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# Blaming for Columbine

## Conceptions of Agency in the Contemporary United States

by Claudia Strauss

Modern Westerners are supposed to embrace a notion of unfettered personal agency. An analysis of public commentary (interviews, editorials, and online message boards) in the United States about the Columbine school shootings shows that the voluntarist cultural model of persons as autonomous agents, while certainly very important, is just one of a number of cultural models Americans use to explain human action and has particular political and interpersonal uses. We might think that conceptions as basic as those of personhood and agency would be hegemonic: both singular and internalized as unexamined, taken-for-granted assumptions. In some contexts, voluntarist ideas about agency are taken for granted, but in others they are promoted quite deliberately. A particularly interesting phenomenon in the United States at this time is the presence of a discourse that may be called *defensive voluntarism*, an explicit, argumentative version of voluntarism invoked to combat other widely circulating views of behavior. The very need for emphatic pronouncement betrays speakers' awareness that voluntarism needs to be defended. These findings point to the need for a person-and-context-centered approach to social discourses instead of one that assumes discourses to be constitutive.

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold took an arsenal of guns and improvised explosive devices to school and killed 12 of their classmates, a teacher, and themselves at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado, setting off a moral panic (Cohen 1972) in the United States. Many U.S. Americans had cultural models according to which senseless violence was associated with poverty, cities, and people of color (Newman et al. 2004). But the two shooters were white and middle-class, a description that applies equally well to Littleton, Colorado. Moreover, while the Columbine High massacre was the deadliest such event up to that time,<sup>1</sup> it was one of a series of similar violent episodes in the late 1990s, in which boys in suburban and rural schools in the United States shot classmates and teachers, seemingly at random. These school shootings became the focus of movies (*Elephant*, *Zero Day*, *Bowling for Columbine*), novels (*Shooter*, *Vernon God Little*, *Nineteen Minutes*), an Eminem song ("I'm Back"), a Marilyn Manson album ("Holy Wood [In the Shadow of the Valley of Death]"), Christian martyrdom tales (e.g., *Rachel's Tears*), academic analyses (e.g., Lieberman 2006; Newman et al. 2004; Watson 2002), social activism, and government policy making. Blame for these shootings was cast on

the content of the movies, music, and video games the shooters watched, listened to, and played, the too-ready availability of guns, bad parenting, lack of religion in schools, and a toxic peer culture that made them outcasts—almost everywhere, in fact, than on the shooters' own freely chosen actions. This is surprising in terms of widely shared assumptions about the way Americans think about agency, personhood, and moral responsibility.

A number of scholars have criticized simple, Orientalist portraits of passive, fatalistic South Asians and other non-Westerners. A significant body of work is developing on cultural conceptions of agency outside of the West. One purpose of this article is to contribute to this body of literature by investigating cultural conceptions of agency in the contemporary United States. The flip side of the portrait of passive, fatalistic non-Westerners is the standard account of modern Westerners as embracing a notion of unfettered personal agency. As Shweder and Bourne put it, the Western "autonomous individual imagines the incredible, that he lives within an inviolate protected region (the extended boundaries of the self) where he is 'free to choose'" (1984, 192). This is "the free agent of Western fantasy" (Ortner 1996, 11). I argue here that there is some truth to this description, but it is only a partial truth. In the first part of this article, I demonstrate that the cultural model of persons as autonomous agents,

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1. The deadliest of "school shootings" are limited to elementary, junior high, and high schools in the United States.

while certainly very important in the contemporary United States, is just one of a number of cultural models Americans use to explain human action. Following Ortner (1996, 11), I will call this cultural model *voluntarism*. Voluntarism in this sense is not the political philosopher's view that human relations should be voluntary but the metaphysical assumption that human actions are the result of unfettered voluntary choices. The voluntarist in this sense may be aware of external factors that have an effect on behavior but still highlights the individual's freedom to choose how to act.<sup>2</sup>

Listening to interviews I have conducted over the past 20 years in the United States, as well as public discourse on different social issues, I have been struck by the variety of notions of agency, personhood, and moral responsibility that circulate in this society. While actors are sometimes depicted in voluntarist terms as masters of their fate, other accounts reveal a more passive view of persons assumed to be shaped by role models, media messages, peer pressure, and the quality of the nurturing they received in childhood. Even among individualistic models of human action, which focus on causes of behavior internal to the person, there is variety: not all individualistic cultural models are voluntarist.

Now, the objection could be—and has been—raised that discourse<sup>3</sup> about Columbine and other school shootings is not a good test case because the shooters were seen as too young or too deeply abnormal to be capable of taking personal responsibility for their actions.<sup>4</sup> I agree that these circumstances may help to explain the high proportion of explanations pinning blame on factors outside the shooters. However, the nonvoluntarist discourses that were called upon to explain the Columbine shootings were not invented on the spot. Commentary about the Columbine shootings was unusual in that a great variety of discourses that embed conflicting notions of personhood and agency were offered in a short period of time, raising people's consciousness of alternatives. But alternatives to voluntarism can be readily heard in public discourse because they are commonly invoked in discussions ranging from public policy to everyday explanations of one's own and others' behavior.

In the second part of my analysis, I turn to the uses of

2. The voluntarist in this sense could hold either that free will is compatible or that it is incompatible with determinism. In folk thought these philosophical issues are not addressed.

3. *Cultural models* are learned, shared cognitive schemas (Quinn and Holland 1987); *social discourses* are standardized ways of verbalizing a cultural model or ideology (Bakhtin 1981).

4. The first objection was voiced to me by Dan Segal (personal communication, September 2004), the second by Joel Robbins (personal communication, April 2006). Some psychologists have made the opposite prediction about explanations of behavior perceived as abnormal: "[individualistic] dispositional causes are most clearly perceived . . . when behavior deviates from expectations of a social role . . . or from a norm of social desirability" (Morris and Peng 1994, 950). (See also Miller 1984, who found that a higher proportion of U.S. subjects gave dispositional attributions when explaining deviant behaviors than when explaining prosocial behaviors.)

different discourses of agency, showing that voluntarist explanations are considered appropriate for some contexts but not others. I also show that voluntarist cultural conceptions (like many other cultural models [Quinn and Holland 1987]) can be held and expressed in a deeply implicit, taken-for-granted way and in a highly explicit, consciously assertive way. We might think that conceptions as basic as those of personhood and agency would be hegemonic: both singular and internalized as unexamined, taken-for-granted assumptions. In some contexts, voluntarist ideas about agency are taken for granted, but in others they are promoted quite deliberately. A particularly interesting phenomenon in the United States at this time is the presence of a discourse I call *defensive voluntarism*, an explicit, argumentative version of voluntarism used to combat other widely circulating explanations for behavior. Multiple cultural models of agency give speakers alternatives to draw upon depending on their rhetorical goals, within the limits of their taken-for-granted assumptions about behavioral causation. This person-and-context-centered view of social discourses requires an approach that combines psychological and social analysis.

## Research on Cultural Concepts of Agency

What is "agency"? Ahearn's review of anthropological work on agency and language (2001*b*) notes a tendency, especially outside of anthropology, to equate agency with free will. She criticizes this definition for ignoring the social construction of action (p. 114). It is inadequate for my purposes as well, because the very point of this study is to see whether agency is equated with free will by contemporary U.S. Americans, so a broader definition is needed. As Ahearn notes, among anthropologists and other social theorists, another common definition of agency is resistance rather than conformity to the social order, which is also too narrow (Ahearn 2001*b*, 115; see also Frank 2006). The definition I will use instead is one proposed by Karp (1986): "Agent refers to persons engaged in the exercise of power in its primary sense of the 'bringing about of effects,' that is, engaged in action that is constitutive. Agency implies the idea of 'causal power'" (p. 137 n. 1; see also Rosenblatt 2004, 468). With this definition of agency, another way of putting my question is "What did commentators on the Columbine shootings believe caused the shootings? Specifically, what causes were most responsible, and who was morally blameworthy?" This is a question about attributions: after-the-fact explanations for our own and others' behavior, divided by social psychologists (too simply, I will show) between *dispositional attributions*, which explain behaviors in terms of agents' stable internal traits, and *situational attributions*, which explain behaviors in terms of contextual factors (Heider 1958; Ross 1977). Such attributions in turn rest on cultural models of personhood, particularly folk theories regarding the causes of human behavior.

Some cultural psychologists have argued that cross-culturally there are two basic models of personhood and agency: a notion of an “independent self” and “disjoint agency” that is typical of the West, especially of middle-class European Americans, and a notion of an “interdependent self” and “conjoint agency” that is typical of the rest of the world. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2003), in individualistic societies with notions of disjoint agency, “agency is the exclusive property of individuals and resides within individuals” (2003, 12) and “outcomes of actions are largely personally controllable” (p. 7); “because individuals are cast as under their own steam, as self-directed, they are also seen as morally responsible for their own actions” (p. 12). In the model of conjoint agency that is typical of non-Westerners, by contrast, “outcomes are [seen as] largely jointly determined and controlled” (p. 7; see also Choi, Nisbett, and Norenzayan 1999; Menon et al. 1999; Miller 1984; Morris and Peng 1994).

Anthropologists have discussed cultural conceptions of agency in a variety of works, many of which aim to challenge the pervasive portrait of passive, fatalistic Asians (e.g., Ewing 1991; Mines 1988; Fox 1996 and the other essays collected in Dissanayake 1996). In an interesting discussion, Ortner (1997, 148) argues, “Far from constructing anything resembling ‘Oriental fatalism,’ . . . Sherpa religion constructs a certain kind of quite effective agency”, although the average person is seen as weak, the power of the gods can be shaped to one’s ends. Ahearn finds a “new, more individualistic sense of agency,” especially among younger residents of the Nepal village where she did her fieldwork, in contradistinction to “residual ideas regarding fate” held especially by older residents (2001a, 248; see also Shore 1982 and Jackson and Karp 1990 for views of personhood and agency in Samoa and Africa, respectively).

However, with the exceptions noted below, there has not been the same movement to render a more subtle analysis of Western notions of agency.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it is common to the point of being a cliché for social theorists to criticize “that unified and freely choosing individual who is the normative male subject of Western bourgeois liberalism” (Pathak and Rajan 1989, 572, quoted in Ortner 1995, 185). Many such texts focus on theoretical questions about social action (see also Holland et al. 1998); empirical questions about the hegemony of voluntarism in the contemporary West are not at issue.

Some poststructuralist and critical theorists have made Western concepts of agency more central to their analysis. Rose, for example, is concerned with the way psychotherapy and other “technologies of the self” have stressed self construction: “the individual is to become, as it were, an entrepreneur of itself, seeking to maximize its own powers, its own

happiness, its own quality of life, through enhancing its autonomy and then instrumentalizing its autonomous choices in the service of its life-style” (1996, 158). Rose points out that this therapeutic effort to enhance feelings of personal autonomy is consistent with neoliberal political economic discourses focusing on personal “autonomy,” “choice,” and “responsibility” instead of government social welfare programs, and he claims that neoliberal discourse “was not an idiosyncratic obsession of the right of the political spectrum. On the contrary, it resonated with basic presuppositions concerning the contemporary human being that remain widely distributed . . . presuppositions that are embodied in the very language that we use to make persons thinkable” (p. 151; see Walkerdine 2006, 39 n. 2 for speculation that such neoliberal person concepts are “more naturalized in the United States” than in Europe).<sup>6</sup>

In some scholarly genealogies, voluntarist beliefs are traced from Hellenistic Greece to Christ’s and Paul’s teaching that “the Christian is an ‘individual-in-relation-to-God’ (Dumont 1985, 98), a view that was developed particularly through the practice of the Catholic confessional (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1986, 171). With Protestantism, especially the Arminian version that stressed free will, resistible grace (humans have free will and can resist God’s call to salvation), and conditional predestination (God predestines for salvation only those He knows will accept Him),<sup>7</sup> so one story goes, came the “Protestant ethic” of rational, disciplined self-control, which places complete moral responsibility on the individual (Weber 1958 [1904–5]). Marx stressed instead the need under industrial capitalism for ideological support for a concept of the unfettered individual, free to sell his or her labor power (e.g., Marx 1973 [1939–41]).

This quick intellectual history should not be taken as a given. Marx and Weber, in particular, complicated this simple picture quite a bit, with Marx also stressing the illusion, under capitalism, that commodities have a life of their own and control us (Marx 1978 [1867]) and Weber arguing that with the maturation of capitalism came a diminution of the sense of individual control. (“The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so” [Weber 1958 (1904–5), 181]). Murray (1993, 9) points out that Christian notions of the self cannot be so easily summarized and suggests that the kind of selfhood that is often taken to be the bedrock of Western thought is actually a product of “the Romanticist literary movement in the late 18th century” (see also Gaines 1984 on the difference between mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant, as well as Catholic, person concepts and Spiro 1993). The point here is only that there is a

5. See Strauss (2000, 90) for speculation about why this might be so for the related question of American person concepts. On the broader issue of whether there are sociocentric elements to American person concepts, see, e.g., Gaines (1984), Hollan (1992), Holland and Kipnis (1994), and Spiro (1993).

6. But see Foucault’s observation that, compared with German and French neoliberal theorists, American neoliberal theorists, especially the Chicago School economist Gary S. Becker, tend to be behaviorists, a view that is at odds with voluntarism: “The American neo-liberal *homo economicus* is manipulable man, man who is perpetually responsive to modifications in his environment” (quoted in Gordon 1991, 43).

7. <http://www.byronbible.org/ask/man/arminian2.html>.

considerable body of scholarly work claiming that in “the West” (i.e., dominant traditions in the Christian, European, industrial capitalist West) there developed a notion of the individual as a morally and metaphysically distinct being, completely free to choose his or her own actions, hence responsible for them.

A handful of anthropologists and other researchers working in the United States have advanced our understanding of concepts of agency in this country. Kusserow (2004, 20) criticizes “a reverse Orientalism (an Occidentalism, so to speak)” in which “the Western self is often flattened into a supposedly uniform and rather generic individualism.” One way of demonstrating greater complexity is to show subtle differences between U.S. social groups. Thus Kusserow differentiates the “hard” protective and mobility-oriented individualist child-rearing ideals of working-class New Yorkers in Queens from the “soft” expressive individualism of upper-middle-class Manhattanites (see also Bellah et al. 1985). Although Kusserow does not explicitly focus on cultural models of agency, they are implicit in her interview material. Working-class interviewees living in a dangerous neighborhood believed that the self had to be toughened to resist bad influences. In the words of one mother, “If you don’t have your own self-awareness, then anyone can get inside of you and change you” (p. 35). Upper-middle-class interviewees, instead, thought that children should be encouraged to express their uniqueness, which they saw as easily damaged by harsh child-rearing methods. Thus, corresponding to class-typical individualistic ideals were class-typical understandings about forces constraining choices: bad social influences for the lower working class, psychologically damaging child-rearing for the upper middle class. Class differences were also noted by Desjarlais (1997, 210, table 1), who found a difference between the “direct, active, autonomous” form of agency advocated by the staff of a homeless shelter, the “oblique, indirect” form of agency practiced by shelter residents, and the “reactive, passive” form of agency of street people.

Others have noted contextual variation in the expression of different cultural models of agency. Hill and Zepeda (1992) speculate that “for many Americans, ‘individuality’ as the locus of responsibility and agency may be largely an artifact of formal and public life as constituted through the legal system, through the practice of formal religion, and in formal political and economic discourse. It may not be salient in quotidian accounts of experience” (p. 222). Linde (1993) finds that when middle-class Americans explain their career trajectories, the unmarked common sense is voluntarist: They are supposed to show that they exercised agency in choosing a career that fit their personal characteristics. Problematic career narratives are ones in which one mentions having an “in” or being overly influenced by others<sup>8</sup> or having a career path that seems too

8. Quinn and Mathews (2005), to the contrary, found that their interviewees readily credited mentors in their career narratives.

accidental or too determined. At the same time, however, some of Linde’s interviewees employed specialized discourses, such as Freudian and behaviorist psychology, and told stories that reduced their personal agency in line with these theories (something unconscious made them act a certain way, or they were responding to others’ reinforcement). Expanding Linde’s analysis, McCollum (2002) shows that when Americans tell stories about how they found their romantic partners, they “deny that intentions and desires played a significant casual role in bringing them together” (p. 121). In other words, Americans have a variety of cultural models of agency, and there are conventions regarding which ones are appropriate in a given communicative event (see Ahearn 2001a for a similar finding in Nepal).

In what follows I expand upon this literature in several ways. First, I document a wider range of alternatives to voluntarist cultural models of agency than other scholars have found, including cultural models that are individualistic but not voluntarist. Another layer of complexity that has not been addressed is variation in conscious awareness of such models, related to variation in what I have called their cultural standing (Strauss 2004), that is, the speaker’s sense of how widely accepted the model is. A widely shared sense that voluntarism is under attack has generated an especially emphatic, defensive form of voluntarist discourse in response in a number of realms. In conclusion, I draw together psychological, cultural, and socio-historical analyses to speculate about the reasons for this complexity.

My larger aim is to show that with a person-centered<sup>9</sup> and context-specific approach, rather than one that is discourse-centered, we can better understand the political, interpersonal, and psychological reasons for expressing one model rather than another and better appreciate the cultural standing of those ideas. By a “discourse-centered” approach, I mean one (usually influenced by Foucault) that focuses on a small number of prevalent discourses traced through a variety of institutions and, typically, written tracts. This approach has inspired some excellent work, but it risks overstating the influence of those discourses. Instead, a person-and-context-centered approach focuses not simply on discourses but also on persons using them, deliberately or unwittingly. In so doing, we gain both a better appreciation of the purposes these discourses serve for speakers and an appreciation of the discourses’ standing.

9. What follows is not classic person-centered research with a careful exploration of individuals’ subjectivity. However, it is person-centered theoretically because my unit of analysis is persons using discourses and because I consider psychological explanations rather than taking discourses as actors (see LeVine 1982 and Hollan 2001 for theoretical discussions). In contrast to the usual person-centered research (including my own previous work), however, this discussion also explores situational factors that make a particular cultural model more salient or useful for a speaker at a given time.

## Methods for Studying Cultural Concepts of Agency

One could try to draw out people's conceptions of agency through abstract discussions about why people behave as they do. That method, however, is likely to elicit only those folk theories of behavior that people have been taught or that they use consciously (Bourdieu 1977 [1972], 18). People's implicit beliefs about causes of human behavior are better elicited by discussion of specific cases, particularly examples of problematic or unusual behavior (Morris and Peng 1994). One sort of problematic behavior, in the United States, is economic failure, and I have previously examined voluntarist and non-voluntarist explanations for poverty (Strauss 2000, 2002). The April 1999 shootings at Columbine High occurred while I was thinking about voluntarism in connection with discourses about welfare and poverty. I realized that the alternatives to voluntarism I had observed in discussions of welfare policy were even more apparent in public commentary on school shootings and decided to investigate further.

My data collection went through three stages. First, I included a question about school shootings as part of a series of interviews I conducted on concepts of a good society in the spring of 2000 with a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of 27 men and women in North Carolina.<sup>10</sup> (With three interviewees I failed to raise the subject, so the final pool is 24 people.) The topic was salient enough that some interviewees brought it up spontaneously, but if they did not, then I asked, "How do you explain all of these school shootings we've been having lately?" This was just one of a large number of topics we discussed, including their life histories; therefore I did not explore it in depth. My interviewees are all identified with their chosen pseudonyms and, on first mention, capsule descriptions of their occupations to show the wide social distribution of these cultural models.

While my interviewees were quite diverse and this method had the virtue of including people who did not volunteer on the basis of their particular concern with the topic of school shootings, they were all located in one state. To get a broader base of public opinion on school shootings, I also downloaded editorials, op-ed essays, and letters to the editor written immediately after the Columbine shootings from the regional U.S. newspapers that Lexis-Nexis searches. I took the first 100 items listed from a search with the keywords "Columbine"

10. All but 5 interviewees were recruited through a random sample phone survey. Participants in the survey were asked if they were willing to participate in face-to-face interviews. Fifteen of the interviewees came from the upper-middle-class Research Triangle Park suburbs and the other 12 from the former textile mill town of Burlington and several small towns around it in Alamance County, North Carolina. There were 13 women and 14 men, 21 who considered themselves white (including 2 who mentioned some Native American ancestry) and 6 who considered themselves black. Seven were professionals with advanced degrees, 8 were in or had held managerial positions in a business, government, or non-profit agency, 6 were clerical, secretarial, and other service workers, 4 were manual laborers, and 2 were students.

or "Littleton" and "editorial" for April 1999, which resulted in 106 editorial pieces.<sup>11</sup> This added many examples of unelicited discourse from all over the country. However, editorial writers are limited to members of newspapers' editorial staffs, op-ed authors are supposed to be experts, and writers of letters to the editor tend to be atypical; for example, in this sample there were three times as many male as female authors for the signed letters and op-eds. In the following discussion the letters and editorials are cited with the published name and the newspaper in which it appeared.

An even broader range of commentary came to my attention when, in April 2004, to mark the five-year anniversary of the Columbine shootings, America Online ran two news stories related to the shootings and invited discussion in their electronic message boards. These are not live chat rooms but websites where people can post comments that start discussion threads and respond to previous comments. Sometimes several people respond to each other's posts within a short time period, creating a series of comments that reads like an unmoderated, highly contentious focus group. I downloaded and printed hundreds of these comments. To keep the project manageable I analyzed the first 337 of them (all the messages in 18 threads), submitted from 229 screen names. Like those who submit letters to the editor, these writers are self-selected, limited to those with strong feelings about the topic, and it is possible that some are not U.S. residents. An advantage of this source, however, is that by 2004 Internet access was so widespread that a great diversity of people was represented and the message boards' anonymity permitted free expression of what would normally be self-censored or euphemized views. One taboo view I found expressed nowhere else but here was praise for the Columbine shooters and, occasionally, expression of the writer's desire to do the same. Other message board reactions to this sort of comment brought into relief some of the interpersonal reasons for articulating voluntarism. In the following discussion the electronic bulletin board postings are cited by the writer's screen name, slightly altered to prevent exact identification but with the character of the original screen name preserved because a screen name is an important part of a writer's self-representation.

In the discussion below I take no stance on the truth of any of the explanations offered for the Columbine shootings. My focus, instead, is on what they reveal about ways of think-

11. Lexis-Nexis starts with the most recent items and works back, so the first editorials listed from the April search came from the end of the month. They are listed alphabetically by the name of the newspaper in which they appeared. I stopped at item 93, which took me through the complete alphabetical list of papers for April 30 and April 29, rather than overcounting the newspapers at the top of the alphabet for a part of a third day's sample. A single document for Lexis-Nexis might be the entire letters page of a paper. Counting each individual letter separately, then subtracting duplicates (e.g., of syndicated columns) and irrelevant items (e.g., ones discussing the behavior of the police during the shootings or ministers at the funerals), I ended up with 106 separate pieces. I have also excluded the 4 Canadian editorial pieces from this analysis.

ing and talking about human behavior, agency, and moral responsibility in the contemporary United States.

## Concepts of Agency and Moral Responsibility in Talk about School Shootings

### *Classic Voluntarism*

Following an earlier school shooting incident in Jonesboro, Arkansas, the online version of the libertarian magazine *Reason* (*Reasononline*, whose motto is “Free minds and free markets”) commented on the kinds of explanations that were offered in that case. The headline for the story was “Blame society first: Individual responsibility is the truly unthinkable.” The author, Brian Doherty, was disgusted with the inclination of experts to displace blame from those he considered most responsible, the shooters themselves. Here is an excerpt from his essay:

A *USA Today* headline states it baldly: “Who’s to blame for school shooting? We all are.”

Even if the blame-everyone-else-first impulse makes no discernible moral sense, it makes a great deal of political sense. After all, if only the perpetrators of crimes are to blame for them, then there’s nothing much for government to do but nab those perpetrators, hold a trial, and, if a guilty verdict is brought down, impose a punishment.

But if social forces, or guns, or violent TV shows and movies are to blame, then cops and judges aren’t enough. We need programs, crusades, and concerted government action to try to change the very nature of our culture and society. We need V-chips, gun control, a revived economy, and new forms of educational indoctrination. [. . .]<sup>12</sup>

A *Los Angeles Times* headline on reaction to the shooting said it all: “Violent culture, media share blame, experts say.” Indeed, who else would say it? The culture of experts demands complicated answers, even if they don’t make much sense.

Alternately, evil could be traced to its root cause, the one thing that makes it possible no matter what outside forces are brought to bear: individual choice. But to the experts, it is too simple to say someone has done wrong and must be punished. The tangled web of “social forces” is always there to be pored over, analyzed, charted, and regressed. [. . .]

The advantage the state takes from blaming social forces for individual mistakes or crimes goes beyond the sort of colorful violence that makes the newspapers. All sorts of social problems for which politicians scramble to find solutions, from single-parent households to drug abuse to

long-term welfare dependence, result from the cumulative effects of bad decisions made by individuals—decisions that are never made by everyone in the same social milieu. Avoiding pregnancy, educating oneself, and becoming self-sufficient are within the power of most individuals, no matter the social forces surrounding them. Anger at the world shifts attention from where real change is both needed and possible—in the choices individuals make—and leads instead to further airy plans for state action [. . .]. Be angry at the kids who did it. (Doherty 1998)

Doherty’s comments are interesting for several reasons. First, his view that “evil could be traced to its root cause, the one thing that makes it possible no matter what outside forces are brought to bear: individual choice,” is an articulate statement of voluntarism. Voluntarism combines a cultural model of persons as free to choose their actions with a focus on the proximate actor (“the kids who did it”) rather than more distal agents. Doherty is aware of social forces acting on individuals, but his schema is that someone of strong character (even shooters as young as the two youths in the shooting incident he refers to above, Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, who were only 13 and 11 at the time) will resist such forces. This is a view that Americans are supposed to share, and indeed many Americans would respond very positively to this message in other circumstances.

Yet, significantly, Doherty’s summary of public discourse about the Jonesboro school shootings, which could equally well have been applied to commentary about the Columbine school shootings, and his embattled tone (Strauss 2004)—the very fact that he has to argue for the view that we should “be angry at the kids who did it”—support my contention that in these school shooting cases the general inclination was to blame someone or something other than the shooters. As I show below, only a small minority of all the comments I looked at said that the shootings were the result of Harris and Klebold’s individual choices and blame rested with them. Paradoxically, while scholars like those cited earlier criticize Americans for overly simple voluntarist views, social critics like Doherty criticize Americans for departing from voluntarism.

Finally, Doherty’s statement also makes clear the political stakes of assigning blame, hinting at a divide not only between big-government liberals and small-government conservatives but also between libertarians like himself who favored laissez-faire social policies and social conservatives who were just as ready as liberals to blame large social forces and institute social programs to correct them. Indeed, the only difference between liberals and social conservatives was which social forces they blamed.

### *Blaming Guns*

In some of the commentaries on the shootings, persons are thought to be freely choosing agents, but a distal actor is blamed. This places the shooters in a larger social context, so

12. My conventions for transcriptions and other quotes are as follows: . . . , lengthy pause; [. . .], deletion; [word], uncertain transcription; underline, speaker’s emphasis; =, latching (no perceptible pause between turns); (( )), backchannel. Parenthetical phrases in italics are contextual or paralinguistic cues. Stammers and verbal fillers were omitted.

it is not classic voluntarism. Consider, for example, this argument for gun control:

The tragedy in Littleton, Colo., was not caused by music, Hollywood, video games or some “subculture.” [. . .] It was caused by millions of people who buy guns and support the National Rifle Association. (David Sawatzki, letter, *Omaha World-Herald*, April 29, 1999)

Here the shootings at Columbine High are portrayed as the outcome of millions of individual, fateful choices to buy guns and support the NRA. Sawatzki seems to imagine each of the gun buyers and NRA supporters as free to act differently, but his statement still widely diffuses moral responsibility. Although extreme, it was typical of the large numbers of comments that blamed the ready availability of guns for the shootings. Some gun control advocates may conceive of the shooters as freely deciding how to act, with their access to guns only multiplying the numbers of dead. Alternatively, some gun control advocates may hold that the ready availability of guns was what Catholics call an “occasion of sin,”<sup>13</sup> creating a temptation to act murderously. This is a more subtle and contextualized schema of human action. Either way, if a distal actor is blamed, this is not voluntarism of the classic sort, of which Doherty’s statement is a clear example.

#### *Blaming Popular Culture*

There is a clear shift away from the notion of a decontextualized, free actor in the following, frequently heard explanation that the shootings can be traced to Harris and Klebold’s exposure to violent music, video games, and movies such as *Natural Born Killers* or *The Basketball Diaries* (Pratt 2001, 39):

There’s a lot of evil in the video games that they play. Somebody’s always bopping somebody else or killing ‘em off. I think it’s overexposure to violence. [. . .] I think what you see all the time slowly but surely has an impact on you. (Interview with Maggie Hughes, retired office worker)

Show children violence, sex and killings, and they will be violent, sexy and killers. (Nancy Pauley, letter, *Omaha World-Herald*, April 29, 1999)

These comments reveal a folk version of social learning theory, based on an empiricist theory of knowledge, according to which observed behavior, especially if it is demonstrated by someone who is admired (fictional or real), is remembered and enacted. Choices are shaped by example and suggestion. This cultural model is the source of much public policy in the United States regulating the “adult” content of movies, television shows, video games, and other media.

13. “Occasions of Sin are external circumstances—whether of things or persons—which either because of their special nature or because of the frailty common to humanity or peculiar to some individual, incite or entice one to sin” (Delany 2005 [1911]).

Others placed popular culture itself in a wider social context:

Littleton is shocking, but sadly not surprising anymore. We are getting used to this now. When one considers the state of civilization in America, is it any surprise that occasionally this is what society disgorges? Hollywood moguls have paid their mortgages a thousand times over on just this sort of bloodshed. [. . .] And we get to watch the inevitable cross-over from news to entertainment from the so-called news media. Give the tragedy a name; show it every night—just like the Olympics. [. . .] But what the hell. We’ve got our SUV with a rack; we’ve got our mutual funds; we’ve got our 48-inch TV. We’re literally printing money and the economy is churning like a runaway train. To where, and toward what end, I wonder. (Tom Beatty, letter, *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 29, 1999)

Beatty sets out a complicated causal chain: culture industry executives driven by economic calculations feed the desires of shallow consumers, producing audience-pleasing violent messages that shape people’s behavior. Notice the lack of individual agency in his phrase “this is what society disgorges.”

#### *Blaming the Moral Climate*

Social conservatives’ explanations for Columbine particularly focused on long-term cultural trends going back to the 1963 Supreme Court decision banning mandatory prayer in schools:

ACLU sues and the supreme court rules that God is an outlaw in the school. Children stop packing their bible to school and begins toting their guns to school. (CHo101272)

For more than 30 years this Godless vacuum has reaped the fruits of contraception, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, assisted suicide and pornography and so entrenched a culture of death that we now see children killing children. (Nancy Czerwiec, letter, *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 30, 1999)

Calling the shooters “children,” although Dylan Klebold was 17 and Eric Harris was 18 at the time, hence adults or nearly so in many of the ways U.S. society defines adulthood, reinforces the writers’ message that Harris and Klebold were victims of cultural forces beyond their control.

#### *Blaming the Parents*

Many commentators blamed not the moral climate or the popular culture industry but the shooters’ parents for permitting their kids to be exposed to violent media or simply for failing to notice that their sons had an arsenal of weapons and were plotting to kill their classmates:

I know when one of my kids has had a bad day much less is plotting a massacre. (MissPeachyMago)

Like some advocates of gun control, those who blamed the

shooters' parents may have assumed that their morally blame-worthy actions were voluntarily chosen. Nonetheless, they placed the shooters in the social context of their family, blaming a distal agent, the parents, rather than the proximate ones, the shooters themselves.

Others saw family life as shaped by larger social dislocations:

We've got away from our basic values, more or less—our home and our families and what's most important. It seems to me like nowadays it's just, it's out there, you know, you've got to make a living, you've got to make that money and this is the easiest way to do it, computer games and this, that, and the other. Kids come home and they eat cold cereal or they grab a quick snack or something like that and the parents come in and, "Oh, don't bother me, I'm busy, I've got—." They bring their work home with them and it's just—To me that's not a good society. [. . .] My parents tried to give me a better life, I tried to give my kids a better life, they try to give their kids a better life. And by the time their kids get grown, life probably won't even be worth anything, as far as that goes. And that's about the way it seems right now, is the reason why all these people are getting out there killing each other, in school and everything. (Interview with Jack Allen, general laborer)

There may very well be something to (*voice shifts, as if she's quoting a standard explanation she has heard*) maybe the parents weren't around enough and—(*back to her own voice*) But I think that has a lot to do with society too, with, you know, if you have to work. While there are a lot of opportunities in this society, you do have to work very hard, I think, to be able to provide the things that you feel like you should provide for your family? (*rising intonation, looking for confirmation*) And I think sometimes it does take you away from your [family] a little more. (Interview with Kelly Hall, sales representative)

Still others portrayed the killers as shaped not by their parents' absence but by what they did when they were present. Such comments reflect the two U.S. cultural models of child rearing that Lakoff (2002) terms the "Strict Father" and "Nurturant Parent" moralities. Here is an example of the Strict Father model from a born-again Christian:

I think a lot of problems can be traced back to parenting . . . too much freedom for kids too young, [no] discipline. I think if you discipline someone, it's because you love 'em. I mean, just like God says in the Bible, you know you prune branches that are bearing fruit to bear more fruit. Those that are not bearing fruit, you break off and throw 'em in the fire. (Interview with Daniel Shane, small business owner)

While advocates of strict discipline in parenting would doubtless say that their goal is to mold children into the sorts of adults who will take personal responsibility for their actions

and make good choices, in Shane's pruning metaphor agency is in the hands of the parent/gardener, not the child/branch, whose fruiting appears to be the result of some combination of natural forces, involuntary individual traits, and parental guidance.

The newer Nurturant Parent model departs even further from voluntarism:

I can't figure out why a child isn't getting their needs met from the family unit where they have to resort to violence. (Interview with Jane Edwards, professor of business)

This sounds like a popular version of psychotherapeutic discourses that place blame on parents who damage their children's psyches by failing to satisfy their psychological needs (cf. the upper-middle-class soft individualism described by Kusserow 2004). Again, notice the lack of agency in Jane Edwards's phrase, "where they have to resort to violence."

The folk theory that children's actions are the result of the way they were raised is not held universally. In a discussion that makes for a fascinating comparison with U.S. discourses about Columbine, Riesman (1990, 183–84) analyzes an incident in which his four-year-old daughter broke a small sauce pot at a Fulani house they were visiting in Burkina Faso:

I was immediately upset and embarrassed, and took her accident as a reflection on me. . . . This attitude amounts to my denying, without realizing it, that she was an independent centre of will and action; it seems to have been based on the tacit premise that it is I who made her the way she is and hence it is I who am the cause of what happened. . . . The fascination children have for the Fulani, and the pleasure they get from being with them, come from the fact that, to them, children have an essence or character that adults perceive as inviolate and as developing on its own quite apart from parental training or influence. In the Fulani view, children grow up under parental care, but not *because of* parental influence.

In that case Riesman was advised not to replace the pot and was told that even if a child were to kill someone else's cow or horse, the miscreant's parent would not be asked to pay.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, in the United States after the Columbine shootings, the parents of one of the victims sued the parents of the shooters.

14. Naomi Quinn (personal communication, June 26, 2006) points out that Western parents also sometimes act as if their children had their own "essence or character." I suspect that there is a difference, in the United States, between explanations for the behavior of one's own children and explanations for that of other people's children. Negative behaviors on the part of someone else's child are often attributed to bad parenting, but the negative behaviors of one's own child may be chalked up to the child's inborn character (see the discussion of the self-serving attribution bias below).

*Blaming School Social Structures*

Other commentators on Columbine blamed the social structure of schools (cf. Ortner 2003), rather than, or in addition to, the family, for Harris and Klebold's violence:

[in response to a posting that said, "ERIC AND DYLAN'S SOULS ARE BEING BURNED BY THE DEVIL IN HELL!!!"] It will probably turn out that Eric and Dylan are flourishing in heaven, because they have made us look a little bit closer into the hellpit that is public high school. They went to correct a grave injustice. They were driven to madness by bullies and bad parenting, not by video games, heavy metal, or violent movies. How can you punish these boys if they don't know any better. Who should be burning in hell are the ones who drove them to such madness, that being their parents and the bullies who constantly tormented them, both physically and mentally. (MDDrost)

Maybe people started picking on D and E in like, 4th grade or something. When I went through, that was the grade where the cruelty really started up. Sure, it warps your mind when it's clear to you that the authority figures who are supposed to protect you obviously could not give two sh\*ts about you or maybe they agree with your tormenters that you are a dweeb. [. . .] Maybe they had just been ostracized to the point of not being that functional anymore. I thought about it like as if this were a pack of apes, and there are those runty adolescent males who have less than no status. It makes you freaky. (SportsPT)

The various teen groups, like the "freak", and "gap-girls", and "varsity/cheerleader" groups tend to isolate certain other kids who don't fit in. I believe that Columbine was a sick high school for all this type of student behavior. So many of these children picked on each other, and made the targeted teens the object of scorn. [. . .] I personally hold the school responsible for what happened at Columbine. (KatFC2L2)

According to MDDrost, SportsPT, KatFC2L2, and the many others who defended Eric and Dylan in the anonymous electronic discussions, the boys suffered from a kind of temporary insanity ("driven to madness" [MDDrost], "It makes you freaky" [SportsPT]) caused by unbearable provocation and low social status. Some saw Harris and Klebold's response as akin to a cornered animal's preservation instinct. Others even saw the shooters' response as a heroic form of resistance:

OH WELL ONLY A WIMP WOULD SIT BACK AND IGNORE SOMEONE PICKING ON THEM!!! I PRAISE THESE BOYS FOR STANDING UP FOR THEMSELVES!!!! (Juhanmf36)

Juhanmf36's agency concept is largely voluntarist. Saying that Harris and Klebold are to be praised implies that they are responsible for their actions. Still, even Juhanmf36 also sees

their actions as reactions to provocation, which is an example of what Markus and Kitayama (2003) call a conjoint agency model, not supposed to be typical of Westerners. Cultural models of joint determination by social entities beyond the individual is certainly implied in the comments blaming the shootings on the NRA, violence in the media, the ACLU and the Supreme Court, bad parenting, status hierarchies in schools, and modern life in general.

*Individualistic But Not Voluntarist Explanations*

Individualistic explanations for the Columbine shootings (i.e., ones that focus on causes arising from within the shooters themselves) were not entirely absent. However, voluntarist explanations were just one of three different sorts of individualistic explanations in the Columbine commentary. The other two focused the shooters' *mental disorders* or their *intrinsic character*. Although, in practice, mental disorders, intrinsic character, and voluntarist explanations can be difficult to distinguish, in their prototypical cases they rest on different schemas of agency, have different implications for moral responsibility, and usually lead to different approaches to punishment for wrongdoing.

Here are some examples of explanations in terms of mental disorders:

The Columbine killers were most likely mentally ill—depressed and/or bipolar. More needs to be done in this country to help mentally ill children and adolescents. (CZ544)

How many more "experts" will offer their opinions on what caused this? Has anyone considered that these two kids were nuts? (Alex Koseluk, letter, *Omaha World-Herald*, April 29, 1999)

Legally, the broad category of mental disorders (as opposed to the narrower one of insanity) is controversial as a factor mitigating criminal responsibility in the United States, reflecting popular opinion that some mental disorders are severe enough to render the miscreants unable to distinguish right from wrong and voluntarily control their behavior while others are not.<sup>15</sup> However, some people (probably CZ544, for example) would no more blame Harris and Klebold for actions resulting from their mental illness than most people would for the physical incapacity of someone weakened by multiple sclerosis.

It is also important to separate individualistic explanations focusing on intrinsic character from those highlighting bad choices, because these have different implications for punishment. If someone is intrinsically immoral, rehabilitation is out of the question. This is clear in the reaction of one of my interviewees, Cynthia Patterson, to a different school shooting that occurred shortly before I conducted my inter-

15. See, for example, Huckabee (2005) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diminished\\_responsibility](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diminished_responsibility).

views in the spring of 2000. In this case a six-year-old Michigan boy, Dedric Owens, shot and killed his young classmate, Kayla Rolland:

CP: You know, the little boy that took the gun to school and shot the little girl several weeks ago, was in first grade?

=

CS: = He's a first grader.

CP: A first grader. I would not, and now, granted that child shouldn't be tried as an adult by any means, but I certainly would never want him in school with my children, or your children. He needs to be separated from society, he obviously doesn't (*small laugh*) have any regard for anyone else that, it's just, there are some people that are immoral, they are born with no feelings for anyone or anything. (Interview with Cynthia Patterson, customer service representative)

For Patterson, Dedric Owens was "born with no feelings for anyone or anything" and there was no hope of change.

#### *Voluntarist Explanations*

To appreciate the difference between intrinsic-character and voluntarist explanations, compare Patterson's comments above with those of Sally Smith regarding the same case:

CS: What do you think they should do? What would you do if you were in charge of doing something with that little boy?

SS: He would go to reform school until age 21.

CS: Is that what you think they should do with him? Put him in reform school?

SS: Mm-hm. ((CS: yeah)) Hang a picture of her on the wall everyday so he could see what he had done and make him think about it every day that he's in there. (Interview with Sally Smith, mill worker)

Smith implies that Owens could repent and change, a voluntarist view that fits the Christian model of the individual who can at any time leave a life of sin and choose God.

Only one other interviewee offered what could be construed as a voluntarist explanation of the school shootings, and it was not his main explanation. Voluntarist explanations were also quite rare in the newspaper editorials. Out of the 106 editorial columns and letters I examined, only 1 stated and only 5 implied that these rampages were caused by the shooters' voluntary choices. The lone explicitly voluntarist statement came, oddly, from a University of Massachusetts sociology professor, John Hewitt, who wrote that while "science has taught us to look for peculiar social or psychological circumstances" in cases of this sort,

the two dead members of the "Trench Coat Mafia," together with their fellows, might simply have chosen evil in circumstances where others choose to play football or to crave membership in the National Honor Society. (John Hewitt, op-ed, *Boston Globe*, April 29, 1999)

In practice, it was sometimes difficult to differentiate among these individualistic, dispositional explanations. Some people described the shooters as "sicko" or "psycho," terms that ambiguously implicate bad intrinsic character, curable mental illness, or a mix of the two. And how should we interpret the AOL messages describing Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as "cowardly" or "pussys," masculinist language that relates individuals' moral choices to toughness of character? Are "cowards" and "pussys" conceived of as intrinsically weak-willed? Or as having chosen an easy way out? Still, despite the difficulties in some cases of categorizing responses, by my best count only 10% of the newspaper editorialists, 8% of my interviewees, and 13% of the AOL message board writers<sup>16</sup> employed voluntarist discourse to explain the Columbine shootings and incidents like it. Why was voluntarism rare in this context, when it is so common in other contexts in the contemporary United States?

#### Uses of Voluntarist and Nonvoluntarist Discourses

The Columbine shootings were an opportunity for Americans to air worries about everything they felt was wrong in their society: too-easy access to guns, lack of family togetherness, violent images in popular culture, bullying and teasing in the schools, and a decline in religious and moral values. The cultural critique came not just from liberals or experts but from average Americans across the political spectrum. It is understandable that people would take advantage of the circumstances to voice their concerns and promote the causes most important to them. Moreover, it should now be clear that in discussing such issues Americans have available a large repertoire of discourses embedding a range of cultural models of personhood, agency, and moral responsibility. In talking about school shootings, whether speakers blamed guns, parents, bullies, popular culture, or the shooters' voluntary decisions seemed to depend on their larger rhetorical goals.

Some of the purposes served by voluntarist moral attributions can be seen if we examine the one communicative context in which a number of commentators *did* place responsibility on the shooters or someone like the shooters. This was in the online message board responses to comments praising the shooters. A posting that started the longest discussion thread I examined had the subject heading "GLAD THEY DID IT I WOULD HAVE TOO" and went as follows:

i'm glad they did it schools ebcoem a real hell hole now a days what with pregnut mother at 15 and 16 to fights everydamn day i'm glad they did it it shows of bad lfies gonntin for teenagers now a days its sucks having to deal with sex drugs and peerprusser adults don't relise it anymore its not

16. I counted screen names, rather than messages posted, because some writers had multiple postings.

sweet nice children its madness! if i had been those kids and could have done it over again the only thing i would have changed was the body count it would have been more teachers and students dead! (XBrokenxDreams5)

This posting evoked strong reactions. Some were compassionate, drawing on the nurturing parent, mental disorders, and social learning models described earlier:

It's a shame that you have such a low self esteem!! Your parents must have, or still do treat you very poorly! So sorry to hear that! (Arizonandnpony2)

This could be the same hopeless frame of mind those 2 shooters were in. How can this not be seen? (PeaceHarmny1)

I was really sad to see your comments . . . I was a teenager many years ago and we had many of the same problems you are facing . . . The only difference I can see . . . is the trash and garbage that you are subjected to in the movies, tv, so called "MUSIC". . . seems everyone is on a race to the BOTTOM! SO SAD! I really feel badly for you! (ShirHg, ellipses in the original)

Other messages in this thread blamed bullies and parents:

innocent people died because apparently the school thought as did mine when I was growing up, that the problems with bullying and tormenting that a few "out" kids experience are not worth the waste of their time when there are more "important" things (such as not suspending any star athletes that are doing the tormenting) to take care of. until of course after years of abuse someone snaps and kills "important" people. (ShihtzuID3)

ONCE AGAIN IT IS EVERYONE ELSE'S RESPONSIBILITY BUT THE PARENTS—I HOLD THEM RESPONSIBLE FOR BRINGING THESE CHILDREN INTO THE WORLD AND SHUFFLING THEM OFF ON SOCIETY TO RAISE—PUT THE BLAME WHERE IT BELONGS—ON THE PARENTS— (Ecran5)

BAD PARENTING EQUALS BAD KIDS . . . . . (RBendtsen)

Other writers focused on XBrokenxDreams5's "sick" (intrinsicly bad) character:

U sick and twisted person. You will have to face your maker and I know you will be going straight to HELL. I hope u rot there to (Clarissandbilly)

you are a sicko and I hope the f.b.i. traces your message. u.r. as sick as they were (Wesmar11)

Still others, however, focused neither on XBrokenxDreams5's intrinsic character nor on her social circumstances but instead urged her to take control of her life. (I say "her" because one participant in the discussion looked up XBrokenxDreams5's screen profile and web site.) Their comments revealed dif-

ferent versions of voluntarism, some secular, others religious, some harsh, others encouraging:

This whole way of thinking is spawned by laziness and a misdirected approach to living. Anyone, whether they're a popular cheerleader or jock, or a successful musician or businessman or artist or athlete or whatever, doesn't feel good about themselves because of how other people treat them, but because of what they do for themselves. You have to put in the effort to find activities, jobs, hobbies, etc. that you can take satisfaction in. When you do that for yourself, it doesn't matter what other people think of you because you don't need them to feel good. [. . .] But this stupid, lazy piece of shit would rather direct all his energy towards hatred and anger than making life better for himself. (Murrayaaron30)

Perhaps if you had paid attention in school and learned how to spell and construct a sentence properly, you would not be such an angry moron. (RAM2CITY)

who ever wrote this statement obviously is a little pussy and I would like to have just 5 minutes alone with him/her. You think your sooo bad ass and shit. such an angry youth, well dude if your so angry and you want a body count come find em. I'll rip your lungs out and put you on the top of a body count listed with title of wanna be little pussys. so til then cut the shit and grow up. [. . .] next what are you gonna say 9–11 was something america deserved? are you gonna feel sympathy for pussy little arab guys? [. . .] its kids like you saying you woulda joined the gunlittleboypussys (not gunmen), please you would have been one of the first ones crying for you mommy! so seriously grow up and stop writing such horrible things (USANavyAO2)

more whining for school kids it is tough growing up you have to be strong!! yes you will survive it!! (SchnppJ78)

You think being picked on in school is a reason for people to die? You can't tell ME how hard it is in school. I just graduated last year, and I went through all of it. I got picked on, jumped, exposed to the drugs, the stupidity, the judgments, the peer pressure, the insane zero tolerance rules, dictator like teachers, and the bullshit educational system. None of this is any reason at all to take a life [. . .] You want a better life? MAKE a better life for yourself, because that is the only way it's going to happen. [. . .] LIFE IS WHAT YOU MAKE OF IT. (EndlessAfterglow1)

I pray the Lord will touch your heart and that you will only take responsibility for your own actions by NOT giving in to peer pressure and realize that you can make your own decisions. (Arizonandnpony2)

I wish you peace and calming in the world. Recognize your power for the positive. (LoriSLCThorntn)

These are all examples of voluntarist discourses, marked by certain characteristic keywords and formulaic phrases: "Any-

one [. . .] doesn't feel good about themselves because of how other people treat them, but because of what they do for themselves" (Murrayaaron30), "grow up" (USANavyAO2), stop "whining [. . .] you have to be strong" (SchnppJ78), "LIFE IS WHAT YOU MAKE OF IT" (EndlessAfterglow1), "take responsibility for your own actions" (Arizona-ndnpony2), "Recognize your power for the positive" (LoriSLCThorntn). While their comments are expressed differently because of their sources in different specific social discourses, all urge XBrokenxDreamsx5 not to blame others but to believe in her or his own power to change circumstances. Comments of this sort came from 23% of the 70 screen names participating in this thread—still not a majority, but almost double the percentage of participants that offered such comments in all the message board postings I analyzed.

These phrases sound so typically American: Why were they not more common? It is not that the writers needed the anonymity offered by the AOL message board to utter these ideas, which are supposed to be the American civic religion. Rather, the anonymity of the online message boards permitted expression of the taboo idea that the Columbine shooters were justified and the threats of desperate writers like XBrokenxDreamsx5. Most Americans did not participate in discussions with someone who praised Harris and Klebold and threatened similar actions, hence they had no need to reply with voluntarist language. Voluntarist discourse is useful, however, as a means of attempting to deter potential future killers, like those who celebrated Harris and Klebold. What is striking about all of the voluntarist quotes above is that (with the exception of RAM2CITY's) none is purely explanatory; instead they use imperatives and second-person pronouns to exhort XBrokenxDreamsx5 to "make a better life for yourself."

I have observed this in other contexts as well, and I would venture that one of the primary uses of voluntarist discourses in the contemporary United States is to motivate others to change their behavior. In this respect voluntarist discourses are distinct from more distal responsibility attributions and even from other individualistic explanations, for example, those attributing behavior to intrinsic character. Compare, for example, Clarrissandbilly's comment: "U sick and twisted person. You will have to face your maker and I know you will be going straight to HELL. I hope u rot there to," in which XBrokenxDreamsx5 is cast as irremediably evil, with USANavyAO2's harsh but ultimately more encouraging "cut the shit and grow up [. . .] seriously grow up and stop writing such horrible things," which assumes that XBrokenxDreamsx5 could act differently.

Voluntarist discourse is also useful as a retort to proposals for social policies that the speaker opposes. For example, a common response in the United States to social assistance for the poor is a voluntarist comment like the one we saw above in Doherty's *Reasononline* essay: "Avoiding pregnancy, educating oneself, and becoming self-sufficient are within the power of most individuals, no matter the social forces sur-

rounding them. Anger at the world shifts attention from where real change in both needed and possible—in the choices individuals make." In the context of commentary about school shootings, a common response to calls for gun control was "Guns don't kill, people do." One of my interviewees, Jack Allen, quoted above, brought up school shootings before I did as an example of problems with modern society. In the context of his problems-with-modern-society social discourse, it made sense to play down the shooters' agency. As he kept talking, he mentioned children's access to guns as a modern problem, but then, probably because he is also a National Rifle Association member, he switched to its standard, individualistic criticism of gun control:

Really I don't think there's any way of actually keeping any weapon, and that's ANY weapon, away from anybody. And that's from a child right on up. I mean you could take a 2-year-old, he could walk into your kitchen and pick up a knife, he can pick up a fork, he can go outside and he can pick up a rock. I mean there's weapons everywhere. Anything you want to use is a weapon. Anything you choose to pick up. There's where it comes back again is what's in the mind of that person.

This was the only other possibly voluntarist explanation, in addition to Sally Smith's, that any of my interviewees offered, and Jack Allen only brought it up at that point to argue against gun control.<sup>17</sup>

But whereas voluntarist discourses are handy for speakers who wish to deflect attention from social context to individual responsibility, they are not at all useful for speakers wishing to instigate social action. If school shootings are the result of individuals' free choices, nothing can be done to stop them. Saying that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold "might simply have chosen evil in circumstances where others choose to play football or to crave membership in the National Honor Society" (Hewitt's op-ed, quoted above) and leaving it at that would be of little comfort to parents, teachers, students, and policy makers who wanted to take some action to prevent future school shootings. The shootings at Columbine High, which were part of a well-publicized series of school shootings in the 1990s, made many Americans fearful for their safety and the safety of their children in places where they thought they could be safe (suburban and rural schools [Newman et al. 2004]). The school shootings led to maturity ratings on video games<sup>18</sup> and metal detectors and antibullying measures

17. I say this is "possibly voluntarist" because Allen may have been thinking that "what's in the mind of that person" depends on voluntary choices ("Anything you choose to pick up") or he may have been thinking that it depends on larger social forces of the sort that he had been talking about a few minutes earlier ("We've got away from our basic values . . .") or both.

18. "The shooting deaths of 12 students and one teacher—and the suicides of the two teenage gunmen [at Columbine]—led then-President Clinton to ask the FTC to investigate whether entertainment companies were trying to attract children to adult-rated movies, music, and electronic games" (*Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2001).

in schools and helped motivate the Million Mom March for gun control. Blaming distal forces that could be changed probably helped people feel they could control these events. I suspect that this is part of the reason that voluntarist discourses were rare in this context.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps another part of the reason that discourses of personal responsibility and individual choice were rarely applied to the school shooting cases in the United States is that most of the shooters were white and middle-class. It is instructive to compare Cynthia Patterson's comments about the six-year-old shooter, Detric Owens ("there are some people that are immoral, they are born with no feelings for anyone or anything") with her initial response when I asked her to comment on "all of these school shootings that are happening all over the country," a phrase that probably brought to mind Columbine and similar examples. Her first response was "The people with the guns are the ones that are responsible for it. That's . . . I can't imagine [. . .] having a gun in the house that's that accessible to a child." I wondered whether it was significant that in most of the U.S. school shootings in the 1990s the killers were white, like Patterson, while Detric Owens was African American. Or that Sally Smith, who is African American, consistently gave voluntarist explanations when I asked about school shootings in general and when she discussed the Detric Owens incident in particular. There are other possible explanations for Patterson's inconsistency: Maybe she felt that Owens's murderous actions at such a young age were proof of his innate immorality. But it is also possible that this is an example of what some social psychologists call the "ultimate attribution error" (Pettigrew 1979), a tendency to give actor-blaming dispositional explanations for the problematic behavior of out-group members but mitigating situational explanations for the problematic behavior of in-group members.

## What Are "Cultural Conceptions of Agency"?

Yet, it is too simple to end the story at this point. At a deeper level we should ask what it means to say that society X has such-and-such a cultural conception of agency. Along with multiplicity of *contents* and *contexts*, I also found variety in the *form* of ideas about agency (Strauss 1997) and in their cultural standing, by which I mean how accepted the view is in the speaker's opinion community (Strauss 2004a). In my interviewees' talk about public events and their own lives sometimes voluntarism was just taken for granted, while at other times voluntarism was highlighted explicitly and argumentatively. Explicit, argumentative uses of voluntarism

19. I am reminded here of Malinowski's prediction that magic will be resorted to in situations of high uncertainty and emotional salience as an attempt to assert control. Concern about the Columbine shootings and readiness to find distal causes for them helps to explain the popularity of Michael Moore's 2002 documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (as Thomas Weisner pointed out to me [personal communication, May 22, 2006]).

were the norm in the commentary about the Columbine shootings, to the extent that voluntarism was invoked at all. This sort of argumentative, explicit voluntarism I will call *defensive voluntarism*. I mean "defensive" not in the psychoanalytic sense but in the sense that the speaker is defending voluntarism against alternative explanations.

In distinguishing different forms of voluntarism (one taken-for-granted and implicit, the other defensive and explicit) I am repeating the distinction Bourdieu drew between *doxa*, the realm of unstated beliefs that are so hegemonic they are not even recognized as beliefs, and *dogma*, the realm of explicit beliefs that, having been contested and lost the "primal state of innocence of *doxa*" (Bourdieu 1977 [1972], 169), now are recognized as one alternative among others. Defensive voluntarism fits this definition of *dogma*: a reply to challenges rather than an unexamined assumption.

An example of voluntarism as *doxa* can be seen in the comment of another interviewee, Catlyn Dwyer,<sup>20</sup> explaining why she did not go to college: "Well, I turned down scholarships in journalism and foreign languages and—because I wanted to get married, I wanted a child." Her statement rests on a taken-for-granted model about the life course for women of her generation and class in the United States—that it was her choice whether to go to college or to get married and have a child. It is with respect to such choices (e.g., whether and whom to marry) that voluntarism truly is a widely shared, *doxic* cultural model in the United States.

Yet, despite Bourdieu's rather hard-and-fast distinction between *doxa* and *dogma*, voluntarism exists in both forms in the United States. For example, Catlyn Dwyer also expressed voluntarism in an explicit, dogmatic way. In an earlier interview, discussing her decision not to go to college, she added, "But I guess the older you get the more mature you are and the way you look at things is different. And as I try now to tell my granddaughters and the daughters-in-law, 'You can do anything. Anything you want.'" That line, "You can do anything. Anything you want," is an example of defensive voluntarism because it foregrounds the person's power to set goals and act on them, implicitly contradicting alternative, more constricting gender-role messages that Dwyer feared her granddaughters and daughters-in-law might be receiving.

Returning to school shootings, the voluntarist responses of the AOL subscribers to XBrokenxDreamsx5 quoted above are examples of defensive voluntarism because they are deliberately posed to counter her placement of blame on her peers. They are stated in the unmitigated, emphatic way (e.g., "You want a better life? MAKE a better life for yourself, because that is the only way it's going to happen. [. . .] LIFE IS WHAT YOU MAKE OF IT") that is typical of beliefs the speaker takes to be the common opinion (Strauss 2004a). However, the fact that voluntarism requires such pronouncements shows that it is contested. The explicit, defensive form of voluntarism that was typical in commentary about school

20. She chose "Catlyn" as a pseudonym because she is a cat lover.

shootings indexes its cultural standing (Strauss 2004) as one alternative among others—a highly valued alternative, it is true, but one that faces competition.

What remained at the implicit, doxic level in the explanations for the Columbine shootings was not the assumption of *individual* control over events but of *human* control. Just one interviewee (Daniel Shane, the born-again Christian quoted above) and only two out of my sample of AOL messages blamed the devil or satanic forces; in all of the comments I analyzed, only one said or implied that the shootings were fated, and no one mentioned sorcery. The explanations offered for school shootings were diverse, but all assumed a naturalized, disenchanting world. It is not that beliefs in fate, God, and satanic forces are absent in the United States, but for most people<sup>21</sup> their use is confined to specialized contexts.

To sum up, we need a middle way between a theory of culture as deliberate rhetoric (e.g., Carrithers 2005) and a theory of culture as implicit cultural models (e.g., Holland and Quinn 1987). Each has a piece of the truth.

### Discourse about School Shootings in Psychological, Cultural, and Historical Context

The way U.S. Americans assigned blame for the Columbine shootings exposes the variety of cultural models of agency in the contemporary United States. This event was unusual for the wide variety of cultural models it tapped and perhaps also for the small role that voluntarism played in the explanations, but competing nonvoluntarist discourses and defensive voluntarist responses were well-established before the shootings. Contention between nonvoluntarist and defensive voluntarist discourses of agency characterizes recent and ongoing debates about a number of other important social policy issues in the United States. Here are some examples:

*Criminal justice.* Advances in brain imaging have given defense lawyers a new tool: the argument that their clients' behavior was caused by brain abnormalities that can be demonstrated with brain scans. Others, such as the legal scholar Stephen Morse, have responded with a formula reminiscent of opponents of gun control: "Brains do not commit crimes; people commit crimes" (quoted in Rosen 2007, 52).

21. There are exceptions in discourse about other events, such as the late televangelist Jerry Falwell's statement that the 9/11 attacks were a message from God: "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the Pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen'" ([http://www.religioustolerance.org/reac\\_ter7.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/reac_ter7.htm)). It is notable, however, that Falwell's explanation for 9/11 was never widely embraced by the American public. Similarly, following Columbine, in all of the popular commentary I analyzed, even social conservatives who shared Falwell's views about the dastardly influence of the ACLU and like groups still gave a naturalistic explanation of their effects.

*Educational failure.* In 1998, when my son was in elementary school in Durham, North Carolina, signs appeared around his school saying, "You choose to make good decisions" and "Make good choices." If he misbehaved, the form he brought home would say, "Nathaniel had two time outs today. The choice he made was \_\_\_\_\_ ("starting to throw a rock on the playground" or "singing in his annoying voice at circle time"). Please talk to him about making better choices." When I asked his teacher why the school had launched this "good choices" campaign, she said that the children in that school, many of whom were bussed in from the inner city, were told too often that they could not do well because they were poor or because they had learning disabilities. She deliberately started the "Make good choices" campaign as a way of empowering them—a clear example of defensive voluntarism. At the same time a friend in New England whose seventh-grade son had failed several of his classes told me that, although she was going to get him tested for a learning disability, the school had informed her that the latest theory among educators was that failure is the result of the child's poor choices.

*Poverty.* During the 1990s there was a shift in antipoverty policy in the United States, culminating in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which eliminated the previous federal guarantee of assistance to the poor. This change in policy was backed by resurgent voluntarist discourse. As Norris and Thompson (1995, 6) point out, by the 1990s, although "many policymakers still believed that environment, culture, or other external circumstances created poverty . . . the idea of choice and welfare dependency was increasingly dominant in the competition of ideas that helped to produce proposals on the active policy agenda."

Indeed, the interdiscursivity among these disparate public policy issues was stressed in Doherty's *Reasononline* comment, which related the Jonesboro school shooting to "all sorts of social problems for which politicians scramble to find solutions, from single-parent households to drug abuse to long-term welfare dependence." Rhetorical exchanges between defenders of nonvoluntarist and voluntarist cultural models are common in the contemporary United States. Is this complexity in cultural models of agency peculiar to this place and time?<sup>22</sup> I do not have the comparative cross-cultural and historical information to answer the question, but I can suggest some possible answers.

### *Multiple Models of Agency as a Universal*

Meyer Fortes (1983 [1959]) posited the universality of two sorts of religious explanatory principles: fate (exemplified by

22. Such debates go back at least 50 years, as Dan Segal (personal communication, July 9, 2006) has reminded me by pointing to Stephen Sondheim's lyrics to "Gee, Officer Krupke," from the 1957 musical *West Side Story*. The song satirizes contradictory American cultural models for explaining deviant behavior.

the story of Oedipus) and personal moral responsibility to gods or ancestors (exemplified by the story of Job). While some religions stress one principle more than the other, he claimed, the universal possibilities of each “reconcile the two main alternatives in the hazardous progress of the individual from the state of unchecked dependence, as an infant at the mother’s breast, to that of constrained independence, as an adult and citizen” (p. 40).

An alternative to this psychoanalytic argument for the universal prevalence of both voluntarist and nonvoluntarist cultural models would be the social psychological explanation, mentioned earlier, of the ultimate attribution error. The ultimate attribution error has an individually focused counterpart, the *self-serving attribution bias*, which is a tendency to give dispositional attributions of one’s own good actions and others’ bad actions but situational attributions of one’s own bad actions and others’ good actions (Miller and Ross 1975).<sup>23</sup> If a self-serving attribution bias and the ultimate attribution error were universal, we could expect that in every society there would be different ways of explaining actions, implying different assignments of moral responsibility, depending on which explanation would enhance the image of the speaker or the speaker’s social group or detract from the image of others, even if the particular form of the explanation did not look exactly like contemporary American discourses of responsibility and blame (see Hill and Zepeda 1992, 197, and Ahearn 2001a, who found this process at work in Nepal, but see Duranti 1994 for different dynamics affecting attributions of agency in Samoa).

23. Catlyn Dwyer’s explanations for not having gone to college furnish a good example of self-serving attributions. Above I gave one example of an explanation, in which she attributed this to her personal choice to instead get married and have a child. That was in my second interview with her. However, at the beginning of the first interview, shortly after I walked in the door, she mentioned that she had turned down scholarships to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and East Carolina University. After I officially started the interview, I asked her about that:

CS: And you say you didn’t do it because . . .

CD: When I was in school women were nurses, teachers, secretaries, or you got married. And I wanted to be a doctor, an archaeologist, an astronomer, I mean those were the things I was interested in but back then you were just kind of . . . *dissuaded* from doing anything like that.

CS: So what did you do?

CD: I got married. (*laughs*) Had a child.

This is a nonvoluntarist explanation, attributing her decision not to go to college to social pressure or perhaps internalized social learning. I believe that she stressed social factors in that context because the nature of my questions and comments leading up to this point might have seemed critical of her decision not to go to college. This self-serving attribution bias modifies what social psychologists call the *fundamental attribution error*, or *correspondence bias*, which is the error of giving dispositional attributions when there is better evidence for situational causes of behavior (Ross 1977).

### *Multiple Models of Agency as Culturally and Historically Variable*

However, some cultural psychologists claim that there is not as strong a tendency to present a favorable personal representation in every society as there is in the United States (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991; Mezulis et al. 2004) and there may be a stronger tendency to commit the ultimate attribution error in the United States than elsewhere. Morris and Peng (1994, 961–62) found that American newspapers were more likely to attribute a mass murderer’s actions to his internal traits (e.g., “darkly disturbed man”) when he was Chinese than when he was American, tending to excuse the latter’s actions as influenced by situational factors such as his recent firing; Chinese newspapers were less likely to use different explanations in reporting these two cases. Morris and Peng’s study suggests that those Americans who saw the Columbine shooters as like themselves (for example, because they were white and middle-class) could be expected to look for blame-mitigating situational attributions, but this tendency would not be found everywhere.

A cultural rather than psychological explanation could be that threats to the autonomy of the self are stressed in the United States precisely because autonomy is an American ideal. After all, valuing autonomy does not necessarily lead people to believe that they are completely autonomous; the effect could be just the opposite (see also Kusserow 2004).<sup>24</sup> For example, in a study of conspiracy theories in Hollywood films, Pratt (2001, 1) speculates,

Conspiracy theory is often symptomatic of more pervasive anxiety among individuals concerning their ability to control their lives. This seems especially true in the United States, with its political culture so much a product of the grand narrative of classical liberalism. [. . .] As Louis Hartz argued in his classic study *The Liberal Tradition in America*, American political thought begins and ends—indeed is virtually coextensive—with classical liberal ideology. Imbued with an individualist ideology reinforced by such cultural documents as Emerson’s essay on “Self-Reliance,” Americans may be more prone than citizens of other cultures to experience peculiarly intense kinds of anxiety over what they perceive as a “loss of

24. Max Gluckman believed that the importance of ascribed kin ties in small-scale preindustrial societies led to a *greater* emphasis on individual moral responsibility than in industrial societies with weaker kin ties: “In Africa the response [to a moral crisis] is to call in a witch-detector, or a diviner; and I shall argue that what he does, in terms of his occult beliefs, is to exaggerate the wickedness of individuals and, as we see it, to hold them responsible for crises arising from struggles rooted in the conflicts in social structure itself. [In the case of the English family firm] an industrial consultant is called in, and he seems to do the opposite to the diviner; he seeks to diminish resort to explanation in terms of individual wickedness or weakness, and to relate difficulties objectively to the exposure of the conflicts within the social system. . . . Thus the tendency [of the industrial consultant] is to diminish, rather than to exaggerate, the responsibility of persons for group and individual misfortunes” (Gluckman 1972, 5–6).

autonomy, the conviction someone's actions are being controlled by someone else, or that one has been 'constructed' by powerful, external agents," producing a contemporary and quintessentially postmodern psychological phenomenon Timothy Melley has labeled "agency panic."

Pratt's discussion, while fascinating, is also somewhat contradictory: Why should "agency panic" be a "quintessentially postmodern psychological phenomenon" if American political thought from the beginning has been based on the importance of autonomy? Indeed, Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964) covers conspiracy theories going back to the late eighteenth century.

Other theorists, perhaps influenced by Weber, see fears of loss of control not as specifically American but as a post-modern or late-capitalist phenomenon (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1986, 144):

There is some agreement that the early, self-reliant forms of individualism are no longer relevant to modern society, and indeed may be incompatible with it. There are indications in the literature that the character of Western, specifically English-inspired, individualism may have changed, as individual and family capitalism declines, as the state intervenes significantly in social and economic life, as the market place is increasingly organized by large and multinational corporations, and as much of the old ideology of unrestrained capitalist expansion is brought into question by Keynesian economic principles. The result is a growing pessimism about the autonomy and authenticity of the individual in modern capitalism.

Hollway and Jefferson (1997, quoted in Ungar 2001, 275) speculate that the loss of a sense of control at present leads to particular emphasis upon control of criminal behavior: "Fear of crime is a particularly apt discourse within the modernist quest for order since the risks it signifies, unlike other late modern risks, are *knowable, decisionable (actionable),* and potentially *controllable*" (see also Marcus 1999 on contemporary conditions that have fostered loss of a sense of agency).

In addition to these structural changes, Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1986) cite the development of the behavioral sciences, especially Freud's emphasis on unconscious irrational forces, as having undermined voluntarist conceptions. With the development of the human sciences and their popularization, what at one time appeared as autonomous choices can now be explained as the result of neurological structures, ego and superego formation, social role models, or culture learning. In demystifying and explaining human behavior, the human sciences undermine the concept of free will, which seems to rest on an unscientific dualistic metaphysics of undetermined spirit in opposition to determined matter. It may be that the rise of social scientific systems of explanation has motivated, in response, the very explicit kind of voluntarism that I call defensive voluntarism. However, voluntarism also probably had a defensive form in an earlier period when it was used to attack aristocratic ideologies of naturally given hierarchies.

## Conclusion

My major goal in writing this paper is ethnographic. Many commentators persist in assuming that voluntarist views of unfettered agency are securely entrenched in the United States, but in fact a voluntarist model of human agency is only one schema available at present for explaining human action. This is not a subgroup difference: all of my interviewees used voluntarist discourse or made voluntarist assumptions at some point in the course of our discussion, but they employed alternative cultural models as well. Voluntarism does have a special status in the United States. In certain contexts it is uncontested common sense. In other contexts, including sites of widespread social anxiety, alternative cultural models of agency provide a more persuasive interpretation. In its explicit form voluntarism is the recognized orthodoxy, as Bourdieu would have put it, and thus is often uttered in an emphatic, unqualified way. Yet, the very need for emphatic pronouncement betrays speakers' awareness that voluntarism has to be defended.

One of the larger lessons I hope will be drawn from this discussion is the importance of understanding how and why people use the discourses they do in particular contexts. There are many approaches to discourse analysis. If we start by assuming that one discourse is constitutive, we may overlook contexts in which it is played down and misconstrue its place in people's conceptual schemes in relation to less obvious discourses. Another lesson is that when we encounter lofty statements of belief and value in our research, we should ask why they need to be made—what, in the saying, is revealed of their cultural standing.

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## Comments

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Strauss has written a thoughtful article about the multiple conceptions of agency circulating in the United States today.

It is indeed the case that some scholars (though by no means all, as Strauss notes) posit a singular, individualistic notion of agency in this society even as they produce complex, ethnographically nuanced analyses of meta-agentive discourses in other societies. Strauss convincingly argues against this practice. And yet, contrary to what she implies in the sentence “We might think that conceptions as basic as those of personhood and agency would be hegemonic: both singular and internalized as unexamined, taken-for-granted assumptions,” hegemony, as Raymond Williams reminds us, is never total, so it should not surprise us that hegemonic conceptions are often accompanied by counterhegemonic ones. Strauss’s discussion of Bourdieu’s notion of *doxa* makes this point persuasively (though I would have preferred the use of Bourdieu’s own “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy” to the word “dogma”).

Strauss’s most important argument is her insistence that comments about agency be analyzed contextually, for the ways in which people attribute responsibility for an event will vary with the specific interactional context. The two very different explanations that Strauss’s interviewee Catlyn Dwyer gave her for having married and had children illustrate this point beautifully. It seems a bit simplistic, however, to label such a complex phenomenon a self-serving “fundamental attribution error,” as Strauss notes many social psychologists would. Whether or not this label is appropriate for Catlyn Dwyer, I certainly believe it is not the best way to understand how Nepalis attribute responsibility for their own or others’ actions differently in different contexts.

Still, I am in basic sympathy with Strauss’s “person-and-context-centered view of social discourses.” The question arises, however, what constitutes appropriate contextualization. Linguistic anthropologists have written about this issue at length. There are no easy answers, of course, but my own preference would be for in-depth analyses of naturally occurring interactions in addition to the elicited interviews, online discussions, and newspaper opinion pieces that are studied here. I wonder whether Strauss’s statement that “this is not a subgroup difference”—that is, that all of her interviewees used both voluntarist and nonvoluntarist assumptions at some point during their interviews—might need to be reconsidered if her data included more naturally occurring conversations situated in everyday social contexts in different communities within the United States. Would there, for example, be any gender differences in the way agency is conceptualized? There are a couple of tantalizing clues in Strauss’s article that gender might be worth considering more closely, as might class, race, ethnicity, geography, and other dimensions of difference.

I would also advocate a closer look at language. When Strauss analyzes how people say something, she derives interesting insights, such as her observation that the unusually numerous voluntarist remarks made in one online discussion thread were characterized by the use of imperatives and second-person pronouns. More of this sort of analysis might have revealed other interesting patterns.

Overall, however, I strongly agree with Strauss that it is very important that we ask “what it means to say that society X has such-and-such a cultural conception of agency.” Strauss begins to answer that question for this society at this historical moment even as she calls into question the very notion of a single, monolithic cultural conception of agency, and for this reason this article is a valuable addition to the scholarship on cross-cultural conceptions of agency.

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This is a substantial contribution not only to ethnography but also to theory in anthropology. It is also provocative in that it sets the mind racing with further possibilities. Rather than praise particular parts of Strauss’s argument—it speaks for itself very well—let me take things up where she leaves off. She concludes, “When we encounter lofty statements of belief and value in our research, we should ask why they need to be made—what, in the saying, is revealed of their cultural standing.” This is a good question or, rather, two good questions. One question is about the relative weight of an item of culture (an image, a story, an idea, a schema, a trope, a commonplace) among all those which we might find current in a given social and historical situation. This is an invitation to broaden our attention comparatively, to open ourselves to the other items of culture in that situation and to other similar items in other situations across the world. It is a wide-angle question, so to speak. The other question—why that statement of belief and value needs to be made—focuses our attention narrowly, on the occasion of speaking (or writing, or singing, or reciting, or displaying) and its accompanying rhetoric.

Nevertheless, even here we may attain some breadth of comparative understanding. Take, for example, the instance of voluntarism which Strauss met in her son’s school. The teacher had set up what might be called a routine rhetorical strategy, namely, a form sent to the child’s parent in response to an incident of bad behavior which announced that the child had made one or more “bad choices” and that the parent should “talk to [the child] about making better choices.” In my own time as a parent in the UK I have noted several occasions on which some parent or teacher has responded to a particularly irksome behavior by a child with a more spontaneous, in-the-heat-of-the-moment version of this, to the effect, “Why did you choose to [yell, laugh, cheat, hit Sally, etc.].?” This is a simpler, more elemental version of the teacher’s scheme, but even in its spontaneity it is already quite complex. It does have the element of voluntarism, but it seems rather an aggressive, rather than a defensive, voluntarism. It projects a strong evaluation of a scene and refers not merely to the agency of the miscreant but also to the perpetrator’s accountability by means of imputing some conscious deliberation on the part of the miscreant. It is, in other words, a

whole story in miniature, a minimal narrative, a “story seed” (Carrithers 2007) and, indeed, one which can expand easily enough to include the justified anger of the speaker.

The campaign for aggressive voluntarism in Strauss’s son’s school is, so to speak, one step farther up the scale of rhetorical premeditation from these spontaneous utterances. Posters were displayed on the walls saying “You choose to make good decisions,” for example, which gives some sense that the campaign was a rhetorical struggle against a rising tide of other narratives. The libertarian opinion piece by Doherty is one step farther still in rhetorical elaboration, being directed at a wide public and carefully set against opposing views of agency and accountability. Nevertheless, his basic narrative comprehends just those narrative elements—individual will, deliberation, accountability, righteous anger—which were present in the other two cases.

So here is a story seed, an interpretation of situations, which seems to have some life of its own across different occasions of speaking and which could be compared with other competing interpretations on the American scene or with markedly different story seeds in, for example, Melanesia (see Young 1983 for a particularly juicy comparator). In the context of Strauss’s article, this observation implies, I think, that the concept of “agency” is too bare, too rudimentary, to embrace what is of interest in her argument. And it is notable that she quite frequently sets “person” in apposition to “agency,” because only through that pairing can she effectively add the notions of accountability and, to a degree, deliberation. Perhaps a better way to put this would be to say that what is being compared here is in fact not bare versions of bare agency but richer and more articulate story seeds, however briefly stated and concentrated they may be. So in addition to the voluntarist story we have the righteous-reaction-to-bullying story, the helplessness-of-the-media story, and many others, some of which differ from each other so much that we may wonder if they are directed to interpreting the same event.

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Furthering a stimulating research program (1990, 1992, 1997), Strauss analyzes the complex and diverse American discourse about Columbine. My response concerns two arguments advanced in this process—one compelling, the other less so.

The first is that agency conceptions range on a spectrum of “cultural standing” or sharedness that influences how, when, and with what conviction they are expressed. Within this Bakhtinian/Bordieuan framework, she dissects layers of American agency discourse, revealing contending individualist and structuralist dogmas that rest on the common base of human-causation doxa. Moreover, she traces dialectics in which orthodox, individualist accounts of action spur het-

erodox, structuralist rebuttals that are answered in turn by defensive, hyperindividualist rejoinders.

Given the call for richer connections to psychology, some parallels are worth noting. Classic conformity research by Sherif, Ash, and others identified mechanisms through which ideas believed to be widely shared influence one’s judgments, even when they contradict firsthand experience and even when the belief about sharedness is mistaken (see Prentice and Miller 1996). Recent comparative studies find that culturally conformist or orthodox patterns of agentic judgment are exhibited by individuals high in need for cognitive closure, which seems to be provided by the use of highly shared concepts (Chiu et al. 2000; Fu et al. 2007). Moreover, these culturally conformist individuals are distinguished not by stronger personal commitment to the traditional agency concepts but by stronger views that these concepts are high in cultural sharedness or standing (Zhou et al. 2007).

The second argument challenges past psychological arguments about American culture and personal agency based on the finding that “the general inclination was to blame someone or something other than the shooters.” This argument suffers from conceptual flaws. First, psychologists’ evidence about differences between cultures in agency discourse (Kashima et al. 2005) does not entail within-group homogeneity or an Occidental picture of unnuanced individualism. Second, the argument conflates agency with blame/responsibility. Analyses since Aristotle (1955 [330 BC]) have assumed that responsibility attaches only to agentic behaviors but not to *all* such behaviors, such as acts of passion or behaviors by children. Similar exceptions are encoded in Anglo-American common-law (albeit within a narrower conception of agency) exceptions for insanity, irresistible impulse, and incapacity, as well as in many other institutions and folkways. Psychological research examines people’s use of such criteria beyond causality when assigning blame and how weights differ across cultures (Hamilton and Sanders 1992; Zemba, Young, and Morris 2006). In sum, lack of blame does not entail the lack of assumed agency.

Additionally, there are evidential limitations. First, Columbine is not a good test case. The actors did not survive, so they were not candidates for punishment. They were not adults, which matters (see n. 4) because it implies less capacity for self-control (Fincham and Emery 1988). The Jonesboro shooters were charged as juveniles and punished lightly.

Second, Strauss’s sampling of discourse may have further skewed her findings. Her interview question “How do you explain all of these school shootings?” didn’t pinpoint Columbine. Some respondents referred to other shootings, or to the *trend* of shootings, which obviously entails structuralist explanations. Strauss’s remaining data are drawn from the opinion pages of periodicals (op-eds, letters, etc.) and parallel forums online. These sources yield interesting statements, which she interprets with great insight, but I doubt that they reflect the authors’ immediate causal attributions for the event. In these forums, the event is but a pretext for airing

heterodox opinions, Strauss (2004a, 187–88) herself has noted that this genre is “by definition one for expressing debatable and controversial views.” I explored this at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) by searching for the first articles about Columbine, selecting sections of the paper representing different discourse genres. The first ten opinion articles replicated Strauss’s content: an editorial about the increased availability of guns, op-eds about America’s “addiction to violence” and changes in its suburbs, and letters about counseling, cliques, gun control, the pressures of our “winner society,” and the diminished role of parents. The first ten front-page articles focused more closely on the immediate causal chain of the incident under headlines such as “Portraits of Outcasts Seeking to Stand Out,” “Sketch of Killers: Contradictions and Confusion,” and “2 Youths Wanted to ‘Destroy the School’” that, I submit, describe the shooters agentically in a culturally orthodox manner. This exercise (which the interested reader could extend) suggests that systematic sampling of discourse genres is crucial in assessing the prevalence and diversity of cultural conceptions.

This variation across sections of the *Times* underscores Strauss’s first argument that culturally orthodox and heterodox agency conceptions are voiced in different discourse genres. However, it also suggests that her data (sampled primarily from heterodox genres) do not overturn the view that personal agency plays a larger role in the explanation of action in American culture than in many non-Western cultures.

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Seeking to confound the ideological ascendancy of an “unfettered personal agency” in the U.S.A. while contributing to a venerable debate concerning the supposedly exceptional quality of the Western understanding of self and person, Strauss synthesizes a person-centered approach to agency within a sort of ecology of such discursive formulations “at large” in American culture. The “defensive voluntarism” model articulated by some of her consultants circles around the uncomfortable topic of the existence of evil. The mass murder of children is overdetermined as social practice and symbolic act, and the reasons given for it therefore speak to more than cognitive models of individual motivations: they reference and reproduce entire cosmologies. Further, statements about such motivations are culturally salient rhetorics whose suasion strategies and genre forms are ignored only at the peril of the analysis.<sup>1</sup>

The rash of school shootings of 1990s America was preceded decades earlier by a much larger mass murder in a school. On May 18, 1927, the Bath Consolidated School in

Michigan was all but destroyed by multiple explosions, killing 45 people and injuring a further 58.<sup>2</sup> Most of the victims were children. The perpetrator was a school board member and janitor at the school. Andrew Kehoe, who blamed a property tax that had been levied to fund the construction of the school for the failure of his farm. Kehoe was very methodical in his preparations, wiring hundreds of pounds of explosives over several months.<sup>3</sup> On the fateful day, having killed his wife and blown up the structures on his foreclosed property, he drove to the school in a truck containing another large explosive charge and various bits of scrap metal and, pulling next to a small crowd around the school superintendent, Emory Huyck, detonated the dynamite, killing himself, Huyck, and several others. Anticipating his posthumous notoriety, he had attached a sign to his farm fence stating “Criminals are made, not born.”

A sentence in a contemporary report hints at the limits of an analysis of simply the content of an “explanation” for such an act while pointing us in the direction of form and structure: “He was notified last June that the mortgage on his farm would be foreclosed, and that may have been the circumstance that started the clockwork of anarchy and madness in his brain” (*New York Times*, May 20, 1927). This sentence is oddly structured, moving from the past tense and past conditional (while referencing a visible social-economic event) to the subjunctive mood in the dependent clause (while presuming an occult physical lesion). A strangely mixed metaphor, “the clockwork of anarchy,” implying both a fixed determinism and a worrisome unpredictability, is the central image in that clause. Strauss’s analysis of the overt content of her consultants’ statements elides these issues of rhetoric and syntax.

Minimally, then, there may be a good case for theoretically distinguishing between agency and responsibility, with the understanding that the relationship between these concepts can be quite variable.<sup>4</sup> In American English at least, the mood of statements about agency is generally the subjunctive and conditional, a construction of the horizon of possibility. The mood of responsibility is generally the indicative and declarative, a retrospective fixing of cause and effect. Indeed, in some of the data that Strauss presents (e.g., the statements of Jack Allen and Kelly Hall) one senses a sort of covert inferential mood that takes some time to settle into a declarative fixing of temporally prior causes to make sense of a present, horrible effect.

2. [http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial\\_killers/history/bath/](http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial_killers/history/bath/), and see also Parker (1992).

3. Kehoe’s life was the subject of much scrutiny thereafter, and the answers that the inquest and the media discovered make for disturbingly familiar reading in the way they gropingly connect fractured bits of a life to ideas of responsibility for a horrific crime.

4. The Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1950), for example, attribute responsibility for witchcraft through the Poison Oracle but are flexible with regard to their understanding of the agency of witches. They accept polite formulations of lack of knowledge about possessing witchcraft substance while assuming that witches attack simply because they are witches.

1. I thank Rob Moore and Emma Heffernan for very helpful discussions based on an earlier draft of this work. Remaining mistakes and opacities are my own.

Cognitive models organizing overt content while invoking elicited “explanation” therefore get to only part of the issue. Mass murder has “causal power” and therefore displays the signatures of “agency” in part because of its event-ness. This quality brings to consciousness nearly all of Hollowell’s (1955, 75–110) basic orientations—self, other objects, space and time, motivation, and normative behaviour. Indeed, its very horror constructs a watershed. This meaningful rupture is the precondition for reflection on various social and moral imaginaries. The features attributed to the person who performed such an act, then, do more than evidence “explanatory models”; they also recognize and reinscribe these fundamental aspects of a culture.

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Strauss shows convincingly that voluntarist models of agency are not as dominant in the United States as they are generally assumed to be. Although voluntarism does play a significant role in discourses about the Columbine shootings (and about other events, we can assume), other conceptions of agency are important, too, and their importance is signalled by defensive voluntarism—the explicit attempt to defend voluntarism against other models. Supplementing a by-now quite long-standing debate that questions the “sociocentrism” of “non-Western” conceptions of agency and self, Strauss adds to a literature that equally questions simple ideas about “Western” concepts and their presumed voluntarism and egocentrism. Both assumptions are much too simple, as is the underlying opposition of “the West” and “the rest.” This should be conventional wisdom by now.

Strauss attempts to explain the incidence of various concepts of agency in U.S. discourses. She points out that pure voluntarism is used less in a descriptive or explanatory mode and more as an emphasis on ideals and values. The tendency she notes for voluntarist models to be employed to explain achievement while situationalist ideas are often used to justify failure also fits into this picture. Geertz’s distinction between “models of” and “models for” resonates here. The two aspects are not necessarily consistent, and neither needs to be the overall “pattern of culture.”

Strauss’s article thus supports Fredrik Barth’s (2002) argument that culture “is” variation, and this brings me to a question which is the flip side of this emphasis on variation: What makes a model a *cultural* model? Strauss asserts that voluntarism “does have a special status” in U.S. society—that it is “in certain contexts the uncontested common sense.” Yet, how common do competing models have to be in order to be cultural, too? If they vary otherwise, are they cultural by simply sharing opposition to a common sense?

Strauss and Quinn (1997, 6) argue that meanings (and models or ideas) are cultural by virtue of arising from similar

life experiences of people. In the conclusion of the present article Strauss argues that variation of cultural models of agency is not a matter of subgroup difference. Thus, the co-variation of people’s experiences and their cultural models is questionable or at least remains unclear.

In much contemporary anthropological writing, culture has been reduced from a noun to an adjective. In other words, it has been reduced from something that requires a definition (a difficult and perhaps even impossible task, as we know) to some rather ephemeral and volatile quality. In my perception the use of the attribute “cultural” is often motivated more by disciplinary custom than by analytic rigour. In my understanding, the addition of the adjective “cultural” to the various models of agency adds little to their explanatory power. Strauss’s article shows that ideas that are supposed to be shared in society are not actually shared (or not to the presumed extent). What is shared, then, is the *assumption* of “sharedness” or the *representation* of certain ideas as being shared and “cultural.”

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Strauss argues that “voluntarism” as a moral philosophy is popularly espoused in American discourses that both recognize individual agency and attribute moral blame and that such everyday uses of voluntarism demonstrate that American personhood and agency are multifaceted rather than singular cultural forms. Her argument that anthropologists should complicate moral agency has already been well established (Battaglia 1999, 1995; Moore 2007). Her new contribution is the analysis of “blaming” as a paradoxical moral discourse that she names “defensive voluntarism.” The recognition that voluntarism must be defended does not undermine trust in such a dominant ideology of moral agency. In effect, voluntarism is defended as moral philosophy while wilful acts of atrocity are blamed on other social forces. I remain a little unclear about defensive voluntarism. It does not answer the more complex question about voluntarism raised by this case: why do a few young people lack the will to restrain the enactment of a violent fantasy of unfettered individual volition?

One way to examine the popular uses of voluntarism is to compare them with another form of moral reason pertinent here. Specifically, how do people reason about the suffering of the victims of school shootings? Moral reason is not culturally specific but a general human activity. A comparison with the Papuan New Guinean case shows that, while youth violence may be structured differently, Papua New Guineans and Americans share the capacity to reason morally. The comparison provides an opportunity for a fuller assessment of voluntarism as a form of moral reason.

Outside the circle of journalist’s reports on the racial and anticolonial violence of assailants, Papua New Guineans who

tried to understand Raskol violence tended principally to empathize with the victims while at the same time reporting tales of almost inhuman social acts (for example, the Raskols who murdered an elderly shopkeeper and eviscerated his pregnant daughter had stolen a police car in the capital by exploding a gunpowder-packed fish carcass in the police station and escaping with a car from the protective compound). At first I gave most of my attention to the equivocal respect for these tales of Raskol banditry, and I can confirm that Kulick's (1993) analysis of Raskols as "Heroes from Hell" is mostly correct; Papua New Guineans are concerned to understand how acts of Raskol violence may also be acts against new socioeconomic hierarchies created by vectors of change beyond their control. However, in time I realized that Papua New Guineans were only superficially interested in the heroics of the young criminals as fighters against the moral injustice of incipient economic injustice. They focused not on the volition of the young people who committed violent crimes but on the pain and suffering of the victims and aimed to show that they empathized with it.

Strauss limits her inquiry to popular discussions of blaming in mostly public forums in which her informants attributed moral culpability to criminal youth. She defines moral culpability in terms of different forms of volition, either conscious and forthright or indirect and defensive. Her interest is to demonstrate empirically that different forms of moral agency coexist in America, with "defensive volition" being a kind of moral argument that paradoxically defends volition while condemning inhuman uses of it. But her argument ends before it addresses the paradox that placing blame judges the inhumanity of specific acts and is not only about the bending of the human will by extrapersonal forces.

Discourses about the suffering of the victims and their families in the school shootings are missing from her assessments of volition, but such discourses do exist and include tales of suicides by relatives as well as those of friends' finding new lives after grief. Only some of Strauss's informants empathize with the victims. They say that inhumanity is the result of having "no regard for others." Considering this comment, perhaps it is finally possible to understand volition as a form of moral agency. Moral agency is an act of volition only when potential murderers reason through the paradox that they cannot enact their will without causing pain to their victims (Arendt 1954). I must ask what is so powerful about the idea of volition as a form of moral agency that stops Strauss from addressing the greater paradox that humans must find the moral reason to constrain the will.

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## Reply

The key issues in this interesting set of comments seem to be the relation of agency to moral responsibility, my methods, my criticism of some related work in cultural psychology,

implications for a theory of culture, and, finally, the moral point of this research.

*Agency and responsibility.* One thing I learned reading these comments and other work they cited is that the relation of agency to moral responsibility is complicated. Being part of a causal chain that culminates in some harm is not sufficient to earn moral reprobation: the actor's willful intention to cause harm is often necessary as well. For this reason, as Carrithers points out insightfully, the voluntarist accusation "Why did you choose to do such-and-such?" is stronger than "Why did you do such-and-such?" (see also Sykes's comments). Saris (n. 4), however, reminds us that this is not universal: Azande witches can be held morally responsible even if they had no conscious intention to harm. Without examples I cannot assess Saris's claim that "the mood of statements about agency is generally the subjunctive and conditional" whereas "the mood of responsibility is generally the indicative and declarative," but his view that these are different kinds of judgments is well taken. Sykes states, "Her argument that anthropologists should complicate moral agency has already been well established," but some of the work she cites (e.g., Moore 2007) focuses on anthropologists' theories of agency rather than ethnographic analyses of U.S. Americans' theories of agency, which was my subject matter.

*Methods.* Ahearn and Saris would like to have seen a fine-grained discourse analysis, and Saris gives a wonderful illustration of the possible payoffs of such analysis with the "clockwork of anarchy" line from commentary on the 1927 Bath School massacre. In Strauss (2004a) I show how cultural standing is marked by such discourse features as contrastive stress and modal auxiliaries, but I judged that level of detail not necessary for my argument here.

Ahearn expresses a preference for "analyses of naturally occurring interactions in addition to the elicited interviews." But what are the chances I would happen to hear commentary about school shootings when my fieldwork was in 2000 and the most notorious such shooting (Columbine) had occurred a year earlier? I also think that the phrase "naturally occurring interactions" should not be accepted at face value. In what sense is an interview any more "unnatural" than a conversation in my presence between one of my consultants and her Great-Uncle Fred? That chat, even without an anthropologist present, might be more forced and less revealing. Anthropological interviews may be uncommon, but they are no more artificial than any of the others (e.g., medical, market research, talk shows) that make this an "interview society" (as Atkinson and Silverman [1997] put it disparagingly). Rather than search for an uncorrupted natural occurrence, we should consider how the context of the interview might influence our results (see also Quinn 2005).

Morris gives a pertinent example of possible context effects, making the good point that my question "How do you explain all of these school shootings?" refers to "the *trend* of shootings, which obviously entails structuralist explanations." His comparison of opinion and news articles about the Columbine

shootings in the *New York Times* is particularly interesting. It is true that editorials express a wider variety of explanations, including controversial ones, than news stories, but there are constraints on the latter stories: In the *New York Times*, especially, they are supposed to be more focused on the "facts" and less on speculations about distal causes. Even with those constraints, there are hints of less individualist explanations. For example, the news article "Portrait of Outcasts Seeking to Stand Out" suggests that Harris and Klebold might have been motivated by their exclusion from Columbine High's popular student athlete cliques.

Morris also questions whether Columbine is a good test case, in part because the shooters "were not adults, which matters . . . because it implies less capacity for self-control." But that didn't stop some of my interviewees from employing individualistic explanations in other cases of juvenile crime, such as the shooting by 6-year-old Dedric Owens or another horrific crime I asked some of them about, the sexual assault and murder of a 10-year-old North Carolina girl, Tiffany Long, by a 15-year-old boy with the help of two companions who were 13 and 17 years old. The incident had occurred in Burlington, one of the sites of my study, two years before my interviews. I deliberately asked my Burlington interviewees for their opinions about it because the victim was white while the boy who killed her and his companions were black; I wondered how the racial dynamics of the incident would affect their answers. What I found was a split. Some interviewees treated the offenders as youths who could not be expected to be responsible, blaming instead their family situation or gang influences, but others waved aside the issue of their age: "The child has adult ideas" (Jack Allen), "The acts that he committed were those of an adult" (Cynthia Patterson). My interviewee Bobby Powell imputed a racial-hostility motive to the killer: "And whether we like it or not, there is, it's always the white doesn't care for the black, but in many, many cases the black sure doesn't care for the white." As in the case of the Jena 6, one has to question why the young Jonesboro shooters, who were white, got off with a light punishment, while the young African-American perpetrator in the Tiffany Long case received a sentence of life imprisonment amidst calls that he be executed.

*Cultural psychology.* The different causal explanations my white interviewees gave for the actions of young white killers versus young black killers are predictable given some social psychologists' observation that U.S. test subjects more readily give blame-mitigating situational attributions for the anti-social acts of in-group members than for those of out-group members. That is why (pace Ahearn) I find this theory useful as a partial explanation for my findings. One of my favorite demonstrations of this ultimate attribution error is Morris and Peng's (1994) comparison of newspaper coverage of two shooting sprees, one by a Chinese student, the other by an Irish-American postal worker. In an influential recent article on cultural differences in "implicit theories of agency," Morris, Menon, and Ames (2001, 174) summarize those 1994 findings

as follows: "U.S. newspaper accounts of murders were more likely to stress individual persons as causes . . . whereas Chinese news accounts were more situational, stressing factors such as group relationships." While this conveys the overall cultural difference, Morris overstates his previous finding, failing to mention that they found the same proportion of situational attributions in the U.S. and Chinese news stories about the Irish-American postal worker. However, my major criticism of work in cultural psychology on cultural differences in causal attributions is not their portrait of "within-group homogeneity," as Morris puts it. It is that their construct of two models of agency, which are supposed to correlate with two polar kinds of cultures (Anglo versus East Asian), overlooks important differences within each of these types. For studies in legal culture, for example, it is important to know not just whether in a given society there is a tendency toward individualistic explanations but also whether such attributions focus on a defendant's intrinsic character, mental disorders, or voluntary choices.

*Culture theory.* Sökefeld, Carrithers, and others ask what my findings mean for our theories about culture. As Sökefeld suggests, the trick is to get the balance right between the extremes of a Cultures-are-homogeneous-and-unchanging view and an All-is-contextual-variation-resistance-and-change view. Cultural psychologists, who have the unenviable task of persuading their colleagues that psychological laws are not as universal as they thought, are pulled toward the former. Anthropologists concerned to correct overly static and homogeneous views of culture are drawn to the latter. Sökefeld asks what remains of the claims Quinn and I voiced earlier (in Strauss and Quinn 1997) that common experiences give rise to common cultural models. He suggests two paraphrases for my views: that "culture 'is' variation" and that all that is shared is "the *assumption* of 'sharedness' or the *representation* of certain ideas as being shared."

I do not hold either of these ideas of culture, although I can understand why a reader might think so. I am concerned to highlight the variation that exists in causal attributions in the United States. The reason I chose to analyze how people explained Columbine and other school shootings, using the discourse genres I did, is that, as Saris puts it, the Columbine massacre was a "watershed" event that brought to the surface a wide variety of common discourses. My point is not that the preponderance of nonindividualist discourses I found is typical but rather that these alternative discourses are readily available to people in the United States not just for the fortunately rare instances of school shootings but also for many other explanatory purposes. As Ahearn proposes, there is probably subcultural variation in resort to different discourses because discourses are more likely to spread through opinion communities that have been exposed to them and found them compelling, given their characteristic experiences. When I said, "This is not a subgroup difference," my point was only that there is not some privileged demographic group that always employs voluntarist discourses in contrast to other,

less privileged, groups that always conceive of personal agency as constrained. All of my interviewees employed both voluntarist and nonvoluntarist discourses, depending on the context.

I also think it important to pay attention to variation in cultural standing, and it seems that all the commentators agree, although there was some misinterpretation of defensive voluntarism, which is voluntarist discourse used to respond to nonvoluntarist counterdiscourses. Cultural standing analysis can be applied to Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance*, cited by Morris, Menon, and Ames (2001, 173) as an exemplar of a U.S. text in which group agency is "denied or disparaged." Emerson does disparage taking direction from others, but the fact that he needed to write such an essay indicates that he felt that too often his compatriots did the opposite. Emerson's ideas about trusting in one's own judgment may have been widely shared, but they were not so ingrained that they just went without saying.

However, what paying attention to cultural standing should also do is remind us that some values, beliefs, and practices do go without saying. In some contexts, as I mentioned, voluntarism is taken for granted in the United States. So too is a tendency to explain unexpected horrible events naturalistically, without resort to fate, sorcery, Satan, or God's will. Furthermore, a cultural model does not have to doxoc to be widely shared among people who acquire it from their similar experiences. It could be the common opinion or even debatable. Sökefeld asks whether competing cultural models are "cultural by simply sharing opposition to a common sense." If they are learned and widely shared, perhaps because they emerged to counter a dominant view, they are cultural. I stand by our argument (Strauss and Quinn 1997) that any theory of culture needs to account for both unifying and fragmenting tendencies.

*The moral point.* Sykes wonders why there is so little talk in my sample about the suffering caused by school shootings. A few of my interviewees and AOL message board writers did express concern for the victims, but because they were not relevant to my focus on how the shootings were explained, I did not include these comments. Her main point is that I should have addressed not popular explanations for school shootings but why killers lack empathy for their victims. The development of empathy is a topic that interests me greatly (Strauss 2004b), but it was not germane to my topic here. Instead, I had a different moral purpose. Too much public policy in the United States is based on the assumption that we are a take-personal-responsibility-for-your-actions society. Many Americans do hold this view, but they readily voice alternative ones as well. My goal was to reveal this complexity and the hypocrisy that sometimes hides it in the hope that this will lead to better ways of dealing with our social ills.

—Claudia Strauss

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