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RHM Author Interview (Youtube video): Cassandra (Casi) Kearney, Ph.D., author of “Mass Shootings and Mental Health: A Historical Perspective on the ‘Mental Illness as Motive’ Narrative”

Cathryn Molloy
cathryn.molloy@gmail.com

Erin Trauth
erin.trauth@gmail.com

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Cathryn Molloy (00:00):

Hello, everyone! Today in my capacity as one of the assistant editors of the Rhetoric of Health and Medicine journal, it is my pleasure to be interviewing Casi Kearney about her piece that will soon be published in the journal titled "Mass shootings and mental health, a historical perspective on the mental illness as a motive narrative." And so, uh, we're fortunate enough that Casi is willing to talk more with us about her upcoming piece and hopefully it'll generate a lot of excitement about reading it once it comes out. So welcome, Casi!

Casi Kearney (00:31):

Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be talking with you all.

Cathryn Molloy (00:34):

Great. Um, so Casi, before we get started, um, could I just ask you to just tell us a little bit about your, where you work in your position.

Casi Kearney (00:44):

Yeah, I'm currently an assistant teaching professor at the University of Missouri in the department of communication. Um, I'm also the director of our online studies program and our basic course in public speaking. So, um, multiple administrative and teaching roles here. Um, and I primarily research the rhetoric of violence and particularly mass violence.

Cathryn Molloy (01:03):

Okay, great. And so I can definitely see how the piece that you worked out for RHM fits with your overall research agenda. That's great. Casi. Okay. So I'm going to dive right in with these questions. A major part of your argument relies on Kenneth Burke's articulation of entelechy. For listeners who've never read about that concept, can you explain this in layman's terms?

Casi Kearney (01:25):

Entelechy is kind of one of those complex, slippery terms that can be articulated in a variety of different ways. Uh, its original conception by, uh, Aristotle was the biological process of, um, organic matter, uh, but Kenneth Burke takes it up to represent the symbolic. Um, and essentially entelechy just means the process of development. In my work, I am particularly fascinated with the development of argumentation following mass violence. Um, so to me, entelechy represents the inevitable completion of an argument form. Um, that the structure and composition in evidence is compiled in such a way that only one legitimate conclusion could actually be viable. Um, the best example I use when I try and describe this term to people is from a Netflix show, "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee," which is hosted by Jerry Seinfeld. If you haven't had a chance to watch the show, it is Jerry Seinfeld interviewing a variety of popular comedians.

Casi Kearney (02:22):

Um, and really what they do is talk about the process of developing jokes for standup comedy and how much thought goes into the buildup into, um, the length of the kind of setup of the joke. Um, how do you use the stage and negotiate space and then lead into that punchline? And there's only, if you have to think about all of these pieces in order for the punchline to land and the audience to think this is the only way this joke could conclude. And when we think about this, when we craft motive following

violence, the same types of processes are in place. We need to design an interpretation of reality using temporary narrators that makes a logical sense to the audience. So that way the perfect end, perfect ending names a villain. And in this case in the villain, it tends to be mental illness. So that's how I think about the term entelechy as it relates to this piece.

Cathryn Molloy ([03:14](#)):

That's excellent. Um, Casi, thanks for that explanation. And I think that your example from the Seinfeld show, it makes a lot of sense. That's one of the things I liked the most about reading your piece was the use of this term and how it gives a theoretical explanation for that process by which, as you say, acts of violence are given this logical end that makes people feel like they're secretly safe from, more safe from something happening, like this happening to them? Oh, okay. So the second question is a mouthful.

Casi Kearney ([03:45](#)):

Haha!

Cathryn Molloy ([03:46](#)):

So in your piece, and I think this is useful to have a long question like this, just because your piece, by the time your interview lands, will probably not be in the journal yet. So just to give people some context, you successfully argue that Unruh, what you say is "Religious fanaticism and unusual appearance," make what you call "enthymematic arguments" on his mental health status and specifically imply that he is schizophrenic. As you explain, "In so doing, media reporting of Unruh and his massacre made his actions the entelechial end point to mental illness and a paradigm case of the violence of schizophrenia." As you point out earlier in your essay schizophrenia, it takes up a lot of space in the public imagination where fears of mental illness diagnoses proliferate and unfortunately lead to stigma and discrimination. You also rightly point out that no evidence exists to substantiate the idea that those with diagnoses of schizophrenia are particularly dangerous. I love that you added data on how those with mental illnesses are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violent crimes and so it, because it seems to me that that's something that a lot of academics that look into anything related to mental health know about, but the general public, not so much so. I just wondered if you had an opinion on this. Of all mental health-related diagnoses and beyond news media accounts: Why do you think schizophrenia in particular has become so heavily associated with violent acts?

Casi Kearney ([05:09](#)):

Absolutely. I really do think that, um, the reason that schizophrenia inspires so much fear is it's really multifaceted, uh, and is heavily tied to media representation. Um, and so one thing to think about when we think about schizophrenia is how ambiguous the symptoms are and how much we have a lack of knowledge of what the symptomology of, um, schizophrenia looks like. There's symptoms such as flat affect, uh, you have somebody who has a lack of pleasure in everyday life. You have individuals who seem to be fidgety or have a lack of attention, and these things can get wrapped up into a variety of other, um, mental illnesses, depression, anxiety, um, even someone who is suffering from ADHD may represent these symptoms. Um, and so those are not the ones that are often articulated in media representations. The, the delusions that gets taken up in many narrative tropes.

Casi Kearney ([06:01](#)):

I need only point to a few different movies. Um, things like Shutter Island, Betty and June, for those of you who've seen that, spider, uh, Donnie Darko, A Beautiful Mind, all are representations of

schizophrenia, which don't actually represent the disease, they represent like an overwhelming or, um, hyper, uh, representation of what schizophrenia, how it manifests and what it looks like it's, I mean, we have the genius in the best case scenario or somebody who is unpredictable and in the worst case, violent and criminal. Um, there's this regular Jessie Quintero Johnson, uh, Bonnie Miller describe the most common media representation of mental illness as a psychopathic, homicidal male who exhibits antisocial behavior because of his inability to relate well with others. A lack of empathy and remorsefulness and then obviously always violent and criminal behavior. And those are the tropes that get taken up a lot in our representations of this disease because it is so ambiguous.

Casi Kearney (06:58):

There's also the way that we use the word in everyday language. I can't count the number of times I've heard students accuse someone of being a schizo when they just mean that their behavior is unpredictable. Um, and so while that seems like there's not much intent behind that, it is a continuum, a reification or a manifestation of the, the cultural expectations we have for disease, which is very treatable, really controllable. Um, but what we see reiterated in media and represented in media tends to inform the way we think about and then becomes our heuristic or mental shortcut for representing an entire class of people. And particularly in the context I'm talking in 1949, um, there was no DSM at the point that we were at this point and everybody was schizophrenic. So there was even more ambiguity about what this disease looked like and what it could lead to. So, um, I think starting as early as 1949 this year has been, um, kind of established and then, uh, worked into media representations throughout.

Cathryn Molloy (07:59):

That's excellent. Um, Casi, I think it is really an important point that you make there that it's not the actual symptoms that match this particular disease that make it so, um, stigmatized. It's what people believe by way of films that they've seen or like you said, just that perpetuated viewpoint that if somebody seems to be acting a little off that they could be called schizo. Absolutely. Very cool. Um, okay. So the next question is, so your essay uses rhetorical theories, um, predictably, um, RHM journal, to uncover the minutia of a largely invisible process of othering, um, shooters via mental illness labels. You suggest that the logical flow of these discourses are the clear warning that mental health problems, if they are left untreated, lead to danger and to violence, death and devastation. As a thinker, how do you negotiate these obviously damaging ideologies with the need to celebrate neural difference on the one hand and to offer viable treatment for those who seek it on the other. In other words, as rhetoricians, how can we best navigate the impulse to offer help to those with mental illness diagnoses, with the moral imperative to protect individuals against normative notions of what it means to be a good citizen? Good human?

Casi Kearney (09:17):

Yeah. So the way, um, as I think about this question, I absolutely 100% fundamentally agree that we need to be doing things to support, um, mental health and mental health treatments, uh, across the United States, um, and beyond. And so that is certainly something that I'm very passionate about. And talking about mental health and mental stigmatization is certainly an important thing we need to do. I take issue with when it is talked about. And so it is frequently discussed in media, uh, and throughout society after violence. So if we continue to see this pattern where an event happens and then we have a, a, a meeting or, um, the president, and president Obama did this after, um, mass shootings in 2012, to then have a meeting about mental health and mental health, um, care, then that's the association people are going to start to make. Now correlation and causation.

Casi Kearney ([10:05](#)):

Um, we can get into a debate there, but if we consistently see these news reports following violence and we do, um, then that's going to be a kind of, again, that mental shortcut. Uh, there is this really great study by Emma McGinty in public health, uh, that looked at news media reports that talk about serious mental illness and gun violence from 1997 to 2012. Um, and in fact, we do see more reports coming out after mass shootings. So 51% of their total sample happened in 2007, 2011 and 2012 which correlates with the Virginia tech shooting, Gabby Gifford shooting. And then 2012 which was a particularly violent year with the Newtown and Aurora shootings. So if this is where the rhetorical space is happening, eventually this is how people are going to make those associations. And then we also have the other side where we aren't funding these things, um, to the same level that we should be. So we're seeing consistent budget cuts for the substance abuse and mental services, health administration. And so we're not getting the support we need, um, or these individuals at the same time that we're continuing stigmatization of them through our rhetorical discourses. Um, that we only talk about it after violence happen then becomes the way we think about it.

Cathryn Molloy ([11:16](#)):

Absolutely. And, and with the, the sort of the intent behind the question too is kind of like, I think as rhetoricians we are sort of well aware of the fact that the construction of certain behaviors as diseased is suspect though. The next question for you, Casi, is you point out that um, Unruh became an archetype of what you call an archetype for violence of mental illness. I think that's really well put in in Margaret Price's chapter. In her book *Mad at School*, she has this chapter called "Assaults on the ivory tower: representations of madness and the discourse of US school shootings." In that piece, she writes that the news media by quote "individuating the shooters and detailing every nuance of their odd or disturbed behavior, these representations reify the belief that madness and sanity are two extremely separate spaces. One dangerous and one safe." Um, and, and that's the end of her quote.

Cathryn Molloy ([12:10](#)):

In your essay, you similarly examine how the news media sidesteps the much more complicated realities at play in mass shootings. In your work and in Price's work, it becomes clear that these rhetorical sleights of hand help to reassure a panicked public that an individual's propensity for violence is both predictable and preventable. Since it's neither nor, what kinds of rhetorical work do you think could help with either alleviating the burden on those with mental illnesses who must unfairly shoulder this public scrutiny and the assumption of violent tendency or with redirecting the public's attention to the actual causes of violent massacres? And I bet you have a great answer because your larger research project has to do with violence.

Casi Kearney ([12:50](#)):

Absolutely. So yeah. Um, this is, this piece comes actually out of a larger work that looks at mass shootings from 1949 to 2012, um, rampage shootings specifically that think about what happens when it's an, an apolitical, non-work based location. How then do we make sense? And then we see the narratives of mental health really taking center stage. Um, I mean, you asked the million dollar question, what do we do to solve for this global, uh, climate change scholars are asking themselves the same thing. Like what do we do to solve, uh, like decades-old phenomenon where these deeply embedded rhetorics have just taken hold? Um, and it's an entire system now of people, of lobbyists, of journalists. Uh, and I mean, this is a question that I get to the end of this project. And I asked myself, um, so what? Cause I watch a lot of John Oliver, and I always feel bummed out at the end cause huge problem.

Casi Kearney ([13:38](#)):

And then that's where the show ends and there's no, so what do we do? Um, and so I've been grappling with this issue a lot. And at first, I mean, there's these really big solutions and then kind of small, everyday. And it's like, how do we navigate those together to a middle ground that we can see productive change? And I am, I will say, very, very optimistic with recent changes in the way that we're talking about these things. Um, and kind of maybe the shift that has the potential to take place. So first I definitely think it requires ongoing education of journalists. Um, and so I think like every colleague I know and every person that I can talk to that works in journalism and communication schools are doing the work that needs to be done to tell, um, these young people that if you're going off into a news media organization, think about the language, think about the frames, think about what it means to search for motive or why motive matters at this point.

Casi Kearney ([14:27](#)):

So motive isn't reality; it's just an interpretation of reality. And so the way you construct that can really lead to instrumental purposes and ends. So what does, what does it mean to be a journalist and where does objectivity start and end? Um, and I think one of the examples I think about why this is possible is after 2012, there was a significant push to stop using the shooter's names as, um, as, uh, predominantly or prominently in news media reporting. Um, I, I can recall reading several speeches by president Obama where, uh, he would avoid using the name and not talk about him specifically because of these calls to not valorize, not dignify their act. And I have seen a shift, like I could recall most of the shooter's names until recently. You don't hear them as much and so it's gonna take time. It's a gradual shift, but it can be done.

Casi Kearney ([15:16](#)):

Uh, I also think it starts with the way that we talk about things and I, I catch myself trying to take certain terms out of my, my, my everyday vernacular, things like "insane, crazy that's mad." I mean, these simple shifts in our language can help. Um, and then calling attention to it when we see it in social media platforms and beyond to say this is an inaccurate piece of information. And that's why I say I'm also heartened that Twitter provides a space where people can start calling attention to certain specific details. Um, we still do see it happening a lot and we still have red flag laws as the predominant thing we're pushing right now, which is again, taking that surveillance and putting it back on us. We're in charge of our own safety. We need to watch, assess and, um, surveil the public rather than these broader laws.

Casi Kearney ([16:00](#)):

Uh, I think we need to continue to promote alternative solutions. Watching the democratic primary last night, we heard a lot of different solutions, um, thinking about the connections between, uh, domestic violence and mass shootings as a more likely predictor and then passing laws and that way thinking about background checks, and significant ways that don't just alienate and take the rights away from certain individuals, but broader, um, broader background checks than illegalizing of guns, taking away assault rifles. Um, and we do, again, I see promise, I mean, places like Walmart are not selling ammunition or handguns, like that is a big step in the right direction. And so when that's getting more media attention, I feel a lot of promise that, um, I think if we could get funding back into the CDC to do these studies, they're just not given the funding that they need to look at how these things happen, how it's a mental or a health crisis, not just a mental health crisis.

Casi Kearney ([16:56](#)):

I think those things and those shifts are essential for the rhetoric to change, but I mean there are big, big scale solutions that require everyone's attention to them. And I feel the most hopeful I felt in awhile that, uh, that these changes are possible. Um, and that we need to continue to call attention to the fact that these discourses are prevalent and salient in media representations. Um, and then think about who we want to be representing us in these, these areas. So a big, big problem that I'm still grappling with, but that's kinda my immediate reaction is it requires all of us.

Cathryn Molloy ([17:31](#)):

Absolutely. And I think you gave a lot of concrete ways that they could be addressed. So I think that's great. I love the idea of like infiltrating journalism education because you're absolutely right that push to not valorize the shooters by way of continuously publishing their names, maybe even inspiring copycats because look at all this wonderful attention. Um, and to give the, the, give the names of the victims instead, that has really, really caught on. So you're right, if there were a similar push to disentangle mass shootings from mental health, that could be a good way as well as I completely agree with you. I think that because of the culture we live in, it's like a go to, to be like, "God, I feel so crazy today!" And then you have to make sure that you kind of like self-regulate and then gently redirect others and to try to, to help with that. So really a great answer to a very difficult,

Casi Kearney ([18:29](#)):

the million dollar question, I like think about it.

Cathryn Molloy ([18:32](#)):

Yeah. Yes. Well, um, so I'm excited to hear what you have to say about this because it seems like what you pointed out earlier, this, this little, this is a little slice of a bigger project for you. So what is next for you in terms of your scholarship? Are you doing more on this important topic? Um, where can we look for the rest of your work?

Casi Kearney ([18:51](#)):

Yeah, so I'm, I currently have a piece in Reading the Presidency. Um, that's an edited volume by Heidt and Stuckey, uh, that thinks about the role of president as comforter in chief with a coauthor of mine, um, Jay Childers. And so we're really thinking about what does this look like from a political office standpoint and how has that changed, from the Clinton era, which really introduced this idea of the comforter in chief, um, to Obama. We haven't, I mean this was before the Trump presidency, which offers a different perspective, and I have a lot of thoughts on what he brings to bear on the comforter in chief role. I think a lot of us have a lot of perspectives on that. Um, and so that is something that we are considering taking up as a larger project, but when it relates to media representations of mental health and violence, there are several more projects that I really want to work on.

Casi Kearney ([19:34](#)):

So, um, the case, there's, there's ways that misogyny plays a particularly salient role in violence and health issues. And, um, how are these, what's the juxtaposition between misogyny and mental health, is it a representation of a mental health issue or is it its own independent category? Um, issues of race and cultural expectations of shooters I think is something else that I'm very fascinated with. This idea of a loner has been a project that's like been bubbling in my mind. What does that mean and how, what is, like, kind of the genealogy of the term loner? Because it used to kind of represent something positive,

someone sitting, like, on Walden pond writing works. Um, and I mean, as a person in Missouri, I think of Mark Twain a lot with this, like loner isolate who produces great works, but the way it's taken up is I think kind of a subversive way to talk about, uh, mental health issues. So that's kind of a project about. Um, and then certainly continuing to think about more contemporary examples would be fascinating. So looking for outlets for that, but um, have work at least published in an edited volume right now.

Cathryn Molloy ([20:36](#)):

That is excellent. Well, I'm super excited to read more of your work. I really enjoyed reading this piece and I love the idea for your loner project. That is so cool. And I think you're absolutely right there that it did a while. I mean even through the 1970s, I feel like the, the, the loner, uh, label would have been like something cool and edgy.

Casi Kearney ([20:56](#)):

Yeah. Like "I'm edgy, I don't need people," but it shifted, and now loner is this really negative. Um, and I would love to just look at it in more in an intentional like meaningful way rather than just saying, I feel like this has happened.

Cathryn Molloy ([21:10](#)):

No, it definitely, cause it seems like it might even align with some of the interesting work on introversion/extroversion. Really cool. Well, Casi, I can't thank you enough for taking the time to talk with me for writing this great piece for the journal and for being willing to help us to promote it by doing the interview.

Casi Kearney ([21:27](#)):

Happy to do it. It was an awesome experience that I really enjoy talking to you.