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Tragedy Club: The Longitudinal Evolution of the Columbine Community

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Tragedy Club:
The Longitudinal Evolution of the Columbine Community

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Abstract

Communities of tragedy have been thoroughly studied in the immediate aftermath of tragic events. However, less attention has been paid to the longitudinal effects of the tragedy on communities. My research examines how the Columbine community constructed and maintained solidarity within their community over the 15 years since the tragic shootings in 1999. I describe and analyze three phases of evolution: the immediate, intermittent, and mediated community. Particularly new here is the articulation of this third phase, in which communities that have experienced tragedy reach out to others to support and assist them. I discuss how this outreach, mediated by organizations, impacts the Columbine community's solidarity. Finally, I detail a model of the evolution of community after tragedy and describe how solidarity levels change over time in a longitudinal model.

INTRODUCTION

On April 20, 1999, two students engaged in an attack on Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. This attack took the lives of twelve students and one teacher in addition to the lives of the two shooters. Since this massacre, unfortunately, tragedy has become a pervasive theme in the lives of many people in the United States and throughout the world. The Columbine massacre was the first large-scale school shooting to gain the attention of the national media.

In the time since the Columbine shooting, much research has been conducted looking at the Columbine community itself. However, the focus of this research has mainly been on how Columbine has affected policy (Fein and Isaacson 2009), how it was represented in the media (Altheide 2009; Birkland and Lawrence 2009; Muschert 2009), what society has learned from this event (Muschert and Spencer 2009a, 2009b), or on how those in the community mourned immediately after the tragedy (Fast 2003; Larkin 2007; Meadows 2003).

Additional research has been conducted on how tragic events such as school shootings or terrorist attacks affect communities (Adams and Boscarino 2005; Applebome 2013; Beyerlein and Sikkink 2008; Collins 2004; Greene 2001; Hawdon, Oksanen, Räsänen, and Ryan 2012; Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Hawdon, Ryan, and Agnich 2010; Katz and Bartone 1998; Macritchie 1997; Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, and Roth 2004; Nurmi, Räsänen, and Oksanen 2011; Ryan and Hawdon 2008; Turkel 2002; Vuori, Oksanen, and Räsänen 2013; Wayment, Barger, Tolle, and O'Mara 2010). Besides shootings and other massacres, research on natural disasters has also looked at the impact on the community after a tragic event (Carroll, Cohn, Seesholtz, and Higgins 2005; Erikson 1976; Gertz 2013; Goldstein 2008; Letukas, Olofsson, and Barnshaw 2009; Quarantelli and Dynes 1977; Sweet 1998; Tuason, Güss and Carroll 2012; Xu 2009). This research has primarily focused on the reaction of these communities immediately after the

impactful events occurred. Many of these studies on school shootings and other mass tragedies have dealt with the psychological impacts of these horrific events on community members (Adams and Boscarino 2005; Katz and Bartone 1998; Newman et al. 2004). Others have examined those who were peripherally affected by certain tragedies and not those directly affected (Beyerlein and Sikkink 2008; Wayment et al. 2010). Many others have focused on the solidarity created immediately after these tragedies occurred (Collins 2004; Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Hawdon et al. 2010; Hawdon et al. 2012; Macritchie 1997; Nurmi et al. 2011; Ryan and Hawdon 2008; Turkel 2002; Vuori et al. 2013).

As opposed to these other communities of tragedy, the reaction of the Columbine community to the 1999 shooting has not been studied as thoroughly. In this article, I examine how the Columbine community was affected by the massacre at the high school in 1999. My study addresses the gap in the literature surrounding the Columbine tragedy and how the community reacted. I fill this void by adding to the research on solidarity that is generated immediately after tragic events by contributing the experience of the Columbine community members.

Although much research has been conducted regarding communities of tragedy and the solidarity that emerges after a tragic event occurs, most of this research was conducted immediately after these events. This is understandable as it is easy to realize that an area has not yet been researched when the event is brand new. However, it is also important to look at these communities of tragedy from a longitudinal perspective.

Much of the research conducted in this immediate aftermath of tragedy focuses on rituals of solidarity in which communities engage to begin the healing process and cope with the recent events (Berns 2011; Cole 2004; Collins 2004; Doka 2003; Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Hawdon et

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al. 2012; Katz and Bartone 1998; Nurmi et al. 2011; Xu 2009). This ritual research expands on the findings of Durkheim (1995) in which he found that rituals are social enactments that enable communities to increase their level of solidarity. The traditional work on solidarity and tragedy also builds off of other research from Durkheim (1966 [1938]) in which he discusses how crime increases the level of solidarity in a community.

The majority of the research on communities of tragedy find that tragedy increases solidarity (Beyerlein and Sikkink 2008; Caroll et al. 2005; Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Hawdon et al. 2010; Hawdon et al. 2012; Letukas et al. 2009; Ryan and Hawdon 2008; Xu 2009). However, some of this research focuses on the negative impact of having solidarity and how this creates conflict in communities (Nurmi et al. 2011; Collins 2004; Carroll et al. 2005; Erikson 1976). One study after a school shooting found that a neighboring community experienced decreased levels of solidarity because of diminished levels of social trust due to the fact that both victims of the tragedy and the gunmen were members of the community (Vuori et al. 2013). Although this shows an alternate view of how a community may react after a mass tragedy, this is not what I found in the Columbine community.

All of these studies detail the reaction of communities immediately after the tragedy occurred. Interestingly, little research has investigated how a community reacts to tragedy years after the initial event occurred. It is necessary to have a longitudinal perspective to examine whether or not the solidarity that is described in the initial aftermath continues into later points in time. No study that I am aware of has looked at a community of tragedy past 13 months after the tragedy. Additionally, the majority of these studies find that solidarity hits a peak somewhere around five to nine months and then gradually decreases (Collins 2004; Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Hawdon et al. 2010; Vuori et al. 2013). While this may be the case, we cannot assume that the

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effects of tragedy will simply disappear into pre-tragedy levels for the community overall. My study addresses this lack in the literature by looking at the Columbine community reaction and perception of solidarity 13 and 14 years after the tragedy occurred. Additionally, there have been some sociological studies that have researched community evolution over time, but none of them have addressed communities of tragedy (Freudenburg and Gramling 1992; Jackson and Mare 2007). Thus, from multiple aspects, my longitudinal research will address several voids in the literature.

In addition to my longitudinal perspective, I also have found that connections were formed between the Columbine community and other communities of tragedy. To date no research has addressed this unusual relationship formed between communities that have experienced similar tragedies. In this article, I describe how this relationship is created and maintained via a mediated community.

I begin with a discussion of the methods I used to gather data. I then lay out the three types of community that emerged after the tragedy at Columbine High School. I conclude by discussing how ritual and solidarity function in time and how tragedy unfolds as a mechanism of unification between multiple communities of tragedy.

METHODS

I grew up in Littleton, Colorado, five minutes away from Columbine High School. My parents moved into the community when I was still an infant. In April of 1999, I was in the second grade and my sister was a sophomore at Columbine High School. On April 20th, two students entered Columbine High School and opened fire on their classmates and teachers. Because I was so young at the time, my parents did not explicitly explain what had happened to me. Over time, I learned more details about what occurred. It was not until years later that I

decided to delve into this topic to try to understand more about what had occurred on that day and in the time since.

After I declared a major in sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder, I knew that I wanted to look more into the aftermath of the Columbine community in the time since the tragedy. News cameras, reporters, and researchers flooded to Columbine immediately after the tragedy. Since then, reports and research have been presented addressing what the nation learned from the tragedy (Muschert and Spencer 2009a, 2009b), how the families immediately impacted by deaths in their family have coped (Fast 2003; Larkin 2007; Meadows 2003), and how the Columbine tragedy has influenced the events after other tragedies (Altheide 2009; Birkland and Lawrence 2009; Fein and Isaacson 2009; Muschert 2009). However, no one has sufficiently researched how the Columbine community has evolved in the time since the tragedy. I began planning a research topic that would address the attitudes and emotions of those in the community nearly 15 years after the tragedy.

I enrolled in a Field Methods course at the University of Colorado and was required to plan, execute, and analyze a qualitative research project. Because I had such a close connection to the Columbine community, I followed Lofland and Lofland's (1995) advice to begin my research by starting where I was. I had already done some preliminary research on the Columbine tragedy, but did not yet have a focused topic. I planned my qualitative participant observation research, for which the goal was to "achieve intimate familiarity with the setting" (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 17). It was through this class that I concretely crafted my interview questions and carried out my first six interviews. I prepared an interview guide before conducting my interviews that provided a semi-structured interview model to guide my questions (Weiss 1994). My research began in an unfocused manner. According to Weiss (1994: 52),

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"Eventually it will be obvious what is important; initially, it rarely is." I had initially planned on concentrating on insider/outsider relationships between members of the community and outside individuals. However, after completing several interviews, I realized that this dynamic did not exist for my participants in the way that I expected. Thus, I refocused my research on the sense of solidarity that my participants described as present in the community. I became aware of how this solidarity had changed longitudinally in the time since the tragedy.

I have extensive contacts with individuals who currently live in or lived in the Columbine community at the time of the shooting. Because my parents live in the community, I continue to spend a significant amount of time there. My personal connections with the Columbine community allowed me to gain entry very quickly in my research setting (Lofland and Lofland 1995). The second interview that I conducted was with Michael, the principal of Columbine High School. I knew that he would serve as a gatekeeper in my research and as my key contact through whom I would recruit many of my other participants. After my two-part interview with him, he suggested many potential interviewees to include in my research and gave me their contact information. He provided me with a list of nine names of individuals who currently work at Columbine High School and who were either students or faculty at the time of the shooting. I contacted everyone on this list and interviewed six of them. Thus my primary method of recruiting participants was through snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Certainly, my connection with the high school as an alumnus and with the principal himself aided my research by gaining me contact with many of my participants.

In total, I conducted 11 in-depth interviews with members of the Columbine community. Every one of my participants lived in or worked in the area surrounding Columbine High School. Seven of my participants were present at the school on April 20, 1999: four were students and

three were faculty. All seven are currently faculty at Columbine High School. All four students who had been students at the time went on to become faculty at the high school. Two of my participants were raised in the Columbine area and graduated from Columbine High School in more recent years. They were both in elementary school when the tragedy occurred. One of my participants was a parent of a student who was at the high school on the day of the shooting. Another participant has lived in the community since before the tragedy and her children graduated from Columbine in 2008 and 2011. All of my participants lived in the community prior to the shooting. All of my participants had a tie to the high school either as students (graduation dates ranged from 1980 to 2010, n=8), parents of students (n=2), or faculty (n=7). One of my participants even saw the school at its beginnings, as his father was an original teacher at the high school when it opened in 1973.

All of my participants (besides two who are currently in college) still live in or work in the community. Two of my participants work at Columbine High School, but live in surrounding areas (Highlands Ranch and Thornton). My participants' ages ranged from 20 to 56. All of my participants were white. This, however, is representative of the demographics in Littleton, Colorado at Columbine High School at the time of the shooting (91.76% white in 2000 census).

I conducted in-depth interviews with all of my participants in Littleton, Colorado or Boulder, Colorado. I met with six participants at Columbine High School, two at a coffee shop in Littleton near the high school, and three participants at my home (one in Boulder and two at my parents' house in Littleton). The interviews ranged from an hour to an hour and a half. I digitally recorded all of the interviews and transcribed them by hand. In this article, I use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of my participants. However, based on their position at the high school, my participants who work at the high school were made aware that they might be

identifiable. Additionally, because of the potential sensitivity of this topic, I made what Weiss (1994) calls a "neutralization" of my own feelings while participants shared their experiences with tragedy (126).

As I continued conducting interviews, I recognized themes emerging in the data. After I finished all of my interviews, I coded them while looking at the levels of solidarity my participants experienced and with whom they felt solidarity. Through my data, I identified stages of communities through which my participants moved in the time since the tragedy.

COMMUNITIES OF GRIEF

When examining the reaction of the Columbine community to the tragic shootings in April 1999, we can see that the community evolved longitudinally. The atmosphere that developed immediately after the shooting varies from the experience and involvement of the community members when I interviewed them 13 and 14 years later. While looking into this community of tragedy, I reasoned that there were different communities that developed over time in relation to the overall community that has experienced a tragedy. The three types of communities of grief that characterized my participants' experiences are: immediate, intermittent, and mediated.

IMMEDIATE COMMUNITY

The immediate community is characterized by the solidarity that was felt in the Columbine community in the months after the tragedy. As Durkheim (1966 [1938]) notes, crime and other socially disruptive events like tragedy generally increase the level of solidarity in communities. This community is defined temporally as the period of time directly after the tragedy in April 1999. It was a period of increased closeness between community members in which many events encouraging this kind of closeness in order to process the tragedy were held.

According to Patrick, a father of four who was a faculty member at the school in 1999 and is still one today, the tragedy created a bond in the community that was not necessarily present before the tragedy:

> I think that there was an immediate tie between anyone who experienced it. So, students and faculty I think felt an immediate tie to one another, the kids amongst themselves and the kids with the teachers and the teachers with the other teachers and the teachers with the kids. I think there was an immediate tie right there.

In this time period, the community members made direct contact with one another. Daily life in this stage surrounded coping with what had just happened. They gathered at events in the community and met up with other community members to process the tragedy and simply be together. It is difficult to put a finite temporal constraint on the immediate community because the solidarity was present in the community in variably high levels in the time directly after the tragedy. However, this high level of solidarity and the feelings of bonding in the community were temporary. The immediate community seemed to last up until a year after the tragedy. During the time frame of the immediate community, events were always occurring. This is part of what distinguishes the immediate community from the two other types of community.

Two kinds of events occurred during the immediate community timeframe: formal events and informal events. Formal events were those that were planned or designated to be a time or site of grieving and healing for Columbine and the community. Informal events, by contrast, seemed to develop on their own out of the natural reaction of the community without intentional thought put into how they would benefit the community. My participants viewed these informal events as just something that they did. There was no planning involved, but these events tended

to be some of the most beneficial in my participants' views in terms of healing and processing the tragedy.

Formal events, created with the specific purpose of giving the community a site to grieve and heal, were frequent in the immediate community. These were organized as a way to bring the community together in settings like churches and schools. Some existed immediately after the tragedy occurred (the day and night of the tragedy), while others were organized weeks later. While these events were characterized by the purpose of bringing the community together, they can be distinctly categorized based on the reason that they were organized. There were three distinct purposes for organizing formal events: reuniting, closure and healing, and returning to normal.

One of the main purposes for the very initial formal events was to reunite families and friends with those who were in the school at the time of the shooting. Specifically, Leawood Elementary School was set up as a site for reuniting parents with their children. This event allowed the community members who were directly involved with the tragedy to interact with one another. As Patrick, the father of four and a faculty member of the school at the time of the shooting and in 2013 stated, "We basically just waited to hear what we could and talked to different kids and that was it." Other events were designated as reuniting sites. One example of this was a gathering at a church that was held the night of the tragedy. This event served as a site for learning what had actually happened at the school from other community members and reuniting with those who survived the tragic events. According to Patrick, this was also a site to learn the details of the tragedy: "No one knew exactly what was going on and no one knew who had been hurt, who had been shot, you just heard so many different things." These sites of

reuniting allowed my participants to learn about what happened and importantly, to be around

others who had experienced the tragedy.

The second distinct function of the formal events in the immediate community was to

allow the community members a space to achieve closure and healing. This included events like

attending funerals, making tiles to put in the school, attending counseling sessions, and gathering

together at memorial services and other gatherings. Many events were held in the months after

the tragedy. Some took place at churches with the specific purpose of providing a place for the

ritual of healing, such as funerals and memorials. Other events were less specific and just

consisted of getting members of the community to interact with each other in a public space.

According to Patrick, the topic of the event did not necessarily matter because

> They provide an opportunity for all of us to be together, but that's more what I
>
> felt like was healthiest, for everybody to be together with each other, not
>
> necessarily the reason we got together in the first place was because of this
>
> particular figure being there or a barbeque or anything. The healing part of
>
> everything was being with one another.

Thus, for the community members, all that mattered was being around other community

members. They were creating solidarity through their shared experience that was solidified with

the ritualized events.

The third function of the formal events was to allow the community to return to normal.

This included having the students and teachers resume classes at Chatfield High School and

returning to the school the next fall after the tragedy. The decision to resume classes at Chatfield,

a nearby high school, was a controversial one, but it is one about which my participants seemed

generally positive. According to Ryan, a graduate of the class of 2001 and a current teacher at the school,

> There was a big debate about whether we should even continue the semester . . . Ultimately, I think the administration made the correct decision to continue, but to do so with a large measure of understanding. I think it was the right thing to do to get us all together in an environment where we're with people who experienced the same thing.

For the students and faculty, returning to school, even if the classes were not covering the same material that they would have under usual circumstances, allowed for some kind of return to normalcy. At the same time, it let those who directly experienced the tragedy be around others who had similar experiences and allowed them to generate solidarity within that group. At the beginning of the next school year, an event was held at the school called "Take Back the School." This event was organized in order to demonstrate that the community surrounding the school rebounded after the shooting and that they were not going to let the tragic events prevent them from returning to the normal event of attending classes. According to Sarah, a social studies teacher who was a student at the time, "It was just like a new beginning that we're all going to enter the school together, it's gonna be positive, and we're not going to let this tragedy stop us from learning and being in our building." As Sarah showed, this event was specifically designed in order to demonstrate that the tragedy would not keep the community from functioning normally.

Informal events, by contrast, were not set up specifically for any reason and were characterized by members of the community coming together haphazardly without intention. Like formal events, however, the informal events can be categorized based on the function that

they served for the members of the community. Three functions characterized the informal events: being with family, symbols of grief, and creating solidarity and understanding.

The first function of informal events was to allow community members to be with their families. In addition to the formal reuniting at Leawood and the church events, the night of the tragedy saw the informal gatherings of families. For most of my participants, this just occurred at the end of the night; it was not specifically planned. According to Bette, a mother of two whose one daughter was a student at the school on the day of the shooting, "Everybody was kind of in their own family." These events allowed for reuniting, but were not formally organized.

The second function of informal events in the immediate community was as a symbol of grief. These events included commemoration rituals around the tragedy. This was specifically demarcated by the makeshift memorial that was spontaneously created by community members around the barrier that surrounded Columbine High School in the days after the tragedy. People would go to this site and leave symbols of grief at individual memorials for each of those who were killed in the tragedy. This site extended into the parking lot in the nearby Clement Park where a few of the cars of the murdered remained. Many put flowers and other signs of remembrance on these vehicles and in the area as a memorial site. Lauren, a mother and teacher who was a junior at the time of the shooting, described how these makeshift memorials served as sites for members of the community to go and see other members from the community:

> There was really no structure or order to it; it was just a lot of stuff and a lot of
> people, which was nice 'cause you got to see other school friends that you don't
> necessarily call on the weekends to hang out, but you go to at least see them and
> acknowledge in your head: there they are . . . It was just nice to have everybody

have this place to go and cry with each other and share with each other and just be

together.

For Lauren and many other participants, this informal, makeshift memorial was a site to express grief with other members of the community.

The third function of the informal events of the immediate community was to create a sense of solidarity and understanding. My participants accomplished this by seeking out their friends and other members of the community in order to be together and create a bond within the community. This was the most important function of the immediate community. The solidarity that was created in the immediate community for other tragedies has been well studied (Collins 2004, Hawdon and Ryan 2011, Hawdon et al. 2010, Hawdon et al. 2012, Macritchie 1997, Nurmi et al. 2011, Ryan and Hawdon 2008, Turkel 2002, Vuori et al. 2013). According to Durkheim's (1966 [1938]) research on crime and solidarity, it is not surprising that when a terrible act such as a tragedy occurs, people bond together and form solidarity within their community. Many of the community members specifically sought out other community members to commune with and share their experiences. According to Ryan, the 2001 graduate and teacher, this manifested itself in being around his friends after the tragedy: "That was a big part of what was going on early for us is we had to find our friends. You didn't do a lot of talking. Just kind of sat there sometimes. But just to be around each other made things more comforting." Lauren explained, "Being with friends was easiest 'cause at least they had some concept of what we were going through." It was directly due to this shared experience that these community members gathered around one another and began to experience solidarity amongst themselves. According to Patrick, this solidarity allowed the community to bond together and say, "We're in this together. We're going to look out for each other. We love each other."

While the formal and informal events allowed my participants and other community members to gather together and grieve with other members of the community, the community also responded to the tragedy as an attack against the entire community. Many of my participants explicitly outlined how they believed the tragedy was meant to destroy the community. Ryan directly addressed this when he stated to the killers, "You sought to terrorize the school and you sought to destroy this community." A constantly repeated theme in my interviews was the sentiment that my participants did not want the killers to "win." In response to this understanding of the tragedy as an attack on the entire community, there were three ways that community members demonstrated that they would not allow their community to be destroyed: staying in the community, reclaiming metaphorically, and returning to normalcy. The first way the community demonstrated that they would respond positively to this attack was by staying in the community. All of my participants lived in the community prior to the tragedy. When I asked whether they considered leaving after the tragedy occurred, all of them responded that they never even thought of that as an option. Sarah, the social studies teacher who was a student at the time, explained why she never considered leaving the community:

> Columbine was always my school and I never, *ever* wanted to go anywhere else
> 'cause this is where my family was, my teachers were here. Michael was here, all
> my friends were here, and I didn't want Eric and Dylan to win. Because if I went
> someplace else because I was afraid to come back to school or didn't want to be
> here because I was afraid then they won in my head.

By remaining in the community, the community members were able to take control over the situation of the tragedy and not let it impact their lives, as much as they perceived the killers

wanted that. Through this reaction, they maintained power over the situation and generated solidarity among the members of the community who chose to stay.

The second way in which the community members maintained this power was by reclaiming the community and the school, metaphorically. According to Lauren, a mother of two and a teacher, solidarity was created after the tragedy in how the community responded. She stated, "Absolutely [I felt a sense of community after the tragedy]. Absolutely. Within our school especially. It was very much like, this is still home. And we still are a great school and a great community. We were quite possessive of reclaiming that title and not being known as the school where the shooting happened." By reclaiming the community and the school, a sense of solidarity and cohesion between the members of the community was created. The members of the community were motivated to reclaim the title of the school as a great place of learning and to stray away from its reputation related to the tragedy.

A third way of demonstrating that the community would not be destroyed by the attack on the school was through returning to normalcy. My participants demonstrated that they wanted this return as quickly as possible to show that they could rebound from the attack on their community. According to Sarah, returning to school the year after the tragedy served this function for her: "We brought up the shootings a lot through the year, how we felt and stuff and it was still kind of like a processing for us, but it was more like, 'Okay, let's get back to school.' And I think we were ready to get back to learning and having things be normal." By returning to daily functioning and a place where the shootings did not come up very often, the community was able to move on from the tragedy and demonstrate that they were not completely destroyed by the shootings.

Additionally, it is interesting to look at how my participants perceived the community response immediately after the tragedy. According to Michael, the principal of the school at the time of the shooting and in 2013,

> In most cases you have a tragedy such as this, it could have destroyed a community. And we stayed together and I think we're stronger as a result of the tragedy. It's unfortunate that thirteen lives were lost, but I really believe we're stronger. I see a community that has come together. If we didn't come together, we would have been destroyed.

The community members perceived that it was their own reaction to the tragedy and the solidarity they experienced that allowed them to actually recover from the horrific events of the tragedy. They did not necessarily perceive this as something that happened naturally, but something that was created through their own reaction to the tragedy. This allowed the solidarity between individuals in the immediate community to be generated and sustained in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy.

Another interesting aspect that was distinct in the immediate community was the presence of the news media at the school and in the lives of community members. In general, the perception of the news media in the immediate community was extremely negative. Reporters became a common enemy for the members of the community because of their constant presence, intrusiveness, and inaccuracy in reporting. According to Ryan, there were "cameras at every street corner . . . I remember having to walk through Clement Park heading to school just having to go through reporter after reporter after reporter." Lauren described how the "media was really aggressive, which I'm still pretty bitter about. I feel like they were really intrusive." Finally, the media created their own reputation for giving out inaccurate information to the public. Patrick

described this: "So much of what was reported on the news was, when I would hear about it, whether it was in the print article or whether it was reported on the news, was just false." These three aspects of the news media created distrust for the media within the Columbine community.

This negative perception allowed the community to define clearly the boundaries of the solidarity that was experienced within the community. The news media were not part of the community and thus were not to be trusted with the experiences of the community members. This was different from how the community members interacted among themselves. One exception to this was the local media. According to Michael, the principal, the national media "would come in, do whatever they had to do without really worrying about the effect it would have on our community." In contrast, Michael described the local news media as being "affected by what happened. They were community members . . . The local media could empathize with what we were going through." In addition to feeling like the local news media were actually part of the Columbine community, it was also clear that my participants trusted the local news more because, according to David, the music director, they were unlike the national media for whom "it seems like they're always looking for some kind of shock angle." Thus, the Columbine community perceived the local media more as insiders than national or non-local media. This affected whose presence they trusted in the immediate community.

INTERMITTENT COMMUNITY

The intermittent community differs from the immediate community in two essential ways. First, temporally, the intermittent community occurred further in time after the tragedy. Where the immediate community reached into about a year after the tragedy, the intermittent community still functioned in 2012 and 2013, when I conducted my interviews. The intermittent community had a more lasting timeframe and began from the time the immediate community

period ended, continuing indefinitely. Second, the number of events and the level of perceived

social solidarity in the intermittent community were fewer than during the period of the

immediate community. That is not to say that they were non-existent. Events still did occur and

many of my participants still believed there was a bond in the community that existed because of

the events of the tragedy. These, however, were intermittent and infrequent. The intermittent

community period involved more personal connection and less community solidarity bonding.

The sense of community for my participants was still present in this intermittent

community period. Some believed that the solidarity formed in the immediate community

continued just as strongly into the intermittent community. Patrick, the father of four who works

as a teacher at Columbine expressed this sentiment: "I think [the solidarity] is different than

before [the tragedy] happened, for sure. But I don't think it's different now. I think it's

something that has continued." Many others, however, believed that there was a stronger sense

of community and solidarity immediately after the tragedy. Karen, a mother of two who often

volunteered at the school, stated, "I think that that is something that has definitely kept going.

It's not as strong as it was after it immediately happened, but I still think it's there, very strong."

Every one of my participants agreed that the sense of solidarity continued years after the tragedy.

According to Patrick, the perception of solidarity was due to the tragedy and the response of the

community:

> Had Columbine not happened and had the community not responded the way it
>
> did, I don't think we'd all be that way today. But because of those things and
>
> because of the response, there's a sense of 'We're going to get through this.
>
> We're going to be all right. We can depend on one another. That in the end, we
>
> care about each other. We're going to do what's best for each other. So that was

not necessarily [there] before that happened, not that it wasn't good, but after that

happened, and even still, *thirteen* years later, I still feel that sense.

This connection was especially apparent for many of my participants who had a direct

connection to the school—because they worked there or had recently graduated from Columbine.

For many of my participants, Columbine still played a large role in their life. They were

still connected to the school and perceived a strong sense of solidarity within the school itself.

According to David, a music director who was in the gymnasium on the day of the shooting, the

school "is still a focal point. I think in every community, the high school is the focal point . . .

'cause obviously it's a prominent building in the community. So I think it still plays an important

role in our community for sure." While David believed that it was simply Columbine High

School's role as a prominent structure in the community that made it important, other

participants explained how Columbine's role in the community enhanced the solidarity that

existed in the intermittent community. Patrick stated, "In a community that's not a small town, I

think it's pretty remarkable that this school plays such a huge role in terms of the impact on the

community in general. It goes back to that whole mentality of, 'We Are Columbine.' And we are

all Columbine." The solidarity that my participants perceived in the intermittent community was

not necessarily the same as in the immediate community. However, it still stemmed from the

tragedy and the reaction of the community afterwards. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the

functional role of Columbine High School and the tragedy itself in creating and maintaining

solidarity in the years since the tragedy.

Unlike in the immediate community, when the high school and community were

constantly holding events for community members and students, the intermittent community was

characterized by having events that occurred only intermittently. These events were infrequent

and depended more on individual experience and quiet reflection than the events in the immediate community. Because these events were not dependent on the interaction of the members of the community, they did not function in the same way as those events as far as building or even maintaining solidarity. The two functions of the events held in the intermittent community were: remembering what happened and learning lessons from the tragedy.

One type of event that allowed my participants to remember what happened was the anniversary remembrance events. These events were held at Clement Park near the high school every year on or around April 20th. Some of the events have drawn a large crowd (especially notable anniversaries like the one-year, five-year, and ten-year). While the goal of these remembrance events might be to reunite the community and provide a place to remember and gain closure, my participants had conflicting views about them. Bette, the mother of two whose oldest daughter was a sophomore at the high school during the shooting, described the feelings of those in the community who believed that the anniversary events were good for them and for the community in general. She stated, "It's always uplifting and healing. It's never tragic and sad. It's always good." However, some of my participants either did not go to anniversary events or had a negative opinion of them. Patrick noted, "I do go to them and they're never fun. I don't know if other people feel like there's healing in those things. I just go to them out of respect for the students and for Mr. Sanders [the teacher who died in the tragedy]. But they're one of the few things that I think, honestly, does not necessarily help me."

An additional type of event that revolved around remembrance and reflecting was the permanent memorial. The Columbine permanent memorial was a project that began almost immediately after the tragedy and opened officially in September 2007. According to two of my participants who were on the Columbine Memorial Committee, the memorial serves as "quiet

reflection time" (David) and a "place where people could go and reflect and kind of process what had happened" (Sarah). The majority of my participants visited the memorial at one time or another (only one had not). Most had only been a few times and for them it was not a place to go often and dwell over the events of the tragedy. If and when they did go, it was a place of reflection, where they could remember the students and faculty member who died. But, as Andrew, a recent graduate, explained, "I like that it's about them but also about the community too . . . it's about people negotiating their own feelings." What Andrew and others pointed out is that the community was a target in the attacks on the school, which Ryan echoed with his remark that the killers "sought to destroy this community." Thus, the memorial serves as a tool for remembering the people who died and also for reflection on the tragedy's impact on the community as a whole.

The anniversary remembrance events and the memorial served a function in the intermittent community. Both were in place in order to remember those who lost their lives and to reflect on the tragedy. These events, while serving a different function than the events of the immediate community also were also structured differently. Both the anniversary and the memorial were structured in ways where they were more about individual experience and solitude than the collective gatherings of the immediate community.

While the permanent memorial was designed as a place for community members and others to go to reflect on the tragedy and over the lives that were lost, it also created a transition from communal gatherings to solitary, individual experiences. Because of how the memorial was designed, it is a site that calls for respect and silence. There are no signs outside of the memorial that instruct people on how to act while they are visiting. The only rule that is posted is that there are no dogs allowed. However, when visiting the memorial, it is clear that people are not talking.

The memorial quietly stands not even a mile from the high school, overlooking the mountains and the foothills. My participants all felt this quiet expectation and it shaped their experiences while at the memorial. Michael stated, "That's just my time . . . when you go there, it's very quiet, people just reflecting." Almost every one of my participants expressed their view of the memorial as "solitary" and a "place of reflection," "very solemn, very quiet," and a place that "lends itself to not having a discussion" (Bette, Sarah, Karen, Patrick). Thus, the environment of the permanent memorial encourages community members to have individual experiences. While they may still be around other community members at the memorial, they are not having direct conversations with them.

Even though the memorial was presented as a place of quiet reflection, it still functioned as a place to remember the tragedy. Thus, it allowed my participants to engage in the ritual of remembering. In Berns's (2011) research on closure, she discusses the role that memorials play in remembering. According to Berns, by remembering the tragedy and those who died, those affected are "trying to end the fear of forgetting" (24). Berns explains how this allows individuals affected by personal or collective tragedies to attain closure from the events. For the members of the Columbine community, by visiting the memorial and other remembrance events with other community members, they are engaging in this type of what Berns calls closure talk—remembering. Thus, it allows participants to move on from the events of the tragedy without completely removing their tie to the events of that day.

Unlike the permanent memorial, the anniversary events allowed my participants to interact with other members of the community while remembering the events of the tragedy. While the memorial was a place where people could choose when they wanted to visit, the anniversaries were events time-locked to the vicinity of April 20th. Thus, the community could

arrange larger scale events that drew crowds. These were more places for reuniting with the community. Members gathered at these remembrance events to see speakers, watch performances, and participate in events like the Run for Remembrance. Bette explained how the gatherings for the anniversaries were one of the only times that the community of Columbine came together as a whole. She explained that she felt solidarity with the community during "[A]n anniversary where you go up to the school or in the park and you're in that total community that you voluntarily went into to feel the feel."

However, not all of my participants saw the anniversary events in a positive light. Patrick described how he saw a lack of connection between these anniversary rituals and community solidarity: "I don't feel the need to go and be around a bunch of people who I do not know and try to share this experience with them." Part of this negativity, he explained, stems from the presence of the media at the remembrance events: "It always seems like it's media motivated. It's always seemed like it's this big media event. And that's why I have no desire to go back there where the media dictates what we talk about, who talks, when we talk about it, and what we say." Thus, the negative perception of the media persisted in the intermittent period. Additionally, my participants did not put emphasis on the importance of the anniversary events for maintaining solidarity in the community. In fact, many did not attend the anniversary events at all, or only did so out of a sense of obligation. While these events demonstrate that community members interacted less frequently than they did during the immediate community period, they show that the community was still bonded over the events of the tragedy. By coming back together every year and every time they visited the memorial, community members were encouraged to remember the tragedy.

The second function that the events of the intermittent community served was allowing community members to learn lessons from the tragedy. Both the memorial and anniversary represented events at which members could reflect on the lessons they learned. Similarly, the high school hosted a day called "Day Without Hate" during which students were encouraged to be kind to others. On this day, the school twice invited an organization called Rachel's Challenge, named after Rachel Scott, one of the shooting victims, to make a presentation. Their message was simple: be kind to others. Rachel's Challenge and Day Without Hate highlighted the lessons that my participants learned from the shootings. These little ways that participants changed have lasted for them and helped them to maintain the solidarity that was created after the shootings.

Most of my participants stated that they believed that the Day Without Hate and Rachel's Challenge were good for the community and good for the high school. According to Michael, they host Day Without Hate and Rachel's Challenge at the school because of his desire for "Columbine to be a place where everyone is accepted, everyone is respected for their opinions." Many of my participants, especially those who actually participated in Day Without Hate and Rachel's Challenge, either as students or as faculty, believed that these events were positive. Jennifer, a math teacher at the school, described Rachel's Challenge and mimicked the opinions of many of my other participants, "I just thought it was awesome. I thought it was really impactful." One exception was David, who stated,

> I chose not to do anything with it. 'Cause to me, the intentions are good,
> obviously, but to me, it's like another cottage industry that popped up after the
> 20th . . . even though they let Columbine do it for free, they're making money off
> of it. And I just struggled with that.

Instead of being bonded by the events directly as they were in the immediate community, my participants were able to maintain solidarity in the community through the lessons they learned from the tragedy. These events and the lessons that they encouraged allowed the solidarity that my participants felt needed to be preserved and maintained as time continued after the tragedy. Three lessons emerged that my participants described as learning after the tragedy: don't trust the media, focus on the positive, and treat each other well.

The first lesson, not to trust the media, was based on the experiences of community members with the press after the Columbine tragedy. Bette described her current feelings about the media: "I've been anti-press a lot since Columbine [laughs]. And I'll pick out the negativity of something in everything in the news these days because of a bad experience with the beginning." Many of my other participants expressed similar feelings regarding their perception of the media. According to Bette, this feeling of being "anti-press" came out of her specific experiences with how the media handled the coverage of the Columbine tragedy. David, the music director who was present at the school on the day of the shooting, described a speech that he gave at the one year memorial anniversary and discussed the community's general feelings about the media: "I talked about some things that I had learned from the past year. One of the things I said was, 'The media is untrustworthy.' Of course, the crowd erupted because the whole community was just down on the press."

While describing this distrust of the media, my participants noted that outside members of the press were not there when the shooting happened and did not understand what the community was going through. Participants felt the reason they were wrong in their reporting was because they were not part of the community. This identification of the news media as outsiders allowed the members of the Columbine community to experience and maintain

solidarity among themselves. By continuing the idea of the media as outsiders years after the tragedy, the community members maintained the press's position on the outside and enhanced their internal solidarity.

Overall, the main lesson learned from the media after the tragedy was that not everything they said could be trusted. This skepticism tied my participants together, and seemed likely to be an enduring legacy for those who experienced it. Patrick mused, "Pre-Columbine, I would have believed anything the media told me. Now I believe very little of what the media says. Because they just don't know. It's not their fault. They're reporting on things they don't have all the facts on."

The second lesson that my participants took from the tragedy in their community was to focus on the positives that have come as a response to the tragedy. These manifested themselves in many, very personalized ways for my participants. However, as a collective, it was easy for my participants to see the positives because of how they perceived how the community responded to the tragedy itself. It was through the community's response that my participants were able to gain the perspective on the tragedy that was necessary to view it in a positive light.

In order to create this lens through which the community members could frame their experiences after the tragedy as good ones, my participants needed to identify how this positive response arose. There are two main foci of these explanations. The first was on the community response generally. The second surrounded the perceived center of the community built around the high school—the principal, Michael.

According to my participants, it was through the response of the community that the members of Columbine were able to rebuild and develop a strong sense of solidarity within their area. According to Michael, this began immediately following the tragedy: "We were a

community that was, right after the tragedy, just in shambles. But look at us now. I mean, we're a great school. We have great kids, positive things going on." Andrew, the recent graduate, invoked a similar explanation, "Yeah this happened, but look at how my community responded." This response was very common among participants. For them, the community generally was very important in generating solidarity after the tragedy. The solidarity that it generated allowed the Columbine community to maintain its sense of solidarity and cohesion from the immediate to the intermittent community. According to Ryan, the community's reaction to the tragedy was directly responsible for maintaining this strength and bonding. "I'm not going to let guys like that [the killers] win. And you sought to terrorize the school and you sought to destroy this community and the only thing we've done is come back stronger." It is the resilience and response of the community that created the stronger sense of communal solidarity that my participants described as experiencing after the tragedy and in the years since.

In addition to the community's response in general, many of my participants commented on the contribution of one important figure in the Columbine community: the principal of the school. Michael has been the principal since 1995 and he was the principal during the shootings and will remain the principal through the 2013-2014 academic school year. When asked about the community's response, my participants constantly brought up Michael's name. It is clear that they all had immense respect and veneration for him as an administrator, individual, and friend. Additionally, they perceived that Michael had a role in helping the community cope with the tragedy and come together after it occurred. According to Michael himself, his goal has been to do "as much as I could to rebuild this community." Nicholas, a former student who graduated in 2010, stated that Michael was able to "make a strong sense of community and solidarity around [the tragedy]." According to Bette, this was something that still persisted thirteen years after the

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tragedy: "He still is a cornerstone to that high school. He still is strong and he still makes his kids strong because he is strong. And it's been that way since [the tragedy]." According to my participants, Michael's role after the tragedy for the community was generating the solidarity that allowed everyone to feel that they were healing from the events of the tragedy. His presence in the community and his reaction to the tragedy led my participants to view him in a very positive light and credit him with creating this sense of community that they all perceived. By utilizing these two specific frameworks, my participants were able to view the positive outcomes of the tragedy.

The third lesson that my participants learned in the intermittent community through the events was to treat others well. Andrew, a college student who graduated in 2010, stated the lesson he believes the community learned: "I think the way the shooting made us all care about other people." According to Jennifer, a math teacher at the high school, "I think that it sort of gave me like a purpose in life—I want to impact people. I want to be kind to people." Jennifer also told me how she had seen the tragedy affect her other friends who were in school with her during the shooting: "There's a lot of us that are teachers or counselors and are from Columbine. I think it's because of the shooting that we all went into something that's like helping others." For most of my participants, the positive lessons that they learned after Columbine were simple. Ryan described some of these interaction-based simple changes that occurred after the tragedy: "All those antagonisms that you used to have or the heated relationships with individuals seemed to disappear somewhat 'cause you realize there's some things worth worrying about and there's some things not. It's not worth being a jerk to people anymore." However, for all of my participants, these lessons about focusing on the positive and being generally kind came at too high of a price. Patrick explained this notion:

I think that there have been a lot of good things that have come out of what

happened here. Now, I would trade every single good thing that has happened to

have those kids back. It wasn't worth the price. As much good as has happened, it

was never worth the price.

However, it was the community's continuing focus on the lessons they learned since the tragedy

and the good things that occurred because of the tragedy that allowed them to experience

continued solidarity so long after the time of the shootings had passed.

What these lessons allowed many of my participants to do was to reclaim Columbine and

the community as their home—a place where they did not feel threatened, but instead where they

felt safe. Patrick described this feeling: "As strange as it sounds, the school has been an escape

for me from the event that occurred here—or at least, teaching and being around kids and being

around other teachers." This same feeling is what helped four of my participants who were

former students at the school to rejoin the community after college as teachers. They perceived a

special tie to the community that surrounded the school. It was due to this solidarity and sense of

home that these former students returned to teach.

However, despite the sense of community and positivity that members of the community

experienced, Columbine still had a negative reputation perpetuated by the media and the events

of the tragedy. My participants were aware of this reputation and made attempts to negotiate this

negative connotation. Members endeavored to ensure that the reputation of Columbine was

normalized, meaning that they wanted to ensure the reputation of the school returned to how it

was pre-tragedy, balancing the negative connotations with positive ones. There are three ways

participants attempted to normalize the reputation of the Columbine community and of

Columbine High School: defending the school, contributing to the community, and making it

part of their history. With these techniques, my participants ensured to non-members and outsiders that, despite how it might seem, the tragedy did not have a negative impact on the community. The way the news media associated the word and place of "Columbine" with negative images and events created an overall negative general perception of the school and the community among outsiders. These three strategies helped combat this negative reputation perpetuated by the media.

The first strategy of normalization that the members of the community participated in was defending the school. The rhetoric that my participants constantly described as using in their interactions with people who were not members of their community was to explain that, "It's still normal." According to Michael, many of the current students, when confronted by outsiders with an incorrect idea about the school, "are pretty sensitive. They get defensive defending Columbine High School when people outside make comments about our school." According to Nicholas, in his interactions with individuals, he would "insist[] on the fact that it was a normal school." Karen described to me that she would "definitely correct" anyone who had an incorrect idea about the school in order to "protect Columbine's reputation." She explained that she feels this way because "I don't want anyone to ever have a negative view of that school." My participants used this strategy when interacting with other people who had a misinformed idea about what goes on at Columbine High School and in the community. This included people asking them whether there were metal detectors at the school or bullet holes still in the walls and lockers, in addition to rumors spread attempting to explain why the tragedy occurred. One of the main rumors that circulated was that the killers were bullied. Ryan gave me the reaction that he gives when people ask him if people are still getting beat up in the school all the time. He explained,

That's ridiculous. I mean, things are really good now. They're better than they

were, but compared to other schools, it wasn't any different. It's way better now.

It's way *different* now. *Now* we're a different school. If anything, *now* we're a

different school compared to the rest of the high schools in Colorado or in the

country.

Sarah also demonstrated how she defended the reputation of the school while correcting others in

her interactions with them:

I want people to be informed that it's still a high school; it's not scary. It's such a

warm, inviting environment and we don't have metal detectors. Kids aren't afraid

to go to school. We don't have bullies. We don't have crazy security. And it's just

a normal high school. That's what I want people to know.

A second normalization strategy involved contributing to the community. By increasing

the positive things associated with Columbine High School, my participants believed these

would outweigh the negative. Andrew, a recent graduate, described why he was motivated to

perform well inside and outside of school:

I wanted to do well at Columbine and be positive and contribute as much as I

could through extracurriculars and stuff, just because I wanted people to see that

Columbine was a good school and just a normal school and there were amazing

students there because I really loved it.

By demonstrating that he was a good student who graduated from Columbine, Andrew was

attempting to neutralize the negative reputation of the school created after the shootings. As we

have already seen, others wanted to demonstrate that they learned lessons from the tragedy. They

contributed to the community by caring for one another and increasing the sense of solidarity and

community that continued to be felt at the high school during my research. By demonstrating that they were examples of good people in the Columbine community, they attempted to normalize the reputation of the school in general.

The third way that my participants sought to normalize the reputation of the school and the community was by making the tragedy part of their history. According to Michael, "It's part of our history, but that history's not going to shape us." By referring to the tragedy as their history, they simultaneously ensured that they have moved on and recovered from the tragedy and that they were able to distance themselves from the events of the tragedy by defining it as "history."

In order to make the tragedy part of their history, my participants informed the current students and other important people in their lives about the importance of the tragedy and the impact that it has had on their lives. Because many of my participants were current teachers at the school, they often had interactions with students. Sometimes students would ask about the tragedy and occasionally, my participants would bring it up to their students on their own. Either way, when having a conversation with others in the community who were not present during the tragedy, my participants felt it was good to explain their experiences to them. According to David, "It's important to know what happened 'cause it's still part of their heritage. They're still Columbine kids . . . I just think it's good for them to hear it . . . 'cause it's part of their story too." Patrick explains that all of the students who graduate from Columbine High School are connected to the tragedy: "Because they go, unfortunately, to the most infamous high school in America. And so they share in that and they, in some way, suffer the consequences of having to be a student at Columbine High School." However, Patrick explained that they are not

necessarily connected to the actual tragedy, but to the positive community that has developed since the tragedy. He stated,

> It goes back to that whole mentality of, 'We Are Columbine . . . And we are *all* Columbine.' That we are all part of this thing and the kids who graduate this year in the class of 2013, they're just as big of a part of this school as the kids who were there on that day and the kids that came before.

Thus, my participants expanded the community of grief in which the Columbine community was subsumed when the tragedy occurred in 1999. They expanded it to include current and future graduates of the school itself. As we will see, this community of tragedy could also be expanded to include other communities that have experienced school shootings and other tragedies.

MEDIATED COMMUNITY

The third type of community that developed was the mediated community. The mediated community represents the most conceptually intriguing community. It is characterized by mediated contact between different communities of tragedy. It was mediated in the sense that there was no direct contact between members of the Columbine community and other communities of tragedy. The only contacts that occurred between members of the Columbine community and other groups were mediated through organizations like Phoenix 999 and the high school itself. Over the past several decades, the number of communities that have experienced collective grief due to massive tragedies such as school shootings have increased. The tragedies that were mentioned the most by my participants were the shootings at Platte Canyon High School [CO] on September 27, 2006, Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, the Aurora movie theater shootings [CO] on July 20, 2012, and Sandy Hook Elementary School [Newtown, CT] on December 14, 2012. Those in the Columbine community reached out to these other communities

where some type of tragic occurrence, usually a shooting and usually at a school, had occurred. These connections were never direct, person-to-person, but only indirect through mediators. When new tragedies occurred, they created the perception of a "club of tragedy" that expanded the boundaries of the community of solidarity. "Club of tragedy" is a term that Michael used to refer to the bond formed between schools and their surrounding communities that have experienced tragedy. This type of community, in contrast to the other two, was not tied to at a finite period of time. It was created and maintained when new tragedies occurred, expanding the community of tragedy. Unlike the other two temporal forms of community, there were no real-world events in the mediated community. After a tragedy occurred, certain mediators appeared that allow communication and support to be channeled from Columbine to other communities experiencing tragedy. These mediators were usually schools or organizations, and there was practically no contact at all between individuals of the Columbine community and members of those other communities. However, after a tragedy occurred, those in the Columbine community perceived a "special bond" between their community and the new one.

My participants' distrust for the media led them to minimalize their exposure to the news coverage of the events. Of course, the news media provides one of the only means of actually learning about these tragedies around the country. However, as Patrick explained, it is important for community members to separate themselves from the news coverage: "If there was a school shooting today, I would not go home and watch the news about it. And I would not get on the Internet and read a ton of stuff about it. I would be informed enough to know what happened, but I would specifically take steps to make sure that I was not constantly bombarding myself with information about it." My participants explained that part of the reason that they avoided the

news coverage was to avoid triggers that would cue emotional memories of the Columbine tragedy. Thus the news coverage they did see was minimal. As Ryan explained,

> I guess what I try to do most often is remind myself that with my own experiences, you cannot trust the media for quite a few days after something like that occurs. And so I try to take everything that is happening with a grain of salt. I try to get as much information as I possibly can as quickly as possible and then allow the people to move on.

My participants shielded themselves from excessive exposure to the coverage of new tragedies and questioned what they were seeing when they actually watched the news.

When tragedy occurs in similar contexts to those at Columbine, brought up in the news or not, members of the community related the events and experiences of the members of the new community of tragedy to their own experience. Jennifer summed up what many of my participants experienced when she said that she thinks about Columbine "if there's any kind of tragedy in the news that's similar." Because of the similarity between these situations, I found that my participants related the new tragedy to the Columbine tragedy, which brought up emotions and memories for them of what they experienced. Karen describes this feeling: "You kind of do a mental comparison in your own head of what they're feeling compared to what you were feeling that day and just how horrible it is . . . It just brings everything kind of back to the forefront." Whenever my participants heard of a tragedy that was similar to their own or geographically close, it brought back memories of their experience with Columbine even though these events were happening almost 14 years later.

In addition to the emotions and memories being brought up, my participants also sought out other members of the Columbine community who had similar experiences with tragedy to

talk to about one of the newer tragedies. Thus, these new tragedies increased the interaction among the Columbine community members, creating a surge of solidarity in the community as a reaction to the news of the most recent tragedy. These increased interactions were similar to the gatherings that happened in the immediate community. Lauren describes her experience with this renewed interaction: "I tend to seek out people who know. When the shooting happened at Connecticut, I immediately went to Sarah who was there in '99 and just kind of vented with her because we were both in similar situations, so we kind of had an idea of how each other felt." For Lauren and many of my other participants, rather than having to explain their situation to someone, they sought out only people who already knew what they had been through. Thus the new tragedies did not encourage the formation of a new community within the Columbine community, but a resurgence of the immediate community.

While these other tragic events allowed community members to interact again and to experience increased solidarity within their own community, it also connected them to the members of the newly affected community of tragedy. These mediated interactions were facilitated by organizations and by the school itself. According to Karen, "I never really had any personal contact in any of the other [tragedies]. It would be kind of weird."

The Columbine community was able to identify the members of these other communities as insiders because they had similar experiences with tragedy. As we have already seen, the news media were defined as outsiders by the Columbine community because of the negative interactions with them and perception of the media's intrusiveness. Thus, the members of the Columbine community developed a sensitivity to the insider-outsider dimension. It is because of this sensitivity that the Columbine community reached out to these members from other communities of tragedy. They did not perceive them as outsiders, but rather because they wanted

to share their knowledge of grieving and healing after a tragedy, they saw these other communities as insiders to the exclusive tragedy club.

Instead of having direct contact with these other communities, the members of the Columbine community reached out and showed support for these other communities through mediated interaction. They did this by organizing to send gifts and banners to the affected schools. Phoenix 999 is an organization housed in Littleton, Colorado and, according to Michael who is involved with the group, is "a group of kids from the class of '99. After the Aurora tragedy, they wanted to get together and start helping people who were involved in these kinds of tragedies." They have met with the survivors of the tragedies and organized donation drives of gifts like teddy bears and other signs of support. In addition, when there was a tragic event at a school, Columbine High School organized a banner that all of the students and faculty signed at the school that they sent to the newly affected school. Michael described the effect of these banners on one school in particular:

> We put it down in the cafeteria and students could write thoughts and well wishes
> and then we shipped it to Chardon [Ohio, where there was a school shooting in
> 2012]. And I know it meant a lot to them because . . . [I saw on the news and] you
> saw this big thing, 'We Love You Columbine High School.' And so we know that
> it means a lot.

Thus, it is through the actual high school and organizations like Phoenix 999 that the members of the Columbine community can show their support to these newly affected communities. Interestingly, the organizationally mediated interaction incorporates both forms of solidarity that we saw in the immediate and intermittent communities. While the immediate community focused mostly on group and collective gatherings to increase levels of solidarity, the

intermittent community involved participation in mostly solitary remembrance events. The mediated community incorporated both collective and solitary solidarity renewal in the forms of the gifts and the banners. The gift donations, completed mediated by groups like Phoenix 999, did not require interaction between any members of the community. The banners, however, allowed for a collective effort because people had to gather in a specific place and sign the banner. Thus, the chances for their interaction were much higher and these were group efforts rather than solitary ones.

What is important to note, however, is that my participants perceived that these gifts and banners and other signs of support mean a lot because they came from Columbine High School. According to Michael, he believed that these gifts and donations and support helped the communities "because it's coming from a perspective that I lived through it . . . There's hope. I provide that hope for them. It's living proof because we're living it. We were a community that was, right after the tragedy, that was just in shambles. But look at us now." According to Michael, this hope is also realistic: "I think it provides hope that it's not going to happen overnight, but there is hope for a brighter future." While all of my participants were willing and happy to provide support and hope to these communities, some of my participants viewed Columbine as having an obligation to reach out to these communities. This is because, according to Patrick, "Columbine is in a very special and unique position to offer some condolence because we've been there."

What is important in connecting the Columbine community to these others is the shared experience of tragedy. While the members of the individual community are drawn together due to their shared experience with the same tragedy, members of completely separate communities of tragedy are drawn together by their shared experience with school shooting tragedies in

general. This is how, according to Michael, the tragedy club is formed. He elaborated on this idea:

> I think there's a special bond, unfortunately, because of the tragedy, that we come
>
> close to stating that, 'We know what you're going through because we went
>
> through it.' I think there's that instant connection. As opposed, not that other
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> things are not appreciated, but when they hear from similar communities that have
>
> gone through tragedy, and much more importantly, as I think Columbine High
>
> School provides the opportunity for them to believe there's hope. That here we
>
> are 13 years later and even though we'll never forget the awful tragedy that
>
> occurred, we're moving forward. We are a strong community and the theme 'A
>
> time to remember and a time to hope,' and we provide that hope for people that
>
> go through similar circumstances.

According to Michael and confirmed by my participants, when there is a new tragedy that occurs, the community of tragedy expands to envelop all other communities who have similar experiences. They are bonded by those experiences and can experience solidarity on a larger level through the many connections in this expanded community. The tragedy club forms a community including all of those that have experienced similar tragedies and provides support and a message of hope for those who will experience it in the future.

In addition to helping these newly affected communities, the mediated community also benefited my participants in two ways: it revived their feelings of cohesion within their community and it renewed their inspiration to be more inclusive than they had been prior to the tragedy. The mediated community allowed members of the Columbine community to revive the solidarity that they experience within their own community. Members talked to other members

about the tragedies and seeing these horrific events unfold reminded them of their own experiences. Thus, the solidarity that was created in the immediate community was sustained by the mediated community. Additionally, because the members saw their community as a role model for how a community can heal after tragedy, the mediated community renewed their inspiration to be better role models. Members saw the mediated community as an opportunity and possibly an obligation for their community to demonstrate to others how they rebounded after the tragedy. Thus, the members benefitted from the mediated community because they had a renewed sense of solidarity by having a reminder of the lessons that they learned from the tragedy. They also gained a good feeling for themselves by helping others. In 1991 Brown published research on "professional –ex's," people who capitalized on their former deviance by turning it into a professional asset, in his case by using their former experiences as alcoholics to become alcohol and drug abuse counselors. He noted that people helped themselves by helping others, not only through the feelings of altruism they attained, but by renewing their own commitment to sobriety. The Columbine community's experiences through the mediated community enabled them to both give back by helping others as well as to renew and strengthen their own solidarity. Thus, the mediated community benefitted both the newly affected communities and the Columbine community.

The only exceptions to the mediated-only interactional mode occurred between Columbine and one other school: Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colorado. This shooting occurred in similar circumstances to Columbine: the shooting occurred at the high school in the middle of a school day. Additionally, this school is geographically very close to Columbine compared to the other infamous, recent school shootings. I also predict that members of the Columbine community would have this same exceptional reaction to the shooting at Arapahoe

High School in Centennial, CO, but this shooting had not yet occurred when I interviewed my participants. However, I drove by Columbine shortly after the Arapahoe High School shooting and the marquee outside of the school read, "We Are All Warriors [the mascot of Arapahoe High School]." This demonstrates how this Arapahoe High School community may also have been enveloped into the Columbine community as Platte Canyon High School was.

This propinquity affected the reactions of the Columbine community in two ways. First, members reported being more affected by the Platte Canyon tragedy than other tragedies because of how close the school was to their community. Sarah describes how "Virginia Tech affected me not as much as Platte Canyon did just because Platte Canyon was so close to home." Many of my participants echoed this sentiment. Second, the geographical closeness allowed the members of the Columbine community to actually go to Platte Canyon High School and interact directly with the community there. Many of the Columbine faculty members did this. Michael affirmed how this variation was tied to the fact of how close the two schools were: "In the state, I'm within driving distance. So I went and spent time at Platte Canyon." Being able to drive straight to the affected community allowed for direct interaction and for Columbine to completely subsume the Platte Canyon community into their community of tragedy.

Beyond this direct, unmediated interaction between members of the Columbine and Platte communities, continued interaction between the two schools occurred through the form of Emily's Parade. This was a rally and a motorcycle ride from Columbine High School to Platte Canyon High School that demonstrated not only how close the schools are geographically, but also how close they have remained due to their shared experiences.

CONCLUSION

The levels of solidarity in the immediate aftermath of the Columbine tragedy were much higher than the levels perceived before the tragedy. This supports Durkheim's (1966 [1938]) conclusion about the functional role of crime in society. We see that in the Columbine community, this solidarity is maintained 13 and 14 years after the tragedy. The community members perceived the levels of solidarity as less than those immediately after the tragedy, but still significantly higher than before the tragedy occurred. Additionally, community members perceived a "special bond" between Columbine and other communities that experienced tragedy. They generally interacted only through the mediation of organizations. However, this mediated community still encouraged the formation of solidarity between the different communities.

In examining the research that has been done on communities that have experienced tragedy, we can see that these communities have gone through similar patterns to the ones I have identified. Table I depicts a general model of longitudinal solidarity that these communities of tragedy moved through in the time period following their tragedies.

TABLE I

Model of longitudinal solidarity in communities of tragedy

Time-Frame Stage	Solidarity Levels	With Whom
I. Pre-tragedy	Normal (baseline)	Community members
II. Immediate aftermath	Extremely high	Community members
III. 5-13 months post-tragedy	Still high, but declining	Community members
IV. 13 months -13 years post-tragedy	[Unstudied]	[Unstudied]
V. 13-14 years post-tragedy	Higher than pre-tragedy	Community members and other communities of tragedy

Hawdon et al. (2010) are the only ones to have described stage I. Their research was based on a survey administered at Virginia Tech prior to the tragedy that measured levels of

solidarity in the university community. This is the only extant baseline data for pre-tragedy solidarity. However, much research has depicted stage II (Beyerlein and Sikkink 2008; Carroll et al. 2005; Collins 2004; Durkheim 1995; Erikson 1976; Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Hawdon et al. 2010; Hawdon et al. 2012; Letukas et al. 2009; Nurmi et al. 2011; Quarantelli and Dynes 1977; Ryan and Hawdon 2008; Sweet 1998; Turkel 2002; Xu 2009). In all of these depictions of communities in the aftermath of experiencing tragedy, researchers found that solidarity levels were increased and were very high compared to their participants' perspectives of pre-tragedy solidarity levels. Hawdon et al. (2010) and Collins (2004) described stage III. Collins (2004) found that there was a "gradual decline towards normalcy in 6-9 months" after the 9-11 tragedy (53). Hawdon et al. (2010) studied the Virginia Tech community five, nine, and 13 months post-tragedy. They found that solidarity peaked at five months and then slowly declined towards pre-tragedy levels. However, solidarity levels at nine and 13 months were still much higher than pre-tragedy levels. To date, sociologists have not described stage IV and I am the first to portray stage V.

As I have shown, perceived solidarity levels in the Columbine community have remained higher than pre-tragedy levels. Members believed that the solidarity that was created in stage II was maintained in the time since the tragedy and was still something that persisted for them many years after the tragedy. This has yet to be studied in other communities of tragedy, but holds true for the Columbine community. Additionally, the solidarity that members of the Columbine community felt is no longer restricted to other members of that community. Thirteen and 14 years post-tragedy, members of the Columbine community extended their community to include members of other communities that experienced tragedy.

Additionally, this model is a longitudinal one. Therefore, it is necessary to have data from each stage in order to fully examine how a community reacts to tragedy. The model of longitudinal diffusion of community after tragedy has two main sections: the immediate community (stage II) and the long-term community (stages III-V). Most of the research on communities after tragedy has focused on the immediate effects of community. This research describes how solidarity, normalization, and fragmenting effects of tragedy are involved in the immediate aftermath of tragedy.

The solidarity that seeps into the long-term community must be established in the immediate community. Research by Hawdon and Ryan (2011) depicts how solidarity was generated in this immediate time-frame post-tragedy. This study examined the community around Virginia Tech. They describe how event-specific activities increase solidarity. By holding events and attending the events, members of the Virginia Tech community promoted and experienced solidarity. My research supports this finding. There were many formal events that were held in the immediate community that focused on bringing the community together. However, there were also informal events that were not created with this specific purpose, but still functioned in this way. Thus, for the Columbine community, informal events and formal event-specific activities promoted and generated solidarity in the immediate community. Additional research by Collins (2004) examined what created solidarity after the 9-11 tragedy. He depicts that "What creates the solidarity is the sharp rise in ritual intensity of social interaction" (53). I also found this to be true in the immediate community at Columbine. Members were constantly around other members and thus participated in many public rituals and interacted very often. This created a sense of solidarity in the immediate community.

Additionally, Hawdon and Ryan's (2011) research described how the Virginia Tech community attempted to return to normal as quickly as possible post-tragedy. They describe the function of returning to normal as increasing the level of solidarity experienced by community members. According to this research, "While one may find it difficult to continue with everyday mundane activities, these activities bring people together, promote solidarity, and enhance recovery" (1378). I found this to be true within the Columbine community. Members in the immediate community found that returning to normalcy allowed them less time to dwell on the tragedy and more time to be around other community members who had similar experiences.

In contrast to the model that I have set up, there are a few studies that have looked at the negative and fragmenting effects of tragedy on community (Carroll et al. 2005; Erikson 1976; Nurmi et al. 2011; Vuori et al. 2013). The negative effects that were described by Vuori et al. (2013) was that solidarity actually decreased after a school shooting in the community they were studying. For Nurmi et al.'s (2011) research, the negative effect was conflict created in the community after a school shooting due to the increased levels of solidarity among some members of the community and not others. According to Nurmi et al. (2011), "The increased level of solidarity was also followed by a variety of negative phenomena such as strengthened group divisions between youths and adults, social stigmatization, and feelings of collective guilt" (300). Importantly, however, these negative effects on the community are usually secondary to the positive effects. Additionally, none of my participants expressed any negative effects of solidarity in their community. If they perceived any fragmenting effects, the positive effects of the community seemed to outweigh them. However, it is also important to examine the reasons why these communities experienced fragmenting effects in their communities after tragedy. According to Vuori et al. (2013), the reason that a decrease in solidarity was experienced was

because there were lowered levels of social trust in the community because the gunmen and victims were community members. Even though this situation is very similar to the Columbine tragedy, my participants never indicated that they felt a sense of decreased solidarity. In Nurmi et al.'s (2011) study, there was the specific condition of the conflict between the youth who were more directly tied to the tragedy and to their parents who were more separated from the tragedy. Because Columbine community members perceived the tragedy as an attack on the whole community, neither the students, nor their parents, nor any other group within the community were excluded from the solidarity. The Columbine community did not experience the same circumstances as these other communities and this may explain why they did not experience the fragmenting effects of tragedy in the same ways.

In regards to the long-term community, there is relatively little research from my longitudinal perspective. However, the research that does exist focused on maintaining solidarity and how the negative effects of community persist longitudinally.

The solidarity that is created immediately after a tragedy is maintained through rituals. Hawdon and Ryan (2011) examined the rituals that sustain solidarity in the months after the Virginia Tech tragedy. They found that what was best at sustaining the solidarity that was created immediately after the tragedy was more informal meetings and "casual conversations with community members" (1377). However, because they conducted their research only up to 13 months after the tragedy, they could not examine how solidarity was sustained more longitudinally. What I found was that sites of remembrance and memorials allow community members to reflect on the tragedy and the lessons they learned from it. This reflection allowed the solidarity created in the immediate community to be sustained and maintained in the intermittent community.

Further, research has been conducted from a longitudinal perspective (but only up to around a year post-tragedy) that examines how the fracturing of a community due to tragedy is sustained in the long-term. These fracturing effects are based on three specific indices that determine if the negative effects will become important aspects of the experience of community members in the long term: loss, experience, and exclusion. Tuason et al. (2012) studied former New Orleans residents who were displaced after Hurricane Katrina. They examined how the perception of loss of community and loss of their homes, possessions, and connections to family and friends allowed them to experience the negative effects of the disaster in the long-term. Similarly, Erikson (1976) demonstrated how the amount of loss experienced by residents in a flooded area affected their perception of the community and of the solidarity experienced. Similarly to loss, the specific experience that one had in relation to a specific tragedy or disaster influenced whether they focused on how the community was fractured or how it bonded together after the tragedy. This is exemplified by Carroll et al. (2005) who showed that a fire disaster could have both fragmenting and cohesive effects on the community depending on how involved the individual was with the experience of the fire. Finally, if there was perceived exclusion of certain members of the community, as in Vuori et al. (2013) and Nurmi et al.'s (2011) studies, then there will be a perceived fracture in the community. The Columbine community did not experience a specific sense of a fracturing or loss of community. This may be due to the fact that no one was forced to move out of the community due to the tragedy and that experiences differed, but the tragedy as a whole was seen as an attack on the entire community, and thus no one experienced any exclusion from the solidarity felt in the community.

Additionally, in my research, the mediated community, while not tied to a structured timeline, existed between Columbine and other communities that experienced tragedy. The

creation of this organizationally mediated community has not been described in the literature. However, a similar community organization is maintained in cyber communities. Cyber communities are those that are maintained purely online and foster relationships that are created and sustained through interaction on the Internet. Within cyber communities, like the mediated community of tragedy, the members usually do not have direct communication. The Internet mediates the cyber community members' interactions and organizations mediated the interactions of members of the mediated community of tragedy. Thus, while they both maintain a structure of mediated interaction and community solidarity, they are generated and maintained in very different ways.

Further, studies have been conducted that looked specifically at the solidarity experienced by individuals who were not directly involved in the community that experienced tragedy. Letukas et al. (2009) looked at how solidarity was created in the U.S. and Sweden in regards to a tsunami in Asia. They found that the media's presence in covering this tsunami allowed the members on the non-affected countries to experience solidarity with and send money and other aid to the affected countries. While this represents an example of how mediated interaction can occur, it differs from the mediated community of tragedy in that the mediated community experienced between communities of tragedy is exclusive. The collective tragedy experience is not media moderated and, in fact, the members of the community avoid the media and reject the presence of the media in their own communities.

Other research has been conducted on the media mediated community that came out of the 9-11 terrorist attacks (Beyerlein and Sikkink 2008; Collins 2004; Turkel 2002; Wayment et al. 2010). The community created after 9-11 was not just limited to the immediate community members. The coverage of the news media allowed for a national community identity to be

created and thus individuals who were not directly affected by the 9-11 tragedy could still experience the solidarity generated in the national community. Again, this was a media-mediated interaction that was demonstrated by relief efforts from citizens of the U.S. and other volunteer efforts after the 9-11 tragedy. However, the Columbine community does not fit into this paradigm because they did not include the media in their experience. Thus, those outside of the community were not permitted to experience the solidarity with the community members. This demonstrates further that the organizationally mediated community created in the Columbine tragedy was exclusive.

Overall, the experience of the Columbine community members creates a model of the longitudinal effect of tragedy and the solidarity experienced by the members. Nearly 15 years after the tragedy at Columbine High School, solidarity was still being experienced within the community. Thus, this creates an extended model of the longitudinal reaction of communities to tragedy and demonstrates that Durkheim's (1966 [1938]) assertion that crime can be a source of solidarity holds true even years after the tragedy occurred. This explains how even after an extremely devastating event like a violent, mass tragedy, a community can continue to function and not succumb to the negative effects of the destructive tragedy.

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