Unpacking the Complex Relationship between Bullying and the Radicalization of School Shooters: A Case Study of the Kauhajoki School Shooting

Introduction

This research paper examines the relationship between bullying and school shooter's radicalization. In this paper, bullying has been defined as a repeated and intentional mistreatment of an individual, marked by a power imbalance between the bully and the victim and manifested through verbal, physical or psychological aggression (Olweus, 1994). On the other hand, radicalization has been described as the process through which individuals embrace extremist attitudes and/or beliefs either violent or non-violent in character (Ebbrecht, 2022).

Although the media typically portrays a story where school shooters are victims seeking revenge against their alleged bullies, the reality appears to be much more complex (Raitanen et al., 2019). Does bullying lead people to commit school shootings, or does it contribute to a combination of factors that may or may not play a role in their radicalization trajectory? By examining this relationship, the findings might challenge common misconceptions and offer valuable insights into the complex nature of the topic. For this reason, the research question guiding this paper is as follows: *What role does bullying play in the radicalization of school shooters?*

This study will begin by reviewing the concepts of bullying, school shooters and radicalization. Then, it will present the selected case study, the Kauhajoki school shooting, along with a detailed description of the case. Finally, it will discuss the findings and the potential limitations of the study. The paper concludes that while bullying alone does not represent a sole driver of school shooter's violent radicalization, when combined with other risk factors it can significantly contribute to the path towards violent radicalization.

Theoretical Background

Bullying

Heinemann (1973) was one of the pioneers in researching and writing about bullying. He took the Norwegian emerging concept of "mobbning" to describe violent group actions against a single individual (Heinemann, 1973). However, among all the existing definitions, Olweu's (1994) conceptualization has been widely accepted. Olweus (1994) defines bullying as aggressive behavior or deliberate mistreatment done on a regular basis and consistently over a period of time, where there is a power imbalance between the victim and the bully. This can imply verbal, physical or psychological aggression (Olweus, 1994).

Already in 2003, Leary (2005) presented "Varieties of Interpersonal Rejection", where he discussed four dimensions of rejection. The first, 'prior belongingness status', refers to the state of belonging before the episode of rejection. He argued that bullying implies no prior belonging. The second dimension, 'evaluative valence', relates to the individual's rejection resulting from either negative or positive features. In this case bullying was associated with the negative attributes. Moreover, 'behavioral disassociation' was portrayed as the actual

experience of being excluded. According to Leary (2005), bullying does not imply disassociation. Finally, the 'Comparative Versus Noncomparative Judgment' refers to certain thoughts following the rejection episode - "Was I excluded while others were accepted?". In this case, bullying does not imply such thoughts (Leary, 2005).

The media has consistently attributed school shootings to bullying, depicting offenders as isolated individuals who suffer from bullying until they resort to violence. However, bullying experiences alone do not necessarily cause school shootings (Raitanen et al., 2019). Therefore, more research on the role of bullying in school shootings is crucial to enhance a shift in the common narrative towards an understanding of the concept not as a central factor to all cases but rather as a contributing one.

School Shooters

According to Celis (2015), school shooters are defined as former or current students, predominantly males, who usually feel a sense of exclusion from their school community and seek attention through their actions (Celis, 2015). They are associated with a self-perception of marginalization and/or the presence of psychological problems (Newman et al. 2004). However, the existing literature suggests that there is no agreed profile, therefore not all school shooters can be explained through the same features (Sommer et al., 2014). Overall, although the scope of the study is limited to the role of bullying, the 'loner' characterization has not been included since it may oversimplify the complex nature of school shooters - as not all offenders are loners (Newman et al. 2004)

School shooters have been generally associated with certain personal grievances, meaning a perceived injustice towards oneself or those around you (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Yet, when these cases involve further grievances traditionally associated with other types of offenders, scholars have emphasized the need to avoid the 'limited' categorizations and refer to cases of lone-actor grievance fueled violence which encompasses different types of perpetrators and allows for a combination of complex motivations and risk factors (Ebbrecht & Lindekilde, 2023). Overall, despite the complex reality of the phenomenon, the unique contextual environment of school shootings makes it a socially relevant typology to research about, drawing the path towards the creation of renewed prevention measures on the basis of lone-actor grievance fueled violence.

Radicalization

Radicalization refers to the process through which individuals embrace extremist beliefs and/or violent or non-violent actions (Borum, 2011; Ebbrecht, 2022). This process is usually motivated by a combination of risk factors and mechanisms that might be common across different categories of offenders (Ebbrecht, 2022). Yet, why do some radicalized individuals resort to violent acts while others stay passive? In such a complex process, two dimensions of radicalization interplay: cognitive - those who remain inert - and behavioral - those who engage in violent or non-violent acts (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). While there are some instances where behavioral radicals have not been deeply radicalized in their thinking, scholars agree that the majority of those who act radically first undergo cognitive radicalization (Wolfowicz et al., 2021).

Based on the Two-Pyramids Model, lone-actor grievance fueled violence appears to be an example of violent behavioral radicalization (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Yet,

according to Karpova et al. (2021), the radicalization of school shooters might also involve cognitive radicalization (Karpova et al., 2021). The cognitive dimension refers to the violent fantasies used by individuals to cope with negative experiences like humiliation or rejection (Ebbrecht, 2022). This dimension involves a social and psychological journey where the individual becomes attached to the notion of violence. The bridge between cognitive and behavior has been illustrated by suggesting that violent fantasies may foster feelings of grandiosity potentially leading to violent actions (Ebbrecht, 2022). Therefore, the behavioral aspect of radicalization involves translating those beliefs into concrete actions - in this case, committing the school shooting. Overall, radicalization can also be explained through the principle of equifinality, which highlights that the process might involve different risk factors and mechanisms leading to one same outcome (Clemmow et al., 2021).

Methods

This paper employs a single-case study approach to examine the role of bullying in the radicalization trajectory of the Kauhajoki school shooter. Unlike the United States, which has been struggling with the phenomenon of school shootings for decades, the Kauhajoki school shooting emerged as a highly relevant case, being one of the first major school shootings in the history of the country. Examining this case can bring key contributions into how experiences of bullying might interact with other risk factors and further contribute to the offender violent radicalization trajectory. In terms of the research criteria, this study employed an open-source research method to analyze a broader range of sources. The main databases utilized have been Google Scholar, Web of Science and Leiden Catalogue.

Analysis

Case Study: Kauhajoki School Shooting

On September 2008, Matti Saari, a 22-year-old Finish student at the Kauhajoki Polytechnic school, killed nine students and one teacher before committing suicide. At a very young age, the perpetrator experienced a hard situation when his parents divorced. He was primarily raised by his mother, which resulted in a distanced relationship with his father until he reached legal adulthood and re-established contact with him. However, he was extremely close with his bigger brother, who died in 2003 when the perpetrator was seventeen. As reported by his mother, he was completely devastated. The loss of such a significant figure during his formative years undoubtedly left a severe emotional scar (Investigation Commission, 2008).

The perpetrator attended comprehensive school from 1993 until 2002. In his lower-level years, first instances of personal grievances appeared, as the offender began to be bullied. Once he reached upper-level comprehensive school, he started to be physically assaulted and threatened by his peers. During these years, he changed schools six times due to his family's frequent move. At that time, he started suffering from anxiety, depression and insomnia. After completing comprehensive school, he enrolled in vocational school but decided to leave. Shortly after, he started secondary school but dropped out as well because of his family relocations. In this short time at secondary school, he also suffered from bullying. He ended up joining another vocational school, which he managed to finish after three years of successful study (Investigation Commission, 2008).

In July 2006, after finishing vocational school, he joined the military service where he experienced integration troubles. He was allegedly harassed and bullied by his fellows who defined him as silent and weird. During his time at the military, he started to act inappropriately and once assaulted a fellow soldier. In a doctor's appointment during the service, the perpetrator informed the doctor about his feelings of social rejection and bullying experiences not only in the service but also throughout comprehensive school. He also reported having suicidal thoughts, difficulty in sleeping, panic attacks and erratic behavior. After the appointment, he called his mother to explain that a fellow service member urinated in his bed. He was later referred to a psychiatrist because he wanted to leave the service. Finally, the perpetrator managed to drop out of the military (Investigation Commission, 2008).

Once he joined the Kauhajoki Polytechnic school, he no longer suffered from bullying. Contrarily, he had a few friends and his academic results were successful. However, in spring 2008, he went to Hungary for a training course where several behavioral problems were reported, including alcoholism and upsetting other students with a knife. According to his friends, the problem with alcoholism escalated significantly resulting in physical altercations and aggressive conducts. He even scared a woman at a restaurant with his school shooting intentions. When an employee intervened, the perpetrator allegedly appeared "odd" avoiding eye contact with him. Additionally, he had openly expressed his admiration for Pekka-Eric Auvinen, the perpetrator of the Jokela school shooting. Mirroring Auvinen, he also ignited fires within his school. Likewise, the summer prior to the attack, the perpetrator changed his style, simulating Auvinen's look (Investigation Commission, 2008; Langman, 2016).

The online component had a key role in this case. The perpetrator used to post several images online showcasing his interest towards shootings and firearms (Sumiala, 2011). Indeed, a week before the attack, the offender posted a youtube video of himself firing shots at a shooting range. The video included a description saying "Whole life is war and whole life is pain. And you will fight alone in your personal war" (NBC News, 2008). Others included phrases such as "Goodbye" or "You will die next". At some point, the police was notified about the publication of several videos about school shootings and took him into custody. The officer who interviewed him did not consider the individual an immediate threat to security therefore he decided not to confiscate his gun. This was a significant error since the next day he committed the attack. The perpetrator left a note saying that he had planned the attack for six years and that it was motivated by revenge for being bullied and his hate for humanity. Some of the victims of the shooting happened to be his friends (Investigation Commission, 2008).

Discussion

The Kauhajoki school shooting illustrates how the perpetrator suffered from relentless bullying both in educational institutions and in the military service. However, it also shows that he experienced further risk factors, including childhood adversities and mental health issues. Therefore, does the revenge for bullying and hate for humanity found in his note fully capture the grievances and motivations that led the perpetrator to commit the attack? In this case, the present risk factors undoubtedly extended beyond bullying. Therefore, although detailed in the note left by the perpetrator, only when considering the complex interaction of motivational impetus and risk factors, we can make full sense of the attack.

As mentioned above, the persistent bullying experiences did not operate alone but rather interacted with other risk factors and mechanisms shaping the offender's violent radicalization. The first contributing risk factor traced back to his formative years, where the perpetrator faced persistent bullying and social rejection from his peers. This situation coupled with further family problems left deep emotional scars (Lankford, 2013). Overall, the interplay of social marginalization, potentially perceived injustice resulting from experiences of bullying and childhood adversities light the fuse of resentment and desire for retribution.

As the perpetrator began to grow, the bullying continued, further exacerbating his feeling of isolation and potentially reinforced the offender's perception that violence was a justifiable response to his personal grievances. Indeed, the perpetrator finished comprehensive school in 2002, which certainly coincides with the year where he started to plan the shooting - as the note highlighted. Moreover, the prolonged torment by his peers surely impacted the offender's mental health and general well-being. As his friends and relatives indicated, it was after experiencing bullying that he began suffering from depression, anxiety, insomnia and even suicidal thoughts.

Moreover, contrary to Celis' (2015) definition, the perpetrator did not seem to feel a sense of exclusion from the school community of the attack, but might have felt it from the general school environment. (Celis, 2015). Likewise, Leary's (2005) dimension of no 'prior belonginess' can be applied to this case (Leary, 2005). The frequent moves during his formative years potentially disrupted his ability to establish a sense of community and belonging within a stable social environment. Therefore, feelings of isolation and rejection could have contributed to his cognitive radicalization, fostering a deeper attachment to the notion of violence as a coping mechanism. Finally, the exposure and clear fascination towards other school shooters, especially Pekka-Eric Auvinen, played a key role in building or solidifying the perpetrator's radical beliefs. His admiration for Auvinen illustrates a process of inspiration and identification. In other words, the attention received by previous school shooters potentially fueled the perpetrator's desire for recognition and perceived "success".

While the above-mentioned factors set the foundation for the perpetrator's cognitive radicalization, his aggressive attitude started to manifest in the military service, where the perpetrator assaulted a fellow soldier indicating a willingness to engage in violent acts. Moreover, the perpetrator's online activities showcased his fascination for firearms and school shootings. These videos represented expressions of violent ideation but went unnoticed or not taken serious enough by the police authorities.

Yet, with all the surfacing risk factors on the table, another key question arises: If the perpetrator did not suffer from bullying in the school of the attack, why did he choose it? As Langman discusses, there are potential indicators of underlying mental health issues which might respond to some of the questions that remain unexplained. While an unequivocal diagnosis cannot be made, evidence suggests that the perpetrator might have been struggling with underlying mental health issues that manifested in his concerning behavior, in this case, a schizotypal personality disorder (Langman, 2016). Altogether, the findings align with the principle of equifinality, since the offender's violent radicalization process stemmed from a multifaceted combination of risk factors that converged culminating in the tragic event (Clemmow et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that not all risk factors carry equal weight or relevance in the radicalization trajectory; some may play a more significant role than others, and their impact can vary depending on the perpetrator's unique circumstances.

While bullying was a significant factor in Saari's life and likely contributed to his feelings of resentment, the relevance of interpersonal rejection might completely differ in other cases of school shootings.

Overall, the Kauhajoki school shooting showcases how persistent bullying, as a variety of interpersonal rejection, when combined with other risk factors, as in this case family problems, mental illnesses, presence of a potential personality disorder and admiring relationship with high-profile school shooters, can significantly contribute to the offender's violent radicalization.

Limitations

While the case study provides valuable insights into the individual-level risk factors, it fails to capture broader societal factors that may have contributed to the offender's radicalization. In other words, while it discusses the publication of online videos, it does not delve deeper into the impact of media coverage. The way the media portrays previous cases of school shootings could potentially contribute to the admiration towards such acts. Therefore, the paper acknowledges the possibility of overlooking or failing to consider further significant factors that could have contributed to the offender's violent radicalization. Additionally, the analysis of a single case study may limit the generalizability of the findings. As abovementioned, the relevance of present risk factors in the radicalization trajectory might significantly differ from one case to another. Therefore, the study acknowledges that the findings discussed in the case analyzed may not be transferable or applicable to certain contexts and situations.

Conclusion

It is crucial to note that not all victims of bullying become radicalized, and not all school shooters have a history of being bullied. Therefore, school shooter's radicalization is a complex process influenced by multiple factors, including but not limited to varieties of interpersonal rejection, mental health issues, personal grievances, subclinical personality traits among other factors. In other words, and as Sommer et al. (2014) highlights, there are no single necessary conditions in the development of school shooters (Sommer et al., 2014). Instead, the process reflects a combination of different risk factors interacting with one another. Therefore, while bullying alone does not present a sole driver of violent radicalization, it can, when combined with other risk factors, exacerbate feelings of isolation and resentment, ultimately contributing to the path towards violent radicalization. Future research could focus on the complex connections between risk factors and identifying the particular context and circumstances that contribute to the heightened relevance of certain risk factors.

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