
The Columbine Victims and the Myth of the Juvenile Superpredator

Glenn W. Muschert
Miami University

This study examines the news media coverage of the 1999 Columbine school shootings, as a component of a noted crime myth of the juvenile superpredator. Thematic content analysis was conducted on 683 articles selected from print and broadcast media, revealing four themes of coverage, including the identification and description of the victims, details of victims' deaths, coverage of memorial services, and other special social issues such as race, religion, and gun control. Chronological analysis of article distribution revealed four spikes in volume of coverage, which is associated with media reframing of the victims coverage to maintain the salience of the story. The Columbine victim coverage reaffirms the crime myth of the juvenile superpredator and reifies the punitive juvenile justice solutions suggested in alarmist responses to erroneous fears about growing rates and severity of youth violence. The impact of the superpredator myth on public discourse about Columbine and similar cases is explored.

Keywords: *Columbine; crime myths; delinquency; media framing; school violence*

On April 20, 1999, the student-perpetrated attack on Columbine occurred, leaving 13 fatally wounded victims and many more injured. What made the atrocity even worse was that millions in the United States and beyond experienced it within the privacy of their living rooms, as the news media rushed to supply audiences with images and narratives of the event and its aftermath. As one social scientist wrote,

The shooting at Columbine High School was something more than a sensational, long-running news story. It was the centerpiece of a national conversation about the state of late-twentieth-century America and the causes of and cures for a newly emerging problem (or a newly emerging understanding) of youth violence. More specifically, it was an illustrative example of how dramatic news events are defined in the news in ways that contribute to the social construction of public problems. (Lawrence, 2001, pp. 91-92)

The Columbine event was a problem-defining *event*, in that it has come to characterize the problem of youth violence and the general understanding of youth social problems. Key to Columbine's status as a problem-defining event was the large scope of the victimization, the dramatic qualities of the victims' narratives, the story's interest to significant demographic

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audiences, and the public and/or political reaction generated by the shootings (Lawrence, 2001, pp. 98-100). In the same way that Columbine “typifies” youth social problems, the Columbine victims, despite being victims of a rare type of attack, have come to characterize the victims of youth violence.

Although Columbine may have been a problem-defining event, the story did not emerge from a vacuum. In popular perceptions, the Columbine shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, exemplify not only school shooters but also juvenile delinquents in general (Smit, 2001), and the vision of the pair is consistent with a contemporary crime myth: that the youth crime problem continues to rise, and that the next generation will contain a cohort of juvenile superpredators (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, pp. 215-233). Although the superpredator myth focuses on perpetrators, its elements have more to do with victims than offenders. If the Columbine shooters came to personify juvenile delinquency, then the Columbine victims must also play an important role in the crime myth. Through an analysis of the news media coverage of Columbine, this article examines the victim narratives as part of the juvenile superpredator myth.

Literature

The current research connects a number of scholarly literatures, including myth making about child victims in social problems research, the mass media-framing literature, and research on the media coverage of school shootings. Despite evidence that clearly indicates declining rates of juvenile offenses, the fear of juvenile violence and victimization pervades in the United States (Glassner, 1999, pp. 53-84). During the past two decades there has been a convergence of public discourse about children and fear of victimization (Altheide, 2002).

Crime Myths

Myths have been a consistent part of all human cultures, and the social functions of these narratives have been allegorical; that is, myths help people to understand the causes and solutions to the challenges of life. The existence of myths about crime and justice are no different, in that “they provide us with a conceptual framework from which to identify certain social issues as crime related, to develop our personal opinions on issues of justice, and to apply ready-made solutions to social problems” (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, pp. 2-3).

More concretely, there are four characteristics of crime myths related to the narrative development of a story. First, a myth requires the identification of innocent and often-helpless victims. Second, a myth requires the appearance of brave and virtuous heroes. Third, there must be a threat to legitimate and established norms, values, or lifestyles. Finally, a crime myth needs the identification of a deviant population responsible (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, pp. 22-26). In the current study, the empirical topic of the Columbine victims allows the examination of the first three characteristics of crime myths, whereas the fourth element is not within the scope of analysis.

Victims in News

In social problems research, victims have played a prominent role. News media reports often focus on victims and their stories because this part of news events is often a dramatic element that generates or maintains the salience of the news event (Chermak, 1995). Discussion of victims has also been a consistent part of social problems research because for a problem to exist there must be a purported victim receiving some variety of injury from that problem. According to Best (1997), the rhetoric of victims rights paralleled the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement. By the 1980s, victimization had become fashionable, as victim advocacy took hold as an industry. Similarly, growth in the self-help industry exploded as popular presses and therapeutic methods expanded in number and scope. Two aspects of the “ideology of victimization” are that the relationship between the perpetrator and victim is unambiguous, and that claims regarding victimization are to be respected, left unquestioned (Best, 1997, pp. 10-13).

If victims in general have been en vogue, children as victims have been especially salient. For example, in the 1980s the missing children problem received a large amount of political and mass media attention (Best, 1987, pp. 102-104). In many cases, horror stories about child victims often serve to typify social problems in general (Johnson, 1995). Over time, sociologists have observed the persistence of child victims and their salience for news events concerning many social problems. Similarly, children have figured prominently as victims in crime myths because their perceived innocence plays into their role as perfect victims (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, pp. 24-25).

Media Attributes and Frames

Mass media attention to a specific topic waxes and wanes and scholars have posited a variety of ways of conceptualizing this process. Among these are the issue-attention cycle, mass media agenda setting, and frame changing to enhance news event salience. Ultimately, scholars have made in-roads into connecting the attribute agenda-setting and framing literatures.

Anthony Downs (1972) coined the term *issue-attention cycle* to describe the process through which issues are discovered by the news media. The issue-attention focus of analysis does examine the time element; however, its focus tended to be broad issues, such as environmental degradation.

An alternative way of conceptualizing the evolution of mass media stories involves examining the mass media agenda setting. McCombs and Shaw (1972) theorized that mass media producers play an important part in shaping the reality conveyed in news content. Consumers of the news are influenced by the aspects of stories that news producers highlight or downplay. In choosing to highlight certain aspects of an issue, the news media influences public discourse agendas about public and political issues. To maintain salience of a news story, the mass media will shift its focus to examine various attributes over the life cycle of a news story.

Finally, the mass media-framing literature examines how mass media choose a unifying idea that serves as a frame for an issue. A media frame is “a central organizing idea for news

content that supplies context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Tankard, 2001, pp. 100-101). Framing has a long-standing history in the sociological literature, notably as influenced by Erving Goffman (1974).

In more recent years, scholars have begun to connect the attribute agenda-setting and the mass media–framing literatures. Viewing frames as analogous to attributes has allowed for this connection, and the conceptual payoff is that it facilitates the study of how mass media maintains the salience of a news event by changing the focus over the life span of the event (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). In the sense that it acts as an organizing principle, a crime myth may appear as a media frame, and one may examine the use of a crime myth related to a particular crime phenomenon to study an empirical case and the framing phenomenon in general.

Media Coverage of School Shootings

There is a small, but growing body of research on school shootings, and a number of these articles have examined the attention these events have attracted in the mass media. The topic has been addressed from various angles, including the mass media’s discussion of clothing at Columbine (Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003), the bias toward violent events and the consistency of coverage across stories (Maguire, Weatherby, & Mathers, 2002), and the role of media coverage in the formation of moral panics about school shootings (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Glassner, 1999, pp. 51-84).

Although to date no social scientific study has focused on the media coverage of school shooting victims, related studies serve to situate the current study. Lawrence (2001) argued that the narrative appeal of Columbine-type events would lead to media coverage, and that discussion of the problem would be a catalyst for discussion of the state of U.S. society in general. A shocking case like Columbine may catch news writers off guard, requiring them to construct news media frames for understanding the event. In this sense, the frames of reference evoked in the Columbine story were not prescribed, nor were the frames used for the victim coverage in Columbine. Although the current study does not directly contradict the Lawrence (2001) study, the connections revealed between the superpredator myth and the Columbine victim narratives do suggest that the media drew on this preexisting crime myth when framing their stories about this event.

From a media studies approach, Chyi and McCombs (2004) studied the framing of the Columbine story, finding that journalists changed time and space frames over the life span of the media event, an evolution that maintained the salience of the story. In general, Columbine was discussed for its social import, and there were two core frames for the news story: First, 24% of the story was “community present,” which is the discussion of what happened at Columbine. Second, 39% of the story was “societal present,” which indicates that the Columbine news event was salient for reasons beyond the individual and community.

Another study examined the news media coverage of the Columbine shootings and determined that the victims played a salient part of the Columbine news event. Victims, fatalities, and wounded were discussed in 9.8% of headlines and 15.4% of article leads included in the study. Fatally wounded victims were discussed in 4.8% of headlines and 7.4% of article leads. Wounded victims who survived were mentioned in 3.2% of headlines and 4.0% of leads (Muschert, 2002, pp. 174-175).

Victims at Columbine

To examine the changing mass media frames in coverage of victims, a content analysis examined the evolution of coverage of the victims of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting. The victims of the Columbine shootings were one of the most dramatic elements of the news event that began April 20, 1999, when two student gunmen, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, carried out their attack. Initially, the number of victims was unclear; however, within 48 hrs following the shootings, the news media established that there were 15 fatalities in the shootings, among them the perpetrators. Although the earliest accounts had suggested as many as 25 fatalities, these estimates were exaggerated because multiple SWAT teams had passed through the building, counting some bodies multiple times. In all, the fatalities included four female students, eight male students, one male faculty member, and the two male student-perpetrators (Muschert, 2002, pp. 51-58). Although there were some cases in the news media where Harris and Klebold were double cast as murderers and/or suicides, analytically this article limits the discussion of the victims to the 12 students and one teacher killed by the shooters. In fact, the perpetrators were rarely discussed at the same time that the victims were memorialized, and Klebold and Harris were omitted from discussion about victims (Smit, 2001).

By various measures, Columbine was considered one of the most highly salient news stories of 1999. Columbine generated higher public interest than any other story of 1999 and was the third most closely followed story of the 1990s, as 68% of Americans followed the story. Journalism executives considered Columbine the second most important story of the year, second only to the U.S. Senate trial and acquittal of President Clinton (Levinson, 1999). In the decade of the 1990s, only the 1992 Rodney King verdict and Los Angeles riots and the 1996 crash of TWA flight 800 generated more public interest, which were followed by 70% and 69% of the public, respectively (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999). Compared to other school shooting events that occurred in the United States, Columbine garnered notably higher coverage in the media (Maguire et al., 2002, pp. 466-468).

To understand the framing process in the victim coverage of Columbine, coverage of the shootings in print and broadcast media, including daily newspaper, television, and radio formats, was analyzed. The current study was guided by these analytical questions:

- How many stories appeared about each of the 13 Columbine victims, and how were these distributed over the life span of the event?
- What were the themes of coverage of the Columbine victims, and how were these distributed over the life span of the event? Did the analysis identify any frame-changing pattern among the themes of coverage over the life span of the event?
- How did the victim narratives evolve over the life span of the Columbine news story, and were any of these associated with the identified themes of coverage?

Method

Data related to the Columbine shootings were collected through a Lexis-Nexis search for the keywords *Columbine* and *Littleton*. The search returned 683 articles from the selected

sources, including the *New York Times*, Associated Press, ABC News, CNN news programs, and PBS news programming. Data were captured in electronic format from Lexis-Nexis, and managed using QSR NUD*IST 4.0 software, a qualitative data analysis tool. Articles and paragraphs that discussed victims were further limited within the 683 articles and were identified through full-text searches conducted using each victim's name.

The study period covers a 1-month period following the shootings, between April 20, 1999 and May 20, 1999, therefore excluding coverage of the Conyers, Georgia, school shootings that occurred on the afternoon of May 20, 1999. Limiting the corpus to these dates allows the examination of the Columbine coverage as discrete from the Conyers shooting. Such a time frame also makes conceptual sense. Although public issues last on average 18.5 months (McCombs & Zhu, 1995), the life span of the Columbine story was 1 month (Chyi & McCombs, 2004, p. 23).

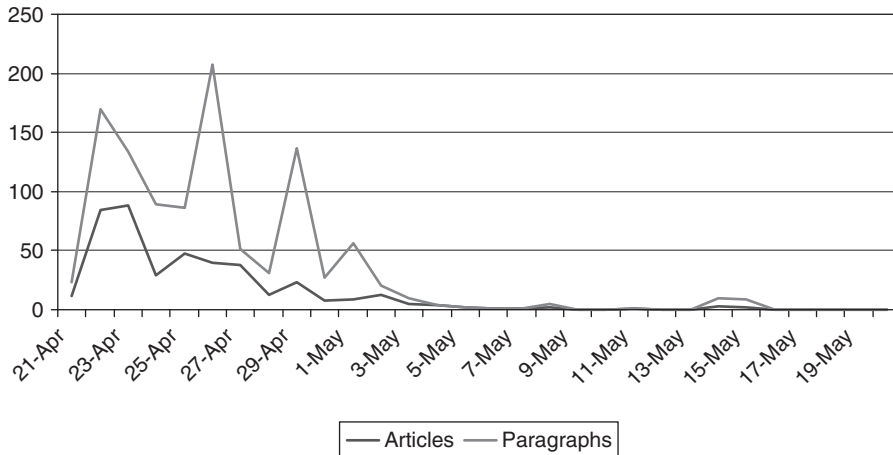
Analysis followed the methodology of ethnographic content analysis, a variety of qualitative content analysis approach described by Altheide (1987, 1996). As the researcher becomes immersed in the data, analysis proceeds through the grounded process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) until hidden patterns and major themes emerge. News texts contain exactly these types of hidden themes as elements within their content (van Dijk, 1988). Thematic coding was nondiscrete, accomplished through a process of repetitive reading of the data. On a more concrete level, coding involved a series of four readings of the articles discussing victims. The first and second readings were conducted to identify the frames employed when discussing the victims. In all, these readings identified four victim themes, discussed in the Findings section. During the third reading, text units were coded as belonging to the themes, and during a fourth reading of the data the thematic coding was replicated to ensure reliability. The similarity between the identified themes of discussing victims and the superpredator myth was recognized post hoc. In the current study, the units of analysis were articles and paragraphs within articles, which provide complementary measures of the volume and frequency of news coverage. Throughout the article findings are reported in terms of both units of analysis.

Findings

Investigation revealed that the volume of coverage about the Columbine victims was unevenly distributed over the life span of the story, and that there were four main narrative themes related to the victims. Discussion of individual victims evolved over time, and this indicates an underlying process of frame changing to maintain the salience of the victim narratives. This section outlines the temporal distribution of articles about victims, differences in coverage given to individual victims, and the thematic elements of the victim narratives. These elements are discussed in terms of their relative prominence during time periods when the media covered victims with higher volume.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of 425 articles and 1074 paragraphs covering victims occurring over the duration of the Columbine news event. Following the shootings on April 20, the coverage of the victims followed a sequence of four peaks on April 22, April 26, April 29, and May 1. Following the last peak on May 1, the coverage of victims tapered off, with comparatively little reportage of victims appearing in the news media. Although

Figure 1
Articles and Paragraphs Covering Victims



previous researchers have demonstrated that the life span of the Columbine story was upwards to a month (Chyi & McCombs, 2004, p. 23; Muschert, 2002), the victims' coverage occurred primarily within the first two weeks following the shootings.

News coverage of the 13 victims was not evenly distributed, as some victims received more attention from the mass media than others (see Figure 2). Notably, Dave Sanders, the only teacher fatally wounded in the Columbine attacks, was covered more extensively than any other victim. Isaiah Shoels, the only African American student fatally wounded, appeared in the second highest proportion of articles and paragraphs. Rachel Scott and Cassie Bernall, both evangelical Christians, appeared with third and fourth most frequency. Daniel Rohrbough, a White male, received the fifth highest coverage in the news media. The remaining eight fatally wounded students appeared with similar frequency and volume.

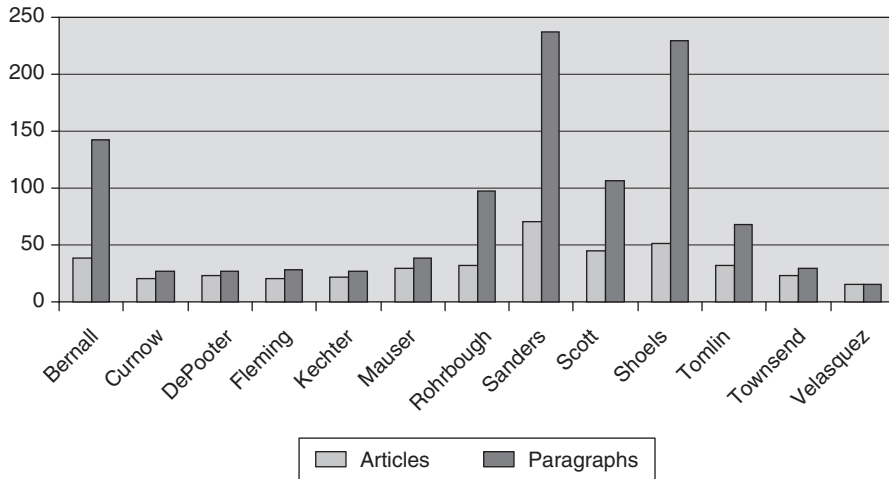
The unequal attention given to certain victims can be explained in terms of the news media's tendency to select what is "newsworthy," especially with regard to aspects of the story that represent affirmations or violations of social norms and expectations, including dramatic narrative possibilities, interest to key demographic audiences, and public and political reaction (Lawrence, 2001, pp. 98-100). In the case of the Columbine coverage, specific victims figured into the four spikes in news coverage observed over the life span of the story.

Themes About Victims

The ethnographic content analysis of the news media content about the Columbine victims revealed four themes:

1. ID/Description of victims: The media concentrated on identifying and briefly describing the victims. These included the age, gender, and class standing of the student victims. As more details about the victims began to emerge, journalists sought out details about the victims' lives and personalities,

Figure 2
Articles and Paragraphs Covering Individual Victims



such as activities in which they had been involved and their personal interests. This theme appeared in 169 (39.8%) articles and 330 (31.6%) paragraphs.

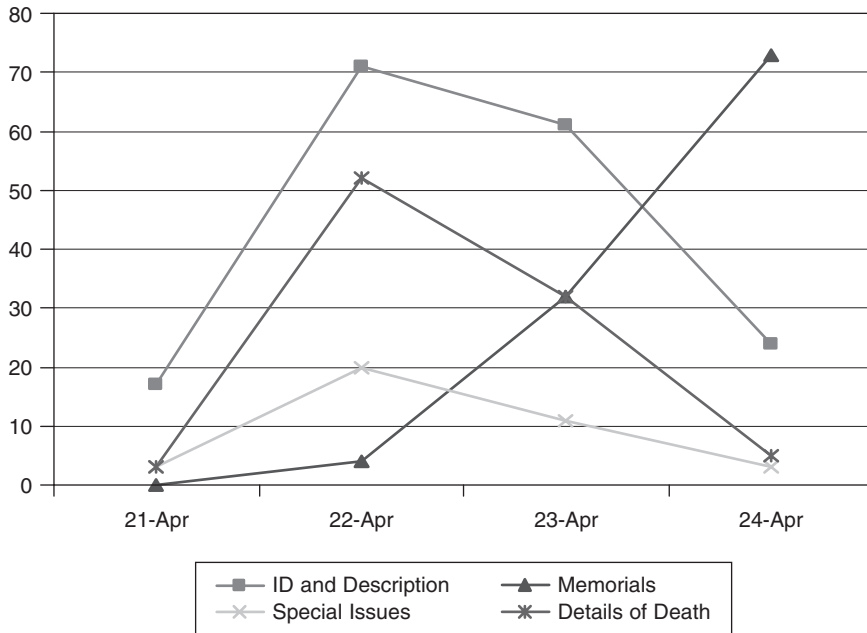
2. Details of victims' deaths: Second, the news reported details about the victims' deaths, such as where they had been when shot, or how they had reacted to the attack. This theme appeared in 103 (24.2%) articles and 202 (19.3%) paragraphs.
3. Memorial services for victims: The news heavily covered many of the funerals and other memorial services for the victims. This theme appeared in 160 (37.6%) articles and 445 (42.6%) paragraphs.
4. Special issues: The news media also reported on a number of social issues relevant to the victim narratives, including race, religion, protest to an informal memorial for the victims, and an anti-National Rifle Association (NRA) protest. This theme appeared in 79 (18.6%) articles and 178 (17.0%) paragraphs.

A combination of the temporal and thematic elements of the analysis reveals frame changing among the themes, evidence of the underlying dynamic process through which the news media changes the focus of coverage of an issue. In this article, the frame-changing process is explained in terms of variability in the presence of the four identified themes of coverage of victims over the life span of the Columbine story, which roughly corresponded to the four identified spikes in coverage.

4/22 Spike in Coverage

The 4/22 peak in the volume of coverage can be explained in terms of the dominance of the ID/description and details of death themes in the victims coverage, and to a lesser extent by the discussion of social issues (see Figure 3). During the early days following the shootings, the news media focused on identifying victims and describing who they were as persons. For example, the *New York Times* wrote:

Figure 3
Themes Converging on 4/22 Peak, by Paragraph



Also among the dead was John Tomlin, 16, a sophomore who moved to Littleton from Wisconsin four years ago and worked after school at a nursery. His father, also named John, said that his son had saved his money and bought a truck recently. "He was as close to a perfect son as you can have," Mr. Tomlin said. (Barron, 1999, p. A26)

At this time, the news coverage also strongly centered on describing the details of the death of the teacher, Dave Sanders, who had risked his life to warn students about the shooting. Sanders was shot shortly after the beginning of the attack but slowly bled to death barricaded in a classroom with a number of students. *Good Morning America's* Diane Sawyer reported:

I read every word about William Dave Sanders, he was the coach and teacher at the school who died. The fact that as he laid dying, his students took off their shirts and put them over him because he said he was cold and keep saying, I'm not going to make it, I'm not going to make it. They even took his wallet out so he could look at photographs in it before he died. (Dean, Gibson, & Sawyer, 1999, n.p.)

Finally, special social issues also factored into the 4/22 spike in the Columbine victims coverage, although in a less significant way than the two dominant themes. Specifically, the news media reported that African American victim Isaiah Shoels had been targeted specifically for his race, and that Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott had been targeted for their

evangelical Christian religious beliefs. After the news media sources included in the study had established the identity and descriptions of the victims, and had presented the details of Dave Sanders' death, the victim coverage decreased for a period of 2 to 3 days.

4/26 and 4/29 Spikes in Coverage

When the initial shock of the shootings had subsided, the families of the fatally wounded victims at Columbine began to bury their dead, and the news media was quick to cover these events. The 4/26 and 4/29 peaks in the volume of coverage can be explained in terms of the dominance of the coverage of memorial services and the ID/description themes in the victims' coverage. These spikes are addressed together because each demonstrated the same dominant themes of coverage (see Figure 4). In addition, the details of death appeared as a minor contributor to the 4/26 spike, and the special issues theme contributed in a minor way to the 4/26 and the 4/29 spikes.

The funerals of Dave Sanders, the teacher, and Cassie Bernall, one of the evangelical students, occurred on 4/26, and both were covered closely by the broadcast media. For both of the victims, the coverage of the memorials contained the other dominant theme in the spike: description of the victims. Retrospectively describing the victim at his or her memorial service is natural; however, what was also present in the victim narratives for Sanders and Bernall was the detail of the deaths. This was a reiteration of the previously reported detail of their death from the 4/22 spike in coverage. For example, the Associated Press newswire published:

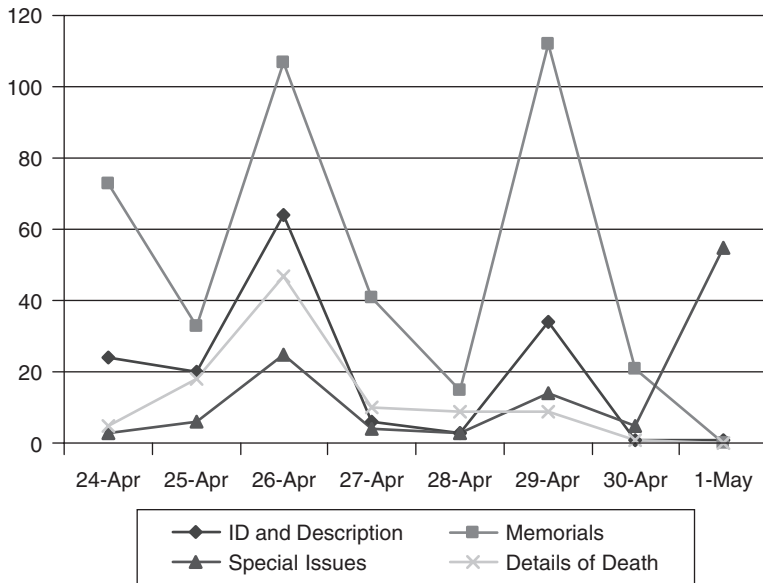
Less than a half-mile from the school, 2,700 mourners at the Trinity Christian Center wiped tears as friends and family remembered William "Dave" Sanders, 47, who was shot twice in the chest as he shepherded students down a hallway to safety. (Weller, 1999, n.p.)

Similarly, the news reported the details for Cassie Bernall's death; however, this discussion occurred within a religious rhetoric. For example, Brad Bernall, Cassie's father, spoke on *Good Morning America*: "When that young man asked Cassie if she believed in God, she boldly said yes, and he shot and killed her. The reason he did that was because she believed in God" (Wehmeyer & Sawyer, 1999, n.p.).

The funeral of Isaiah Shoels occurred on 4/29, the third of the spikes in the Columbine victim coverage. The funeral was attended by public figures such as Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King III and Colorado Secretary of State Vicki Buckley. For the 4/29 peak of coverage, the mass media concentrated on the funeral service and its description of Shoels' personality and achievements. Unlike the coverage of the Bernall funeral where religion was more present, the coverage of the Shoels funeral included race as an ancillary topic. The presence of race as afterthought is illustrated in the following quote from Vicki Buckley:

Isaiah Iman Shoels, a young man who may have been small in stature, but today stands, and has stood and will be remembered among the giants of men. Isaiah, just as David, met and battled his Goliath daily. He battled the giants of ill health. He battled the giant of adversity everyday. And through adversity, he overcame his adversity through hard work. Isaiah fought the racism which spawned hatred, and its continuous chapters of violence. (Allen & Moret, 1999, n.p.)

Figure 4
Themes Converging on 4/23 and 4/29 Peaks, by Paragraph



5/01 Spike in Coverage

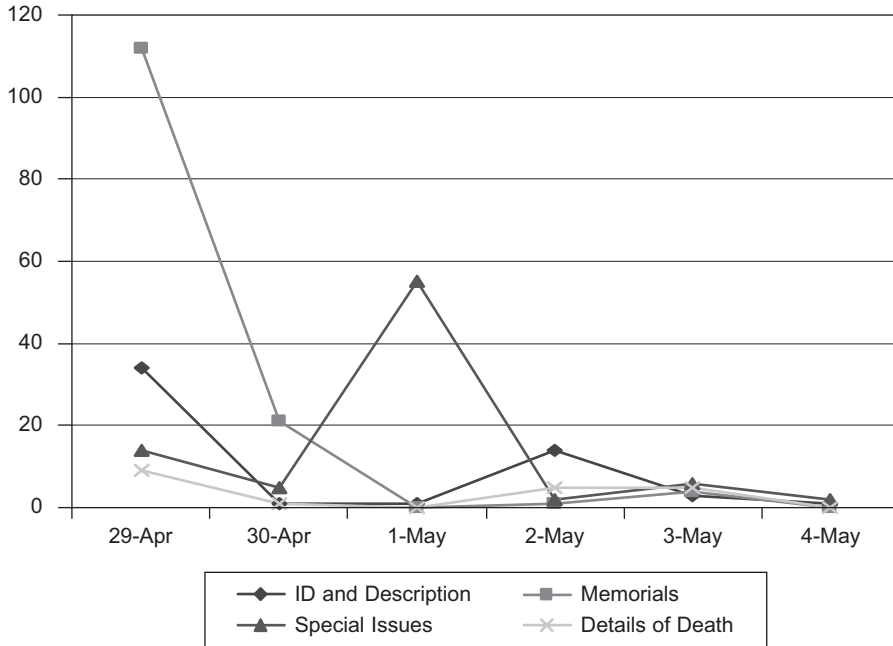
The final peak in the volume of coverage occurred on 5/01 and can be explained in terms of the coverage of two subtopics within the special issues theme: outcry about an impromptu memorial to the victims and an anti-NRA protest. None of the other themes of coverage figured significantly into the 5/01 spike in coverage (see Figure 5).

The most prominent of the special themes concerned a memorial to the Columbine victims that was erected on a hill overlooking Columbine High School. Greg Zanis, a carpenter from Aurora, Illinois, erected 15 eight-foot crosses in memorial to the 15 fatalities of the Columbine shootings. On the 15 crosses Zanis tacked a picture and wrote the name of each of the fatalities in the shootings, including the two perpetrators. The inclusion of the shooters in this memorial caused a stir within the community, and this uproar carried over into the news media discourse. Brian Rohrbough, father of one of the student victims, spoke publicly about the issue:

It is never right to honor a murderer with his victims. We would not have done it with Jeffrey Dahmer—there would have been a public outcry like has never been seen, and yet here, someone through some misguided intentions thinks that's OK, and it's wrong. (O'Brien & Zewe, 1999, n.p.)

Within days, Rohrbough removed the cross for shooter Dylan Klebold, while others from the community removed the cross for Eric Harris.

Figure 5
Themes Converging on 5/01 Peaks, by Paragraph



In addition to the uproar about the crosses, the news media covered the public protest and outcry relating to the annual meetings of the NRA, which had been scheduled to occur in Denver, Colorado, well in advance of the shootings. In response to appeals from Denver Mayor Wellington Webb, the NRA cancelled the gun show and public expo that typically accompanies the annual meetings but went forward with plans to hold the administrative meetings for the association. Despite the NRA’s intent to scale back the meetings, there were protests about the NRA intending to hold its meetings.

Protesters at the [Colorado] state Capitol carried signs with slogans such as “Shame on the NRA” and “Let’s cradle children, not Uzis.” The two gunmen in the Columbine High School shootings killed 12 students and one teacher before committing suicide. At today’s demonstration, Tom Mauser, the father of slain 15-year-old student Daniel Mauser, could barely contain his grief. (Zwerdling & Roberts, 1999, n.p.)

Ultimately, the four spikes in coverage of the Columbine victims can be explained in terms of shifting media frames in the reportage. The peak on 4/22 primarily contained identification of the victims and coverage of the details of victims’ deaths. The 4/26 and 4/29 peaks in coverage focused most heavily on memorial services and description of the victims’ personalities. Finally, the peak in coverage that occurred on 5/01 can best be understood as a specific focus on two special issues related to the aftermath of the shootings. In

addition, the connections between the ethnographic content analysis and the distribution of coverage over time figures strongly into the relationship between specific victims and the identified themes within the victim narratives.

The careful counting of the timing and volume of various themes' appearance helps to elucidate the frame-changing dynamic of mass media. Although the mechanism of the ebb and flow of themes in the Columbine coverage is governed by the salience-maintenance process of frame changing, it is also the case that the frame selection was limited to the selection of frames coherent with the juvenile superpredator myth. Several victims were utilized as exemplary during the spikes in coverage, and therefore the individual victims are also connected with three elements of the superpredator myth.

Discussion

In the Columbine victim coverage, the news media did in fact engage in frame changing over the life span of the story, and the selected frames appear to have been limited to those consistent with the crime myth of the juvenile superpredator. Therefore, while journalists could potentially have framed the Columbine victims in a myriad of ways, the thematic content analysis reveals that news media personnel drew on this social myth when crafting stories. It has been documented in the literature that the news media does engage in frame changing to build or maintain story salience; however, it also appears that the selection of frames is limited to those consistent with the general mythological understanding about events like Columbine. Therefore, what is presented as salient in the discussion about the victims is part and parcel of the superpredator myth.

The Columbine shooters are among the archetypical examples of youth offenders, such as Leopold and Loeb, as much for high level of premeditation as for their nihilism. Although the discussion of the role of two shooters as perfect villains is beyond the scope of this article, it bears mention that the emergence of Klebold and Harris among the worst examples of youth offenders is related to the fact that they selected really good victims. The Columbine victim narratives clearly demonstrate three characteristics of a crime myth: the presence of innocent victims, the appearance of heroes, and the threat to established values. This section explores the consistency of the Columbine story with the superpredator myth.

Despite stories suggesting bullying as a possible motivation behind Klebold and Harris's attack on the school, the shooters were identified as a new brand of perpetrator: the suburban rampage school shooter. Successful crime myths involve the targeting of individuals or groups perceived as innocent (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, pp. 24-25), and in this case the 12 students and one teacher were busy attending to their responsibilities at the school. Therefore, all of the victims killed in the Columbine attacks fit into the category of innocent victims, and this was one focal concern in the initial spike in coverage observed on 4/22. The student victims were discussed in terms of their demonstrated potential for future achievement, and the teacher was discussed in terms of his past contributions to the school and community.

In addition, the Columbine narrative also allowed for the emergence of virtuous heroes, an additional element of the crime myth. In the earliest surge in reporting, the media seized on the story of Dave Sanders' heroic death. Not only was this victim an undeserving innocent in the attack, he also stood out for his valor under fire. As the shooters stalked the

Columbine halls, Sanders ushered students to safety. Holed up in a classroom, he slowly bled to death while waiting for police to sweep the premises. The story of the hero Dave Sanders was so powerful that it was rehashed during the second spike in coverage observed on 4/26, which coincided with his own and Cassie Bernall's funeral.

The presence of a single hero in the Columbine shootings was not sufficient to maintain the salience of the victim narratives. The news media also focused on the story about Cassie Bernall's heroic affirmation of her religious beliefs. Although the media had reported in the early days following the shootings that Bernall had been targeted for her faith, it was not until her funeral that the heroic nature of her response became a significant focus. In building the appeal of Bernall's image as a heroine, the news reported that in the years before her death that she had battled the lure of Satanism. In a narrative sense, Bernall's response served as the reciprocal of the shooters' apparent nihilism. As the story went, confronting two of her peers who had crossed to the dark side, she stared up the barrel of a gun and affirmed her beliefs. The story of Cassie Bernall has been one of the most persistent elements of the Columbine victim narratives and has appeared widely in the evangelical press (e.g., Bernall, 1999).

Just as the framing of the Bernall story evolved from that of an innocent to a hero, the Isaiah Shoels story followed a similar trajectory as it came to dominate the victim coverage during the 4/29 spike. If anyone had been the unfortunate victim of the shootings, it would have to be Shoels who, as the story goes, was targeted for being African American. At his funeral on 4/29, the news media focused on additional details, including Shoels's having overcome a heart condition to play on Columbine's varsity football team. Despite the fact that the medical situation was unrelated to the Columbine event, the news media characterized Isaiah Shoels's recovery from illness as heroic.

In addition to highlighting the innocence and heroic nature of these victims, the Columbine victim narrative also discussed how the shootings represented a threat to established social norms. With regard to the Bernall and Shoels stories, the news media highlighted the tragedy of these victims' deaths through discussing the religiously and racially loaded themes contained in the stories. Nationally recognized Christian leaders, such as Franklin Graham, spoke at the Bernall funeral, while African American leaders, such as Martin Luther King III and Jesse Jackson Jr., spoke at the Shoels funeral. In this sense, the Columbine victim stories illustrated the narrative salience of Columbine's threat to Christian and African American communities, regardless of the veracity of the stories themselves. An aspect of the rhetoric of victimization is that claims about victimization are generally unchallenged (Best, 1997, p. 13). Despite a lack of evidence to support the claims that the Bernall and Shoels stories are true (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 2000), there were no cases in the examined data in which the veracity of the claims were questioned.

The final spike in coverage observed on 5/01 was explained in terms of the controversy generated by the memorial crosses and the NRA meetings in Denver. The first controversy involved Columbine parent Brian Rohrbough's objection to memorializing Klebold and Harris alongside the 13 victims. An aspect of the rhetoric of victimization is that the relationship between victims and perpetrators is clear (Best, 1997, p. 11). Because the 15 crosses might have initiated the expression of some sympathy for the shooters, the news media focused on the possibility that memorializing Klebold and Harris might threaten the moral foundations of public grieving process. Similarly, the outrage expressed as the NRA held its annual meetings in Denver also centered on the public outcry about gun control policy.

The Columbine victim narrative has been shown to be a manifestation of the juvenile superpredator crime myth, one that further reinforces and legitimates the status quo framing of the larger problem of juvenile violence. Because the latent function of crime myths is to act as a framework for understanding crime problems, the application of these frames of reference also helps to promote and limit possible solutions. Kappeler and Potter (2005, pp. 215-233) suggested that the outcome of the superpredator myth about juvenile justice has been the increased transfer of youth to adult court, the imposition of harsher sentences for juveniles, and the erosion of confidence in the juvenile justice system.

In its more abstract senses, *Columbine* has become a keyword for a complex set of emotions surrounding youth, risk, fear, and delinquency in early 21st century United States. The outrage evoked by the rhetoric of victims in the Columbine story may preclude us from moving beyond our knee-jerk reactions to this horrible event. At some point, we will need to acknowledge the suffering and anguish Klebold and Harris caused in their community and beyond, and then move forward with sober assessments of the associated social problems. Even in bleak conditions, hope can persist, and my hope is that, as a society, we can begin to look for the lessons in what occurred at Columbine. As this article has demonstrated, the myth of the superpredator is alive and well following the Columbine shootings, and the demonization of the perpetrators had more to do with the victim narratives than with the characteristics of the perpetrators themselves. As recent case studies of school shootings demonstrate (e.g., National Research Council, 2003; Newman, 2004), these events are sparked by complex sets of contributing factors, ones that cannot be addressed by the ready-made solutions that accompany crime myths.

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Glenn W. Muschert, a sociologist of social problems, is criminology program coordinator and assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Gerontology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. His research focuses on the sociological and public policy implications of mass media coverage of high-profile crimes, such as school shootings and child abductions. His recent publications have appeared in *Critical Sociology*, *Sociological Imagination*, and *Sociological Inquiry*.