Tampere University

JENNI RAITANEN

Deep Interest in School Shootings Online

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
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ABSTRACT

School shootings are a global phenomenon, and the perpetrators use symbolic violence to send a message beyond the site of the violence. School shooters are impacted by cultural scripts that describe the reasons and methods for school shootings. These scripts and narratives related to school shootings are circulated online. Many school shooters have been active online, using the internet as part of their actions, for example, by publishing pictures and writings before their massacre. The media and, nowadays, social media have amplified and circulated school shooting narratives and thus given the perpetrators the fame and status. The online world is also a place where school-shooting-related communities are formed. People deeply interested in school shootings share, create, and circulate material on these massacres and their perpetrators. However, deep interest in school shootings is an under researched phenomenon, and its impact on and relation to school shootings are not well understood. The aim of this dissertation is to broaden the understanding of online communities built around school shootings and the effects these communities have on school shootings.

Data for this study were collected through online interviews of 22 people deeply interested in school shootings. Seven of these interviewees were interviewed a second time. In addition, a yearlong online ethnography was conducted to support the interviews and to broaden understanding of the phenomenon. The interviews were semistructured, and the interviewees came from different parts of the world. According to our findings, people deeply interested in school shootings form global online communities that are present on different social media platforms. In these communities, material related to school shootings is created, recreated, and circulated. People deeply interested in school shootings also circulate narratives that explain why school shootings happen. Even though the interviewees came from different parts of the world, their narratives were strikingly similar, as the interviewees talked extensively about school shooters' bullying experiences and other social problems shooters had faced as well as bullying experiences the interviewees had encountered in their own lives. One or both of these narratives appeared in 21 of the 22 interviews. However, at the same time, deep interest in school shootings has many forms. People deeply interested in school shootings differ in their focus

and level of interest, and they can be divided to four subgroups: researchers, fangirls, Columbiners, and copycats. Membership in these subgroups may overlap, and individuals can move from one group to another. We also found that people deeply interested in school shootings can be divided into three groups based on how radical their opinions related to school shootings are: people with neutral opinions, people who sympathize with some school shooters, and people who are interested in conducting a massacre of their own. Most of the interviewees could be categorized in the sympathizer group, and none could be categorized in the group with those who are interested in conducting their own massacre. Some interviewees however expressed worry about potential school shooters in their communities. The opinions related division was based on a theory developed in terrorism studies and showed in practice how school shooting research and terrorism research could benefit from one another, even though these two attack types now are researched mainly in different fields.

Altogether, according to our findings in this dissertation, a deep interest in school shootings does not equal a desire to conduct a school shooting. However, online school-shooting communities circulate school-shooting-related narratives and give the perpetrators fame and recognition. At the same time, school-shooting communities are underused in the prevention of school shootings, as many of their members do not condone the violence of school shootings, and some are worried about potential school shooters among them. Focusing more on online communities formed around school shootings can provide new insights leading to the understanding and prevention of school shootings.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Koulusurmat ovat globaali ilmiö, ja koulusurmaajat käyttävät symbolista väkivaltaa lähettääkseen viestin tapahtumapaikkaa laajemmalle yleisölle. Koulusurmaajiin vaikuttaa kulttuurinen käsikirjoitus, joka kuvaa koulusurmien syitä ja tekotapoja. Sekä kulttuurista käsikirjoitusta että koulusurmiin liitettyjä narratiiveja jaetaan internetissä. Useat koulusurmaajat ovat olleet aktiivisia internetissä ja käyttäneet sitä osana tekoaan esimerkiksi julkaisemalla kuvia ja kirjoituksiaan ennen joukkosurman toteuttamista. Perinteinen media, ja tänä päivänä myös sosiaalinen media, ovat voimistaneet ja vahvistaneet koulusurmiin liitettyjä narratiiveja ja antaneet koulusurmaajille mainetta ja statusta. Internetissä on myös koulusurmien ympärille muodostuneita yhteisöjä. Koulusurmista voimakkaasti kiinnostuneet henkilöt jakavat, luovat ja levittävät koulusurmiin ja niiden tekijöihin liittyvää materiaalia. Ilmiönä voimakasta kiinnostusta koulusurmiin ei ole juurikaan tutkittu, minkä seurauksena sen vaikutusta ja yhteyttä koulusurmiin ei tunneta kunnolla. Tämän väitöskirjan tavoitteena on lisätä ymmärrystä internetin koulusurmayhteisöistä ja niiden vaikutuksista koulusurmille.

Tutkimukseen liittyvä aineisto on kerätty haastattelemalla internetissä kahtakymmentäkahta koulusurmista voimakkaasti kiinnostunutta henkilöä. Seitsemän näistä henkilöistä haastateltiin myös toisen kerran. Haastattelujen lisäksi toteutettiin vuoden kestänyt etnografia internetissä tukemaan haastatteluita ja lisäämään ilmiöön liittyvää ymmärrystä. Haastattelut olivat puolistrukturoituja ja haastateltavat olivat lähtöisin eri puolilta maailmaa. Aineiston perusteella koulusurmista voimakkaasti kiinnostuneet henkilöt muodostavat globaaleja internetyhteisöjä sosiaalisen media eri alustoilla. Näissä yhteisöissä luodaan, muokataan ja levitetään koulusurmiin liittyvää materiaalia. Tämän lisäksi koulusurmista voimakkaasti kiinnostuneet henkilöt levittävät narratiiveja, joissa selitetään koulusurmien syitä. Vaikka haastateltavat olivat lähtöisin eri puolilta maailmaa, narratiivit joita he kertoivat, olivat silmiinpistävän samankaltaisia. Haastateltavat kertoivat laajasti koulusurmaajien kiusaamiskokemuksista ja muista sosiaalista ongelmista joita nämä ovat kohdanneet, minkä lisäksi he kertoivat myös omista kiusaamiskokemuksistaan. Jompikumpi tai molemmat näistä narratiiveista oli löydettävissä kahdessakymmenessäyhdessä haastattelussa. Kuitenkin samaan aikaan

voimakas kiinnostus koulusurmia kohtaan sisältää myös useita muotoja. Koulusurmista voimakkaasti kiinnostuneilla on toisistaan eroavia kiinnostuksen tasoja ja kohteita, ja heidät on mahdollista jakaa tämän perusteella neljään alaryhmään: tutkijoihin, fanityttöihin, columbinerseihin sekä heihin, jotka haluavat jäljitellä aiempia tekijöitä ja toteuttaa oman koulusurman. Henkilö voi kuitenkin siirtyä näiden alaryhmien välillä ja alaryhmien väliset rajat mennä päällekkäin. Tämän lisäksi koulusurmista voimakkaasti kiinnostuneet voidaan jakaa kolmeen ryhmään riippuen siitä, kuinka radikaaleja heidän mielipiteensä koulusurmiin liittyen ovat. Ensimmäinen ryhmä muodostuu koulusurmiin neutraalisti suhtautuvista, toinen henkilöistä jotka sympatisoivat joitakin koulusurmaajia, ja kolmas heistä jotka ovat kiinnostuneet toteuttamaan oman koulusurman. Suurin osa haastateltavista oli luokiteltavissa sympatisoijien ryhmään, eikä yhtäkään heistä koulusurman toteuttamisesta kiinnostuneiden ryhmään. Osa haastateltavissa toi kuitenkin esille huoltaan yhteisöissään olevista potentiaalisista koulusurmaajista. Tutkimuksessa käytetty mielipiteisiin perustuva jaottelu pohjautui terrorismitutkimuksessa kehitettyyn teoriaan, ja osoittaa käytännössä kuinka koulusurmatutkimus ja terrorismitutkimus voivat hyötyä toisistaan.

Tämän väitöskirjan aineiston perusteella voimakas kiinnostus koulusurmia kohtaan ei tarkoita samaa kuin halu toteuttaa koulusurma. Koulusurmayhteisöt kuitenkin levittävät koulusurmiin liittyviä narratiiveja ja antavat koulusurmaajille mainetta ja huomiota. Toisaalta samaan aikaan koulusurmayhteisöjä ei ole osattu hyödyntää koulusurmien ehkäisyssä, vaikka aineiston perusteella usea yhteisön jäsen ei hyväksy koulusurmien väkivaltaa ja osa toi esille huoltaan potentiaalisista koulusurmaajista yhteisöissään. Koulusurmayhteisöihin keskittyvä tutkimus voikin tarjota uusia näkökulmia koulusurmien ymmärtämiseen ja niiden ehkäisemiseen.

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ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

Publication I	Raitanen, J., Sandberg, S., & Oksanen, A. (2017). The bullying-school shooting nexus: Bridging master narratives of mass violence with personal narratives of social exclusion. *Deviant Behavior*, *40*(1), 96–109.
Publication II	Raitanen, J., & Oksanen, A. (2018). Global online subculture surrounding school shootings. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *62*(2), 195–209.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Today, mass shootings and terrorist attacks targeted at civilians and bystanders occur so often that people have almost become accustomed to seeing them in the news. These massacres shock people, naturally, but at the same time, the public quickly forgets them. The attacks gain massive media presence, at least when the massacre takes place in the Western world. However, the media shifts fast to new topics, and people move on. Victims and people directly affected by these massacres do not have the same luxury of forgetting, and their lives are forever changed.

There are also others whose daily lives are focused on these gruesome events. They are individuals who have a deep interest in these violent acts and the perpetrators who commit them. It is an interest in the macabre forms of life: in death and those who cause it. These people may not share the attackers' reasoning or ideas but have other reasons for their interest. Some, however, do share the perpetrators' ideology, some see them as martyrs, and a few become radicalized to the point they conduct their own acts.

Valentine's Day 2015 was the day planned for a mass shooting to take place at a shopping center in Canada. Two of the conspirators met on Facebook and found they had a shared desire to stage a mass shooting similar to the Columbine massacre (Rhodes, 2019). The Columbine school shooting occurred in 1999 in the United States and was perpetrated by two teenagers. The planned Canadian shooting included a third person, whom Rhodes (2019) has been described as being a "cheerleader" of the planned attack. One of the first two conspirators was sentenced to life in prison, and the other one killed himself as police closed in on his home a day before the planned attack. The third person was sentenced to 10 years in prison. (Rhodes, 2019).

The first two conspirators in the Canadian shooting plot defined themselves as "Columbiners" (Rhodes, 2019), a definition that indicates a deep interest in school shootings, especially the Columbine case, and usually a participation in a school-shooting-related online subculture. The Columbine inspiration for the planned attack is clear: The person serving a life sentence has said their intention was to commit suicide after the massacre, as the Columbine attackers did (see Rhodes,

2019). According to an interview she has given, she started researching the Columbine massacre for a novel she was writing and became obsessed with the theme, spending nights surfing webpages of like-minded people and posting on her own blog (Beswick, 2019).

In addition to being school-shooting inspired, the planned attack seemed to have political motivations. According to a news article, the perpetrator serving a life sentence seems to be ideologically right-wing, as she shares Nazi ideas of racial hierarchy, even though she is half-Asian (see Rhodes, 2019). Furthermore, according to her own account, they decided to attack a shopping mall because it was a place where people went to consume, and the attack was planned to be "a protest against Capitalism, against consumerism, against greed" (Rhodes, 2019). The reasons she has given for the planned attack bring to light her philosophy and ideology on mass murders:

> A public massacre is very much an attack on the public itself. . . . Everything else is secondary. It's about a sort of attack on the common people, not an open attack on one's enemies … It's on people who just sort of blindly support them, people who are complacent. People who some people like to call ´sheeple´. You're just purifying the world from those who just do not have very much to contribute to it. (Beswick, 2019)

The foiled Valentine Day's mass shooting presents questions that are difficult to answer. What makes an individual become obsessed with massacres such as school shootings in general and specifically a terrible event that took place years ago, such as the Columbine massacre? What role did the online community of like-minded people interested in school shootings play in this? How should one categorize a foiled plot: as a school shooting, terrorism, or a mass attack? Should the motivations for the planned attack be described as personal or ideological—and if the latter, is it right-wing-ideology, anti-Capitalism, or just antihuman?

The aim of my dissertation was to try to find answers to these types of questions by focusing on school-shooting-related online communities and the people who form these communities. For most people, the interest in massacres and their perpetrators seems deviant and wrong, and it can easily be judged. However, when individuals radicalize toward violent extremism, they usually develop polarized views on society and have a strong sense of "us" and "them" (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011). The planner of the foiled shopping mall attack used the term "sheeple" and believed that the planned victims did not have very much to contribute (Beswick,

2019), thus framing the planned attack as a form of purification. This is undoubtedly deviant and wrong and should never be glamorized or romanticized. However, research has suggested that unlike this planned attacker, most people who have radical ideas do not act on them (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Thus, when discussing potentially radicalized individuals or those on the path toward radicalization, one should aim to deconstruct this type of "us"–"them" division instead of strengthening it by using it ourselves through labeling these people as deviant or evil. This requires understanding of the logic and reasoning of these individuals' worldview, even when it is difficult and against one's own morals. However, violent behavior should never be justified.

This is where the interest for my research began. Due to previous academic research (e.g., Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012), I knew there were online communities formed around school shootings. As the research on this area was small, I found there was a lack of in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. In addition to the topic of school shootings itself, I found the distinctions made in the academic studies interesting. Even though school shootings, terrorism, and mass shootings often share a resemblance, they usually are studied in different fields, and researchers focus on different aspects. School shooting research's focal point is often at the societal level, especially that of schools, whereas terrorism research tends to focus on the individual level of the perpetrators. Throughout this dissertation, I try to combine terrorism research and school shooting research and to bring new insights to school shooting research.

I use the terms "deep interest in school shootings" to describe school-shooting-related interest and "people deeply interested in school shootings" to describe people interested in this subject. Previous researchers have used the term "fan" to describe these people (e.g., Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012). However, during my data collection and analysis, I found that people interested in this theme have different levels and focuses and are heterogeneous in their interest in school shootings. As school shooters often aim to become famous through their attacks (e.g., Larkin, 2009; Webber, 2017), I decided to not use their names in my dissertation and thus not give them the fame they were after.

First, I examine previous literature on the subject. I begin by discussing school shootings and the ways in which serious targeted violence has been categorized as well as how people radicalize toward it. I explore research on online radicalization and focus on what is known about it in the school shooting context. I end the literature review by discussing narratives of mass violence and the effect stories told online and offline have on school shootings. After the literature review, I explain the

aims of my research and my research methods. I describe the results of my research, and in the discussion section, I discuss my findings and give suggestions for the future research.

1.1 DIFFERENT FORMS OF MASS VIOLENCE

Deadly violence is horrific in all of its forms. When the violence is directed at bystanders without any premonition, it causes panic and fear on a large scale. The fear is circulated further as media reports on these attacks spread quickly and social media distributes all of the possible information. Today, this often includes videos of the crime scene filmed by bystanders, victims, or even the perpetrators.

These violent events have been defined in public and academic discussion as terrorist attacks, lone actor terrorism, school shootings, mass shootings, and so on. The difficulty with research on mass murder incidents is that the definition of what constitutes a mass murder shifts (Gill et al., 2016). Terrorism has been defined as violence that is committed usually against civilians to achieve political goals and behavioral change by creating fear among large numbers of people (Doosje et al., 2016). The aim of terrorism is to intimidate a certain audience, and sometimes many audiences, and the victims are chosen because of their symbolic meaning (Klausen, 2015).

Terrorist offenses can be conducted by groups of people, often referred to as "cells," or by lone actors. The term "lone actor" is used to refer to individuals who use terrorist tactics to achieve their ideological goals, but the term is contested and there is, for example, no common definition of what type of behavior lone actors demonstrate (Liem et al., 2017). The lone actor category also has been criticized lately; for example, Schuurman et al. (2019) found that for many solo attackers, social ties have influenced their actions greatly and that lone actors who are truly lone are uncommon. Additionally, Weimann (2012) has made the following argument on lone actor's online social ties: "They may operate alone, but they are recruited, radicalized, taught, trained and directed by others" (pp. 78–79). Acts of terrorism committed by lone actors is seen as a major national security threat in Europe and North America (Meloy & Gill, 2016).

There are also categorizations of different subgroups. For example, Sporer et al. (2019) divided people who were inspired by ISIS to different subgroups; to foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria, to individuals who are radicalized from their homes and conduct lone actor attacks and to "soft sympathizers," people who

spread ISIS's message using social media. In recent years, Al-Qaida and ISIS have become the most notorious terrorist organizations, and ISIS's impact has been seen not only in terrorist attacks, but also in the phenomenon of foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq to construct a caliphate.[1]

Different categories of violence often have blurred lines and tend to overlap. Nonetheless, scholars have categorized and made clear-cut distinctions between attack types, even though these categorizations are often oversimplified (Sandberg et al., 2014). Recent research has begun to question this type of categorization. For example, by analyzing incidents in Germany in the past 10 years, Böckler et al. (2018) found that the boundaries between terrorist attacks and targeted attacks on schools have started to become indistinct. Furthermore, Sandberg et al. (2014) reported that the attack on Utøya island in Norway closely resembled school shootings, even though the perpetrator did not mention school shootings at all in his manifesto. Moreover, in their research, Newman et al. (2004) found that school shootings and workplace shootings have some profound similarities: "They represent the tips of similar icebergs, where those who feel ostracized, marginalized, and threatened with emasculation react with murderous violence" (p. 58).

Sandberg et al. (2014) argued that nowadays, the cultural script of school shootings is one of the many cultural resources that influence mass murders, moving the script's impact away from the realm of schools. The foiled Valentine Day's plot in the Canadian shopping center, which was inspired by the Columbine shooting, supports this argument. The form and means of the violence within a defined category also are not stable. According to Sunde et al. (2020), in recent jihadi attacks, the background and modus operandi have resembled more closely violence that is not political, such as violence in mass killings and gang violence. In addition, even though school shootings traditionally have been seen as nonpolitical, school shootings inevitably are not that different from violence that is political—at least from the perpetrator's point of view (Malkki, 2014).

The academic research also has been divided based on these categories, especially in that school shooting research seldom discusses terrorism and school shootings together. There are also only a few empirical studies comparing school attacks and lone actor terrorism (Böckler et al., 2018). In terrorism research, school shootings sometimes have been seen as part of the lone actor category and sometimes the targeted violence category. However, school shootings have received very little

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[1] ISIS, an acronym for "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," also is called IS and ISIL, and different researchers use different acronyms. For the clarity of the text, the organization will be called ISIS throughout this dissertation.

attention in terrorism research (Malkki, 2014). Thus, research on these two areas—terrorism and school shootings—has been separate for the most part. School shooting research has focused mainly on social factors, such as the community where the attack took place (see, e.g., Heitmeyer et al., 2013; Oksanen et al., 2013) and the perpetrators' psychological profiles (see, e.g., Ferguson et al., 2011). Malkki (2014) has pondered, for example,

> Can it be that the political elements in the shootings have been downplayed and ignored in the aftermath of the shootings? Maybe the strong focus on the mental health and peer relation issues has overshadowed other aspects of this phenomenon? (p. 186)

Terrorism research has focused more on the perpetrators' radicalization process, which in the school shooting context is not really discussed at all. In the terrorism context, there are different risk assessment methods for practitioners to evaluate the risk for violent extremism (Sarma, 2017). In school shooting research, risk assessments seldom are discussed, and the methods developed are threat assessments and procedures to help school staff when a student makes a threat (for more on the use of these methods, see, e.g., Cornell et al., 2012; Goodrum et al., 2018).

The main reason school shooting research has bypassed the findings of terrorism research might be the connection usually made between terrorism, politics, and religion. However, religion can have a smaller effect than thought (Aly & Striegher, 2012), and politics and religion are sometimes present in school shootings. For example, the Virginia Tech shooter compared himself to Jesus in his manifesto, saying, "Thanks to you, I die, like Jesus Christ to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenceless people" (as cited in Langman, 2014a, p. 1). According to Böckler et al. (2018), who have studied school shootings and lone actor terrorist attacks in Germany,

> Using theoretical coding and constant case comparison, the contribution shows that the two phenomena have overlaps in which developmental processes and social mechanisms are similar. Both school attackers and Jihadi attackers frame their act of violence using cultural scripts and perform the attack on a public stage where victims are attacked not on the basis of personal conflicts but because of their symbolic meaning. Taking into account the similarities in the perpetrators' developmental pathways, the authors propose that it might be more fruitful from

an operational perspective to discuss severe target school violence and terrorist attacks under a common concept of demonstrative violence than to artificially assign them to exclusive classes of violence. (p. 5)

The definition is not always clear-cut in jurisprudence either. The attack at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, in the United States was motivated by White supremacist ideology, but the attack was not labeled terrorism by the government (Norris, 2017). However, even crimes labeled terrorism are treated differently by the media. According to Kearns et al. (2019), the perpetrators' religion—Islam, in particular—is the largest predictor of how much news coverage an attack receives. Similarly, school shooting research has found that race is an issue in media portrayals of school shootings. Park et al. (2012) found that in media reports on the Virginia Tech school shooting, one third of newspaper articles had information on the perpetrator's race. Not all mass murders receive the same attention, though, as policy discussions, political discourse, and subsequent actions are more common after school shootings and lone-wolf terrorist shootings than other types of public mass shootings (Silva & Capellan, 2018).

There are also themes that have been studied in depth in school shooting research but not in terrorism research. One of these themes is violent masculinity and its effects on school shootings (see, e.g., Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Klein, 2006, 2012). According to Kimmel and Mahler (2003), most school shooters have been bullied, have had their masculinity questioned, and have been teased as being gay. This type of behavior in schools is due to larger social demands and gender pressures in society (Klein, 2012). Considering that most terrorist offenders are male, it is surprising that this theme has received so little attention in terrorism research. In terrorism research, gender-related discussions seem to be focused mostly on the female gender and women's roles in jihad (see, e.g., Nuraniyah, 2018; Pearson, 2015). Even though most of the terrorists in Europe are men (Globsec, 2019), the gendered approach to radicalization focuses primarily on women (Pauwels, 2019). However, this view might be changing, as, for example, Pearson (2018) argued, "Analysis of masculinity is important to understanding male and female extremism. Current narratives on masculinity, including 'toxic masculinity' and a 'crisis of masculinity', are key in discussions of extremism" (p. 3).

Another theme that has caused different amounts of discussion in terrorism and school shooting research is violent extremism. The term is used frequently in the context of terrorism research but seldom in school shooting research. Violent extremism often is defined as committing or supporting violence to achieve goals

that are political, religious, ideological, or social (United States Government Accountability Office, 2017). Under "violent extremism," the United States Government Accountability Office (2017) listed acts of anti-government extremists, radical Islamist extremists, White supremacists, and other ideologically inspired domestic violent extremists. The report did not list school shootings under violent extremism but referred to a plan that listed school shootings as similar phenomena to single actor terrorism.

It should be noted that research on violent acts that seldom happen is difficult. There are methodological issues to be considered, as there are few cases, and they have many potential causes (Sandberg et al., 2014). Monahan (2017) also wrote that in the United States, researchers' requests to interview terrorist prisoners have been refused by officials, and thus academic research is based mainly on secondary information. If there is a chance of interviewing a terrorist, the individual might not be able to explain his reasons profoundly (Aly & Striegher, 2012). In addition to this, smart terrorist groups follow academic research and are thus able to take counterintelligence measures (Dean & Pettet, 2017).

1.2 RADICALIZATION TOWARD EXTREMIST VIOLENCE

The term "violent radicalization" is used to describe the process that leads to violent extremism. Violent radicalization has been researched in terrorism studies in depth in the last 2 decades. Doosje et al. (2016) defined radicalization as "a process through which people become increasingly motivated to use violent means against members of an out-group or symbolic targets to achieve behavioral change and political goals" (p. 79). The research has developed from seeing radicalization as a forward-leading stairway model (see Moghaddam, 2005) to understanding it as dynamic and individual process (see, e.g., Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

Violent radicalization differs from nonviolent radicalization through the violence in which the process culminates. Nonviolent radicalization is common in society and can be the basis for societal changes seen as positive (Sarma, 2017). Furthermore, even though many people have radical opinions and may sympathize with violent action, only very few of them act violently according to these opinions (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014). However, even though one might not use violence, they might support a terrorist organization in other ways (for more on recruitment and different roles, see, e.g., Windisch et al., 2018).

Today, there are different models describing violent radicalization, but many of these explanations are similar. Most theories focus on how the individual level, social contacts, and the societal level affect radicalization. Some studies have described these as the microlevel, mesolevel, and macrolevel. According to Doosje et al. (2016), the microlevel includes factors within a person that may influence the process of radicalization, such as personal uncertainty and feelings of insignificance, and the mesolevel includes a social environment that supports violent extremism and a perceived understanding that an individual's peer group is being mistreated in society. The macrolevel encompasses large societal factors, such as perceived worldwide threats (Doosje et al., 2016).

Hafez and Mullins' (2015) theory on radicalization uses similar divisions, even though the terms are different. According to Hafez and Mullins, violent radicalization can be seen as a puzzle comprised of a combination of networks, ideologies, and grievances and enabling support structures and environments. McCauley and Moskalenko's (2011) theory on radicalization is similar. According to their findings, there are six mechanisms of radicalization: group grievances, personal grievances, risk and status, love, freezing, and slippery slope. Likewise, Monahan (2017) identified that five risk factors—ideology, affiliations, grievances, moral emotions, and identities—have promise as terrorism risk factors.

Thus, altogether, even though there are some differences in current theories on violent radicalization, the theories have more similarities than differences. What is commonly understood today is that the process of radicalization to violent action is complex and dynamic, as it is impacted by many factors on different levels. Because of the complexity and dynamicity of the radicalization process, there is no common profile for violent extremists, as these factors are combined in a unique way in every individual. Because researchers have found common mechanisms of radicalization, they have been able to develop risk assessment methods to assess the risk level of individuals in the context of violent extremism. According to the Radicalization Awareness Network (2017), risk assessment has been divided to three different basic models:

1. Professional judgment involving risk predictions based solely on the professional's experience and knowledge of the individual being assessed;
2. Actuarial tools based on checklists of risk indicators, using a formula which results in an overall risk prediction (e.g., high, medium, or low risk);
3. Structured professional judgment (SPJ), which combines both approaches (professional and actuarial) to guide the process systematically, identifying risks

and evaluating the individual in context. In this SPJ model, assessment is based on both the presence and relevance of risk factors for the individual concerned. (Radicalization Awareness Network, 2017, p. 29)

The risk assessment methods used today, such as extremism risk guidelines (ERG+22), Structured Assessment of Violent Extremism (SAVE), Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP), and Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA), are based on the same research on terrorism and extremism, use similar indicators, and are based on SPJ (Dean & Pettet, 2017). These tools work with indicator lists, such as context and intent, beliefs and attitudes, commitment and motivation, history and capabilities, and protective circumstances (Radicalization Awareness Network, 2017).

Assessing risk factors for terrorism and extremism is still in its early stages (Dean & Pettet, 2017), and very few risk assessment methods today have been verified or tested for effectiveness (Radicalization Awareness Network, 2017). Gill et al. (2016) also noted, "The results highlight the need for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to consistently update their threat and risk assessment protocols because some factors that underpin risk may be dynamic in nature" (p. 171).

1.3 SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Different studies have used various terms to describe and define incidents in which multiple people are killed intentionally in educational institutions (Böckler et al., 2013). Different definitions for school shootings have, for example, affected the figures on the school shooting cases reported (Robertz, 2013). As school shootings do not have official criteria, it is up to researchers to define the types of incidents they include in their research; for example, some researchers use a minimum number of victims or the use of a firearm in the attack in their definition (Böckler et al., 2013). Newman et al. (2004) defined a school shooting, or rampage school shooting as they called it, as an incident that occurs at a school-related public place in front of an audience and is conducted by one or more shooters who are current or former students of the school, and the attack involves multiple victims, including people being shot at random or due to their symbolic meaning. Larkin (2009) used his definition to differentiate school shootings from other violence that takes place in school areas, such as gang-related violence, school invasions, and incidents in which a student takes a gun to school without any intention to shoot anyone.

To underline the problem with the classification of school shootings, Langman (2013) argued that it is misleading to discuss rampage school shootings as if they would all constitute a single phenomenon because the perpetrators, their reasons for the attack, and the methods they use differ. Using the location of schools as indicators is also not clear-cut, as, for example, in the United States, a crime legally is considered a crime in school when it takes place while a student is traveling from or to school or participating in a school-sponsored event (Bondü et al., 2011).

In addition to the current wide range of definitions, the rarity of school shootings in general makes them difficult to study using survey and observational methods as they have low prevalence (Wike & Fraser, 2009). Moreover, some differences have been found when comparing school shootings in and outside the United States. According to Madfis and Levin (2013), in international school shootings, the perpetrators were older than those in American school shootings, half were former students, none acted in homicidal partnership, and more of them explicitly targeted school staff. There also have been many cases outside the United States in which the perpetrator did not have access to firearms and used other attack methods, such as explosives or knives (Böckler et al., 2013). Similarities are also present. In the United States, school shootings often take place in small towns and suburbs that are predominantly White and upper or middle class (Klein, 2012). This is similar to school shootings outside the United States, as most of them have taken place in villages or small towns (Madfis & Levin, 2013).

School shootings do not form homogenous groups, and different types of school shootings and school shooters can be distinguished, as a number of causes and a complex interaction of risk factors are behind the attacks (Bondü & Scheithauer, 2012). School shooters come from different backgrounds and vary in their mental health status; for example, some are suicidal and plan to die during the attack, some plan their escape, and some kill family members in addition to attacking the school (Langman, 2013).

Most school shooters have been male (Langman, 2013; Madfis & Levin, 2013). Due to the shooters' gender imbalance, many researchers have focused on understanding how masculinity and gender performance influence school shootings. For example, Kellner (2012) argued that even though school shooters may have different motivations, they share crises in masculinity, create ultramasculine identities with guns and violence, and aim to gain fame and celebrity from the massacre. Klein (2006) also claimed that behind school shooting in the United States are ideas of masculinity, which expect boys to display dominance, aggression, and violence to achieve status in a masculine hierarchy.

According to Newman et al. (2004, pp. 229–230), there are five conditions for a school shooting to happen that are necessary but not sufficient. First, the perpetrator sees himself as being extremely marginal in social contexts that are important to him. Second, the perpetrator has psychosocial problems—such as severe depression—that magnify the feeling of marginality. Third, there is a cultural script available for the perpetrator that provides a school shooting model. Fourth, there is failure in the surveillance system for identifying teens who have problems. Fifth, the perpetrator has access to guns. Thus, according to Newman et al. (2004), school shootings are caused by a combination of factors and cannot be explained by single causes.

These findings are similar to those of other research. Madfis and Levin (2013) also found five stages that are necessary but not sufficient for a school shooting to happen. These stages work cumulatively, and none of the stages by itself is seen as a cause for school shootings. These stages are chronic strain, uncontrolled strain, acute strain, the planning stage, and finally massacre in the school. The chronic strain consists of persistent and long-term problems in an individual's life. Sometimes, school shooters' homelife and school relationships are characterized by frustrating and stressful conditions, such as long-term bullying in school. Uncontrolled strain means the student is being rejected or ignored by peers in a small community and has no alternative social outlets outside school. Acute strains refers to incidents that one perceives as catastrophic, such as a rejection by a girlfriend, and that work as a catalyst. In the planning stage, the prospective perpetrator plans the attack, for example, deciding on weapons and preparing the logistics.

School shooters are impacted by a cultural script of school shootings, which prescribes behavior, provides a model for how to solve problems with a school shooting, and links masculinity with violence (Newman et al., 2004). However, the script is not stable, as the shooters construct it, edit it, and re-edit it through their actions (Sandberg et al., 2014). New school shootings thus change and strengthen the script. The way school shootings are portrayed in the media and in social media also affects the perceptions of school shootings. Information in the media on former offenses and their perpetrators have inspired school shooters and influenced how they executed their acts; thus, in addition to previous shooters, fictional characters from the media also have a similar effect (Bondü & Scheithauer, 2012). The spread of school shootings also can be seen as part of a wider movement of ideas globally. Similar to the way they adopt American popular culture and consumer products, such as Coca-Cola, dissatisfied individuals outside the United States have been inspired by highly publicized American mass murders (Madfis & Levin, 2013).

More than other forms of youth violence, rampage school shootings resemble other rampage shootings, particularly mass murders (Moore et al., 2003). School shootings especially resemble workplace homicides, in which a current or former employee attacks their colleagues or superiors; just like in school shootings, workplace attackers are targeting not only individuals but also an institution, and the perpetrators often suffer from marginalization (Newman et al., 2004). Klein (2012), however, argued that there are similarities between school shootings and other forms of violence taking place in schools. Based on her research, the same patterns are present in school shootings and everyday bullying violence due to the social demands and destructive gender pressures created by the larger culture. Klein thus argued that almost all school shooters had reacted violently to their school's oppressive social hierarchies. Somewhat similarly, Henry (2009) saw school shootings as part of a continuum of violence in schools:

> School violence is a broad phenomenon with multiple manifest forms that together compose a continuum of violence. The explosive violence that grabs media attention, such as rampage shootings, is at one end of this continuum but is itself the outcome of many subprocesses of violence, which are contributing causes that occur over time in relation to students and the school in its social, political, and cultural setting. The culmination of these processes can produce a crescendo outcome or remain in less violent forms. The problem with analyzing school violence is that we often separate it into types and subtypes of school violence in attempts to explain each, without recognizing the cumulative interrelations and interaction between them. However, research on violence toward children and youth has demonstrated that those who are subject to violence themselves become violent. (pp. 1250–1251)

However, in general, the discussion related to school shootings seems to differentiate school shootings from more common school violence, and explaining school shootings narrow-mindedly in conjunction with school bullying has been criticized. For example, Madfis and Levin (2013) emphasized that most rejected and bullied young people do not commit a massacre. The same is argued by other researchers who have found that though some school shooters have suffered bullying, the bullying itself does not explain the shootings (e.g., Newman et al., 2004), and a broader focus on understanding and preventing school shootings is needed (Mears et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, even though bullying experiences do not explain school shootings, the theme of bullying might still be connected to school shootings, especially in the online setting. To bullied adolescents with psychological problems that aggravate the seriousness of their bullying experiences, school shooters may seem like rebels (Lindberg et al., 2012). The theme of bullying comes up in the findings of Böckler and Seeger (2013), who have studied school shooting fans through online interviews and surveys. According to Böckler and Seeger, school shooting fans' interest in these massacres and their perpetrators is fed by their own negative social experiences, such as victimization and exclusion. Additionally, according to data from a study by Lindberg et al. (2012) on school shooting threats in Finland, there are differences between the threateners based on whether they make their threats online or offline. According to Lindberg et al. (2012), young people who made a school shooting threat online had reported more bullying experiences and depression, did not have prior delinquency, had threatened others more often with clear intention, and had already made some preparations for the attack. The adolescents who made a threat offline, on the other hand, more often had a history of delinquency and problems with impulse control (Lindberg et al., 2012).

School shootings take place in public places, and victims of these attacks usually seem to be targets of the violence simply due to bad luck, which creates a perception that participation in social activities and events is not safe and predictable (Larkin, 2018). Even though school shootings seldom occur, images of the attacks and meanings attached to them spread around the world (Muschert & Sumiala, 2012). Usually, school shooters intend to take as many victims as possible and to kill more people than previous school shooters have. The more people the perpetrators kill, the more publicity their attacks receive (Newman et al., 2004).

When researchers and journalists describe the school shooting phenomenon, they often start with the Columbine school shooting, which occurred in 1999 in the United States. The Columbine massacre widely influenced subsequent school shootings (Larkin, 2009). Even though years have passed and many deadlier massacres have taken place, Columbine is still the most significant school shooting. The Columbine massacre was not the first school shooting, but it changed how school shootings are seen. For example, Webber (2017) said, "Each new shooting that achieves mediated status adds to or improves upon the script created at Columbine" (p. 25). The Columbine shooting's influence on later school shootings is evident. The two perpetrators framed their act as political, arguing it was done in the name of oppressed students (Larkin, 2009). They videotaped themselves talking about the upcoming massacre, and one of the two said they would "kick-start a

revolution" of the dispossessed (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). These tapes, often referred to as "the basement tapes," were shown exclusively to media in a one-time-only presentation (Larkin, 2009). However, other material the perpetrators produced is openly available online, as are other materials related to the attack, such as a picture taken of the perpetrators after their suicides. As the material related to Columbine is so widely available online, it has been easy for other people interested in the case to immerse themselves in it. However, this behavior is not limited to the Columbine shooting. School shootings are extremely mediatized and have become a global cultural phenomena (Muschert & Sumiala, 2012).

1.4 VIOLENT RADICALIZATION OF SCHOOL SHOOTERS

Little school shooting research has discussed the radicalization of school shooters in a systematic way. Some research, however, has developed models that resemble terrorism researchers' discussions of the radicalization process. When the term "radicalization" is used, its meaning in the context usually is not defined, though some studies refer to it. For example, Heitmeyer et al. (2013) described the radicalization of the Columbine school shooters as such:

> As the two shooters developed fantasies of superiority (nonetheless socially acceptable) they were at the same time forced to realize that they were not receiving recognition. Rather, they were ignored, and so they secretly radicalized their attitude to their lives over a lengthy period. Their hatred erupted into violence directed primarily against students with particularly high recognition levels (athletes), but also against students who were especially despised (Hispanics). (p. 45)

The reason for the infrequent use of the term "radicalization" in school shooting studies might be the age of the term. The term "radicalization" has been used widely only since 2005 regarding "homegrown" terrorists in Western Europe (Sedgwick, 2010). Furthermore, the term "radicalization" usually is connected to religion and politics (see, e.g., Moghaddam, 2005), even though motives that are nonpolitical also can lead a person to commit terrorist violence (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014), and religion plays a smaller role in the radicalization to violent extremism than often thought (Aly & Striegher, 2012).

The focus school shooting research often takes is similar to how criminology traditionally determines reasons for crimes. Criminology often focuses on the background factors of crime, such as poor supervision by perpetrators' parents, low self-control and association with peers who are delinquent, and situational factors such as the presence of targets that are attractive, the absence of guardians who are capable, and others' provocation (Agnew, 2006). School shooting research seldom has discussed the perpetrators' ideologies or attitudes, even though some researchers have focused on the individual level of school shooters, as Madfis and Levin's (2013) did with their model on strains. Sometimes, school shooting research has gone to the point where the perpetrators almost were victimized. For example, Heitmeyer et al. (2013) wrote:

> Thus the primary and essential priority is to improve recognition and the general climate in the student body and among the teaching staff of schools and colleges. As a fundamental prerequisite, it is necessary to strive for a new *culture of recognition* and mutual watchfulness both in schools and in the general social context. Such a culture would prevent adolescents from experiencing social disintegration, losing control over their own lives, and taking refuge in extreme violence as an escape from their dramatic situation in order to achieve an illusory immortality. (p. 52)

For school shooters, the killings constitute a final moment to assert power in a failed and disastrous existence, and the planning of the event is thus in their interest (Madfis & Levin, 2013). However, the idea of a mass murderer acting in a sudden explosion of rage is persistent, at least in the public's mind (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). The planning of an attack is often a long process, and the common idea of mass murderers as madmen who snap is a misconception in cases where the perpetrator is not suffering from hallucinations or psychotic delusions (Madfis & Levin, 2013). School shooters often leak their violent intentions beforehand (Silver et al., 2018), which might be partly due to the lengthy planning period. Because the perpetrators seem to shift toward an attack through different phases, radicalization also could be discussed in the context of school shootings.

Even though there has been major public pressure to prevent future attacks using profiling to identify school shooters in advance (Ferguson et al., 2011), few threat assessment methods have been developed in school shooting research. The interest in developing and redeveloping assessment methods has been much less in school shooting research than in terrorism research. In addition, the focus in school

shooting research seems to be more on the development of processes for schools to handle threats made, not in developing assessment methods based on SPJ for the risk assessment of an individual. However, the importance of being able to assess a threat of a school shooting is understood (see, e.g., Goodrum et al., 2018). According to Cornell (2003), threat assessment has many advantages compared to other methods used to prevent school shootings. Cornell found that unlike zero tolerance, threat assessment takes into account the context of the threat and the way school responses is based on the actual danger the student poses.

There are some methods developed for assessing a school shooting threat. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (1999) developed a four-pronged assessment model method for assessing the risk of those students who have made a threat; the areas assessed in this method include the personality of the student, the family dynamics, the social dynamics, and the school's dynamics and the student's role in those dynamics. The aim of this method is to assess all areas of the student's life to determine whether the student will carry out the threat (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999).

Another threat assessment method, the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, provides steps to be taken when a student makes a threat (Cornell, 2003). Furthermore, the United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education (2004) have collaborated to develop a guide for managing threatening situations in schools and creating a safe school climate. The guide distinguishes between a threat assessment inquiry and a threat assessment investigation, which are planned to work in a continuum. The process starts with an inquiry, which is made by a school threat assessment team, and proceeds to an investigation conducted by law enforcement officials if the inquiry points to a valid threat of targeted school violence. The guide does not include any indicators for the threat assessment but provides advice on what type of information should be gathered and key questions to focus on regarding different areas. In addition to these, checklists have been developed to identify warning signs of youth violence (Verlinden et al., 2000).

School shooting research often points out the dangers that false positives in the conduction of a threat assessment might have on students' lives (Ferguson et al., 2011; Verlinden et al., 2000). However, the problem is also that school personnel do not dare underreact to a threat that seems serious (Cornell et al., 2012). At the same time, research has shown that students may receive harsher discipline from the school when there is no method to assess the threat. According to Cornell et al. (2012), "A threat assessment approach would permit school authorities to make reasonable judgments when it is evident that a student's behavior does not constitute

a serious threat of violence" (p. 101). Goodrum et al.'s (2018) research also found that the proper implementation of a threat assessment method is the key to its being successful. However, these threat assessment methods also have been criticized. According to Ferguson et al. (2011), for example, the FBI's threat assessment method for school shooters "mixed together a certain degree of empirically valid information, common sense, and nonsense" (p. 145).

2 ONLINE LIFE AND MASS VIOLENCE

2.1 RADICALIZATION ONLINE

The internet and social media play significant parts in most people's lives today. They communicate with friends using online instant messengers and social media pages, read news and search for information on issues they are interested in, and purchase items online. However, the internet is also influencing mass violence in numerous ways. Terrorist organizations, especially ISIS, have used the internet to spread propaganda and recruit new members (Greenberg, 2016; Speckhard et al., 2018), and for many lone actors, the internet is central to their radicalization (Weimann, 2012). The internet and dark web, meaning the part of the web that is accessible only through special software, contain a large amount of terroristic material (Weimann, 2016). The internet makes acquiring considerable knowledge on different groups, discourses, and strategies related to terrorist acts possible, thus making online sites portals through which individuals can become part of groups, form new groups, and become self-taught terrorists (Vertigans, 2011). Social media is used to develop social support networks, which format a collective identity and have effects beyond the online world (Holt et al., 2015). Hawdon (2017) hypothesized that "social media may be amplifying extremist ideologies and leading to more involvement in extremist causes." Thus, there is an increasing concern among many scholars, politicians and members of the public, that violent extremist material online and its easy availability impact violent radicalization (Conway, 2017).

Different social media sites share real footage of and material on violent extremist events (Keipi et al., 2017). However, in the context of terrorism, Vertigans (2011) has argued that individuals usually do not become terrorists just by visiting militant webpages. According to Vertigans, prior to spending time on these pages, people already have an interest in the subject, as they have been actively searching for the images and information online and thus already have been shifting toward radical ideology.

The internet has been used methodically by terrorist organizations to achieve their agenda. Terrorist organizations have distributed their ideology and propaganda, and recruited new members online (Speckhard et al., 2018), using social media platforms such as Twitter to do so (Sporer et al., 2019). Terrorist organizations can groom and manipulate potential recruits online (Vertigans, 2011). ISIS especially started using social media in a new, sophisticated way; the organization's communication strategy portrayed the restoration of the caliphate as every Muslim's religious duty and used and distributed powerful images intended to impact viewers' emotions (Farwell, 2014). ISIS began its online campaign in 2014, and part of it was aimed directly at young Western people to recruit them to become jihadists by using different grooming techniques, such as comparing jihad with the popular video game Call of Duty (Shaban, 2020). The recruitment was intense, as it was done every hour of the day in over 20 languages, and even though ISIS lost the caliphate, it remains online and operates from there (Speckhard et al., 2018). The use of the internet in recruiting and distributing propaganda is nothing new, as other terrorist organizations, such as Al-Shabaab, have also used it to their advantage (Farwell. 2014). However, ISIS's recruitment differs from other organizations in the past in its sophistication and the use of individuals' weaknesses as an advantage. Speckhard et al. (2018) described the recruiting process of ISIS recruiters online:

> When anyone retweets, likes, or endorses their materials, ISIS cadres swarm in and try to seduce such individuals into the group. During the course of conversation aimed at grooming for recruitment, ISIS recruiters find what is missing or hurting in the lives of those they target. Then, they offer quick fixes, such as promises of dignity, purpose, significance, salary, sexual rewards, marriage, adventures, travel, escape from problems, and promises of an important role in building the "utopian Caliphate." They use whatever it takes and works to sway their target into beginning to serve the group's goals. Today's jihadi recruiters need only a computer and Internet connection to recruit, inspire, and direct terrorist attacks—even continents away.

In addition to becoming radicalized through direct recruitment, individuals can become radicalized online by immersing themselves in the extremist material they find. For instance, for many Muslim youths, radical material in extremist websites and in YouTube videos has impacted their radicalization (Ben-Israel, 2018). The internet influences not only the perpetrators' ideologies, but also the planning of their attacks. It allows lone actors to find material—such as bomb-making

tutorials—that enables them to carry out more advanced and lethal actions (Cohen et al., 2013).

Perpetrators with different ideologies and attack types have used the internet systematically prior to their attacks to spread their opinions and perceptions and to maximize their publicity. For example, a White supremacist attacker in a Holocaust museum in 2009 had expressed his anti-Semitic ideology online prior to the attack (Cohen et al., 2013). With school shootings, online postings prior to the attack are so common that they can be seen as part of the attack blueprint. For example, the photos and videos many of the perpetrators have taken of themselves are almost identical (Paton, 2012).

The internet also has been used as part of the massacre through live-streaming and live updates on social media. Using this technology allows the attacker to spread fear and their ideology and to maximize the attack's impact on a global scale. The use of the internet as part of a massacre was seen vividly in the 2019 massacres in New Zealand, as the perpetrator livestreamed his killings. Even though the video was removed quickly from different social media platforms, it instantly started circulating globally as people viewed, downloaded, and shared it (Warzel, 2019). In addition, the attacker in Thailand in 2020 updated his Facebook account while conducting the attack, and before the attack, he had posted an image of a pistol and bullets with the words "it is time to get excited" and "nobody can avoid death" (BBC, 2020).

With school shooters, online extremist content and communication with like-minded people can be even more significant to the radicalization process. Unlike in a religious or politically motivated ideology, individuals interested in a school shooting theme are very unlikely to meet offline in their natural, day-to-day lives. This can, of course, sometimes happen, as the Columbine attack showed. In general, however, the internet is vital to school shootings, as it is traditionally used by school shooters as part of their actions. The perpetrators of the Columbine massacre were the first school shooters to post information online, and since then, many have followed suit (Oksanen et al., 2014). For example, according to the findings of Finland's Ministry of Justice (2009), in the last days before his attack, the Jokela school shooter participated actively in conversations in an online community related to the Columbine shootings, even showing a picture of his gun, and on the morning of his attack, he uploaded a video to YouTube of the school building and a picture of himself pointing a gun toward the camera. He also wrote on a website dedicated to school shooters that history would be made that day (Ministry of Justice, 2009).

Even though school-shooting-related online activity seems to be common for school shooters, there is a lack of research focused on understanding what kind of impact the online world has had on school shooters' behavior. As school shootings are media spectacles, school shooters' postings leave a lasting mark on social media, and most of the material they have posted can still be found online (Oksanen et al., 2014). Thus, it is highly likely they have importance for the school shooters who follow. However, the research done so far on school shooters' online behavior has been focused mainly on single cases. For example, Kiilakoski and Oksanen (2011a) concentrated on the Finnish school shooters in the Jokela and Kauhajoki massacres and their usage of the internet.

The way attacks are discussed and commented about online also holds meaning for future attacks. According to Sporer et al. (2019), the "soft sympathizers" of ISIS spread the terrorist organization's message and propaganda on social media, aim to normalize their actions and have them accepted by the masses, and provide ideological justification for the organization's violence. Sporer et al. (2019) researched ISIS's soft sympathizers' tweets in the 24 hr after terrorist attacks in Paris and Nice, France, and Orlando, Florida, in the United States. According to Sporer et al. (2019), the sympathizers used a neutralization technique to condemn the people condemning the attacks: First, the sympathizers argued that the violence used by the condemners' countries is equal to, or bigger than, the violence used by ISIS; second, they said that people in the Western countries are only compassionate for victims who are Westerners and they do not care about civilian casualties in the Middle East; and third, the soft sympathizers compared the lack of empathy for and solidarity with Middle Eastern Muslims with the empathy for non-Muslim victims in the West. Thus, Sporer et al. (2019) argued that opinions broadcasted online—in this case, on Twitter—can amplify messages and exacerbate biases, making Twitter a battleground for competing perceptions.

2.2 DARK ONLINE FANDOMS

For devout followers, the internet provides vast amounts of information and a platform on which to create and share material (Guschwan, 2016). With social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, one can also find like-minded individuals easily (Keipi et al., 2017; Oksanen et al., 2014). This occurs on a global scale, as people around the world build relationships, share knowledge, and connect with communities online, making digital information a key part of globalization

(Guschwan, 2016). Studies on fans have contributed to research on understanding community, identity, and the concept of text, and as contemporary mass culture saturates people's lives, research on fandoms is one way to understand today's digital culture (Booth, 2010). The new digital formats have made audiences creative producers, and they now co-create meaning with formal producers (Guschwan, 2016).

Interaction between the likeminded often takes the form of online groups and fandoms. "Fandom" is an acronym for "fanatic domain," which is a subculture created and formed by fans of the same topics (Rahayu & Rahman, 2019). Fans are individuals who are enraptured by a particular media object (Booth, 2010). Fandoms are called "dark" when the fans' interests lie in people who have conducted heinous violent acts (Broll, 2019). Although there is long-standing research on different types of fandoms, fans of dark interests have received less focus. Instead of focusing on understanding the potential social relevance and the insights these communities can give, scholars have often overlooked or ignored them (Rico, 2015). However, understanding dark fandoms is important, especially because being a fan has profound impacts on one's identity. Individuals base their identities on their deference for whatever they are fans of (Booth, 2010).

The importance of studying online behavior is also connected to increasing the understanding of violent radicalization. First, people who are connected socially are likely to exert influence, which can be beneficial or harmful, on each other (Oksanen et al., 2014). In addition to this, according to Meloy and Yakeley (2014), anonymity in the online world is likely to lead to increased self-disclosure, which causes more feelings of intimacy toward groups and individuals. Meloy and Yakeley also found that feelings online are as strong, or even stronger, than feelings offline. Due to the nature of these communities, people participating in them are bonded by shared interests (Keipi et al., 2017). The networks social network users create and maintain can be strong and active and can carry radical ideologies (Oksanen et al., 2014).

One example of ta dark online fandom are admirers of terrorists organizations. According to Ben-Israel (2018), ISIS fangirls have been active on Twitter and Tumblr, and the blogs on which the fangirls post are a mix of for example religion, Islamism, militaristic images, selfies, kittens, horses, and heart shapes. As Ben-Israel (2018) stated, "The softer imagery like kittens in ISIS fangirls' Tumblr accounts acts as a recurring tool used by the 'sisters,' side by side with the 'hard images' to lure young Muslim-European females to cross the lines, to also become ISIS fangirls and to immigrate to the 'Islamic State'" (p. 70).

Previous research has found that there are also different online communities focused on school shootings (see Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Broll, 2018; Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012; Rico, 2015). These online fan communities have been present, for example, on YouTube (Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012), Reddit (Broll, 2018), and Tumblr (Rico, 2015). During their data collection in 2012, Oksanen et al. (2014) identified 113 proschool-shooting profiles; out of these, 100 belonged to the same network, with Columbine school shooting fans forming the core of it. The users' profile names also reflected this, as many alluded to the names and known nicknames of the Columbine attack perpetrators (Oksanen et al., 2014). According to Oksanen et al. (2014), the fans saw the shooters as heroes and trolled memorial videos of the school shooting victims. The fans online seem to form ideas of "us" and "them," which is typical in violent radicalization (see McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011).

In an online ethnography, Paton (2012) found that fans used parts of the school shooting repertoire, such as surveillance camera sequences, shooters' self-made videos, and perpetrators' favorite music. Paton found that these materials were used repeatedly in fans' profiles and can be seen as an integral part of the culture formed around school shootings. According to Paton's analysis, these objects are cultural references that have become codes one must master to be part of the peer group and are used as signs of resistance for challenging the dominant representation of school shootings. Rico (2015) studied school shooting fans by analyzing the posts, texts, and comments on various social networking sites, such as Tumblr, Facebook, and DeviantArt. According to his findings, school shooting fans view the Columbine shooters as victims of bullying and their act of massacre as retaliation against superior athletes. Rico found that in addition to bringing forth their ideas in writing, fans also use art such as drawings and paintings. According to Rico, school shooting fans seemed to identify and empathize with the Columbine shooters.

Fan research has broadened the knowledge of the interrelationship between the media and individuals (Meyer & Tucker, 2007). As massacres are highly mediatized phenomena, there is a parallel between them and traditional media products of which people are fans. Pearson (2010) found evidence that questions the view of online fan communities as egalitarian and bottom-up associations; as with offline communities, online fandoms also have cliques, hierarchies, and conflicts. The way ISIS uses online fandom communities especially can be seen as reflecting changes in the usability of fandoms in general; in this context, ISIS appears to use its online fandoms as a means for achieving their goals (for more on ISIS fan community, see Ben-Israel, 2018). Thus, even though at first glance, school shooting fandoms and ISIS fangirls online, as described by Ben-Israel (2018), seem to resemble each other in many ways, there

is a significant difference. Behind the ISIS fandom is an organization that uses girls to its advantage by spreading its propaganda that aims to recruit new members (see Ben-Israel, 2018). The school shooting fandom and the communities built around it online seem to be self-sufficient, created by and for those deeply interested in the theme.

3 SCHOOL SHOOTINGS AND NARRATIVES IMPACTING RADICALIZATION

3.1 NARRATIVES OF SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

3.1.1 Narratives of violent crime

Besides direct victims, symbolic violence needs an audience. Violence is performative, as violence without an audience is socially meaningless, and what makes violence effective is that it stages power and legitimacy (Schröder & Schmidt, 2001). When witnessed and shared, pictures of violence become heavy with meaning, as happened with pictures of the planes hitting the Twin Towers in New York in 2001. Together with other signs, like the number combination "9/11", these pictures became globally shared symbols. With these symbols, people can tell a whole story and trust most others to share its meaning. These symbols become part of master narratives that are shared. Snajdr (2013) described master narratives and their impact accordingly:

> From an anthropological perspective, a master narrative is an over-arching cultural message as well as a framework of knowledge and action. Operating discursively through textual and other communicative technologies, a master narrative tries to "make normal" both ideology and action on the broadest and most pervasive levels and spheres of society. It becomes (or tries to become) the standard view. (p. 230)

However, as a large number of 9/11 conspiracy theories suggest, not all individuals share these narratives. Master narratives are constantly recreated, challenged, and modified (Loseke, 2007). In academic research, the narrative is a way to theorize social and psychological phenomena and is also a research method (Carless & Douglas, 2016).

Narratives—or stories—told in a society affect the way people see reality. Narratives seem to be the only way people can describe lived time, and life impacts

the narratives, and the narratives impact life (Bruner, 2004). The impact stories have on people's experiences traditionally has been well researched in social sciences and the humanities (Presser, 2016). For example, based on previous research, Carless and Douglas (2016) proposed six benefits that narratives can have for positive psychology research. They found that narratives can offer rich insight into one's lived experiences, help to understand the meaning of personal experiences, provide insight into the storyteller's path of life, let researchers to focus on both social context and personal experience, allow one to understand the embodied life of a human being, and finally call for relational engagement that is ethical.

These qualities Carless and Douglas (2016) proposed can be broadened to other research areas besides positive psychology. Narrative analysis is about investigating the story itself, and it can be used to study disruptions in one's life to macrolevel phenomena (Riessman, 2000). In recent years, researchers have started to focus on how narratives' being told impacts criminal behavior, and a new area of narrative criminology has been developed. Narrative criminology focuses on how stories, especially the ones told of the self, influence criminal and other behaviors that can be seen as harmful (Presser, 2016). In narrative criminology stories are seen as dynamic and interactional, as their meaning varies depending on who tells the story, to whom, when, where, how, and for what purposes (Tutenges, 2019). Narrative criminology "seeks to explain crime and other harmful action as a function of the stories that actors and bystanders tell about themselves" (Presser, 2012, p. 5). Narratives can be seen especially important in violence where the perpetrator wants to send a message with his actions, as in terrorism, school shootings, or massacres conducted by lone actors. For example, ISIS uses stories to construct identity and meaning for its actions (Presser & Sandberg, 2014). According to Malkki (2014), both school shootings and terrorist attacks use symbolic violence and aim to send a message to a wider audience than those immediately affected.

Narratives have been divided into master narratives and personal narratives. A master narrative is "a totalizing schema, which orders and explains reality, experience, and knowledge" (Yu, 2010, p. 1). Sometimes master narratives are called big or collective narratives (see Rowe et al., 2002), grand narratives and metanarratives (Yu, 2010). The term "master narrative," however, seems to be more established (see, e.g., Smith & Dougherty, 2012; Snajdr, 2013; Thommesen, 2010; Yu, 2010).

In addition to the master narratives circulated in a society, people also are impacted by the stories they tell about themselves, as these have, for example, an effect on the way people see themselves as part of the society. These stories are called

personal narratives (see, e.g., Rowe et al., 2002). Individuals position themselves in their personal narratives, for example, by describing themselves as victims or agentic beings, and this positioning signifies the performance of identity (Riessman, 2000). Loseke (2007) argued, "Narratives create identity at all levels of human social life" (p. 661). A narrative identity is an individual's internalized and evolving life story that integrates the past that is reconstructed and the future that is imagined, to give life some degree of purpose and unity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Identity is not something that one possesses, but it is made using specific cultural resources (Esteban-Guitart, 2012).

Today, more than ever, master narratives are circulated by the media. Already in 1995, Kellner argued that people live in a media culture, where television, movies, and other cultural products produce models describing, for example, what being successful is or what men are like. As school shootings are international and highly mediated events (Muschert & Sumiala 2012), school shootings cannot be understood without looking at them in the context of the media.

Personal narratives told by perpetrators of severe violence are not always explanations of reality, but they show how the perpetrators see themselves or wish others to see them. For example, the perpetrator of the attacks in Utøya, Norway, presented himself in his manifesto as outgoing and popular, even though many people who knew him in person described him as being shy and lonely (Sandberg, 2013). Furthermore, the school shooter in Jokela, Finland, had an online identity that was very different from the person he was in real life; offline, he was lonely and had problems interacting with other people, but in his online videos, he constructed a violent masculine identity, had strong political opinions, and fantasized about sexual dominance (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011b). For the attacker at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville in the Unites States in 2008, the violence was meant to characterize him as a man who is strong, bold, and fearless and whose attack was an act of heroism aimed at doing good for the country (Presser, 2012).

3.1.2 Narratives of school shootings

Kimmel and Mahler (2003) argued that to understand school shootings, one should not focus on the form of the shootings, such as questions about the perpetrators' family histories, but on the content of these acts—among others in the narratives and stories that accompany school shootings. School shooting narratives can be

divided into two types: the stories told by school shooters and the stories told of school shooters.

According to Larkin (2009), the Columbine massacre changed the messages shooters tell. Pre-Columbine school shooters seldom put their motivations into larger, political contexts. The Columbine attackers, on the other hand, framed their attack as overtly political, done in the name of students who are oppressed. By doing this, they established a new paradigm and gave a rationale and vocabulary to future school shooters. Thus, Larkin (2009) argued that the Columbine massacre influenced subsequent school shootings in multiple ways:

> First, it provided a paradigm about how to plan and execute a high-profile school rampage shooting that could be imitated. Second, it gave inspiration to subsequent rampage shooters to exact revenge for past wrongs, humiliations, and social isolation. Third, it generated a "record" of carnage that subsequent rampagers sought to exceed. Fourth, Harris and Klebold have attained mythical status in the pantheon of outcast student subcultures. They have been honored and emulated in subsequent rampage shootings and attempts. In all cases, perpetrators either admitted links with Columbine or police found evidence of Columbine influences. (p. 1314)

For many of the perpetrators, a school shooting is a masculine solution for regaining feelings of control (Madfis & Levin, 2013). Many, if not most, crave fame and recognition. Some of the perpetrators have named their desire to become famous as one their motivations for their attacks (see Larkin, 2009; Webber, 2017). For example, the Columbine attackers discussed in the tapes they recorded of themselves how directors would fight over the rights to film their story and pondered which one of two world-famous directors, Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino, would be better suited for the job (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). Neither Tarantino nor Spielberg filmed a movie based on Columbine, but others did. For example, the award-winning movie *Zero Day* was based on the Columbine shootings. Different movies, documentaries, news articles, and books have addressed school shootings.

Even though most of these items presumable have been written or filmed with no intentions of influencing the school shooting scene, they nonetheless have had an effect on it. The way the media portrays school shootings affects the next school shooters, according to Kiilakoski and Oksanen (2011b):

> School shooters have been active in re-circulating the cultural material of earlier shootings and sometimes even misinformation disseminated by the media. Writings by the shooters, media material, television shows and films have created a web of intertextual references on shootings, violence and the school context. (p. 248)

Larkin (2009) also noted that school shooters since the Columbine massacre have aimed to influence the media and not just to have been influenced by it. Moreover, the Columbine shooters planned their attack as if the massacre was a movie script, and since the Columbine attack, school shootings have become more a part of popular culture (Sandberg et al., 2014).

To understand the stories told by school shooters, one needs to focus also on the audiences to whom these stories are being told. In addition to the obvious audience—the communities that are attacked—the audiences for school shooters especially include the media, school-shooting communities, and future school shooters. For example, school shooting fans have made tribute videos to school shooters (Paton & Figeac, 2015). The Jokela school shooter wanted his actions to be remembered forever, wished to leave a permanent mark on the world, and reckoned he would gain followers (Ministry of Justice, 2009). And in his manifesto, the Emsdetten school shooter spoke directly to his imagined audience by stating,

> Before I go, I will teach you a lesson, so that nobody will ever forget me again! I want you to realize, that nobody has the right to interfere in others [sic] lives under a fascist pretext of law and religion! I want that my face will be burnt into your heads! I don't want to run away anymore! I want to contribute my part to the revolution of the outcasts!
> I want R E V E N G E ! (as cited in Langman, 2014b, p. 2)

As narrators, school shooters may also change the tone of their message depending on the audience. In a farewell message he left behind for his family, the Jokela school shooter justified the massacre as a means to make the world a better place and hoped that the circumstances would be better in the future so that people would not have to take actions such as his (Ministry of Justice, 2009). However, in the media package he posted online, he expressed contempt for ordinary people and mass society, stated his act was a form of political terrorism, and argued that he was attacking not only his school, but also the human race and all of society (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011b).

Webber (2017) discusses how in today's hyperreal mediascape it is difficult to critically distinct real people from their presentations in the media. Thus, Webber found that liking a mass murderer is similar to identifying with a fictional character in a novel. One could argue that this makes the stories told about school shooters and the stories they tell about themselves even more significant. In addition to previous school shooters, the perpetrators are influenced by popular culture, and the stories told of school shootings are relevant to the perpetrators. According to Kiilakoski and Oksanen (2011b), school shooters use music and movies to refer to previous school shooters and actively have used cultural productions in the construction of their identities. Cultural products that have become significant points of reference to school shooters are, for example, the film *Natural Born Killers* and music from the German-American industrial rock band KMFDM (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011b). Part of the script of school shootings is to use cultural products, such as music and films, to prepare for the attack (Sandberg et al. 2014). Thus, specific music and movies are being weaved into the narrative of school shootings and given new meanings in this context.

The consequences of narratives told regarding the reasons for school shootings are especially evident in the Columbine case. The explanation that circulated after the shooting was that the perpetrators were loners and bullied at school and in the shooting, they targeted the school's "jocks" for revenge; this explanation was extended to school shootings that happened afterward by the media (Mears et al., 2017). These narratives have a direct impact on future attackers, and they influence the cultural script of school shootings, as seen for example in the narratives in which the Jokela and Emsdetten school shooters framed their attacks. As Sandberg et al. (2014) argued, "Cultural scripts are narratives as acted out" (p. 282).

4 STUDY OBJECTIVES

4.1 AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of my research was three-fold. My first aim was to increase the available information on school-shooting communities online and in general to understand the fandom and deep interest in school shootings more deeply. I was interested to know how the fandom of school shootings is present online, how the members of these communities communicate with each other, and the meaning this fandom has in their lives. The second aim was to find out whether online communities are connected to school shootings and whether potential school shooters are present in these communities. The third aim of my study was to learn how people deeply interested in school shooters differ from actual school shooters.

As I immersed myself in the subject of mass violence, I also began to notice similarities between school shootings and other targeted and symbolic violence. To my surprise, these similar violent acts were studied in different fields: school shootings in school shooting research and the other targeted and symbolic violence in terrorism research. Therefore, many findings in one area of research were not discussed or used in the other area. This was especially the case with the themes of radicalization and risk assessment, both highly studied in terrorism research and nearly nonexistent in school shooting research.

As I went through my data, these views became strengthened to the point that in my last article, my coauthor and I used a theory developed in terrorism studies to analyze my school-shooting-related data. This view also affected the broader framework of my dissertation. My aim was not only to discuss school shootings related to communities online, but also to discuss them in the larger context of school shootings and online radicalization. With this, I wanted to discuss how similar the acts of school shootings and terrorism-related crimes often are, yet how far from each other the research on these two topics has become. I also argue that radicalization should be discussed more in the context of school shootings, especially regarding how the online world affects the perpetrators' radicalization process. I am not the first to acknowledge the similarities between these attack types, as there are

resent research that argues similarly (see Böckler et al., 2018; Malkki, 2014). These views are few, but I hope my research can help start a discussion on this topic.

The aim of my first article, "The Bullying–School Shooting Nexus: Bridging Master Narratives of Mass Violence With Personal Narratives of Social Exclusion" (Raitanen et al., 2017), was to understand the narratives that people deeply interested in school shootings tell about school shootings. In this article a framework of narrative criminology was used to analyze the effects these narratives had on interviewees and on how school shootings are perceived. In my second article, "Global Online Subculture Surrounding School Shootings" (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018), the focus was on understanding how the school shooting subculture is presented online. The aim of my third article, "Deep Interest in School Shootings and Online Radicalization" (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2020), was to focus on opinions of people deeply interested in school shootings, and the similarities between school shootings and terrorist attacks.

4.2 DATA COLLECTION

The data collection was divided into online ethnography and interviews conducted online. I began with online ethnography in February 2015 and ended in February 2016. However, even after this, I sometimes visited different school-shooting-related pages during the interviewing period. I had 22 interviewees, and I started the online interviews in July 2015 and finished in September 2016. I wanted to conduct a second round of interviews with the same interviewees. However, I was able to interview only seven interviewees again. These interviews were conducted between May 2016 and February 2017.

The interviews were semistructured. This meant I had set of questions that I asked everyone, but otherwise the interviews were more conversational. Some interviewees also asked questions, such as how old I was and why I wanted to research a school-shooting-related topic. I conducted all but one of the interviews by chatting in Skype. Due to one interviewee's wishes, I sent them the questions via email, and they replied to me the same way. For the recruitment of interviewees, I created a blog on Tumblr where I explained my research. Then, I started sending private messages to people who, based on their postings on social media platforms, seemed to be deeply interested in school shootings. After some time, members of online school-shooting communities also started to contact me. Some found my blog on Tumblr, and others had friends who recommended me to them.

The interviewees came from almost all around the word. Of the interviewees, 15 (68%) identified as female, four (18%) as male, and three (14%) as transgender (one genderqueer, one gender-fluid, and one female-to-male transsexual). The interviewees came from different parts of the world: six from the United States; three from Germany; two each from Mexico, Australia, and the United Kingdom; and one each from Poland, Hungary, Argentina, Portugal, Singapore, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. The interviewees' ages ranged from 15 to 32 years old, and their mean age was 20.2 years old.

Online ethnography is ethnography done in online environments. As a method for studying the everyday lives of groups of people, ethnography provides many advantages for studying the culture of online worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Researchers studying online communities have used methods from traditional anthropology and sociology and adopted them in the online context (Ward, 1999). Thus, it is up to the researcher to define the boundaries of the field being studied (Tuncalp & Le, 2014).

My aim with online ethnography was to learn as much as I could about online school-shooting communities. Because I did not have prior specific knowledge about school shootings and school shooters besides academic literature, I became familiar with the phenomenon while conducting the ethnography. For example, I studied which sites are used, what are important cultural artefacts for these communities, and which school shooters get the most attention.

My field was school-shooting communities online, especially on social media. Because ethnography uses participant observation, I wanted to do what people deeply interested in school shootings seemed to be doing. To define the boundaries for my research, I chose to conduct the online ethnography on the open internet and did not include the dark web in my research. After becoming familiar with my topic, I gradually focused on places people deeply interested in school shootings seemed to visit the most, that is, the social media platforms Tumblr, DeviantArt, and YouTube. Tumblr is a platform on which users have blogs, can follow and comment on other users' blogs, and can send short private messages. DeviantArt is a platform on which users post their art and comment on other users' artwork. Users can also send private messages to other users. YouTube is a platform on which users can share videos and comment on videos posted by other users.

Later, after already starting the online interviews, I was allowed to join a closed Facebook group built around people deeply interested in school shootings. Facebook is a social media platform where users can post text, pictures, and videos, build networks, join private and public groups, and send private messages to other

users. Of these social media platforms, Tumblr seemed to have the most school-shooting-related pages and posts. This fandom was somewhat interwoven with larger "true crime" communities. Thus, during my online ethnography, I came across blogs that had postings on school shootings and infamous serial killers.

Again because ethnography uses participant observation, I aimed to do what people deeply interested in school shootings seemed to do. Thus, I read books, watched movies and videos, and listened to music that came across in discussions on social media. This proved to be useful when I was conducting the interviews, because I was able to ask direct questions regarding the interviewees' opinions on these cultural products. The interviewees also seemed to appreciate that I took time to become familiar with the cultural products central to the school shooting culture.

4.3 ETHICS

Deep interest in and fandom of school shootings is highly controversial, and in the beginning of my research, I was concerned that I would not be able to get interviewees because of this. However, I had relatively no problems with this, and I understood from some of my interviewees that I had received a good reputation in the school shooting community, and some recommended their friends to participate in my research. Due to the controversy of interest in school shootings, I took special care in protecting my interviewees' identities. The only identification I asked from my interviewees was the country they lived in and their age and gender. Only individuals at least 15 years old were accepted as interviewees. In order to increase the anonymity of my interviewees, I anonymized them differently in each article. Because the interviews were conducted in writing using chat and one interview was done via email, the interviewees' identities were even more protected because I only had the identifications they gave me. At the same time, this could be seen as problematizing my data collection, because I had no way to verify my interviewees were whom they said they were. However, as Presser (2016) argued regarding narrative research, "The narrative criminology scholar has an interest in them whatever their presumed accuracy or inaccuracy. We wonder about the impacts of stories; it matters little whether they are 'true' or 'false'" (p. 139). Similarly, Ward (1999) argued virtual ethnography research allows members of virtual communities to define their parameters and reality.

I have cowritten all the articles that are part of this dissertation with other researchers. As the data were collected for my dissertation, I conducted the

interviews and the online ethnography and was the only one in contact with the interviewees. I was also the only one who had access to nonanonymized data. No direct threats came up during the interviews. If there would have been any, Finnish legislation would have obligated me to report these to the authorities.

5 MAIN RESULTS

5.1 STUDY 1

In the first article, my coauthors and I focused on master narratives people deeply interested in school shootings provided of school shooters and how these narratives were interwoven with interviewees' personal narratives. The interviewees talked widely about school shooters' experiences with bullying and social problems in school and their own experiences with being bullied. One or both of these narratives were present in 21 of the 22 interviews. According to our findings, people deeply interested in school shootings circulate a master narrative, which states that school shooters have been bullied and that the bullying is the cause of school shootings. What was striking was the similarities of the narratives, even though the interviewees came from different parts of the world. Because the master narrative of bullied school shooters is globally recreated and circulated online, the potential audience for the narrative is vast. Thus, we argued bullying is a salient factor for the shootings if it constantly is cited as such.

5.2 STUDY 2

The second article focused on school-shooting communities online and the people participating in them. My coauthor and I argued that people deeply interested in school shootings form a global online subculture. According to our findings, people deeply interested in school shootings have interests that they share, and they find cultural objects related to school shootings important. However, we found that people deeply interested in school shootings do not form only one group but can be divided into four subgroups. These subgroups are fangirls, researchers, Columbiners, and copycats. Of these groups, only copycats are interested in conducting a school

shooting. However, we also found that membership in these subgroups may overlap. In addition, members from these subgroups can move from one group to another.

Based on our findings, we also argued that media accounts of school shootings have had an effect on the school shooting subculture, as people deeply interested in school shootings use media content and recreate and circulate this content (e.g., in the form of artwork modified from media images).

5.3 STUDY 3

The third article focused on deep interest in school shootings and online radicalization and discussed the similarities between school shootings and terrorist attacks, even though they usually are studied in different fields. Because of this separation, school shooting research has not discussed the theme of radicalization almost at all. However, radicalization is a very highly researched theme in terrorism studies. With this in mind, my coauthor and I used the opinion radicalization theory developed in terrorism research to analyze the data collected during the interviews. Based on our findings, people deeply interested in school shootings can be divided into three groups based on the radicalness of their opinions regarding school shootings; people with neutral opinions, people who sympathize with some school shooters or identify with them but do not condone the violence, and people who are interested in conducting a massacre. Of our interviewees, most could be categorized in the sympathizers groups, and no one expressed an interested in conducting a massacre. However, two of the interviewees said they could have become school shooters in the past, and altogether we found that individuals who are interested in conducting a massacre are present in online communities centered on school shootings.

We also argued that becoming deeply interested in school shootings seems to deepen one's opinions more than it changes them. At the same time, we hypothesized that the risk possessed by someone depends on nonopinion-related issues in their lives. Thus, we suggested that practitioners working with these issues should focus on cases in which a person's violence-related opinions become stronger after they become deeply interested in school shootings. Based on previous research on school shootings, we suggested that in these cases, the practitioners should focus on nonopinion-related strains in the person's life.

6 DISCUSSION

People deeply interested in school shootings form a global online subculture in which they share, create, and recreate school-shooting-related material and circulate their views on school shootings and school shooters. An encompassing theme of the interviews was the bullying experiences many of the interviewees reported having, and those bullying experiences they perceived school shooters had experienced. The similarities between narratives were striking, considering the interviewees came from different parts of the world. I together with my coauthors determined bullying stories were formed as personal narratives and master narratives that were woven together and that the circulation of these narratives has reinforced the idea of bullied school shooters. However, even though the narratives were similar, people's deep interest in school shootings is far from homogenous. People deeply interested in school shootings can be divided into four subgroups based on their focus and interests: researchers, fangirls, Columbiners, and copycats. These subgroups can overlap, and people can move from one group to other. Second, by using a theory developed in terrorism studies, we found that people deeply interested in school shootings could be divided into three groups based on how radical their opinions of school shootings are: those with neutral opinions, sympathizers, and those interested in conducting a school shooting. The data indicated that becoming deeply interested in school shootings seems to deepen opinions a person already has. Altogether, the data suggest that only a portion of the people deeply interested in school shootings wish to conduct a massacre. These are the individuals in the first model who belonged to the copycat subgroup and in the second who wished to conduct a shooting. Many of the interviewees acknowledged the presence of potential school shooters in their online communities, and some addressed their worry over the issue. At the same time, communities built around school shootings circulate simplified narratives of school shootings, and the very presence of online school-shooting communities gives the perpetrators the fame and recognition many of them have longed for.

The findings of this research support previous studies of school-shooting-related fan communities online (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Broll, 2018; Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012; Rico, 2015). In addition, the same social media platforms that previous researchers have noted, such as YouTube and Tumblr, still were relevant in the

school shooting culture during my data collection. The importance of Columbine in school-shooting communities was evident in my findings, similarly as Oksanen et al. (2014) found. In general, my finding also support the argument made by Larkin (2009) on the significance of the Columbine massacre to subsequent school shootings, even though my focus was on deep interest in school shootings and not on school shooters.

Explanations that portray school shooters as bullying victims and loners have been circulating since the Columbine massacre (see Mears et al., 2017), and based on my findings, these explanations are often present in school-shooting communities online. Similar to Böckler and Seeger's (2013) data, my interviewees brought up negative social experiences that they connected with perceived experiences of school shooters. Altogether, even though I agree with previous researchers (e.g., Madfis & Levin, 2013) that school shootings cannot be not explained solely by bullying experiences, individuals with bullying experiences seem to be more drawn to a deep interest in school shootings and the online communities formed around these massacres and their perpetrators. My research thus underlines the importance of understanding narratives of violence and contributes to the discussions of narrative criminology (e.g., Presser, 2016; Presser & Sandberg, 2014). By adapting a theory developed in terrorism research, I joined researchers who have argued about the similarities between terrorism and school shootings (e.g., Böckler et al., 2018; Malkki, 2014; Sandberg et al., 2014).

The most notable limitations of my research include the small number of interviewees and the lack of face-to-face contact with them. I was able to reinterview only seven of the 22 interviewees, which limited the data I was able to collect. Without direct contact, I had to rely only on what the interviewees told me about themselves. However, not being able to see my interviewees in person might also have had a positive effect. Because a deep interest in school shootings is a very controversial topic, the interviewees might have been more open with their thoughts because they were anonymous. Anonymity might also have had other effects. Even though I was open about my identity and my research, the interviewees were forced to rely on my word about whom I was. Because the interviewees participated in my research voluntarily, it is possible that people who, for example, had something to hide did not want to participate. It is thus possible that the ones fantasizing about or planning a school shooting did not want to participate in my research due to a fear of capture. Thus, my research results might show a deep interest in school shootings as less harmful than it might be.

I recommend future researchers to look into school shooters' radicalization processes and the way online and offline worlds are interwoven. Newman et al. (2004) and Madfis and Levin (2013) defined sufficient conditions for school shootings to happen, and based on the findings of this research, taking into account an individual's opinions related to school shootings and their school-shooting-related online activity might be worth exploring as new conditions. Furthermore, because school shooters often leak their intentions beforehand and are active online and because many people participating in school-shooting communities online do not condone the violence of these massacres, I find school shooting-communities are underused in the prevention of mass violence. However, because these communities are global and present in the online world, reporting possible crimes is difficult, because one might not know which country's authorities to turn to. A means of establishing a globally held webpage for submitting information on possible attackers would thus be worth exploring. Furthermore, I find that a deep interest in school shootings also could be studied as a phenomenon that reflects today's world; for example, it may say something about the problems of presenting seemingly perfect lives on social media that the only people an individual can identify their negative experiences with are school shooters who died years ago.

I began this dissertation by describing the foiled plot for a massacre in a Canadian shopping mall, which I find to be an example of the worst culmination point of a deep interest in school shootings. At this very moment, new individuals fantasize about the idea of killing other people and see this as a result of their problems. To prevent this, researchers need to develop new methods for identifying and assessing possible attackers and learn to understand how they radicalize from an interest that for many others seems to be quite harmless to the point of using violence. Shifting the focus to the online world of school shooters and those deeply interested in them can provide new insights.

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PUBLICATIONS

PUBLICATION
I

The bullying-school shooting nexus: Bridging master narratives of mass violence with personal narratives of social exclusion

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Abstract

This study examines the narratives that people who are deeply interested in school shootings tell about school shootings and their interest in the subject. Data come from 22 qualitative online interviews with individuals from 12 countries across the world, and the study is based on a framework of narrative criminology. We find that the theme of bullying weaves together personal narratives and the master narrative of school shootings. We discuss how deep interest in school shootings does not equal a desire to commit a massacre; rather, the circulation and recreation of the bullying story can reinforce scripts about responding to bullying with mass violence.

Keywords: School shootings, fandom and deep interest, narrative criminology, master narrative, personal narrative

Introduction

School shootings have attracted massive public and academic interest since the Columbine massacre in 1999 (Agnich 2015; Böckler and Seeger 2010; Larkin 2009; Newman et al. 2004; Robertz and Wickenhäuser 2010). Currently school shootings are considered a global phenomenon as they have been taken place for example in Germany, Finland, Canada, Brazil and Australia during the 2000s (Böckler et al. 2013; Sandberg et al. 2014). Despite being statistically rare incidents (Borum et al. 2010), school shootings are often described as unexpected because they occur in places that are thought to be safe and because the victims and perpetrators are both young (Newman et al. 2004). Due to these characteristics, school shootings are sometimes portrayed as simply "evil" (Nurmi and Oksanen 2013).

School shootings are not only direct violence, but also a form of symbolic violence; their intention is to send a message to a broad audience, not only to the victims (Malkki 2014). Thus, understanding school shootings requires understanding the symbols the shootings embody and the stories that accompany the violence. School shootings have often involved potent narratives, as the offenders have planned and committed their acts within a general framework in which young victims take revenge against their bullies (Newman et al. 2004; Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011; Sandberg et al. 2014). The cultural stock fueling such narratives is considerable

because school shootings are present in a variety of films and documentaries starting in the 1960s but especially since the 1990s (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011).

The use of web resources by school shooters and their fans has been documented in previous research. School shooters around the world have used social media to upload videos and pictures prior committing the massacres (Böckler and Seeger 2013; Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011; Paton 2012). Videos on Columbine, Virginia Tech, Jokela and Kauhajoki shootings are widely discussed and commented on YouTube (Lindgren 2011). There are also web pages and online communities where members express admiration for and sympathy with school shooters (Böckler and Seeger 2013; Oksanen, Hawdon & Räsänen, 2014; Oksanen, Räsänen, and Hawdon 2014; Paton and Figeac 2015). Thus, school shooters, like other infamous mass murderers and serial killers, have fans and admirers.

Our aim in this study is to examine the stories told by people who are deeply interested in school shootings. We emphasize the interwoven relationships between the life stories told about school shooters and the life stories of those who admire or sympathize with the shooters. School shooting 'fan sites' have existed online ever since the Columbine shootings, but there is little research on this deep interest in school shootings. With this study, we will contribute to the understanding of online communities focusing on school shootings and also apply new perspectives to the already-numerous causes of school shootings.

Bullying and school shootings

School bullying has been widely discussed in studies of school shootings. Reviews of school bullying show that shooters experience high rates of victimization and that school shooters have often felt excluded or rejected (Leary et al. 2003; Verlinden, Hersen, and Thomas 2000; Newman et al. 2004). Yet, studies have typically focused on perpetrators but not on the wider communities that follow school shootings and school shooters. Public discussion has frequently focused on bullying as a major causative factor in school shootings. School shooters are often seen as loners who have experienced constant bullying until they "snap" (Ferguson, Coulson and Barnett 2011: 150). The commonly held perception is that school shootings can be understood as a process of "get mad, get guns, get revenge" (Tonso 2009:1266–1267). Despite this commonly held perception, bullying has not been central in all school shooting cases (Borum et al. 2010), and many leading studies consider bullying as only one factor among many (Bondü and Scheithauer 2011a; Böckler et

al. 2013; Ioannou, Hammond and Simpson 2015; Langman 2009; Newman et al. 2004; Newman and Fox 2009).

Other relevant factors include, for example, symptoms of narcissistic personality traits, depression, and lack of empathy (Bondü and Scheithauer 2011a, 2011b; Böckler, Seeger, and Heitmeyer 2011; Newman et al. 2004; Robertz and Wickenhäuser 2010). Sociocultural problems, such as crises of masculinity (Kellner 2013), homophobia (Kimmel and Mahler 2003) and cultures that promote aggressive and competitive behavior (Klein 2012) have also been proposed to explain school shootings. Another important factor in school shootings is the cultural script with which they are associated. According to Newman et al. (2004:230), the cultural script of school shootings provides an example of how to solve problems. The school shooter must believe that an attack on the school will solve his problems, such as bullying. However, the concept of bullying must be used with caution in the context of school shootings. It can be defined in a variety of ways, and accounts of school shooters being bullied often come from third-party accounts that may not be accurate (Ioannou et al. 2015:197). Ferguson et al. (2011:151) also note that perpetrators' feelings of being persecuted do not necessarily reflect reality. Most importantly, many young people have experiences of social exclusion without engaging in violence; therefore, social problems alone do not adequately explain school shootings.

In sum, existing evidence shows that a combination of psychological and social problems plays a crucial role in school shootings. As Newman and colleagues argue, boys who suffer from the most severe bullying are not necessarily the ones who become school shooters, instead,

> *it's the boys for whom a range of unfortunate circumstances come together* – those who are socially marginal, are psychologically vulnerable, are fixated on cultural scripts that fuse violence with masculinity, live in areas where firearms are readily available, and attend schools that cannot identify this constellation (Newman et al. 2004:230, italics in original).

While the roles of social exclusion and harassment in the lives of school shooters are complex, bullying is the main explanation for school shootings presented by the media. The typical media-driven framing of school shootings is a story in which the perpetrators are victims who take revenge against their supposed bullies (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011; Leary et al. 2003). For example, multiple school shooters have referred to the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, as heroes or martyrs (Larkin 2009; Malkki 2014; Kiilakoski and Oksanen

2011). This story about school shootings is replicated in news media, television documentaries, films and other cultural products, creating a powerful master narrative about school shootings. School shootings have become dramatic and spectacular acts, and the shooters themselves have understood and partly staged their acts to fit the script of school shootings (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011). Facilitated by the Internet, these stories of school shootings spread globally, with increasing impact on potential school shooters and on those who are fascinated by these events for other reasons.

Narrative criminology

Narrative criminology (Presser and Sandberg 2015; Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016) is a relatively new framework within criminology that emphasizes the role of stories in motivating, mitigating or desisting crime. Narrative criminology is also interested in the impact of stories on the judicial system more generally (e.g. Ugelvik 2016) and in narratives of crime, for example in the media (e.g. Katz 2016:233). The emphasis in narrative criminology is not on whether the stories studied are "true" or "false" but on how the myriad stories people tell reflect the multilateral nature of identities, values, communities and cultures (Sandberg 2010:448; Presser 2016).

Narrative criminologists argue that crime and narrative are closely connected and that studying stories can be a way to access the core of the causes of complex crimes (Sandberg 2013:69). The relation between narratives and crime can be analyzed from different viewpoints. Katz (2016), for example, has distinguished between "culture in crime and culture about crime". Culture in crime refers to how people committing crimes understand them. Culture about crime can be divided into at least three types: descriptions of crimes by the observers, descriptions of the offenders after the crimes, and descriptions of crime in the media. Katz then emphasizes that the focus of cultural criminology is on the interaction between culture about crime and culture in crime.

Narrative criminology offers a new and important way to analyze school shootings and the deep interest in them. It is essential to understand how school shootings are represented among people who are deeply interested in them. Using Katz's (2016) division, we are interested in how stories told about school shooters are interconnected with the personal narratives of people deeply interested in school shootings and how these stories are connected to school shootings. Thus, we are interested in what types of stories are told about school shootings and how this can impact the stories told by school shooters.

Social knowledge and insights evolve when narratives are shared with others (Mello 2002, 233), and what is written in these Internet forums has an impact on the speaker as well as on others (Presser 2012:5). The Internet's significance in constructing and sharing narratives cannot be overestimated. As Hoffman (2010:12) argues: "--- the Internet can no longer be regarded as a practical means for information retrieval but rather as a global communication hub which is fused by various local groups of users on a daily basis." For example, although experts disagree about the impact of school bullying on school shootings, bullying becomes important if it is cited as the main factor in explaining school shootings by online communities of people deeply interested in school shootings. The meanings of school bullying must thus be understood from wider cultural and narrative perspectives. Narrative environments such as Internet forums do not fully dictate how narratives are constructed or the situations where narratives are told, but they have great impact on the content, form and role of the narrative in that context (Gubrium and Holstein 2012).

To understand different forms of narratives, Loseke (2007) distinguishes among personal, institutional and cultural narratives. Cultural narratives are at the macro-level and include abstract types of actors that simplify the world, closely resembling what has been described as master narratives elsewhere. For the sake of clarity, we refer to these and other narratives that are synonymous as master narratives throughout the study. These narratives usually have particular authors, storylines and forms (Loseke 2007). They are dominant and socially acceptable narratives (Perrier, Smith, and Latimer-Cheung 2013:2090) that reveal relatively fixed common viewpoints in a specific culture (Thommesen 2010:2). A master narrative is a schema that is totalizing; it not only explains reality and knowledge but also orders them (Yu 2010). Master narratives become, or try to become, standard views (Snajdr 2013). Yet all master narratives are not equally relevant to everyone (Kölbl 2004:28), and they are constantly created, changed, challenged and rejected (Loseke 2007:664). Master narratives affect the way we comprehend the world and the stories we tell about ourselves. They are internalized as part of individual and social identity (McLean, Shucard, and Syed 2016:2), and they contribute to shaping personal narratives and identities (Hammack 2008; Esteban-Guitart 2012). Master narratives are a way for us to discuss and to present our identities and perceptions of ourselves (Brookman, Copes, and Hochstetler 2011:399), and they are reproduced because we become stories that we know (Andrews 2004:1).

Master narratives are closely connected to personal narratives, or stories we tell about ourselves. Personal narratives are linked to collectives, and people create their own personal narratives using master narratives as resources (Rowe, Wertsch, and Kosyaeva 2002). Master narratives also limit what can be told in personal stories. Stories that we hear and tell "are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue" (Brooks 1984:3). With personal narratives, we create consistency and coherent identities in a confusing world (Loseke 2007: 672).

The first aim of our study is to analyze how our interviewees described the impact of bullying and social problems on school shooters: What is the role of school bullying in master narratives of school shootings? The second aim is to analyze how individuals with deep interests in school shootings link their personal experiences to the school shooting master narrative: How are the master stories of school shooters intertwined with the personal narratives of those drawn towards these events? Our goal is to understand how personal narratives and master narratives are combined in the composition of these stories. Finally, because stories are inspirational to their audiences (Presser 2016:140), we discuss the potential impact that stories about school shooters may have on future school shootings.

Method

Data for this study come from interviews with 22 people who we describe as having a deep interest in school shootings. By using the broad concept of "deep interest," we differ from previous research in which the term "fans" has commonly been used. We do this because people who spend substantial amounts of time on the websites related to school shooters do not form a homogenous group in terms of interests or reasons for being on those sites. Moreover, while some of the interviewees described themselves as fans, others did not want to be labeled as such. We believe the broader "deep interest" term reflects this phenomenon well.

Interviews were conducted from July 2015 to September 2016. A blog was created in Tumblr and used as a way to contact possible interviewees. The blog also served as a place where people interested in being interviewed were able to read about the research and about the interviews. The interviewees were recruited from social media profiles related to school shootings, especially from Tumblr and DeviantArt. Some participants also contacted the researcher by themselves after hearing about the study. Out of 22 interviews, 21 were conducted in writing using

Skype and one was conducted by sending the interviewee questions via e-mail due to that person's wishes.

The interviewees ranged from 15 to 32 years of age. The medium age was 20.2 years old. Fifteen of the interviewees told us they were female, four of them told us they were male, and three defined their genders as follows: one as female-to-male transsexual, one as genderqueer and one as genderfluid. Six interviewees were from the United States, three were from Germany, two were from Australia, two were from Mexico, two were from the United Kingdom, and one participant each was from, respectively, Portugal, Argentina, Hungary, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Poland and Singapore. Interviews were semi-structured. There were common questions that we asked all the interviewees, but there was no other structure to limit the conversation. The questions we asked addressed issues related to the interviewees' interest in school shootings and to how they saw the online (fan)communities of school shootings.

Based on the functional scale of internet anonymity, the anonymity of the interviewees varied from visual anonymity to full anonymity (see Keipi and Oksanen 2014). The amount of anonymity varied because the interviewees gave different types and amounts of personal information. Of course, when interviews are conducted online, interviewees' "true" identities are never certain. We cannot know for sure that the interviewees are who they say they are. Thus, the most appropriate method of understanding collective understanding in virtual words is to conduct research from participants' own points of view (Boellstorff 2008:61).

Data used in this study also come from online ethnographic research conducted from February 2015 to February 2016. Ethnographies done online have been described as virtual ethnography, online ethnography, cyberanthropology and netnography (Tunçalp and Lê 2014:61). Kozinets (2010:1) uses the term netnography to describe "a specialized form of ethnography adopted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today's social worlds". While we do not refer directly to data from the netnography in this study, it has provided us with important background information that we have used to understand this phenomenon and to conduct the interviews. As a result of our netnography, we collected ample information on deep interest in school shootings, which helped us to ask better questions and to understand the answers that the interviewees gave us.

Ethics, limitations and analysis

The interviewees were not asked at any point for identifiable personal details except age, gender and country of residence. In the analysis, we have omitted this information because there is only a relatively small community of fans and people deeply interested in school shootings. Although the general public would not be able to identify the interviewees, there is a possibility that the interviewees could be recognized by other members of these online communities. The first author was responsible for the interviews and the netnography. The second and third authors viewed only the parts of the data that were made anonymous, and none of the data were traceable back to the real identities of the interviewees.

Despite the considerable strength of having global data, our study is limited to 22 interviewees, and the analysis could only focus on the qualitative investigation of this phenomenon. As this study focused on a group of people who are difficult to access, the interviews were conducted over a moderately long period of time (14 months). Some limitations also involve the analysis of the data. When analyzing the interviews, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish whether the interviewees were discussing specific school shooters or school shooters in general. Yet, we did not find this particularly problematic because perceptions of single events contribute to the creation of the common view of school shootings.

There are different ways to generalize narrative data. In our study, we have used ethnographic generalization, in which personal narratives are used to unveil otherwise hidden meanings, motivations, social practices, interactions and mythologies. (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008:129–130). Bullying was a common theme in the interviews, and thus the analysis was constructed around the stories the interviewees told about bullying. As a starting point for the analysis, we used Gubrium and Holstein's (2012) argument that all varieties of accounts can reflexively be connected to prior written or unwritten narratives. Thus, we did not approach the narratives the interviewees constructed as merely individual stories but rather as narratives that were intertwined with other narratives and constructed in a specific social context. Because stories are shaped by context and social interaction (Gubrium and Holstein 2012), the interviewing context impacted the narratives interviewees constructed by focusing the narratives around certain topics.

Results

The stories that interviewees from around the world told about school shootings were strikingly similar. In particular, the bullying theme stood out as a widely shared narrative. Our interviewees talked extensively about school shooters' bullying experiences and other social problems school shooters had endured. Interviewees also talked extensively about how they had been bullied themselves. We found one or both of these narratives in 21 out of 22 interviews. In the following analysis, we first present how the partly media-driven master narrative of bullied school shooters was present in the accounts of people deeply interested in school shootings. Second, we present how this master narrative was woven into their personal narratives.

Bullying of school shooters: the master narrative

Master narratives impact the way we understand the world and the incidents that we encounter. They provide a framework that we use to make sense of our experiences, and they help us to create a coherent identity (Kerrick and Henry 2017:1). Master narratives are circulated widely and unveil what we know and value, as well as how we should act (Brookman et al. 2011:398).

When analyzing our data, we found that our interviewees saw school shootings in a strikingly uniform way. Out of 22 interviews, 15 interviewees brought up bullying or other social problems school shooters have had. Six interviewees brought the subject up indirectly, and only one interviewee did not bring it up at all. The stories about how school shooters had been bullied were so dominant and similar that we argue they reflect a master narrative: a simplified and uniform way of seeing the shootings. The master narrative of bullied school shooters is constructed as follows:

1) School shooters have been victims of bullying or have suffered from other social problems
2) Bullying and other social problems that the shooters have suffered from are an important cause of school shootings

Although there was some variation, bullying was generally understood to be one of the main reasons for school shootings. Many claimed it was the most important reason for attacks. Our interviewees then emplotted bullying with school shootings. Stories are constructed from multiple occasions that are joined together with a plot (Ahmed 2012:235), and in emplotting, events are translated into episodes and

significance is attributed to instances that are independent (Somers 1994:616). One of the interviewees, for example, described the connection between bullying and school shootings as follows: "politicians blame gun laws and the parents but no one cares about why they really did it: because they were bullied." (Interviewee 9). Another interviewee recalled assuming, upon first hearing about the Columbine massacre, that the shooting was a reaction to bullying: "Regarding Dylan and Eric, I just remember that when it happened I was first shocked but immediately thought "Badass! They probably got bullied too!" (Interviewee 5).

Generally, there was a tendency to see bullying as one of the main themes across cases of school shootings and similar episodes: "In my opinion, school shooters felt threatened by others (like bullies) or disappointed with the society, I could mention the most 'famous' like kip kinkel, Anders Bierviek [Breivik][2] (not a school shooter but still), Adam lanza, Seung-Hui Cho, and others" (Interviewee 20). One of the interviewees described the Columbine perpetrators' endeavors and reasons for the attack in more depth:

> School shooters to me are people who want to let their true self out and by doing so they use violence take Eric harris and Dylan klebold for example the was [they were] rejec[ted]
> They both were rejected and one day they let there [their] frustrations out
> They didn't care w[h]ether the punishment was death or not they just wanted their message out (Interviewee 2)

Only one interviewee did not bring up bullying or the social problems of the shooters at all. In 6 interviews, these problems were brought up indirectly. Yet even in these indirect discussions, the interviewees' perceptions of the school-related social problems of school shooters came across. For example, when asked why they thought they were so interested in the subject, one replied as follows: "Mainly because I was bullied a lot throughout my life in school & now at work.. I've always been into much darker things, or topics that don't seem to interest the general public. But mainly because I relate. I've read Dylan's journal , & I've read Eric's I just understand where they're coming from in a sense". (Interviewee 6). Thus, the interviewee implied that the Columbine shooters were bullied.

Master narratives usually involve one-dimensional characters and portraits of life that are less complex than reality (Loseke 2007:666). Defining the shooters as victims was common due to their perceived experiences. One interviewee described how the

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[2] Square brackets are used by the writers to clarify the interviewees' words due to typing errors, etc.

massacre could have been prevented if the shooters had been treated differently: "I feel that if they have been given more help or have someone to understand them, the chances of them committing school shootings would be lesser. I feel that everyone is a victim in school shootings, even the perpetrator." (Interviewee 1). Another interviewee similarly called for understanding of the sufferings of the Columbine shooters: "because it's always about things like "Let's honour the 13 angels that died that day" and completely disregard the two depressed kids that were bullied and abused to the point of insanity." (Interviewee 3). One interviewee described one of the Columbine shooters as follows: "I feel the strongest towards Dylan Klebold. People have said that Dylan was a nice guy and the last person they would even imagine doing something like that. He was also bullied and I think that really had a big effect on him and his choices." (Interviewee 21).

Stories that connect bullying and school shootings are common in the media (see Leary et al. 2003) and entertainment industry (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011). As our data show, this master narrative of bullied school shooters is also shared among people deeply interested in school shootings. Many of our interviewees portrayed school shooters as victims, and they emplotted bullying with school shootings. What is significant, therefore, is the similar use of characters (school shooters as victims) and similar plotlines (bullying linked to shootings). This is not to say that the bullying experiences of school shooters are not "real" but that stories always simplify and reconstruct reality. Thus, when the master narrative of bullied school shooters is repeated, reconstructed and circulated, it becomes "the reality". Master narratives are powerful stories because they offer us a way to identify with experiences that are thought to be normative. Story plots in master narratives serve as models for all stories; through these stories, we understand the stories of other people as well as of ourselves. (Andrews 2004:1). The master narrative of bullied school shooters impacts the stories told about school shootings and the stories that are connected to school shootings.

Personal narratives of bullying

Personal narratives are both based on and selectively drawn from experiences people have (Presser 2009:179). The criterion for selection is often familiarity. Master narratives are therefore a great resource for personal narratives, as they can be used to identify relevant experiences for inclusion in personal narratives. As opposed to master narratives, personal narratives occur at the micro-level, "producing personal identities, the self-understandings of unique, embodied selves about their selves"

(Loseke 2007:662, italics in original). Through personal narratives, we construct our identities and plot our experiences to establish who we are (Presser 2016).

Our interviewees composed stories that were very similar to each other. Out of 22 interviewees, 19 reported experiences of bullying or other social problems. The severity of bullying experiences varied from severe bullying and social alienation to less severe social problems, such as loneliness or difficulties of being with others. The personal narratives were often constructed as follows:

1) Person has suffered from bullying or other social problems such as loneliness
2) Due to these experiences, the person understands the perceived similar experiences of the shooters

Usually, these experiences came up when the interviewees were asked about their reasons for being interested in school shootings or when they were asked whether their own experiences had an impact on their interest in school shootings. In almost all of the interviews, the interviewees brought up their bullying-related experiences by themselves. This indicates that the interviewees saw stories about their bullying-related experiences as meaningful with respect to the topic of deep interest in school shootings.

In personal narratives, interviewees connected their traumatic experiences to the perceived experiences of school shooters. One explained, "Another important reason is that I've been severely bullied and beaten in School. Plus Problems at home. And my own psychological Problems. I can totally relate to what drives them to do something like that." (Interviewee 5). Similarly, another stated, "i got in touch with the topic when I was heavily bullied in school and I therefore I suffered from depression and social anxiety. (Interviewee 9). One told us that "---but unlike Eric and Dylan, I choose not to fight with the bully and just ignore them." (Interviewee 19). One described how the experience had changed how they view the world: "I guess it has being bullied definitely changed my views on society and I became this misanthropic because I had nothing else and Columbine was my escape it was what I see as a really great story and a sad one too because someone like you did this." (Interviewee 2)

Those who had experienced less severe problems with bullying also connected their own experiences to their interest in school shootings. One wrote that "I felt very uncomfortable with myself and others growing up" (Interviewee 3), and another that "I struggled socially in school. Like...I wasnt exactly bullied, but not very popular

either" (Interviewee 13). In personal narratives, interviewees described how being considered an outsider had changed who they were and how they perceived life. Here is one such description in more depth:

> I was bullied when I first started primary school too by some year 6's, I was 4 years old I think, and it was just name calling and being pushed around and stuff. There were a few times in secondary school too where I was bullied for my hair again, but all these experiences haven't affected me as such, its just given me thicker skin and more respect to victims and dislike to bullies. (Interviewee 18)

Experiences of being bullied or socially excluded were important for the personal narratives and life-stories of most of those deeply interested in school shootings. Life stories integrate incidents in life, thus linking the past to the present. They give meaning and direction to one's life (Sandberg 2016:159). Our interviewees told that they could understand what the shooters had gone through because of their own experiences of bullying. Interviewees also explained that they started to understand the shooters when they studied their life. One of our interviewees told, "I only saw them as these two monsters that did this horrible thing, and as my research progressed, I saw they were just kids like me, who were bullied and isolated to the brink, and they snapped." (Interviewee 14).

Many interviewees weaved their own experiences together with what they perceived to be the lives of school shooters. They made frequent comparisons between their own lives, feelings, and experiences and those of the shooters. In this way, they used the master narrative of bullied school shooters when constructing their own personal narratives. One interviewee described relating to one of the Columbine massacre shooters: "I can really relate to Dylan Klebold. Aside from the homicidal thoughts I have a lot of the same feelings that he wrote about having (depression, low self-esteem, wanting to find love, not feeling accepted, etc.)" (Interviewee 22). Speaking on behalf of a community of "columbiners," one interviewee tried to generalize:

> most columbiners have one thing in common: we have felt like outsiders or victims at some point in our lives. we have felt like absolutely NObody could understand how alone we have felt, and that experience is exactly what Eric and Dylan lived. knowing that there were even just two boys out there who felt the same way as we feel now gives us comfort. (Interviewee 4).

Consistent with this theme, another pointed to the differences between those interested in school shootings and others:

> I feel like if a person went through their lives being good-looking, popular with a decent home life and a happy disposition
> they wouldn't be interested in school shooters (…) I feel like people like me that went through some terrible stuff can relate to it because it's dark and unhappy but we can understand it (Interviewee 3)

Because of their experiences, many interviewees said they were able to relate or to identify with specific school shooters. Relation and identification with the shooters had a broad impact on some of the interviewees' lives. They described how specific shooters had made them feel less alone and helped them to cope with hardships. According to one interviewee, "I have had a very traumatic upbringing, and I guess they make me feel less alone" (Interviewee 4). Another wrote: "i wanted to get to know them. and it was the only thing i cared about, it became a part of my life. i could identify with it and keep a distance to the events at my school." (Interviewee 9). This identification with school shooters is similar to how people relate to other celebrities: They adopt their beliefs, values, attitudes and behavior, which are sometimes similar to their own, or which they are predisposed to endorse (Brown 2015:264). Such identification relies on narrative imagination, or the ability to understand someone else's hopes, desires and emotions (Nussbaum 2006:390).

Even though many were able to relate to or identify with the shooters, we found that most of the interviewees emphasized that they did not relate to the shooters' violent aspirations. As one explained:

> I'm not a fan of murder and violence on that aspect. I grew up with violence and I despise it. When I think about the massacres, the blood, the dead bodies and pain they caused I feel ill. But the persons they have been before those massacres (At least when it Comes to Kip, Eric and Dylan) I do like because I can relate and see similarities between me and them (just as persons and not regarding the crimes). (Interviewee 5).

Most of our interviewees described their interests similarly. Wanting to commit a school shooting of their own or idolizing the violence of school shootings was not the reason they were interested in school shootings. Many explained that they liked school shooters because they perceived themselves as having had similar experiences, not because of the shooters' violent acts. Other reasons for

interviewees' deep interest in school shootings also came up, such as romantic interest in school shooters. Still, a few described how they could also relate to the desire to commit a violent act. One wrote: "A lot of these people had tough times in their lives, at school, at home, mental health issues, I can relate to all those things. I know what it feels like to be angry and hurt enough to feel like suicide or homicide, or both, is the only way out." (Interviewee 15). In these narratives, social problems were again connected to school shootings.

Narratives that circulate socially offer us a model for making sense of ourselves and must be used as resources when composing life stories and personal narratives (Loseke 2007:673). As our data shows our interviewees reflected the master narrative of bullied school shooters in their personal narratives. They repeatedly brought up personal experiences that were similar to the perceived experiences of the shooters, and they made comparisons between their lives and the lives of school shooters.

Narratives are used to give meaning to one's life, and by telling stories, one becomes who one is (Andrews 2000:77). For many of our interviewees, the master narrative of bullied school shooters made their lives more meaningful: because of their perceived common experiences with school shooters, our interviewees felt they were not alone with their painful experiences. They saw their painful experiences reflected in the experiences of school shooters and thus constructed their identities by comparing their lives to those of the shooters and to those who had not suffered the way they and the shooters had. In these personal narratives, the lives and the stories of school shooters and people deeply interested in them were interwoven.

Discussion

Our aim in this study was to examine the stories that 22 people deeply interested in school shootings told about bullying. Because our analysis was grounded in narrative criminology, we were interested in studying stories about school shootings and their potential consequences (see Presser 2012; Sandberg 2013). We were interested in how the stories told about school shooters are interconnected with the personal narratives of people deeply interested in school shootings and how these stories are connected to school shootings. Thus, we have sought to investigate the interaction between culture about crime and culture in crime (Katz 2016).

The master narrative of bullied school shooters makes a strong connection between bullying experiences and school shootings. This master narrative is common in the media (see Leary et al. 2003) and entertainment industry (Kiilakoski and Oksanen 2011) and, according to our data, it is also shared among people deeply

interested in school shootings. Many of our interviewees composed their stories by using similar characters (school shooters as victims) and similar plotlines (bullying linked to shootings Our results about master narrative and its impacts are related to other studies that see master narratives as a common way to see and explain reality (see Loseke 2007; Thommesen 2010; Yo 2010; Snajdr 2013).

We have emphasized the intertwined relationship between the life stories of school shooters and the life stories of those who admire or sympathize with them. The personal narratives that our interviewees composed often described their own bullying experiences. Our interviewees used the master narrative of bullied school shooters in their personal narratives and thus in their identity construction. We found that interviewees often constructed their identities in opposition to those who had not suffered the way they had. They categorized themselves together with school shooters and, due to their perceived shared experiences, discussed themselves and the shooters as "us". This type of division or "othering" can be used as part of identity construction (Rødner 2005; Kerley, Copes and Griffin 2015; Loseke 2007; Hammack 2008; Lavin 2017). As Rødner (2005:343) writes, "Indeed, the Other is a special kind of category as it allows a distinction between positive and negative identities." It is not surprising that our interviewees categorized themselves the way they did in the narratives they composed, as the division between a moral "us" and a deviant "them" is grounded in storytelling itself. Telling stories is a powerful tool to communicate norms and values and to draw boundaries between "us" and "them" (Sandberg 2016:154). Our results support the research of Paton (2012), who has argued that for people who are marginalized or for those who are different and pushed aside, school shootings have become a message. For these people, participation in the subculture of school shootings is a way to rebel against "normality".

As master narratives serve as models for all stories (Andrews 2004:1), we argue that bullying becomes an important factor in the shootings if it is constantly cited as such. People learn from stories, and they adapt their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors based on what they have heard or read (Hoeken, Kolthoff, and Sanders 2016:292). Offenders, for example, frequently imitate stories told about crimes; sometimes, committing a crime is seen as a way to have a life worthy of narrating (Sandberg 2016:157). At the same time, the master narrative our interviewees reproduced also reconstructs reality: bullying becomes an important factor if it is constantly cited as such. As Holstein and Miller (1990:105, italics in original) argue: "Describing someone as a victim is more than merely reporting *about* a feature of the social world; it *constitutes* that world."

Because the master narrative of bullied school shooters is recreated and circulated online globally, its potential audience is enormous. Our results thus intersect with the ideas of Newman et al. (2004) about the cultural script of school shootings by showing that online communities also provide an example of how to solve problems by connecting shootings to bullying. In this context, it is not meaningful to discuss whether school shooters have been bullied or not, as is so often done in the discussion about school shootings (see, for example, Cullen 27.4.2012). Understanding these narratives and their implications for people's behavior is more significant. As Hammack (2008:224) argues: "--- the relationship between a "master" narrative and a personal narrative of identity provides direct access to the process of social reproduction and change." Although their responses might have been influenced by the interview guide and research context, most of our interviewees connected the master narrative of school shooters to their own experiences of social exclusion.

Our results suggest that also people from societies that are less organized and coherent share and participate in the reconstruction and circulation of master narratives. This is noteworthy, especially because our interviewees who came from different parts of the world composed such distinctively uniform narratives. Based on our data, most people deeply interested in school shootings do not idolize the violence in school shootings or wish to commit a massacre by themselves. Yet, at the same time, the stories they tell can have an impact on school shootings. The results also shed light on the importance of online communities and the stories told by their members online. These results have practical implications. Online communities have become places where people are encouraged to use violence, for example in the name of different terrorist groups (Sandberg et al. 2014). Stories thus count, and especially stories told online because their audiences are worldwide and potentially number in the millions.

Conclusion

Our data suggest that many people deeply interested in school shootings see school shooters as bullied and perceive shootings to have been caused by the bullying. Our interviewees thus reflected the master narrative – already familiar from the media and entertainment industry – of bullied school shooters. This master narrative was intertwined with interviewees' personal narratives of bullying because many of them had suffered from bullying-related problems themselves. Based on the interviews,

deep interest in school shootings does not mean that a person wishes to commit a massacre or that the person even idolizes violence. Yet, the online recreation and circulation of the master narrative of bullied school shooters may have an impact on school shootings because it can reinforce scripts that emphasize the relation between bullying and school shootings. This can further inspire a tendency to solve personal problems with mass violence.

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PUBLICATION
II

Global Online Subculture surrounding School Shootings

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Abstract

This study is grounded in extensive online ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 22 people who expressed a deep interest in school shootings. Such people form a global online subculture; they share common interests and find the same cultural objects important. Media accounts of school shootings have fueled this subculture; its members participate in the re-creation and circulation of online media content and give new meanings to that content. We found that people deeply interested in school shootings do not form a homogenous group, and they are divided to four subgroups within the subculture based on members' focus and interest: researchers, fan girls, Columbiners and copycats. Out of these, copycats are the only subgroup explicitly interested in replicating the acts, although subgroup membership can overlap, and members can move from one subgroup to another. Beyond copycats, other subgroups also participate in giving perpetrators fame and circulate reasons for the shootings. These accounts may influence future perpetrators.

Keywords: school shootings, social media, Internet, subculture, ethnography

Introduction

The internet has played a role in school shootings since the 1999 Columbine massacre. School shooters have been inspired by the previous shootings and shooters, as well as by the media's portrayals of them (Bondü & Scheithauer, 2012, p. 73, Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011; Larkin, 2009; Robertz & Wickenhäuser, 2010). The perpetrators have used the internet and social media to attract followings and to communicate their ideas and ideologies to the public by uploading videos and texts prior to their attacks (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011; Larkin 2007, 2009; Paton, 2012; Sandberg, Oksanen, Berntzen, & Kiilakoski, 2014). Perpetrators have also mentioned the desire to become famous as a motivation for their shootings (Lankford, 2014; Larkin, 2009; Sandberg et al., 2014).

The most influential school shooting has been the 1999 Columbine massacre. The Columbine perpetrators claimed their massacre was a political act, conducted in the name of other oppressed students (Larkin, 2007; Larkin 2009). In a videotape, one of them argued that with their massacre they would "kick-start a revolution" of the dispossessed (Gibbs & Roche,1999). They also videotaped themselves, and one

of the perpetrators posted writings, such as rants and death threats, online (Larkin, 2007; Larkin, 2009). Despite the cultural relevance of the Columbine school shooting case, the culture of school shootings has evolved now on social media and it is hence important to understand and analyze the current social media communities surrounding school shootings.

Social media today provides easy access to material concerning various extreme topics, including sites dedicated to death, murder, and massacres. Such sites circulate real footage and media information concerning extreme events such as mass murder (Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2017). More importantly, the rise of social media has made it easy for people to engage in such extreme online communities and to find similarly minded people (Oksanen, Hawdon, & Räsänen, 2014). Online communities involve groups of individuals interacting regardless of the existence of direct friendship links among them (Oksanen et al., 2015; Schweitzer & Garcia, 2010). Rather, the members of online communities are bonded by shared interests or goals (Keipi et al., 2017). In the case of online school shooting communities, the members' shared interests lie in school shootings and shooters. Researchers have proven the existence of web pages and online communities dedicated to school shootings and shooters (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012; Paton & Figeac, 2015). In these forums, school shooters and their followers can "negotiate identification, appropriation and protest via their definitions" (Paton, 2012, p. 206). These communities also participate in the creation and re-creation of narratives related to school shootings.

This study continues to investigate the growing importance of social media on the school shooting phenomenon. We analyze the global subculture of people who are deeply interested in school shootings. Our study provides a new global perspective on the phenomenon that is also important due to the rapid changes within social media. The study is grounded in a subcultural theory perspective and also relies on previous studies on school shootings.

School Shootings and Online Subcultures

School shooters have actively used online sources, as has been noted in studies focusing on the perpetrators (Oksanen, Nurmi, Vuori, & Räsänen, 2013; Sandberg et al., 2014). Fewer studies have investigated the broader online community's ties to the phenomenon; to our knowledge, no researchers have closely studied the interlinkage of the media and the people who have deep interests in school shootings. Scholars who have focused on online communities have produced similar

outcomes. According to Paton's (2012) research, fandom in school shootings is a subculture that allows teenagers to question social structures. Paton's findings are similar to those of Böckler and Seeger (2013), who saw that, for fans of school shooters, "school shooters not only function as spokespersons for a larger group, but in a sense become the forerunners of a 'revolution of the dispossessed'" (p. 334).

Oksanen et al. (2014) found that most of the school shooting fans on YouTube belonged to a single network that resembled a small-world network. People who were interested in the Columbine shooting formed the core of this network, and its small-world nature made it very easy to access.

Subcultural researchers have emphasized that subcultures have shared values and cultural practices, that their members use symbols and signs to identify with each other, and that they do so to subvert the norms of dominant or mainstreams society to at least some extent (Blackman, 2014; Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000). Scholars who have previously studied online school shooting communities have agreed that these communities indeed use similar symbols, signs, and language and that they all engage in discussions that could be considered deviant from the perspective of mainstream society. Oksanen et al. (2014), for example, considered the Columbine attacks to be a central uniting point for fans from various countries. These fans, for example, often repeated slogans such as "in Eric and Dylan I live" (Oksanen et al., 2014, p. 62). Webber (2017) stated that it is difficult to critically separate real people from their media presentations in today's "hyperreal mediascape"; liking a perpetrator of mass violence may thus be similar to liking a violent character in a book. This can be "fairly harmless, except for in these cases where the sensational media make it out to mean something more than it actually can be" (Webber, 2017, p. 128). In this sense, people who are interested in school shootings could be seen as similar to members of any other subculture with a dark fascination.

Traditionally, subcultures have been limited by space and time; however, some musical subcultures such as punk were affected by the media (Hebdige, 1979). The so-called post-subcultural turn in the youth studies in the 1990s meant that subcultures were considered fluid and fragmented (Bennett, 2011; Blackman, 2014). This reflected both societal change and the media's increasing influence. Therefore, post-subcultural theorists placed more focus on the media's increasing importance among youth subcultures (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Since the 2000s, the rise of the internet—and particularly social media—has allowed various subcultures to act trans-locally and enabled the existence of virtual subcultures (Hodkinson, 2002; Williams, 2011).

Williams (2011, p. 159) noted, however, that it is worth considering the grounds on which websites or forums can be considered subcultural. Websites and especially social networking sites are just a starting point for social activity and interaction. Subcultures need active members that use similar signs and symbols. These signs can be relatively stable over time as long as a group has active members (Oksanen et al., 2014; Sandberg, 2013). At the same time, the development of social media has enabled users to maintain anonymity when needed. Social media also provides easy access to and rapid sharing of information, both of which are central to the current media age. It also provides users with fluidity in both identity and consumer preferences. For example, it is possible to be a member of virtual communities and subcultures that are peripheral to one's identity (Ward, 1999, p. 96).

Method

We collected the data for this research via an online ethnography and interviews. Ethnography is a method for understanding the way people live out their lives and make sense of them (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Hine, 2015). In ethnographic research one enters into a social environment which is often unfamiliar, and participates in activities that take part there (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). As ethnography is "written representation of a culture" (Van Maanen, 2011, p.1), it is not only defined by the data collection process. As Geertz (1973, p. 6) has argued:

> --- doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description".

An online ethnography (i.e., netnography or virtual ethnography) involves ethnographic work conducted on the internet (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Markham, 2005), and it can be used to understand today's digital social worlds (Kozinets, 2010). The need for using ethnographic research methods in online environments has been documented for a long time (see for example Wilson & Peterson, 2002). As Hallet and Barber (2014, p. 308) argue, studying people in their "natural habitat" today should include people's "online habitats," since relationships and identities are now also being created and reproduced in online spaces. Offline

and online social connections are often essentially linked, and the internet has become a place where everyday life happens (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

We conducted the online ethnography between February 2015 and February 2016. The process was started by visiting a variety of websites and communities. Our aim was to understand the deep interest in school shootings as a phenomenon and how it is present online: for example, what type of material is being published online, what shootings get attention and how the shooters are presented. Our aim was also to collect information on deep interest in school shootings before conducting the interviews in order to ask more accurate questions and to understand the interviewee's answers and references better.

Because most of the interactions between people who are deeply interested in school shootings are limited to specific sites, three sites became our main focus during the ethnography: Tumblr, DeviantArt, and YouTube. We were also able to participate in a closed Facebook group where people who are deeply interested in school shootings interact. Besides observing the interaction and publications online, we consumed material and media that was often referred to in these online communities. This included for example texts and videos by school shooters and by people deeply interested in them.

We conducted the first round of interviews between July 2015 and September 2016 and the second round of interviews with the same interviewees (seven participants) between May 2016 and February 2017. Interviewees were recruited online by sending invitations to people who, based on their online profiles, seemed to be deeply interested in school shootings. A blog was created on Tumblr where people were able to read about the research. Some interviewees also contacted us directly and expressed that they could be interviewed.

In total, we conducted online interviews with 22 people who are deeply interested in school shootings. To accommodate one interviewee's request, we used e-mail as the interviewing method in that case, but for all other interviews, we conducted chats in Skype. The interviews were semi-structured.

The mean age for the interviewees was 20.2 years (range: 15–32). Of the interviewees, 15 (68%) identified as female, four (18%) as male, and three (14%) as transgender (one genderqueer, one gender-fluid, and one female-to-male transsexual). The interviewees came from many parts of the world: six from the United States; three from Germany; two each from Australia, Mexico, and the United Kingdom; and one each from Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Argentina, Kuwait, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates.

The first author was responsible for conducting data collection, and she was the only one who had access to the interviewees' personal contact information, identities, or ethnographic data. Throughout the data collection process and whenever using the data, we did our best to anonymize the personal information that we received during the interviews or found when conducting the ethnography. This meant keeping the data collected secure and ensuring that we used no names or nicknames in our research. The only personal information we asked the interviewees to give was their age, gender, and country of origin. We also chose not to use these identifiers in the quotations because, even though most readers would not be able to identify the interviewees' identities, people inside the school shootings community might be able to do this. To further anonymize the interviewees' identities, they are not numbered in the order of their interviews. For the sake of clarity, the most obvious writing mistakes have been corrected in the quotations.

We were strict in our anonymization because a deep interest in school shootings is stigmatized. In addition, many of the interviewees are young and have problematic backgrounds, so they comprise a possibly vulnerable group. In our research, we have chosen to refer to the interviewees as "people who are deeply interested in school shootings," even though the term *fan* has been more commonly used in the previous research. This is because many of the interviewees were strict about not wanting to be labeled as fans and because we found that the interviewees did not form a single, clearly delineated category. Thus, out of respect for the interviewees' self-determination and for scientific clarity, we chose to use the broader category based on deep interest.

Deep Interest in School Shootings as a Subculture

Based on our data, people who are deeply interested in school shootings share similar interests, perceptions, and worldviews, which are often mirrored in their styles and other everyday choices. Such commonly shared factors indicate that these people form a subculture. These objects and ideas are found, shared, and re-created online via social networking sites such as Tumblr, DeviantArt, YouTube, and Facebook.

The common denominator between almost all of our interviewees was their interest in the Columbine massacre: 20 out of 22 interviewees named Columbine as one of the most important shooting for them. Only one interviewee did not mention Columbine at all. Other school shootings that the interviewees identified frequently as being important were the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in the US and the Jokela High School shooting in Finland. Our findings from the ethnography also

highlight the importance of Columbine for those who are fascinated by school shootings. For example in Tumblr, pictures and writings of the perpetrators of that massacre are very common. Perceptions of Interviewee 1 highlight the importance of the Columbine massacre to many: “Yes, it’s always been about Columbine in my mind. It’s the first school shooting I came across and that’s how I started to research other shootings, but none of the others interest me so strongly.”

Like for Interviewee 1, the Columbine shooting was what also introduced many others to the school shooting phenomenon. Most likely this is due to Columbine shooting’s huge media coverage and the shooting’s interlinkages with entertainment. Columbine has been featured in films and the shooters left behind cultural materials, including journals and videos that refer to movies, music, and video games. As the Columbine massacre was extensively covered in the media, these meanings were widely disseminated, and later school shooters used them (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011; Larkin, 2009). One of our interviewees explained the importance of the Columbine shooting among people deeply interested in school shootings:

> Because Eric and Dylan are easily to relate to. Two white kids that listened to angry music from a different country. The characters they played to the world were cool bad guys. I’m sure in real life they were nerdy, geeky and not as cool as they pass themselves off as but many people, kids especially can see themselves as either them or friends of theirs. They like the same music, play the same games. They were not bad looking and when they put on their "uniforms" they became almost like comic book antiheroes. (Interviewee 2)

Besides their interest in the Columbine shooting, people deeply interested in school shootings also considered the same shooting-related objects as important. The most important cultural objects and style preferences were those that have been linked to the Columbine shooters. These especially include photographs (e.g., the image of the perpetrators’ suicide) and texts (e.g., their journals). The interviewees also mentioned shared music preferences and style choices, as well as cultural artifacts that reminded them of their interest in the shooters in their daily lives. For example, Interviewee 3 described the impact the interest had on clothing in the subculture:

> I remembered that people would dress up like Eric and Dylan, wearing trench coats or long black coats, black clothing, leather boots or dr. martens and

> especially their famous t-shirts ("natural selection" and "wrath"). I wore Dylan's t-shirt too, dressed up in black and wore a long black coat during that time.

Based on our interviews and ethnographic research, searching for school shooting related material and editing and circulating it online is a big part of the subculture. Many of this material can be traced to material that media have published. Pictures are often edited by adding objects, such as text, on them. In addition, participants create shooting-related works of art, such as drawings, and share them online. Interviewee 1 described the creation of this type of art: "Also I've been submitting some of my fan arts of Reb and Vodka on Deviantart, so mostly I used it to transform my 'sick' fascination somehow into art ;)." Reb and Vodka are nicknames that the Columbine killers used.

Besides shared interests and cultural artifacts, we found that many of our interviewees also shared similar experiences in life. Many told about problems with bullying and other social problems they had encountered. These experiences were often connected to perceived similar experiences of school shooters, and some saw that interest in school shootings gave them strength, since they felt they were not alone in their hardships. Many said they could relate with some specific shooters. For example, Interviewee 14 said the following: "I can really relate to Dylan Klebold. Aside from the homicidal thoughts I have a lot of the same feelings that he wrote about having (depression, low self-esteem, wanting to find love, not feeling accepted, etc.)."

Yet, even though we found different common denominators between our interviewees, we found that deep interest in school shootings is divided to different subgroups. This is not surprising, since subcultures are often divided into smaller subgroups, scenes, or styles (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, & LeVine, 2011; Hodkinson, 2002). We identified four subgroups, based on the participants' focus and level of interest in school shootings. These subgroups were: researchers, fan girls, Columbiners and those who wish to commit a shooting of their own, here referred to as copycats. There is overlap between these four categories, and they are not fixed; members can belong to multiple subgroups or move from one subgroup to another. However, similar ways of categorizing the community arose in many of the interviews.

Researchers

The first group consists of people who are very interested in searching information on school shootings and school shooters. Interviewees often called them *researchers*, as they focus on finding information on school shootings in which they are interested. This material can be very detailed, and include for example searching what was the weather like on the day of the Columbine massacre.

Researchers are interested in understanding why school shootings happen and how the perpetrators were alike and they spend significant amounts of time studying the subject. In some cases, interest in school shootings is linked to interest in other true crime events or in social or political issues, such as on how social structures impact school shootings.

During our ethnography, we found blogs and videos which were focused on distributing information and facts about school shootings, and sometimes answering school shooting related questions. Based on our interviewees, researchers use different sources to find information, and the internet is the main source. There is plenty of school shooting related material online, and due to today's internet based media, information concerning new school shootings can be found online almost instantly. Interviewees described searching information from social media, documentaries, books, and sometimes from academic publications. Interviewee 3 described their research methods, in response to a question about conducting Internet searches on school shootings:

> Yes, every day. All information I found on the internet, reports, diaries, videos . . . everything. During that time, there were several forums and websites where i found information. I collected a lot of it on my hard drive.

Although the interests of researchers lies in information and facts about school shootings, they are usually motivated by personal reasons. Many of our interviewees said that they could associate their own life events with those of the perpetrators. One major example of this was experiences with bullying. For some, being a researcher was also mixed with romantic or fanlike feelings towards specific school shooters which relates to the next subgroup of this subculture: fan girls.

Fan Girls

Fan girls are people whose interest in school shootings is focused on specific school shooters, and the interest usually contains romantic or sexual elements. Based on the interviews, fan girls are typically girls or young women. One of our interviewees also mentioned fan boys who worship school shooters, but did not claim these fan boys have sexual or romantic interest in school shooters. This theme also did not come up in any other interviews, although Langman (2017) identified two male school shooters who appeared romantically or sexually infatuated with the Columbine perpetrators. Overall, however, being a fan girl seems to be usually connected to female gender, as the term implies.

For many fan girls, school shooters have achieved celebrity positions. Thus being a fan of a school shooter is very similar to being a fan of any celebrity. The fandom includes searching for information on one's favorite shooter and it can include having school shooter related memorabilia. For example Interviewee 4, who defined herself as being between a fangirl and a researcher, wrote: "The wallscreen of my iPod is Dylan's picture & I like to draw him, I have a lot of sketches of him. And I follow closely any update of the case in Tumblr..."

Based on the interviews and ethnography, fan girls seem to be focused on specific school shooters as people, and the violence the shooters have conducted is not their main focus. The Columbine shooter referenced above by Interviewee 4 especially is often the subject of fandom and romanticized ideas. This is at least partly explained by the writings in his journal, which often discussed love. Based on the ethnography, fan girl material online often includes humorous aspects, for example funny memes made of one's favorite shooter. In DeviantArt and Tumblr, one can find art made of school shooters where romantic or sexual themes are present. Interviewee 5 described fan girls' behavior in online spaces accordingly: "You can see them all around Tumblr, writing love notes and things like that. Editing pictures with hearts."

In the school shooting communities, the fan girl type interest is sometimes criticized, since their interest is not seen as "real". For example, Interviewee 6 wrote: "I see it as people that just lust over the killers. They are only interested in the "hot" ones. Their knowledge may be very superficial. They are often young teenage girls."

Based on our interviews, being romantically or sexually interested in a school shooter is thus quite often seen as controversial among people deeply interested in school shootings. As fan girl material is common in online communities, many of our interviewees wished to underscore that they do not idolize or admire school shooters as fan girls do. Yet it seems that, for many fan girls, having a crush on a

school shooter seems to be quite innocent, it lasts only some time, and it is reminiscent of having a crush on celebrities that are more socially acceptable. For example, one of our interviewees told us that she used to have a crush on one of the Columbine perpetrators because of how much she felt he could understand her, alhough she did not define herself as a fan girl. When asked why the crush ended, Interviewee 5 answered, "Because I grew out of it, like many people of the fandom have done."

Columbiners

Columbiners are people whose main interest is in the Columbine shooting. Yet, even though most of our interviewees were very interested in Columbine, all of them did not define themselves as Columbiners. This seems to be due to the term's different interpretations.

For some, the term was neutral and used to describe people interested in the Columbine massacre and other school shootings in general: "Usually (as far as I know) there's just a worldwide movement of 'Columbiners/school shooter fans' going on" (Interviewee 7). For some, the term had a negative meaning and was connected with superficial knowledge of school shootings and a fan-like attitude. Interviewee 8 linked the term with less serious interest: "Hmm, I think my motives differ from the majority of so-called Columbiners. Because most of them seem to be girls who are sexually attracted to the shooters and have a more humorous way to dwell into this subject."

Thus, the term Columbiner can be intertwined with other categories of interest, depending on the viewpoint. Interviewee 9 described the different aspects of being a Columbiner:

> Some of my friends on Tumblr are Columbiners and they are like you and me, they don't live up to this poor reputation because they treat the fandom as an interest. There are definitely Columbiners who are people you really would not want to associate yourself with, they worship Dylan and Eric and hope to either commit their own shooting or have sex with them.

Some interviewees linked Columbiners to adoration and idolization without the connection with romantic or sexual interest. For example Interviewee 10, who was mostly interested in Columbine, answered accordingly when asked about being a

Columbiner: “No I do not because mostly Columbiners admire them. I do not admire them at all or think what they did was right.”

The common denominator among these different definitions is the focus on the Columbine massacre, as the term implies. For many of our interviewees, this meant excessive research on Columbine and also included identification with the other Columbiners and with one or both of the Columbine shooters. As Interviewee 11 explained:

> Most Columbiners have one thing in common: we have felt like outsiders or victims at some point in our lives. We have felt like absolutely NObody [*sic*] could understand how alone we have felt, and that experience is exactly what Eric and Dylan lived. Knowing that there were even just two boys out there who felt the same way as we feel now gives us comfort.

As the media heavily covers school shootings, it is not a surprise that a subculture of people who are deeply interested in school shootings is also seen as newsworthy. Based on the ethnography and the interviews, media is particularly focused on Columbiners and the interest from the media is usually seen in a negative light. Interviewee 12 described media’s interest and associated outcomes accordingly:

> We just don’t want to deal with public scrutiny. I mean heck, it hurts people’s feelings to have the news be like “we found these MONSTERS online talking about Columbine. . . . Some friends of mine have had their blogs publicly named by the news and it overwhelmed their blog with traffic. And people will start trolling the Columbine(r) tag.

Even though the term “Columbiner” was a very common sight when conducting the online ethnography, interviews revealed that its definition is not straightforward. Views about the Columbiners are contradictory: some see the term as neutral, others connect it with shallow or unhealthy interest, and for some it stands for a community of people with whom one can finally feel a sense of togetherness.

Copycats

The fourth group comprises those who would like to carry out a school shooting of their own. None of our interviewees defined themselves in this group, but many brought up this issue. For example, Interviewee 6 saw that these types of people

form a specific category: "There is also a third category too, but I haven't come across too many of these - people who idolize them and genuinely want to become killers themselves." Another interviewee divided people deeply interested in school shootings to two groups based on their readiness to use violence:

> There are the ones that obsess over school shootings but do no harm cause they feel like they have no reason to, and then there are the ones who are obsessed, and they will commit the act of a school shooting no matter what. (Interviewee 13)

When one is "obsessed" with previous school shootings and wishes to commit an act of their own, the shooting is linked with fame and notoriety. The subject of gaining notoriety through a massacre was well understood among many of our interviewees. Interviewee 6 answered accordingly when asked if committing a school shooting was a way to get famous:

> Sadly yeah, I think some people see it that way. They know the newspapers and tabloids will be all over it, their face plastered on every cover, everyone analyzing their lives in great detail, asking why, that probably motivates some people to violence.

One of the most well-known mass shooting enthusiasts who also became a perpetrator was the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter. He was keenly interested in mass shootings (Murray, 2017), and admired many shooters online (Webber, 2017). He was also part of a Columbine related online forum where he spent three years posting comments about many previous school shooters and mass shooters before his own attack (Coleman, 2014). One of our interviewees discussed the presence of possible school shooters in school shooting related communities by describing their encounter with the Sandy Hook perpetrator:

> When you are in a community like this for a long period of time it's only a matter of time [before] someone you know or even just talk to or read their posts kills people or tries to. This has happened a few times with the one going through with it Adam Lanza. (Interviewee 2)

Based on the interviews, many people deeply interested school shootings acknowledge the presence of potential school shooters among their communities.

Some brought it up as a concern, and others did not address it at all. Since the school shooting subculture is global, and the interaction between its members is largely anonymous, the risk of encountering a future school shooter in the real world where that person could harm you may not seem like a real possibility.

Discussion

In this article, we have focused on the general characteristics of a subculture of people who have a deep interest in school shootings. We have found out that people who are deeply interested in school shootings share similar perceptions and that they consider many of the same cultural objects to be important. A deep interest in school shootings is not merely present online; it plays a role in the everyday lives of most of this group's members, and it can manifest in their style choices—for example, in clothing and music. In this sense, the subculture of people who are deeply interested in school shooting is similar to other youth subcultures (Muggleton, 2000; Williams, 2011).

As with many other subcultures, a deep interest in school shootings is divided into different subgroups: researchers, fan girls, Columbiners and copycats. These four groups we identified were not fixed, there was overlap between them, and members can move from one subgroup to another, but they indicate that people deeply interested in school shootings do not form a homogenous group. They have different levels and foci of interest, and only the copycats are interest in carrying out a massacre of their own. Thus, even a deep interest in the school shootings does not straightforwardly or inevitably make one a potential school shooter. Yet, one's focus and level of interest in school shootings can change over time and could become more severe (Oksanen et al. 2013).

A deep interest in school shootings, as a phenomenon, is linked to media's accounts of school shootings. As postsubcultural theorists have emphasized, current subcultures are increasingly linked to traditional and social media (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Williams, 2011). This subculture uses the internet and social media to interact, and fast access to a global user network is a key to the subculture's existence. Social media enables users to be active consumers (i.e., prosumers), and individual users continually edit, update and comment on the content (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Hence, people who are deeply interested in school shootings do not only passively receive media content; they also re-create and circulate it online. Through this process, new meanings are given to that content, and new objects—especially artwork—are created.

People who are deeply interested in school shootings use content that is available online. Thus, even if media were to change policies about reporting of school shootings, the online communities surrounding school shootings likely would not vanish. However, excessive reporting on the shooters and death tolls may increase the shooters' attractiveness in the eyes of some individuals (Oksanen, Hawdon, & Räsänen, 2016). The media make the shooters famous and simplify the reasons for these shootings. As the subculture gets its information on shootings mostly from the media, the media-constructed narratives are likely to be shared globally. Even though most people who are deeply interested in school shootings are not likely to become school shooters themselves, the communities circulate reasons for these massacres and participate in creating fame and followings for the shooters. These accounts may influence future perpetrators.

There are some limitations in our data. For instance, we had 22 interviewees but were able to re-interview only seven of them. In particular, due to our research topic, the interviewees were hard to reach. Our ethnographic research lasted for only one year and was focused on only a few sites related to the subject. Despite these limitations, our data are strong, and the results of the ethnography and interviews supported each other. This study also contributes to the literature by showing that this is a relatively stable subculture that has existed for a long time (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Oksanen et al., 2014; Paton, 2012). Researchers should continue to investigate online subcultures such as those with a deep interest in school shootings. This line of study is important for understanding both social media–era subcultures and the global, mediated phenomenon of school shootings.

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III

Deep interest in school shootings and online radicalization

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Abstract

School shootings and terrorism attacks share many similarities, but these acts are often studied in separate research fields. Therefore, authors of studies on school shootings have not discussed radicalization of the perpetrators in depth, even though in terrorism studies radicalization is a highly researched theme. Online radicalization is even less studied as a theme in the school shooting context. Using opinion radicalization theory developed in terrorism studies, we analyzed online interviews (n = 22) with people deeply interested in school shootings. The analysis showed that people deeply interested in school shootings can be divided to three different groups based on the radicalness of their opinions toward school shootings: those with neutral opinions, sympathizers, and those interested in conducting a massacre. Data also indicate that becoming deeply interested in school shootings seems to strengthen an individual's opinions more than it changes them. Research and risk assessment of school shootings should focus more on the radicalization process of school shooters, because it is also done in the area of terrorism studies. The results imply that online school shooting communities have unused potential in the prevention of school shootings.

Keywords: school shootings, radicalization, terrorism, online radicalization

School shootings have been a subject of media and academic interest ever since the Columbine massacre in 1999, which started a spree of school shootings globally (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Böckler, Seeger, Sitzer, & Heitmeyer, 2013; Larkin, 2007; Sandberg et al., 2014). School shootings are statistically rare (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010; Ferguson, Coulson, & Barnett 2011; Wike & Fraser, 2009), but they are heavily publicized and thus have effects beyond the places they occur (Borum et al., 2010; Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Due to social media and online news, information on new school shooting sprees travels around the world almost instantly (Muschert & Sumiala, 2012).

The Internet has played a crucial role for many school shooters since the Columbine massacre; it has been a place to construct a school shooter identity and a venue to spread explanations and justifications for the massacre (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011; Paton, 2012). The existence of online school shooting communities

has been noted in previous research, and members of these communities have been referred to as "fans" (Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Oksanen, Hawdon, & Räsänen, 2014; Paton, 2012). However, this fascination with school shootings has different focuses depending on the people involved, and hence recent studies have suggested the term "deep interest" instead of "fan" or "fandom" (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018; Raitanen, Sandberg & Oksanen, 2017).

Despite the presence of online school shooting communities and the significance of the Internet in the preparation and the execution of school shootings, there has been no research that has focused in depth on school shooters' radicalization or online radicalization. This was recently noted for example by Vossekuil, Fein, and Berglund (2015), who called for more research on social media for understanding targeted violent attacks. In fact, even though radicalization is an often used concept in terrorism research, the term is seldom used in the school shooting context. This reflects the deeper division between school shooting research and terrorism research. The division of the research is surprising because it can sometimes be difficult to define when a mass attack is terrorism and when it is a school shooting (Böckler, Leuschner, Roth, Zick, & Scheithauer, 2018; Böckler, Leuschner, Zick, & Scheithauer, 2018; Sandberg, Oksanen, Bernzen, & Kiilakoski, 2014). The difficulty of categorizing different attack types is at least partly due to the similarities between school shooters and especially lone actor terrorists (see de Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, 2016; Kaplan, Lööw, & Malkki, 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014). However, authors of recent research have started to focus on similarities between different attack types. Böckler, Leuschner, Zick, et al. (2018) have found that school shooters and jihadi attackers use cultural scripts to frame their attacks. Both also commit their acts in public spaces, where victims are chosen by their symbolic meaning, not due to personal reasons. The attack in a German shopping centre in 2016 for example had many similarities with school shootings, even though the massacre was at first framed as terrorism (Raitanen 2018). The perpetrators may also wish to portray their acts in a certain way. For example the terrorist attack in Norway 2011 had close resemblances to school shootings, although the attacker Anders Breivik did not refer to school shootings in his manifesto (Sandberg et al. 2014).

Due to the shared similarities between terroristic attacks and school shootings, school shooting research could benefit from theories developed in terrorism studies. In this study we demonstrate this by using opinion radicalization theory, first introduced by Leuprech, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley (2010), who constructed a two-pyramid model to divide narratives on global jihad from terrorist action. McCauley and Moskalenko (2014) referred to these pyramids as the "opinion

radicalization pyramid" and the "action radicalization pyramid", and used them in the context of political radicalization. The division is made because radicalization to extremist action and radicalization to extremist opinions are psychologically different (McCauley & Moskalenko 2017). We have used the opinion radicalization pyramid as a means to define deep interest in school shootings more profoundly. Our data consist of 29 interviews conducted online with 22 people deeply interested in school shootings. Our aim was to understand why only a few people deeply interested in school shootings become school shooters themselves.

Radicalization and School Shootings

In the context of terrorism studies, much has been written about radicalization. At its basis, radicalization research is focused on identifying the process where an individual starts accepting ideas that are increasingly extreme, justifying the use of violence (Holt et al., 2017). For example, Doosje et al. (2016) define radicalization as "a process through which people become increasingly motivated to use violent means against members of an out-group or symbolic targets to achieve behavioral change and political goals" (p. 79). Radicalization process has been described differently in different theories. Radicalization has been seen as a forward-leading process, a staircase, where one gradually moves toward the use of violence (Moghaddam, 2005), or as a nonlinear process, where radicalization is constructed from different dimensions that effect each other (Hafez & Mullin, 2015). However, researchers have criticized the linearity of the staircase model (see, e.g., Lygre, Eid, Larsson, & Ranstorp, 2011), and today radicalization is more often seen as a complex and dynamic process. Radicalization to violent extremism is determined by myriad circumstances and events, which have a different effect on every individual (Leuprech et al., 2010; Mohamed Ali, Moss, Barrelle, & Lentini, 2015).Thus different theories on radicalization underline radicalization as an individual process (Hafez & Mullin, 2015; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011). Radicalization is also not explained by psychopathology or abnormality; regular people can move toward violence (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011). However, based on context, there are also multiple definitions for radicalization because the term has been used differently in the contexts of foreign policy, security, and integration (Sedgwick, 2010).

Leuprech et al. (2010) have developed a narrative pyramid of global jihad to visualize the development toward radical opinions. McCauley and Moskalenko (2014) renamed this pyramid the "opinion radicalization pyramid" (p. 71; see Figure 1). The pyramid is comprised of four parts, which are (starting from the bottom)

neutrals, sympathizers, justifiers, and personal moral obligation. At the bottom are those Muslims who do not accept the narrative of global jihad. On the second level are Muslims who sympathize with the idea that the West is carrying a war on Islam. The next level consists of those Muslims who find that jihadists are defending Islam and their acts are religiously and morally justified. On the top of the pyramid are those Muslims who see supporting and participating in defending Islam as an individual duty. The model highlights the difference between opinions and actions. According to McCauley and Moskalenko (2014), "The great majority with radical ideas do not take radical action. And some join in radical action without prior radical ideas (though they will likely learn radical ideas after joining)" (p. 72). Thus even highly radical opinions do not automatically lead to violent radical actions.

In the school shooting context, radicalization has received much less focus than in terrorism studies. Few school shooting studies have used the term *radicalization* (e.g., Böckler & Seeger, 2013; Heitmeyer, Böckler, & Seeger, 2013; Oksanen et al., 2013), but the term has not been defined in depth in the school shootings context. Authors of some studies have discussed the process of school shooter radicalization without defining or using the term as such. For example, Meloy, Hoffman, Roshdi, & Guldimann (2014) found school shooters to have warning behavior that may indicate increasing risk for violence. Madfis and Levin (2013) have developed a model that contains five stages that are necessary for a school shooting to happen. These are chronic strain, uncontrolled strain, acute strain, the planning stage, massacre at school. According to Madfis and Levin, these individual stages do not form sufficient conditions for school shootings, but intersect and work in a cumulative way. Thus, Madfis and Levin's model somewhat resembles Hafez and Mullins' (2015) model on radicalization by stressing that these strains are interlinked. However, in Madfis and Levin's model strains are chronological, whereas Hafez and Mullins (2015) see radicalization as a nonlinear process.

School shooting literature usually focuses on discussing how social, cultural, and personal factors contribute to the shootings (Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004; Robertz & Wickenhäuser, 2010; Rocque, 2012; Verlinden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). School shooters have been found to suffer from social problems, such as feelings of marginalization or bullying, as well as mental health issues (Kellner, 2013). Cultural factors, such as existing cultural models or scripts that promote violence as a solution, have also been seen as causes to these massacres (Kellner, 2013; Klein, 2012). In general, the previous school shooting literature has focused on school shootings as a special category that differs from terrorism.

In terrorism studies, on one hand, school shooters have sometimes been included in the "lone actor" category. Lone actors or "lone wolves" are individuals who conduct terrorist acts by themselves (Danzell & Maisonet Montañez, 2016). School shootings and lone actor terrorism can be defined as spectacular acts of violence, differing from regular patterns of violence, and perpetrated by one person or a very small group of people (Kaplan, Lööw, & Malkki, 2014). School shooters and lone actor terrorists share similarities, because both of these attackers use planned violence due to grievances (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014). De Roy van Zuijdewijn and Bakker (2016) included school shooters in their categorization of lone actor terrorists in cases where the shooters have pursued societal impact and wanted to influence a wider audience. Thus, school shootings are not always that far from political violence, at least when it comes to the perpetrators' opinions (Malkki, 2014). However, the lone actor categorization has been contested lately, because for most "lone" attackers, social ties have been essential for the construction of the capability and motivation for the acts (Schuurman et al., 2017).

One reason for the division between terrorism and school shootings, especially in the school shooting research, might be the commonly made links between radicalization, religion, and politics (Moghaddam, 2005; Paniagua, 2005), which are not usually seen as motivators behind school shootings. Yet nonpolitical motives, such as excitement or revenge, can also lead a person to commit terrorists attacks (Borum, 2015; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014), and religion can play a smaller role in the radicalization than often thought (Aly & Striegher, 2012). Besides perceived differences between school shooters' and terrorists' motives, historical and contextual reasons might also have impacted why radicalization is usually not discussed in the context of school shootings. School shootings have been the focus of academic research, especially since the Columbine massacre in 1999 (Larkin, 2009). However, wide use of the term *radicalization* did not begin until 2005 due to the "home-grown" terrorists of Western Europe (Sedgwick, 2010). Due to this, the term *radicalization* is usually discussed in the context of violent jihadism, even though the term has also been used, for example, in the context of right-wing extremists (see Pisoiu, 2015). Sometimes presumptions might also impact how massacres are seen. For example, the Virginia Tech shooter used religious language in his writings, such as by making a comparison between himself and Jesus (see Langman, 2014). One could argue that if the shooter had referred to the Islamic faith in such a manner, he could have been categorized as a terrorist.

Online Radicalization

Online radicalization is seen as one of today's major security challenges (Macdonald & Whittaker, in press). Because social connections and collective identities play a significant part in individuals' radicalization (Mohamed Ali et al., 2015), the Internet (especially social media) is today seen as a place for effecting the radicalization process. The Internet has great value in communication, and it enables indoctrination and recruiting (Holt et al., 2015). Terrorist organizations and people supporting them administrate thousands of websites and social networking platforms (Weimann, 2016). However, not all use these terrorism-related affordances online similarly, as user's individual needs, motivations, histories and expectations affect the use (Gill et al., 2017). For example research by Gill et al. (2017) found an association between online learning and selection of harder targets in terrorist attacks.

The Internet can be a place where one can become self-radicalized and where people can radicalize others (Huey, 2015; Picart, 2015; Reynolds, 2012). In self-radicalization one gets inspired by material they find online and finds imaginary connection with a terrorist group (Picart 2015). However, radicalization without any direct impact of other people is very rare (Schuurman et al. 2017). Also, even though a person might be seen as "socially isolated" by conventional standards, he or she can at the same time be well connected to groups and contacts online, sharing with them similar interests and ideologies (Liem, van Buuren, de Roy van Zuijdewijn, Schönberger, & Bakker, 2017, p. 19). Online communication, for example, increased the radical ideology of Norwegian mass attacker Anders Breivik, as well as of many school shooters. This is partly because these attackers were able to gain support for their extreme ideology online by friend selection and ignoring negative feedback. Breivik for example looked for support for his ideology online, and was influenced by the ideas he found there. (Sandberg et al., 2014).

ISIS has lately become known for its new way of using the Internet, because its members have used social media sophisticatedly. ISIS used a communicative strategy that portrayed the restoring of the caliphate as a religious duty of all Muslims, and used cellular technology and the mainstream media in distributing this message (Farwell, 2014). Social media can thus be used in the circulation of master narratives that connect the use of violence to the aimed goal. Narratives explaining the reasons for violence have also been distributed in the context of school shootings (Raitanen et. al. 2017). Because online life has been noticed as part of the radicalization process,

a method for assessing cyber-related behavior in the context of violent extremism has also been developed (see Pressman & Ivan, 2016).

Authors of school shooting research have rarely focused on understanding the interconnectedness of school shootings and the online world. However, some authors have addressed the phenomenon; for example, Kiilakoski and Oksanen (2011) discussed the impact the Internet had on the Jokela school shooter and how it affected his path to becoming a school shooter. Jokela school shooter communicated actively on Columbine shootings with others who gave support for school shootings actions. Similar support was not gained from school friends offline who were worried about his talks about school shootings (Oksanen, Nurmi, Vuori, & Räsänen, 2013). Paton (2012) in the other hand found that school shooters she studied used self-produced online videos and multimedia packets to gain audience for their opinions and for their staged, violent identities. In this material school shooters copied behavior of previous school shooters, and actively associated themselves to a group of school shooters.

Authors have so far limited their studies to single cases, and there is a lack of a comprehensive review of how many school shooting cases involve online radicalization and what kinds of phenomena are involved. The lack of research on school shooter radicalization online is baffling, because many school shooters have been active online, leaving traces of their fascination with previous massacres and posting material online related to their shootings. Some have produced self-made videos, and even more have participated in online forums for fans of school shooters or posted warnings in their online profiles (Paton, 2012; Sandberg et al., 2014). School shooters' participation in online networks also challenges the view that pictures school shooters as loners who lack social ties (Paton, 2012).

Authors of previous research on online school shooting communities have often focused on the potential harm these communities may pose. For example, Böckler and Seeger (2013), who have studied virtual school shooting fan groups, stated that their findings "point to a radicalized youth milieu where school shooters not only function as spokespersons for a larger group, but in a sense become the forerunners of a 'revolution of the dispossessed'" (p. 334). Böckler and Seeger (2013) continued by arguing that due to the fans' social and identity problems, "feelings of anger and hate arise, radicalized attitudes and violence-affirming ideologies take root" (p. 335). Oksanen, Hawdon, and Räsänen (2014), who have studied school shooting networks on YouTube, found that school shooting fans express their justifications for the shootings online. However, recent research by Raitanen and Oksanen (2018) showed that school shooter communities are heterogeneous, and deep interest in school

shootings can have various focuses. People deeply interested in school shootings can be divided to four different categories: researchers, fan girls, Columbiners and copycats. These are not fixed categories, because one can belong to multiple categories at the same time, and the category can also change. Even though only the members of the copycat category would like to replicate a school shooting, the online school shooting communities can participate in the radicalization process (e.g., by giving school shooters fame and circulating master narratives that simplify reasons for the shootings; Raitanen et al., 2017).

To understand better the role of online school shooting communities in the context of school shooter radicalization, we analyzed how the members of these communities discuss potential school shooters among them. After this, we discuss how deep interest in school shootings has affected our interviewees' perceptions and attitudes.

Method

Interviews and Online Ethnography

For this research, we conducted online interviews with 22 people deeply interested in school shootings between July 2015 and September 2016. Seven out of 22 interviewees were reinterviewed between May 2016 and February 2017. The original aim was to interview all participants for a second time, but we were able to recontact only seven of them. Interviews were semistructured. This meant that there was a set of question that we asked from everyone, such as for how long the interviewee had been interested in school shootings and/or school shooters, and did their life situation had any impact on them becoming interested in the subject. Also additional questions were asked based on interviewees' individual situation, making the interviews more conversational. All but one interviewee were interviewed using text chat in Skype. The remaining interviewee was interviewed using e-mail due this person's wishes. All interviews were hold in English and there were no significant language problems.

Interviewees were recruited online from school-shooting-related social media pages, especially from Tumblr and DeviantArt. Tumblr is a social media platform where users can create their own blogs and follow other users. In DeviantArt users can post their art, such as paintings, and give comments to other users' posts. We created a blog in Tumblr where we told about our research in detail. Most of the interviewees were recruited by sending them a private message in social media and

giving them a link to our research blog for more details. Some interviewees also contacted us after hearing about the study.

Before interviews, a 12-month online ethnography was conducted. The aim of the ethnography was to understand school-shooting-related communities better prior to the interviews. This meant spending significant amounts of time online in school shooting related social media pages. Also, due to etnography's participant observation nature, we sought to find out what was culturally relevant in the school shooting context and what people deeply interested in school shootings did, and replicated this. This for example meant watching specific movies and listening to specific music.

Interviewees were aged between 15 and 32 and their mean age was 20.2 years old. Four interviewees defined themselves as male, 15 as female, and three as following: one as genderqueer, one as female-to-male transsexual, and one as gender fluid. Interviewees came from all over the world: six were from the United States, three from Germany, two from the United Kingdom, two from Australia, and two from Mexico. One participant each was from Kuwait, Singapore, Poland, Portugal, Argentina, Hungary, and the United Arab Emirates. For the sake of clarity, we have modified the interviewees' texts by correcting the most obvious typing errors.

Ethical Aspects

Deep interest in school shootings is highly controversial and possibly stigmatizing, which caused us to be very strict in our anonymization. During the interviews, interviewees were not asked any other identifying questions besides their age, gender and country they live in. In this article, we have even anonymized these identifiers. This is because even though most readers would not be able to recognize our interviewees from this information, people from school shooting communities might be able to do so. We did not encounter any direct threats to violence during interviews. If this had come up, we would have been obligated to report this to the police based on Finnish legislation. The first author was responsible for the entire data collection and is the only one who possesses the interviewees' contact information and had access to the nonanonymized data.

Data Analysis Tools

We used the radicalization of opinions theory by Leuprecht et al. (2010) as a starting point for the data analysis. Our aim was to use the theory to understand deep interest in school shootings and the role of online communities in the radicalization process.

However, because almost zero empirical research on the school shooter radicalization process exists, we do not argue that the opinion pyramid shows the path of school shooters' radicalization, which is also in line with Leuprecht et al (2010). This said, our data, however, showed various levels of interest in school shootings, starting from relatively mild interest to interest that has significant importance in one's life.

We have applied content analysis for the qualitative data analysis. Because our data sample is small, we have not categorized our interviewees more precisely on different levels of the opinion pyramid, but focused on discussing how these different levels came up in our interviews. There might be more levels than the three we are presenting, but these were the ones that clearly came up in our data. We especially concentrated on presenting how our interviewees talked about potential school shooters among them.Thus, we describe how people on the two lower levels of the opinion pyramid discussed the ones on the top level. The descriptions our interviewees gave on potential shooters varied, but their view of their dangerousness came across. Because we focused on opinions, we also analyzed how becoming deeply interested in school shootings has impacted our interviewees' opinions, and how the change in opinion toward school shootings came up in our interviews.

Results

Pyramid of Deep Interest

Our data showed different levels and focuses of deep interest in school shootings. In previous research, these differences were used to describe various interest categories (Raitanen et al., 2017; Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018). However, we suggest that deep interest can also be categorized based on individuals' opinions toward school shootings, as done in understanding global jihad (Leuprech et al., 2010). Thus, we have constructed an opinion pyramid illustrating levels of deep interest in school shootings (see Figure 2). The pyramid is composed of three levels: neutrals, sympathizers, and those interested in conducting a massacre. In the neutral level, we define those who have interest in school shootings, but do not indicate any positive feelings toward the shootings or the shooters or identify themselves with the perpetrators. We had few interviewees at this level. For example, Interviewee 1, who said they spent a few hours daily on the subject, explained their views on school shootings accordingly: " I don't think school shooters are people that should be admired for what they did, however, it is interesting to me the way they think and

what motivated them to do what they had. School shootings are not a good thing, and they could be prevented in many ways"

Sympathizers sympathize with some school shooters or identify with them, but do not condone the violence in school shootings or indicate they would like to conduct a massacre. Most of our interviewees could be located at this level of the pyramid. Many told us they have social problems and that they relate to or identify with specific school shooters due to these shooters' perceived similar experiences. For example, Interviewee 2 explained the reasons they relate to Columbine attackers: "Their beliefs that nobody else in the world could feel what they felt, their anger, their disgust with humanity, how they felt like victims and saw no other way out—I have had a very traumatic upbringing, and I guess they make me feel less alone".

The individuals at the top level of the pyramid have an interest in conducting a massacre, but as Leuprecht et al.'s (2010) theory suggests, they may or may not do this in practice. None of our interviewees expressed an interest in conducting their own massacre. However, many talked about this type of individual, and two interviewees said they could have done something like this in their past. Because most of our interviewees could be located in the second level of pyramid, the levels of the pyramid are not proportional to the quantity of people expressing these types of opinions.

Our interviewees often divided people in school shooting communities into those who are interested in school shootings and those who are interested and would like to replicate a shooting, thus reflecting the significance of opinions. For example, Interviewee 3 divided people into those who can commit a school shootings and those who have no reason to do this:

> There are the ones that obsess over school shootings but do no harm cause they feel like they have no reason to, and then there are the ones who are obsessed, and they will commit the act of a school shooting no matter what. There are so many cases of a young boy just walking into their school and shooting people because they want to surpass Eric and Dylan. (Interviewee 3).

Interviewee 4 similarly brought up the category of potential school shooters online: "There is also a third category, too, but I haven't come across too many of these—people who idolize them and genuinely want to become killers themselves". Another interviewee described how some people in online communities condone school shootings and suggested that they could commit a school shooting of their own:

> But I think there are different communities within the fandom, for example, there are those who completely worship and idolize shooters. I wouldn't class myself within this type because some of these people completely condone shootings and suggest they want to replicate their own. (Interviewee 5)

One interviewee, who reported having problems with marginalization and mental issues and who said they were able to understand school shooters' motives, answered accordingly when asked what separates them from school shooters:

> I'm not in such a desperate situation. I think a person who plans to shoot up their school does this because they feel it's the last meaningful option they have. I'm not that dissatisfied with my life, though. Also I'm not sure if I would be cold blooded enough to do such a thing (Interviewee 6)

Besides describing differences between people interested in replicating a shooting and those who are just interested in the phenomenon, some of our interviewees also brought up their worry about the presence of potential school shooters in their communities. A few even described their encounters with these people. One wrote about threats they had encountered online: "I've seen anonymous asks of high schoolers threatening to shoot up their school. I don't know if that's a call for help or just trying to, in some way, call for attention (Interviewee 7). Interviewee 7 continued by describing the type of written responses they had seen to these threats: "I've seen answers from: Go on to: Please, get out of anon and send me a message". Two interviewees discussed their meetings with a young man who, according to CBC News (2015), plotted a massacre in a shopping mall in Canada but killed himself when police surrounding his home. According to CBC News (2015) and our interviewees, the man was deeply interested in school shootings and spent time in school shooting fan online communities (see Stagg, 2016; Tutton, 2017). Interviewee 8 discussed him accordingly:

> Well I lost a friend, he committed suicide and was involved in a foiled plot to shoot up a mall in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on Valentine's Day. We spoke plenty and he was very into Columbine like myself and the last two weeks of his life I witnessed him get hounded and bullied by people within the community, it was very hard for me to sit back and watch all this unfold. When I found out he had

> taken his own life, I can't even describe the overwhelming feeling of sadness that over came me... I named my 1st firearm after him. James... (Interviewee 8).

Interviewee 9 described encounters with the same man:

> A lot of people were calling the guy names and stuff after; he had been kind of confrontational/a troll before that on Tumblr. But I think people were actually disowning him BECAUSE of the incident. Either that he failed, or that he shouldn't have done anything like that, etc. Also there's much speculation about who called the cops.
> I knew him but only a tiny bit. A couple of exchanges on Tumblr. He was one of those "love to hate them" forum members that makes trouble with the other members. I'm glad I was nice to him, good grief. (Interviewee 9).

The presence of potential school shooters in online school shooting communities is thus not only understood by people deeply interested in school shootings, but has a very personal effect on some. Interviewee 10, who stated they had encounters with the perpetrator of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, described the guilt they felt: "We shared a message board over the course of 2 years or so. It's pretty surreal and [I am] left with guilt. Not only do you wonder if you could have helped the shooting not happen but what you could have done to stop them to begin with"

Based on our interviews, deep interest in school shootings can thus be divided based on the radicalness of opinions. Even though many people deeply interested in school shootings relate to or identify with school shooters, their opinions are not that radical because they make divisions between those interested in school shootings and those who are interested in conducting a school shootings of their own.

Change in Opinions

Individuals' views toward school shootings can change over time (Oksanen et al., 2013). Based on the theory first developed by Leuprecht et al. (2010), a person can move upwards or downwards in the opinion pyramid, and one can also skip levels while doing so (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). This notion is also supported by our data. However, our data suggest that when an individual becomes deeply interested in school shootings, deep interest does not necessarily change a person's opinions, but increases them. This becomes evident when viewing how our

interviewees described changes brought about by becoming deeply interested in school shootings. Some reported the interest had a positive impact on their lives, but for many the impact can be seen as negative. Positive impact was, for example, connected to a reduced sense of alienation and loneliness and to an ability to feel empathy, even toward mass murderers. Interviewee 11 for example explained that becoming deeply interested in school shootings made them more empathic, and they felt they could understand people better.

However, some interviewees described effects that can be seen as negative, especially in the context of how they saw the world. This could indicate radicalization of opinions. Interviewee 8 answered accordingly when asked how they saw other people in general and had this perception changed since they started to be interested in school shootings or school shooters: "I hate people, even before I was into the subject, and it has indeed opened my eyes more, and made me realize I'm not alone"

For Interviewee 12, becoming deeply interested in school shootings caused them to have a "greater sense of social alienation". In the case of this interviewee, becoming deeply interested in school shootings seemed to increase their worldview, instead of changing it:

> Well, [at] 16, when I was finding out about the massacre I [had] been going through the 'dark time of my life', I can say honestly. I found myself researching Columbine and other tragedies during depressed or stressed episodes... It wasn't like I was looking for something to serve my mental health, but just to feed my depression more and more. (Interviewee 12)

Interviewee 6, on the other hand, started pondering their interest in school shootings as follows: "I tend to have a bit of a nihilistic thinking sometimes, for example. The question is though- did I become interested in shootings because of this, or does reading about shootings trigger it?"

Interviewee 13 described finding new friends in school shooting communities, however, this also affected their social life offline: "I made more closer friends that understood me but I started to stop socializing in real life". The interviewee answered accordingly when asked if having a deep interest in school shootings changed their perceptions of other people in general: "It has significantly. I now hate most people and never was interested in making new friends" (Interviewee 13). In general, the interest in school shootings also seemed to be connected with hatred this interviewee felt:

Interviewee 13: I guess it has. Being bullied definitely changed my views on society and I became this misanthropic because I had nothing else and Columbine was my escape. It was what I see as a really great story and a sad one too because someone like you did this.
Interviewer: What do you mean by that "someone like you did this"?
Interviewee 13: Someone who had this hate for people someone who was bullied like you someone who only had his thoughts as escape.

We were able to interview some of our interviewees for a second time, which also allowed us to focus on the potential change in opinions toward school shootings. The second interview with Interviewee 13 showed a change in their opinions. When interviewed for the second time after 4 months, the same interviewee said they were not as interested in school shootings as in the last interview:

Interviewer: Why do you think you are not that interested in school shootings anymore?
Interviewee 13: Well back then I was angry. Now it just really turned into sadness itself.
Interviewer: Has something changed in your life then?
Interviewee 13: I'm more antisocial I guess I have shutted myself in more and had more thoughts in the process.

Two interviewees stated that they could have become school shooters in the past. These interviewees shed light on reasons for how and why radical opinions toward school shootings can change. According to Interviewee 4:

If I had access to guns, and if I had actually been forced to go to school and not allowed to skip when things got too much for me, if I had not had the support, if the bullying had been that bit worse, [it] might have been me.
I've never had the most optimistic outlook regarding people in general. My life experiences have probably reinforced this attitude more than my interest in school shootings ever has. I probably was drawn towards the topic because I know hatred very well. I know it is not easy to overcome. (Interviewee 4).

Thus, Interviewee 4's story also supports our previous argument that deep interest in school shootings does not necessarily change an individual's opinions but enforces them. Another interviewee stated that "if I had not been able to go to

another school, I maybe would have done it myself or kill myself." (Interviewee 14). In the second interview, the same interviewee was asked what they would like their old self to know, or what they would like to say to this person—the one that who thought about committing a school shooting. The interviewee answered:

> I would like her to know she's not alone, she'll get out of this and grow older and stronger. I would say there are a lot of people who love her and that there are so many beautiful and loving things in life. I would tell her that this is not everything, that it's going to end and that survival and leading a good life is the best revenge, not suicide. (Interviewee 14)

As our interviews have shown, deep interest in school shootings seems to increase individuals' opinions and worldviews more than it changes them. For example our data suggests, that getting deeply interested in school shootings does not seem to cause hate towards other people in itself, but the interest might deepen already existing hatred. However, these opinions and ideas can change, and individuals' opinions can become more or less radical in time.

Discussion

The aim of our research was to adapt a theory produced in terrorism research to a school shooting context. Our research suggests that people deeply interested in school shootings differ in their opinions toward school shootings. These differences can be presented as a pyramid, similar to the model developed by Leuprecht et al. (2010). We were able to divide people deeply interested in school shootings into three types based on their opinions on school shootings: those who have neutral opinions, those who sympathize with school shooters, and those who are interested in conducting their own massacre. Most of our interviewees could be located in the second level of the pyramid. Because of this, our pyramid model only describes the radicalization of opinions, not the quantity of individuals in different levels.

Our research is the first that has adopted a theory from terrorism research in this manner. Previous research on school shootings has been more focused on individual and societal factors behind school shootings, not on the process of perpetrators' radicalization. Our data show that people who are interested in conducting a massacre of their own are present in online communities around school shootings. Future research should then focus on factors that cause or prevent them from conducting a massacre. Based on previous research on factors connected to school

shootings (e.g., Ioannou, Hammond, & Simpson, 2015; Newman et al., 2004; Wike & Fraser, 2009), we could hypothesize that these individuals' potential to conduct a massacre depends on nonopinion-related issues in their lives that can either increase their risk of committing a massacre or work as protective factors. This also supports the model of Madfis and Levin (2013), which among others presents various strains that impact the likelihood of school shootings to happen. This hypothesis is similarly in line with Hafez and Mullin's (2015) theory of radicalization. However, because our research on school shooter radicalization is among the first, more research is needed for us to discuss this topic more profoundly. We thus suggest that research and risk assessment of school shootings should focus more on the radicalization process of school shooters, because it is also done in the area of terrorism studies. Because school shooters do not have a shared profile, it would be productive to concentrate on the change in a shooter's behavior before the act. Focusing on possible perpetrators' online behavior is vital, because the Internet provides a platform for school shooting information and communities for people deeply interested in these massacres. Perhaps by changing our perspective we would be able to find traits that school shooters share and learn new ways to prevent these acts. Differentiating opinions from actions, as Leuprecht et al.'s (2010) theory suggests, can also provide more profound understanding of how some individuals become school shooters.

Online school shooting communities have unused potential in the prevention of school shootings. What we know about the behavior of school shooters is that they tend to leak information of the upcoming massacre (Leuschner et al., 2011; Wike & Fraser, 2009). Due to the online communities, it is very likely that some shooters may leak the information online. Because many people deeply interested in school shootings do not approve of the violence of the shootings and wish they could have prevented previous shootings, we should give members of school shooting communities information and ways to handle alarming material they encounter online.

Based on our research we suggest practioners working with these issues to focus on opinions and the possible changes in them. Especially, are there negative opinions and have they become stronger after one has gotten deeply interested in school shootings? Also, are there strains in life situation that together with radical opinions may increase the risk of violence? Altogether we strongly recommend academians to focus on similarities between perpetrators behavior in different types of harmful acts, and to use knowledge gathered in different fields more broadly.

Limitations

Our data are limited to 22 interviewees. However, this number can be considered sufficient, because people deeply interested in school shootings are relatively difficult to reach. In addition, we were able to interview seven of them twice. Another limitation is that the data collection method might have affected our outcomes; it is possible that individuals who felt the strongest about school shooters were the ones who were the most interested in being interviewed. Potential school shooters also might not have wanted to be interviewed out of fear that someone would discover their thoughts. Yet if so, this only affects the quantity of individuals on different levels of the opinion pyramid. Lastly, we understand that using a model developed to describe opinions in a Muslim population is not a comparable way of describing opinions among people deeply interested in school shootings, and our aim was not to parallel these two groups. Our aim was to use the understanding of opinion radicalization in the terrorism context to understand opinion radicalization in the school shooting context, because both of these crimes share similarities.

Conclusion

School shootings and terrorism share similarities, but research focused on them has mainly been separated. Our research shows that theory developed in terrorism studies can be applied in the school shooting context. Based on our data, deep interest in school shootings can be viewed from a radicalization perspective. We have constructed a three-level pyramid model to present different focuses of those who have a deep interest in school shootings. These levels are neutrals, sympathizers, and those interested in conducting a massacre. According to our data, deep interest in school shootings seems to increase one's opinions more than it changes them. We suggest that future research should focus more on the radicalization process of school shooters and that online school shooting communities have unused potential in the prevention of future attacks.

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Figures

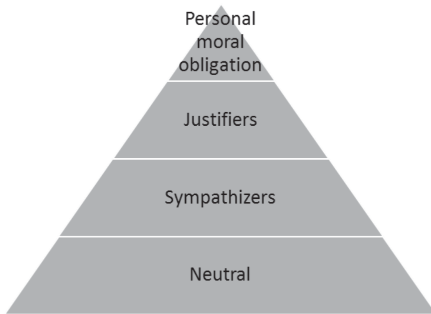

Figure 1. The narrative pyramid based on Leuprech et al. (2010)

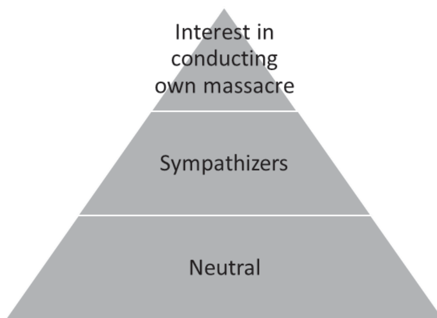

Figure 2. Pyramid of deep interest in school shootings.