

From the Editor

The mainstream media seems to be having trouble differentiating between “fault,” “cause,” and “contributing factor,” especially when it comes to high-profile crimes.

In the case of the Isla Vista killer (story detailed elsewhere in this issue), there is a lot of hand-wringing about whether young men’s expectations with regard to women, fueled by images of model-perfect women and frat-boy lifestyles in movies and television, caused or contributed to a murderous rampage that left six people and the perpetrator dead, and others wounded.

That seems both possible and likely—but, also, largely irrelevant. Most people who see these kinds of images do not react by stabbing, shooting and running people down with cars. Most people process the images in a way that allows them to continue with their lives, with never a thought of murder.

You can—and probably should—argue that these images and stories, which promulgate lifestyles based on privilege and desire—are coarsening to everyone, but you cannot say they “caused” the murders.

Similarly, when two pre-teen girls plotted and executed a murder attempt on their supposed friend, the media immediately latched on to a horror website the two girls were obsessed with as a “cause” of the crime.

Again, any number of questions

arise, including why there are such websites in the first place, why the parents of these girls were unaware of the depth of their fixation with it, and why they were so unsupervised as to be able to lure their victim into a park and try to kill her.

We live, unfortunately, in a culture where “cause” is more important than effect.

I have no doubt that real professionals in behavioral sciences, law enforcement, medicine and the like can make *some* sense of “cause,” but have no faith that pulling folks from the ranks of the experts on to television shows for 2-3 minutes of explanation does much to help solve crimes like these, to make the general public understand them or to prevent similar incidents.

It is a kind of witch hunt, like tying some poor woman to a rock and throwing her in a river to see if she floats—and is therefore a witch. We haven’t evolved very much from the 17th century, if our idea of proving something is to have someone without complete information make a snap judgment and then broadcast it to the world.

The worst part of this system is that it can never help to prevent crime, to identify criminals or to keep anyone safer.

It is almost primitive the way “explanations” are sought and discussed, and, ultimately, dismissed with a kind of collective shrug. Why not just ascribe this

aberrant behavior to evil spirits or inanimate objects—see if they float, and shrug again?

In case after case of mass murder, there is clear evidence that the agents of mayhem were known to have behavioral and/or medical problems.

But in case after case, it is also clear that the identification of these problems all but stopped there. In some cases, therapies and drugs are in play, but more often than not, it comes down to a notation in a casebook that there’s something wrong—and that is where it stops.

Certainly the host of services that are available—from school counselors all the way to law enforcement—do great good in many cases, but the onerous bureaucracy involved also prevents action in many cases.

Unless we, as the public, stop seeking causes and start holding people accountable for their dereliction of duty, beginning with parents who ignore the danger signs, these types of incidents will continue, and the twisted actors in them will be further fueled by media attention to them.

It does not take an expert to see this.

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