

Stop Scapegoating the Mentally Ill

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

Last month in this newsletter I wrote about the important activism of young people. As higher ed employees (and as journalists who cover higher ed), we are surrounded by young people. I noted that in my work, I hear a lot of scorn for the young people. But in light of the recent tragedy in Parkland, Florida, the kids have risen to the occasion. I also pointed out that the kids of Black Lives Matter have been doing similar good work over the past few years (to much less acclaim).

And yet the Parkland teens are not perfect, nor is their activism. As many folks on social media have pointed out, to offer helpful criticism of the work of the Parkland kids and other gun control activists does not mean you are tearing down that work. It means you want to make that work stronger. It is in that spirit that I offer helpful criticism now.

Do not use people with psychiatric disabilities as scapegoats in the gun control debate. Scapegoating mentally ill people is a ploy.

Do not fall for it.

Gun Violence on Campus

Gun violence has been a problem for college campuses for decades, ever since a sniper climbed the clock tower at the University of Texas in 1966 with a rifle and opened fire, killing 17 people. The shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007 was one of the deadliest spree killings in history, killing 32 students and faculty. The list goes on.

The point is, gun violence haunts college campuses. When the March for Our Lives took place in March 2018, the lives of college students—not just precollegiate students—were on the line.

The march was an extraordinary event with an extraordinary turnout. [According to CBS News](#), approximately 200,000 people turned out for the Washington DC march alone. Furthermore, there were some 800 other marches held across the country.

A Troubling Manifesto

In advance of the march, the Parkland students published their "[manifesto to fix America's gun laws](#)" in *The Guardian*. But the manifesto is troubling, as many disability activists have pointed out.

The first problematic point comes under their argument for a national database for background checks. The Parkland students write, after calling for a database, "This data [on guns] should be paired with infractions of gun laws, past criminal offenses and the status of the gun owner's mental health and physical capability."

Why, I wonder, do they need information about a person's "physical capability"? I understand why they've put "mental health" in there—they're scared of the same bogeyman everyone else is—that gun violence can be stopped by stopping people with mental illness. I'll return to that red herring in a moment. But I cannot decipher why they would so broadly target disability.

The next plank of their platform is this one: "Change privacy laws to allow mental health care providers to communicate with law enforcement." They continue: "Privacy laws should be amended. That will allow us to prevent people who are a danger to themselves or to others from purchasing firearms." They would further discard the privacy protections of disabled people, allowing the police access to—medical records? I'm not sure exactly. Already health care providers are required to report when a patient is a danger to self or others. What more are the students asking for here?

And then a third plank is this: "Dedicate more funds to mental health research and professionals." Under this plank, they discuss how prevalent mental illness is among those who kill people with guns.

And thus, we have a problem. There are nine planks of their platform. Three discuss mental health and disability—one-third of the planks.

The manifesto of the Parkland students has fallen into a common trap: scapegoating the mentally ill for gun violence.

Why Scapegoating Works

After all, if you can scapegoat a particular group of people for gun violence, then guns aren't the problem. The group is.

Scapegoating works when a group is small and already vulnerable. People with major mental illnesses make up a small portion of our population, and they are among our most vulnerable. They are [abused and killed by the police](#) and by their own [care providers](#). They are abused and die in [nursing homes](#). They are abused and die by the hands of their [own family members](#).

Furthermore, the vast majority of gun violence is not spree killings: Mass shootings make up less than one-half of 1 percent of gun homicides each year, according to [The Washington Post and the Gun Violence Archive](#).

If you look at who perpetrates the majority of gun violence against others (that is, not suicide) in the United States, the violence is committed by young men, [especially those who have a history of domestic violence](#). But you won't find "young men" on a manifesto against guns—that would be sexist, right? Even if most gun violence, and nearly all spree killings, are perpetrated by men.

And you won't find "domestic violence" on that manifesto either—nothing so boring would ever work as a scapegoat. But we have known, for decades, that domestic violence predicts future gun violence against others. [According to The Nation](#), "There is a far stronger link between domestic violence and mass shootings than any other cause, including politics or religious fundamentalism." Furthermore, according to the same research, over half of the mass shootings that occurred between January 2009 and July 2014 also involved a domestic killing.

Indeed, that University of Texas sniper shooting that arguably began the era of spree killings? The sniper stabbed his mother and his wife to death just before he climbed that clock tower and opened fire.

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If you want a predictor of spree killings, look no further than men who commit acts of domestic violence.

By taking aim at mental illness, we are putting some of the most vulnerable of our society at risk instead of facing the real causes of gun violence.

What We Can Do, Especially on Campus

When you are a member of a scapegoated group, you hide. You do not seek help. Right now, you have students on your campus who may have anxiety disorder, or obsessive compulsive disorder, or depression, and they might need help. And now they are afraid to seek help. Why?

When the Parkland students published their manifesto, many disability activists spoke out against it, but many spoke in private, expressing their fears that they would be attacked because of the words of the charismatic Parkland kids. These fears are legitimate. Without intending to, the Parkland kids have further alienated an already alienated group.

Expressing that you are an ally is now even more important. Something as simple as putting a sign on your office door stating that you are a friend to people with all disabilities, including psychiatric disabilities, will go a long way. Know how to help a student if she comes to you for help—have the right phone numbers on hand. Be prepared to talk a student through a crisis.

Don't underestimate how much the manifesto, and even the march itself, [alienated disabled people](#). Protest movements often do. We disabled people want to join, but we often can't, for a variety of reasons. Scapegoating disabled people to make a movement's message more palatable isn't just wrong; it's dangerous. 📖

Permissive Leadership and the Illusion of Control, continued from page 8

and should not rely on power or control. As leaders, the illusion of being in control might feel strangely comforting initially to some, but most of us quickly come to the understanding that control is just that, an illusion. Perhaps this realization is reached more quickly by women, since women's power is often based on building personal relationships, unlike men, who rely on more formal power that is rooted in the position. However, my sense is that most leaders, regardless of gender, would concede that the price of a top-down authoritarian approach would always outweigh any positive gains. Would any of us really want to impose our will to accomplish an end if other approaches were accessible to us?

Although permissive leadership might seem like an oxymoron to some, I feel certain that leaders who have been elected to serve but have faced innumerable roadblocks and barriers will intimately recognize this concept. All this is not to say that permission and power cannot coexist. Leaders just need to reframe what is powerful. Women leaders can and should reclaim and appropriate notions of power as an essential tool for transformational leadership but only after trust and respect have been firmly established. 📖

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York to director of athletics at the City College of New York.

- **Dr. Kathryn VandenBosch** begins another five-year term as dean of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- **Dr. Bonnie Van Lunen** moves from professor and chair of the School of Physical Therapy and Athletic Training to dean of the College of Health Sciences at Old Dominion University VA, beginning June 10.
- **Sharon L. Walker** moves from interim dean of the Bourns College of Engineering at the University of California, Riverside to dean of the College of Engineering at Drexel University PA, beginning Sept. 1.
- **Dr. Suzanne E. Weinstein** becomes assistant vice provost for learning outcomes assessment at Pennsylvania State University.
- **Debbie White** moves from budget fiscal officer for the College of Arts and Sciences at Kansas State University to VP of administration and finance at Peru State College NE.
- **Dr. Kathleen M. Wilbur** moves from VP for government and external relations at Central Michigan University to executive VP for government and external relations at Michigan State University.
- **Dr. Dawn Williams** moves from interim dean to dean of the School of Education at Howard University DC.
- **Cassi Winslow-Edmonson** becomes director of IU Corps at Indiana University in Bloomington.
- **Dr. Gayle Zydlewski** becomes director of the Maine Sea Grant College Program, beginning July 1. 📖

PROFILE: Women Leaders: Made, Not Born, continued from page 11

"It's a clean, well-lighted place and they pay me something," she quips.

Having watched many of her UNL colleagues retire, she's seen them struggle to piece together "meaning for their life." "I haven't seen it yet where people are really happy" in retirement, she says.

And as an administrator and leader where you essentially "rule the world," Grady believes she would make a "lousy volunteer."

No doubt. 📖

Panel Tackles Issues of Sexism, Misogyny and Patriarchy, continued from page 13

and calls on them to use nonacademic language so that all in attendance may understand.

"Having an audience with a variety of backgrounds really helps there be a cross-dialogue," Williams says. "The other folks on the panel had a lot of good insight on legislation and policy. My goal was to try to emphasize a way that these conversations around consent and violence are deeply cultural.

"While it's very important that we have legislation that supports getting justice for victims and survivors of violence, a lot of this conversation around misogyny, #MeToo and patriarchy is going to take everyday cultural challenges," she adds. "These urgent conversations, particularly around #MeToo and patriarchy, are important because we really need to consider what the steps are toward equity." 📖