

I Guess We'll Never Know Why

Like Michael Moore, I grew up in “gun country.” While Moore grew up in the Midwest, I hail from the South, a region known for its hunting culture, opposition to gun control, and high levels of firearm-related crimes. Although I grew up in a household with guns, I support gun control in the United States because guns *can* be and indeed are very closely associated with a major social problem—homicide. I am not sure that Michael Moore would agree. Indeed, Moore points out on his web site that *Bowling for Columbine* “is not a film about gun control. It is a film about the fearful heart and soul of the United States.” Moore is ambivalent about the availability of guns (although less so about bullets) in the United States, and he chooses to target what he calls “fearful heart and soul of the United States” instead. While Moore can be commended for bringing the gun violence debate to the big screen, I found the film to be a disappointment despite its critical and economic success. His film has a number of shortcomings, and as is well known, Moore has been taken to task by both gun control proponents and opponents for what are said to be factual errors in his film. Perhaps the majority of Moore’s critics have been opponents of gun control: I am not one of them.

Even the legitimate arguments of gun control opponents notwithstanding, it is an inescapable fact that the United States has an incomparably high rate of firearm-related murders. Moore makes this clear in his comparison of the homicide rates of the United States with those of other industrialized nations such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, and France. Gun violence in general and homicide in particular are major social problems in the United States, and Moore had good cause to make a film about them. The shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 were the most horrendous of a number of such youth-related incidents during the 1990s (and into the new century) and also warranted the attention Moore pays them. Youth violence is a particularly onerous aspect of firearm-related homicide. While Moore’s presumed goal—finding the causes of firearm-related homicides—is a noble one, his suggestion that the most significant causal factor is the dangerous cocktail of guns and fear (with the emphasis on fear) is unconvincing. I would like to look at some of Moore’s claims about fear and about media effects in creating a culture of fear.

The centerpiece of Moore's arguments for why the United States has such a high level of gun violence is his claim that Americans are gripped with fear. A montage of threats suggests that Americans are easily frightened by phantoms: terrorists, Y2K, killer bees, African American males, their neighbors, their government. Although he suggests that the nation's history does not explain its current levels of violence (an argument supplemented with evidence from Germany, Japan, France, or Great Britain), Moore goes on to present a brief *South Park*-like cartoon of American history, written by Moore and drawn by Harold Moss's animation studio, which claims that white Americans have been gripped by deep-seated fear of African Americans for centuries. Moore repeatedly argues that violent attitudes or behavior cannot be learned, but that fear can be. Although it is not clear why media might influence attitudes and behaviors related to fear but not those related to violence, Moore repeatedly blames the mass media for creating a culture of fear but exonerates them for creating a culture of violence. Moore presents his main argument near the end of the film. "A public that's this out of control with fear," Moore says in a voiceover while the screen shows New Yorkers running from the collapsing of one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center "should not have a lot of guns or ammo laying [sic] around." This sequence offers a stark example of *Bowling for Columbine*'s use of exploitation tactics, even though Moore ridicules *Cops* and nightly local news for blending news and entertainment. Throughout the film, Moore's soundtrack voiceovers (and the music) is either commentative (usually whenever Moore is *not* being ironical or sarcastic) or contrapuntal (usually whenever Moore *is* being ironical or sarcastic). Given that he does not sound ironic in this sequence, the images suggest panic and hysteria while the voice intones that this is now the current state of affairs. Ignoring the manipulative quality of making a general claim about the American "psyche" while showing individuals react to a very real and specific threat, Moore seems to conclude that the role played by the media in firearm-related homicide is, then, an indirect one—the violence committed by citizens saturated with media-generated fear.

An important source of this thesis is Barry Glassner's book *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (1999). In his book, Glassner analyzes how the mass media cover what are claimed to be widespread social problems such as teen pregnancies, road rage, drug use, and youth violence. Importantly, Glassner, who appears in *Bowling for Columbine*, places a great deal of

the blame for what he believes are Americans' misperceptions of the dangers facing them in everyday life on the mass media. In the film, Moore and Glassner stroll leisurely along the flowered boulevards of South Central. Their walk around South Central seems safe enough; the point that Glassner wants to make is that there is nothing to fear in this part of Los Angeles, with its attractive boulevards, and that white Americans have gotten a warped view of the area—and murder rates in general—from the overemphasis on crime in the nightly news and from the infotainment narrative form of the crime stories.

Glassner and Moore are basing their claims on the idea that the media can influence individuals' perception of reality even when it conflicts with that reality, which is a central tenet of cultivation theory. A great deal of media effects research has been carried out to investigate the relationship between television viewing and perceptions of crime rates and fear of crime. In brief, the main claim is that individuals who view television for a significantly higher number of hours a week than average television viewers tend to believe that the world is more dangerous than crime statistics suggest that it is. Although cultivation theorists examine the influence of various genres (originally focusing on prime time entertainment), they have also concentrated on television news. The findings have been mixed: some researchers suggest there is a connection between heavy viewing and a belief in high rates of crime (including homicide) while others have suggested no such connection exists.

In any case, Moore is inconsistent in his (unacknowledged) use of cultivation theory. First, Moore (rightfully) ridicules the idea put forth in the wake of the tragedy at Columbine put forth by various talking heads on television and members of Congress that popular entertainment in general and Marilyn Manson in particular were somehow (indirectly) responsible for what happened at Columbine. (He neglects to mention that early reports about the so-called Trench Coat Mafia that Columbine High shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were believed to belong to were in part inspired by Goth rock; in the film, we hear Eric Harris's father's voice on the soundtrack in a 911 call on the day of the shooting saying his son may be involved and that Eric was a member of the Trench Coat Mafia.) Although Moore finds this argument silly, he presents his own media effects argument to explain not why Harris and Klebold carried out their massacre but why the society and culture they lived in is fearful. Thus, Moore argues that popular entertainment in the mass media has no influence but that the nightly news on local television stations and nationally

broadcast series like *Cops* do. Moore ignores an important parameter: the claims of cultivation analysis are said to be valid for people who watch television significantly more hours than the average American. The television content of cultivation analysis research included programming that would fit under the rubric popular entertainment. Second, *Cops* is a popular entertainment program. Why might *Cops* have influence on people's attitudes but not Marilyn Manson? I think Moore's misuse of media effects theory here is indicative of a tendency within many of the polarized debates in the United States today: each side appeals to subsets within theories to support their arguments but reject their opponent's use of those theories, throwing their opponent's baby out with the bathwater while keeping the water for themselves.

Another interesting point emerges from the scene with Glassner and Moore in South Central. Glassner points out to Moore during their stroll around South Central Los Angeles that although there had been a 20% decline in homicides during the 1990s, there had been a 600% increase in broadcast news coverage of homicide. Moore and Glassner agree that this over-representation of homicide has contributed to Americans' ignorance about and fear of homicide, a fear they suggest is unwarranted. This is an odd claim for Moore's fear thesis. Moore's claim that the mixture of fear and guns contributes to the high rate of homicide violence is not borne out by the relationship between television news coverage and homicide rates. According to Moore's thesis, the over-representation of homicide should lead to greater fear of homicide (and suggested throughout the film) then to an increase in gun purchases followed by an increase in gun-related homicides. Yet, the over-representation of violent crime, including homicide, on local television news broadcasts has *not* increased violent crime rates since violent crime and homicide rates have *fallen* even as representations of violent crime have *increased* exponentially.

Despite the decline in crime rates, including firearm-related homicides, those rates remain extremely high by any standard (except by historical comparison with recent United States history). In other words, perhaps it is not so much the spike in coverage of homicide that causes Americans to be concerned; they are simply concerned about the all too high levels. Indeed, this leads me to ask: Did Moore make his film because he was influenced by the over-coverage of homicide in the United States or because he was simply concerned about a social problem that is serious and tragic no matter how often the news media cover it? If Moore was capable of making a documentary about the problem of firearm-related violence in the United States for

the latter reason, there is no reason to believe that other Americans wouldn't draw the same conclusion independent of local television news coverage. Indeed, given the high homicide rate, one could alternatively argue that in focusing on homicide, the broadcast news media are simply doing what Moore purports to be doing with his film—drawing attention to a tremendously important social problem.

Finally, there is something misleading about focusing on “fear” as motivating violence: it focuses on a psychological state or traits associated with victims or potential victims of crime rather than perpetrators of crime (with the exception of self-defense, broadly conceived). How often are particular acts of these crimes committed because of fear on the part of the perpetrator? This phenomenon does exist—the abused child that murders its parent(s), the abused spouse who murders her husband—but it accounts for only a fraction of homicides. Specific acts of homicide, in other words, do not seem to be motivated by fear. Moore claims to be seeking the cause of the high levels of firearm violence in the United States, but he does not look for the causes of specific categories of violence. Although he provides images of various kinds of gun violence, he does not discuss specific kinds of violence, except youth violence and school shootings. Yet, even these forms of violence are not examined in terms that sociologists, criminologists, psychologists, and other researchers use in trying to understand the causes of violence. As the Critical Incident Response Group of the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime points out, each “specific category of violent crime ... calls for distinct responses from employers, law enforcement, and the community.”¹ Yet Moore avoids the hard work of closely examining the specifics and chooses instead an amorphous cause, the culture of fear. He could have addressed issues related to specific gun crimes such as intimate partner violence, in which men murder their spouses, or gang and drug-related firearm violence. Moore would have made a more effective (although probably less commercially viable) documentary if he had looked at the perpetrators and victims of gun-related crimes in terms of the demographics of those actual groups. For example, his attack on rural gun enthusiasts seems to me misguided since these people commit very few of the gun-related crimes in the United States. While one can find their obsessions with guns odd, taking away their guns would have little effect on the murder or other gun-related crime rates. Hunters do not loom large in gun-crime statistics.

Although he says that is what he set out to discover, Michael Moore never really attempts to explain *why* Harris and Klebold went on their rampage; indeed, he concedes to Matt Stone, who co-created *South Park* and who also went to high school in Littleton, Colorado, that “We’ll never know” why the two did what they did. Keeping his putative analysis at a very high level of abstraction (violence, violent culture, fear) makes Moore’s job a lot easier. Every example fits—all acts of violence, all uses of guns become equivalent. For example, this allows Moore to suggest to the spokesperson at Lockheed Martin that there is an equivalence of sorts between the missiles that Lockheed Martin produces on the one hand and firearms on the other. Not only are those missiles weapons of mass destruction, so are the weapons Harris and Klebold wielded in their assault on Columbine High School.

I would like to re-emphasize that while I support gun control efforts in the United States and agree with Moore’s basic—undeniable—point that the astronomical rate of firearm-related deaths in the United States is a terrible thing, I find the arguments he puts forth in cinematic terms to be insufficient in their explanatory force. Perhaps Moore’s film is best viewed as infotainment rather than a traditional documentary. Just as it remains unclear exactly what the fear that Moore in the final end rests his case on refers to—is it to be understood as a cumulative fear of bees plus terrorists plus crime?—it remains unclear why Moore made this film—to spark debate over gun control, to argue passionately for or against something (never clear exactly what), or to make money. I guess we’ll never know.

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ⁱ Rugala, Eugene A., ed. *Workplace Violence: Issues in Response*. Quantico, Virginia: FBI Academy, 2002. p. 22.