

## Gender and Violence

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Nearly half of all people in the U.S. have brown hair. What if you were to read a report tomorrow that indicated that people with brown hair committed 85% of the violent crimes, 90% of the homicides, and were, in general, 7 times more likely than other hair colors to commit a violent act in the U.S.? Would you become concerned about hair color? Would you start to wonder if, perhaps, we should start to understand what about being a brunette contributes to crime and violence? How would you feel if the hair color of perpetrators was virtually never mentioned, even though they did a significant majority of the crime in this country? We know, of course, that there is no significant connection between hair color and crime perpetration, but there is another demographic that the above statistics apply to that is virtually never mentioned in day to day discussions of violence and crime—gender.

We know that men do, indeed, commit 90% of the homicides (Cooper & Smith, 2011) and 98% of the mass killings (Melnick, 4/23/2013), are seven times more likely to commit a violent act (Cooper & Smith, 2011), and comprise more than 80% of those arrested for most crimes (with the exception of prostitution) (Anonymous, n.d.). Virtually every form of violence known—murder, robbery, sexual assault, simple assault, elder abuse, domestic violence, war crimes, terroristic acts, etc., are primarily committed by males and often overwhelmingly committed by males. The only forms of violence where women are more likely to be the perpetrators are elder neglect and child abuse. However, even those statistics may be misleading since women are more likely than men to be around the children or caring for the elderly (e.g., you can't abuse a child or an older adult whom you have no contact with). This is a key point that Jackson Katz makes in his video "Tough Guise" (1999) and in his follow-up book *The Macho Paradox* (2006).

Our "gender blindness" is pervasive and continues to be quite troubling. You can find examples virtually every day. In an online article written last year about the causes of violence (Hayes, 2014), psychologist Laura Hayes challenged the misconception that mental illness causes violence, instead stating that "anger" is the primary cause. Unfortunately she did not make a single mention that most of these "angry" individuals are males. More recently, in the book *Why "Good Kids" Turn into Deadly Terrorists: Deconstructing the Accused Boston Marathon bombers and Others Like Them* (LoCicero, 2014), reviewed in the last issue of *The Oregon Psychologist*, political recruiters and cultural context are focused on, again without a single mention of the even more dominant quality of gender. "Good kids" is an overly broad characterization since the vast majority of terrorists are males. We shouldn't be asking why "good kids" turn into terrorists, but why "good boys" do.

We are continuing to wrestle with issues like race in this country (e.g., the "Black Lives Matter" campaign) and homophobia (e.g., the recent Supreme Court decision supporting same-sex marriage), but sexism continues to be mostly off of our radar. Just one recent example of this was the theater shooting in July in Louisiana in which a man with a "history of mental illness" shot and killed two theater goers before killing himself. The movie showing in that theater was Amy Schumer's *Trainwreck* (Apatow, 2015) and since then she has spoken out in favor of gun control (and the ability of the "mentally ill" to access guns), including with her second cousin, a

New York senator. What is striking is the complete absence of any discussion of gender. Not only was the gunman a male, but both of the people he killed were women, as were a number of those wounded. In fact, it is apparent that this killer, who openly spoke of his hatred of women, intentionally selected a “women’s” movie that would likely have primarily women in attendance. Yet virtually no media outlet (or the movie’s star and writer, Amy Schumer) has named this for what it clearly is—a hate crime against women. The only article I could find mentioning this factor was an article in Huffington Post (Licorish, 2015).

As psychologists, we are often asked about the psychology of violence, in particular the role that mental illness plays. We know that mental illness plays a small, almost negligible role in violence (Mental Health Reporting, n.d.) and it is important that we make this clear. On the other hand, it is equally important that we also name a clear factor that does play a role in violence—that of gender and, I believe, gender socialization.

A key aspect of stopping violence is addressing the underlying gender socialization which involves a simultaneous embracing of masculinity and rejection of femininity. It is central in the work I do on a daily basis with men who have done domestic violence. It is vital that we include a gender analysis in these crimes and acts of violence and understand that without addressing the role of gender socialization we won’t be adequately naming, acknowledging, or addressing what is really going on.

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