

**Analysis of the Film**  
**Bang Bang You're Dead**  
"  
Identity Theft

Identity Theft  
Charles Heiskell Kope  
Santiago Canyon College



### **Introduction**

Today, high school students are not only worrying about their grades and whether or not they are going to pass their huge midterm exams and all of their difficult classes to get end to great schools, they are also worrying about whether or not they will fit in with their peers, who they can and cannot hang out with in order to maintain a positive social appearance, or how they can simply make it through the day without being bullied by the higher social cliques. Social structures in high schools are all very different but they generally all exhibit the same process of determining who is higher on the social hierarchy. The higher class of the Rivervale High school social structure in the film "*Bang Bang You're Dead*" tends to be those who exhibit the most school spirit where as the lower classes have no school spirit at all, or cheer against the school or not at all. The higher social cliques generally only see themselves as higher on the pyramid if they have someone below them that they can look down upon. The faculty, like the students, show a certain prejudice towards those students who do not exhibit as much school spirit as the general population of the school, or as the female lead character in the film, Jenny, would say, it is "a school who cares more about students who score touchdowns and slam dunks than those who are just worrying about how to make it through the day" (Ferland, 2002). This kind of social structure is dangerous in an institution for developing young adults into functional members of society, as it may lead them astray from the true knowledge of who they are. For example, students who are intelligent and studious may be passed off as nerds by the more popular students, which could damage their social skills, self-esteem, and their social functioning. These "nerds" will therefore grow to believe in this distorted image of themselves and may therefore never lead a life where they are truly happy and confident in who they are. The film, "*Bang Bang You're Dead*" takes a long hard look at the social-psychological aspects of high school, such as the pyramid of hate relating to prejudice sources of prejudice and explaining and demonstrating social and cognitive through the use of a main character, Trevor Adams, whose interactions with individual students and faculty members, social groups and cliques, as well as the school as a whole, shapes who he is and the decisions he makes.

### **Film Summary**

The plot of the film "*Bang Bang You're Dead*" centers on Trevor Adams; a successful student who spontaneously became known as the "mad bomber" after being arrested for building a bomb and threatening the school football team. He was then forced to seek anger management, counseling, and repeat his courses in summer school. Trevor was harassed, avoided, and bullied by faculty and students, who believed he was the reason for the installation of an \$11,000 metal detector at the school door and a zero tolerance policy. Trevor's Theater teacher, Mr. Duncan, took notice to Trevor not being enrolled in Theater and approached him about being in the play "*Bang Bang You're Dead*." After researching the play and much hesitation, Trevor decided to take the lead role in the play as the high school student who murders his parents and five of his classmates and is now imprisoned; a path in life that Trevor so nearly chose when he planted the bomb and threatened the football team. Due to Mr. Duncan's casting of Trevor as the play's killer, parents, faculty, students, and authorities press for the removal of the play. Back at Rivervale High school, two student cliques begin to clash: the Jocks, the schools athletes, and the Troggs, the lowest clique in the high school hierarchy, begin to conflict and the result is violence and abuse between the school. In an attempt to gain

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protection and friendship, Trevor assimilates into the Troggs and begins to act out his violent tendencies by firing illegal weapons and underage drinking. Meanwhile, parents and the school board press for the play's removal from the school. The theater students were then forced to rehearse in a private church, being banned from the city. Back in film class, Trevor turns in a videotape which Mr. Duncan views as an explicit threat toward a member of the school's football team. In the meantime, the violence between the Jocks and the Troggs escalates. Trevor was arrested for his violation of the zero tolerance policy; his house was searched and his possessions seized.

The authorities found a videotape among his possessions, and, when viewed, it was revealed to be Trevor's Last Will and Testament. He spoke of how he was tormented, how the students gave him a new name such as "trash can" or the "mad bomber," and how he was going to take his name back in front of the whole school. It was revealed that the threats began because Trevor was trash canned in the cafeteria in front of the whole school and sought revenge. As a result, many of the football team members were suspended or expelled, and likewise was Trevor. When leaving the campus, Shaun met Trevor and told him to come along with him, where he revealed the Troggs' plans to sneak guns past the metal detectors into the school and massacre all of the students they could, mainly, the jocks. Trevor videotaped everything: from their plans to sneak the guns into the school, to their practice round of attacking the school, and even their last goodbyes to their family members. The next day, Trevor returned to Rivervale High school, not because he had class, but because he was the only person who know of the attacks that were about to be carried through on the campus. Trevor warned Jenny to get outside, and then warned Mr. Duncan about Troggs with guns. Immediately the cafeteria was evacuated. Trevor confronted the Troggs, and persuaded them to give themselves up. Shaun was hesitant, and when he was informed the cafeteria was evacuated, he made an attempt at suicide, which was stopped by both Trevor and the rest of the Troggs. The end of the film was the production of "*Bang Bang You're Dead*," the story of Josh, the confused murderer who killed five of his classmates and his parents. All of the football players were required to attend.

**Film Analysis**

In the film, "*Bang Bang You're Dead*," many aspects of prejudice are clearly portrayed between the different cliques. The Pyramid of Hate, along with social and cognitive sources of prejudice, plays a significant role in the behavior of the Troggs and Jocks and their interactions with each other, other students and faculty alike. Some of these social and cognitive sources of prejudices include unequal status among students, the self-fulfilling prophecy, stereotype threat, Social Identity Theory, ingroup bias, conformity, as well as categorization, distinctiveness, and attribution. In Rivervale High school in the film, the students organized a hierarchy governed indirectly by the school, which determines a student's status with respect with his activities and involvement in school. The hierarchy is described by a student as tables in the cafeteria; "This table is for varsity and cheerleaders, over there is the druggies, stoners, deadheads, burnouts, hippies, preppies, over there is the skateboarders and skateboard chicks, and that's the nerds, techies, wiggers, hip-hoppers, rednecks, and all manner of Goths, freaks, trouble makers, losers, sluts, gays, floaters, and the Troggs" (Ferland, 2002). The unequal status between the cliques in the school create tension, and govern who is friends with who, and what privileges and rights they get compared to others. As is apparent in "*Bang Bang You're*

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*Dead*,” unequal status breeds prejudice (Myer, 2007). Because of this, the Jocks look down on the Troggs, and the Troggs believe, the higher the monkey climbs, the more you see of his back end. The Jocks were abusive towards the Troggs, and for protection, students such as Trevor, as Jenny, the female lead, would say, “I think Trevor puts on a dangerous act so kids will leave him alone” (Ferland, 2002). But the Jocks do not see it as it is; this ridicule and discrimination will always affect Trevor. As was once said, “One’s reputation cannot be hammered... into one’s head without doing something to one’s character” (Myer, 2007). This is the self-fulfilling prophecy, as Mr. Duncan would say, “when you label a kid at risk, you just created a kid at risk” (Ferland, 2002). Trevor describes his feelings about being called “Trashcan” saying “They give you a name. The name does something to you, it alters your molecules, and one day you wake up, and you look in the mirror and you don’t recognize yourself anymore because, you believe them. They win, you lose. You want to cry ‘please, leave me alone,’ but no one’s listening, because nobody cares because you don’t have a name anymore because they took it away. And then one day, they say that name and you hear something go snap. You realize what you got to do; you got to take back your name, and you’ve got to do it in front of the whole school because that’s where they took your name away from you. You have to do it so every kid can remember” (Ferland, 2002). Of course, one cannot simply retrieve their name as if it were a loaned out jacket. But, in Trevor’s definition of the self-fulfilling prophecy, he simply confirms its effects on him by referring to the genocide of the Jocks as a way of becoming who he once was. Trevor became the “mad bomber” and “trashcan” when he believed what his peers were calling him. A vehicle for self-fulfilling prophecy is stereotype threat, or a self-confirming apprehension that one will be evaluated based on a negative stereotype (Myer, 2007). This is reflected in a dialogue between Trevor and an Officer during his interrogation:

COP: “Why do you bring a camera to school every day, Trevor?”

TREVOR: “The same reason you bring a gun to work; to shoot people.”

MR. DUNCAN: “Trevor, just because they cast you as the bad guy doesn’t mean you have to play the part” (Ferland, 2002).

This reflects how Trevor has the attitude that is expected of him, and that he became the “mad bomber” by being called it day in and day out. Becoming the “mad bomber” sent him to the bottom of the class system, and he began to identify with the Troggs, who were also the outcasts of the school. This is reflected in the Social Identity Theory, which states we put ourselves and everyone else into a category, we identify with certain ingroups and gain self-esteem by doing so, and we compare our groups to certain outgroups with a favorable bias towards our own group (Myer, 2007). In the film “*Bang Bang You’re Dead*,” the categorization is obvious: the school is arranged in certain categories and cliques that compose the high school hierarchy. Trevor begins to identify with the Troggs, which he participates in underage drinking and shooting illegal weapons, which made him happier and gain more self-esteem, which is shown by his high involvement in the Troggs’ activities. All of the social groups judge each other accordingly, resulting in the hierarchy. Even though his involvement with the Troggs included illegal and immoral activities, Trevor shows an ingroup bias; that is the tendency to favor one’s group (Myer, 2007). This is shown by his involvement with, and approval of, the actions and motives of the Troggs. The ingroup bias of the faculty and authorities lead them to install the zero tolerance policy, which is prejudiced against

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students who are interested in the macabre. The conformity of the faculty to the zero tolerance policy, even when they understood Trevor's end of the story, shows that the prejudice towards Trevor and the Troggs is maintained by inertia (Myer, 2007). Mr. Duncan, who related and understood Trevor, viewed a video Trevor made as a threat because it depicted a gun, and reported it to the principal of the school in order to remain liked and not violate the social norms. Likewise, the principal was forced to conform to social norms by expelling Trevor in order to keep her job and maintain her reputation even after presented with evidence that Trevor was not at fault. In addition to origins of prejudice, there are many sources of prejudice that are present in the minds of the students.

The school as a whole climbed the Pyramid of Hate, some climbing faster than others. They all became more and more prejudice towards Trevor as he descended down the scale of school spirit, which was taken to extremes by those loyal fans of their high school. Parents, teachers, and authorities all pushed for the removal of the play from the school, as well as the removal of Trevor. Prejudice begins with prejudiced attitudes, including scapegoating and accepting stereotypes. All of the parents believe Trevor is a troubled child who ponders day and night how he can best attack his classmates, and that his involvement in the production of the school play would set him off. When Shaun, a member of the Troggs, induces panic in the crowded school cafeteria by lighting off firecrackers during a pep rally, Trevor is taken down to the office, escorted by police awaiting interrogation. In the words of Mr. Duncan, Trevor's film teacher and the director of the play, "Trevor gets on stage to play Josh and he faces himself and that's good, and when the school needs a scapegoat, Trevor is hauled off down to the office for interrogation. That, more than any play, is the kind of thing that could set someone off" (Ferland, 2002). According to the "Pyramid of Hate," scapegoating is assigning blame to people because of their group identity, such as what the school is doing with Trevor (Anti-Defamation, 2003). Because Trevor is a member of the Troggs with a rocky school history, the school seeks to pass on the blame to him without any solid evidence. His history of attempting to bomb the school football team has earned him the stereotype of being dangerous, hostile, hateful, and antisocial. These stereotypes, or beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people which are sometimes over-generalized, inaccurate, and resistant to new information (Myer, 2007), lead directly to prejudiced attitudes towards the Troggs, and more particularly, Trevor. A friend and fellow faculty member of Mr. Duncan took Mr. Duncan aside and asked, "How's the mad bomber" (Ferland, 2002), which demonstrates that students and faculty alike accept this stereotype. Prejudiced attitudes such as these lead to acts of prejudice, such as name calling, ridicule, and social avoidance and exclusion.

Trevor was stripped of his identity, and replaced with the name "Trashcan" or "the mad bomber" (Ferland, 2002). He had no friends, and would frequently be ridiculed by other students; one student asking, "Hey, Trashcan, blow up any schools lately" (Ferland, 2002). This demonstrates that the student, as well as Mr. Duncan's friend who referred to Trevor as the "mad bomber," accepts the stereotype that Trevor is a crazed terrorist. Because of his bad reputation and the widely accepted stereotypes about his personality, Trevor is also subject to social exclusion and social avoidance. An example of this is when Katie, the female lead in the play and film "*Bang Bang You're Dead*," meets Trevor, where he is sitting by himself, segregated from the rest of the school at the table

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he proclaims is for “pariahs.” He is sitting there because he is excluded from the general population of the school due to their prejudice of him, and is avoided by his classmates. Trevor makes videotapes of his day to day encounters at school, which include people turning away from him, staring at him without talking, and people clearing a path for him in the halls to avoid contact with him. Acts of Prejudice, such as these, pave the way for discrimination (Anti-Defamation, 2003). Trevor faces this discrimination at both school and work. At school, he is harassed by other students who constantly tell him to “get out of our school,” and by treating him like he is inferior, small, and lesser of a person than anyone else at the school. Trevor is constantly being searched and questioned of his actions, just as when Trevor says “They went through my bag twice, and someone went through my locker” (Ferland, 2002). The people of the Rivervale community do not trust Trevor, and discriminate against him because they believe he is still in a murderous mindset, and has no desire to change. Trevor also faces employment discrimination at his father’s dry cleaning business. For example, when a customer walked in to drop off her laundry, she noticed a family picture with Trevor’s face in it, and promptly picked up her things, saying “I’d rather take my business elsewhere.” (Ferland, 2002). Another example comes from Trevor’s home videos; when he is in a store attempting to make a purchase, the clerk behind the counter screams “Get out of here! You’re a trouble maker! Get out of here! Get that camera out of my face! Go on!” (Ferland, 2002). Because the customer and the clerk are prejudice against Trevor and people like him, they do not want to give him or take his business, believing he is bad and of lower status and is not deserving of such business. This discrimination, or “unjustifiable negative behavior towards a group or its individual members” (Myer, 2007) ultimately leads to violence.

The Jocks, which are the most influential and high-ranking clique on campus, are openly abusive and violent, whereas the Trogs, the lowest group on campus, are more passive and threatening. Being very hot-headed, the Jocks do not need much reason to attack a fellow classmate. In the film, the Jocks routinely abused students, mainly by stuffing their heads in toilets, stuffing students in lockers, as well as shoving them into lockers (Ferland, 2002). The Trogs stoop to more passive levels and deliver more threats than assault, such as leaving a bullet in a Jock’s locker and three words that would evacuate any campus: “Bomb. Two O’Clock” (Ferland, 2002). Violence escalates between the Jocks and the Trogs, each of which are recorded on the walls of their own school. The students desecrate their school, or violating the sanctity of the symbolic house of worship of the school-spirited Jocks (Anti-Defamation, 2003) by spray painting the score in the battle between the jocks and the Trogs. The vandalism starts out unnoticeable, such as the spray painted message being only seen by the male students in the Boy’s bathroom, and gradually grows with the intensity of the violence to cover an entire wall of lockers in the hall of the school for all to see. Both groups committed terrorist acts in order to instill fear in their enemy. The Jocks threatened students with physical pain, such as one Jock telling a younger student, “If you’re not singing jingle bells next time you see me, you’re going to be hurt” (Ferland, 2002). The Trogs sought more public terrorism: Shaun, a member of the Trogs, lit firecrackers in the crowded school cafeteria during the Jock’s pep rally, which caused a public panic of a shooting in the school, resulting in injuries. As the intensity of the violence increased, so did the Trogs contemplation of Genocide; the deliberate, systematic extermination of an entire people (Anti-Defamation, 2003). In order to end the prejudice between the Jocks and the

Trogs, the Trogs decide the violence has gone too far, and decide to sneak four weapons and ammunition into the school to carry out their plan of murdering each and every one of them in cold blood. Similar to Adolf Hitler, the Trogs believe their 'final solution' of destroying the jocks will lead to a more peaceful school environment.

#### **Author's Response**

The film, "*Bang Bang You're Dead*," is an incredibly powerful film that closely examines the roots of prejudice between social cliques in high school that lead students to resort to mass murder or suicide. There is far more to say than there is here, and the content is very open to interpretation and debate. This film made me closely examine my attitudes towards other groups of people, and understand the impact that words can have on people that may not be apparent at first glance. Bullying and violence are becoming more and more of a problem in schools, and violent acts such as school shootings and mass murder are occurring more and more frequently. The play "*Bang Bang You're Dead*" was written after the Thurston High School shootings where Kipland Kinkel murdered his classmates after killing his parents. Through the viewing of the film, my curiosity of how seemingly normal people can carry the capacity to commit mass murder was aroused, and I thought about the social aspects of the situation. I recalled I was very young at the time of the Columbine shootings, and I did not carry the capacity to understand the concept of students murdering their classmates. I truly did not understand the perspective of potential murderers until examining the characteristics of the character, Trevor Adams.

Before viewing the film, I always pictured mass murders as deviant, or antisocial. I did not think they would have any care in the world what would happen to them or their victims or even their victims families. As my perspective was corrected, I learned that murderers may be antisocial, but there are other cases where the perpetrator feels he or she has been pushed to their limit, or that their choices are rational in his or her own mind. I believe the pyramid of hate as well as the social and cognitive sources of prejudice explains such cases perfectly, and should give forensic psychologists an excellent basis for determining a murderer's psychological profile before and at the time of the shootings in the case of a murder-suicide. After viewing this film and reflecting on high school life, I understand the pressure some students face while getting an education in the public school system. I believe if this problem is corrected through addressing the problem with both bullying and teenagers with guns there will be a noticed decrease in both school violence and prejudice between groups and people as a whole.

#### **Conclusion**

Just as in the large scale American society, high schools set up social structures and class systems that cause prejudice. Although it is on a smaller scale, Rivervale high school demonstrates the same social and cognitive sources of prejudice as well as the pyramid of hate just as witnessed across the globe. The film "*Bang Bang You're Dead*" demonstrates these concepts through the story of Trevor Adams and his involvement and placement in the bottom of the high school hierarchy. Through his struggles, mistakes, and choices, it is demonstrated how the hate projected onto Trevor as well as his reputation being hammered into his mind shaped his choices and just about lead to the genocide of an entire social group of his classmates. Just as seen in some real life school shootings as well as other violence related to bullying in school, "*Bang Bang You're Dead*" depicts the effects of cruelty and abuse of the social structures and pecking orders

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seen in American high schools. High school students have more pressure on them than is healthy for their age, and, to them, their education is not the first thing on their mind while they are at school.

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