I FEEL REJECTED: ALIENATION AND SOCIAL CONNECTION IN THE PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF SCHOOL SHOOTERS

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ABSTRACT

The media have long perpetuated the stereotype of school shooters as disaffected loners. This has become the default narrative following an attack, even in the absence of supporting evidence. Disaffection and isolation are manifestations of social alienation—a psychosocial phenomenon. The media discourse and academic literature both suggest that social alienation in the lives of these gunmen is worthy of further exploration.

This paper asks: What types of social alienation do school shooters express in their own words? Do they also express social connection, and if so, how? And finally, are there specific examples of thematic patterns and vocabulary that are used when communicating social alienation? These questions are resolved through a three-part qualitative content analysis of the personal narratives of nineteen rampage school shooters.

The first part of the analysis applies a model of alienation developed by social psychologist Melvin Seeman to the corpus. This model breaks alienation into six elements: powerlessness, meaningfulness, normlessness, self-estrangement, cultural estrangement, and social isolation. The corpus is also analyzed for references to social connection in the second part of the analysis. The third part of the study is an inductive analysis that resulted in the creation of a thematic framework that is grounded in the lexicon of school shooters. Ten categories were created to reflect how the shooters convey alienation.
While every shooter in my analysis expressed alienation in some form, no two shooters expressed the same combination of elements. Fourteen of the nineteen sources studied included some form of social connection, too. The media rarely shows this side of the shooters, sacrificing nuance in favor of perpetuating the myth of the disaffected loner.
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“I’m not what the media says I should be.”

-Jon Romano
Introduction

There is a crisis in the United States of America. This crisis is the emergence of a cultural script that instructs young people—overwhelmingly young men—that one possible solution to the struggles they are facing is to bring weapons to school and devastate their communities. We know that—statistically speaking—school shootings are rare. And yet, the destruction they cause is profound and far-reaching. Worse still, experts believe that future shooters with fame-seeking tendencies will “innovate” more shocking and disturbing rampages in their search for infamy, with these attacks becoming more deadly to outdo prior attacks and ensure they cannot be ignored by the media (Lankford, 2016, p.127).

Perhaps because of the depravity of this particular breed of mass murder, school shootings have become media spectacles (Frymer, 2009). Beyond the initial rush to cover the incident while the shooter is still active and share the human impact of these heinous acts of violence, comes the quest to make sense of the senseless. What drove this particular person to carry out a rampage attack? How could this have been prevented? Why does this keep happening? The media’s attention quickly focuses in on building a narrative around the shooter. Given the suicidal tendencies of mass shooters—48% of mass shootings end with the death of the perpetrator—the process of learning about what drove the shooter to act relies largely on speculation from witnesses, classmates, teachers, and others who the shooter interacted with in the lead up to their attacks (Lankford, 2015). The media has developed a dominant narrative that school shooters are socially isolated loners. This narrative has become the default, even when it is not immediately clear that this characterization is accurate—Secret Service data shows that only 10% of school shooters have no close friends at all (Newman, 2004; O’Toole, 2000). Despite this, the narrative of school shooters as loners has been elevated to mythic levels due to the media’s role in perpetuating this stereotype in the public consciousness.

This narrative that casts all school shooters as disaffected loners appears to equate disaffection with social isolation. In addition to perpetuating the myth of the disaffected loner, a
common refrain is that these perpetrators are troubled outcasts who fell through the cracks of a broken system. Indeed, research has found that perceived marginalization is one of the necessary but not sufficient conditions for carrying out a rampage shooting (Newman, 2004; Wike & Fraser, 2009). Marginalization, disaffection, and isolation are all manifestations of a broader psychosocial condition—social alienation. The media discourse and the academic research both suggest that social alienation in the lives of these gunmen is worthy of further exploration.

The definition of social alienation used in this study states that it is “a widely shared subjective feeling of loneliness and discontent; or separation from, if not rejection by, society and its values” (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). This project attempts to answer the following questions: Do school shooters express social alienation in their personal narratives? What types of alienation do they express? Do they also express social connection, and if so, how? And finally, are there specific examples of thematic patterns and vocabulary that are used to communicate social alienation? These questions are addressed through a two-part qualitative content analysis of the personal narratives of school shooters.

It is impossible, not to mention irresponsible, to distill the cause of these rampage shootings into a single-factor explanation. Instead, it is critical that we deepen our understanding of each of the conditions that contribute to the constellation of causes that lead a young person to consider carrying out this type of attack, of which alienation is just one. Existing research has already established that there simply is not one single profile that can encompass all school shooters (Langman, 2008; O’Toole, 2000). This project finds that there is no one-size-fits all narrative for all school shooters that can contain their myriad experiences with alienation, either. This is why I have favored turning to the personal narratives of these school shooters to explore the messy, complicated, and unique ways in which the shooters in this sample express alienation as well as social connection. By using a two part qualitative content analysis, I am first able to apply an existing model for understanding alienation as a multi-faceted phenomenon to these
first-person narratives. I am then able to find thematic and language patterns that emerge from these narratives.

In Chapter One I review the research on which this analysis is built. I begin by exploring the relationship between school shootings and the media, with a particular focus on school shootings as media spectacles. Next, I seek to establish a definition for the rampage school shootings studied in this thesis, and contextualize my argument within the existing literature examining the psychology of school shooters. From here I move to explain how alienation relates to the topic of school shootings. I frame alienation as one piece of the metaphorical puzzle that explains what makes a young person consider carrying out a violent attack on their peers. This leads into a detailed overview of what alienation actually is, how it is defined, and how it has evolved over time. In this section, I outline Melvin Seeman’s foundational work establishing social alienation as a psychological phenomenon. Seeman explained alienation in terms of its six elements, which form the basis of the a priori code used in the first part of my content analysis.

The remainder of my literature review focuses on the validity of studying the narrative justifications left behind by rampage shooters. Here, I substantiate the many ways in which researchers have used the words of killers to inform their understandings of the psychology of individual school shooters, as well as the broader culture that enables this type of violence. Chapter One concludes by situating the foundational literature in the context of efforts to prevent future school shootings.

In Chapter Two, I explain the source of the narrative justifications that form the basis of my analysis, and the criteria I used to determine whether to include certain pieces of content in my corpus. I also reflect on some of the challenges I faced in this process. This section includes descriptions of the original source material, as well as details of the rampage attacks carried out by the 19 shooters who fit the criteria for selection. I then explain iterative qualitative content analysis as my methodological approach.
The first part of my analysis is the application of Seeman’s framework for alienation to the personal narratives in my sample. This section includes a coding table with exemplars to demonstrate how this framework is applied. The second part of the study is an analysis of “social connection” in the narratives, which includes any expression that appears antithetical to the idea of social alienation. While the goal of the first two parts of my analysis is to see what forms of social alienation and connection, if any, were expressed by the shooters in the sample, the third part of my analysis aims to understand the thematic patterns, and vocabulary that are used to communicate social alienation. My methodology chapter closes with an explanation of how I use qualitative content analysis to identify these patterns and categorize them.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five showcase the results of my study. These three chapters are rich with original source material to bring the analysis to life. In Chapter Three I describe how powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement manifest in the words of school shooters. In Chapter Four I critically analyze the expressions of social connection latent in the personal narratives, to see how they contest the idea that all school shooters are alienated. Then, in Chapter Five, I report on the recurrent themes apparent throughout the writings, without being constrained by an existing framework. Instead, I wanted to establish a nuanced framework that consolidated these expressions in terms of recurrent themes, without oversimplifying them. The result is a ten-category framework for understanding the language used by school shooters when expressing social alienation.

In Chapter Six, the conclusion, I consider whether my findings have resolved my research questions, and evaluate Seeman’s framework for usefulness and ease of application. I further reflect on the strengths and limitations of my approach, the implications of this research, and offer recommendations for further research that expands on this paper. Finally, I grapple with some of the ethical considerations of conducting sensitive research, and how I attempted to carry out this research responsibly.
It bears warning that some of this material is difficult to read and disturbing in nature. The killers whose words are the basis of this paper killed a total of 106 people. Twelve of the nineteen shooters died by suicide after carrying out their attacks. By definition social alienation is a psychosocial phenomenon, which means that it considers individual psychology in the context of social surroundings. However, I want to be clear: No explanation for violence should diminish that these shooters are responsible for their actions. There is far too much at stake to ignore the possibility that social factors are a critical part of the terrible constellation of conditions that lead an individual to decide to bring a gun to school and kill their peers. By looking to the words of the shooters we have an opportunity to explore how their experience of social alienation and connection impacted their lives—and their decisions—in their own words.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

School shootings and the media

The phenomenon of contemporary school shootings in the United States emerged in the late 1990s when, over a period of a few years, a series of suburban adolescents went to school, armed with lethal weapons and the intention of killing members of their school community. It is no accident that the emergence of this phenomenon coincided with the rapid growth in popularity and influence of cable news networks in the United States (Frymer, 2009). These news networks regularly take horrifying violent incidents and make them the object of relentless media scrutiny, elevating instances of human tragedy into sensationalized news events. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of school shootings in the United States, which have become media spectacles (Kellner, 2008; Frymer, 2009). The media’s obsession with school shootings is irrefutable. There were almost 10,000 stories written in the 50 largest newspapers on the Columbine shooting and its aftermath (Newman, 2004). These tragedies captivate American audiences, too. Nielson Media Research showed that CNN averaged more than 2 million viewers the afternoon of the Columbine shootings, almost three times as many viewers as the previous Tuesday (Frymer, 2009). School shootings are a powerful combination of America’s deep fascination with the loss of innocence and nature versus nurture, made even more gripping by the almost made-for-television scenes of nail-biting police standoffs, heart-wrenching reunions between parents and children, and stories of heroic acts by teachers and students alike. There is also a cultural hunger to uncover why such depraved acts of violence are taking place at schools in otherwise safe communities. The Survey of American Fears, conducted by researchers at Chapman University, found that 42% of Americans were afraid or very afraid of being the victim of a random mass shooting (2018). Beyond the element of fear, school shootings have also become the battleground of debates on American values from gun control, mental healthcare, faith, and the education system.
While the reality is that school shootings are—thankfully—very rare, the perceived risk is high and reflected by the amount of policy and media attention that school shootings receive (Pew Research Center, 2018). The Everytown for Gun Safety Action Fund, which uses one of the broadest definitions of school shootings, counts "every time a firearm discharges a live round inside or into a school building or on or onto a school campus or grounds, as documented by the press” (O’Leary, 2018). According to Everytown’s data there were 39 shootings in K-12 schools in the United States in 2017. Most shooting deaths of young people occur in non-school locations (Lieberman, 2006; Kellner, 2008). Critics argue that the disproportionate focus on school shootings is because the vast majority of rampage school shooters—and their victims—are white (Newman, 2004). However, despite how rare these incidents are, the impact of school shootings on the American psyche has been profound. For parents, policymakers, school staff, and students themselves, these horrifying attacks have shaken the fundamental belief that students are safe in their schools (Wike & Fraser, 2009). According to a Pew Research study, 57% of teens say they are worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school and 63% of parents of teens reported that they were at least somewhat worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their child’s school (Pew Research Center, 2018). According to Hong et al. citing a 2006 study, social workers perceive school violence as a major concern, reflected in the amount of their time spent on violence prevention programing in schools (Hong, Cho, Allen-Meares, & Espelage, 2010; Slovak, 2006). School violence encompasses a broader spectrum of concerns, including school shootings. The impact of the early shootings such as Columbine were so far reaching that we may not even yet realize how much has changed as a result of these incidents. The ubiquity of zero-tolerance anti-bullying policies was largely driven by reports that the Columbine shooters were bullied and targeted by football players (Hong, Cho, Allen-Meares, & Espelage, 2010). Indeed, school shootings, no matter how rare, terrorize the American public and generate fear for children’s safety, and the media seizes the opportunity created by our violence-fixated culture to generate profits that exploit this morbid fascination (Frymer, 2009).
Extensive media coverage of school shootings has become such an inevitable hallmark of news production that many shooters directly address the media in their rationalizations for violence, or make reference to how they hope the media will talk about them in the aftermath of the shootings. Fame-seeking rampage school shooters are all but assured that they will reach notoriety through the media coverage of their attacks. Those motivated by the desire for infamy seek to manipulate and influence how the media will memorialize them (Lankford 2016). The Columbine shooters intentionally orchestrated their attacks to produce a media spectacle, inspiring a generation of school shooters to do the same (Kellner, 2008). An example of this is Seung-Hui Cho, who famously mailed a multimedia package to NBC News on the day of the Virginia Tech Massacre, which included over 25 video clips and over 40 digital photographs, as well as an almost 2,000-word document, included in this paper (Kellner, 2008). Recently, media organizations have been encouraged by campaigns such as “No Notoriety” to avoid inadvertently influencing prospective school shooters through perpetrator-focused coverage of these attacks, instead encouraging victim-centric reporting and even avoiding or minimizing the use of perpetrators’ names (Lankford 2016).

The dominant media narrative in the aftermath of a school shooting tends to follow the frame of the alienated youth driven to violence in response to the frustration of being socially marginalized. Following the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, Seung-Hui Cho’s motive was frequently reduced to his reaction to navigating “American hedonistic ‘hook up’ culture” as an Asian male (Kellner, 2008). Recently, there has been some pushback from progressive outlets against the mainstream media’s overzealous commitment to pursuing the social isolation of school shooters as the dominant narrative following an attack (Cullen, 2012; Lopez, 2014). According to CDC and Secret Service data only about one in ten school shooters reportedly had no close friends at all (Newman, 2004). In order to truly understand and explain what drives rampage killers to act, it is important to challenge the media’s pursuit of a common thread that claims to encompass all of these school shooters, as reports from the CDC and the FBI show that
there is no single profile for school shooters that could be used to identify or predict potential school shooters (O’Toole, 2000).

**What is a ‘school shooting’?**

Part of the challenge in finding data about the number of school shootings that occur each year is based on definitional differences on what counts as a school shooting. Three of the major databases that compile this information are *The Washington Post*, Everytown, and Wikipedia. Their definitions vary significantly and as a result the number of school shootings in 2017 is 14, 39, or 9 (O’Leary, 2018). Definitional discrepancies are the result of disagreement on whether shootings need to take place on campus, during the school day, between members of the school community to count, or whether there need to be any casualties, or intent to kill or injure someone random or specifically targeted, or whether accidental misfires are also to be counted.

Simply put, a school shooting is a shooting that takes place primarily on school grounds. At their broadest, school shootings can include the shooting of a specific individual targeted because of a conflict, gang-violence, or another reason (Langman, 2008). That is to say, any (attempted) murder of an individual that takes place on school grounds with a gun could be considered a school shooting. Newman writes that this kind of school shooting usually takes place in urban settings. The suburban and rural rampage shootings that capture the media’s attention are distinguished from these urban shootings by the random nature of victimization, the degree of advance planning, the public setting of the attacks, and are best described as an institutional attack (Newman, 2004). Newman defined *rampage school shootings* as (i) being carried out by students who either attended the school they targeted at the time of the shooting or attended prior to the attack, (ii) taking place on a “school-related public stage”—that is, in front of an audience, and (iii) as involving multiple victims, at least some of whom were shot at random for their symbolic value (Newman, 2004; de Apodaca, Brighton, Perkins, Jackson, & Steege, 2012; Langman, 2008). This study will use Newman’s definition, which has become the academic standard in this field of research. While rampage shooters generally shoot at random,
school shootings can still be differentiated based on intended victims. Some shooters target teachers and administrators, others target other students, and most fall somewhere in between (Newman, 2004). There is also great symbolic value placed on the school as the setting of the attack for rampage shooters, who seek to disrupt the “heart and soul of public life in small towns”, whereas in urban shootings schools are often the setting for violence because of the convenience they offer (Newman, 2004, p.15). Sometimes, school shooters may commit murder at other locations as part of their “internalized narrative” which has led to the description of these incidents as either bifurcated—occurring in two locations—or non-bifurcated school shootings (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017, p.177).

An important and saturated area of study is to explain what causes these—predominantly white—boys to become school shooters (Newman, 2004). Peter Langman, the leading scholar on Columbine, developed a typology of rampage school shooters based on available information. He retroactively investigated ten school shooters and determined that they could be categorized into three types: traumatized, psychotic, and psychopathic (Langman, 2008). Traumatized school shooters were typified by coming from “broken homes”, with at least one parent with substance abuse issues and at least one parent with a criminal history. They had also suffered abuse (physical and/or sexual). The so-called psychotic shooters were notably distinct from the traumatized shooters, coming from “intact families” with no evidence of abuse, parental criminal history, or parental substance abuse. Instead, these shooters showed evidence of either “schizophrenia or schizotypal personality disorder” which include “paranoid delusions, delusions of grandeur, and auditory hallucinations” (Langman, 2008, p.81). Psychopathic shooters, like psychotic shooters, came from “intact families” with “no histories of abuse or significant family dysfunction”. What distinguishes them is narcissism, a lack of empathy and/or conscience, and sadistic behavior (Langman, 2008, p. 81). These three distinct types of school shooters, in Langman’s view, partly explain why other researchers have struggled to identify a single profile for school shooters.
Of course, conversations around mental healthcare are an important aspect of reducing and preventing school shootings, but being depressed or suicidal cannot be viewed as a straightforward predictor of rampage school shootings, given the number of young people who suffer from depression or experience suicidal ideation (Newman, 2004). According to Secret Service data, only a third of school shooters had been evaluated by a mental health professional and less than one-fifth had been diagnosed with a mental health or behavioral disorder prior to their attacks (Newman, 2004).

Newman et al developed a theory of five ‘necessary but not sufficient conditions’ for rampage school shootings to occur. These include 1) the shooter’s self-perception as marginal and alienated in the spheres that they consider important; 2) psychosocial problems that magnify the impact of this sense of marginality; and 3) the availability of cultural scripts that map out ways to carry out the attack and that suggest solutions to the shooter’s problems (Kellner, 2008, pp. 22-3); 4) the failure of school and mental health systems to intervene before these young people turn to extreme violence, and 5) gun access (Newman, 2004). According to Wike and Fraser, risk factors for student-perpetrated school shootings include “alienation from school, rejection and victimization by peers, access to guns, practicing with guns, and leakage of plans” (2009, p.167).

**Why alienation?**

When it comes to explaining what causes school shootings there are many differing perspectives, and disagreement occurs when any single factor explanation is offered. Early research sought to establish whether there was a causal connection between violent media—especially video games—and violent behavior. Researchers found that “prosocial behavior, empathy for the distress of others, and sensitivity to aggression were diminished after exposure to violent video game play” (Calvert et al., 2017). This has been oversimplified by news commentators, who are quick to claim that a causal connection has been established, when in fact the literature is clear: “No single risk factor consistently leads a person to act aggressively or violently. Rather, it is the accumulation of risk factors that tends to lead to aggressive or violent
behavior” (Calvert et al., 2017). This makes sense, given that almost all young people are exposed to violent media in some form, and only very few of them go on to carry out school shootings. This could also indicate that some young people are more susceptible to the desensitization to violence by video games than others. According to Newman, it is not that video games cause school shootings, but that they obscure the consequences of violence (2004). Other explanations try to bring together developmental risk factors and elements of the school environment that reinforce exclusion (Wike & Fraser, 2009), as well as the view that there is some sort of “contagion effect” that causes at-risk individuals to replicate violence that is covered in the media. Critics say that contagion theories of school shootings and mass murders are overstated, but there is some evidence that these incidents can “cluster in space and time based on national news reports and social-media metrics” (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017, p.189). However this does not justify panic (Newman, 2004). Multifactoral, multiperspectival explanations seem to best reflect the complex constellation of reasons that create the conditions that enable school shooting to take place.

In his seminal paper, “The Media Spectacle of Columbine: Alienated Youth as an Object of Fear”, Benjamin Frymer explores how the media coverage of the Columbine massacre elevated the fear of “alien youth” to new mythic levels (Frymer, 2009). The construction of youth as objects of fear and loathing was sparked by the string of school shootings that took place in 1998 in predominantly white communities, and culminated in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings which served as the cultural moment where benign youth estrangement was widely accepted as being something far more sinister (Frymer, 2009). Frymer explains that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were transformed from complex teenagers into symbolic representations of alien youth. To establish the existence of this narrative of alienated youth, Frymer carried out a critical discourse analysis of media reports on Columbine, looking at explicit mentions of alienation or estrangement, as well as broad references to “youth disaffection, detachment, disconnection and isolation” (Frymer, 2009, p. 1391).
Social alienation is just one such factor—one piece in the metaphorical puzzle that explains what makes a young person consider carrying out a violent attack against their peers. An FBI study of 18 students who either carried out or planned school shootings characterized alienation as a personality trait common to many of the students. Alienation was defined as “more than just being a loner” and reflected a deep despair at the sense of separateness from society (O’Toole, 2000). Newman reiterates that school shooters are not all victims of bullying or complete loners, but they do share a common experience of perceived social marginality (2004; Verlinden at al., 2000). In this view alienation is considered a social phenomenon experienced by an individual.

Another view is that alienation in young people is a condition that is reinforced by institutions such as the American public school system. In 2012, a group of researchers based out of Concordia University–Irvine carried out a study that looked at characteristics of schools in which fatal shootings occur, which showed that schools with environmental conditions which allow “feelings of anonymity or alienation among students” may help foster conditions associated with fatal school shootings (de Apodaca, Brighton, Perkins, Jackson, & Steege, 2012, p. 363). Newman’s fieldwork in two communities that had suffered school shootings revealed that it was not weak social ties that led to school violence there, but the dense, interconnected social networks that can make those who don’t fit in feel further isolated (2004). School conditions positively associated with fatal shootings include the size of school enrollment (including teacher to student ratios), urban or suburban settings, and public funding (de Apodaca, Brighton, Perkins, Jackson, & Steege, 2012; Baird, 2012). The researchers recommended that future research should include a qualitative analysis of anonymity experienced by perpetrators, in comparison with the characteristics of the schools where the shootings took place. The experience of feeling close attachments to members of the school community and feeling personally invested in the success of the school are considered predictors of positive developmental outcomes around academic achievement and makes an individual less likely to turn to violence. Nearly all school shooters
appear to have little to no attachment to their school communities and furthermore no school shooters have ever shown evidence of being attached and committed to school (Wike & Fraser, 2009). This validates the importance of better understanding the specific experiences of alienation experienced by rampage school shooters (de Apodaca, Brighton, Perkins, Jackson, & Steege, 2012, p. 375).

In their analysis, Wike and Fraser attempt to propose six prevention strategies at an individual and institutional level. Of the six strategies they put forward, three are very clearly related to addressing the problem of social alienation. They recommend that strengthening school attachment, breaking down codes of silence, and establishing screening and intervention protocols for troubled and rejected students could help prevent future tragedies (Wike & Fraser, 2009). This, again, demonstrates that deepening our understanding of social alienation as experienced by these troubled and rejected students is practically useful.

Peer rejection, which includes break-ups in the context of romantic relationships, and the subsequent situational humiliation have been identified as precursors of many shooting events (Wike & Fraser, 2009). Newman rejects this notion, claiming that proximate events are likely to explain when a shooting takes place rather than explaining why it takes place (2004). Of course, peer rejection and break-ups are a common occurrence in adolescent life, but for high-risk youth even acute rejection can, through a threshold effect, exacerbate an already existing predilection to violence (Wike & Fraser, 2009). Peer victimization, which is more intense than simple rejection, is also an exacerbating factor for school shooters who usually lack the skills to cope with peer-related traumas (Wike & Fraser, 2009). The intensity of the rejection or victimization is also not an indicator of who becomes a school shooter, it is most often not the student who gets bullied the most relentlessly that carries out a school shooting. Becoming a rampage shooter is the result of an unfortunate set of circumstances coming together that fulfill Newman’s five necessary but not sufficient conditions, and can lead to a tragic choice to direct their rage and despair outward (murder) instead of inward (suicide).
What exactly is alienation?

The word alienation is often thrown around in the context of school shootings (Frymer, 2009), but is actually quite amorphous and abstract. Social alienation, in the way we currently understand it, has its early roots in the 1840s in Marx’s discussion of the separation of the worker and the product and processes of his labor, whereby the capitalist system as a whole, and the bourgeoisie who benefit from it, exploit the individual worker to the point where the worker is unable to fully realize his humanity. In the late 19th century sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote extensively about anomie in his book Suicide. Durkheim’s anomie was a condition that he believed emerged from the erosion of social ethics following rapid social change and the collective feeling of unease or despair in a new, modern society without the social ties of the past (1897). Durkheim was concerned this condition would give rise to increases in suicide (1897; Newman, 2004). While specific definitions of alienation may vary slightly, there is consensus that it is “a widely shared subjective feeling of loneliness and discontent; or separation from, if not rejection by, society and its values” (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). There is also a clear connection between alienation and harmful action, whether internalized in the form of suicide, or externalized in the form of retaliatory violence (Greene & Gabbidon, 2009; Durkheim, 1897).

Social alienation as a phenomenon has been studied from philosophical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. Melvin Seeman was the foundational scholar on the matter of social alienation as a psychological phenomenon, and over time he explained alienation in terms of its elements (Pulvino & Mickelson, 1972). According to Seeman there are six varieties of alienation: (i) powerlessness, (ii) meaninglessness, (iii) normlessness, (iv) cultural estrangement, (v) self-estrangement, and (vi) social isolation (Seeman, 1959; 1975). Dean’s Alienation Scale simplified Seeman’s elements in order to empirically measure powerlessness, normlessness, and social isolation, which were the three facets of alienation that he found adequately encapsulated the various feelings associated with alienation that Seeman had created distinct categories for (Dean, 1961).
Table 1.1: Synthesized definitions of the six facets of social alienation from Dean, Mau and Seeman

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<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>The individual places high value on a set of goals but has low expectancy or probability of fulfilling them (Seeman, Dean, Mau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaninglessness</td>
<td>The individual fails to make sense of the circumstances and events they encounter, and how the present connects to the future (Seeman, Mau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>This falls within Dean’s definition of powerlessness</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normlessness</td>
<td>The individual experiences a conflict of norms as they believe that it isn’t possible to achieve culturally prescribed goals through the available or socially acceptable means (Seeman, Dean, Mau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social isolation</td>
<td>The individual feels separated from the in-group or considers themselves a “loner” (Seeman, Dean, Mau, Pulvino and Mickelson)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-estrangement</td>
<td>The individual feels that societal norms limit them from being who they would ideally be otherwise and unable to find activities rewarding and engaging (Seeman, Mau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>This falls within Dean’s definitions of powerlessness and normlessness</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Estrangement</td>
<td>The individual believes their values are “discrepant” from those of the society they belong to (Seeman, Mau)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1992, Mau used Seeman’s elements of alienation to map the validity of “student alienation” as a specific type of social alienation. Mau stated that indicators of student alienation include absenteeism, poor academic performance, and violence (Mau, 1992). Given rampage
school shooters choose to carry out their attacks in educational settings, it is important to further explore school shooters’ experiences of alienation within their school life in order to understand the context and symbolism behind their choice in location. Mau offered contextual definitions of four elements of alienation as students might express them: (i) *powerlessness* – when a student places high value on a set of goals (e.g. Going to college) but has low expectations of fulfilling them (e.g. bad grades); (ii) *meaninglessness* – for students this can be an inability to connect performance in school to a good job in the future; (iii) *normlessness*—which manifests in the school context as students’ seeking to undermine the “legitimacy of school officials” for example through cutting class with friends; (iv) *social estrangement*—quite simply, this refers to students who do not participate in school activities and are considered “loners”, notably these students don’t necessarily have attendance issues and therefore their alienation isn’t always identified by school officials (Mau, 1992, p.733).

In his chapter, “The Situation of Contemporary Youth” Kellner maps out how youth alienation has evolved as a contemporary concept. Beginning in the conservative 1950s, where the emphasis was on conforming to the mold of the organization man, Kellner says that alienation in young people consisted of acts of nonconformity and acting against the values of conservative society (2008). This changed in the 1960s, where rebellion against the norm, and *doing your own thing* were signs of a positive, healthy, and creative youth counterculture that actually served to create a sense of shared rebellion against a society that caused feelings of disaffection. Kellner characterizes the 1970s and 1980s as a time where a “flexible normality” emerged, which allowed for more diversity in what was considered normative (2008, p. 75). Modern hypermasculinity was also amplified during this time (Kellner, 2008). Post-1980, there was conservative backlash against the music of youth counterculture that coincided with the Reagan era. “The major premise of punk rock was a response to the boredom, competitiveness, and the alienation of contemporary suburban living” (Larkin, 2007, p.182). This continued and expanded to include rebukes of rap and hip-hop, along with internet and video game culture well into the early 2000s. This same
conservative backlash was evident in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings when discussions turned to looking at the perpetrators as “superpredators” condemning ‘fatherless, Godless and jobless’ youth as irredeemably damaged (Kellner, 2008, p.74). People for the American Way’s “Right Wing Watch Online” July 1999 report analyzed right-wing coverage of the Columbine massacre, and found that Focus on the Family’s James Dobson blamed the breakdown of the family unit—even though both Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were from intact families—and the decline of a Judeo-Christian value system for the incident.

Suburban and rural public schools are particularly prone to a culture of athletic admiration in which young men who struggle to conform to heteronormative hypermasculine cultural expectations experience a sort of internal conflict (Newman, 2004). This can be considered a form of alienation in and of itself. This specific type of alienation is made more dangerous by the cultural scripts that “connect manhood to guns, domination, and the power that comes from terrifying the innocent, [offering] a template for action” (Newman, 2004). Only in the last decade has gender and violent masculinity specifically been used as a lens through which to understand school shootings as a phenomenon. In 2007 following Seung-Hui Cho’s rampage shooting at Virginia Tech, Bob Herbert of the New York Times was one of the rare voices in mainstream media who focused on the gender element of the tragedy and wrote about the shootings as compensatory behavior for a “faltering sense of manhood” (Herbert, 2007; Kellner, 2008).

School shooters appear to have a heightened sensitivity to perceived marginalization and victimization, and view others as having hostile intent, which can explain why they may isolate themselves socially or only associate with other alienated peers (Wike & Fraser, 2009). While most rampage shootings committed by adults are attributed to lone wolf gunmen, young people who commit rampage shootings often do so with peer support in the form of co-conspirators or with peer encouragement. In fact, in almost half of the thirty-seven school shooting incidents
studied by the Secret Service, the gunmen were said to be influenced or encouraged by others (Voskuil, Reddy, & Fein, 2000).

**The shooters in their own words**

A 2002 US Secret Service study found that there is a “narrative impulse within the disordered mind that compels the prospective school shooter to commit his thought and plans to writing ahead of time” (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017, p.181). Lankford found that 50% of school shooters “provided direct written or verbal explanations for their behavior” (2013; 2016 ). Since school shootings are almost always pre-mediated, planned, and almost never impulsive (Newman, 2004), there is more time to potentially detect and prevent an attack when the perpetrator is in the planning stage, if someone has reason to suspect such planning is taking place. The term *leakage* is used to describe the disclosure (whether partial or complete, inadvertent or deliberate) or warning signs that an individual is seriously planning an assault (Wike & Fraser, 2009). In over 75% of school shooting incidents at least one other person had information that the perpetrator was considering or planning the attack (Newman, 2004). Some students who go on to plan school shootings submit academic assignments that are disturbing and, with the appropriate training, this is an opportunity for intervention (Newman, 2004).

The biggest distinction between serial killers and rampage shooters, in terms of the creation of narrative accounts around their attacks, is the paraphilic purpose of documentation used by serial killers (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017). That is to say, the autobiographical impulses of serial killers tend to be in order to document their actions for a fetishistic purpose whereas for rampage shooters the narrative process has a functional role in their planning process (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017). School shooters, dating back to Charles Whitman (the “Texas Tower Sniper”) in 1966, often leave behind the rationalization and motives for their violent attacks in narrative form. An exception to the leaving behind of narrative rationalizations for public consumption are the aberrant adult shooters who carry out rampages in schools they have no association to; for example Adam Lanza, the 20 year-old behind the Sandy Hook massacre in Newtown,
Connecticut in 2012. These perpetrators tend to focus on a victim-type and are closer to the serial killer/paraphilic typology than the rampage shooter formerly typified as a “classroom avenger” (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017,). Risk factors for adults who enter schools and violently attack students and teachers are different from those that apply to student shooters (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

Of course, not all rampage school shooters have left behind a trail of documents, videos, and social media postings. They don’t all write manifestos. And when they do, they are not all made available to the public. Each individual shooter undoubtedly had their own motives for writing, which impacted the way they wrote, the content of their writings, and their intended audience (if they had one in mind). For example, Seung-Hui Cho mailed a multimedia dossier to NBC News the day of his attack. Cho assumes an exaggerated hypermasculine identity that seems contrived (Kellner, 2008), by adopting a new persona he attempted to shape how he would be remembered by the media. Larkin uses the word “treatise” to describe Eric Harris’s writing (Larkin, 2007, p. 138) because of the systematic way Harris wrote about his plans, theorizing and sharing his personal philosophies in a far more sophisticated manner than one would expect from an angsty teenager (Larkin, 2007). Compared to suicide notes, the narrative justifications of rampage shooters tend to be far more egocentric focusing on their perceived victimization or justifying their worldview (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017) or they may vary from fame-seeking, apologetic, or a final attempt to taunt their perceived tormentors (Newman, 2004).

When it comes to fame-seeking rampage shooters, criminologist Adam Lankford suggests that their desire for fame can be understood as a reaction to feelings of being overlooked and undervalued in the past. Given their inability to achieve fame using socially acceptable means due to their low social status or perceived victimization, these attackers turn to violence as a means to notoriety, “the body count…exists primarily as a method of generating media attention” (Lankford, 2016 p.124). Lankford’s study seems to support this, finding that fame-seeking rampage shooters on average killed and wounded more victims than non-fame seeking rampage...
shooters (2016). The act of leaving behind a narrative rationalization for their violent acts, “legacy tokens” such as a suicide note, manifesto, or video, is arguably indicative of a fame-seeking tendency, however these rationalizations are often in the form of apologies to loved ones, which is an important distinction. Lankford classifies fame-seeking rampage shooters as those who explicitly reference fame as a motive for their attacks (Lankford, 2016). Not all fame-seeking rampage shooters leave behind these legacy tokens, preferring infamy through enigma instead (Lankford, 2016). Even with a trail of documents, we don’t know exactly why a shooting took place.

When the motives of these rampage killers are unclear, the media fills the void with conjecture. This is what happened following the Columbine massacre. Various myths spiraled in the aftermath of the attack, flamed by media speculation and rumor. Dave Cullen wrote that many of the biggest myths were to do with the intended targets of the rampage. Speculation was rife that “jocks, African Americans, and Christians” were the main targets (1999), however the extensive writings and detailed plans left behind by Eric Harris revealed that the initial plan involved propane bombs exploding in the cafeteria– his own words proved that “every kid killed was a target of opportunity” (Cullen, 1999). The media often creates intrigue over the documented explanations or justifications for these rampages by sensationalizing them. For instance, NBC News anchor Brian Williams used the word “manifesto” when reporting on the multimedia dossier sent by Cho (Kellner, 2008).

It is not just the media that sensationalizes the narrative justifications of school shooters. Socially outcasted young people elevated Harris and Klebold’s journals to mythic proportions. They were widely discussed in designated online forums–such as columbinemassacre.forumotion.com–and are often quoted or referenced in the writings of other school shooters (Follman & Andrews, 2015). In carrying out the Columbine massacre and producing materials intended to be viewed and read by the public, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold set out a very precise cultural script that can help explain a disturbing change between the school
shootings of the late 1990s and those we see today. Cultural scripts are “strategies of action” or tools that are available to be applied to solve problems that are taught and reproduced throughout the culture (Newman, 2004). According to writer Malcolm Gladwell, this shift can be explained using Mark Granovetter’s model of “tipping points” or thresholds. The Granovetterian model uses the example of a riot to explain a person’s decision to act (in this case, riot). Simply put, it explains that the 99th person to riot is significantly less radical—has a much higher threshold to act—than the first rioter. Applied to school shootings, Gladwell suggests that while the popular belief is that we now have a critical mass of deeply disturbed young men who are capable of extreme violence, in reality we are now at a point where you do not actually need to be deeply disturbed to consider carrying out these horrifying acts (2015). Worryingly, the internet makes the videos, writings, and plans of these rampage killers increasingly available globally. They have now become instructive to a generation of socially outcast young men, who may never have carried out shootings if not for the threshold being continually lowered with each shooting that becomes part of this cultural narrative (Gladwell, 2015). Research on imitative violence in cases of school shootings shows that the availability of these scripts influence the form of the attack rather than the amount of attacks (Newman, 2004).

By studying the gunmen’s own words, whether from journals, videos, online postings, suicide notes, or a public-facing “manifesto,” we can gain insight into the ways in which these young men express alienation, if at all. Since many of the perpetrators of school shootings kill themselves as part of their plans for violence, researchers are often limited to “retrospective reviews” of the perpetrators’ lives (Langman, 2008). The evidence suggests that school shooters often distort or overstate their perceived victimization and marginalization and assume hostile intentions (Newman, 2004). This is why it is important to try and gain as much insight into the perpetrator’s own experience of alienation, because other people in the community may not believe that the perpetrators were victimized or rejected in a profound way, but the perpetrator may have a vastly different perception of their social experience. In some cases, the extent of the
would-be gunmen's true feelings were imperceptible to those around them. For example, “Eric [Harris, of Columbine]’s written rants were accompanied by an eerie behavioral coolness. Other students did not perceive Eric’s anger” (Larkin, 2007, p. 128). Arntfield and Danesi write that “secret schizoids” like Elliot Rodger are often able to fit into society for some time (2007). Having access to the personal musings of these perpetrators means not having to rely on other people’s memories, given that it is likely that these gunmen succeeded in hiding the extent of their dysfunction or rage.

**School shooting prevention and shooters’ writings**

A 2016 study considering the motivations of fame-seeking rampage shooters offered three predictions, (i) “the number of fame-seeking rampage shooters will continue to grow”, (ii) “fame-seeking rampage shooters will attempt to kill more victims than past offenders killed”, and (iii) “fame-seeking rampage shooters will “innovate” new ways to get attention” (Lankford, 2016, p.127). That is to say, this problem is not going anywhere, and if anything, is predicted to cause more damage than previously experienced. Reports from the CDC and the FBI show that there is no single profile for school shooters that could be used to identify or predict potential school shooters (O’Toole, 2000). Any such profile would most likely be too broad and include many students who were not truly at risk of becoming a school shooter, and may also miss some students who truly were at risk (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

A group of Israeli researchers proposed a ranking/prioritization procedure similar to the kind used to identify sexual predators that would automatically profile school shooters based on their self-written texts. Their methodology included vector space models of semantics that look at the meaning of a word based on analyzing the words that co-occur within three words of the target word. For instance, it could be that “depressed” is most often co-located with “angry” or “lonely” and this is mapped out as a vector in two-dimensional space. The researchers chose to look at the “phenomenology” of mental disturbance experienced by school shooters rather than diagnosed symptoms, and all of the texts selected for analysis are from the perpetrators’ first
person perspective before the murders took place. The dimensions for analysis were determined based on the DSM-V criteria and Millon’s personality traits (Neuman, Assaf, Cohen, & Knoll, 2015). This very rudimentary system of identifying potential school shooters is rife with ethical grey areas, (Newman, 2004). However, they propose that this ranking/prioritization should be used by trained psychiatrists or psychologists in situations where parents have consented to allow their teenagers’ social media to be analyzed within delineated boundaries. There is therefore precedent that analyzing the self-written texts of perpetrators can be a useful foundation for developing new prevention and identification tools. (Neuman, Assaf, Cohen, & Knoll, 2015)

Often, prevention tools and mechanisms suggest increasing security. Wike & Fraser suggest that increased security including metal detectors and school resource officers “has the potential to bolster school attachment and promote breaking down codes of silence” (2009, p.168) but this is far too general, and doesn’t take into account the way that the militarization of schools or bringing policing into schools may affect communities of color and students who belong to minority groups differently, to the point where they may actually feel less safe at schools in which these practices are common. There is a danger in panic-policing and implementing measures that can backfire. Given the media attention, it is easy to spend a disproportionate amount of money on this issue at the expense of resources for issues that affect far more children. Teachers can be trained to to identify students whose schoolwork may present leakage. Through the creation of safe, confidential reporting structures, teachers may feel more comfortable making difficult judgements that “counterbalance privacy and academic freedom with public safety” (Wike & Fraser, 2009, p.168).

Eliminating any one of Newman’s five necessary but not sufficient conditions for becoming a school shooter can reduce the chances of the occurrence of a rampage shooting. Alienation, in the form of marginalization, is one such condition. In finding ways to understand and address the experience of alienation, it is possible that we can disrupt the constellation of
conditions and prevent future violence. Of course, this is no simple task. For now, we must look
to the material we have available and seek answers there.
Chapter 2: Methodology

This thesis seeks to discern how school shooters express social alienation and social attachments in their narrative rationalizations. For the purpose of my analysis, social alienation is defined as a psychosocial phenomenon characterized by “a widely shared subjective feeling of loneliness and discontent; or separation from, if not rejection by, society and its values” (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). I will be using the six varieties of alienation laid out by Melvin Seeman to ensure that my analysis encompasses social alienation as a multidimensional phenomenon, and not in terms of simple social isolation or marginalization, as the media is prone to doing (Seeman, 1959; 1975).

The FBI describes the “narrative impulse” of school shooters who are almost “compelled” to write about or otherwise record what they are planning and why (Arntfield & Danesi, 2017, p.181). This impulse means that they sometimes leave behind narrative rationalizations that can provide us with unparalleled insight into their frame of mind prior to their attacks, and even help us understand why they resorted to violently attacking their school communities to begin with. These narrative rationalizations allow us to explore whether the dominant media narrative—that the perpetrators of school shootings are socially alienated youths—is in fact rooted in the lived experiences of these perpetrators, and expressed in their personal writings and videos.

In order to identify a corpus of narrative rationalizations of school shooters, I had to grapple with a few realities. The first was the relatively limited sample as, thankfully, school shootings are rare. Secondly, while much has been made of this narrative impulse shared by school shooters, not all school shooters leave their narrative rationalizations to be discovered as legacy tokens. They may discard or delete them, or simply never have written or produced them to begin with. Finally, not all narrative rationalizations are publicly available. This is understandable given the imitative nature of this particular type of school violence, and the
emergence of cultural scripts around school shootings that largely resulted from the ubiquity of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris’ journals and writings online following the Columbine massacre.

Psychologist Dr. Peter Langman is an expert on school shooters, and as part of his work he maintains the most comprehensive database on school shootings, Schoolshooters.info. Langman’s database is comprised of information and documents related to school shootings carried out by 76 perpetrators. The documents compiled in this database include court documents, investigative reports, and transcripts of interviews with perpetrators who survived their attacks, witnesses, and people who knew the perpetrators. Some of these documents are redacted to protect the identities of those who are named. Langman’s database includes legacy tokens for around 40% of the perpetrators, however not all of these were eligible for this study. Sources were selected for this analysis if they fit the following criteria, to ensure the sample was consistent:

1. Is the source written/created by the perpetrator of a school shooting?
   - For this analysis to be effective in answering the research question it must only consider expressions of social alienation in the shooters’ own words. This eliminates any court documents and witness interviews that may attempt to describe the shooters’ experiences with social alienation, as these are not written from the shooters’ perspective. It is critical that these sources do not rely on other people’s memories– which run the risk of being false or manufactured–as they try to retroactively make sense of what drove the perpetrator to violence.

2. Was the source written/recorded during or before the attack?
   - Many perpetrators of rampage school shootings die during their attacks, either through self-inflicted gunshot wounds or as a result of a standoff with police. As a result, police and other experts often don’t get the chance to question these perpetrators, so we have limited ways of establishing their state of mind prior to the
attack. Even in the few cases where we do have post-attack interviews, or letters written by the perpetrators while they are incarcerated, we cannot assume that the substance of these documents accurately reflects what drove them to violence. It is fair to assume that the impact of having carried out traumatizing acts of violence, as well as the desire to appeal for reduced sentences, can mean that perpetrators create false narratives (perhaps not deliberately) in post-attack accounts. To ensure that the texts or recordings reflect the shooters’ frames of mind in the lead up to the attack, and their rationalizations for the attack, they must have been written before or during the attack. This criterion precludes the inclusion of post-attack documentation.

3. Is the source autobiographical or philosophical in nature with references to an attack and/or a rationalization of violence?

- This analysis focuses on the self-written or recorded narrative rationalizations of rampage school shooters. A source is considered a narrative rationalization if it references specific plans for violence or attempts to justify violence in general. These can take the forms of manifestos, suicide notes, personal journals, online blogs, YouTube videos, or social media profiles. It should attempt to put forward the perpetrator’s rationalization for violence or detail some aspect of their worldview in a reflective way. While some school shooters have been known to write violent fictional stories, these are beyond the scope of the analysis. We cannot justify attributing the thoughts and behaviors of fictional characters to the perpetrators without making substantial leaps and assumptions, whereas autobiographical or philosophical musings can certainly be said to reflect the shooters’ worldviews prior to the attack.

4. Does the attack perpetrated by the author fit Newman’s definition of rampage school shootings?
(i) carried out by a current or former student of the school,
(ii) in front of an audience, and
(iii) at least some of the victims were chosen at random for symbolic value
(Newman, 2004).

- This paper seeks to analyze expressions of social alienation that contribute to a young
  person’s decision to commit a symbolic act of violence against an institution that they
  belonged to at some point. Aberrant adult attacks carried out by someone with no
  affiliation to the school are more akin to terrorist attacks than rampage school
  shootings. The school setting is chosen because it is convenient rather than symbolic.
  An example of an aberrant adult shooter with no discernible connection to the school
  he attacked is Adam Lanza who attacked Sandy Hook Elementary School. His
  narrative rationalizations are beyond the scope of this analysis.

This purposive sampling approach has resulted in a final sample size of 19 school shooters whose
narrative rationalizations I will be analyzing.

Table 2.1 Source type and word count

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Source type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Nikolas Cruz     | 321   | Transcription of three videos found on Cruz's cellphone after the Parkland massacre. Two of the videos were recorded on the morning of the attack. Cruz outlines his plan and how he's going to get there, and suggests that while he was currently no one and nothing, "with the power of my AR you will all know who I am."
<p>| William Atchison | 94    | Suicide note written at 6:51 A.M. on the day of his attack. Atchison explains what he is going to do, including killing himself. He explains that he just wants out of his meaningless life, and feels like he doesn't belong in the state in which he lives. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Source type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chris Harper-Mercer</td>
<td>1591</td>
<td>Harper-Mercer wrote this self-described manifesto and it was discovered on his hard drive following his attack. His manifesto tackles his belief in the inferiority of Black men, despite being 40% Black himself. He describes being in communion with dark forces and being socially unsuccessful, and address the media directly to debunk any misinformation about his media consumption habits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl Pierson</td>
<td>1035</td>
<td>Police released excerpts of Pierson's journal to the public. These excerpts mostly detail his frustration that the medication prescribed by his doctors feels like it isn't working. He writes about his plans for Project Saguntum (his name for the attack), about the significance of the intended date, and how hard it is to keep his plans to himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose Reyes</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>Reyes wrote two letters, in the first he addresses his parents and talks about how much he loves them and that he understands that they may hate him for his actions. The second letter his addressed to his teachers and fellow students, and talks about getting revenge for the way they ruined his life through embarrassing and demeaning him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Butler, Jr.</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>In a brief Facebook post written the morning of his attack, Butler blames his move from Lincoln, Nebraska to Omaha for driving him to carry out this shooting. He expresses remorse to the families of his victims. He implies that he will commit suicide, which he then went on to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pekka-Eric Auvinen</td>
<td>1826</td>
<td>Titled &quot;Natural Selector's Manifesto&quot;, Auvinen wrote about his attack as a &quot;one man war against humanity, governments, and weak-minded masses of the world.&quot; He believed that laws, and dominant ideologies disrupted natural selection by privileging &quot;lousy, miserable, arrogant, and selfish&quot; people.</td>
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Table 2.1 (Cont’d.)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Source type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seung Hui Cho</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Transcribed portions of the multimedia manifesto that Cho mailed to NBC news. It is a hateful and graphic explanation of Cho's deep feelings of cultural alienation and rejection of Christian hypocrisy and American hedonism. He is preoccupied with his status as part of the &quot;Weak and Defenseless&quot; people, and sees his attack as the beginning of a revolution where these people rise up to avenge the &quot;rape&quot; that they experience at the hands of the powerful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bastian Bosse</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>Video transcript where Bosse discusses the effect that the media dictating what is cool and what isn't cool has on kids who can’t conform to that. He doesn't like school because he doesn't feel in control of his own life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alvaro Castillo</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>Castillo's handwritten journal outlines his obsession with the Columbine Massacre, to the point that he names his attack &quot;Operation Columbine&quot;. His writings show his excitement in his preparation for the attack, and references to Anna, a girl he says he loves and cares for. His final entry appears to be after he has killed his father, where he writes about how good it felt but also that he loves his father and his hope that he is with God now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth Bartley</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>Handwritten suicide note addressed &quot;to whom it may concern.” Bartley was primarily preoccupied with requests for what do with his body. Poignant because of its immaturity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey Weise</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>Three separate online postings in which Weise expresses feelings of betrayal and disappointment. He also seems hopeless about his situation improving and references past suicide attempts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon Romano</td>
<td>1004</td>
<td>The note that Romano wrote and left at home on the morning of Feb. 9, 2004 is a brief explanation of his hopelessness and fears around the future and the lack of meaning in his life. He writes about his ambitions and his fear that he won't be able to realize them. Finally, he spends most of the note writing personalized goodbye to around 12 relatives and 8 friends revealing his social attachments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<td>Eric Harris</td>
<td>6660</td>
<td>Eric kept a journal in the year leading up to the Columbine massacre he was planning with his friend Dylan Klebold. His journal details his deep hatred for people who he believed mindlessly conformed and didn't exercise freethinking. His self-aggrandizement is apparent, frequently mentioning how he hopes that he will go down as some sort of god or hero. However, there are also many references to feeling marginalized by peers, therefore showing the conflict that he felt between his attack being part of a larger revolution against society in the name of free thought, and the writings of a rejected schoolboy who was unable to be socially successful in high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan Klebold</td>
<td>5602</td>
<td>Dylan's journal is mostly lovesick ramblings by a young man who hoped to be romantically successful. His writing is pseudo-grandiose, and he often goes off on poetic tangents that are almost unintelligible. His writing seems to be much more personal, as he does not seem to be writing for a future audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kip Kinkel</td>
<td>854</td>
<td>Journal entry where Kinkel explores his conflict between wanting and hoping for love and a better future, but feeling unable to realize these goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke Woodham</td>
<td>619</td>
<td>Assorted writings including a will leaving his belongings to friends, and musings about romantic rejection. He calls for people to fill their hearts with hate and read philosophy and develop their own belief systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan Ramsey</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>Ramsey wrote these two notes before his attack. It is clear from them that he planned to die during his attack, but in fact he survived. He writes about feeling rejected more than feeling alone, and seems to explain that he holds on to negative experiences even though his positive interactions are more frequent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Slobodian</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Slobodian wrote a suicide note in which he explains that he hoped to kill two of his teachers and any one else who got in his way. He also states that he loves his family and knows that they love him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of shooter</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>School</td>
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<tr>
<td>William Atchison</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Aztec High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pekka-Eric Auvinen</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Jokela High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenneth Bartley</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Campbell County Comprehensive High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert Butler, Jr.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Millard South High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bastian Bosse</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Geschwister Scholl</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alvaro Castillo</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Orange High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seung Hui Cho</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nikolas Cruz</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chris Harper-Mercer</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Umpqua Community College</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eric Harris</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Columbine High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dylan Klebold</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Columbine High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karl Pierson</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Arapahoe High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evan Ramsey</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Bethel High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jose Reyes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sparks Middle School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jon Romano</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Columbia High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeffrey Weise</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Red Lake High School</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
I will be carrying out an iterative qualitative content analysis of the expressions of social alienation and social connection that are both explicit and latent in the narrative rationalizations of 19 school shooters. The first part of my analysis will use Seeman’s six varieties of alienation as the categories to code for. The second part will look for evidence of social connection in the personal narratives, and the third part is an inductive analysis that generates a new, more intuitive framework through which to understand social alienation. Qualitative content analysis allows for a nuanced exploration of how social alienation and connection are expressed, which is the heart of my research question. School shootings are rare but devastating, which means my sample is small enough to allow me to form a nuanced understanding of expressions of social alienation and attachment rather than just measuring how frequently these expressions occur. A single intense expression of social alienation can be as revealing as a series of similar expressions, but many quantitative methods fall short in identifying these important examples. Given that social alienation is a subjective feeling of a collectively understood phenomenon, it is useful to look at each expression of social alienation individually and then consider how it relates to the phenomenon as a whole. When carrying out a quantitative content analysis, the code needs to be pre-determined, similar to the first stage of my analysis. However, one of the goals of this thesis is to explore the vocabulary and thematic language patterns these shooters use to express social alienation so that they are more readily identifiable and practical for those working closely with young people. I want these new categories defining the features of language used by the shooters to emerge from the data, and this inductive approach requires qualitative content analysis.

Before beginning my analysis, I had to ensure that all the narrative rationalizations I will be using were transcribed, or typed up in the case of scanned handwritten journals, formatted for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of shooter</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Survived</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
analysis, and saved as .doc files. This includes making sure any of Dr. Langman’s annotations were removed, and that scanned or handwritten sources were typed up so that they were machine-readable. I then did an initial read and re-read of all the sources, highlighting all references to social alienation or social connection using an open-coding approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). These highlighted references are the meaning units for my analysis. I used a manual method for my analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017); these meaning units were then entered into a spreadsheet, with a column indicating which shooter’s words they are. The first part of my analysis uses Seeman’s six varieties of alienation as the foundation for the code. Using the codes below, I analyzed language units and categorized them into one of the six categories. I then explained any overarching themes and other findings for each category.

Table 2.3 Coding table for initial analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>Feeling as though you are unable to fulfill goals and desires that you have</td>
<td>“I hoped I would get better and become a state trooper. I don’t ask for help, because what if I get better, then can’t be a cop? That’s all I want to do. But now I’m just too afraid.”  -Romano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaninglessness</td>
<td>Feeling that you have no purpose and no hope for a better future, feeling apathetic or that nothing gives you joy or happiness.</td>
<td>“My life is nothing and meaningless.” -Cruz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normlessness</td>
<td>Feeling as though the only way of attaining success or achieving your goals—culturally acceptable or otherwise—is through socially unacceptable means.</td>
<td>“If I can’t pry your eyes open, if I can’t do it through pacifism, if I can’t show you through displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet.” -Woodham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Isolation</td>
<td>Feeling lonely, living without much social interaction or sense of connection to a community, family, or friend group.</td>
<td>“I live a lone life, live in seclusion and solitude.” -Cruz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-estrangement</td>
<td>Feeling as though you are unable to fulfill your potential or find activities that are rewarding and engaging because of societal norms.</td>
<td>“I don’t know who I am. I want to be something I can never be. I try so hard every day. But in the end, I hate myself for what I’ve become.” -Kinkel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Estrangement</td>
<td>Feeling as though your values are discrepant to those of the society or cultures you belong to.</td>
<td>“Now, with the government having scandals and conspiracies all over the fucking place and lying to everyone all the time and with worthless, pointless, mindless, disgraceful TV shows on and with everyone ob-fucking-nessed with Hollywood and beauty and fame and glamour and politics and anything famous, people just aren’t worth saving.” -Harris</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
my analysis aims to understand the thematic patterns, and vocabulary that are used to communicate social alienation. This helps us understand what I refer to as *The Lexicon of School Shooters*. It is important that these findings offer practical and intuitive categories so that the nuances of how alienation is expressed are easily understood and identifiable, so that it adequately encapsulates how social alienation is expressed today. I used an inductive approach to do this, sorting the meaning units for social alienation identified in the first part of my analysis into codes based on the main point they convey. Some of the meaning units identified in the last chapter were a few sentences long, and contained multiple different themes within them. The meaning units from the first part of the analysis were split so that for the second part of the analysis the units contained only one theme. Meaning units in the second part of the analysis are therefore shorter, often partial sentences. I then sorted these codes into categories, which constitute the sub-themes in my findings. Once these have been determined, those categories were organized into broader themes. These broader themes will answer the question: What features of the language used by school shooters in the sample convey social alienation? The findings tables were created to ensure that definitions are clear and examples are given, so that the broader themes can be used as a priori code for future research.

While the purpose of the study is to better understand social alienation as a psychosocial phenomenon experienced by school shooters, this research alone cannot be used to predict or explain the experience of every school shooter or future school shooter. The results of this analysis, as is the case with all qualitative research, will only reveal how the shooters included in the sample express their feelings of social alienation and attachment.
Chapter 3: Applying Seeman’s Model of Alienation

Powerlessness

“Here I am, 26, with no friends, no job, no girlfriend, a virgin. I long ago realized that society likes to deny people like me these things.”

-Christopher Harper-Mercer

Seeman’s definition of powerlessness involves the conflict an individual experiences when they share culturally upheld aspirations, but have low expectancy of fulfilling them. For example, if someone believes they need to own a house by the time they are 35, but has struggled to maintain full-time employment, they might experience a sense of powerlessness. This frustration exists because the individual is unable to realize a socially respectable goal or milestone that they deeply value or buy into. One of the commonly-held cultural goals that was apparent across this sample was the desire to be seen as socially successful. This means being successful with girls (either romantically or sexually), wanting to have more friends or be accepted by peers, wanting to get a certain job, or otherwise feel respected or admired.

I inferred what they appear to be framing as aspirational from the sentiment of their expressions. Often, these inferences are in the form of lamenting the lack of specific culturally-celebrated things from their lives. Dylan Klebold wrote, “What’s bad [about my life] — no girls (friends or girlfriends), no other friends except a few, nobody accepting me even though I want to be accepted, me doing badly & being intimidated in any & all sports, me looking weird & acting shy — BIG problem, me getting bad grades, having no ambition of life, that’s the big shit.” This list in and of itself shows that Klebold values friendship, connection with women, wanting to be accepted, doing well in school, being good at sports, looking normal, and acting confident.

German school shooter Bastian Bosse shared that he “wanted to have friends, to have clothes with the brand name on it in big letters.” This demonstrates that he subscribes to the cultural script that

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1 Throughout Chapters 3, 4, and 5 there are frequent references to quotes from the corpus. The use of APA in-text citations impacts the clarity and readability of the work. Instead, the authors of each quote are identified when their words are referenced.
says that being popular with fashionable clothes is desirable. These are cultural norms that you would expect a male high school student to buy into. Their alienation in these moments is not a clash between what they find aspirational and what society deems respectable—cultural alienation—instead it derives from their frustration that these goals are not attainable for them.

A common refrain is the resentment stemming from these young men feeling that they are not considered sexually attractive. Given that they believe that being sexually successful with women is aspirational, this is a clear example of powerlessness. In his manifesto, Chris Harper-Mercer writes extensively about the inferiority and brutality of Black men, and that despite this they are still sexually successful “vaginal pirates”. What is ironic is that Harper-Mercer himself is mixed-race. He theorizes, “girls would rather go with alpha thug black men.” Eric Harris’ journal entries were generally rage-filled and self-aggrandizing. In a rare instance of humility, Harris reflects “I have always hated how I looked, I make fun of people who look like me, sometimes without even thinking sometimes just because I want to rip on myself [sic]. That’s where a lot of my hate grows from. The fact that I have practically no self-esteem, especially concerning girls and looks and such.” Harris also makes the off-hand comment “maybe I just need to get laid [sic].” This again shows a desire to have sex with women, and the frustration that they believe they are not seen as sexually attractive enough to do so.

Some of the young men also shared a feeling of powerlessness when it comes to romantic love, as distinct from sexual intimacy. Dylan Klebold’s journal is laced with references to unrequited romantic love. Due to the redaction of the released journals, it is unclear whether he is referring to the same girl throughout or whether there are multiple girls he is infatuated with, but he writes about wishing he could cuddle her and laments wanting something he can never have. Similarly, Kip Kinkel expresses heartbreak that the object of his affections could never love him back. This powerlessness seems to connect with a sense of social attachment, in that it reveals an ability to form romantic attachment. This will be discussed in the upcoming section on social connection. An overlapping sense of powerlessness and social isolation is clear when these young
men express a desire for more friends or connection with women, but an inability to form strong relationships with their peers. References to wanting more friends are abundant in these narrative rationalizations. When powerlessness collides with social isolation, the individual appears to experience a form of peer-directed isolation.

Another shared instance of powerlessness is the tension that arises when an individual has a dream job or future career they feel strongly about but feels as though it is impossible for them to enter that profession. Eric Harris and Jon Romano both wrote about wanting jobs in the military or emergency services. As Romano discusses his strained relationship with his father he says, “He also told me I had no way of being a fireman when I was about ten or eleven.” For Romano, this appears to have been extremely discouraging. The fear of not being able to realize his childhood dream of being a fireman or law enforcement professional was so intense that he said it stopped him from reaching out for help, “I hoped I would get better and become a state trooper. I don’t ask for help, because what if I get better, then [sic] can’t be a cop? That’s all I want to do. But now I’m just too afraid.” For Harris, his previous run-ins with law enforcement appeared to make it nearly impossible for him to become a Marine as he had hoped. His powerlessness here is expressed as anger and disappointment. “Hey god damn it I would have been a fucking great marine. It would have given me a reason to do good.”

There is also a clear desire to be seen as normal. Some of these young men are self-aware enough to realize that they are seen as weird, but are ill equipped to do anything about it. Their powerlessness is based on the desire to fit in. Conformity or being normal is the goal they aspire to, but they are unable to fulfill this. Kip Kinkel states this unambiguously, “Why aren’t I normal? Help me. No one will.” Klebold writes that he wants happiness, but instead has “the most miserable existence in the history of time.” In other cases this is much more implicit, for instance, references to wanting to do well at school (Klebold, Reyes) or otherwise fit in.

These young men express their powerlessness in the most literal way when they allude to, or directly point out, their systematic disempowerment at the hands of the in-group. Seung-Hui
Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, refers to himself and people like him as “the Weak and Defenseless people” throughout his rambling declaration of revolution. Evan Ramsey declares that he reached his breaking point because he was “sick and tired of being treated this way everyday.” This relentless deprivation of respect is cited as a reason why these young men are hungry for total control and dominion. Karl Pierson chillingly declares, “I will do something I have wanted to do for a while—mass murder and be in a place of power where I and I alone are judge, jury and executioner.” These references to the violent ways they hope to assert their power over those who they feel they have been subjugated to show the intensity of certain experiences of unrelenting powerlessness.

“I don’t want to see, hear, speak or feel evil, but I can’t help it. I am evil.”

-Kip Kinkel

Meaninglessness

“Some will of course say I had so much to live for, but I don’t think so. I had no friends, no girlfriend, was all alone. I had no job, no life, no successes. What was it that was supposed to happen, what great event was it that was supposed to make me realize how much there was going for me.”

-Christopher Harper-Mercer

When an individual experiences meaninglessness, or lack of purpose in their life, it is understandable why they might search for meaning in the form of a greater cause. Meaninglessness is when someone feels they are being “confronted with empty, irrelevant choices” (p.66, Travis, 1986). They are unable to find meaning or purpose in the circumstances they encounter, and cannot makes sense of how the present relates to the future (Seeman, Mau). In their narrative rationalizations, the school shooters studied in this thesis make reference to their struggle to find meaning or purpose, feeling as though they are choosing between inconsequential choices that are made even more empty by the illusion of free will given by a society that has already limited the available options. This section discusses expressions of meaninglessness,
which are central to understanding why some of the shooters refer to their plans of attacks as missions or their contribution to a greater cause. There is more discussion of this phenomenon in the next section, *Normlessness.*

At its core, meaninglessness is manifested as an inability to find anything that gives the individual a sense of meaning or purpose. This is expressed using sweeping statements about feeling directionless and going through the motions every day without any sense of connection to their daily routine and broader life. Nikolas Cruz commented on this lack of purpose quite literally in one of his videos, saying “My life is nothing and meaningless.” Atchison summed this up by writing, “Work sucks, school sucks, life sucks.” This gives us some insight into the way Atchison viewed school and work as separate from “life”, despite the fact he undoubtedly spent the majority of his time working or at school. This adds color to why he may feel detached. The phrase “life sucks” was used by a number of the shooters in this sample. This is notable because there is a sort of euphemistic quality to this expression, which has come to be symbolic of teenage apathy. However, the feeling that “life sucks” is given more gravity when you consider that Evan Ramsey uses this to explain why death—his own and other people’s at his hands—seemed like an escape, “LIFE SUCKS in its own way, so I killed a little and killed myself” (Ramsey). This purposelessness is not for lack of trying. Some of the shooters express their frustration that they are unable to find meaning in relationships, school, and other aspects of their life. These shooters want to be able to find meaning, but are just not able to. Kip Kinkel wrote “Please. Someone, help me. All I want is something small. Nothing big.” This experience of lack of personal meaning is a commonly held form of alienation among the sample.

Where finding one’s life purpose reflects meaninglessness on an existential level, individuals can also experience meaninglessness when it comes to the smaller choices we have to make on a daily basis. Eric Harris, and Pekka-Eric Auvinen— who was heavily influenced by Eric Harris’ writings—express the idea that society and its institutions are programs of mass delusion that are meant to strip humanity of its natural state of individuality, instead creating “weak-
minded masses” (Auvinen). They are frustrated by the lack of free-will and autonomy because social norms and standards have already limited the options that are available, therefore rendering all choices empty and irrelevant. Harris explained that the great irony is that people have been made into “robots” explaining, “No matter how hard I try to NOT copy someone I still AM!” Dylan Klebold philosophized over feeling that his daily tasks were empty in the face of the impending massacre he was planning with Eric Harris; “It’s interesting, when I’m in my human form, knowing I’m going to die. Everything has a touch of triviality to it. Like how none of this calculus shit matters. The way it shouldn’t.” (Klebold). This shows that meaninglessness can be experienced both before these young men have decided to turn to violence, but also as a result of deciding to carry out a rampage attack.

Meaninglessness is also characterized by an inability to connect the present to the future (Mau). Some young people may find it difficult to have perspective about how the things they experience when they are young may not matter when they are adults, but also how things that may seem irrelevant now can set them up for success in the future. For example, young people may not realize that being unpopular at school does not mean they are condemned as social outcasts forever, but they also struggle to imagine that what they are learning in school has any bearing on their future career goals. Almost all the school shooters imply that school was not a happy place for them, either because of social struggles, problems with authority figures, or a lack of belief in the purpose of school as an institution. Bastian Bosse put it succinctly when he wrote “Life has been beautiful, until I went to school the first time.” (Bosse). This inability to see the purpose or temporary nature of school amplified whatever alienation and lack of fulfillment they were experiencing there. Eric Harris expressed his lack of perspective when he wrote about being caught with a flask of alcohol in his journal. He is dismissive of the idea that being “ratted out” was for his own good, “I know you thought it was good for me in the long run and all that shit.” (Harris). Harper-Mercer had a similar reaction to the attitude that things would get better, as he was unable to see what could possibly change his situation, “What was it that was supposed to
happen, what great event was it that was supposed to make me realize how much there was going for me.” There is a clear sense that these young people are not able to believe the adults in their lives who are trying to offer perspective, and are experiencing the aspect of meaninglessness Mau described in his study.

“It’s interesting, when I’m in my human form, knowing I’m going to die. Everything has a touch of triviality to it. Like how none of this calculus shit matters. The way it shouldn’t, the truth.”

- Dylan Klebold (1999)

Normlessness

“If I can’t pry your eyes open, if I can’t do it through pacifism, if I can’t show you through displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet.”

- Luke Woodham

Normlessness is described as a conflict of norms. This occurs when an individual believes that it isn’t possible to achieve their goals through the available or socially acceptable means (Seeman, Dean, Mau). This is most commonly understood as the sense of anomie Durkheim wrote about. Examples of normlessness in the sample can be broken down into three subtypes. The first is the desire to fulfill a personal goal at all costs for the individual’s own self gain. The second is the rationalization that the end justifies the means because they are carrying out a noble act for a greater good and not just their own gratification. Finally, the third type of normlessness is expressed as a trivial rebellion or disregard for seemingly uncontroversial and widely accepted social norms. While five out of the 19 school shooters studied in this sample express normlessness in some form in their narrative rationalizations, Eric Harris’ journal contains the most significant examples of the first and third subtype.

The urge to realize a personal goal at all costs for an individual’s own self-gain means that an individual is prepared to violate socially acceptable norms in order to get the outcome they want. Essentially, this form of normlessness is a state where a person believes the end justifies the means, even if those means are harmful or otherwise in conflict with societal norms. Eric Harris
expresses this in his willingness to do whatever is needed to carry out *NBK—Natural Born Killers*—the code name he and Dylan Klebold gave their planned massacre at Columbine High School, “If [I] have to cheat and lie to everyone than that’s fine. THIS is what I am motivated for. THIS is my goal.” He is prepared to cheat and lie, two socially maligned means, in order to carry out his personal goal. Harris also expresses a disturbing disregard for sexual consent when he reveals, “I want to grab a few different girls in my gym class, take them into a room, pull their pants off and fuck them hard. I love flesh . . . the smooth legs, the large breasts, the innocent flawless body, the eyes, the hair, jet black, blond, white, brown, ahhh I just want to fuck! Call it teenager hormones or call it a crazy fuckin [sic] racist rapist.” He wants to fulfill his personal goal of having sex at all costs, even rape. This is a clear example of a troubling sense of normlessness.

While Harris’ normlessness appears to be a justification for him to fulfill his self-gratifying goals, a few of the other young men in the sample express their normlessness through the lens of martyrdom. For these individuals the ends justify the means because they believe that their cause is more noble than the laws of man. They view their violation of social norms a necessary step to overturn the power imbalance for members of the underclass that they identify with. Cho even expresses a reluctance to cause pain and suffering, but said that he felt compelled to in order to complete his “mission”, “Heaven knows I wouldn’t hurt a single leaf of a flower. But when the time came, I did it. I had to. What other choices did you give me?” Cho reveals that he believes that there was no other way to fulfill his purpose without deviating from socially acceptable means. Luke Woodham similarly expresses that violence seemed a last resort. It is possible that Cho and Woodham are feigning their apparent reluctance in order to gain sympathy or otherwise rewrite history, “if I can’t do it through pacifism… then I will do it with a bullet.” Erik Auvinen was also prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for a perceived higher purpose, “I am ready to die for a cause I know is right, just and true... even if I would lose or the battle would be only remembered as evil.” These young men consider carrying out actions that are seen as evil and causing unimaginable suffering as worthwhile if it means they are able to achieve their ultimate
goals, because the laws of man are simply inadequate to allow them to complete their missions. Luke Woodham and Christopher Harper-Mercer were both resolute in their view that societal norms and standards are restrictive, imploring others to “Make your own rules. Live by your own laws” (Woodham) and offering solace to those who violate the “laws of man” by saying they will be rewarded on the “other side” (Harper-Mercer).

Not all expressions of normlessness evident in these narrative rationalizations were violent or so horrifying. In fact, there were two instances in Eric Harris’ journal where normlessness manifested itself as seemingly trivial rebellions against widely accepted cultural norms. The first example is when Harris rejects something as noncontroversial as grammatical conventions, putting forward the idea that “spelling is stupid unless I say, I say spell it how it sounds, it’s the fuckin [sic] easiest way!” He believes he does not have to rely on grammatical standards to be understood. This disregard for even the most mundane of social norms could easily be overlooked in the context of the more intense and hostile examples. Another instance of futile rebellion is when Harris rants about how laws that protect people’s belongings of theft somehow encroach on his freedom, “Isn’t America supposed to be the land of the free? How come, If I’m free, I can’t deprive a stupid fucking dumbshit from his possessions if he leaves them sitting in the front seat of his fucking van out in plain sight and in the middle of fucking nowhere on a Frifuckingday night. NATURAL SELECTION” (Harris). Once more, Harris exhibits a tendency to reject cultural norms if they get in the way of him getting what he wants, whether it comes to his murderous mission or the most inconsequential desire.

“Fear no t the laws of man, when you get to the other side you will be welcomed.”

-Christopher Harper-Mercer
Social isolation

“I live a lone life, live in seclusion and solitude.”

-Nikolas Cruz

The idea that school shooters are socially isolated loners is fairly common in the cultural imagination, making this one of the more interesting forms of alienation to analyze (Cullen, 2012; Lopez, 2014). Social isolation is the state of being separated from the in-group, or being considered a loner. In the narrative rationalizations included in this sample, expressions of social isolation can broadly be categorized in two ways. The first is external or peer-directed social isolation. This is when the individual is explicitly marginalized through being bullied, left out of activities, mocked, or otherwise humiliated. This is the kind that the media coverage often focuses on. In these cases, the person is being socially isolated by external forces, such as their peers or institutions. The second is self-directed social isolation, where the individual socially isolates themself, either deliberately or inadvertently. This is a more internalized process where the individual’s perception that they are different from their peers acts as a barrier to their social engagement. Social isolation in these narrative rationalizations also manifests as an expression of loneliness or a comment about being alone. Where the individual expresses loneliness, it can be inferred that the social isolation is not voluntary, that is, that they would prefer to not be socially isolated. Where the comment is about being alone, it is generally considered as descriptive or observational. There does not seem to be a value attributed to the state of being alone.

External or peer-directed social isolation is evident when school shooters discuss being bullied, humiliated, or excluded from social activities by other people. It is also offered as an attempt to justify why they are driven to direct their anger outward as violence against others. For instance, Pierson wrote, “When I do commit my atrocities, I want the conversation to be about elementary school teasing. Words hurt, can mold a sociopath, and will lead someone a decade later to kill.” (Pierson). In his view, the teasing he endured was enough to warrant planning a rampage attack at his school. This sentiment was echoed by Luke Woodham who wrote, “I killed
because people like me are mistreated every day” (Woodham) and Eric Harris who seethed, “Everyone is always making fun of me because of how I look, how fucking weak I am and shit, well I will get you all back, ultimate fucking revenge here.” (Harris). Clearly, this marginalization and humiliation affected these young men in a profound way. There is also evidence of powerlessness here as they value being socially accepted, so the rejection they face at the hands of their peers serves to alienate them further, “I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things. And no don’t fucking say “well that’s your fault” because it isn’t, you people had my phone #, and I asked and all, but no.” (Harris). Peer-directed isolation is therefore more accurately described as a precursor to alienation, rather than an expression of alienation.

Self-directed isolation is an internalized feeling of not belonging or a fear of rejection that is driven by a person’s own perception of their marginalization. It is either reflexive or a conscious choice where someone is isolating themselves or withdrawing from social contact of their own accord, unlike peer-directed social isolation, where the social isolation is happening as a result of humiliation and rejection carried out by others and likely out of the subject’s hands. Kip Kinkel describes the way he has internalized his social marginalization, clearly stating, “no one ever makes fun of me” but he still feels like “everyone is against” him (Kinkel). Similarly, Dylan Klebold blames his social marginalization on the intrinsic differences between him and his peers, but also preempt the counter-argument that he might be overstating the differences he perceives. “I see the people at school — some good, some bad — I see how different I am (aren’t we all you’ll say) yet I’m on such a greater scale of difference than everyone else (as far as I know, or guess).” (Klebold). He describes himself as an outside observer here, withdrawing from his peers because he feels he is different from them. This is a hybrid of cultural alienation and social isolation. Self-directed isolation can also be expressed as a self-conscious utterance of low self-esteem or insecurity. Nikolas Cruz talks about the “solitude” in which he lives his life, and in one of his videos he declares, “I am nothing. I am no one.” (Cruz). It can be inferred that his low self-image and his solitary life are related, with his social isolation perpetuating his belief that he
is no one and vice versa. Klebold wrote, “I hope that people can accept me... that I can accept them...” It is evident here that he is aware that he plays a role in his own isolation and social detachment; that just as his peers reject him, he rejects them. This example also demonstrates that the individual may feel like self-directed isolation is also involuntary, because it is almost reflexive. However, Klebold also actively chooses to disengage socially, noting his role in the rapid shrinking of his circle of friends, “my friends (at my choice) are depleting & collapsing under each other.” (Klebold). Self-directed social isolation does not necessarily require the individual to be aware that they are socially isolating themselves.

Expressions of social isolation can also be descriptive statements that don’t involve discussing who is causing the isolation. When this happens, they can be understood to either be a value-neutral or even positive statement that describes the individual as simply being isolated, or they can be an expression of loneliness, which implies that the individual is isolated against their will. An example of the former is Cruz sharing, “I live a lone life, live in seclusion and solitude.” There is no obvious sense of loneliness here. In fact, solitude actually has a positive connotation to it. More common is a sense of loneliness, which suggests that the subject would prefer to not be socially excluded or marginalized. Harper-Mercer laments, “My whole life has been one lonely enterprise,” Dylan Klebold echoes this, “Ever since 7th grade, I’ve felt lonely,” and Bastian Bosse admits, “You are alone and you want to have friends.” This is a hybrid of social isolation and powerlessness, as the individual places high value on social connection but is not able to fulfill this desire.

“I feel rejected, rejected, not so much alone, but rejected. I feel this way because the day-to-day treatment I get usually it’s positive but the negative is like a cut, it doesn’t go away really fast.”

-Evan Ramsey
Self-estrangement

“I just can’t be happy in the society or the reality I live. Due to long process of existential thinking, observing the society I live and some other things happened in my life.”

-Pekka-Eric Auvinen

Quite literally, self-estrangement is a sense of separation from oneself. It is best understood as a “cognitive sense of separation” (Nair & Vohra, 2012:27) that occurs when an individual feels that societal norms have limited them from fulfilling their potential. Whereas normlessness involves an individual rejecting socially approved norms as a means of fulfilling their goals, self-estrangement is the feeling of despair that arises from realizing that fulfillment is not possible, even through socially deviant means. It is also associated with the inability to find things engaging, a growing sense of indifference (Kahn 1990), and self-loathing. In this sample, self-estrangement has three core expressions. The first is feeling so disconnected from themselves that they cannot and do not feel joy, the second is feeling they are not living an authentic life, and the third is that they dehumanize themselves.

When the shooters in this sample express their inability to feel joy they most commonly describe a feeling of insurmountable despair. Klebold calls it “a dark time, infinite sadness.” Bartley simply observes, “I am always so sad now. I never feel joy ever” and Pierson, Kinkel, and Castillo describe unsuccessfully trying to overcome their sadness. Auvinen, whose sense of superiority is tangible throughout his so-called *Natural Selector’s Manifesto*, explains that “due to long process of existential thinking, [and] observing the society I live [in]” he believes he “just can’t be happy in the society or the reality [he lives].” For him, the inability to be happy in society is the result of being too evolved and reaching a level of awareness that is incommensurable with happiness. For the others, the inability to feel joy and the relentless sadness seems to be a deeply disturbing state.

Another aspect of self-estrangement emerges when the individual feels that society limits them from realizing their true potential. The cognitive separation that occurs in this state reflects a
person’s disaffection that results from not living authentically and being true to themselves. To put it in Kip Kinkel’s words, “I don’t know who I am. I want to be something I can never be. I try so hard every day. But in the end, I hate myself for what I’ve become.” (Kinkel). Where Kinkel internalizes this to become self-loathing, Weise describes the intensity of this feeling differently; saying that it as though part of him has died. Like Auvinen, Cho also feels that society is responsible for limiting his potential, in keeping with the bitter tone of his writing, he declared, “I could have been great.” This form of self-estrangement, as with others, is laced with a sense of hopelessness and finality.

Self-estrangement in its most intense form is expressed as self-dehumanization. In this sample, the young men are so disconnected from their humanity that they reduce themselves to a sickness, object, or nonhuman being. Harper-Mercer, whose narrative rationalization is a treatise on the inferiority of the black man, despite being mixed-race with an African American mother, declares that the “The black man is the most vile creature on the planet. He is a beast beyond measure.” The use of words like “vile creature” and “beast” is obviously degrading and dehumanizing. In addition to these animal metaphors, the shooters also use the word “monster” (Reyes) and “bomb” (Pierson) to describe themselves. In addition to using metaphors, there is a tendency to describe themselves as sick or even to attempt to diagnose themselves in quasi-psychological terms. Castillo admitted, “I know I am sick,” (Castillo) while Pierson writes, “I am a psychopath with a superiority complex.” (Pierson). This sort of language, coupled with Harper-Mercer’s belief that he was “born bad” with no societal “recourse”, (Harper-Mercer) reinforces their deterministic belief that these rampage attacks were inevitable. Dehumanization here serves as an expression of alienation, as well as absolving the shooters of agency and responsibility.

“I know I am sick. What do you do with sick people like me. They can’t change. You have to sacrifice them. Bad things could happen. We have to learn how to sacrifice ourselves.”

– Alvaro Castillo
Cultural estrangement

“What do I hate / What I don’t like?

Equality, tolerance, human rights, political correctness, hypocrisy, ignorance, enslaving religions and ideologies, antidepressants, TV soap operas & drama shows, rap-music, mass media, censorship, political populists, religious fanatics, moral majority, totalitarianism, consumerism, democracy, pacifism, state mafia, alcoholics, TV commercials, human race.”

-Pekka-Eric Auvinen

Cultural estrangement occurs when an individual believes that their values are “discrepant” from those of the society they belong to (Seeman, Mau). Cultural estrangement is different from powerlessness, meaningfulness, and self-estrangement in that it does not necessarily reflect a negative judgment of self, or a belief that they lack something that others have. Instead, ascribing to a set of values that are not shared by those in the society you belong to actually requires a level of confidence or self-belief that is more akin to superiority (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1990). We can identify cultural estrangement by assessing an individual’s attitude to mass culture, the intensity of their social criticism, and the way they reject the norms, values, and practices of the society they live in. For instance, Auvinen titled his narrative justification “The Natural Selector’s Manifesto.” It is rife with cultural alienation. Essentially, he saw his role as being a “natural selector” because cultural norms had failed to support the evolution of a stronger society as policies support the weak, who have now taken over society. He intends to begin course-correcting the world through his attack. This shows the depth of political disaffection and cultural alienation that can exist when an individual feels their values are discrepant from those of the society they live in. This section will look at cultural estrangement as expressed in terms of us vs. them language, rejection of institutions, and rejection of mass culture.

One of the clearest ways that the school shooters in this sample express cultural estrangement is in the way they employ us vs. them language. Seung-Hui Cho, who perpetrated the Virginia Tech massacre, explicitly gives names to the in-group and out-group that subvert the way society
sees them. He calls the people he identifies with the “Weak and Defenseless people” or the “Poor and the Weak”, using capitalization to make it clear that these are names. He uses countless names to label the social elite, including “Descendants of Satan Disguised as Devout Christians” and “Hedonists, Charlatans, Sadists, Rapists, Terrorists”. By using demeaning, hostile language to describe those who society sees as the in-group, Cho makes his disdain for social values clear.

Implicit uses of *us vs. them* language include trying to explain the ways in which these shooters feel they are not like the rest of society. This is generally compounded by a sense of superiority that qualifies why they are better or more evolved than the status quo. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold both discuss being God in their journals, and a few other school shooters do too. Harris expresses this many times saying, “I feel like God and I wish I was, having everyone being OFFICIALLY lower than me.” Klebold also expressed his superiority in similar terms, “I think, too much, I understand, I am GOD compared to some of those un-existable brainless zombies.” Pekka-Eric Auvinen preempted the criticism that he expected would be leveled at him explaining, “You can say I have a “god complex”, sure... then you have a “group complex”! Compared to you retarded masses, I am actually godlike.” The use of the word “godlike” in the manifestos of school shooters is considered a nod to Eric Harris (Langman, 2016). So while significant, it should be noted that this is likely to be imitative and not coincidental. This motif of considering themselves free-thinking, intellectually and morally superior beings in comparison to the masses who are, according to them, weak-minded robots, is present in Harris, Klebold, Cho, Auvinen, Atchison, and Bosses’s narrative rationalizations.

A handful of the school shooters in this sample discuss their politics or attitudes to the dominant ideologies in society. When they do, they exhibit a wholesale rejection of the institutions and foundational beliefs of modern capitalist democracies. At the center of this rejection is the belief that society acts to protect the elite, and that laws and institutions are meant to disenfranchise and disempower the masses. Auvinen wrote in his manifesto, “laws protect the retarded majority which selects the leaders of society” declaring “this is my war: one man war
against humanity, governments and weak-minded masses of the world!” Eric Harris also believed that laws went against human nature, claiming, “human nature is smothered out by society, job, and work and school. Instincts are deleted by laws.” When it comes to religion, Cho was obsessed with the idea of Christian hypocrisy asking, “Do they wanna perpetrate endless sessions of crucifixions and holocausts on our innocent life then go to church and praise the Lord and Jesus?” This distrust of the government, dominant religions, and other institutions like the public school system shows the extent of cultural estrangement that is possible.

From the late 1990s to the present day, young people have been bombarded with messages around what is aspirational through popular culture in the form of music, television shows, movies, and other mediums. There is a tendency to reject mass culture and things that are seen as aspirational or cool evident in this sample, although others in the sample choose to show the ways they do enjoy mass culture (see section on social connection for more). Some reports suggested that Seung-Hui Cho was experiencing cultural alienation due to his cross-cultural upbringing–he moved to the U.S. from South Korea around the age of eight years old (Bowyer, 2007). It is important to note that he was also said to suffer from severe anxiety, depression, and selective mutism (Adams, 2007). Cho condemned American hedonism repeatedly in his writings, referring to his targets as “hedonists”, calling out their “wanton hedonism” and frivolous spending. At points, this doesn’t seem grounded in reality. He uses “caviar” and “cognac” as symbols of this hedonistic lifestyle, which seems a strange choice when describing hedonism in Virginia in 2007. Auvinen demonstrates his rejection of mass culture by listing “…TV soap operas & drama shows, rap -music, mass media… consumerism, TV commercials” as some of the things he hates. There is a moral superiority evident in this repudiation of mass culture and how it often appeals to young men. Castillo made a note on the cover of his journal reading, “No cuss words or profanity is used. I do not believe in using foul language.” Once more, this is an unexpected value that is at odds with what one might assume an 18-year-old male would consider
aspirational. For these young men, rebellion against these discrepant values becomes their sole purpose.

“Your two million dollar house wasn’t enough? Your BMW wasn’t enough? Your inheritances weren’t enough? You have to fuck and steal from the Poor and the Weak who have nothing in order to gratify your fucking pride and hedonism? What are you going to do with the blood money? Buy a new Mercedes?”

-Seung-Hui Cho
“Love is more valuable than anything I know. To love is to enter a completion of oneself. I hate those who choose to destroy a love, who take it for granted. Love is greater than life even. As I look for love, I feel I can’t find it. Ever. But something tells me I will, someday. Somewhere.”

-Dylan Klebold

The dominant media narrative of the alienated school shooter rarely, if ever, conveys the ways in which these gunmen were socially connected. I use the term “social connection” here to mean the opposite of social alienation. As a category for analysis, social connection encapsulates any references expressed by the shooters that appear antithetical to the elements of alienation outlined in the previous chapter. For example, expressions of love—romantic or familial—or mentions of friendship seem to challenge the idea of social isolation, references about looking forward to the future conflict with the idea of meaninglessness, and finding culturally approved activities engaging contrasts with the concept of self-estrangement. Understanding the ways that these young men feel a sense of connection is a useful first step in identifying where the media’s characterization of these shooters falls short. Furthermore, perceived marginalization is one of the necessary but not sufficient conditions for carrying out a rampage shooting (Newman, 2004), and so deepening our analysis of social connection might contribute to the development of prevention mechanisms that attempt to leverage an existing sense of belonging in at-risk individuals.

This analysis considers both explicit mentions of social connection in the personal narratives of school shooters, for example listing the names of people they care about or activities they enjoy, as well as latent references, like tangential musings on the significance of love. The form that the narrative rationalization takes does appear to have a bearing on the level of social connection present in the piece. Where suicide notes or wills tend to be directed to loved ones and therefore more emotional or personal, public- or media-facing justifications and manifestos are likely to be much more fixated on communicating the motivation for the rampage attack rather than disclosing personal attachments.
Table 4.1: Examples of Social Connection in the Personal Narratives of School Shooters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Presence of Social Connection</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Form of connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William Atchison</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pekka-Eric Auvinen</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“Don’t blame my parents or my friends.”</td>
<td>Family, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth Bartley</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“There are only three people that I have ever really loved my dad, my Papaw Ken + Mamaw Polly.”</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Butler, Jr.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“I greatly affected the lives of families ruined but I'm sorry”</td>
<td>Remorse - social norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bastian Bosse</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alvaro Castillo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“I will send Anna and e-mail telling her how much I love and care for her.”</td>
<td>Romantic love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seung Hui Cho</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikolas Cruz</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“My love for you, Angie, will never go away”</td>
<td>Romantic love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Harper-Mercer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“My only solace in online life is posting on Kat.cr as the user lithium_love.”</td>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Harris</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“It’s MY fault! Not my parents, not my brothers, not my friends, not my favorite bands, not computer games, not the media.”</td>
<td>Family, friends, activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kip Kinkel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“What kind of dad would I make?”</td>
<td>Future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan Klebold</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“The love will always be there. GOD I LOVE HER!!! It’s so great to love.”</td>
<td>Romantic love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl Pierson</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.1 (Cont’d.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Presence of Social Connection</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Form of connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evan Ramsey</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“she took both William and I in and didn’t get any money for it, and she like was a mother for William and me.”</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose Reyes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“Dear mom and dad, I’m sorry about all this”</td>
<td>Remorse – social norms, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon Romano</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“Mom – I love you. You treated me like a King. Thank you for everything. It’s not your fault.”</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Slobodian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“I love my parents and my family and I know that they love me”</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey Weise</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke Woodham</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“I, Luke Woodham, being of sound mind and body, do hereby will to Grant Boyette my books. To Lucas Thompson: my guitars and amplifier and their equipment.”</td>
<td>Activities, friends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common form social connection takes in these narrative rationalizations is familial love. This includes the shooters articulating that they feel loved by their families, as well as acknowledging that they themselves love their families. Michael Slobodian wrote in his suicide note, “I love my parents and my family and I know that they love me.” (Slobodian). Reyes wrote two letters, one was addressed to his parents. “Dear mom and dad, I’m sorry about all this,” it began, it goes on to offer “if you hate me and my family doesn’t love me it’s okay. I’m [sic] know that I’m just an idiot. But I love you and I wish the past would be good and better some day.” Despite the obvious lack of understanding about the impossibility of changing the past,
Reyes wants his parents to know that he understands that they might hate him after he carries out his attack, but even so, he continues to tell them he loves them. He even tells them, “I wish I can be a smart and a better kid so I can be the better son in our family [sic]” (Reyes).

Some of the shooters express their familial love in the form of concern that their loved ones will be blamed in the aftermath of their rampages. They often include their close friends in these statements, as well. Harris was adamant that the blame shouldn’t fall on his family, “It’s MY fault! Not my parents, not my brothers, not my friends.” Similarly, Auvinen insisted no one knew about his plans, “Don’t blame my parents or my friends. I told nobody about my plans and I always kept them inside my mind only.” Evan Ramsey expressed gratitude and love for “Superintendent [sic] Sue Hare” writing, that she “is the nicest person I’ve ever met cause she took both William and I in and didn’t get any money for it, and she like was a mother for William and me.” (Ramsey). This shows that even when the shooters do not come from intact families, they can still experience a type of familial love. Expressions of familial love can vary in intensity. Klebold mentions his family and close friends as a positive part of his life, “Let’s see what I have that’s good: A nice family, a good house, food, a couple of good friends, & possessions.” This is not as effusive a declaration of familial love as Romano who wrote, “Mom – I love you. You treated me like a King. Thank you for everything. It’s not your fault.” In fact, Romano wrote personalized goodbyes to around 12 relatives and 8 friends revealing his social attachments. It is therefore clear that some of the shooters express familial love, or at least concern for their loved ones, in a way that indicates some form of social connection and attachment.

Seeman notes that an inability to find culturally-approved activities engaging is a sign of alienation (1959, p.790), yet some of the shooters in the sample exhibit clear and healthy attachment to objects, activities, and other products of mass culture. Luke Woodham revealed the things he cherished most by writing a short will, designating which friend should receive the items that are most meaningful to him.
“I, Luke Woodham, being of sound mind and body, do hereby will to Grant Boyette my books. To Lucas Thompson: my guitars and amplifier and their equipment. Also, all of my guitar magazines and guitar books. I leave my music and lyrics to Lucas Thompson, so that he may perform them. I also leave my other writings of philosophy and poetry to Grant Boyette, they are a part of me and may be published as a process of my life.”

Woodham’s love for music, books, and writing shows that he was able to find culturally-approved activities rewarding. Klebold mentions that he has “small stupid pleasures ... my so called hobbies & doings.” This implies he derives some pleasure from them, but not enough to give his life meaning. Romano lists his favorite television shows, movies, and music in order to prove that he is “different than what the media says school shooters are.” In doing so, he reveals that he enjoys popular culture. Auvinen, for all the cultural alienation he expressed in his so-called manifesto, pleads, “Don’t blame the movies I see, the music I hear, the games I play or the books I read. No, they had nothing to do with this.” Romano and Auvinen both reveal their deep affinity for cultural products that imply some sort of connection with society at large.

Expressions of romantic love— including the desire for love—may indicate that an individual longs for, and is capable of, social attachment. This is distinct to coveting sex or power over someone. Kinkel and Klebold both proclaim in their narratives that they think they might be in love. These proclamations include a sense of excitement and confusion. Klebold’s journal is filled with details of crushes, declarations of love, as well as unrequited love. In one such instance, Klebold writes, “OH my God ... I am almost sure I am in love.” Elsewhere in his journal he philosophizes on the value of love, “Love is more valuable than anything I know. To love is to enter a completion of oneself.” Cruz and Romano both name girls they love, and Castillo even named a gun after the girl he declares he loves. In expressing these romantic feelings and desires, these shooters reveal that they are capable of feeling human connection. This may, however, contribute to their feelings of powerlessness, as it is not clear if the feelings they convey are reciprocated.
Yet another sign of social connection is looking to the future, making achievable plans, expressing hope, and imagining what the future may hold. This is in contrast to the inability to see how the future connects to the present, which is an aspect of meaninglessness. Kinkel wonders, “What kind of dad would I make?” Kinkel used the conditional tense instead of the future tense (“what kind of dad will I make”), which reveals that while he was able to dream about the future, he was still unsure whether he would ever realize these dreams. Romano expressed his ambitions of joining law enforcement, “I hoped I would get better and become a state trooper,” again, the tense he used reveals that this was a past ambition, one that he has lost hope in. Klebold, however, expresses hope for the future in the context of romantic love, “As I look for love, I feel I can’t find it. Ever. But something tells me I will, someday. Somewhere.” Through these vignettes of imagining the future, the tension between alienation and connection that these young men experienced is tangible.

Social connection in the narrative justifications of these school shooters took several forms: attachment to family, friends, or activities, romantic love, expressions of remorse that showed an understanding of shared social norms, or imagining a better future. I found that fourteen of the nineteen shooters in my analysis expressed social connection in at least one form. In contrast, only seven school shooters expressed social isolation in their narratives. These findings challenge the dominant media narrative that stereotypes all school shooters as loners, instead demonstrating that this default characterization is reductive and often inaccurate. By offering a more complete picture of these shooters we may even be able to curb the media spectacle that fame-seeking rampage shootings aspire to create.

“Mom – I love you. You treated me like a King. Thank you for everything. It’s not your fault.”

-Jon Romano
Chapter 5: The Lexicon of School Shooters

The previous two chapters demonstrated the types of alienation and social connection expressed by these school shooters in their own words. Seeman’s framework was developed decades before the contemporary phenomenon of rampage school shootings began. As such, it provides a way of understanding alienation that can apply across many different samples. Mapping the corpus of narrative rationalizations to Seeman’s framework offered a way of understanding that the social alienation experienced by school shooters is akin to the way other populations experience alienation.

However, for Seeman’s framework to be so widely applicable, the categories need to be somewhat broad and general. In order to look specifically at how these school shooters express alienation in their own words, it is imperative to also build a dedicated framework that allows us to understand how school shooters specifically communicate alienation. To do this, I will expand on the analysis in the previous chapter and consider it along with recurring language patterns, to categorize the function of each unit of expressed alienation.

Where Chapter Three answered the question: What kinds of alienation do school shooters express in their narrative justifications? This chapter addresses how they choose to communicate these feelings of alienation. In the first part of my analysis, I was looking for instances of the six elements from Seeman’s model of alienation, whereas in this part I was able to look for any recurrent themes throughout the writings, without being constrained by an existing framework.

The following are ten themes that reflect how these school shooters convey social alienation, along with their definitions. It is most useful to understand these ten themes in two broad categories, emotional justifications and “rational” justifications. Emotional justifications are attempts to rationalize their violent plans in terms of their personal emotional experiences, whereas “rational” justifications are attempts to characterize their violent plans as a reaction to some form of societal injustice or warped worldview. Later on in the chapter, each theme will be
considered for subthemes, key words and patterns that can be used to identify this type of language, an example, and a list of shooters who communicate their alienation in that way.

**Table 5.1 The Lexicon of School Shooters: Emotional vs. “Rational” Justifications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional Justifications</th>
<th>Rational Justifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insignificance</td>
<td>Social hierarchies in school life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme power over others</td>
<td>Societal control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged and unrelenting humiliation</td>
<td>Ideological justifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stagnation</td>
<td>Martyrdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching breaking point</td>
<td>Preemptive attempts to control the post-attack narrative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.2 The Lexicon of School Shooters: Thematic Framework and Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social hierarchies in school life</td>
<td>Individual paints a picture of the dominant social norms and power dynamics of their school community, and uses this to describe why the feel excluded from it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insignificance</td>
<td>Individual conveys their powerless and low self-worth in relation to their lack of social interaction and worthlessness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme power over others</td>
<td>Individual believes that they are superior to the masses, portraying themselves as god-like, the masses as inferior, and their desire to be arbitrators of life or death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal control</td>
<td>Individual details their observations about how society brainwashes the masses, and frames their experience as societal oppression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological justifications</td>
<td>Individual espouses their personal, political, and philosophical ideals and asserts what is wrong with the world and how they would correct it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martyrdom</td>
<td>Individual is committed to a mission they believe is greater than themselves. May also invoke other religious references including to the afterlife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged and unrelenting humiliation</td>
<td>Individual describes the humiliation they have endured and often couches it in terms of the amount of time they feel it has been going on. May also convey that they find it hard to move on from past betrayals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stagnation</td>
<td>Individual discloses feeling emotionally numb, being in a constant state of suffering, or feeling apathetic towards life in general. May question a higher power about why they are encountering these circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching breaking point</td>
<td>Individual reveals that they feel they are about to snap due to their rage. They also describe a feeling of readiness and excitement to carry out their attacks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preemptive attempts to control the post-attack narrative</td>
<td>Individual is preoccupied with how they will be remembered, and therefore tries to preempt and debunk common tropes around school shooters, including their media consumption habits, for example. Some express concern for how their families will react, how the media will portray them, while others address their victims and their families.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social hierarchies in school life**

These young men are encumbered by feelings of social alienation that are deeply rooted in the power dynamics and social norms associated with school life. They fixate on the seemingly entrenched dynamics and situate their alienation within this context. Often, the tight-knit, group-mentality common in their suburban and rural school communities is used to highlight their own perception that they don’t belong and have been excluded from the social aspects of school life. Certain social norms in particular seem to have a more profound alienating effect on the men in this sample, who describe a pervasive culture of consumerism and masculinity, in particular how masculinity is tied to sports, sexuality, and self-esteem.
Table 5.3 Social hierarchies in school life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social outcast</td>
<td>Outcast, loner, different, don’t fit in, everyone is against me, loser, rejected, don’t belong, I have evolved, psycho,</td>
<td>“Everyone knows everyone. I swear – like I’m an outcast, &amp; everyone is conspiring against me” - Klebold</td>
<td>Auvinen, Bosse, Cho, Klebold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>Jock, alpha, thug, vaginal pirate, no girlfriends, sports, no ambition, shy, gay</td>
<td>“No I’m not gay, girls just didn’t want me. As I said before they went for the thug blacks.” – Harper-Mercer</td>
<td>Harper-Mercer, Klebold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumerism</td>
<td>Money, brands, clothes, big letters, hedonism, cars, blood money, caviar,</td>
<td>“I wanted to have…clothes with the brand names on it in big letters” - Bosse</td>
<td>Bosse, Cho, Klebold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Insignificance

In Chapter 3 we looked at powerlessness as one dimension of alienation. This was evident in the way these young men referenced their desire to be socially successful, despite repeatedly falling short. Here, the young men use language that reflects their feelings of insignificance and low self-worth to convey their sense of powerlessness.

Table 5.4 Insignificance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>Alone, lone, no friends, no girlfriend, no one ever truly cared for me, seclusion, solitude,</td>
<td>“I sit here all alone. I am always alone.” - Kinkel</td>
<td>Bosse, Cruz, Harper-Mercer, Kinkel, Klebold, Woodham,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthless</td>
<td>Don’t deserve her, ignore me, fucking worthless, pathetic, void life, nothing, no one, repulsive, the Weak, the Defenseless, no ambitions</td>
<td>“I really must be fucking worthless” - Weise</td>
<td>Castillo, Cho, Cruz, Kinkel, Klebold, Weise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Few people know who I am, I am no one,</td>
<td>“Few people know who I am.” - Kinkel</td>
<td>Cruz, Kinkel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Supreme power over others

As stated in the Chapter 3, it takes self-confidence to commit to values and beliefs that are in conflict with the dominant cultural beliefs and values of the society you belong to. The young men who experience cultural alienation, a clash of value systems that arises from an individual rejecting the status quo, seem to use language that indicates their sense of superiority. This manifests in believing they are God or god-like, that the rest of humanity is pathetic, and that they view themselves as the arbitrator of life and death.

Table 5.5 Supreme power over others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am GOD</td>
<td>I am GOD, I feel like God, I am higher than most anyone, I am actually godlike</td>
<td>“I think, too much, I understand. I am GOD compared to some of those un-existable brainless zombies.” -Klebold</td>
<td>Auvinen, Klebold, Harris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathetic human race</td>
<td>Scum of the earth, pathetic, you aren’t human you are a robot</td>
<td>“I have no mercy for the scum of the earth, the pathetic human race.” - Auvinen</td>
<td>Auvinen, Harris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The arbitrator</td>
<td>Be in a place of power, judge, jury, executioner, If I can’t show you through displaying of intelligence then I will do it with a bullet</td>
<td>“I will do something I have wanted to do for a while–mass murder and be in a place of power where I and I alone are judge, jury and executioner.” -Pierson</td>
<td>Pierson, Woodham</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Societal control

Much of the rejection of cultural norms and standards that is at the core of cultural alienation and normlessness stems from a mistrust of society and its institutions. Some of the young men in the sample are outspoken in support of theories that there is a systemic conspiracy
to control the masses that is carried out on an institutional level, as well as an interpersonal level by authority figures.

**Table 5.6 Societal control**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brainwashed</td>
<td>Enslaves, voluntarily slavery, robot, slave, group complex, masses, brainwash, ever wonder, think a little more and deeper, good little robots</td>
<td>“Ever wonder why we go to school? Besides getting a so-called education. It’s not too obvious to most of you stupid fucks but for those who think a little more and deeper you should realize it. It’s society’s way of turning all the young people into good little robots and factory workers.” - Harris</td>
<td>Auvinen, Cho, Cruz, Harris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>System, society, media, political government programs, job, school, government, TV shows, Hollywood</td>
<td>“Long live the revolution against the system, which enslaves not only the majority of weak-minded masses but also the small minority of strong-minded and intelligent individuals.” - Auvinen</td>
<td>Auvinen Bosse, Cruz, Harris,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>People, cops, parents, teachers, you</td>
<td>“But people (ie, parents, cops, God, teachers) telling me what to do, think, say, act makes me not want to fucking do it” - Harris</td>
<td>Bosse, Cruz, Harris</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ideological justifications**

These are the kinds of expressions one might expect from manifestos. They include the philosophical and political musings of young men who feel that they can offer a worldview that can correct the social failings of the systems and culture in which they currently live. Their language is characterized by sweeping statements about the way the world should be, and is often grandiose and academic in tone. The shooters who communicate alienation in this way identify specific elements of the status quo that they take issue with, and refer to specific demographic groups or institutions as enemies as well. These justifications can be considered as their solutions.
to the conditions that they feel cause their own alienation and limit themselves from reaching their true potential.

### Table 5.7 Ideological justifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defining the enemy</td>
<td>Humans who, you violators of human rights, blacks, the black man, vile creature, gays, lesbians, women, the system, the world of delusion, is my enemy</td>
<td>“The system discriminating naturality and justice is my enemy. The people living in the world of delusion and supporting this system are my enemy.” - Auvinen</td>
<td>Auvinen, Cho, Harper-Mercer,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way I want it to be</td>
<td>We know what we are to this world, America = white, ALL gays should be killed, I love the Nazis, I can’t get enough of the swastika</td>
<td>“We should ship yer black asses back to Afrifuckingka [where] you came from.. We brought you here and we will talk you back. America = white. Gays…well all gays, ALL gays should be killed.” - Harris</td>
<td>Harris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The status quo is wrong</td>
<td>Today, totally misguided, devolving, laws protect the retarded majority, too many thoughts and different societies all wrapped up together, what do I hate, money, justice, morals, rules, laws, manmade words, all talk and no actions, I hate the fucking world</td>
<td>“Today the process of natural selection is totally misguided. It has reversed.” - Auvinen</td>
<td>Auvinen, Harris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence as retaliation</td>
<td>No sympathy, no respect for, no mercy, what did you expect</td>
<td>“We have no sympathy in killing humans who have no respect for other people’s lives” - Cho</td>
<td>Cho</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Martyrdom

Meaninglessness as a type of alienation reflects an individual’s inability to enjoy culturally approved activities, while normlessness is described as the conflict that occurs when an individual feels they are unable to fulfill their goals through socially approved means. The shooters who extensively invoke the language of martyrdom in their narrative justifications have found purpose through their planned attacks, and eschewed social norms and expectations when they decided to use violent and deadly means to fulfill their goals, instead. Through using the familiar cultural lexicon of martyrdom, these young men seek to identify with a cause, perhaps as a reaction to their alienation. There are clear language patterns evident across this sample of young men who invoke the language of martyrdom.

**Table 5.8 Martyrdom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Mission                           | Cause, sacrifice, the battle, fight, die, mission, giving up your lives for a cause, to inspire generations, I am prepared to fight and die, this is what I am motivated for, my goal, revolution, my war, one man war against humanity | “I have chosen my way. I am prepared to fight and die for my cause. I, as a natural selector, will eliminate all who I see unfit, disgraces of human race and failures of natural selection.”  
- Auvinen, Castillo, Cho, Harris |                                                                                   |
| Afterlife                         | Other side, he is finally with God and Tony, God be with him, hell, when I’m in my human form | “My success in Hell is assured. They will give me the power that I seek.”  
- Harper-Mercer                                                                 |                         |
| References to spirituality and religion | Descendants of Satan Disguised as Devout Christians, You should be at peace, I’ve aligned myself with the occult, my religion is not a formal one, align myself with demonic forces | “My religion is not a formal one, but more so a new age one. I’ve aligned myself with the occult since I was born.”  
- Harper-Mercer                                                                 |                         |

69
Prolonged and unrelenting humiliation

Often, the shooters in this sample couch their descriptions of bullying and torment in measures of time. This paints a picture of sustained ostracization over their formative years. At times, they speak in extreme terms, using words like always, never, or everyday to convey that their suffering was incessant. At other times, they reference the specific periods of time when they remember their perceived marginalization to have begun. Descriptions of the humiliation they describe enduring vary in their intensity with Cho repeatedly using the metaphor of rape to convey the level of degradation he felt that he was subjected to at the hands of the cultural elite.

Table 5.9 Prolonged and unrelenting humiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unrelenting nature of their ostracization</td>
<td>Ever since 7th grade, I have endured 10 years, elementary school teasing, since 3rd grade, my whole life, the majority of my life, everyday, 24/7, constantly, never, still, always, infinite, back in the day, routine, monotonous, ever since I arrived in this world</td>
<td>“Since 3rd grade, people picked on me. And I was a loser. I wanted to have friends.” - Bosse</td>
<td>Bosse, Castillo, Cho, Kinkel, Klebold, Harper-Mercer, Pierson, Ramsey, Romano, Woodham,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to move on</td>
<td>The past hurts, it doesn’t go away really fast,</td>
<td>“I feel rejected, rejected, not so much alone, but rejected. I feel his way because the day-to-day treatment I get usually it’s positive but the negative is like a cut, it doesn’t go away really fast.” – Ramsey</td>
<td>Ramsey, Romano,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humiliation</td>
<td>Rejected, people make fun of me, do they wanna rape us, spit on me, knocked me down, laughed at me, ripped on me, abandoned me, embarrassment, say that I pee my pants, say mean things, gay, lazy, stupid, idiot, stealing my money</td>
<td>“Do they wanna smear dog shit on our face then give us a dirty towel to wipe away? Do they wanna rape us then give us a stained toilet paper to clean up?</td>
<td>Bosse, Cho, Harris, Kinkel, Ramsey, Reyes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emotional stagnation

Some of the shooters in the sample grapple with feeling emotionally numb, which is associated with the dissonance that arises from self-estrangement. They either disclose that they are not being able to feel anything at all: whether joy, sadness, or pain, or they share that they are trapped in a state of seemingly inescapable suffering. When this happens, they are either describing the state they are in, how it makes their lives feel meaningless, or questioning why they are enduring such a strange feeling. This apathy to the world around them is often shared with an element of self-consciousness that what they are experiencing is not normal and that something is wrong with them.

Table 5.10 Emotional stagnation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally numb</td>
<td>No emotions, not caring, numb, part of me is dead, nothing makes me happy, can’t cry,</td>
<td>“Oh well…my emotions are gone. So much past pain at once, my senses are numbed. The beauty of being numb.” - Klebold</td>
<td>Castillo, Klebold, Pierson, Weise,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mere existence</td>
<td>Existence, something small, shit life, nothing, meaningless, hate myself, hate everyone,</td>
<td>“My life is nothing and meaningless” -Cruz</td>
<td>Cruz, Kinkel, Klebold,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning circumstances</td>
<td>Why, God, normal, I should be, I wish</td>
<td>“Why aren’t I normal? Help me. No one will.” - Kinkel</td>
<td>Kinkel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>Miserable, misery, eternal suffering, help me, my head doesn’t work right</td>
<td>“I feel that I am in eternal suffering” -Klebold</td>
<td>Kinkel, Klebold, Woodham,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reaching breaking point

Several of the shooters in this sample admit that they are teetering on the brink of snapping. Self-estrangement involves a cognitive state of separation, which may explain why these young men who have calculatedly planned their rampage attacks describe feeling impulsive.
The word “ready” recurs in the sample, implying that they are prepared and set to carry out their rampage attacks. There appears to be a distinction between feeling ready to snap and feeling ready–prepared–to carry out their attack. This has to do with feeling out of control versus feeling a growing sense of anticipation and readiness to act.

Table 5.11 Reaching breaking point

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ready to explode</td>
<td>Bomb, ready, I could snap at any moment, I have had enough, today is the day, ready to tear your fucking heads off, and now I’m a monster</td>
<td>“I am so full of rage that I feel I could snap at any moment. I think about it everyday.” - Kinkel</td>
<td>Auvinen, Harris, Kinkel, Pierson, Reyes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preemptive attempts to control the post-attack narrative

Early school shooters presciently anticipated the media attention their attacks would garner, and subsequent shooters now know to expect the same. As a result, some of the men in this sample attempt to help shape the post-attack narrative in their writings. This is also reflected in how they chose to disseminate their writings, if at all. Robert Butler posted his brief note as a Facebook status the morning of his attack. Eric-Pekka Auvinen uploaded a multimedia file, including his “Natural Selector’s Manifesto” to the internet prior to his attack. Seung-Hui Cho mailed his multimedia manifesto to NBC News part way through his attack, apparently after killing his roommates. However, many of the writings in the sample were personal journals that were never posted online or mailed anywhere, some were handwritten, and others were discovered on hard-drives. It is not always clear if the shooters intended for them to be found and read or not. For those who do try and manipulate the media narrative, this exertion of control could be a way to finally wielding power after feeling impotent and invisible as a result of their experiences of alienation.
Table 5.12 Preemptive attempts to control the post-attack narrative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Used by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shielding loved ones from blame</td>
<td>It’s my fault, don’t blame my parents or my friends, it’s not your fault</td>
<td>“It’s MY fault! Not my parents, not my brothers, not my friends.” - Harris</td>
<td>Auvinen, Harris, Romano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing media tropes around school shooters</td>
<td>Favorite bands, computer games, media, movies, music, books, I like to laugh, I’m not what the media says I should be, How am I different that what the media says school shooters are?</td>
<td>“Don’t blame the movies I see, the music I hear, the games I play or the books I read. No, they had nothing to do with this.” - Auvinen</td>
<td>Auvinen, Harris, Romano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling how they want to be remembered by those who knew them</td>
<td>They are a part of me and may be published, don’t fucking say, I am a psychopath with a superiority complex</td>
<td>“And no don’t fucking say “well that’s your fault because it isn’t, you people had my phone #, and I asked and all, but no.” - Harris</td>
<td>Harris, Pierson, Woodham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting responsibility</td>
<td>I’m sorry about all this, if you hate me, it’s okay, I know that I’m just an idiot</td>
<td>“I greatly affected the lives of the families ruined but I’m sorry” - Butler</td>
<td>Butler, Reyes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This approach allowed me to consider the same expressions of alienation that I worked with in the first part of my analysis in an entirely new way. Instead of being preoccupied with the form of alienation they were describing, I allowed the focus to shift to what these shooters were trying to communicate. It is highly unlikely that these shooters knew that their words reflected Seeman’s model of alienation, and it is doubtful that they even intended to communicate alienation at all. This part of the analysis resulted in the creation of a thematic framework, *The Lexicon of School Shooters*. I was able to identify ten distinct categories based on themes that reflect what the shooters were trying to communicate when they were also conveying alienation.
Conclusion

Prior research has established that it is not possible to come up with a single profile that fits all school shooters (Langman, 2008; O’Toole, 2000). Similarly, my analysis found that there is no one-size-fits all narrative that encompasses how the nineteen shooters in this sample experienced alienation. While every shooter in my analysis expressed alienation in some form, no two shooters experienced the same combination of alienation’s elements. Fourteen of the nineteen shooters studied expressed some form of social connection along with alienation in their personal narratives. The media rarely shows this side of the shooters, preferring to report on the evidence that supports the default narrative, sacrificing nuance in favor of perpetuating the myth of the disaffected loner.

I set out to resolve whether or not school shooters expressed social alienation in their personal narratives, and if so, in what forms. I found that all six of Seeman’s elements of alienation were evident across the corpus, with varying levels of intensity. I found that powerlessness was linked with the shooters’ frustration that they were unable to fulfill their desire to be socially successful. Meaninglessness manifested in sweeping statements about feeling directionless and going through the motions without any sense of connection to their daily routine and long term goals. Normlessness was expressed as a willingness to violate social norms in order to fulfill a personal goal for the individual’s own self gain, to complete a so-called mission, or a trivial rebellion against seemingly uncontroversial and widely accepted social norms. Social isolation was found to be either self-directed or peer-directed. Self-directed social isolation is when someone socially isolates himself, either deliberately or inadvertently. Peer-directed social isolation is what the media’s caricature of school shooters relies on, someone who is explicitly marginalized through being bullied, left out of activities, mocked, or otherwise humiliated. When the shooters share feelings of self-estrangement they describe being so disconnected from themselves that they cannot and do not feel joy, they feel they are not living an authentic life, and that they have lost their sense of humanity. My analysis found that cultural estrangement was
expressed in terms of *us vs. them* language, the rejection of institutions, and the rejection of mass culture.

Another focus of my research was to examine if and how the shooters showed that they were socially connected. I created one category that encapsulated all expressions that were antithetical to each of Seeman’s elements of alienation. Social connection was most commonly conveyed as expressions of romantic or familial love, connection to friends, looking forward to the future, and finding culturally approved activities engaging. These expressions varied in intensity, and do not prove that the shooters were not, in fact, alienated. Instead, this offers a nuanced understanding that many of these young men were simultaneously socially connected in some way, and yet still experienced alienation.

Finally, I developed The Lexicon of School Shooters, comprised of thematic patterns and vocabulary that are used to communicate social alienation. I found ten distinct themes that emerged from the corpus, each with subthemes and corresponding lexicons that can be used to identify this speech easily. For example, within the broader theme of the “social hierarchies of school life,” the shooters specifically used words that relate to masculinity, consumerism, and feeling like social outcasts. Seeman’s framework prevented the detection of these language patterns, as the majority of the meaning units that fall within the theme of “social hierarchies of school life” were coded for either cultural estrangement or social isolation. Meaning units were not compared across categories in the first part of the analysis. This new ten-part framework offers a new way to understand how the shooters in this study communicate social alienation.

**Limitations**

Melvin Seeman first developed his definition of alienation as a multi-faceted psychosocial concept in the 1950s. While it remains valid and applicable today, it does not inherently reflect the way that alienation has been exacerbated through the ubiquity of technology and other aspects of rapid modernization. Seeman’s model of alienation was designed to be general enough that it could be applied to a variety of different contexts. Mau used it to evaluate
the concept of “student alienation” as it relates to their connection to the educational experience; it could equally be used to consider workplace alienation, for example. As a result, I found that the elements themselves were too broad to be meaningful on their own in the specific context of rampage shootings. I resolved this by treating Seeman’s elements as top-level codes, and looking for ways to organize subcategories so that the analysis was more useful.

Several of the definitions for Seeman’s elements mention or allude to culturally prescribed goals or socially approved behaviors. This assumes that the corresponding dominant social norms are clear. I had to make some assumptions as to what the social norms that dominate the lives of young men in the United States are. However, the youngest shooter in my sample is just twelve years old, while the oldest is twenty-six. It is likely that there are some age-related differences in the social norms in the lives of pre-teens and young adults. Eighteen of the nineteen shootings in my sample took place between 1997 and 2018, however Michael Slobodian’s attack took place in 1975. I carried out my analysis using the assumption that the prevailing norms that govern the lives of adolescent boys and young men have not varied significantly in that period. Critics argue that the disproportionate focus on school shootings is because the vast majority of rampage school shooters—and their victims—are white (Newman, 2004). The dominant cultural norms that form the basis of this assumption largely reflect this: they are the norms one would assume exist in predominantly white suburban and rural communities. Twelve of the nineteen shooters in my sample are white, while there are two biracial (African American and white) shooters, two Latino shooters, two Native American shooters, and one Asian shooter. One could argue that culturally prescribed goals or socially approved behaviors may vary significantly based on these ethnic and racial differences. Furthermore, there are three shootings in the sample that took place outside of the United States: one in Finland, one in Germany, and one in Canada. My assumption in including all of these is based on the idea that the prevailing social norms and pressures that young men face across Western countries are practically equivalent.
In Chapter Four I consider the way these shooters attempt to preemptively control the post-attack narrative. This implies that the shooters assumed that their words would eventually become public. All the personal narratives included in my analysis are required to meet the criteria for “narrative justifications:” a first-person account written prior to the attack that references specific plans for violence or attempts to justify violence in general. Sources that comprise the corpus include self-proclaimed manifestos, suicide notes, personal journals, online blogs, YouTube videos, social media profiles, or posts. All sources are considered equally for social alienation. It is important to note that they vary greatly in length, and this may impact the number of different elements of alienation present in that source. It is also likely that expressions of alienation in public-facing narratives vary from those that were not written with the expectation that anyone else would find them. For example, if the writer thought his words might be read someday he might espouse ideological justifications to try and inspire copycats. It is important to consider that expressions of social alienation might be disingenuous, and part of a constructed narrative that is meant to justify violence by claiming it was done as part of a greater cause.

There were some personal narratives that were not included in this analysis as they failed to meet all of the selection criteria. I attempted to keep my criteria as inclusive as possible, while ensuring that they reflected appropriate academic precedents. I was therefore unable to include Adam Lanza’s writings. Lanza perpetrated a massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in which he killed twenty-six people, including twenty children who were six and seven years old. In the public discourse, it is notorious for being one of the most disturbing school shootings of our time. However, Lanza was a twenty year old who had never attended Sandy Hook Elementary School, and as such, this does not fit Newman’s definition of a rampage school shooting (2004). Elliott Rodger carried out his attack near the University of California, Santa Barbara campus. Rodger gained infamy as the author of a deeply disturbing, and incredibly misogynistic, 137 page manifesto titled “My Twisted World.” As Rodger never attended UC
Santa Barbara, this case did not fit the criteria for inclusion in my analysis. These are two of the most notorious rampage shootings in recent memory, and I recommend that this methodology be applied to an expanded sample of mass shooters in the future.

**Future research**

This research builds on the existing contributions to the understanding of the individual psychology of school shooters as part of a broader social context. This methodology can be applied to any number of populations. For example, this iterative content analysis would be useful in understanding how terrorists of all persuasions experience alienation and social connection. Once this methodology is applied to other populations, it can be viewed comparatively to see if there are similarities in how violent extremists across ideologies experience alienation. It should be noted that there may be difficulties in accessing these personal narratives, as they might be made unavailable for security purposes. Another possibility for future research is to apply this methodology to the personal narratives of non-violent men in the same age range to see how the language used by the shooters in this sample, along with the expressions of alienation, compare to a control group.

Finally, as mentioned in my literature review, there have been attempts to create tools to screen the online writings and videos of young people who are believed to be at risk of perpetrating attacks. While still in the early stages, and plagued with ethical issues around academic freedom, privacy versus security, and consent, this field of work, if effective, could help prevent future attacks. It is therefore worthy of considerable research and discussion.

**Implications**

This project has revealed the ways in which national media coverage of school shooting events has fallen short, specifically by inaccurately describing the perpetrator’s motives for violence and prior behavior. There are some guidelines and campaigns that have attempted to make recommendations for responsible reporting on mass shootings in general, and school shootings in particular. These include the “No Notoriety” campaign, that recommends keeping
the use of the perpetrator’s name to a minimum so as not to give the perpetrators the notoriety
they sought (Walsh, 2018). Most of these guidelines approach the subject in terms of preventing
contagion and imitative violence, avoiding sensationalism, and not glorifying the shooters
through disseminating photographs or quoting heavily from their personal narratives. This is
incredibly important. However, when reporting on the perpetrator is inevitable, it is also critical
that journalists challenge reductive narratives that characterize school shooters one-dimensionally
as loners and outcasts. While there is a certain level of comfort that comes from describing these
perpetrators as abnormal, this thesis suggests this is not always accurate and contributes to a false
narrative that may actually impair our ability to address the issue of rampage school shootings in
effective ways. For example, one consequence of this reductive narrative is the creation of PSA
campaigns that place the burden of responsibility on other students. #WalkUpNotOut was a
digital movement that emerged following the National Student Walk Out, where there were more
than 3,000 student-led walk outs across the U.S. to call attention to the issue of gun violence in
the wake of the Parkland shooting in 2018 (Kirby, 2018). The #WalkUpNotOut campaign
suggested that students should “walk up” to students who are ostracized instead of protesting, as a
way of preventing future violence (Kirby, 2018). Inherent in these campaigns are two
assumptions: 1) school shooters are readily identified as ostracized, and 2) social connections will
prevent them from engaging in violence. My research suggests that neither of those assumptions
are true. Committing to accurately reporting on perpetrators of mass violence, including the ways
in which they experience alienation as well as social connection, can actually spark a deeper
understanding of the constellation of causes that contribute to these senseless tragedies. This
project is useful in helping reporters as well as those who work closely with young people
identify expressions of alienation and connection to facilitate discussion of school shooters as
multi-dimensional students. There is, of course, a role for journalists to comfort the public in the
aftermath of such incidents, yet it is vital that the reporting remains fact-based.
Ethical considerations for responsible research

I grappled with a few ethical issues myself while writing this thesis, as is common among researchers studying sensitive subjects. First and foremost, my priority was to ensure that it was clear throughout my study that while there are social forces at play in the lives of these shooters that must be analyzed, these young men alone are ultimately responsible for the deaths of 106 people between them. Alienation is a widely experienced phenomenon. Not everyone who experiences alienation uses it to justify violence against other people, let alone carnage on this scale.

There are subcultures that have emerged online that cast these killers as martyrs and anti-heroes. In conducting my research I came across forums dedicated to discussing school shootings, along with Tumblr tribute blogs dedicated to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold in particular. These are, for all intents and purposes, fansites. To these fans, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are cultural icons. They are objects of fascination and intrigue. I was wary that quoting heavily from the personal narratives of school shooters might cast them as sympathetic figures. I deliberated over how I should even refer to the subjects of my analysis. I chose to refer to them primarily as “shooters,” but I also use “young men,” “perpetrators,” and “gunmen” interchangeably. I don’t believe that calling these shooters “monsters” and attempting to dehumanize them is the solution, but I did want to err away from using their youth to somehow excuse or diminish the devastation they caused, which is why I never refer to them as “boys”.

The purpose of my thesis was to resolve if and how school shooters expressed alienation and social connection in their own words. I found that most do both. This should not come as a surprise. Despite over-simplistic media stereotypes, the personal narratives of school shooters show that there is no single-factor cause that can explain why these particular students carried out their rampages. These stereotypes often shift some of the responsibility from the perpetrator to the victims by framing these attacks as retaliatory. Part of the horror of these massacres lies in understanding that these nineteen young men were not rampage shooters until the very moment
they put their plans into motion and opened fire on their classmates, teachers, and other members of their communities. Before that, they may well have been disaffected loners, mentally disturbed outcasts, or victims of bullying—just like countless other young people who don’t commit these atrocities. The media has a responsibility to the public, and to the victims, to accurately and ethically report on school shootings, without relying on reductive stereotypes in the absence of evidence.

“Immediately after the shooting, I felt hopeless. Like my life had been ruined. Then I refused to think this way. I am not going to allow another school to have 17 fewer people walking around. And I will most certainly not allow anyone else see her friends get shot and die.”

-Eden Hebron, Survivor (2018)
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