

Understanding Immigrant Male Youths Anger

It surprised many that South Korea, long known for its disciplined, law-abiding, honest labor force, and boasting one of the world's lowest murder rates, would produce, in an immigrant, a mass murderer in the United States. How did Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho come to commit his murderous atrocities and what can we do about it?

I believe the answer lie more in understanding the effects of the Confucian-derived ideology on many young Asian male immigrants, along with the Columbine tragedy and teenagers' taunting.

Like the Korean shooter, I immigrated at age 8, attended grade and high schools where I was usually the only Asian (or one of only two Asians) in a class. I then attended a technical college, and eventually studied as a liberal arts major, as did Cho. Society has changed since I went to college, in the late 70s, but many immigration adjustment issues remain the same. Perhaps I can shed some light on how Seung-Hui Cho may have felt. Though he's Korean and I'm Chinese, we're both from the same Confucian-East-Asian culture.

What is it like to immigrate at age 8? Many of his teen acquaintances said Seung was continually teased and taunted. Language was undoubtedly an issue. English language is difficult and can carry many meanings; an Asian immigrant typically doesn't have the verbal skills to defend himself. Cho likely swallowed his anger in silence as he was verbally being cut to pieces.

There have also been studies that indicate Asian men are regarded as the least attractive by American women. If Cho was holding suppressed anger, he would scare girls more. Perhaps, that's why he imagined a girlfriend from outer space.

Adjusting to America for an Asian is perhaps more difficult than for many other cultural groups because there are fewer Asians from which newcomers can develop their own social norms. Black Americans are abused more than Asians, but there are more social traditions and institutions that restrain, rechannel, or suppress blacks' anger. Hispanic immigrants come in larger numbers and have established cultures that restrain their anger.

For an 8 year old Asian immigrant, life can be painfully distressing. Almost certainly, Cho likely initially followed his parent's Korean (Confucian-derived) ethics. Unfortunately, these ethics don't really work as well in the United States, and US culture no doubt influenced him differently as well. This friction can mean problems at home as well as in school.

On the plus side, his parents' Confucian-derived ethics would teach Cho hard-work, honesty, respect for elders, lots of self-discipline, and leaning toward academics. But these ethics are ineffective for an immigrant youngster in a school and social environment where verbal attacks, abuse, and social rejection continually occur.

Because they arrive here as adults, Cho's parents came here with their sense of ethics, self, and usually family already established. They are always "foreigners" and prefer their foreign customs, tastes, mannerisms—their ideology. On the other hand, their children would face conflicting cultural norms, expectations, differing social institutions, and different reward systems. It's not just Cho; many of the East Asian immigrants' sons are deeply saddened by these cultural conflicts.

How is it then that Cho's sister, also an immigrant child, did not also become a social deviant? East Asian societies are patriarchal, and the son's discipline can be much tougher than the daughter's. Asian parents love their children—their sons must be *taught* to be good and successful, and their daughters are regarded as *inherently* good. This means that the daughter can do less wrong; she's given lots of love, but whether she succeeds or not, she is subject to far less criticism by her parents. If a daughter raised this way becomes success-oriented, she can do well, because she had less parental criticism (which would turn into self-criticism), and she received continual parental love along with Confucian emphasis on academics.

When it comes to raising boys, however, Asian parents will typically be very critical during their son's development. Why? For centuries, this is how Asian parents raised their sons. The problem is that the Asian immigrant boy is also trying to adapt to American school and other cultural norms that tell him much of his parent's "constructive" criticisms are invalid.

Thus, an Asian immigrant son can be unjustly criticized at home, at school, by the society, and by the culture. Easy to see how he might become lonely and angry.

Confucian ethics is simply ethics—and the real world isn't ethical; so Confucian disappointments have always been present. The Eastern religions, notably Buddhism and Taoism, have psychology comfort measures to deal with these disappointments. These include meditation, spiritual practices, and religion-derived maxims.

So, we now see in Cho's case: 1) an immigrant's son who might be unjustly criticized at home by his parent's Asian ideologies on how to raise a son 2) an immigrant's son who is unjustly criticized and taunted at school 3) a young man who grows angry and has trouble making friends and girlfriends due to his anger. 4) a Western society without the religious means to soothe the anger. 5) a Western society with lesser social means to soothe the anger.

Then there were certainly other possible issues: Cho's older sister was more successful—which would cause more difficulties for an Asian male. Cho may have had mental illnesses. But, there's no evidence of his mental illness. Like so many young East Asian immigrants, he carried his anger in silence.

Why did Cho's anger translate into cold-blooded murder? Why didn't he become a wife beater or commit suicide, drink alcoholically and abuse drugs? I believe part of the answer is that the tragedy at Columbine offered a new and deadly-destructive outlet for Cho's anger. It seems likely Cho would have seen some kind of twisted retribution for himself in copying the actions of the Columbine shooters, who were also taunted by their peers.

This isn't just a case of East Asian immigrants' sons encountering cultural adjustment difficulties. Muslim immigrant sons also frequently feel society is unjust to them; the London bombers were Pakistani immigrants' sons. These anger turned to rage are understandable, but these courses of action are illegitimate.

The solution is not simply tighter gun control, better psychiatric evaluation controls, or faster emergency response. And, it would be very expensive stop teasing and taunting in the pre-college years.

One idea would be to provide courses that teach immigrant youths how to deal with the cultural adjustments they'll face. Such course would help the youth see past the cultural issues and unjust parental and peer criticisms, teach him how to handle the teasing and taunting, and more. Inexpensive, education needed anyhow, and might just work!