

“THE SHOOTER HAS ASPERGER’S”: AUTISM, BELIEF, AND “WILD CHILD” NARRATIVES

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Having reviewed hundreds of press reports on school shootings since 2000, I find a consistent pattern of narrative speculation about the association of autism and more specifically Asperger’s syndrome with individuals who commit mass violence in America. In reporting the “motivation” for shootings by teens and young adults, the press typically relies on oral narratives provided by classmates and family members, rather than medical documentation. Often these reports cite odd, unusual, or asocial behavior by the individuals, sometimes prompted by bullying or engagement in game or music participation, that lead to an unanticipated violent outburst, colloquially called a “meltdown,” “breakdown,” or “losing it.” The press reports reflect, or respond to, a more general belief found in the population concerning the shooter’s deteriorating mental state since childhood and the notion that he, and the shooter is assumed to be male, had gone undiagnosed or kept his diagnosis secret in mainstream society, commonly with the suggestion that he should have been institutionalized or separated from “normal” youth. Pathologizing or folklorizing the phenomenon, observers often mention an unrecognized or suppressed “epidemic” of autism or mental illness along with speculation about environmental as well as medical reasons bordering on the conspiratorial for the contemporary rise of retributational violence by youth. Without discounting scientific attempts to understand brain function in relation to youth violence, I frame the discourse among such observers in the context of folk psychology, a term that has come into usage outside of folkloristics, but can be applied to issues of social interaction as manifested in traditional cultural practices of children (Haselager 1997; Thomas 2001). The key concept suggested by folk psychology is that people as part of their localized cultural experience perceive, predict, and explain one another’s actions, thoughts, and motivations, often in relation to inherited norms of social behavior expressed through narrative and ritual.

The Intellectual and Cultural Construction of Autism, Asperger’s, and Aspies

Although the public has a number of beliefs about autism, and Asperger’s characteristics which is usually tied to autism, thus expressing a folk psychology, the psychiatric community has a set of definitions it circulates among its practitioners, most notably in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, known by the initialism DSM and a number indicating its edition. In the most current version of DSM-5 prepared by the American Psychiatric Association, autism is listed under “neurodevelopmental disorders” as “autism spectrum disorder.” The disorder entails “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity,

nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and skills in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 31). The spectrum refers to relative severity of symptoms, related in the scientific literature to impairments of the development of the brain or central nervous system. Neurodevelopmental disorders that are differentiated from the autism spectrum are intellectual developmental disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, tic disorder, and developmental coordination disorder (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 31-86). Readers will notice the absence of Asperger's syndrome from this list. In DSM-5, the American Psychiatric Association declared that "many individuals previously diagnosed with Asperger's disorder would now receive a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder without language or intellectual impairment" (2013, 32).

Autism as a label is a little over a hundred years old, and became popular only after 1943 when American child psychiatrist Leo Kanner described eleven children with "autistic disturbances of affective contact," that is, a highly variable social impairment that he linked to a neurodevelopmental disorder (Schriber, Robins, and Solomon 2014). Kanner differentiated this disorder from schizophrenia that Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist who introduced the term "autism" in 1911 along with "schizophrenia" in his weighty tome *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias*, thought was connected (McNally 2009). Kanner hypothesized that the autistic disturbances he observed were inborn and presumably genetic. Later psychiatrists described the social impairment that Kanner described as "Kanner's infantile autism," which appeared similar to the syndrome proposed around the same time as Asperger's. One major difference is the muteness or abnormality of speech among Kanner's children in his study, whereas Asperger's was viewed as more of a social disorder and in the twenty-first century is more popularly known (Pearce 2005). Notice of Asperger's syndrome is credited to Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger's paper "Die 'autistischen Psychopathen' im Kindesalter" in a German journal of psychiatry and neurology in 1944. In the essay, he identified patterns of children who had poor nonverbal communication skills (their speech, however, was fluent but long-winded, literal, and pedantic), were emotionally detached, displayed egocentric behavior, and were physically clumsy. Later clinicians identified additional symptoms of repetitive behavior, obsession with specific interests, and normal to superior intelligence despite difficulty in conventional school work. Although Asperger noted the association of abnormalities with the childhood years, usually among males after starting school, he noted that the traits were lifelong.

Before Asperger's paper, psychiatric literature included case histories of "schizothymic" or "schizoid" patients. Ernst Kretschmer in 1925, for example, wrote about a patient who had no friends at school, was odd and awkward in social interaction, was observed being oversensitive, and was unhappy when away from home. Drawing psychiatric attention, including folkloristic as well as psychoanalytic commentary from Sigmund Freud, such patients were described as having invented a detailed imaginary world. Freud in 1918 in his famous cases of the Wolf Man and Rat Man referred to "infantile neurosis" as a mental disorder caused by an Oedipal conflict that has been symbolically noted in the

male patient's early childhood. In adulthood, the patient displays obsessional and paranoid behaviors associated later by psychoanalysts with autism (Loewald 1974). Freud did not observe violent tendencies in his case histories of young adults plagued by this neurosis, but Kurt Schneider in 1923 identified a psychological type called "affectionless psychopaths" who pursue their own interests with ruthless indifference to other people's feelings. Although Asperger, Freud, and Kretschmer did not mention a propensity for violence in the different childhood disorders they identified, Schneider noted the possibility that "psychopaths" could harm others in pursuit of their special interests.

The connection of "affectionless" patients to autism owes largely to a 1981 paper "Asperger's Syndrome: A Clinical Account" in *Psychological Medicine* by English psychiatrist Lorna Wing. She introduced the label "Asperger's syndrome" to replace the negative, vague terms "psychopath," "schizoid," or "neurotic." Her connection of Asperger's to autism was based upon similarity of symptoms described by Asperger to Kanner's autism, such as the inability to understand that others have beliefs that are different from their own. These neurologically based deficits prevent normal social intercourse, including the ability of the children to engage in joint fantasy or to empathize with the feelings of others. The significance of the connection to autism is the shift to what Kanner (1943) called an "innate" disorder with the suggestion of genetic transmittal within families.

For the first time in 1994, and then in a revision of 2000, the American Psychiatric Association in its influential *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR) listed "Asperger's Disorder" (299.80) as a distinct condition (Klin 2003, 106-7). The primary features, according to the manual, were "severe and sustained impairment in social interaction and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities" (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 80). The stated contrast to "Autistic Disorder" was the absence of "clinically significant delays or deviance in language acquisition ... and spontaneous communicative phrases" (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 82). No mention was made of a propensity to violence; in fact, the concern in the manual for Asperger's patients was the experience of "victimization by others" (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 82). Although the DSM-IV-TR noted occasional associations with Depressive Disorders, more frequent was a prior diagnosis of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD, estimated to affect 3 to 7 percent of all school-age children). As with Asperger's, ADHD primarily affects boys, according to the manual, ranging from ratios as high as 9 to 1 (Asperger's is 5:1). DSM-5, released in 2013, however, eliminated Asperger's as a distinct condition and placed its symptoms under a broad category of "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 50-59).

Placement of Asperger's syndrome or disorder on the autism spectrum by medical authorities has been disputed, primarily on the bases of the refocusing of Asperger's as a communication disorder rather than a neurological or learning characteristic. Some critics who view the autism spectrum as a social construction worry that psychiatrists have broadened the population of individuals as patients who are at the high functioning end. The diagnosis on the autism spectrum, according to this view, will stigmatize these persons and potentially concentrate

treatment on communication rather than intellectual and social issues. Another argument against the elimination of Asperger's syndrome as a separate category is a cultural defense. One report from the College of William and Mary, for example, points out that "Many also see the Asperger's diagnosis as part of their identity, especially those who have lived with the label for many years. By grouping all spectrum individuals together, they fear they will lose this, as they will not be able to relate or identify with a majority of their autistic peers under the new criteria" (Disability Services 2014). This identity for many individuals diagnosed with Asperger's is the "Aspies" who view themselves positively as "neuro-diverse" with creative, intellectual, and occupational assets (Robison 2007). They often express Asperger's as a value of being different that they do not want to change (Robison 2012). As a group whose members often communicate with one another in listservs, online networks, and special groups (including camps), Aspies nonetheless worry about being misunderstood, and feared, as diseased, incapable of social relationships, and dangerously violent (Robison 2012). Although Aspies increasingly advocate for themselves, they are aware that Asperger's has become a folk term with negative connotations in popular culture and folklore (Robison 2012; Seventhvoice 2013).

In the psychiatric community, the issue of communication skills apparently was a key in the decision to eliminate Asperger's from DSM-5. The manual stated that "individuals who have marked deficits in social communication, but whose symptoms do not otherwise meet criteria for autism spectrum disorder, should be evaluated for social (pragmatic) disorder" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 51). Apparently responding to criticism of cultural standards for social communication, especially in narrative competency, the DSM-5 noted culture and gender-based diagnostic issues. Acknowledging that "cultural differences will exist in norms for social interaction, nonverbal communication, and relationships" (and therefore the perception of maladjustment), the manual insisted nonetheless that "individuals with autism spectrum disorder are markedly impaired against the norms for their cultural context" (American Psychiatric Association, 57; emphasis added). It hypothesized, for example, the late- or under-diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder among African American children. Still finding more males with the disorder, the manual considered the possibility that girls might be left undiagnosed because of "subtler manifestation of social and communication difficulties" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 57).

Another factor in the elimination of Asperger's from DSM-5 was the concern of overgeneralizing behavioral difference into a definite pathology. As one writer who self-identified as an Aspie reported in response to the Newtown shooting, "If you meet somebody with Asperger's, you've only met one person with Asperger's. Asperger's is a blip on the far-reaching autism spectrum and no two cases are the same. Just as no 'typical' person deserves to be tar-brushed with the evil acts of another, Aspies don't deserve the bad press they're getting" (Inquisitr 2004). Parents in a support group I attended for caregivers for youth diagnosed with Asperger's often uttered the statement "If you've seen one Aspie, you've seen one Aspie" as proverbial wisdom, and I heard this saying in conversation with parents of Aspies elsewhere (Lovett 2005, 29-30; Snowy Owl 2005; Szalavitz 2009). It

counters the adage "Seen one, seen them all," which suggests that characteristics of an individual or thing repeated in other instances, and therefore do not have to be witnessed (Ammer 2013, 393; Mikkelson and Mikkelson 2006; Shapiro 2006, 11).

Despite the cautionary message in the folklore of Aspies about overgeneralizing and pathologizing non-conforming behavior, the term "autistic" has emerged in popular parlance to refer to someone socially disconnected or annoying, showing up in middle-school slang, so my children tell me, apparently to replace playground use of "spastic" and "retard" which has become repressed or obsolete. According to DSM-5, Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorder are general terms for disorders of brain development (autism first appears as a separate condition in DSM-III in 1980; in DSM-II, schizophrenics could be identified by "autistic, atypical and withdrawn behavior" and autism is totally absent in DSM-I published in 1952). In that sense, such disorders are neurological rather than psychological conditions, although diagnosis is based upon a checklist of manifest behaviors, not on a physiological examination. If it is physiological, skeptics have questioned why so many more children are being diagnosed as autistic in the twenty-first century. As of 2008, about 1 in 88 children were identified with an autism spectrum disorder and boys (1 in 54) are 5 times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls (1 in 252). In 2002, the number was 1 in 150, or 23 percent lower. Medical sources note the difficulty of an exact count of individuals with Asperger's syndrome, but most sources cite an incidence between 1 in 250 to 500 persons (Stanford 2003, 33-34). That suggests the syndrome to be more common than childhood cancer, muscular dystrophy, or cerebral palsy (Bashe and Kirby 2010, 18). Other estimates run between 2 to 7 per 1,000, still a small segment of the population (Baio 2014; Kuehn 2007). Even if Asperger's is no longer in the DSM, it is getting more attention in popular culture with characters on twenty-first century television shows such as "The Bridge" (2013-2014), "Parenthood" (2010-2014), "Glee" (2011), "Grey's Anatomy" (2008-2009), and "Sherlock" (2012-2013). Others such as Sheldon Cooper on "Big Bang Theory" (premiering 2007) while not identified as having Asperger's, are popularly associated with its characteristics (Learningneverstops 2012). Indeed, showing the rise of Asperger's awareness in public consciousness, press reports refer to Cooper as the first, and most popular, situation comedy character with Asperger's (Collins 2010).

The trend to depict modern-day "oddball" characters having Asperger's on television and movies raises speculation whether Asperger's cases are more prevalent in the twenty-first century because of conditions of modern society and environment, including linkages made by commentators to various children's vaccines, drugs (acetaminophen is frequently mentioned), and high-gluten and fast-food diets, or the tendency to diagnose autism more for behavior that some would call characteristic of children or particularly boys (Park 2011). In January 2014, a folkloric event occurred when Jenny McCarthy, host of the popular television show "The View," angrily answered rumors that her eleven-year-old son Evan was misdiagnosed with Asperger's syndrome or autism. The story was connected apparently with McCarthy's outspoken criticism of childhood vaccinations such as the Measles, Mumps and Rubella shot (MMR)

being responsible for the rise in autism rates (Vultaggio 2014). She also claimed to have cured her son of autism through a gluten and dairy free diet and vitamin regimen she developed from social connections (McCarthy 2008). Many postings on social media concerning the rumor referred to her questionable parenting as a single mother who served as a model for Playboy magazine (Johnson 2014). One comment, for example, was that "Jenny McCarthy's son might grow up to be surprisingly levelheaded, which would be a miracle considering his parentage" (Nguyen 2014). The comment arose in McCarthy's public statements on her difficulty of controlling her autistic son, who often reported his mother to the police. On her XM radio show, "Dirty, Sexy, Funny" she broadcast this anecdote: "He [her son Evan] called 911 and said, 'I am alone in the house. My mom abandoned me. I go back in the house and it's 911 and they're like, 'Your child just called. Is there an emergency?' I'm like, 'What? No! Everything is fine.'" (Nguyen 2014). Critics use this narrative to question whether she has an active boy rather than someone with a neurodevelopmental disorder (Celebitchy 2014; see also Gnaulati 2013).

Even Hans Asperger in 1943 wondered if the condition he was observing might be, in his words, "an extreme variant of male intelligence, of the male character," which appeared increasingly out of place in a feminizing or domesticating society. In other words, he opened for comment that the syndrome he observed was a case of "boys will be boys," which with Euro-American modernization appeared abnormal. British psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen hypothesized that autism in boys might be overdiagnosed to control male behavior in a feminizing society, but saw truth to the idea that autistic behavior is related to what he called an "extreme male brain," which presumes differences between typical men's and women's brains (2004). Another connection to masculinity as a problem in cases of autism is in genetics. Research has been undertaken to investigate a folk belief that violent and criminal behavior can be explained with a chromosomal deviation. The investigation hinges on an additional Y sex chromosome attached to the normal XY pairing in males, a rare condition estimated to affect 1 to 1.5 per 10,000 live births (Cashion and Roden 2011). In an attempt to explain severe temper tantrums and violent tendencies biologically, questions have been raised by popular writers as to whether patients diagnosed with Asperger's have this configuration (Miedzian 2002, 70-71).

Another line of biological investigation that responds to folk psychology questions the role of parents rather than environment and more often than not, the research subject is the mother. One proposed explanation for the rise of autism diagnoses, for example, is the increased number of pregnancies by women over the age of 40 (Moisse 2010). Although an epidemiological study published in 2010 confirmed a 51 percent higher risk for mothers over 40 compared to women 25 to 29, it did not dig down specifically to Asperger's syndrome (Moisse 2010). One study in 2012 that specifically concerned maternal connections to Asperger's children used crowd-sourced data to suggest that women who have a history of bipolar disorder or depression are more likely to have a child with Asperger's syndrome than classic autism (Wright 2012). The scientific evidence is growing for biological factors contributing to Asperger's characteristics in children, and even

before these studies became publicized, cultural representations of youth with Asperger's often pinned blame following folk psychology on a single, inattentive, or depressed mother.

School Shootings and the Folk Psychology of Asperger's Syndrome

Why is the tragedy of, and the discourse that followed, the Sandy Hook shooting significant toward a modern conceptualization of folk psychology? The answer lies in the projection of anxiety about independent children and their parenting onto narratives of mental derangement in public space. Here are the facts. Around 9:30 a.m. on December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, armed with guns and ammunition, entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and proceeded to fatally shoot twenty children and six adult staff members. As first responders arrived twenty minutes later, Lanza took his own life with one of the three guns he brought into the school. One of those responders was also Newtown Bee associate editor Shannon Hicks, who sent out the first photographs over AP wires of police and teachers leading children away from the school. National news agencies rushed to the scene and 24-hour news networks cut into programming to give live coverage. Confusion existed about the identity of the shooter and in the rush to report the news, national outlets such as ABC and CNN mistakenly reported that the shooter was Adam's brother Ryan and that his mother was a kindergarten teacher at the school who was found dead inside. ABC News talked to neighbors who described Adam Lanza as "odd" and displaying characteristics associated with mental illness. An AP story on December 17 quoted a high school technology club adviser who claimed that Lanza, who was a member, had a "rare condition in which he couldn't feel pain." Although 'congenital insensitivity to pain' (CIP), a neuropathic disorder, is associated with self-inflicted injuries, press informants interpreted this report as pointing to Asperger's Syndrome (Wagner 2012; see also Magee 1963). The *New York Times* in its cover story the next day was more specific: "Some former classmates said they had been told that Mr. Lanza had Asperger's syndrome which is considered a high-functioning form of autism" (Flegenheimer and Somaiya 2012).

Other reports collected from classmates, counselors, and teachers claimed the shooter had sensory integration disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, a developmental disability, or autism generally, but the rumor that Lanza had Asperger's had the most traction in print, television talk shows, and social media, despite the declaration by H. Wayne Carver II, the state's chief medical examiner, that Asperger's is not associated with violent behavior and his dismissal of Asperger's as a reason for Lanza's rampage (Owens 2012; see also Nano 2012). Although Carver reported looking for identifiable diseases associated with Lanza's violent action, he told the press that Asperger's "is simply not on the menu, in terms of what is wrong with this kid. Asperger's is not associated with behavior patterns that are violent" (Owens 2012). The state's attorney's report issued almost a year after the shooting refers to a diagnosis in 2005 of "Asperger's Disorder" related to "significant social impairments and extreme anxiety." It added that he "lacked empathy and had very rigid thought processes. He had a literal

interpretation of written and verbal material. In the school setting, the shooter had extreme anxiety and discomfort with changes, noise, and physical contact with others." He did not have a learning disability and tested with an overall IQ in the average range. The report related his Asperger's characteristics along with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) concerns, emotional and/or Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) spectrum behaviors, and high level of anxiety to problems of school performance rather than violence. The report underscored that "those mental health professionals who saw him [Lanza] did not see anything that would have predicted his future behavior" (Sedensky 2013, 35).

Nonetheless, in the absence of a clear motivation for the killing spree, speculation spread about whether Asperger's explained his outburst of violence. And even though reports came out of his OCD and PDD spectrum behaviors, public commentary focused on labeling him with Asperger's (Koplewicz 2012). On CNN the night of the shooting, Piers Morgan interviewed psychologist Xavier Amador, who told a nationwide audience that "a symptom of Asperger's, and this is one report coming out which may or may not be true, is something's missing in the brain, the capacity for empathy, for social connection, which leaves the person suffering from this condition prone to serious depression and anxiety" (Christopher 2012). On *60 Minutes* on December 16, Lanza family friends Mark and Louise Tambascio informed reporter Scott Pelley that Adam's mother told them he been diagnosed with Asperger's and she complained that it was a full-time obligation to take care of him, made all the more difficult as a single mother (Owens 2012). At the same time, Fox News's *Hannity* presented Dr. Marc Siegel, who told interviewers, "If he had something called Asperger's, he may have had ongoing meltdown." His remark was countered by Curtis Brainard, who covers science journalism for the *Columbia Journalism Review*: "There's absolutely no association between autism and acts of premeditated violence, such as those that we saw in Newtown" (Garfield 2012).

Among Adam Lanza's alleged symptoms was a lack of sociability and narrative competency. His high school Latin teacher told a reporter that "he didn't want to be around people." "He had a great 'Latin mind,'" she said, because the language is very structured. Suggesting that he did not fit in because he was humorless, she told the interviewer, "The day he made his first joke, I almost cried." The *New York Times* reported that he was the butt of jokes, stating, "Mr. Lanza's evident discomfort prompted giggles from those who did not understand him" (Halbfinger 2012). But most quoted informants noted that he was not bullied or ridiculed. Matt Baier, a high school classmate, summarized: "From what I saw, people just let him be, and that was that." Others mentioned that he had a positive experience in his time at Sandy Hook; there appeared to be no reason for revenge. Although he was described as a "shut-in," classmates remembered a boy involved in outdoor activities of soccer and skateboarding in addition to playing video games and reading indoors (O'Leary 2013; see also Flegenheimer and Somaiya 2012).

Classmates mentioned Asperger's in relation to his "flat affect." "If you looked at him," an unidentified classmate said, "you couldn't see any emotions going through his head." Referring to cultural expectations of middle and high school, one classmate stated, "In high school, no one really takes the time to look and

think, "Why is he acting this way?" Although he was reported talking about aliens and "blowing things up," this was, according to a classmate, "the typical talk of prepubescent boys." If classmates were aware of other social transitions such as his parents' divorce, departure of his brother to New Jersey, and withdrawal from his mother, pundits were not linking them to the Newtown shooting as much as the attribution of Asperger's. In a kind of confirming narrative coda common in legends, classmates pointed out that he was smart, having been placed in honors classes, lending credence to the belief that children with Asperger's, while not socially adept, were savants, or in the vernacular, geeks. In an unconfirmed story, a supposed friend of Adam's claimed that his mother's threat to have Adam committed to an institution triggered the violent rampage. Another blame-the-mother narrative claimed that his mother's obsession with guns influenced young Adam (Halbfinger 2012). Adam's estranged father Peter Lanza in various interviews tried to answer public association of his son's violence with Asperger's by stating that it was a name for Adam's quirky ways but he never thought of it as a condition leading to violence. For his father, Adam was a "normal little weird kid" who enjoyed his time as a student at Sandy Hook Elementary School (Ellis 2014).

The connection made in the press and on the street in Lanza's case between mass murder and Asperger's Syndrome came on the heels of a mass shooting inside a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, on July 20, 2012. Attorneys for James Eagan Holmes, who was arrested for the crime, entered a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity but did not disclose the nature of the suspect's mental illness. Nonetheless, on MSNBC, Joe Scarborough caused a row by stating that after he heard the news of the shooting, "I knew it was a young, white male, probably from an affluent neighborhood, disconnected from society, it happens time and time again. Most of it has to do with mental health. You have these people that are somewhere, I believe, probably on the autism scale." Although he admitted that he did not know "the specifics about this young man," he generalized that "we see too many shooters bearing the same characteristics mentally" (Joe Scarborough 2012). Scarborough was skewered by the mental health community for his comments. In response, he issued a statement revealing that he had a son with Asperger's syndrome and claimed that his comments about the Aurora shooting were in the context of advocating for stronger support systems for youth with autism. He referred to the "growing Autism epidemic" that is, in his words, "a tremendous burden for children, parents and loved ones to endure" (Zakarin 2012).

The belief that people with Asperger's syndrome are violent accelerated when police identified 22-year-old Eliot Rodger for a killing spree of students in Isla Vista, California, near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara, on May 23, 2014. Although Rodger had not been officially diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, Deborah Smith, the principal of a high school he attended, told the *New York Times* that he displayed "classic symptoms of Asperger's syndrome: He was socially awkward, had trouble making eye contact and was very withdrawn, if very smart" (Nagourney, Cieply, Feuer, and Lovett 2014). On Twitter, hundreds of tweets attributing his violence to Asperger's appeared with the hashtag #Aspergers with the suggestion that the condition, like a hidden virus, is dangerous because

people who have it blend into society until a violent "meltdown" occurs. The implication was that contemporary society was too tolerant of the mainstreaming of persons with mental illness. Another connotation was that Asperger's was a virulent illness that many "geeks," "gamers," and loners possess (Roberson 2014). Nichi Hodgson answered these knee-jerk responses with the complaint that variations on the belief "the dude has Asperger's" is a "mawkish non-sequitur that quickly closes down any further interrogation of the reasons for his actions, and the notion of personal agency" (Hodgson 2014). Moreover, the label of Asperger's stigmatizes and pathologizes anyone who seems odd, idiosyncratic, or iconoclastic in a mass society.

Rodger had misogynist feelings of vengeance against women that he expressed in a YouTube video and a long manuscript, but these sentiments are not part of the criteria of Asperger's (Hodgson 2014). Voicing the attribution in social media, however, offers a physically evident trigger in the absence of a rational motive. The tweets could be interpreted as folk beliefs to fill in details not available in official reports. Those beliefs not only express post-modern fears of being surprised by violent perpetrators in a world of strangers in which individuals' identities and mental states are not manifest, but also indicate the charge of mental instability in a child as a function of poor parenting. In a narrative that extends from the underlying anxiety about proper child-rearing, youth are most susceptible to coming-of-age stress in which students are pressured to conform by totalizing institutions that have a role of *in loco parentis*. According to this scenario, violent retribution is the tragic, sociopathic outcome of pent-up frustrations that the disease channels abnormally. The Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown, for example, said in an interview on the CBS program "Face the Nation" that Rodger had been able to "fly under the radar" and conceal his mental instability. "It's very apparent," Brown said, "that he was able to convince many people for many years that didn't have this deep, underlying mental illness that also manifested itself in this terrible tragedy" (Gazzar 2014; see also Inquisitr 2014).

Of folkloristic interest, commentators on mass shootings frequently reflected on a central trait by shooters of blurring the lines between fantasy and reality in addition to play and violence, in key cultural practices such as game playing, music fandom, and movie watching. Despite the recognition of living in an individualistic society that with consumer technology makes it easier to engage in activities alone, commentators consistently mentioned the trait of being a "loner" as a sign of maladjustment. Further, this social "disability" became a problem supposedly in not being able to recognize a culturally formed frame of play that might contain violent elements. Of special concern to commentators was the relation of secluded individuals to technology when engaged in video games with violent content and disembodied messaging through social media and texting. Commenting on an inventory of Adam Lanza's possessions three and a half months after the shooting, for example, the *New York Times* stated that "he had cocooned himself in front of electronic game consoles in the basement of their home, playing warfare games." Noting that information on the lives of the family to date has yielded little insight, the article viewed the contents as affording a "fuller picture of the dark corners of Mr. Lanza's mind." Among the

items were books connected to autism. The *Christian Science Monitor* viewed the content as revealing "a troubled young man who clipped newspaper articles about school shootings and played hour upon hour of violent video games" (Kleinfield, Rivera, and Kovaleski 2013). He reportedly had aspirations to become a Marine and participated in gun play, which the press interpreted as an oddity for a boy (Scherer and Khadaroo 2013).

Beliefs in a direct link between autism and violence also had come out in the case of 22-year-old Jared Lee Loughner, convicted of killing six and injuring thirteen people in a shooting attack in 2011 at a public meeting at a Safeway supermarket north of Tucson, Arizona. Medical evaluations diagnosed him as a paranoid schizophrenic, but psychologists speculated to the media that he had "autism or other mental illnesses." According to CNN, he "creeped out classmates and teachers with his odd behavior" (Fantz and Grinberg 2011). The *New York Times*, however, reported that "Several of Jared's friends said he used marijuana, mushrooms and especially, the hallucinogenic herb called *Salvia divinorum* ... none of this necessarily distinguished him from his high school buddies. Several of them dabbled in drugs, played computer games like *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo* and went through Goth and alternative phases" (Barry 2011: 16). The report quoted teachers who noted his sudden outbursts in class and asking incoherent questions. WrongPlanet, the primary discussion forum for autism, featured a thread, "Jared Loughner is an Aspie?" Zen wrote "What annoys me is that every time some nutcase goes on a shooting spree, the media is all, 'He was a loner, quiet, kept to himself, didn't have many friends ...' No wonder we have it rough." In response, Jared Guinther wrote, "I wouldn't doubt that he is an aspie, but I think he has a severe mental illness." The distinction here is that despite popular perception of Asperger's as a mental illness, Aspies refer to medical literature asserting that it is a developmental disability and neurological condition. Indeed, they commonly refer to themselves positively as "neuro-diverse" in contrast to "neuro-typical" society, and do not look to get "cured" or "fixed" (Jared Loughner 2011; Scally 2008).

Before the Newtown, Aurora, and Santa Barbara shootings, I wrote that expressive culture suggests an American folk psychology in which youth violence represents a failure of individual responsibility and public morality (Bronner 2011). For example, "classic" twentieth-century teen legends such as "the roommate's death" and the "boyfriend's death" portray youth as victims by crazed or insane killers, presumably adults, but in the school-shooting discourse of the twenty-first century, apparently ordinary youth whose problems go unnoticed lash out at children unreasonably and tragically, either because of a difficult family life, strange habits or clique, or bullying by peers. Nonetheless, the assumption is that they were lost socially and emotionally in mass society. When their secret "disease" is revealed, lines that were thought to be clear on what is normal and what is not are questioned, often with a reference to modern self-indulgence and lack of parental or institutional control. Another boundary that gets questioned is the division between play and reality, especially one involving violence in games and other forms of fantasy entertainment. A status anxiety becomes apparent in the role of individuals who in an open, inclusive society navigate on their own,

rather than with the support of familiar community structures such as family, religion, and school. In the absence of direct motives for an act of violence, an undetected disease of the mind, much like a virus without symptoms, is blamed for driving a lost, unguided individual to disaster.

The folk idea of the individual ill-equipped to navigate modern social worlds often leads to parables of experience, in the form of wild and diabolical child narratives, frequently with the implication that parents have lost control of their children in modern society and do not pass ethical values and discipline associated with a secure, community-based past to their children. Aware of the predominance of these narratives in society, Aspies counter with stories of successful, admired historical figures such as Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, or Andy Warhol, who supposedly had Asperger's characteristics of asocial and repetitive behavior. This is not to say that there are not individuals who have violent tendencies, but my point is that the association of school shootings with an autism epidemic embedded in statements claiming a duplicated pattern or plot has a core of unsubstantiated belief that potentially projects anxieties of enfeebled masculinity, absent parenting, and massification in modern society. The belief especially relates to incidents in public space, which act as microcosms of a bureaucratized, impersonal culture in which traditional activities of childhood are no longer controlled by communities and parents. The discourse is indicative of the uncertainty of post-modern boundaries between normal and abnormal in which traditional control of youth from generation to generation appears in decline and communities vie with institutions for moral hegemony over public space.

Lorna Wing, who is often credited with popularizing Asperger's Syndrome, resorts to folklore to epitomize the dilemma of Asperger's as a negative disorder or positive condition. She tells the story of Brother Juniper, called the "jester of the Lord," who was one of the original followers of St. Francis of Assisi. A persistent legend is his service for a feeble poor man who longed for a meal of pig's feet. Capturing a pig in a nearby field, he cut off a foot and cooked the meal for the man. Trouble was that the pig's owner came to St. Francis in great wrath about the slaughter of his pig. St. Francis reproached Juniper and ordered him to make amends. Juniper did go to him but retold the tale of the pig's foot as though he had done the man a favor. The owner then gave Juniper the rest of the pig for the sake of charity. Her point is that the Asperger's youth is often unconventional and literal, and this can get him into trouble, but the outcomes are usually noble.

But in contemporary discourse, the more frequent legendary reference with questioning of the child's ability to discern between fantasy and reality is likely to be stories of the autistic child who, alone at home, tells his returning parent that he caught a "troll" (Emery 2012; Mace 2010). Raising narrative questions about possible symbolic equivalents of the earlier circulating story of the choking Doberman who eats the fingers of a thief who hides in a closet, the troll is found to be suffering in the "shut-in" closet. He had been a delivery person or leafletter who had come to the door. On Snopes.com, the earliest version dates to 2009 and two others from 2010 are reported, all from the United States (Mikkelsen 2013). A key element of the narrative is that the child is left unsupervised, or lacking parenting, at home. Folklorists might recognize other connections

to stories circulating in the early twenty-first century of a developmentally or mentally challenged child who, left on his own, brings a penguin home from the zoo, thinking the animal is there for the taking, and a small child mistaken for a gnome by drug-tripping young adults. Whereas earlier collected narratives mention a child with Down's Syndrome, later ones replace this with Asperger's or mention a "mentally ill" child. The legend invites commentary on the literalness of the Asperger's child, and in the case of the latter, a connotation of adults as irresponsible guardians or representatives of an addled popular culture, who have a mistaken folk perception of the Asperger's child.

The uncontrollable or "wild" child and its symbolic equivalence with animals has been the subject of numerous narratives since the eighteenth century and as late as 2008, often focusing on the consequences of isolation from humans by small children. Popular psychologist Bruno Bettelheim may have had an influence on the connection of autism in legends of feral children to autism with his famous essay in 1959, "Feral Children and Autistic Children," in which he suggested that reports of the feral children were more likely descriptions of autistic children rather than infants raised by non-humans. He hypothesized, however, that ultimately, the stories point out the problem of "extreme emotional deprivation" for abnormal children. Although he does not say so, his thesis raises the possibility that the popularity of the animal-parented story, even if the raising by animals is untrue, could be a projection of a belief that the rambunctiousness of some children, especially boys who resist "domestication," owes to poor or single-mother parenting characteristic of a modernizing society. Folklorist Michael Carroll observes that the "animal-parented stories," typically with male children suckled by a female parent, demonstrate that a female animal in the absence of a male produces an autistic or defective human being and this view is inherent in a folk psychology of the "normal" family. His conclusion is that sons who "fail to repress their Oedipal desires would suffer disastrous [sic] consequences" (1984: 81).

Yet an added trope is apparent in the discourse of the allegedly autistic shooter in modern America. The son has withdrawn from both mother and father, not embraced the mother, and displaced them with popular culture, which he cannot relegate to its proper place of fantasy as normal children can. Rather than being guided by culture, he is trapped in it, and unable to rely on traditions to help him perceive how to act properly, i.e., sedately. In saying he is autistic, narrators are projecting an attitude that the child was like anyone else but was not able to process the meaning of masculine entertainment. Violence, even if *out of character*, expresses in narrative the adult fear that the child is retrieving the male warrior ideal that eliminates the sign of mainstream society — its institutionalized children doing what they are supposed to do. In this folk logic, the boy, who was confused about what a modern man should do, becomes primal or feral and exerts revenge on other children as representatives of childhood and the institutions that could not help him. The task, then, is not just to incarcerate him as a criminal but to figure out what his frame of mind is, and by extension, examine the vulnerability of the cultural frame that surrounds neuro-typical society. The discourse of the Sandy Hook, Aurora, and Santa Barbara shootings reveals a folk psychology, especially pervasive in America, that the ultimate explanation of mass

violence, and the uncontrollable boy, is an invisible internal ailment that points away from possible external cultural factors that would make adults culpable.

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