Introduction

The Gender Police

In October 1997, I heard on the radio that Luke Woodham, a sixteen-year-old, had killed two classmates and wounded seven others in a school shooting in Pearl, Mississippi. In a note, Luke declared: “I am not insane. I am angry. I killed because people like me are mistreated every day.” He explained that he was tired of being called a “faggot”; he was additionally enraged that his girlfriend—whom he killed in the shooting—had broken up with him.

At the start of the Woodham case, I began examining school shootings. Two months after the massacre in Mississippi came a shooting in Kentucky, then one in Arkansas that same month, and then another in Arkansas three months later in March 1998. There was a shooting in Pennsylvania that April, in Tennessee that May, and then in Oregon that same month, where two students were killed and twenty-two wounded. A year and a half later, on April 20, 1999, as I was driving home from my job as a school social worker, I heard about the Columbine shooting on the radio. I pulled the car over and sat paralyzed as I heard the latest terror unfold.

I continued to study these cases and began to look at shootings prior to Woodham, while also watching one after another take place. This book covers shootings over three decades: 1979 to 2009. I am still struck by the similarities among them. In almost every one, perpetrators targeted other boys who had called them names associated with homosexuality, girls who had rejected them, or both. Even in cases when the shooters lashed out against their schools for perceived injustices related to discipline or academic assessments, gender pressures often played a role: the shooters talked about these actions as challenges to their masculinity.
It became clear, as I uncovered the roots of these shootings, that children and teens continue to feel forced to conform to a narrow set of gender expectations in order to be accepted. Things have clearly grown worse, however, since my own childhood, when the dozen or so school shootings that occurred in the seventies barely registered in the national consciousness. It is more common today for those victimized in school to pick up guns and turn them on fellow students.

Some difficult economic and social circumstances have developed over these three decades, and since the turn of the century new challenges have surely made life even harder for children and adults alike. These forces add pressure to school environments, which are often the only social spaces children have. In many of the towns and cities where school shootings took place, everyone attended the same school. For those who were tormented during the school day, extracurricular activities were just extensions of the same environment. Many of these children seemed to have no way out. They felt beleaguered by other youth in their school, as well as by some school faculty who spoke derisively to them or who even joined in the bullying.

Ideally students shouldn’t need to find alternative spaces to feel safe and accepted. Schools are responsible for helping students become self-reflective, self-actualized, compassionate, and civic-minded people. Instead, teachers often become resented authority figures, while students become passive and docile, or rebellious and then accused of “acting out.” The obsession with gender, status, obedience, and competition that occupies our students undermines their relationships with themselves and with others, as well as their ability to learn and thrive. In many of our schools, precious opportunities for creating community and developing critical thinking are lost; instead, perhaps more than ever before, cutthroat competition, cruelty, isolation, and anxiety prevail.

Over the last thirty years, school shootings have gone from a rare occurrence to a frequent tragedy. From 1969 to 1978, there were 16 school shootings in the United States. (Interestingly, 3 of them were committed by state police against student protesters.) From 1979 to 1988, there were 29 school shootings, almost double those in the previous decade. Between 1989 and 1998, school shootings just about doubled again, to 52; and from 1999 to 2008 they increased again, as 63 new shootings took place. Shootings continue to increase in number; there were 22 in 2009 alone. By my count, there have been 166 shootings in schools in the last
three decades (182 in the last forty years). Yet even as they become more common—with more than 500 students and 150 parents, school faculty, and other adults killed or wounded—these cases are persistently viewed as “aberrations.” Each new incident provokes surprise and shock.

Many of these mass shootings or rampages took place in predominantly white, middle-class or upper-class suburbs or small towns and have been treated by other scholars and critics as an isolated and unique phenomenon, sharing nothing with gang-related or single-targeted shootings or other forms of school violence. In my research, however, while there are some disparities, I found more similarities among these various forms of violence. Experts also tend to fix blame on factors external to schools: severe mental illness, access to guns, or media violence, especially video games. While these issues surely play a role in the high incidence of such events, we need to ask a more fundamental question: What occurs in schools themselves—the sites, after all, of the shootings—that causes so many students to become unhappy, anxious, depressed, and motivated by rage?

This book proposes that there are inextricable connections between school shooting outbursts, the “everyday” violence of bullying, and the destructive gender pressures and social demands created by the larger culture and endured by virtually all children in our schools. Although the forms of school violence may differ, the same patterns emerge. Boys (and, increasingly, girls) lash out to prove that they can fulfill their narrow gender prescriptions. Nearly all the school shooters were violently reacting to oppressive social hierarchies in their schools.

As I will show, the conditions that have helped spark school shootings are not aberrations; they are the norm. The hurtful and violent bullying with which teens contend has become commonplace and has reached disturbing levels. Our ubiquitous zero-tolerance policies help schools suspend or expel students who commit violence, but they do not prevent the specter of violence from returning again and again. They certainly do nothing to halt the quieter violence—the violence students do to themselves, the depression and suicide, for instance, fostered by the same conditions. To stop school shootings as well as the more common culture of despair in our schools, we will need to transform our schools’ cultures.

In addition to examining a wide range of studies, I conducted more than sixty interviews with children and adults in the United States between March 2006 and March 2008. Since I had worked in schools for over twenty years, I had access to people in school communities that I might
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not otherwise have had. I found quickly that most people had a story about either being bullied or witnessing bullying incidents. I share their stories in *The Bully Society* to bring to life the common situations our children experience and to show the similarities between the school shooters’ complaints and those of average American children and adults from our schools.

My interviews included working-class, wealthy, and middle-class families from rural, inner-city, and suburban communities. Most of the people I interviewed were white, but I also interviewed people with African American, Latino, and other ethnic backgrounds. I conducted slightly more interviews with white middle-class students from suburbs, since most of the school shootings took place within this demographic. I also interviewed more people from the Northeast. Fewer school shootings took place in this region, yet the same bully cultures that led to so many shootings in midwestern and southern states persist there. Students ranged in age from approximately eleven to twenty-six. I also interviewed some teachers and related professionals in their thirties and forties who reflected on the bully cultures in their schools when they had been younger. They came from places including the inner cities of Manhattan and the Bronx, rural Maine, Connecticut, North Carolina, Texas, and New York State, especially Long Island and Westchester.

I have changed the names of my respondents, and I mention their demographics in general terms to protect their privacy. I refer to my student and parent interviewees by a first name only and my school faculty respondents by only a last name. Actual first and last names are used only for those individuals whose stories have been reported in the media and for individuals who wanted to be named directly. I have allowed people to speak for themselves, both in public testimonies and in interviews I conducted myself. Sometimes people used less respectful language in their anecdotes; but I am hopeful that both young people and their elders will speak more civilly when the concerns of so many students, school faculty, and parents are more effectively addressed.

As you will see, the stories and concerns shared here illuminate three key traits of everyday school culture discussed in *The Bully Society*.

The first is *gender policing*, or pressure to conform to gender expectations. Students (and adults) engage in constant surveillance of themselves and others to enforce boy and girl codes. Most people in a given school community tend to become members of the “gender police,” correcting their own and one another’s behaviors, attitudes, and dress according to their perceived expectations for proper gender performance.
The second is a set of *masculinity imperatives*. Hypermasculinity is the dominant gender norm imposed by the gender police. Boys—but also girls—obtain status by displaying aggression and a willingness to demonstrate power at another’s expense.

The third is *normalized bullying*. Bullying is the tool by which the most aggressive members of the gender police use coercive and often violent power to acquire and maintain high social status. By participating in gender policing, and targeting students they perceive to be failing in the task of meeting masculinity norms, students elevate their social status.

The rigid status hierarchies found in today’s schools have not developed in a vacuum. They come from a larger, more encompassing set of values, generated by what I call a *bully economy*. Economic and cultural trends associated with extreme capitalism, including severe income disparities and related values pervasive in popular media, have helped institutionalize masculinity prescriptions (i.e., aggression and dominance) and intensified gender policing in multiple forms.

Children today learn that status is everything, as described in chapter 1, “Social Status Wars.” Race and class are our most typical indicators of power, and conformity to gender expectations is paramount. This chapter explains how students become gender police recruits—and how their policing fuels battles over status and power in schools.

Chapter 2, “Masculinity and White Supremacy,” examines theories of masculinity and their relevance both to school shootings and to the everyday violence that has become accepted in our schools. Boys are expected to be powerful and dominant and then are often attacked and ridiculed if they appear gay, poor, or nonwhite or have any number of other perceived differences. A recipe for violence ensues when boys are pressured to be hypermasculine and then are marginalized through classism, racism, heterosexism, or other forms of prejudice.

“Violence against Girls,” chapter 3, addresses how boys learn from an early age that they assert manhood not only by being popular with girls but also by wielding power over them—physically, emotionally, and sexually. This chapter examines school shootings where the perpetrators specifically targeted girls who rejected them and where they lashed out indiscriminately as a result of perceived damage to their manhood after being “dumped.” These shootings reveal other problems in schools too, including a high level of sexual harassment and dating violence.

Chapter 4, “Gay Bashing,” examines the fate that awaits many boys who are perceived as failing to meet accepted parameters of masculin-
ity and whose peers label them “gay.” These boys, judged as wanting by students as well as adults—the school’s gender police—are taunted and abused. Many of the school shooters were heterosexually identified victims of relentless gay bashing; many cited revenge against such masculinity challenges as a motivation for their shooting. Boys are expected to demonstrate what I have called a **flamboyant heterosexuality**—flaunting and bragging about sexual exploits with girls—with aggression and disdain. A successful image imbued in sexist and heterosexist expectations can vault a boy to the top of his school’s status hierarchy. Conversely, failure to conform to this image (by being respectful to girls, for instance) can quickly render boys vulnerable to harassment and assault.

As discussed in chapter 5, “Girl Bashing,” girls are themselves driven to conform to superficial and destructive gendered standards. Female teens and tweens navigate a minefield: they are judged by conventional standards regarding their body type and their ability to attract boys, but they are also increasingly pressured to be “tough” in today’s hypercompetitive and pervasively masculine society. These pressures encourage girls to use violence as a means of proving themselves and help explain the dramatic increases in violence committed by girls as outlined by recent research.

Much of the violence girls (and boys) wield is through text messages and in cyberspace, as addressed in chapter 6. Slut bashing and gay bashing are common and persistent in these venues. Each technological innovation (texting, instant messaging, e-mail) makes this type of insidious bullying more painful and intimate. It was bad enough when students were harassed on Facebook pages, but now they are tormented by text messages sometimes nonstop; or they may be victims of “sexting,” in which sexual photos of them are widely distributed to embarrass and humiliate them and ruin their reputations.

Chapters 7 and 8, “Adult Bullies” and “The Bully Economy,” trace the competitive pressures that pervade our schools to our economy and politics. While schools serve as pressure cookers where ruthless competition and other hypermasculinity imperatives are expressed in extreme form, adults inadvertently or explicitly play out the same social status conflicts relating to wealth, race, looks, and sexuality, as well as grown-up versions of gay and girl bashing, dating violence, and harassment. The same ruthless social hierarchies and hurtful cliques can be found among adults: many parents and teachers bully one another, and bully children and students too.

An increasingly unfettered capitalist economy has both fed and been fed by these values. Adults continue to work long hours and weeks to be
able to purchase the clothes and lifestyles that help them achieve status among each other. Often the business tactics necessary to achieve such wealth require the same objectification found in our schools—that is, a casual disregard for the feelings and lives of others.

Chapters 9 and 10 discuss whether particular educational policies and typical school cultures are likely to encourage or mitigate bullying and violence. Chapter 9, “America Is from Mars, Europe Is from Venus,” compares the more “masculine,” punitive, individually focused policies prevalent in the United States with the more “feminine” relationship- and community-oriented policies that are common in European and Nordic countries. Many U.S. anti-bullying programs focus on helping students to stand up for themselves and talk back to potential bullies. Research has shown, though, that developing bonds among school faculty and students and helping students and faculty support one another in such situations are more effective. Chapter 10, “Creating Kinder Schools and Cyberspaces,” highlights some excellent and successful programs in the United States and across the world, with a particular focus on programs that help develop a collective courage.

The Bully Society concludes by pointing toward the necessity for change: dismantling our schools’ bully society, which is driven by our contemporary bully economy. The following pages present insights necessary for understanding and undertaking this challenging and essential task; together, as the conclusion shows, we can transform our schools into more humane and compassionate communities.

Working on this book led me to reflect on my own early experiences in schools and what might have been different then, when school shootings were comparatively rare. When I felt excluded at school, I didn’t fantasize about an attack on my tormentors. I wanted to tell everyone why I thought they had certain values wrong. I wanted to improve my environment, not destroy it. Gender, though, was also at the core of my own difficult experiences in school.

My troubles began on the cusp of adolescence, when I became a “girl” instead of a kid in my local public elementary school. In fifth grade, pressure to demonstrate typical gendered behaviors began to permeate our school days. Competition and backbiting replaced what I had previously experienced as a positive and enjoyable school environment. Until then, I had been perceived as popular and had been voted president of my class every year. Now suddenly I was the class pariah. A girl in the class had
started making comments about me—saying I had too many boyfriends and telling different boys who she believed liked me that I liked a different one better. Like many girls across the country, I had my first experience with what I refer to in this book as slut bashing—in which girls or boys question the sexual legitimacy of a target and then lash out at her with vicious names conveying that she is worthless.

These unpleasant experiences continued in sixth grade, and the negative social culture changed only slightly when I went to a private middle school. I quickly discovered that I didn’t have the right clothes, the right look, the right gestures, or the right things to say. I was dismayed by the flood of new rules and expectations and realized that I needed to change everything about myself if I wanted to be accepted in this new environment. The gender prescriptions in private school were not only strict but expensive. In public school I needed Keds and then Pro-Ked sneakers; now I needed pricey designer jeans (Sassoon or Jordache), and I was expected to go on shopping “dates” with certain girls to be included in after-school social events and activities. It was a lot of work to become a “popular girl” in this school, and everyone seemed to be striving to achieve this goal. But even when I wore the right clothes, talked to the right girls, and hung out with the right crowd, I felt somehow disconnected. I felt alone as I struggled to be accepted by a group of people who were themselves working hard to be included. The popular codes inflicted expectations on everyone, effectively building impenetrable obstacles to authentic self-expression and connection. Instead, people talked about each other in ways I thought were mean as they jockeyed for status among the “in” groups.

While my childhood challenges were mild in comparison with what millions of American children endure today in their schools, I was often miserable, and I longed for some alternative safe space. I found some reprieve at the time in a community-oriented summer camp. For many of us there, camp became a preserve, a salvation from the rougher social environments we experienced during the rest of the year at school. This community, and others where I’ve worked as a professional since then, showed me that compassion and connection with others are vital for learning and thriving. Such support should be available to all youth. People shouldn’t have to wait until they get through their school years before it presumably gets better; growing up shouldn’t have to be quite so hard.

I’ve worked for decades to change schools and the larger social environment that tends to breed violence and other bullying behavior. For eleven years I worked in secondary schools; I served as a conflict resolu-
tion coordinator, a teacher, a substance abuse prevention counselor, and a school social worker and guidance administrator, often dealing directly with bullies and their targets. I listened to students in different kinds of educational environments—from the elite and exclusive to those from inner cities—as they complained about feeling frightened and confused, detached and lonely. More recently, I have worked in public and private universities as a sociology, social work, and criminal justice professor. My research has focused primarily on the links between school violence and gender. Through it all, I have studied what would help students—male and female—to feel supported, recognized, and empowered by other students, as well as by teachers and parents.

In 2000, as a school social worker, I helped 100 percent of my students at an at-risk New York City public school gain entrance to four-year colleges—35 percent of them with full scholarships to excellent private universities. Many of these students emerged from violent gang and drug cultures in their neighborhoods, homelessness, sexual abuse, extreme depression and anxiety, truancy, and other conditions that might have been predicted to doom their futures. These students were instead inspired by the community-oriented focus of their public school and the work they themselves contributed to making the school more compassionate and supportive. The community support they received at school helped them become potential future leaders, instead of remaining in conditions of poverty and violence.

As I discuss in the book’s later sections, I’ve seen students leave gangs and become part of mediation teams, working heroically to recruit record numbers of new students to their school’s conflict resolution program. Some of my students initiated and wrote the first sexual harassment policy in their school, then worked tirelessly to get it the respect and support it needed to be instituted schoolwide.

Students collaborated to create different kinds of helpful programs and then thrived in the smaller communities we created. The warmth generated by these affirming and safe environments had positive effects on the students’ lives—attendance, grades, behavior, graduation rates, and entry to college. They also enhanced the larger school environment. Many of my students had been brutally gay-bashed and slut-bashed in previous schools—whereas we worked together to support these students and addressed such concerns effectively in communitywide meetings. Methods for creating compassionate communities in schools are literally infinite.
I became a school counselor because I wanted to help those who struggled in school. I believed then and believe now that it is possible to create more supportive and empowering school environments. Right now the gender police dominate our schools: students and adults often monitor themselves and one another for perceived infractions against respective gender codes, in gangs as well as in more common social cliques. To create safe schools, we need to examine the forces that turn them into gender police training grounds inciting so many forms of violence.

This book aims to help concerned families, schools, and communities understand the dangers of oppressive gender expectations—and offers alternatives. I hope it helps fuel the quest for the kind of community-oriented and caring schools children need to thrive.