“If I can't have you girls, I will destroy you”: Hegemonic Masculinity, Aggrieved Entitlement, and the Isla Vista Killings

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ABSTRACT

On May 23, 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger posted a video on YouTube and e-mailed out a 137-page autobiography; in each, Rodger expressed intense anger towards women for rejecting him his whole life and towards men for taking women away from him. On that same day, Rodger went on a killing spree, murdering six, injuring thirteen, and then committing suicide himself. Men have perpetrated 93.8% of all mass murders between 1976 and 2008, and the American construction of masculinity plays a prominent role in these murders. Sociologists Michael Kimmel, Rachel Kalish, and Eric Madfis studied mass murders and found that almost all perpetrators of these crimes experienced aggrieved entitlement, the belief that perceived emasculation justifies retributive violence. Building off of the work of Kimmel, Kalish, and Madfis, this essay will use a social constructionist and intersectional framework of gender and patriarchy to analyze the videos, forum posts, and autobiography that Rodger left behind in order to understand how Rodger's masculinity and aggrieved entitlement led him to commit these murders.

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We will never reduce the number of violent Americans, from bullies to killers, without challenging the assumptions on which masculinity is based: that males are superior to females, that they must find a place in a male hierarchy, and that the ability to dominate someone is so important that even a mere insult can justify lethal revenge.

– Gloria Steinem (1999)

On May 23, 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger murdered six people, injured thirteen, and then killed himself. This mass killing is now known as the Isla Vista or Santa Barbara killings (Sidner et al. 2014). After any mass killing, the first question on our lips is why: why would someone do such a thing? Yet Rodger himself had already answered why. Before the murders, he posted a video on YouTube and e-mailed out a 137-page autobiography; in each, Rodger expressed intense anger towards women for rejecting him his whole life and towards men for taking women away from him (Sidner et al. 2014). In the video, he said, “I’ll give you exactly what you deserve, all of you. All you girls who rejected me […] and all of you men for living a better life than me, all of you sexually active men. I hate you. I hate all of you. I can’t wait to give you exactly what you deserve: annihilation” (as cited in Garvey 2014). Elliot Rodger did not develop these attitudes within a vacuum. Elliott Rodger developed these attitudes within our culture, and our culture told Elliot Rodger that to be a man, you must be dominant. You must dominate over women. You must dominate over other men. And if you feel emasculated, you are entitled to use violence to get revenge and to restore your manhood. For my research, I apply sociological theory to all of the texts that Elliot Rodger left behind — his videos, his forum posts, and his autobiography — in order to understand how our cultural definitions of masculinity created his sense of aggrieved entitlement and ultimately led to these murders.

Theoretical Framework

After decades of research by sociologists such as Judith Lorber, the sociological consensus is that gender is a social construct (Lorber 1993: 35). Masculinity and femininity are not innate, biological characteristics of men and women (Lorber 1993: 35). Instead, cultures define what is masculine and feminine and then transmit these definitions to all of us through the process of socialization (Lorber 1993:35). As Lorber (1993:40) has noted, in the West, these definitions are constructed to create a system of male dominance and female oppression; this system is known as patriarchy. Within this system, women are expected to serve the men in their lives by meeting their sexual needs, but also by caring for them as wives and mothers (Lorber 1993:37). An intersectional framework, pioneered by black feminists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia H. Collins (1990), complicates this understanding of gender and patriarchy; intersectionality explains that how we experience our gender is affected by our other master statuses such as our race, our class, and our sexuality.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Not only do men dominate over women, but some men dominate over other men. In her influential work Masculinities, sociologist Raewyn Connell (2005:77-80) theorized that there are three types of masculinity in the West: hegemonic masculinity, subordinate masculinity, and complicit masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is violent, aggressive, stoic, brave, competitive, and completely unfeminine, and hegemonically masculine men have “power over those who are considered inferior, especially women and nonhegemonic men” (Connell 2005:77). Hegemonic masculinity is characterized by superiority, violence, and dominance (Connell 2005:77). Boys and men are taught to aspire to this type of masculinity; for example, as sociologist Michael Kimmel (2008:25) notes, boys are taught to look up to strong, independent, powerful men who solve their problems...
through violence, such as soldiers, superheroes, cowboys and policemen. Society rewards those who embody hegemonic masculinity with wealth, power, prestige, and women (Connell 2005:77). Since hegemonic masculinity embodies power and requires dominance, to be completely hegemonically masculine, a man must be white, straight, and wealthy because men who embody this identity hold the most power in our society (Connell 2005:77).

Subordinate masculinity is the opposite: those who occupy subordinate masculinity are weak, effeminate, possibly gay, and do not dominate over anyone, women or men (Connell 2005:78). These men are at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy because they do not perform their gender in accordance with gender norms, leading to social rejection and even violence (Connell 2005:78). The third category, complicit masculinity, exists for those men who do not embody hegemonic masculinity but still express their gender in socially approved ways and reap the benefits of patriarchy (Connell 2005:79).

This hierarchy is very tenuous; normative masculinity is a status that must be earned and demonstrated repeatedly through actions (Connell 2005:90). A man can lose his masculine status at any time—he can be emasculated and move from complicit or hegemonic masculinity to subordinate masculinity (Connell 2005:92). Emasculation occurs when a man does not receive the treatment he feels that he is entitled to on the basis of his manhood; he then sees himself as less of a man, or thinks that others see him as less of a man (Connell 2005:92).

**Aggrieved Entitlement**

As Kimmel (2008:177) has found, if a man loses his place in the masculine hierarchy and becomes subordinately masculine, he can use violence, associated with hegemonic masculinity, to restore his status. Men who use violence to restore their masculinity must feel that they are entitled to a certain kind of treatment on the basis of their manhood; they must also believe that when they don’t receive this treatment, they are entitled to use violence (Kimmel 2008:177). These men see violence as justified retribution for the perceived emasculation (Kimmel 2008:177). Kimmel (2008:23) calls this phenomenon “aggrieved entitlement.” He (2008:23) theorizes that aggrieved entitlement intensifies when men have a higher social status due to their race and sexuality: white, straight men experience the most severe aggrieved entitlement because they believe that they are entitled to more than other men on the basis of their master statuses. Though one may expect wealth to worsen aggrieved entitlement, Kimmel (2008:23) argues that wealthy, straight, white men are less likely to experience aggrieved entitlement because they are less likely to see their entitlement suffer; they usually continue to enjoy large amounts of privilege and power due to their wealth.

Aggrieved entitlement has become more prevalent in contemporary American society because people who are male, white, and/or straight have in fact lost some of their power due to gains by the feminist movement, Civil Rights movement, and the LGBTQ movement; many white, straight men have also lost their financial stability or middle class status due to the Great Recession, further decreasing their power (Kimmel 2008:23). Despite losing this power, they have not lost their sense of entitlement because prevailing ideologies, promulgated and maintained through the media and other social institutions, reinforce the belief that white, straight men—those who are hegemonically masculine—are entitled to social power and domination over other men and women (Kimmel 2008:24). Thus, these men experience tension between what they actually receive and what they think they deserve, resulting in their sense of righteous anger and aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2008:24). Aggrieved entitlement is exemplified in a variety of situations, including rape, domestic abuse, and violence between young men (Kimmel 2008:25). At its most extreme, aggrieved entitlement takes the form of mass murders.

**Mass Murders, Subordinated Masculinities, and Aggrieved Entitlement**

Criminologists Fox and Levin (2012:157) define mass murders as “the slaughter of four or more victims by one or a few assailants within a single event, lasting anywhere from a few minutes to as long as several hours.” Mass murders are not as uncommon as they may seem; Fox and Levin (2012:137) found that during the years 1976–2008, mass murders occurred approximately twice per month and caused an average of 125 deaths per year in the United States. The mass murderers were disproportionately male, 93.8%, and disproportionately
white, 69.9% (Fox and Levin 2012:137). My analysis, based on sociologist Eric Madfis’s (2014:68) reasoning, will not examine mass murders committed by criminal opportunists, who commit a massacre during the course of another crime, or mass murderers related to gang violence because the motivations for those two types of mass murder differ strongly from the motivations of the majority of these murders.

Madfis (2014:67) examined mass murders with an intersectional lens and found that white, straight, middle class to poor men who suffered subordinated masculinities — primarily because of downward mobility, but also because of other frustrations, rejections, and disappointments — are the most likely to commit mass murders. He theorized that white, straight men will feel entitled because of their identity, but when their identity does not yield the rewards they believe they deserve, they feel emasculated (Madfis 2014:78). According to Madfis (2014:79), mass murders can “bring back (or forge anew) a masculine identity full of pride, accomplishment, and even international fame.” While Madfis does not name this phenomenon, his explanation for these mass murders fits the description of aggrieved entitlement as defined by Kimmel.

Sociologists Kalish and Kimmel (2010:452), in their study of school shootings, had very similar findings: they found that since 1982, school shooters have been mostly white, straight young men in rural and suburban areas. These young men, just like Madfis’s mass killers, were subordinately masculine; they did not fit in among their hegemonically masculine peers, they were not “cool,” they were sometimes nerdy and effeminate, and they were often bullied and gay-baited (Kalish and Kimmel 2010:59). All of these young men were socially rejected because they were not hegemonically masculine, yet these young men did not just feel victimized but also superior to those who victimized them (Kalish and Kimmel 2010:461). They felt enraged because they did not receive the treatment they deserved on the basis of their superiority; therefore, they felt justified in using violence to restore their power, exemplifying aggrieved entitlement (Kalish and Kimmel 2010:461). These boys did not conform to hegemonic masculinity in many ways since they occupied subordinate masculinity, but, in a sense, these boys were overconformists — they clearly believed in hegemonic masculinity because they used an extreme act of violence to restore their masculine identities (Kalish and Kimmel 2010:461).

In his book Angry White Men, Kimmel (2013) examines two other mass murders that exemplify aggrieved entitlement. The first case is George Hennard’s mass murder in 1991. Hennard had vowed that he would punish the “evil women” of his town who “rejected his advances over the previous years,” and so he opened fire in a restaurant, killing fourteen women and ten men before killing himself (as cited in Kimmel 2013:170). The second case is George Sodini’s mass murder in 2009; Sodini wrote extensively in an online diary about his failures with women, in which he claimed that he had not had sex in twenty years and detailed his “growing rage at women in general for such emasculation” (Kimmel 2013:169). Sodini went to a women’s aerobics class, killed five women, injured twelve other women, and then shot himself (Kimmel 2013:169). The dynamics of aggrieved entitlement are again at play: these straight, white men felt that they were entitled to women. When women rejected and emasculated them, these men felt that women deserved to be punished with violence, thus establishing their dominance over women and restoring their masculinity. This particular form of aggrieved entitlement is motivated by sexual entitlement.

**Elliot Rodger and the Isla Vista Killings**

Elliot Rodger was born in 1991 to a British father who worked as a freelance photographer and director and a Malaysian mother who worked as a unit nurse on Hollywood film sets (Nagourney et al. 2014). He moved with his parents to Los Angeles at the age of five, and at the age of seven, his parents divorced; soon after, his father married a Moroccan actress and model (Nagourney et al. 2014). Both of his parents fulfilled his every wish almost on command, providing him with a lavish lifestyle: he attended movie premieres, went on trips to Europe and Morocco with first class flights, owned $500 Neiman Marcus sweaters, and drove a BMW (Nagourney et al. 2014). Rodger was always thinner, shorter, and weaker than other boys his age, and he was socially withdrawn (Nagourney et al. 2014). He had been seeing psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors since a young age, and though he was never officially diagnosed with a mental disorder, psychologists and psychiatrists have suggested that he may have suffered from depression, anxiety,
Rodger switched high schools because he was bullied twice before graduating; he then attended two different community colleges in Los Angeles before finally attending Santa Barbara City College in Isla Vista, California, where he ultimately planned and carried out his murders (Nagourney et al. 2014).

Rodger left behind several artifacts that divulged the beliefs that ultimately led to his massacre: he posted extensively on two forums, PUAhate.com and Bodybuilding.com; posted many videos to YouTube; and just before committing his murders, e-mailed out a 137-page autobiography titled *My Twisted World* to acquaintances, family, and a local news station (Nagourney et al. 2014). While many of the original forum posts and videos have since been deleted; many journalists reported on the contents of these posts and videos before their deletion (Garvey 2014; Glasstetter 2014; Woolf 2014). These texts show that Rodger very clearly experienced aggrieved entitlement. Rodger differs from most mass murderers due to his race and class; like most mass murderers, he was straight and male, but he was also mixed race (half-white, half-Asian) and wealthy. These differences, however, only exacerbated his aggrieved entitlement: his race contributed to his sense of emasculation, and his wealth aggravated his sense of entitlement.

Rodger displayed an intense preoccupation with hierarchy. In his autobiography, he explained that he first realized that there was a social hierarchy in fourth grade—that “some people were better than others” (Rodger 2014:17). He believed that there was a hierarchy within masculinity, “alphas” were at the top, “betas” were at the bottom, and women were below all of them. Rodger’s hierarchy was explicitly sexist, racist, and classist, with wealthy white men at the top (Rodger 2014:23). He never mentioned any sexuality besides heterosexuality, seeming to operate under the heteronormative assumption that all men are straight. Rodger (2014:28) constantly compared himself to his male peers, situating himself within this hierarchy; he lacked the characteristics of the popular boys, who were athletic, tall, confident, white, and attractive to girls, exemplifying hegemonic masculinity. Rodger, in contrast, was a skinny, short, shy half-Asian male. He understood that he was at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy — he embodied subordinate masculinity. Rodger writes that at one of his high schools and later at a college party, he was bullied, called a “pussy” and a “faggot,” emasculating pejoratives that associated Rodger with femininity and homosexuality (Rodger 2014:46; 122). Yet while Rodger knew that he had been placed by others at the bottom of this hierarchy, he believed that this was incorrect and unjust because he was truly superior to his peers, declaring in a video, “I am, in truth, the superior one, the true alpha male” (as cited in Garvey 2014).

For Roger, the ultimate signifier of hegemonic masculinity was having a “hot girlfriend” to have sex with; he believed that his male peers all received attention from girls and were sexually active while he was alone (Rodger 2014:54). He became obsessed with having a hot, white, blonde girlfriend, believing that this would be the key to superiority and happiness (Rodger 2014:54). In a forum post on Bodybuilding.com, he wrote, “It’s been my life struggle to get a beautiful, white girl” (as cited in Glasstetter 2014). The girlfriend of his fantasies had no characteristics besides being hot, white, and blonde; she had no agency as all she ever did was love him, have sex with him, and accompany him on walks (Rodger 2014:59). She was not a fully-fledged subject but an object who existed entirely to meet Rodger’s needs. Women’s lack of subjectivity permeated *My Twisted World*, and aside from family members, a female bully, and one female friend, no women or girls had names or qualities besides their level of attractiveness. In fact, the vast majority of the women in the text were completely interchangeable nameless, hot, blonde girls, almost as if no other women existed in Rodger’s world (Rodger 2014:76; 78; 82; 85; 87; 95; 100; 106). Rodger never found a girlfriend, and he never had sex or even a first kiss (Rodger 2014:59). However, Rodger believed that he was fundamentally entitled to a girlfriend because of his masculine superiority, stating, “I am an intelligent gentleman, and I deserve the love of girls more than the other obnoxious boys of my age, and yet they get girls and I don’t” (Rodger 2014:82). As a result, Rodger became deeply resentful and even more misogynistic; on the Bodybuilding.com forum, he argued that women didn’t want him because they had awful taste in men, showing that “their minds haven’t fully evolved” (as cited in Woolf 2014). In a post on PUAhate, he wrote, “There is something mentally wrong with the way [women’s] brains are wired. They are incapable of reason or thinking rationally” (as cited in Woolf 2014). Of course, Rodger’s
lack of success with women was most likely due to his lack of social skills. Rodger was unable to maintain friendships in general, and Rodger's attempts to meet women consisted of him walking around a street, sitting in a public space, or standing at a party while he waited for a pretty girl to be attracted to him and approach him (Rodger 2014:64; 88; 102). Lacking this self-awareness, Rodger started to become violently misogynistic, desiring to punish all of the girls who weren’t attracted to him because he felt that they had wronged him, rejected him, and emasculated him. In a video, he proclaimed, “You think I'm unworthy of you. That's a crime I can never get over. If I can't have you girls, I will destroy you. You denied me a happy life and in turn I will deny all of you life, it's only fair” (as cited in Garvey 2014). Like Hennard and Sodini, Rodger experienced aggrieved entitlement based on sexual entitlement; he felt entitled to a hot, blonde girlfriend, did not receive one, and then felt justified in punishing women.

Rodger was also fixated on race, clearly having internalized racist ideologies. He wrote that he felt different from his peers because he was mixed race, half-white and half-Asian; in fourth grade, he dyed his hair blonde in order to fit in with his white peers (Rodger 2014:17). His own racial identity was subordinately masculine. Traditionally in the United States, Asian males have been stereotyped as being effeminate, skinny, short, lacking body hair, unassertive, apologetic, and unthreatening (Chua and Fujino 1999:394). Contemporary media portrayals of Asian males depict them as nerdy, asexual, or lusting after women from afar (Chua and Fujino 1999:396). They are rarely shown as in relationships, especially not with white women; these depictions translate to reality as white women cite these stereotypes as a reason for not dating Asian males (Chua and Fujino 1999:398). Thus it makes sense that Rodger, a skinny, short half-Asian male, would have this fixation on white, blonde women; earning a white, blonde woman, usually the sexual property of the hegemonically masculine white men who were his socially dominant peers, would distance Rodger from his subordinated Asian male identity, showing the extent to which he has assimilated into white society and white hegemonic masculinity. Yet to Rodger's dismay, not only did he never receive a hot, white, blonde girlfriend, but he saw men of “inferior races” with the women he coveted; he saw a black man, an Indian man, a “dark-skinned Mexican guy,” and a “disgusting full Asian” man, with white, blonde women, and he regarded these sights as “great insults to [his] dignity” (Glasstetter 2014; Rodger 2014:84; 87; 121). Rodger’s racial identity subordinated him in the masculine hierarchy, but seeing men of even more subordinate races with the prizes he coveted only intensified his belief that he had been deeply wronged, contributing to his sense of aggrieved entitlement.

Rodger was very wealthy, and even in times of financial difficulty, both of his parents met his needs “with excellent precision” (Rodger 2014:21). Rodger exhibits classism throughout his texts. In lieu of other forms of dominance, Rodger tried to use his wealth to dominate. Whenever he felt inferior, he went shopping (using his parents’ money) to buy expensive clothes that would make him feel superior (Rodger 2014:94). When he learned that there is a “car hierarchy,” that “some students at [Santa Barbara City College] drove better cars than others,” he begged his parents for a more “upper-class car” until his mother bought him a BMW (Rodger 2014:128). Rodger felt that he was entitled to expensive possessions, and that because of his wealth and expensive possessions, he was entitled to women. He would walk around in his superior, expensive clothes and drive around in his superior, expensive car, believing that hot, blonde girls would see his signifiers of wealth and become attracted to him (Rodger 2014:130). When this didn’t work, he decided that he should become a multi-millionaire at a young age; he “realized that wealth was the only way I could lose my virginity, the only way I could have the beautiful girlfriend I know I deserve” (Rodger 2014:101-02). Rodger then played the lottery several times, each time losing (Rodger 2014:70; 79; 102; 113); after all of these losses, he decided that he will never have a beautiful girlfriend and so he must punish all of the beautiful, blonde, white women of Isla Vista.

Yet Rodger was not just angry with women; he wanted to punish both men and women because “the males deserve [pain] for taking the females away from me, and the females deserve it for choosing those males instead of me” (Rodger 2014:87). Again, Rodger felt that he was entitled to these women because he was a superior man — he was the “supreme gentleman” (as cited in Garvey 2014) — and so these women were his, only to be taken away by these men. Rodger perceived this to be a great injustice; because men and women deprived him of what he felt he deserved, emasculated him, and
subordinated him, he felt justified in using violence to punish them and thus restore his status as hegemonically masculine, the “true alpha male” in his words (as cited in Garvey 2014). Elliot Rodger’s beliefs exemplify aggrieved entitlement at its most extreme.

Rodger concocted a plan for his Day of Retribution; he began by legally purchasing three handguns and more than 400 rounds of ammunition, despite California’s strict gun control laws, and began practicing at a local gun range (Sidner et al. 2014). He decided that he would start by killing his Asian American roommates, then he would start luring people into his apartment to torture and kill them (Rodger 2014:132). Next, he would go to the Alpha Phi sorority house (“full of hot, beautiful blonde girls”), kill all of its residents, and set the house on fire (Rodger 2014:132). His third phase was to drive down to his father’s house, kill his brother whom he viewed as sexual competition, and then kill his stepmother whom he believed emasculated both him and his father (Rodger 2014:132). His final step was to drive down to a major street in Isla Vista, hit as many pedestrians as possible on the way, dumb a bag of severed heads on the road, massacre everyone on the street, and then commit suicide via a gunshot to the head to avoid capture by the police (Rodger 2014:133).

Thankfully, Rodger’s massacre was much more limited than he had planned. On the night of May 23, 2014, he fatally stabbed two of his Asian American roommates, George Chen and Cheng Yuan Hong, and their Asian American friend, Weihan Wang, at his apartment complex (Covarrubias, Mather, and Stevens 2014; Yang 2014). Then, Rodger went to one of University of California Santa Barbara’s Alpha Phi sorority house a few blocks away, opened fire on three white, blonde women who belonged to the Delta Delta Delta sorority, and injured one and killed two (Covarrubias, Mather, and Stevens 2014). Next, Rodger went to a local deli, only shooting at one UC Santa Barbara student, mixed-race Christopher Ross Michaels-Martinez, killing him (Covarrubias, Mather, and Stevens 2014; Yang 2014). Rodger then drove around recklessly and erratically, shooting pedestrians and hitting them with his car but killing none (Sidner et al. 2014). Four deputies found him, and they exchanged gunfire; he drove away at a high speed, hit a cyclist, and ultimately halted when he collided with other cars (Sidner et al. 2014). When the officers reached his car, they found that he had committed suicide by shooting himself in the head (Sidner et al. 2014). Ultimately, Rodger killed six people other than himself: three Asian American male students, two white, blonde students, and one mixed race male student. All of the men killed were men of color, illustrating his racism, and all of the women killed were white, blonde sorority girls, confirming that the only women he wanted, the only women he felt rejected by, and the only women he wanted to punish were white, blonde women.

**Ending Aggrieved Entitlement and Male Violence**

Elliot Rodger experienced intense aggrieved entitlement because of his race, class, gender, and sexuality, and his aggrieved entitlement motivated him to commit these murders. Yet Elliot Rodger committed only one of the 200 mass murders that have occurred in the last nine years in America. We can prevent these national tragedies, but only if we eradicate aggrieved entitlement. To do this, we must fundamentally change American masculinity. We must abolish the hierarchies, both between genders and within. We must allow men to have a range of gender expressions without fear of social rejection. Most importantly, we must uncouple masculinity and violence.

**References**


