

Bad Apples or Sour Pickles? Fundamental Attribution Error and the Columbine Massacre

by Gary K. Clabaugh and Alison A. Clabaugh

While a few bad apples might spoil the barrel (filled with good fruit/people), a vinegar barrel will always transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles—regardless of the best intentions, resilience, and genetic nature of the cucumbers. So does it make more sense to spend resources to identify, isolate, and destroy bad apples or to understand how vinegar works. . . ?

—Phillip Zimbardo

It was 11:19 a.m. on April 20, 1999—Hitler’s 110th birthday—when Erik Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado. Planning to kill most of the 400-plus students eating at the time, the pair planted two twenty-pound bombs in the school cafeteria. Then they waited outside the building, hoping to pick off blast survivors as they staggered out.

When the bombs failed to detonate, the pair stormed into the cafeteria and opened fire. Forty minutes later, twelve students and a teacher lay lifeless; another twenty-three students were wounded—many gravely. Harris and Klebold also were dead of self-inflicted gunshot wounds. Police worked into the next day to find and deactivate the thirty bombs the pair had planted throughout the school.¹

The FBI’s Bad Apples

What set Harris and Klebold off? The FBI’s team of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, including a Michigan State University psychiatrist and Supervisory Special Agent Dwayne Fuselier, the FBI’s chief Columbine investigator, and a clinical psychologist, assert that Harris killed because he was a “psychopath.” Klebold, they say, was “hotheaded, depressive, suicidal,” and under Harris’s influence.² The FBI experts are

not claiming that Harris was delusional or out of touch with reality. They are asserting that he simply was a world-class hater out to punish humanity for its inexcusable inferiority.

Fundamental Attribution Error

Is the FBI correct? Was this horrific incident simply the evil spawn of a remorseless teenager with a world-class superiority complex and an angry, suicidal alter ego? Let's turn to our experts who wrote about safe schools in the Fall 2003 issue of educational HORIZONS and see, based on their recently published contributions, what they would likely say.

To begin with, all the authors would probably, and correctly, say that the FBI has it wrong. John Merrow would emphasize the importance of emotional, intellectual, and physical safety at Columbine High. Alfie Kohn would caution that we shouldn't blame kids for a disaster that may well have grown out of the wrongs in our society. Tom Cottle would see the influence of the two boys' families as the likely key. Deborah Meier would point to a lack of awareness or intentional indifference to kids being tormented by other kids. Similarly, James Noonan would investigate the school climate.

None of these experts, however, would focus solely on Harris and Klebold—and in so doing, they all avoid the prevalent mistake known to social psychologists as “Fundamental Attribution Error,” a common blunder that involves falsely ascribing behavior to temperament or personality while underestimating the power of situational factors on the same behavior.

The Columbine Pickle Barrel

What was the situation at Columbine before the massacre? Was this high school one of those vinegar-filled barrels that transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles, or were Harris and Klebold bad apples who spoiled an otherwise wholesome barrel?

A painstaking investigative report by the *Washington Post* describes pre-massacre Columbine as filled with social vinegar. The high school was dominated by a “cult of the athlete.”³ In this distorted environment, a coterie of favored jocks—who wore white hats to set themselves apart—consistently bullied, hazed, and sexually harassed their classmates while receiving preferential treatment from school authorities.

Other students hated the abuses of the “steroid poster boys” but could do little. A former student testified, “Pretty much everyone was scared to take them on; if you said anything, they'd come after you, too.”⁴

Here is more of what the *Post* found was going on at Columbine:

- Bullying was rampant and unchecked. For instance, a father told *Post* reporters about two athletes mercilessly bullying his son, a Jew, in gym class. They sang songs about Hitler, pinned the youngster to the ground, did “body twisters” on him until he was black-and-blue, and even threatened to set him on fire. The father reported the bullying to the gym teacher, but it continued. When the father took his complaint to the guidance counselor, he said, he was told, “This stuff can happen.” The outraged father had to complain to the school board to get relief for his son.
- Athletes convicted of crimes were neither suspended from games nor expelled from school. The homecoming king, a star football player, was on parole for burglary yet still permitted to play. Columbine’s state wrestling champ was allowed to compete despite being on court-ordered probation, and school officials did nothing when he regularly parked his \$100,000 Hummer all day in a fifteen-minute parking space.
- Sexual harassment by athletes was common and ignored. For example, when a girl complained to her teacher that a football player was making lewd comments about her breasts in class, the teacher, also a football and wrestling coach, suggested she change her seat. When an athlete loudly made similar comments at a Columbine wrestling match, the girl complained to the coach. He suggested she move to the other side of the gym. Finally, the girl complained to a woman working at a concession stand, who called police. The next day a school administrator tried to persuade the girl’s mother to drop the charges, telling her that pressing them would prevent the boy from playing football. When the youngster was found guilty, he still was permitted to play.

How important were these injustices to Harris and Klebold? Did they care about them, or even know about them? They both knew and they cared. In fact, the *Post* reports that dozens of interviews and court records alike show that the pair’s homicidal anger “. . . began with the injustices of the jocks.”⁵

They became convinced that favored athletes could get away with anything. For instance, a close friend reported that the pair saw a star athlete, in front of a teacher, forcefully shove his girlfriend into a locker. The teacher did nothing. Such injustices enraged Harris and Klebold. That’s why, just before opening fire in the cafeteria, they demanded that all the jocks stand up. They planned to kill them first.

In sum, pre-massacre Columbine High seems to have been the kind of place that “will always transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles.”

Zimbardo’s Prison Study

Now let’s put the social situation at Columbine in still broader perspective by turning to a well-known experiment by the social psychologist Phillip Zimbardo (quoted earlier). He set up a simulated “prison” in a Stanford University basement, where a random sample of psychologically “normal” college students was assigned one of two roles: prisoner or guard.

The experimental setting was realistic. Prisoners actually were kept behind bars, made to wear uniforms, and identified only by their numbers, such as “Prisoner #12.” The guards, who worked in eight-hour shifts, were given Mace, handcuffs, and billy clubs.

Professor Zimbardo planned to observe the participants’ behavior systematically for two weeks in their new “roles” within the social context of his “prison.” But he ended the study after only six days because students playing the roles of “guards” exhibited an escalating level of violence and abuse toward the “prisoners.” Although an initial battery of psychological tests indicated no pathology among participants, it had taken only a few days for situational forces to overwhelm dispositional ones. As Zimbardo noted, “The Evil situation triumphed over Good people.”⁶

Zimbardo’s “prison” resembles the *Post’s* description of Columbine High. The favored clique of white-capped athletes assumed a role similar to that of Zimbardo’s “guards.” The outcasts, the kids who did not fit in, were their “prisoners.” The abuse was essentially the same. Unlike the experiment, however, no one stepped in to end the intolerable situation at Columbine before it was too late.⁷

Vinegar at Work

The fact that Harris and Klebold were social outcasts made them especially conspicuous targets for abuse. Social psychological research reveals that not fitting in is costly. Group members typically first try to persuade those holding minority opinions or who are otherwise different to conform to group standards. But if individuals still fail to conform, social rejection follows: nonconformists typically are ostracized as social pariahs.

That is precisely what happened to Harris and Klebold. Both notorious nonconformists, they definitely did not fit in. As one Columbine student observed, “They didn’t look like other people,” and “They didn’t dress or act like other people.”⁸ Consequently, they became social outcasts and victims, deeply resentful of their marginality and outraged by their subsequent victimization.

Harris and Klebold were peripheral members of just one group: the so-called “Trench Coat Mafia.” (The leading athletes assigned this name to a loose collection of the school’s non-athletic social outcasts who had taken to wearing black—most markedly long black—trench coats.) Predictably, the athletes regarded these conspicuous rebels as especially legitimate targets for abuse, and Harris and Klebold got more than their share. Once, for instance, they were standing outside the school with a friend when a carload of athletes went by and a passenger threw a bottle at them. It smashed at their feet. The friend recalls Klebold saying, “Don’t worry, man, it happens all the time.”⁹

Harris and Klebold’s marginalization and subsequent maltreatment were major factors in the massacre. Their powerlessness in the face of this favored clique’s illegitimate authority, psychological abuse, physical intimidation, and sexual harassment sparked a profound desire for revenge. As one student told a *Post* reporter, “They just let the jocks get to them. I think they were taunted to their limits.”¹⁰

Eventually their rage led to a plan to strike back at their tormentors. That, in turn, morphed into a scheme for indiscriminate mass murder in a school they had come to loathe.

Discovering and Modifying Causal Networks

None of our exploration is meant to excuse Harris or Klebold. As Zimbardo observes,

Acknowledging the power of situational forces does not excuse the behaviors channeled by their operation. Rather, it provides a knowledge base to shift attention away from simplistic “blaming of the victim,” and ineffective individualistic treatments designed to change the evildoer, toward more profound attempts to discover causal networks that should be modified.¹¹

That is the primary task of educators charged with containing school violence. They must discover and modify its causal networks. Years ago a pioneer social psychologist, Solomon Asch, incisively observed, “Most social acts have to be understood in their setting, and lose meaning if isolated. No error in thinking about social facts is more serious than the failure to see their place and function.”¹² Nevertheless, that is precisely the blunder the FBI fell into.

No matter how seductive they might seem, it is generally unwise to trust bad-apple explanations of school violence.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, “Columbine High School Massacre,” >http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine_High_School_massacre>.

2. Dave Cullen, "The Depressive and the Psychopath: At Last We Know Why the Columbine Killers Did It," <<http://slate.msn.com>>, posted April 20, 2004.
3. Lorraine Adams and Dale Russakoff, "Dissecting Columbine's Cult of the Athlete," *Washington Post*, June 12, 1999, A-1.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Phillip Zimbardo, "A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil: Understanding How Good People Are Transformed into Perpetrators," in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil: Understanding Our Capacity for Kindness and Cruelty*, ed. Arthur Miller (New York: Guilford, 2004).
7. Note that Zimbardo's experiment offers a powerful explanation of the abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.
8. Sandra Fish, "Suspects' Neighbors Stunned by Shootings," *Boulder Daily Camera*, April 22, 1999, 1.
9. Ibid.
10. Adams and Russakoff, "Dissecting Columbine's Cult."
11. Zimbardo, "A Situationist Perspective."
12. Quoted on the home page of the Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict at the University of Pennsylvania, <<http://www.psych.upenn.edu/sacsec/about/solomon.htm>>.

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