

THE PEER STRUCTURE OF COLUMBINE HIGH

ONE SIGNAL ASPECT of the shootings at Columbine was that the prime targets were Harris and Klebold's peers. Although Kate Battan and John Kiekbusch, the investigators of the Columbine shootings, characterized them as "equal opportunity haters" (Cullen 1999c), twelve of the thirteen people they killed, besides themselves, were fellow students. The one teacher who was killed, Dave Sanders, seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In his writing, Eric Harris vowed retribution for the harassment he received at the hands of his peers. In his diary, he wrote: "After I mow down a whole area full of you snotty ass rich mother-fucker high strung God-like-attitude-having worthless pieces of shit whores, I don't care if I live or die" (Cullen 1999b). Throughout the shootings, the boys made comments such as, "This is for what you did to us," and "We are going to kill you all" (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office 1999; Zoba 2000). The bombs were placed in the cafeteria near the tables where the athletes sat and were timed to go off when the maximum number of students would be present. Whatever motives they may have had for the shootings, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the major targets were their peers and their school.

Their planning and their behavior were consistent in targeting fellow students. Administration, teachers, and staff were considered, if anything, collateral damage. Much has been made (Cullen 1999b) about the issue that

if they wanted revenge on those responsible for Klebold's and Harris's nearly daily harassment and humiliation, why did they not seek out the so-called jocks who terrorized them? Why did they go to the library instead of the gym? None of the victims was on the hit list that Eric Harris compiled, which contained, for the most part, the names of some of the harassers; however, it also contained the names of girls who refused to date him, especially those girls who strung him along before finally refusing. During their rampage, the boys were obviously looking for athletes, but not necessarily hunting them out. What Cullen failed to point out was that the bombs were planted in the cafeteria underneath the tables where the athletes congregated for lunch.

It was clear from the outset that the target for Harris and Klebold was their peers. It did not matter whether they were innocent or guilty, jocks or nerds, males or females, or evangelicals or atheists. There are three reasons why they did not set out to target specific peers: first, they were interested in body count. They planned a massive killing that would have easily exceeded the death toll in the Oklahoma City bombing. Second, and related to the first, they wanted to do something spectacular that would make them famous because of the notoriety of their act. The third reason why they did not target specific peers was that they apparently wanted to target the entire peer structure, in which they were at the very bottom. Although they were harassed by a small minority of the student population, they blamed everybody in the school for their own degraded social status. Therefore, it is important to examine the peer structure in Columbine High School.

The structure of peer relations at Columbine High School was trifurcated: The "in crowd" was at the top and the outcast students were at the bottom, with the bulk of students in a vast middle ground. The shape of the membership in the peer group structure could be likened to a diamond with very small numbers of students at the top and at the bottom. Students in the middle could be differentiated by activities and sports participation, musical tastes, religiosity, and drug habits. The peer group structure of Columbine High School was quite typical of suburban high schools, with the athlete and cheerleader crowd at the top of the heap (Eckert 1989; Wooden and Blazak 2001). Across the country, football is the dominant high school sport and often the only basis for community solidarity and identity (Bissinger 1990); football players are the local heroes not only within the school but in the larger community as well. The literature on social status in the high school has been consistent over the last fifty years in identifying athletics as the defining factor in adolescent subcultural status (Coleman 1961; Gordon 1957). The one deviant case (Larkin 1979) tends to prove the rule. In a suburban high school that was known to have a football team that was continuously at the bottom of the league and which had a very active dissident

student subculture, the so-called jock/rah-rah crowd did not have hegemony over the peer subculture. Rather it contested it with the intellectual/politico students. But this was 1976, in the wake of student political activism in a school known for its student political activism.

The bottom of suburban high school subcultures tends to be much more pluralistic and localized than the top. The outcast student groups can vary greatly among schools, although anti-intellectualism seems to be a commonality. Wooden and Blazak (2001), in their case study of the peer structures of four Southern California suburban high schools in the late 1990s, found high academic achievers (known as “brains” or “smacks”) at the bottom of the peer structure in all four high schools. Band members and ethnic minorities (“cholos,” a disparaging Anglo term for Mexican American gang members, and Asians) were at the bottom in two high schools, along with a variety of other subcultures, based upon such criteria as social skills (nerds/geeks/loners), musical tastes (metalheads/punks), or, for girls, sexual promiscuity (sluts). At Columbine, the bottom of the student social structure included Asians (who were not mentioned by other students but were observed by this author to be isolated from the rest of the student population) and “dark kids,” or goths. The Trenchcoat Mafia was considered a collectivity of dark kids.

For an area that was solidly upper-middle-class, socioeconomic background played an extremely important part in the structuring of peer relationships, especially among the girls. Not surprisingly, the most visible status groups within the peer structure were the jocks and “preps” at the top and the outcasts at the bottom. The jocks were visible by virtue of their celebrity, their reputation for partying, and their aggressive behavior toward others of lesser status. The outcasts were particularly visible because of their ostensible lack of conformity in dress, behavior, and musical tastes.

Among the students interviewed for this study, there was a consensus about the nature of the peer structure of the school. All students who were interviewed were able to locate themselves within that peer structure, suggesting that it was visible to all. One student characterized the peer structure of Columbine as follows:

JZ: The major cliques are like—it’s really weird, it’s different than it was four years ago or whatever, because the football, you know, the jocks and the stoners, are [friends] because the jocks like to get high.

RL: And the stoners supply them?

JZ: Oh yeah, of course. And so we’re—I don’t mean we; I don’t do that—they’re all like one big group of friends. And then I would say if I

had to break it down, the jocks and stoners are friends, and then you have your band kids, and then your drama kids, and then you have your choir kids, and it just kind of breaks down like that. It doesn’t necessarily break down as it used to, with the jocks versus the stoners and that kind of thing. ... And then you have the dark kids.

RL: Goths?

JZ: Yeah. The kids that they don’t care about anything, they’re into your hardcore substances and that kind of thing. That’s kind of how it is now.

RL: [I see.] That’s kind of interesting. And where [do] you fit into this?

JZ: I, um, smoke weed [laughter breaks out] ...no, I’m just kidding. It’s funny that this is recorded.

RL: There’s a kind of undifferentiated middle here that can go any way?

JZ: Yeah.

RL: That’s pretty standard.

JZ: Most of my friends are in a group and I just kind of, I found it easier to live in high school without a group. As soon as you don’t have a group any more, you don’t have to worry about the drama, the high school drama of arguments and fights, of “you did this” and “well I think that.” You know, that kind of thing. You don’t have that any more as soon as you step back, and say, “Why do I have to be part of a group when I can be friends with everyone?”

RL: What about your closest friends?

JZ: Who are they?

RL: Yes. What kind of group?

JZ: I’d say probably the cheers and the poms and the football players. ... I don’t talk to too many band kids; they don’t like the ... things [I like] (Recorded May 1, 2003).

In the Columbine peer group structure, the term “choir kids” has a special meaning because the choir has an overrepresentation of evangelical students in it. Although there are members of the choir who are there because they like to sing in a group, many of the choir members also sing in church choirs. Unlike other high schools that have been studied by sociologists over the years (Eckert 1989; Larkin 1979; Wooden and Blazak 2001), at Columbine High School, the religious factor played an important part in the stratification of student subcultures, although, like ethnicity, it tended to be hidden. One student noted, “Simply by not being Christian, you were tossed by the popular group.” What that student meant by “Christian” was that evangelical students tended to be

openly and sometimes aggressively religious, calling themselves "Christians" to differentiate themselves not from Jews, Moslems, or Hindus, but from nominal or secularized Christians and those from liberal Protestant sects.

THE IN-CROWD

At the top of the social structure of Columbine High School was the in crowd, consisting of the "cheers and the poms and the football players," as characterized by one female student who identified herself as a member of the leading crowd by virtue of her being a prep. A prep, in adolescent parlance, is a student who makes good grades, may participate in athletics but is not a jock, and is popular among peers. She characterized the position of the in-group thus:

I went in, and I was a prep, as they would call them, and so that's different that I fit in with, and I came to church, so I kind of stayed away from that kind of mentality of parties, but there was definitely diverse groups when I was there. I think it kind of changed as the years went on. It was always like the rich, the popular kids, always had more, more like, what you'd say was favoritism from teachers, a lot of favoritism than other peer groups. And other peer groups too. You knew who they were. I didn't know who the band kids [were], I don't know who the goths, the dark kids, were ... (Recorded May 12, 2003).

In Columbine High School, because of its heavy emphasis on sports, preps played a minor role in the in-crowd. Most students viewed the in-crowd as primarily consisting of football players and the cadre of girls who hung out, dated, and supported them. As one student said, "The peer group structure, it was kind of weird. You've got the typical football player, cheerleader deal."

A consensus existed among the students that the leading crowd consisted primarily of jocks, cheerleaders, and their friends. The leading crowd was approximately as ethnically and racially diverse as the rest of the school. African Americans and Hispanics were represented in the leading crowd although it was predominantly white. One student characterized the ethnic makeup of the leading crowd as follows:

RL: Now, this leading crowd, what you seem to be telling me is that they tended to ... I think you've already told me, their attitudes toward people who were different—Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians—this was

revealed in racist and anti-Semitic remarks. Was this true of many members of this leading crowd?

EK: Not that I know of because some of them actually were African American or Hispanic.

RL: Members of the leading crowd?

EK: Yes.

RL: And why were they members of the leading crowd? Were they just good people, or were they jocks, or what? Or both, or what?

EK: Yeah. Basically, throughout my career, there were three African Americans total that were in the leading crowd. And they were older than our crowd too. Then some of the Hispanics or—basically the Hispanics, they were either jocks or they had been friends with people in the leading crowd since elementary school. And I know some of them, for the girls, they were cheerleaders. Which would fit into the leading crowd too, because they would date the jocks. ...

RL: Right, right. Now how [about] kids from different ethnic groups? Did they hang together, did they eat at separate tables in the cafeteria or anything like that?

EK: Yeah, from what I can remember, yes. All the Asian kids would pretty much stick together, all the Hispanic kids would pretty much stick together, and all the African Americans would pretty much stick together. There might be some intermixings among them, but, I mean not, they'd sit at their own lunch table but they wouldn't be spread out over a bunch of different groups (Recorded May 5, 2003).

The racial and ethnic inclusiveness of the peer structure at Columbine High School provided the outward appearance of tolerance. In southern Jefferson County, there was little, if any, tension between racial and ethnic groups. Issues of racism, ethnic exclusion, and anti-Semitism emerged only after the shootings, especially after the racism of Klebold and Harris was revealed in the killing of Isaiah Sholes, and the anti-Semitic remarks of Eric Harris on his Trenchcoat Mafia web site. The implicit and embedded nature of racism, ethnic exclusion, and anti-Semitism was revealed more starkly in the nationally televised memorial service on April 25, 1999.

Several students identified jocks as a clique within the in-crowd. A typical description follows:

IG: To me there ... were the jocks and there were the athletes. Jocks were the jerks who made fun of people and ... they were just ignorant and

stupid; they didn't use their brains like they should have. Athletes, on the other hand, participated in sports and used their brains and were nice caring people. The jocks would walk around saying things like "gay!" and "fag!" and "sex" and stupid things, stupid words like that that really made no sense. To show you the brilliance of some of these minds, one of the jocks asked my friend [Z] one time if he was gay, and it came out: "Are you gay? I think you're gay. Are you gay? I think you're gay," blah, blah, blah. "Are you gay, fag?" It's just like, give it a rest, man. (Recorded May 1, 2003)

A parent who was interviewed offered a similar characterization of the jocks:

There's a difference between athletes and jocks in my opinion, and the ones that are, basically the jocks is what I am talking about here. But absolutely no respect for anyone; all they think about is themselves ... (Recorded May 12, 2003).

The differentiation between athletes and jocks was confirmed by an outside researcher who, in the wake of the shootings, conducted a study of the internal climate of the school (Huerter 2000). In her report she stated, "There was a clear distinction made by several people that there were 'jocks' who were involved in bullying, and there were 'athletes' who were not" (2). In Columbine parlance, the term "jocks" referred to a specific group of predators.

In the media blitz following the shootings, reporters interviewing Columbine students focused on what they referred to as "the cult of the athlete" that pervaded the high school (Adams and Russakoff 1999). Within that cult was a group that I have termed "the predators." Whether or not students were themselves victims of intimidation, harassment, or physical abuse, everyone knew who the abusers were: They were primarily members of the football and wrestling teams, although according to some people, some soccer players also may have been involved. This group was fairly cohesive and easily identifiable in the school; they constituted their own status group. The size and membership of this group varied on an hourly and daily basis, depending on who was hanging with whom, the time of day, and who was around, but was estimated to consist of about twenty members (Prendergast 1999). The core of this group consisted of three or four members who were known to administration, faculty, and students. Although their targets could be anyone, they tended to focus on the small group of outcast students. Obviously, not all members of the in-crowd were predators. Also in the leading crowd were scholar-athletes and student-leaders. It was the predators, however, who set the tone in the halls of Columbine High School.

The predators, who were male, had their female counterpart. Although not as openly violent, the females at the top of the social hierarchy at Columbine High School were highly covetous of their social status, which was tied to the socioeconomic background of their families and was also linked to the neighborhood from which they came. In an interview with four female Columbine students, the following discussion of the leading group of female students transpired:

FS1: I remember when I first got to Columbine I thought people here are so nice, because everybody has a smile on their face. The popular kids, you know, they all smiled. [Burst of laughter from all. N.B.: The laughter was cynical and knowing.] Yeah, smiles [sarcastically]. They talked horribly about one another behind their backs. In my middle school, people would openly get in fights and stuff and just say what they thought. In Columbine, everybody wore that little smile, but you know, you learned to discern ...

FS2: Who was real and wasn't.

FS1: Yeah. So many of them. They had that smile and ... I remember being in choir—I was with this group of [high status] girls, and every girl who'd walk by, they'd say [stage whisper], "Go away, go away, what does she think she's wearing?" They'd talk to the person [face-to-face] because there was this game, this status game, where they had to be nice to the right people, so they could get ahead.

RL: How would you know that you're getting ahead?

FS2: It's a jealousy/gossip game. It went, "Oh, hi! I have more money than you do, but I need to keep my status, so I'm going to pretend like I like you, that I like these other people who have more money than I do." It's like just a whole stupid—"My parents have more money than yours" or "I have more money" or "I drive a Mustang; you don't have a car." It's a stupid game. It's like everybody's jealous of what everybody else has. And there's these horrible gossips, like these girls who would spread horrible gossip about everybody. And I never—I was never there long enough to see the whole game, and understand the purpose of it, but I did hang out with this girl who hung out with a lot of the very popular girls, and so I'd be around them, and they would talk and say horrible things about her, and she would go and say horrible things about them, and it's just like I never understood it but it's a whole status thing. ...

FS3: Where you try to slander someone else's name to [raise your own status].

FS2: It's like a whole game, and even if it's good gossip or bad gossip, if people are talking about you, you're popular. Even if it's bad—"Oh my god, what is she wearing? Did you hear what she did the other night?" and stuff. And I think that's part of it. It's a whole stupid game. It's like people with nothing better to do than to try and make gossip about someone else so they can have status in our school.

FS4: I picked up on part of it. I think it's a funny thing. Whenever I'd appear, one of the first things people would ask was, What neighborhood do you live in? Like no one could ask me that before, you know. Whenever I was the new kid in school.

FS2: I got that too.

FS4: They wanted to know ...

FS3: And these condos [have] just been built, and I didn't know what neighborhood it was. I'd just moved here. "Well, I live off of Coal Mine. I'm not sure." And they're, "How can you not know which neighborhood you live in?" Like that's some really important thing.

FS4: You know, one thing that I noticed that really affected me about it afterwards, was that even the people that hated me before, after the shooting happened, when we saw each other, when we basically recognized, you just, all of those grudges went away. Everything went away. You just hugged that person. And you felt that they were really happy to see you. Then all of a sudden there's talking about moving on and [burst of laughter from other girls] then it was back to the same thing, back to the same thing. And I think that that's a bad thing. I think that it happened for a reason, and I think that I've changed as a person—I don't hold grudges—I can't hold a grudge because you never know when's the last time you're going to see a person (Recorded May 13, 2003).

FS3 was very much aware of how one's neighborhood of origin played into the status struggle among the female students of Columbine High School; she was one of the privileged ones from Governors Ranch. This perception was corroborated in an interview with SK and CL:

RL: I talked to some other girls, and they said that when they first entered Columbine, one of the first things they were asked by other girls was, Where do you live?

CL: Yup. It was very important to live in Governors Ranch, which is where I live now.

DL: Where's Governors Ranch.

CL: It was the nicer neighborhood. ... It had a nicer elementary school.

SK: It's got the Brady Bunch vibe so deeply it's scary. ... It's one of the feeder elementary schools. Governors Ranch, Leawood, Normandy, Columbine Hills, Dutch Creek. Five elementary schools, and they all go into Ken Caryl [Middle School]. That's the only feeder junior high is Ken Caryl, so six years with the same fucking kids.

CL: Junior high was absolutely horrible for me 'cause I was a Leawood kid at the time, I was a poor kid. I got it horrible there.

SK: I was a Normandy kid, so I was like in the middle.

CL: The girls would not, as much as I wanted to have friends in junior high, they would belittle me and they were always making fun of me, they wouldn't include me in their things because I lived in the poor neighborhood. I mean that was the bottom line. I wasn't cool enough for them because I lived in the poor neighborhood.

DL: Is there really a poor neighborhood around here?

CL: No. (Recorded April 30, 2004)

The gossip played on the sense of paranoia of female students. It was always carried on behind the victim's back, only to be learned about later. An interview with a female student who was a member of the leading crowd, well-known for her physical beauty and a favorite among football team members, and who was perceived as so high in status as to be unapproachable by an outcast student, revealed the following:

SK: This is weird. CL was the girl who was so hot and popular she didn't need to be on the cheerleading squad.

CL: But I wasn't popular in the sense that I had a lot of friends; it's just everybody knew who I was, but I really didn't have any friends. It's just people knew who I was 'cause of the way I dress and the way I look. People thought I was in the popular crowd, but I really hated all of them. And I didn't hang out with people on the weekends. I wasn't associated with that crowd. If anything, within the popular crowd I was known for arguing with them and causing a ruckus and being hated by them because I wouldn't put up with their, whatever they did. I didn't pretend like I was happy.

DL: But CL, you dated this guy who was a jock, right?

CL: I dated all the popular guys. But whenever they would go out on the weekends, I stayed home by myself. It's just those were the only guys

asking me out. So if a girl's going to date in high school, how else is she going to go out with somebody? Those are the only guys that had enough guts to ask me out. SK never asked me out. Never, never, never ever.

SK: Remember the first time you came out here and we sat—you want to hear this story? This is going to be interesting. After math class, fourth hour, CL and I sat next to each other. I was like, I guess I was like the nerd guy who sat at her table.

CL: I never thought you were a nerd.

SK: We'd talk all the time, and we'd help each other with math, blah, blah, blah. And finally I did get the guts to start talking to her outside of class. ... We were friends. And a friend of hers, let's not name him what his real name is, the man you were talking about, and a few of his friends came up and told me that I shouldn't talk to her because I was a fag, and I should learn to suck cock instead.

CL: Was I there when you said that?

SK: You were five feet away with your back turned.

CL: So I didn't hear it, 'cause if I would have heard it, you know what I would have done if I would have heard that.

SK: So it shot my confidence for asking any girl out. I didn't date a single girl at Columbine after that, couldn't do it. So it wasn't that we didn't want to, it's that we'd get the shit kicked out of us if we tried.

RL: That's interesting.

CL: I didn't know that.

SK: Yeah, I know.

DL: That's more than interesting, that's horrifying.

RL: It's like property.

CL: Yeah, I always felt like property, always.

SK: You could tell. No offense to you, but you were definitely regarded as property. It was fucking horrible.

CL: Even when I didn't have a boyfriend, and even though I didn't, I wasn't friends with them, and I didn't hang out with them. I was property (Recorded April 20, 2004).

This conversation reveals several aspects of the peer culture at Columbine High School. First, although CL was perceived to have high status among her peers because of her physical beauty and the fact that she dated members of the football team, she was not a member of the female leading crowd. She characterized her relationship with girls in the leading crowd as one of mutual dislike,

for at least three reasons: (a) She came from a family with a modest socioeconomic background; (b) She was Hispanic; and (c) Many were jealous of her physical beauty and attractiveness to the jocks. Because of the abuse she received from the girls in the leading crowd in junior high school, she decided that she was going to keep her distance from them in high school. In so doing, ironically, she found herself friendless and lonely on weekends even though she was regarded by her peers as having high social status.

The leading crowd of jocks, cheerleaders, and hangers-on were well aware of who they were and defended the boundaries between themselves and lesser mortals in the social structure of the school through intimidation and humiliation. This was as true for the girls as it was for the boys, although the techniques of intimidation and separation were quite different. The jocks were not afraid of using physical intimidation and rituals of public humiliation to maintain their supremacy in the peer social system. The leading group of girls defended their positions with as much viciousness as did the boys. However, their means were much less direct, with gossip that focused on sexual activities, the wearing of clothes, physical attributes, and so forth as methods of distinguishing themselves from other female students.

According to Columbine students, within the structure of peer subcultures, stoners occupied a relatively privileged position. Stoners were traditionally identified as those students who came to school stoned on marijuana. They were also identified as wearing jeans with black T-shirts emblazoned with the name of their favorite rock bands, usually bought at concerts where they played. They were also notorious for skipping school and missing classes, hanging at friends' houses, and partying during the day.

Wooden and Blazak (2001), in their analysis of four Southern California high schools, found that members of stoner subcultures, variously known as "dirtbags," "punks," "metalheads," and "burners," tended to have low peer status. Eckert (1989), classifying them as burnouts, viewed them at the bottom of the peer structure. Larkin (Larkin 1979) identified the precursors to stoners as "freaks," who carried on the hippie/freak radical (Foss 1972) cultural disaffection from dominant authority, at the bottom of the peer structure of the high school he studied in the mid-1970s.

The elevation of stoners as associates of the leading crowd is a unique discovery for researchers of adolescent subcultures. However, with the increasing acceptability of marijuana usage among adolescents in the 1990s (Marijuana Policy Project 1996), the stoners were received with greater favor within the leading crowd for apparently two reasons: First, marijuana usage was perceived as cool (O'Harrow and Wee 1996) and not necessarily associated with being a

slacker; second, the stoners were the sources of marijuana for the leading crowd members who were not well connected.

The gender politics of the leading crowd were traditionally sexist. The jocks considered their girlfriends as their property and would let males of lesser social status know that to take an interest in girls who dated the jocks was to invite physical retaliation. For some, physical retaliation was not limited to the guys who may have poached on their property, but to the girls as well. I have heard, as did newspaper reporters (Adams and Russakoff 1999; Gonzales 1999; Kurtz 1999), stories of harassment, intimidation, and physical abuse of female students by members of the football team.

THE "INBETWEENERS"

In any large high school such as Columbine with its 1800 students in 1999, most of the students comprise a relatively undifferentiated mass. Although the majority of students may be identified, as JZ noted above, by their school activities—the band kids, the debate team, the choir students, the chess club—such categorization is amorphous, and many students did not easily fit into any category. IG, a student who identified himself not a member of the leading crowd though certainly having a certain amount of peer status in the school, characterized himself and his clique as follows:

IG: You had your skaters, you had your stoners, you had your academics or nerds, I guess, and the crowd I ran with for the most part, we really didn't feel into anything. There was no real archetype for us. We called ourselves "the posse" and included eight guys from the school and then there were two guys who didn't go to the school. And one guy was a football player, a couple were stoners, some were academics or nerds, if you want to call them that. A couple of other guys were on the swim team with me. Another guy was a skater, all that kind of stuff. We were just the melting pot of different male cliques within the school.

RL: Was your posse, was it ... typical, or was it more diverse than most groups?

IG: I would say it was more diverse than other cliques. We all had friends from different sides of the coin. Everybody, since they came from a different clique beforehand, had contacts with different cliques. Like Z, he was on the football team, so he got along with some of the jocks

a little bit better, and then D and L had more contact with the stoner type, more D than L. And L and B were academics, and my friend A and my friend M were on the swim team with me, and M was even on the debate team with me. L was the skater punk, and that kind of stuff. Then the other two, like I said, didn't go to the school.

RL: Did you guys share musical tastes?

IG: Yeah. That was one thing that brought us together. We all liked to get together and play music, and, in fact, Z and L were in that band that I was in, and one of the other guys that didn't go to the school was also in the band. Music was the big thing that brought us together. We liked hanging out together: everybody was really very cool with everybody else, so it was a good arrangement I guess [laughs] (Recorded May 1, 2003).

Another inbetween student described the peer social structure at Columbine High School and her place in it as follows:

RL: I wonder if you could talk about the various groups in your school. Now we know about the Trenchcoat Mafia, which was an identifiable subgroup. Were you familiar with them; did you know any of them?

EK: I didn't know them on a personal basis; I did know who they were. I could point them [out], and even if they weren't wearing the trench coats, it was not [hard to tell]. Two of them would come down the stairs or be off that same period and it's like, "Oh, here come members of the Trenchcoat Mafia." And some days they didn't even have their trench coats on. I mean, we knew who they were; they usually hung out in the same spots in the morning; and it's like I knew who they were since my sophomore year. They were around all the time until the point where I graduated.

RL: And were there any other identifiable groups that you would say, "Oh, there goes a member of—"

EK: They didn't have identifiable names. There was more of the Gothic crowd that would wear a lot of black. Then there was more of the skater crowd who kind of dressed in skateboard type clothes and would have their skateboards with them. There would be, of course, the druggie crowd that tended to, I guess, I don't know how hard core into drugs they got; I know they smoked a lot of marijuana—I never specifically watched them take up before classes started in the morning. I'm

trying to think who else. And then I guess some of the people I hung out with, we were more, I guess, floaters, you know, where we wouldn't be strictly stuck into one group. I didn't hang out with the jocks or anything like that, but, you know, I'd hang out kind of with the members of different groups of people (Recorded May 5, 2003).

The students in the middle tended to have greater freedom than either members of the leading crowd or the outcast students in the choice of their friends. Although many of the in-between students had friends who were in the leading crowd, very few of them associated with the outcast students. Of the several outcast students that I interviewed, all indicated that they pretty much associated among themselves and had very little contact with other students in the school. According to one Trenchcoat Mafia member:

RL: I see. ... [W]hat would you say is your most common feeling as you look back on your time [at Columbine]?

ED: I have to say frustration.

RL: And what frustrated you?

ED: Just the inability to learn anything at all, the complete caste system that they had. I was an outcast, and people just wouldn't talk to me because I wasn't in their group of friends. It just irritated me because it seemed to me that they were just too shallow to be able to, they're too shallow and stuck in their own little world to be able to see beyond it.

RL: I see. So there was a lot of judgment on the basis of appearances; [is] that correct?

ED: Not just appearances, but outward demeanor, basically anything. How you acted, the way you spoke, the certain little mannerisms you had, how you dressed, who your friends were (Recorded April 10, 2003).

This view was corroborated in a conversation recorded between two former students at Columbine High:

SK: Don't look at me like that, SL. You remember how Columbine was. ... Littleton's that superficial. I just remember how people were treated based on their looks. I do (Recorded April 30, 2004).

Yet, one student who did hang out with the outcast students described herself as follows:

JP: I don't know where I'd put myself ... I was really into art, so I had a lot of friends from my different art classes. I never smoked in high school, but I hung out at the smoker's clique, which like most people who hung out there were kind of not generally accepted, so I don't know. I wasn't in the popular, crappy, Christian crowd ... (Recorded May 13, 2003).

As can be seen by JP's comments, she was antagonistic and hostile to members of the leading crowd, primarily because of the hypocrisy she perceived in their profession of Christian values, their aggressiveness toward their fellow students, and their drug and sexual indulgences.

Eckert (1989), in her discussion of the antinomies of adolescent peer cultures in the school, noted that the relationships between the outcast students and the leading crowd were dialectical in that members of the leading crowd had no friends in the burnout subcultures and vice versa. However, students in the middle could have friends among both jocks and burnouts. In Columbine High School, relationships between jocks and outcast students were more polarized. Those students in the middle who had friends among the jocks tended to adopt the attitudes of the jocks toward the outcast students, even if tacitly. Although they may not have been as aggressive toward the outcast students, they were very much aware of their degraded status and tended to be disdainful of them and not associate with them. Those very few students in the middle who associated with outcast students tended to adopt the hostile attitude of the outcasts toward the leading crowd. Because of the domination of the peer group structure by a leading crowd that included not only jocks but was also Christian, there was greater antipathy toward the outcast students, especially because outcast students made religion an issue. They flaunted their atheism, agnosticism, or Satanism, in the case of some goth students, in the face of evangelical students, who were viewed by the outcast students as narrow-minded and hypocritical. Evangelicals were not viewed as "goodie-goodies" because the leaders of the predators were supposedly evangelicals.

THE OUTCAST STUDENTS

The outcast students, or in Brooks Brown's self-appellation, the "loser students," constituted an extremely small portion of the student population at Columbine, perhaps fewer than twenty students. Because they were such a small group and all experienced similar fates at Columbine High School, they knew and empathized with each other. This small group, who sometimes identified themselves as

"nerds," tended to be bright students—many were intellectually pretentious—but tended to resist the conformity that dominated the student peer culture. Many, including Eric Harris, tended to consider themselves goths or dark people. In opposition to the clean-cut preppie, Abercrombie and Fitch dress of the vast majority of students, Gothic students tended to dress in black and were often unkempt. Of course, the most identifiable clique of the outcast students at Columbine High School in the late 1990s was the Trenchcoat Mafia. The emergence of the Trenchcoat Mafia is instructive about the status and experiences of the outcast students.

Joe Stair was the consensual leader of the Trenchcoat Mafia. He described its origins as follows:

Stair: The Trenchcoat Mafia ... started out just as a group of friends; we didn't even call ourselves the "Trenchcoat Mafia," as I'm sure you've heard. We called ourselves the "Trenchcoat Club." It's just a group of friends. We thought we were being cool. We didn't really fit in with any of the other classic cliques. We were all pretty much outcasts; so we just clung together and gave ourselves this name, just for the heck of it.

RL: And how many of you were there?

Stair: Let's see, when I joined the Trenchcoat Club it was probably just four or five individuals. And then a bunch of my other friends, they saw me hanging out with this group of kids; some of them were wearing the dusters, [and] so they joined up. It just went from there. Kids started just calling us the "Trenchcoat Mafia" because some of our members, some of our friends wore dusters, so they started calling them that because a lot of us were interested in the military or wanted to join the military afterwards. Some of them carried themselves as if they were a member of the military. And they tried to use that term as a derogatory statement, I would assume. We thought it sounded cooler, so it was like, hey we'll go with that. That sounds good. I like that (Recorded May 1, 2004).

Brooks Brown (Brown and Merritt 2002) identified the naming of the Trenchcoat Mafia originating in a specific incident:

While sitting at lunch one day, a few of the athletes were doing their usual routine, making fun of the kids they don't like. They saw this group of kids sitting together, all wearing black trenchcoats [sic] on a day when

temperatures were in the 80° range. One guy commented that with the trenchcoats[sic], the group of outcasts look like some sort of Mafia.

"Yeah, like the trenchcoat [sic] Mafia," said another.

The term was supposed to be an insult. Instead, the group embraced it as a badge of pride. They were the outcasts and, rather than be ashamed of it, they were proud of it. In fact, they wanted to fight back against their antagonists. ... (68)

This version of events was confirmed by another Trenchcoat Mafia member who stated:

ED: It started out as a fashion thing, because it looks cool, and a bunch of people that were hanging out in the same groups picked up on the style, and just one day actually it was ... I think it was actually Rocky Hoffschneider that coined the phrase. I think he said, "What are you guys? Some sort of Trenchcoat mafia? Well, we thought it sounded cool, so it sort of stuck (Recorded April 10, 2003).

Virtually every student at Columbine High School knew about the existence of the Trenchcoat Mafia, even though they may not have known any of the individual members. One student who did not identify himself as a member of the leading crowd but as having friends among the jocks described the Trenchcoat Mafia as follows:

RL: Did you know anything about the Trenchcoat Mafia?

IG: Oh, of course. Everybody called them the "Trenchcoat Mafia." It was a joke. They didn't even given themselves that name. ... And it was just because everybody in that group wore a trench coat, they were black [meaning "dark"] for the most part, and they hung out together. It was just kind of, "Oh, here comes the Trenchcoat Mafia." It was just kind of a coined term, like "the jocks."

RL: Well, according to Joe Stair, they kind of gathered together for self-protection. Did you see anything of that? Were these people who were continually picked on by other students or not?

IG: They got their share, just like everybody else of that unpopular crowd, but again, they knew their place. If you don't want to be bothered, don't bother them. It's kind of like a bumblebee thing. But as far as getting together in order for self-protection, no more than any other group would.

RL: I see.

IG: At least I would think. Not being part of the group, I cannot really say what their mind-set was, but they hung out together because they had common interests, whatever those interests were. I didn't know. They were friends, and they happened to like trench coats and that was their thing. Just like my group of friends like Hawaiian shirts, but no one called us "the Hawaiian shirt mafia" or anything like that (Recorded May 1, 2003).

IG, like so many students at Columbine High School, could identify the Trenchcoat Mafia and its members but had no friends among them. His testimony is quite similar to that of EK above. The vast majority of students knew who they were but did not associate with them because of their strangeness and unpopularity. IG referred to them as "a joke." This attitude was prevalent among Columbine High School students; outcast students were subject to ridicule.

In some sectors of the student population, dark students were a source of unease. The concept of dark students or students being on the dark side generated suspicions of Satanism on the part of evangelical students. Some students did dabble in Satanism or Wicca, in the case of females (Brown and Merritt 2002), although there is no evidence that members of the Trenchcoat Mafia or Klebold and Harris did. In the heavily evangelical South Jefferson County, adolescent rebellion often took the form of witchcraft or Satanism, as in the case of Cassie Bernall, an evangelical student who was killed in the shootings, and who, prior to her reconversion to evangelical Christianity, practiced Satanism with a friend and fantasized about killing her parents (Bernall 1999). Students who considered themselves Satanists or witches were viewed by evangelical students as those who chose evil over good and in need of redirection into a life in Christ. This may be one reason why some evangelical students attempted to convert outcast students to evangelical Christianity.

The outcast students were something of a counterculture in the halls of Columbine High. The vast majority of students were school-oriented, conforming, and well-behaved. Where most students adopted the preppy mode of dress, maintained their physical appearance, did their homework for the most part, participated in athletics and after school activities, practiced for their SATs or their ACTs, and looked forward to college, the outcast kids ostensibly disliked school, did not attend to their outward appearances other than to be distinct from the larger population, hated the jocks and the stupidity they represented, and kept to themselves. Although many of the outcast students were quite bright, many of them received poor grades, especially in courses in which they had no

particular interest. For example, Dylan Klebold was characterized by one of his teachers as a "slacker." He was unkempt, uninterested, made minimal efforts in the class, and was in danger of failing.

He was one of those kids that didn't pay a lot of attention. He got a B in the [ninth grade] class, but he didn't work very hard. And he was just a normal student. But as a senior, he was one of those kids that just wore grubby clothes all the time, wore his hat backwards all the time. ... He was going to do the very least amount of work possible. That's basically what he did. He tried to talk me one time into letting him not have to come to class—just show up on the days of the tests. And I said, "No. You have a choice. You can come to class and stay awake, or you can drop the class." But he barely passed the first semester AP calculus. I'm not sure he would've passed second semester. He was borderline. 'Cause he just didn't work hard—he was a slacker. The kids had nothing to do with him, but when kids act and behave like that, the other kids that are in AP calculus, the really good kids, don't want anything to do with him (Recorded May 1, 2004).

For some students, the existence of the outcast students was a blight on the shining image of Columbine High. Because they were at the bottom of the social structure and such antipathy was directed toward them, the vast majority of students avoided them. Their isolation created a situation whereby the jocks could humiliate and harass them with virtual impunity. Looking at them from the outside, IG presumed that they received no more abuse than any other group on campus. However, IG was never stuffed into a locker, never had bottles thrown at him while walking home from school, was never gratuitously beaten up because it was a fun thing to do, although he could relate a story about being called a fag by one of his peers until he punched him, ending the harassment.

Simply put, the outcast students of Columbine High School suffered harassment on a daily basis. The rest of the student body either ignored or studiously avoided the predation, minimizing its prevalence in their own minds. The faculty and the administration were blissfully unaware of what was happening in the halls of the high school. In the next chapter, the issue of bullying and predation at Columbine High School will be examined in detail.