

**A Strike for Peace**

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*Bowling for Columbine* (Film, 2002) is a movie that I have chosen to watch twice now. Since I was young, I've been fascinated with the human condition and how two people in the same human form could go in completely different directions with their lives – did it come down to nature, nurture, socialization, or the lack thereof? This particular event – Columbine – has gotten my attention since it happened; I was seven years old and it was my sister's first birthday. We lived in New Hampshire, halfway across the country from Littleton, Colorado, where Columbine High School is located, and the tragedy was engulfing every news station around. My parents always did a good job at trying to protect us kids from what was on the news because it always seemed to be so violent and depressing, and now that I am a 32-year-old adult female, I have my own view of the world and how the media markets different events to our country. The film *Bowling for Columbine* was a thoughtfully put-together film that showed the reality of gun violence and the ease of obtaining weapons in the United States vs. other countries, while simultaneously showing the audience the influence that both media and aggression in individuals or communities, can have on the United States as a whole. "Social psychologists define aggression as behavior that is intended to harm another individual who does not wish to be harmed" (10.1 *Defining Aggression*, 2015). Aggression can also be considered a 'gray area' because the person being perceived as aggressive may not be meaning to do so, which leaves the intent behind the aggression to be an unknown factor. I consider aggression one of the baselines that leads to violence, which is where the film *Bowling for Columbine* shows how dangerous of a recipe that aggression, media, stereotypes, and weapons can be.

*Bowling for Columbine* pulled together quite a few different aspects of social psychology and displayed them in a very in-your-face way to show what America was truly like in 2002 in rural Michigan or suburban Colorado and how it compared to other countries such as Canada. I felt that the Director and Narrator, Michael Moore, did a great job of interviewing community members in the rural town of Oscola, MI and the suburb of Littleton, Colorado, and comparing their reactions and answers to those of citizens in Ottawa, Canada. The biggest difference that Mr. Moore found was that in Canada, the news media was more positive – newscasters were giving the audience advice on how to make sure your

parents have enough in their retirement to go into a home if needed, they spoke about new and upcoming events happening in the community and focused on the positivity happening around the world. When speaking with citizens in the American towns, Mr. Moore was told about the constant barrage of gun violence and Black-violence that was portrayed on the television or in the papers; Mr. Moore even got live footage of a few different emergencies happening at the same time and newscasters needed to decide where to go – on camera they said they would always choose the emergency that involved gun violence over any other story. By contrasting the experiences of Canadians and Americans, and even Americans in Canada, Mr. Moore was successfully able to show that violence in the media could be a direct cause of the violence we experience in America. When these violent acts or events are portrayed everywhere, in any style of media, people get scared, and in turn, they can become aggressive. According to a model called ‘Priming Aggression’, “the activation from the viewed violence spreads automatically in memory from the perceived violent acts to other aggressive ideas and in the end increases the likelihood of engaging in violence”. Basically, the study showed that seeing things such as violent TV, violent videogames, or having exposure to handguns leads to aggressive thoughts such as ‘shoot’, ‘gun’, ‘hurt’, or ‘kill’, which creates violent behavior such as retaliation, using guns, or gossip and ridicule; the more that we (adolescent and adults alike) consume negative and violent media, the more likely or apt we are to have aggressive thoughts which could lead towards risky, violent behavior (10.1 *Defining Aggression*, 2015). Michael Moore did a great job of showing this progression of ‘seeing violence’ to ‘violent behavior’ in his film as he showed countless media advertisements in the United States for guns, ammunition, and violence. One of the gentlemen that Mr. Moore interviewed was Barry Glassner, the author of *The Culture of Fear*, who did extensive research into the media, how it portrays world events, and how it has stimulated fear in Americans for decades. Barry confirmed Mr. Moore’s previous sentiments about the media choosing what they cover, to which Barry opined that “communities are conditioned to believe that they are more dangerous than they are”. This type of fear in an individual, nevermind community, can certainly be cause for aggression towards our fellow-citizens if we are in constant belief that we will be under attack by our neighbor. Barry also mentions that, in one particular

city, the crime rate in a period of time went down by 20%, but the coverage of murders and gun violence on the news went up by an astonishing 600%! That is an incredible number and brings up the question: why can't the media tell a more accurate representation of the current state of the community or country, or at least be a bit more positive, and if they were, would that mean for a less scared, less aggressive country? To bolster his point, Mr. Moore also interviewed the former producer, Dick Hurlan, for the TV show *COPS* – a show which is currently on its 36<sup>th</sup> season – and is all about the police chasing down 'the bad guy'. Dick and Mr. Moore spoke about how it seemed to be that most of the individuals that were being arrested were black, and discussed how that factor on top of all of the historical events and tragedies that have happened for black people, could affect the black race as well as how they are perceived by any other races viewing that show. When Mr. Moore asked Dick why he couldn't start a show about arresting white-collar criminals or chasing down Wall Street lawbreakers, his answer was, "Anger does well, hate does well, violence does well, tolerance and understanding and trying to be better than you were yesterday does less well" when referring to television ratings. This just goes to show that the ratings and the money is what matters – not what is being shoved in our youth's faces or how that may affect their growth both mentally and physically into adulthood. If a child is consistently around hate-fueled language, playing violent videogames or hearing the news talk about the number of murders or suicides that have taken place lately, how can they be expected not to become aggressive in some way, even if just to protect themselves? I think this documentary film by Mr. Moore did an incredible job of trying to assist us in answering this very question – this film focuses more on the social aspects that could have led to these two boys committing such a heinous act and how if those social influences were possibly changed or different, there may have been a very different outcome in a tragedy like Columbine.

Not only did *Bowling for Columbine* present us with important questions as a country, but I feel that if more Americans were to watch this movie, they would understand how each of the factors I mentioned previously (aggression, media, stereotypes, and weapons) can truly influence a country, a community, and an individual into horrendous acts; maybe if more people were able to look at this film

from a social psychological perspective, they would be able to step back and take different pieces away from this documentary and understand how, as one nation, we can become more peaceful, less afraid, and in turn have less aggression towards our neighbors and maybe events such as Columbine will be much fewer and far between. Another point that Mr. Moore so strategically interlaced throughout this film was about stereotypes and discrimination, which I had touched on previously when referring to Mr. Moore's conversation with the former *COPS* producer, Dick. Overlayed with this conversation were dozens upon dozens of clips of black men and women being arrested, or murdered, talking about gang violence, and making it out to look like the only aggression in the United States is coming from the black community, which in turn made white people fear for themselves and hold on to stereotypes from decades ago. A black person could not even own a firearm until 1955, the same year that Rosa Parks infamously took her seat (*Bowling for Columbine*, 2002). Because Mr. Moore did such a great job of breaking down what the media or corporations do to spread hate and distrust, I believe anyone watching this film would be able to take something away from it – whether it's having a better understanding of what aggression can lead to, or how stereotypes and prejudice can play a factor in our lives because of the media that is put out there for us to consume. This film did a great job of not only narrating and explaining the dangers of prejudice and discrimination in media, but it also played a large part in starting to make a difference in some of these communities. One of the most heartwarming parts of the film is when Mr. Moore takes two survivors of Columbine to the K-Mart Headquarters in Michigan and was eventually able to get the leaders at K-Mart to agree to stop selling ammunition in all of their stores within 90 days of their announcement. Another positive piece to the story was that Lockheed Martin, which builds and delivers weapons to the U.S. Military, made a sizeable donation to the local schools for teachers and students to undergo anger management training and learn alternate ways to handle their aggression or frustration, or how to respond to one another when in a tense situation. Personally, I think this is a great addition to any school, for any age; mental health is important in every step of life and it's important to not only understand how you, yourself, respond to high-stress or high-pressure situations, but also to understand how you respond to those around you, and how they may respond to you. If everyone can learn at a

younger age how to communicate more effectively and with less aggression, I truly believe that violence would no longer be the immediate answer, to a threat, or the feeling of someone being aggressive towards someone else. The film and narration had a great way of presenting the audience with plenty of information and media in many forms, but never directly stated where the narrator or writer of the film stood on any particular situation – they just wanted to research information and speak with both influential corporate figures and regular citizens and present it to the audience as it was discovered.

With this being the second time I have watched *Bowling for Columbine* (the first time I was 16), I had the ability to go into the film with a new perspective; an adult perspective with a bit of world knowledge and experience under my belt. As soon as Michael Moore started discussing the way that media influenced our feelings which led to fear or aggression, and when he showed all of the clips of the news reports of black men or women being violent, it brought me right back to the months following 9/11. The planes crashing into the towers was everywhere – you couldn't miss it no matter how hard you tried. I was 9, I had no clue what a terrorist was, and I was terrified. I did 'know' one thing though: what a terrorist looked like. Now, looking back, I can see that this was the first real experience that I can remember, dealing with stereotypes and prejudice, and it had a profound effect on me. I went out into the world daily in fear that a man with a 'funny-looking hat' and dress would start bombing my neighborhood or my school. I didn't understand how far New York was from New Hampshire and I certainly didn't understand that what a person looks like is *not* what makes them take out these terrible acts on innocent people. Now, having been educated in basic social psychology, and accompanied by my experience in the military and understanding of how people can work together regardless of skin color, sexual orientation, religion, etc. I am able to look at this film in a different light that when I was younger. I am able to see how all of these factors: aggression, media, stereotypes, and weapons can be a true recipe for disaster. If we as a country and society can shift our focus to the positive things happening in our communities and lives, and change the dialogue to be more empowering and uplifting to our citizens, maybe we could truly

see a change in the aggression that is shown in most Americans and instead of being fearful, we can relax and enjoy the freedoms that the men and women before us fought so hard for.

## References

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