peers to be succeeding, causing them further feelings of ostracization—they turned to sexually abusing young girls in their families, stating that the abuse finally made them feel “successful” (Messerschmidt, 2017, p. 119). This viewpoint reflects the ideal promoted by toxic masculinity that sex with women equals success; further, it matters only that sex is obtained, not whether the woman (or girl) consents. Men are taught that sleeping with—or more importantly, possessing and controlling—women is central to their masculinity; this is why they see romantic/sexual rejection as an act of war on their manhood (Muparamoto, 2012). Rather than persisting in their pursuit of successful masculinity

through consensual sex, the boys in the Messerschmidt article “reflexively chose to turn to a masculine behavior that was available to [them]. . . expressing physical control and power over younger girls through sexuality” (Messerschmidt, 2017, p. 118).

This is the thought process that toxic masculinity instills in many men from the time they are young: sex with women is a signifier of dominant masculinity, and dominant masculinity is the ultimate success. The Messerschmidt article also perfectly demonstrates how failure to adequately perform masculinity can result in violence as a means of masculinity reinforcement; the “achieve at all costs” attitude is a direct contributor to rejection violence—even when that violence is directed at someone other than the initial rejecter, as the article demonstrates. Whether the rejected party goes home and abuses a younger family member or immediately attacks the rejecter, the violence is still a result of being unable to obtain sex consensually and the ensuing feeling of failure. When sex is not available, violence becomes the fallback for performing masculinity, and any system in which violence is a vital piece is toxic by nature. It is therefore expected here that there will be a strong relationship between the presence of characteristics indicative of toxic masculinity and rejection violence.

Chapter IV

Methods

This study is a qualitative document analysis (QDA). QDA is used as a means for “collecting and analyzing interpretively a systematically selected set of documents, including text and/or visual images, in an effort to uncover their meaning, themes, and cultural and social significance” (Kraska & Neuman, 2012, p. 268). Further, QDA allows researchers to not only uncover but also compare the meanings, themes, and cultural/social significance of data within the selected set of documents. QDA is typically conducted on already existing documents, with the researcher immersing themselves into deciphering meanings, gaining insights, and constructing theories as opposed to creating or collecting new documents firsthand (Kraska & Neuman, 2012). It is in this way—the analysis of already existing research—that the present study is conducted.

Within the spectrum of QDA, the current study further employs a combination of thematic content analysis and discourse analysis. Thematic content analysis is defined as research which portrays the thematic content of texts by identifying common themes for analysis (Anderson, 2007). This method was chosen because upon reviewing the cases several themes quickly emerged and analysis of them became a necessary part of the study. For this part of the analysis, each case was scrutinized for themes, a list of which can be found in the Findings and Analysis section of this study.

Discourse analysis can be defined as the analysis of connected writing (Harris, 1952). It is utilized to determine patterns for particular texts, and allows conclusions to be drawn from said patterns. For the discourse analysis in this study the content of the

current research on both rejection and masculinity were analyzed, and particular attention was paid to the patterns present for the concepts of toxic masculinity and rejection sensitivity.

Data collection

In the current study, content and discourse analysis were applied to news media articles and blog posts which recount cases of male-on-female rejection violence. News media is an appropriate data source because real cases of rejection violence must be analyzed in order to determine what themes are common among them. The cases were found through Google searching for the terms “women attacked for rejection” and “rejection violence.” The search criteria included cases that were reported between 2012 and 2017. The news articles and blog posts examined were from multiple countries, although most of those included were taken from sources within the United States, as most of the cases uncovered took place there. All cases from other countries came from local news media but were printed in English. Over 50 individual cases within more than 40 news media articles and blog posts were discovered, all occurring within the last six years.

Themes established themselves upon review of the case, quickly emerging as common threads. Viewed interpretively, these cases provided an opportunity for a thorough appreciation and comprehension of their meaning and significance as it is related to larger issues of toxic masculine violence. The cases were analyzed in light of the research gathered and detailed in the literature review, and further links were identified between the literature and the context of the cases themselves.

Chapter V

Findings and Analysis

From the Google search, over 50 cases of rejection violence were located within more than 40 news media articles and blog posts. Most cases were carried out in the United States, with only four coming from other countries, including England, India, Malaysia, and South Korea. The age of the victims varied; the youngest victim was three years old, and several of the victims were teenagers. The race of the victims and/or perpetrators was rarely mentioned in the articles and blogs studied, so it is impossible to make any definitive statements about race. In all cases studied the victims were female and the offenders were male. In 29 of the cases a weapon was used, and weapons included a brick, a glass, a basketball, poison, acid, pepper spray, knives, and guns. The rest of the cases were simple assaults where the offender used only their body to carry out the attack. Of the cases studied, the victim and perpetrator were strangers in 27 instances, and the rest of the cases involved victims who knew their attacker personally, including those who had an intimate relationship with their attacker.

The rejection violence that emerged during the analysis did not take one particular form, rather it was varied and directed both at the primary victim (i.e. the woman of focus) as well as secondary victims (their friends and families). For example, one woman was stabbed to death for returning her boyfriend's engagement ring (Davis, 2016), while in another instance a man murdered eight people, including his ex-girlfriend, because she changed the locks to keep him out (USA Today, 2015). In the former case, the only victim was the primary one; in the latter, there were clearly many secondary victims.

Despite these variations, common themes did emerge. These themes included the use of aggressive and/or derogatory language, the lack of ulterior motives for the violence, the victim's method of rejection, the victim-blaming which occurs in reaction to the violence, the dehumanization of women, narcissistic entitlement, and masculine honor beliefs. Each of these themes is explored in detail in the following sections.

Violence language

In seven of the cases studied, the offender uses sexist or derogatory language toward the victim before and/or during the attack. One example is a case where a man threw a glass “like a baseball pitcher” into a woman’s face, because she told him that his dancing on her was inappropriate (Clemons, 2016). The man not only threw the glass in reaction to the woman’s rejection, but also called her “a dumb ugly bitch” (Clemons, 2016, p. 1). In another case, a woman ran away from a man pursuing her after leaving a bar, whereupon he shouted that she was “stupid” and a “bitch” (“When Women Refuse”, n.d.). Another case related the story of a woman who awoke the morning after rejecting her ex-boyfriend to find that he had covered her car in sexist epithets such as “slut, bitch, [and] whore” (“When Women Refuse, n.d.). Another man referred to a woman who rejected him as the “dumbest bitch [he] had ever met” (Markus, 2016).

This use of language – particularly gendered words like bitch, whore, and slut– reflects the hierarchy that toxic masculinity perpetuates, and the use of sexist language such as this is indicative of a view wherein the woman is a lesser object. Such language posits women as inferior and, in instances like the aforementioned cases, is used as a means of reminding them of their place in the public sphere. For a perfect stranger to call a woman “a dumb ugly bitch” (Clemons, 2016, p. 1) is proof of his need to remind her of

her place—a place where she is expected to satisfy his whims by reacting positively to his advances and, by not doing so, has positioned herself as an enemy. Further, the use of words like “whore” and “bitch” is particularly gendered; these are not words often aimed at men, and especially not in the context of rejection violence. Such gendered language is used as a means of lashing out at the woman in much the same way as the attack itself; it is a retaliatory method of restoring honor and masculinity to the man who feels he has suffered the loss of both.

Lack of ulterior motives

In all the cases studied, there is no clear motivation behind the violence that occurred aside from the rejection itself. In one case, passersby had to fight off a man who immediately began stabbing a woman he did not know after she dismissed his attempts to sexually pursue her (Keaton, 2017). The survivor confirmed that she did not know the man; he simply propositioned her sexually, she said no, and he began his attack. The details of this case, particularly the fact that the woman did not know her attacker and that they had no other conversation, make it highly unlikely that there could have been another reason for the man’s violence toward her. This is similarly reflected in other cases; in another instance, a man slammed a pregnant woman into the ground and stabbed her in the abdomen because she did not respond to his advances (Wilson, 2014). In this case the woman did not even speak to the man; she ignored him and he attacked her.

Further, there are some cases in which the perpetrator outright admits his motivations after the fact. In the case of a man who brutally murdered and mutilated a woman for rejecting his marriage proposal, he told police that the motivation for his crime was her rejection (Robinson, 2017). In another instance, a man stabbed a woman

for returning a gift he had sent her, later telling police “I ambushed her. . .and asked her [about the gift]. I lost my temper and stabbed her many times because she didn’t clearly answer” (Kyodo, 2016). Yet another case reveals a man who told police he had enlisted two juveniles to carry out an acid attack on a woman because she rejected his marriage proposal (Bhardwaj, 2014).

All these cases illustrate that the main factor in the attacks was the woman’s rejection. Based on the conceptual framework I have outlined, this is likely due to strongly held masculine honor beliefs and narcissistic entitlement. The men behind these attacks were attempting to perform masculinity by securing female attention and, when their attempts failed, felt as if they were being cheated out of something that they were inherently owed. Further, their failure to perform what they viewed as masculine behavior likely left them feeling inferior, which in turn led to violent behavior as a means of reclaiming their lost masculinity. Whether the attacker admitted it, or the facts of the case simply show it, many cases of rejection violence have no ulterior motive; the only discernible drive is to punish the victim for the crime of saying no.

Victim blaming & method of rejection

The toxicity of hegemonic masculinity is particularly evident in view of reactions to cases of rejection violence. For example, in the case of the young girl who was knocked off her bike by a boy whose catcalls she rejected, Internet users left comments stating, “Hope the concrete washed her mouth. Moral of the story: don’t be a bitch for no reason ladies” (Warren, 2015). This kind of statement is a prime example of how toxic masculinity sustains itself; not only does it promote rejection violence in the first place, it applauds it after the fact. The girl in this case was expected to respond favorably, and

because she did not, toxic masculinity dictated that she deserved what she got (Warren, 2015). Not only is this reinforcing heteronormative patriarchal gender relations, but it is communicating to the girl that her wants, needs, and consent in the matter is irrelevant and to ignore the wants of a boy risks violence/leads to violence.

This socialization is carried on into adulthood as evident in the case of Twitter user @EricaaRaynee, who shared her experience with being punched in the face by a man whom she refused to give her phone number (Clutch, 2016). She received a similar response: replies to her story outright stated that she had “disrespected” her attacker by refusing to give him her number and that the violence she experienced was therefore her fault. Others agreed and even went so far as to analyze the photo of her facial injuries in order to accuse her of lying about how they occurred (Clutch, 2016). She was painted as a “deserving” victim – a woman who got what was coming to her based on her own actions. This is a clear case of victim blaming, where the scrutiny fell upon the victim and her behavior as opposed to her attacker’s. There are few comments which demonize the man for his reaction to rejection; rather, the entire focus seems to be on what she could have done to avoid being assaulted—if she was assaulted at all.

Similar responses were yet again prevalent in the Elliot Rodger case; on a Facebook page dedicated to uplifting Rodger as an “American hero,” users left comments stating that Rodger was probably a “nice gentleman guy who just got rejected by women into insanity” (Stratmoen et al., 2017, p. 151). Despite the fact that none of the victims in these cases initiated any sort of violence against their attackers, they are still blamed for the violence they experienced, and the attackers are painted as martyrs who only acted as reasonable, hetero-masculine men should when their claim to a woman’s body is denied.

Such sympathy for the perpetrators of rejection violence is reminiscent of the “incel” (or “involuntarily celibate”) movement, wherein men who feel they are owed sex yet are not receiving it lament their misfortune with women (Williams, 2018). The internet is full of message boards and forums in which self-described incels commiserate with one another, positing themselves as poor, neglected, unwanted innocents against whom life has been impossibly rigged. Their conversation does not stop at self-pity, however; they also discuss ways to punish women for not wanting to have sex with them. This often includes talk of mass rape fantasies and how to stalk women without being arrested. While the movement largely exists online, it carries over into the real world in a deadly way, and there are tens of thousands of men who identify as incels. The incel movement has taken responsibility for a number of mass murders, including a 2018 attack in Toronto wherein a man who was involved in the movement drove a van into a crowd, killing ten people. They have also taken credit for the Elliot Rodger case, and his manifesto stands as a testament to the self-pitying, violent nature of the group (Williams, 2018).

Another common reaction to rejection violence is to argue that if the victims had only reacted more politely—been softer and more indirect, let the attacker “down easy”—they would not have experienced violence. This is predicated on hegemonic constructions of US femininity, that women should be passive, weak, polite, and take up little space (Renzetti, 2013). It also conveys the message that it is a woman’s job to “manage” male violence, especially when it is directed at them. Despite this, the research shows that using more indirect methods of rejection does not necessarily result in more favorable outcomes (Sinclair, Ladny, & Lyndon, 2011). While women who are blunt in

their rejection of men's advances may be more likely to experience immediate violence, women who are demurer in their rejections are more likely to continue to be harassed.

Sinclair et al. (2011) write that an internal rejection, or a rejection that clearly communicates the woman's disinterest in the man himself, may be the only kind of rejection likely to lead to immediate violence—as opposed to external rejection, which lets the man down gently by leading him to believe that factors besides plain disinterest are involved in the rejection. The problem with external rejection, however, is that it is more easily ignored; it “may only lead to continued, or even enhanced, unwanted pursuit as the rejected pursuer may maintain hope for a relationship and thus may persist to wait out. . .or overcome the situational obstacle” (Sinclair et al., 2011, p. 505). This is called obsessive relational intrusion (ORI), which is defined as “unwanted and repeated pursuit or invasion of an individual's sense of privacy by a stranger or acquaintance who either desires or presumes an intimate relationship” (Sinclair et al., 2011, p. 503). If allowed to continue—through, for example, an external or “soft” rejection—ORI can develop into behaviors like stalking...which typically culminate in some form of violence. The question is not whether or not a softer or easier rejection would prevent rejection violence; it is how long it will delay it. While it should be noted that not all cases of rejection end in violence, it should also be noted that men who are likely to perpetrate rejection violence will perpetrate it whether it is immediately after the fact or sometime in the future after developing ORI (Sinclair et al., 2011).

Moreover, the argument that women should alter their attitude toward rejection is victim blaming at its most potent. The onus should not be on women to prevent the violence against them; it should be on men as individuals. The choice to perpetrate or not

perpetrate rejection violence belongs to the men themselves. Further, while some literature points out the “vulnerability” (Hyde, Drennan, & Howlett, 2009, p. 238) that men feel upon being romantically or sexually rejected, it should be noted that this vulnerability is completely different from the vulnerability that women feel upon rejecting them. In a rejection situation, men are afraid that they will fail and be seen as weak; women, on the other hand, are afraid they will be harmed or even killed for saying no. This dichotomy is a direct result of the power differential instituted by toxic masculinity. Men’s dominance is so important in this system that it is worth committing violence to maintain (Haider, 2016).

The dehumanization of women

The ultimate evil behind sexuality is the human female. They are the main instigators of sex. They control which men get it and which men don’t. Women are flawed creatures, and my mistreatment at their hands has made me realize this sad truth. There is something very twisted and wrong with the way their brains are wired. They think like beasts, and in truth, they are beasts. Women are incapable of having morals or thinking rationally. . . Women should not have the right to choose who to mate and breed with. That decision should be made for them by rational men of intelligence. (Rodger, 2014, p. 136)

The above quote comes from Elliot Rodger’s manifesto (2014). Within the manifesto he expresses this sentiment and many others of a similar tone, repeatedly using language which dehumanizes women and illustrates their inferior nature. In some instances he does not even refer to women as “women”—instead, he calls them “the females of the human species” and “creatures” (Rodger, 2014, p. 1; p. 41). This sounds particularly animalistic, invoking the language that one might use when referring to a lesser being. Throughout his manifesto Rodger consistently uses dehumanizing language to delegate women to less-than-human status.

The dehumanization of women is prevalent in cases of rejection violence, present in at least five of the cases studied. In another such case, the perpetrator went so far as to say “it was easy” to murder a coworker who turned down his romantic pursuits (Bult, 2016). Another man stated that he “didn’t feel anything” after he shot a woman for saying she was interested in dating someone else (Gruber-Miller, 2016). In both these instances, the offenders discuss their violence as if it were as simple as killing a fly; there is no sense of shame or remorse from either (Bult, 2016; Gruber-Miller, 2016). The lack of guilt over killing another human being might suggest that the perpetrators did not even see the victim as human; they were easy to kill because they were “less” in some way.

As Schwalbe (1992) writes, any strategy for the maintenance of power most likely involves the dehumanization of and lack of empathy toward other groups. Since toxic masculinity positions men and women as binary opposites who are competitors for power (Haider, 2016), this dehumanization is a means of ensuring that men come out on top. If women are relegated to less-than-human status, they are not equals, people of even human; they are subjects that can be more readily subjected to violence or death.

Narcissistic entitlement

Narcissistic entitlement is characterized by feelings of superiority, vanity, and inflated sense of self, a combination which results in the feeling that one is deserving of sex (Lebreton et al., 2013). Those who exhibit traits of narcissistic entitlement are also known to respond aggressively to ego threats; it has been noted that feelings of distress after rejection may intensify depending upon one’s level of narcissism, and that individuals who possess narcissistic traits externalize their failures by blaming others (Kelly, 2001). Further, feelings of entitlement “may foster expectations for receiving

sexual favors and lead to coercion in response to perceived rejection by the victim” (Lebreton et al., 2014, p. 820). In some cases, this coercion comes in the form of violence.

An inflated ego and the feeling that one is owed sex combined with the tendency toward aggression should one be denied it is often demonstrated by perpetrators of rejection violence. While can be argued that narcissistic entitlement was present in all cases studied, it was an obvious factor in at least three cases, wherein the offender verbally expressed his view that he was entitled to the victim’s sexual and/or romantic attention. In a particularly illustrative case, a man who attacked at least four Asian women in New York wrote a blog post wherein he stated, “I just couldn’t understand why Asian woman didn’t find me attractive” (Roy, 2015, p. 1). The man simply expected that the women he approached would find him attractive and want to say yes to his advances; when this turned out to be false, he reacted aggressively.

I talked to nearly 1500 Asian women and none of them took time out of their day to say hello. . . I became furious. . . I knew the only way I could overcome that sense of rejection-would start by assaulting the women that carelessly rejected me (Roy, 2015, p. 1).

The man felt entitled to attention from Asian woman in particular and became violent in reaction to their rejection.

Elliot Rodger also exhibited signs of narcissistic entitlement; in his manifesto he writes that his life is “tragic” because “the pleasures of sex and love” have been denied to him (Rodger, 2014, p. 20). This statement implies a belief that such “pleasures” are to be

expected and demanded. Later in his manifesto Rodger returns to this idea, questioning why women have never been attracted to him or given him their love and affection when he so clearly deserves it. Finally, he writes, “I will punish all females for the crime of depriving me of sex” (Rodger, 2014, p. 132). Not only does Rodger feel that he is owed sex and love from women—he feels that depriving him of those things is an actual crime which warrants retribution.

These cases illustrate well the concept of narcissistic entitlement. In both instances, the perpetrators felt that they *deserved* love and sex from women, and had difficulty understanding why they were not receiving what they deserved (Rodger, 2014; Roy, 2015). This inability to fathom how one could not receive something they felt they were owed unfortunately resulted in violence, reinforcing the notion that those who possess narcissistic tendencies are likely to respond to rejection with violence (Kelly, 2001; Lebreton et al., 2014).

Masculine honor beliefs

It could easily be argued that all the cases analyzed for this study exhibit signs of masculine honor beliefs held by the perpetrator. The perpetrators in these cases feel personally insulted by women’s rejection, and masculine honor ideology explains why. Masculine honor beliefs are defined as cultural sets of norms that dictate how men should behave, particularly in response to insults (Stratmoen et al., 2017). Those who hold masculine honor beliefs find rejection insulting because it is an indicator that others do not find the individual as valuable as they find themselves. Individuals who subscribe to masculine honor ideology are particularly vigilant about defending their own self-worth – so rejection is viewed not only as insulting, but also as an indefensible attack on their

self-image. Naturally these feelings lead to anger upon being rejected, and since toxic masculinity promotes aggression as a reasonable response to anger, violence ensues (Stratmoen et al., 2017).

Because masculine honor ideology posits rejection as a personal insult – and because it encourages aggression as a reaction to insults – it is not hard to imagine its presence in most, if not all, cases of rejection violence. Its position as part of toxic masculinity also makes it pervasive, so it is likely that anyone exposed to toxic masculine ideology has also been exposed to masculine honor beliefs.

There are some cases where the presence of masculine honor beliefs is particularly evident: Elliot Rodger, for example, felt that his lack of sexual success besmirched his honor, hence his belief that he must use violence to redeem himself. This attitude implies a feeling of ownership toward women as well as a belief that failing to obtain sex from them was a mark against his person (Rodger, 2014). Because masculine honor beliefs “dictate that men must respond aggressively to threat or insult in order to create and maintain their desired masculine reputations” (Stratmoen et al., 2017, p. 1), Rodger decided that an appropriate response to perceived rejection was violence. The people he murdered and injured that day died because of Rodger’s need to maintain a masculine reputation, one way or another. The same can be said for the case where 25-year-old Tyrelle Shaw attacked multiple women, noting that he had complimented 100 women but had failed to obtain a date with any of them, which he saw as an insult to his masculinity (Roy, 2015). Shaw later committed suicide to avoid being caught by police, writing in his last note that he “couldn’t understand” women’s lack of attraction to him. This case illustrates how deeply masculine honor beliefs are held by some: because of his

feelings of entitlement and wounded masculinity, Shaw not only injured others, but also took his own life. These choices are clearly a result of his interpretation of rejection as an insulting, personal failure.

Each theme detailed above (language, lack of ulterior motives, method of rejection, victim blaming, dehumanization, narcissistic entitlement, and masculine honor beliefs) is a building block. While any one of these themes alone might not point to toxic masculinity as a major aspect of rejection violence, the presence of multiple themes—especially where multiple themes are present in single cases—indicates that it is indeed an overwhelming factor. Toxic masculinity encourages and even demands such behaviors from men, so it is no surprise that their presence is evident in cases of rejection violence.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

Whether we would like to view it as such or not, rejection violence has become a pervasive global phenomenon. It takes minimal effort (a few minutes and a Google search at most) to uncover dozens of cases in recent years wherein women have been attacked and frequently even murdered for turning a man down—whether in response to casual sex, a marriage proposal, or even a refusal to acknowledge an advance at all (Feldscher, 2012; Kutner, n.d.; Robinson, 2017). These are not isolated incidents, and the fact that they are so often treated as such makes them even more dangerous; when we fail to recognize the validity of rejection violence as a problem in women’s lives, we fail to analyze its causes and therefore to provide solutions.

This study intends to establish clear links between toxic masculinity and rejection violence that have not often been analyzed, and even further research is needed. The current study involves a limited number of cases, and future research could include a wider range of behaviors. For example, future research on rejection violence could include a more in-depth look at street harassment and stalking behaviors; although previous research on both is easy to find, neither topic has been thoroughly studied through the lens of rejection violence as it is established here. Further, a deeper analysis of the relationship between gender socialization, toxic masculinity, and rejection violence needs to occur for us to fully understand the ways that gender is taught and subsequently internalized and performed, and how that education can create rejection violence scenarios.

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