EXPLORING PERSONAL NARRATIVES: EXPERIENCING THE DAWSON COLLEGE SHOOTING

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Abstract

Research on school shootings has generally focused more on the perpetrators than the victims of such crimes. The current study seeks to explore personal narratives of students who experienced a school shooting at Dawson College in 2006. To understand how people experience school shootings, interviews were conducted with three separate cohorts of individuals: Dawson students who were present at the time of the shooting; Dawson students who were not at the school at the time of the shooting; and high school students who would be entering the college the following year. These groups were chosen under the expectation that victimization is experienced differently depending on proximity to event. A narrative approach highlighted five critical aspects of being involved in a school shooting: experiencing the shooting; views on victimization; coping mechanisms; perceptions of safety; and interpretations of the event, past and present. In general, it was discovered that all three cohorts had similar experiences with regard to views on victimization and interpretations of the event. In contrast, the cohorts reported unique experiences with regard to how they experienced the shooting and their perceptions of safety following the event. Regarding coping mechanisms, the cohorts reported a combination of both similar and unique experiences. The findings highlight the idea that school shootings are experienced at both an individual and a group level.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to express my most sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Amy Farrell. From the pilot study to the finished product, this project was made possible by her knowledge, guidance, encouragement, patience and, most importantly, willingness to help. The things that I learned throughout this process have been immeasurable.

Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. James Alan Fox and Laurie Mastone for their help on this project. I have been struck by the helpfulness and support of the faculty and staff of the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice since the day I began the Criminology programme, and this thesis served to highlight the amazing dedication these individuals show on a daily basis.

To the brave individuals who chose to share their stories with me, it is through your experiences that I hope to bridge the gap in knowledge on the topic of school shootings. Thank you for taking the time to help me learn about your lives, both past and present. A special thanks goes to Ms. Donna Varrica, who, on several occasions, patiently answered all of my questions regarding Dawson’s policies.

Lastly, to my friends and family, especially JC, DB & TD, your support and love has guided me through this process. I appreciate every phone call, text, study session and cup of coffee that led to the completion of this project. Thank you for all that you did, thesis-related and otherwise!
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After completing five years of high school, students in Quebec, Canada enter CÉGEP¹, two-year “general and vocational” institutions that mark the “first stage in higher education” (Fédération des CÉGEPS, 2014). CÉGEPs, designed to bridge the gap between high school and university, are meant to prepare students to succeed in both the job market and in future higher education (Fédération des CÉGEPS, 2014). While giving students a taste of autonomy, CÉGEPs allow students the opportunity to explore over 50 college programmes with ease, before a more structured choice needs to be made for university (Fédération des CÉGEPS, 2014). In 1969, the first CÉGEP to offer English classes opened its doors in Montreal. Dawson College has since become the largest CÉGEP in Quebec, comprised of “approximately 10,000 day and evening students, mostly aged between 16 and 20” (Dawson College, 2014; CBC, 2014).

Behind the college lays a 20,000 square foot garden, which boasts various certifications including the “Biodiversity Garden Certification” as well as the “Monarch Oasis Certification” (Espace pour la vie, n.d.). Since its creation in 2007, the Ecological Peace Garden has seen over 1,500 volunteers and over $100,000 has been raised to continue its missions of promoting wildlife in the city and creating a peaceful, quiet place for Dawson College students to use both freely, and as a “living, breathing, classroom”; a location for various classes to meet and admire the wonders of the garden (Espace pour la vie, n.d.; Donna Varrica, personal communication, January 28, 2015). Despite the beauty that is demonstrated by the hundreds of flowers and shrubs in the green space, the Ecological Peace Garden was born out of a horrific, senseless act of violence. Five years prior to the

¹ CÉGEP is a French acronym that stands for Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel. In English, this translates to ‘General and Vocational College’.
garden’s completion in 2011, a lone gunman entered Dawson College and began his shooting rampage.

At 12:41 pm on September 13th, 2006, Kimveer Gill, a 25 year-old Indo-Canadian with no affiliation to Dawson College, walked towards one of the main entrances of the school (CBC, 2014). After shooting at several students standing outside the doors of the De Maisonneuve entrance, Kimveer Gill entered Dawson College. Gill continued his shooting rampage in the college’s atrium, which, at the time, was “bustling with students on their lunch breaks” (CBC, 2014). While some students managed to escape from one of Dawson’s many exits, other students were left hiding in the cafeterias surrounding the atrium while others had no choice but to barricade themselves in classrooms (CBC, 2014).

At 12:44 pm, after over 400 emergency calls had been placed, police, who were nearby on an unrelated matter, arrived at the school (CBC, 2014). At 12:48 pm, some of the “last gunshots were heard” as police and Gill entered into a shootout in the atrium of the college (CBC, 2014). Approximately an hour later, Gill’s lifeless body was dragged out of the building and onto De Maisonneuve Boulevard, where he was covered by a tarp until medical officials could take over (CBC, 2014). In all, Gill fired 72 times with a semi-automatic rifle and six times with a handgun, injuring 17 students and killing one- first-year business student Anastasia De Sousa- before turning the gun on himself (Daly, 2009; Séguin et al., 2013).

At the time, I was just beginning last year of my high school career and knew that I would be entering Dawson the following year. As such, I can attest to how deeply this event shook both the Dawson community, as well as Montreal’s community at large. While I was fortunate enough to have not been more directly involved in the event, I, like many others, became tangled in the aftermath that such tragedy produces. Between the panic of trying to
reach my friends who were at the college on that day, to learning about what they had witnessed and trying to understand the changes in affect, behaviour and cognition that this event would soon produce in some of my friends, one thing became clear to me: while many of my acquaintances had gone through the same incident that day, they had distinct experiences and connections to the shooting and their roles as victims of a crime. Years later, as a student of criminology seeking to address the gap in knowledge on the topic of school shootings, I re-examine questions about how students experience such events utilizing the systematic tools of social science research.

The present study seeks to compare and contrast the personal narratives of those who lived through a school shooting, something that has not yet been explored in extant research. In addition, the long-term consequences and victims’ current attitudes towards the event will be explored, as now nearly a decade has passed since the shooting. In order to best understand the complexity of the incident, several themes, including experiencing the shooting, views on victimization, coping mechanisms, perceptions of safety and interpretations of the experience will be explored with regard to three separate cohorts: 1) students who were physically present at the college during the shooting, 2) students who were enrolled at the college but not physically present at the time of the shooting, and 3) students who would be entering the college the following year. These three cohorts were selected under the assumption that proximity to the event might have an effect on victimization experience.
Review of Literature

In the wake of the 1999 shooting at Columbine high school in which 13 people were killed and 21 injured before the two assailants committed suicide, mental health professionals, educational staff, law enforcement and the general public began to take school shootings more seriously (Flannery, Modzeleski & Kretschmar, 2013).

Despite the massive public attention that school shootings typically receive, research in the field is lacking (Muschert, 2007; Elklit & Kurdahl 2013). As noted by one researcher (Muschert, 2007, p. 60) though many disciplines- including sociology, psychology and media studies- have attempted to study school shootings, there remains “no unified body of knowledge about such events”. The author goes on to note that social science research in the area has tended to focus on the perpetrator, looking for causes or commonalities amongst school shooters to serve as “red flags” for school officials and health professionals in an attempt to prevent such occurrences from happening (Muschert, 2007). Despite the efforts of researchers to understand school shooting perpetrators, Muschert (2007, p. 68) writes, “the fact that many researchers have focussed on a single causal dynamic has contributed to the lack of integration on the field”. Additionally, as described by Flannery et al. (2013, p. 5), this type of assailant-centric research that aims to predict and prevent future events “is a slippery slope that will usually result in more false positives than false negatives”. Instead, Muschert (2007, p. 68) proposes that these violent events “need to be understood as resulting from a constellation of contributing causes, none of which is sufficient in itself to explain a shooting”. This thesis attempts to begin to fill this gap by addressing the experiences of students who lived through a school shooting in 2006.
Below, existing research in the field of school shootings and victimology will be discussed, with regard to three general themes: how often school shootings occur, what researchers know about school shootings when they do occur, and what is known about experiencing crime, in general.

Prevalence of School Shootings

As reported by various researchers (i.e., Flannery et al., 2013; Rocque, 2012, p. 305), in the past twenty years, violent events at educational institutions have seemingly “evolved […] into a different and more deadly form”; since the mid 1990s, an unparalleled amount of violent events have occurred “in which students carried deadly weapons to school and opened fire on fellow students or faculty members”.

‘Rampage’ school shootings, defined as events in which “multiple victims, who may or may not be known to the shooter are targeted” tend to receive substantial media attention (Flannery et al., 2013, p. 1). As reported by Shultz and colleagues (2014, p. 2), “the news cycle is regularly punctuated by a ‘breaking story’ describing a mass shooting in progress, with ‘live’ footage showing law enforcement personnel responding to an ‘active shooter’ scenario and streams of frightened school children or civilians rapidly evacuating the scene”. Nonetheless, these incidents occur less frequently than shootings in schools targeting a single victim (Flannery et al., 2013; Shultz et al., 2014). In fact, violent incidents occurring in educational settings are neither novel- one of the first documented multiple-victim school shooting in the United States occurred in 1956 (Rocque, 2012)- nor are they very common: “during the 2009-2010 school year, there was approximately one homicide or suicide of a school-aged youth at school per 2.7 million students enrolled” (Flannery et al., 2013, p. 3).
That is to say that, in the United States, the chance of a student falling victim to a shooting incident at school, be it by homicide or suicide, is approximately 1 in 1 million (Voskuil, Reddy, Borum, Modzeleski, 2002). Nonetheless, as Kiilakoski, Nurmi and Oksanen (2014, p. 353) state, one of the most upsetting features of school shootings is that their threat exists as a possibility; they “cannot be laid to rest”.

Generally speaking, while the 1990s did see an increase in multiple-victim shootings at educational institutions, school violence rates during the same time period were actually on the decline. Between 1994 and 2007, violent crime rates in schools fell nearly 70% (CDC, 2008). As noted by researchers Wike and Fraser (2009), despite these decreasing rates of school violence in the 1990s, numerous school shootings, which were highly covered by the media, have caused the apprehension that perhaps the current policies and procedures in place are ineffective in ensuring the safety of academic institutions.

What is known about Experiencing School Shootings

Researchers have noted, “while the possibility of experiencing a school shooting is low, when one does occur, it significantly impacts victims, witnesses, responders and the community for many years to come” (Flannery et al., 2013, p. 3). As such, this section will be divided into two areas: the psychological consequences on victims of school shootings and how these events impact surrounding communities.

Psychological Consequences on Victims. Regarding the psychological consequences of school shootings on those affected, many researchers have remarked on the lack of information currently available (e.g., Muschert, 2007; Elklit & Kurdahl, 2013; Fallahi, Shaw, Austad, Fallon & Leishman, 2009). Most research in this area tends to be focused on
university-level adults; research on young-adults or teenagers is especially lacking in the field (Elklit & Kurdahl, 2013).

Of the studies that do exist, most find that students who experience school shootings have increased rates of mental health issues initially, but that these rates tend to dissipate a few months after the event. For example, 30 days post-shooting at Northern Illinois University, researchers found that posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) were present in 49% of a sample of female undergraduate students enrolled in the school (Mercer et al., 2012). By nine months post-shooting, this number dropped to 11% (Mercer et al., 2012). In contrast, in research on maladaptive coping and psychological distress, Littleton, Axsom and Grills-Taquechel (2011) found that scores of depression and anxiety remained somewhat stable in female students two weeks, six months and one year after experiencing the Virginia Tech shooting. To the best of my knowledge, research on the mental health of students 30 months post-event represents the most long-term research on school shootings and psychological effects. Here, researchers discovered that for the most part, participants reported little or no long-lasting effects after having been involved in the Northern Illinois University shooting (Orcutt, Bonanno, Hannan & Miron, 2014).

Researchers Suomalainen, Haravuori, Berg, Kiviruusu, and Marttunen (2011, p. 491) explored the “incidence of posttraumatic distress, general psychiatric disturbance and possible changes in substance use” in students after a school shooting at a high school in Jokela, Finland. Here, the researchers determined that almost half of their sample (261 students) reported symptoms of posttraumatic distress four months after the event, a finding that tended to be especially true for females. In addition, the researchers found a slight increase in substance use amongst students following the attack (Suomalainen et al., 2011).
By the same token, in a project funded by the Quebec government to look at how students and staff at Dawson utilized psychological services in the wake of the tragedy, researchers discovered that a year and a half after the event, there continued to be a greater incidence of various mental health issues reported by students and staff, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, depression and substance abuse in addition to an exacerbation of pre-shooting mental health disorders (Miquelon et al., 2014; Séguin et al., 2013). Suomalainen and colleagues (2011) also found that incidence of posttraumatic distress increased with an increased exposure to the shooting. Other researchers have replicated this finding as well: Mercer and colleagues (2012) determined that being within close physical proximity (e.g., seeing the gunman, hearing gunshots, etc.) was significantly related to PTSS and PTSD in victims of school shootings.

Despite the negative psychological reactions some members of the Dawson community exhibited, only 13% of respondents reported seeking help from a professional (Miquelon et al., 2014). As noted by the researchers, despite the traumatic nature of these mental health issues, this number isn’t much different than the reported 10% of psychological help-seeking individuals in the general population in 2002 (Miquelon et al., 2014). Instead, researchers stated that both students and staff tended to turn to the Internet for help with their psychological consequences (Miquelon et al., 2014).

Lastly, a handful of researchers have examined experiences of psychosocial support amongst school shooting survivors. To illustrate, Murtonen, Suomalainen, Haravuori and Marttunen (2012) explored the experiences of psychosocial support amongst teenagers following the 2007 school shooting in Jokela, Finland. Here, it was discovered that adolescents who were more severely exposed to the shooting received greater amounts of
crisis support than students who were less exposed (Murtonen et al., 2012). Moreover, students universally cited support from their friends and family as “important” (Murtonen et al., 2012). In line with this, other researchers have cited an inverse relationship between familial support and the presence of distress; that is, with increased levels of social support, survivors report decreased levels of psychological distress (Suomalainen et al., 2011; Grills-Taquechel, Littleton & Axsom, 2011).

**Impact on Community.** As previously mentioned, researchers have acknowledged that school shootings not only affect those directly involved, but can also extend to affect individuals and communities not directly involved (e.g., Flannery et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2014). For example, nationwide, half of parents of school-aged children think that a school shooting could happen in their neighbourhood (Gallup, 2001 as cited by Juvonen, 2001). Moreover, this number jumps to 75% when looking at high school students (Gaughan, Cerio & Myers as cited by Juvonen, 2001). Additionally, in his research on community bereavement, social worker Jonathan Fast discovered that the community surrounding Columbine High School reported a variety of both negative and positive responses to the event. Such reactions, demonstrated by “the cliques, crowds in which the killers and victims circulated, their churches, the high school itself, the town of Littleton and those from beyond its borders”, including feelings of anger, grief, a newfound appreciation for life, and survivor guilt in the wake of the tragedy (Fast, 2003, p. 486).

Researchers have also addressed the effect that geographical distance has on perceptions of safety. For example, looking at data obtained from the 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), researchers Brener, Simon, Anderson Barrios and Small (2002) found that, after the incident at Columbine, high school students, nationwide, were 2.6 times
more likely to miss school because of safety concerns than they were prior to the incident. While this increase was found in all geographic areas (urban, suburban and rural), this finding was especially true for students in rural areas: these teenagers were 12 times more likely to miss school following Columbine than their urban and suburban counterparts (Brener et al., 2002).

In a related study, researchers Stretesky and Hogan (2001) were interested in the extent to which the Columbine shooting impacted the perceived safety of female students enrolled in a university in upstate New York. In this study, the researchers’ findings suggested that perceptions of safety might be altered by the media’s substantial attention paid to a particular violent crime; students enrolled at Rochester Institute of Technology felt considerably less safe after the shooting in Colorado (Stretesky & Hogan, 2001). As explained by Stretesky and Hogan (2001, p. 440), the portrayal of such events by the media “may even impact students’ perceptions of safety more than their own past victimization experiences”.

**What is known about Experiencing Crime**

Though research on experiencing school shootings has served mostly to explore the short-term impact of PTSS and PTSD, research on how individuals experience other forms of crime, in a more general sense, might help to inform our understanding of the potential impacts of school shootings. For example, research has shed light on gender differences in experiencing domestic violence, variations in suffering stranger versus nonstranger violence, disparities in psychological proximity to victims of crime and distinctions in psychological reactions of children and their parents (i.e., Kimmel, 2002; Kaukinen, 2002; Breslau, Davis,
Andreski & Peterson, 1991; Sanders-Phillips, 1997). Additionally, researchers have discovered evidence of both unique and shared experiences in victims of a particular traumatic event and victims of another traumatic event (e.g., Bisson & Shepherd, 1995; Wirtz & Harrell, 1987). Knowing this, it is possible that research on other forms of crime and victimization could inform the minimal pool of knowledge surrounding school shootings.

Of particular interest to this study is the research on proximal experiences of victimization. Specifically, researchers have distinguished between primary victims (individuals who have been personally victimized in some way) and secondary victims (which typically represent the ‘significant others’ of primary victims, witnesses to a traumatic event and, in some cases, crisis workers) (Chung, Easthope, Farmer, Werrett & Chung, 2003). While no one definition exists to decipher primary and secondary victims, researchers have differentiated between suffering a personal crime (e.g., rape victim, domestic or nondomestic assault victim, robbery victim, etc.) and group crimes (e.g., terrorist attacks, hate crimes, etc.).

**Personal Victimization.** Researchers have noted various, albeit related, responses with regard to psychological consequences of experiencing an instance of personal victimization. For example, in research designed to explore victims of civilian violence, participants reported experiencing peritraumatic emotions and posttraumatic anger and intrusion symptoms following the violent incident (Kunst, Winkel & Bogaerts, 2011). In a study on emotional and behavioural responses to personal victimization in various hate crimes, participants reported feelings of anger, fear, sadness, powerlessness and suspicion of others (Barnes & Ephross, 1994). Other researchers cite fear of repeat victimization as the main source of distress following an instance of personal victimization (McBrearty, 2011).
Pertaining to coping mechanisms, researchers Wirtz and Harrell (1987) found significant differences between victims of rape, domestic assault, nondomestic assault, robbery and burglary. For example, rape victims reported utilizing the highest number of coping mechanisms, while victims of domestic assault and burglary utilized the fewest. Of the various responses, rape victims reported most often (in comparison to victims of other crimes) changing their phone numbers, staying at home more frequently, moving and purchasing or carrying a weapon (Wirtz & Harrell, 1987). In comparison, burglary victims reported staying home more often, moving, installing and using locks or bolts as their most used coping responses following victimization (Wirtz & Harrell, 1987). In addition, following all forms of criminal victimization, the most frequently utilized coping mechanisms across crimes was staying home more frequently and becoming more cautious (Wirtz & Harrell, 1987). In line with this, numerous other researchers have made mention to the notion of being more cautious (including being hypervigilant, hyperaroused, etc.) following instances of personal crime (e.g., McBrearty, 2011; Boccellari et al., 2007; Willis, 2008).

Lastly, one researcher, who approached victims of a variety of crimes who were seeking medical treatment for their injuries in an emergency department, discussed her participants’ desire to defend themselves as victims (McBrearty, 2011). In line with this, researchers Janoff-Bulman and Freize (1983) posit that finding purpose in victimization could be the result of an effort to cope and make sense of an unexpected violent experience.

**Group Victimization.** Researchers found evidence that individuals experience witnessing crimes differently depending on whether or not the victim is known to the witness. For example, in a study on relationship proximity to adolescent witnesses to crime, researchers discovered that teenagers reported greater depressive symptoms when witnessing
violence against a friend or family member (Lambert, Cammack, Boyd & Iolongo, 2012). In comparison, the researchers found no relationship between depressive symptoms and witnessing a crime against a stranger or acquaintance (Lambert et al., 2012). However, these findings have not always been congruent. For instance, other researchers did not identify any differences in psychological distress between secondary victims to a train crash, with regard to their proximity to the event: “the traumatic impact of the disaster seemed to have affected the residents to a similar degree, regardless of whether they lived nearer or further away from the crash site” (Chung et al., 2003, p. 269).

Comparably, residents of Norway reported intense emotional responses, most frequently feelings of sadness and unreality, following the terrorist attacks in Oslo and on Utoya Island in 2011 (Thoresen, Aakvaag, Wentzel-Larsen, Dyb & Hjemdal, 2012). In this case, while physical and geographical closeness were associated with early emotional reactions, only psychological proximity was associated with PTSS (Thoresen et al., 2012).

**Gap in Literature**

As Flannery et al. (2013, p. 6) write, “while most media attention is on the mental health of school shooters, we cannot forget the impact of school shooting incidents on the surviving victims, including those who may not have been injured but who may have witnessed the incident or been affected by it in other ways”; it is necessary to address victim needs and make sense of their experiences after a school shooting. Though some research does exist on victimology as it relates to school shootings, it has tended to mostly be grounded in studies on posttraumatic symptomology. In addition, to the best of my knowledge, no research currently exists on the long-term consequences of experiencing such
an event. As such, to date, the only option that exists is to turn to research on other types of crime to inform the questions that remain regarding school shooting victims. For example, it is possible that survivors of school shootings live through similar experiences post-trauma than do victims of personal or group crimes. Nonetheless, it is impossible to say with certainty whether these results pertain to victims of school shooting. For this reason, many questions remain unanswered about what it is like to survive a school shooting.

It should be noted that though some research has been conducted on the mental health and service utilization of the Dawson College community eighteen months after the shooting, the present study extends our understanding of the experience at Dawson in a variety of ways. Specifically, this study builds on previous research by: 1) examining the complete experience of surviving a school shooting by also considering experiences on the day, perceptions of both safety and victimization and interpretations of the event, past and present 2) examining how these various features are experienced by three separate cohorts of people who were touched by the event and 3) examining the longer-term consequences of the experience, by speaking with students almost a decade post-shooting.

In an effort to gain the most complete understanding of what it is like to survive a school shooting, the present exploratory study seeks to bridge the gap in both school shooting and victimology literature by using personal narratives to explore experiences, both at the time of the event and almost a decade later. Incorporating what is known about psychological and geographic proximity to crime, this study will encompass yet another facet of victimology research by studying students who were both directly and indirectly involved in the shooting.
Research Questions

Due to the lack of information that currently exists on how school shootings are experienced (specifically with regard to narrative information on victimization, long-term consequences and differences in individual experiences), paired with my personal experiences with the Dawson College shooting, I explored research questions to address this gap in knowledge. Specifically, I sought to answer five research questions: 1) how did the individual experience the Dawson College shooting? 2) does the individual identify as a victim? 3) how did the individual cope with any trauma or negative feelings associated with the experience? 4) how did experiencing the event impact the individual’s perceptions of safety? 5) how did the individual’s perceptions of the event change over the weeks and years following the event?

To answer these questions, I collected qualitative information from in-depth interviews with former Dawson students about how they experienced a school shooting. Because school shootings encompass a unique form of violence where a multitude of individuals can be victimized in varying ways (e.g., physical injury, directly witnessing the event, fearing for ones life while hiding or evacuating, coping with friends and family members’ experiences, etc.), this research sought to explore how proximity to the event impacted students, both at the time of the event and today, almost a decade after the fact. To do so, I collected personal narratives from three cohorts of students to compare and contrast: Dawson College students who were physically present at the time of the shooting,
Dawson students who were not physically present at the time of the shooting, and lastly, the group that would be entering the college the following year\(^2\).

It should be noted that before embarking on this project, I developed a pilot study that took place during Summer 2014 in which three individuals (one from each cohort) were interviewed\(^3\). While the purpose of this pilot study was to aid in developing my qualitative research skills, it also served to help refine my interview guide, cultivate a coding system, extract relevant themes and practice writing a qualitative paper. As such, the interview guide used for this research had been developed to collect as much information from each participant’s narrative, and covered four main topics: current and past education and work experience, memories of the shooting, reactions to the shooting, and long-term consequences. To analyze the above research questions, I chose to compare and contrast the experiences of each cohort through five main themes that emerged in the interviews: experiencing the shooting, views on victimization, coping mechanisms, perceptions of safety and interpretations of the event, both at the time and presently.

Method

Study Population and Sampling

Dawson College students who were enrolled at the college in the fall of 2006 or 2007 were considered eligible to participate in this study. More specifically, to meet inclusion criteria requirements, participants were only considered if they had been physically present at the college during the shooting, if they had been enrolled at the college but not physically on

\(^2\) Throughout the text, these cohorts will be designated by abbreviated terms: Present, Enrolled and High School, respectively.

\(^3\) Because these interviewees did not sign the official consent form developed for this research, their responses were not considered in this thesis.
campus at the time of the shooting, or if they would have been entering Dawson College the following year (Fall 2007). No other inclusion criteria existed.

The sample for this research was chosen out of convenience. Since I had also personally experienced the Dawson College shooting, I approached three acquaintances of mine that I knew fit the inclusion criteria (one from each cohort) to serve as ‘seeds’ for my snowball sampling method. After each interview was conducted, I asked participants to reach out to two acquaintances that they believed might fit the inclusion criteria and ask permission to share their contact information so that I could be in touch regarding my research. I sent every referral a recruitment script via email that outlined the project. If they agreed to meet, we decided on a location and time that was convenient for the both of us.

Recruitment began in early December and continued until the beginning of March. For reasons related to travel, interviews occurred in two blocks: for the most part, interviews were conducted in the weeks between December 15, 2014 and February 1, 2015. Additionally, four interviews were conducted during early March 2015.

Most of the individuals I contacted regarding my research were willing (and eager, in many cases) to meet. Typically, individuals who did not wish to meet either ignored my initial texts or emails, or responded telling me they were not interested in participating. One individual agreed to meet and then changed their mind on the day of the interview; they mentioned that participating would be too difficult, and that they no longer felt comfortable partaking in the research.

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4 It should be noted that while every participant referred two friends to me, one participant referred eight acquaintances. Though each was contacted, not all of them participated in the research.

5 A gender-neutral pronoun is used in an effort to maintain the individual’s anonymity.
It should be noted that while convenience sampling was ideal for this project, several limitations of this method exist. For example, in this research, a high number of participants wished to refer “desirable” acquaintances. As such, I saw a much larger number of participants who were present at the time of the shooting, as opposed to participants who fit into the other two cohorts. Additionally (and especially because my sample size is relatively small), several of the participants had either gone to the same high school, grew up in the same neighbourhood or were in the same friend group, which could have resulted in biased information by representing individuals from similar social networks. For example, it is possible that friends might share certain experiences or attitudes because they might have helped each other to cope through the event. Despite these limitations, this sampling method helped to provide a sample of students that might otherwise have been difficult to identify in order to explore variation in experiences.

I interviewed 21 individuals about their experiences with the Dawson College shooting. No information was collected on age, but because the students I was speaking with had been students at Dawson in 2006 and 2007, it is safe to assume that they would have been between 23 and 27 at the time of the interview. Demographic information on gender by cohort can be found in Table 1.

**Information Collection**

Interviews with all 21 participants were semi-structured, allowing for exploration of important themes that I may not have initially thought to investigate. At the start of the interview, participants were asked to read through the consent form and encouraged to ask
for clarification when needed. Before beginning the interview, I reminded participants that participation was entirely voluntary and confidential, that they could stop participation at any time without consequence and that it was okay to not know (or remember) the answer to a question. Additionally, participants were encouraged to be as detailed as possible, whenever possible. I then asked participants for permission to turn on my personal audio tape recorder (which was used for transcription purposes only), and the interviews began.

All interviews were conducted in public places of the participants’ choosing. For the most part, this included various coffee shops and a couple of bars on the island of Montreal. In all, the interviews lasted an average of 41 minutes, with the shortest at 16 minutes and the longest 90 minutes. As previously mentioned, the interviews covered four main sections: current and past education and work experience, memories of the shooting, reactions to the shooting, and long-term consequences. Within each section, a number of related topics were covered.

Qualitative Analysis

Once the interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed onto my computer using Microsoft Word. From there, the interviews were coded using NVivo, an analysis software created for qualitative research. For analysis of the pilot study interviews, I first free coded text using line-by-line coding to classify and label central ideas within each interview and then organized the codes into a hierarchy.

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6 IRB Approval Number: 14-10-07
7 Due to the sensitive nature of the study, extra care was placed on the participants’ well-being both during and after the interview. For example, participants were reminded of the psychological services available to them within the community and were encouraged to contact these services should they feel any discomfort following participation.
I used the hierarchical codes from the pilot study as a starting point for developing the codes for the present research. While most of the codes relevant to this research had also emerged in my pilot study, I also created several new free codes for this analysis to cover themes that had not appeared in the pilot\(^8\). With the emergence of a variety of key codes (codes that recurred across interviews), I was able to extract multiple themes within the 21 interviews to explore in the five sections below. I then assigned relevant codes to each subsection of my findings section, and designed tables and compared notes and to summarize and visually analyze the findings across cohorts\(^9\). Notes were taken on the major ‘takeaways’ for each theme, and, if present, deviations from the major ideas were noted as well. As such, the findings section is organized to reflect this technique: for each subsection, the overarching themes are presented first, followed by a discussion of ‘unique contributions’.

**Findings**

In keeping with the research questions listed above, the findings section is divided into five distinct subsections: Experiencing the Shooting, Views on Victimization, Coping Mechanisms, Perceptions of Safety and Interpretations of the Event: Now and Then.

**Experiencing the Shooting**

In each interview, the participants were asked about their general experiences on the day of the shooting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants reported varying information,

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\(^8\) Examples of the new codes created include, but are not limited to: Reports of a Second Shooter, Stigma about Victimization, etc.

\(^9\) For a listing on the specific codes that substantiated the main topics covered in this analysis, refer to Table 2.
including where they had been on the morning of the shooting, how they had realized there was a shooting and what they had done during the event. Because the Present cohort represents that majority of the sample, their experiences will be primarily discussed in the general discussion. Distinctive experiences of the Enrolled and High School cohorts will be discussed in the Unique Contributions section below.

To begin with, it became clear in the interviews that a hierarchy existed with regard to how well the participants remembered their experiences that day: Present participants remembered the most, High School participants the least and the Enrolled cohort fell somewhere in between. Because the Present cohort experienced the traumatic event more directly than either the Enrolled or High School cohorts, it is possible that their memories of the day were encoded and stored more successfully than those who were less physically or emotionally connected to the event. Scientists in the field of neuropsychology have found evidence to support this finding: “emotions and especially aversive experiences enhance encoding processes and memory for the emotional event” (Dirnberger et al., 2012, p. 592).

Each cohort reported being in very different locations at the time of the shooting. The majority of participants I spoke with in the Present cohort reported that they had been inside Dawson College at the time of the event, whether in classrooms or in a hallway, club space or the atrium. To illustrate, two participants reported actually having been together at the time of the shooting. While they were headed towards the atrium after class, the participants heard what they believe were fire crackers: “[…] we’re like ‘Oh! There must be some form of event going on!’ […] We were like anxious, to go check out what it was.” (Interview 5). Both participants remembered running against a crowd of people who were yelling for everyone else to turn around and exit the building away from the atrium. Instead
of obeying these warnings, the participants were eager to see what event was unfolding there and, as such, continued to the location. Once they got to a balcony that overlooked the atrium, the participants witnessed the shooter hiding behind the vending machines and police officers following him with their guns drawn. Though one police officer looked up at them and told them to leave, it wasn’t until more shots were fired that the participants realized they could be in danger from where they were standing. From there, both participants ran to the nearest exit.

To give another example, one participant was sitting in the atrium at the time of the shooting, playing cards with a group of friends. He and his friends heard gunshots go off, but as was the case in the situations discussed earlier, the participant believed the noise he was hearing was a firework. Nonetheless, everyone in the atrium, including the participant, dove to the floor. On the floor, a police officer or a security guard motioned for everyone to crawl to a far corner of the room where they were able to shield themselves behind a wall. On his way, the participant crawled passed a student that had been shot in the leg. Once he reached the corner of the room, the participant realized that one of the friends he had just been with had been shot in the arm and was being attended to by a cafeteria worker. The participant remained in the corner of the room until a police officer eventually communicated to those in hiding that they were safe to exit the building.

In addition, several participants, while not directly inside the college during the shooting, were within immediate proximity to the school. For instance, two participants reported having been outside of the De Maisonneuve entrance at the time of the event.

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10 The participant couldn’t remember.
11 As previously mentioned, the De Maisonneuve entrance is where Kimveer Gill began his shooting rampage. He eventually entered the school from these doors.
While one participant did not specifically remember hearing gunshots, the other participant remembered thinking she was hearing firecrackers. Both participants reported lots of screaming, and stated that most people outside of the building either dropped to the ground or started running away from Dawson. One participant stated: “Either people ran or people got on the ground. A lot of people got on the ground. And I was stepping on people as I was running away and I was running on top of people.” (Interview 9).

The other participant stated that she was one of the many that fell on the ground. Once the shooter was inside, the participant was swept up in a mass stampede of students running, panicked, away from the college. She, like several participants, reported that crowds of people would run in one direction only to chaotically change directions entirely upon hearing that a second shooter may be present12.

Looking back on the experiences of the Present group, it seems that no one protocol was adopted by the Dawson staff members during the event; instead, some professors decided to evacuate their classes, while others decided to barricade themselves in classrooms. For example, one participant reported that his class went on lockdown during the time of the shooting. After unsuccessfully trying to convince his classmates and teacher to ‘rush’ the shooter if he entered the class, the participant and another classmate pushed desks and chairs up against the door. Here, they ‘stood guard’ while everyone else, including the teacher, hid.

12 There were multiple reports of additional gunmen at Dawson but after a full sweep of the area, police did not find any evidence to support these reports. During a conversation with a member of the communications team at Dawson, she told me that the police report hypothesized two reasons for why this might have been: 1) students were probably witnessing undercover officers with their guns drawn, running to the scene and 2) the shooting took place in an open space which allowed the gunshot sounds to reverberate throughout the area. As such, many people believed that the shooting was taking place in several locations and from many directions. (Donna Varrica, personal communication, January 28, 2015)
As this respondent explained: “There were 40 some odd kids under a desk, crying, calling loved ones. So for them it was really sombre. For me it was just kind of a fight or flight and we chose to fight.” (Interview 13). Other participants remembered that their teachers had told them to exit the building without having implemented a strategic exit strategy for the students in their classes. In fact, one participant mentioned that his teacher was running ahead of the students, in an effort to evacuate the building first. Taken together, these findings help to illustrate the mass confusion and chaos that arose in the wake of the emergency.

It should be noted that though evacuating the school did end up being safe for the classes that chose to do so, at the time, there was no way of telling how many shooters were in the school, where they were located, whether police were responding, etc. While this finding raises some red flags about the actions taken by some staff members at Dawson that day, almost all participants I interviewed from this cohort reported feeling neutral or satisfied with the way the college handled the situation. It is important to highlight here, instead, that this event led Dawson (and surrounding educational institutions, for that matter) to proactively re-evaluate their emergency protocols and make necessary changes using the knowledge they gained from the shooting in September 2006. For example, a member of Dawson’s communications team mentioned that the school’s evacuation plan had always been to exit the school and enter the mall across the street (Alexis Nihon). Since the shooting in 2006, it became evident that this was not always possible; Alexis Nihon, at the time, was also evacuated. As such, Dawson now has a Plan A evacuation plan (Alexis Nihon), and a Plan B evacuation plan, in case the area near Dawson is also being cleared (Donna Varrica, personal communication, January 28, 2015). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these
strategies, typically referred to as ‘Critical incident planning’, have become common practice throughout schools and businesses in recent years. For example, in the United States, millions of people (including 1,600 police departments and 1,600 K-12 Schools) have been educated on the ALICE program, the primary “active shooter response program” in the U.S. (ALICE Training Institute, 2014).

With regard to those who were in Dawson during the shooting, but not in a classroom, many participants reported examples of their delayed knowledge of danger. For instance, as illustrated above, several participants mentioned hearing gunshots, but not associating the sound with danger and, instead, continuing to walk towards the atrium where the shooting was in the midst of unfolding. To highlight, one participant reported: “It sounded like construction, like a jackhammer or like a drill or something because they often do construction at Dawson- it sounded exactly like that. So I kept going, I thought it was just that.” (Interview 12). Another participant reported attributing the sound to firecrackers: “[...] we’re like ‘Oh! There must be some form of event going on!’ [...] We were like anxious, to go check out what it was.” (Interview 5). In both examples, the participants reported initially ‘normalizing’ the unbelievable: while they acknowledged the noise they were hearing, they assumed it was coming from something more familiar to them (i.e., a firecracker or construction). As such, the participants delayed their knowledge of danger; in both cases, the individuals continued to approach the shooting.

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13 As previously stated, the shooting occurred around lunch time- one of Dawson’s busiest hours. In the atrium where the shooting occurred, there are two cafeterias, several vending machines, and one of Dawson’s main entrances (which directly faces the food court in the mall across the street). At any given time, but especially around lunchtime, it is very common for students to converge in the atrium. As such, it would not be uncommon for students who were finished class, at the time, to be on their way to the area.
Another finding that emerged in this section was the importance of cell phones: almost all participants remembered using their phones during or immediately after the shooting. While most people were trying to call out to their friends and family to let them know they were safe, others were learning about what they were experiencing, as it was unfolding. For example, one participant remembered her sister calling while she was in the midst of running away from the shooting spree outside. As she put it: “And then my sister phoned me, who lived in Nova Scotia. And she’s like, ‘I heard that there’s a shooting at Dawson, what’s going on?’ So at that point it seemed like she knew more about it than I did […]” (Interview 7). Another participant said: “I remember speaking to my father and he was saying…he was hearing what was going on in the news. So he was saying there were people in the school, shooting, get yourself out, but we couldn’t get out because we were told not to leave […]” (Interview 13). In both instances, the participants were alluding to the notion that the external world was informing them on what was going on in their immediate surroundings, as they were living through it.

With regard to cellphone use, another theme emerged from almost all interviews: due to the volume of calls in the vicinity of Dawson, cell phone towers crashed and students were no longer able to send or receive calls or texts. As explained by one person:

And I remember just the sheer panic that it was my mom’s birthday, and I remember trying to call her and I’m just thinking, ‘holy [expletive], she can’t hear me. She can’t get a hold of me, and I’m sure this is on some form of news outlet. At the time, the cellular networks weren’t that strong and it crashed, you couldn’t find anyone. You couldn’t call your best friend. You couldn’t text. It was just complete and utter radio silence. And I think that
was the scariest part, because I was just thinking to myself `[expletive], Mark
is in the cafeteria, Dan could be in the cafeteria…James, everyone.'

As mentioned by the participant, the fact that the cell phone towers crashed is troubling for
a variety of reasons: Dawson students would not have been able to inform anyone that they
were okay, and students would not have been able to locate friends nor would they have
been able to call loved ones for comfort in the aftermath of such a shocking event.

**Unique Contributions.** Due to their physical location, neither the Enrolled cohort
nor the High School cohort had any experience hearing gunshots, delaying danger or leaving
Dawson. Instead, both cohorts primarily reported either being at home or on their high
school lunch breaks at the time of the shooting, respectively. For example, one participant
chose to skip school that morning, and was woken up by a phone call from a friend at
Dawson. His friend explained that there had been a shooting, and asked if the participant
would mind driving to the school to pick him up. Once there, the participant described his
experience: “[…] students were flooding the streets, crowds everywhere and, you know,
people crying, just in shock.” (Interview 11).

As was illustrated in the previous passage, cell phones were important to both the
Enrolled and High School students as well. In fact, every participant from each of these
cohorts reported learning of the shooting via cellphone (e.g., a friend from Dawson texted, a
parent called), and remembered trying to get in touch with friends or family who were at
Dawson. For the most part, the participants did not remember issues while using their cell
phones.

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14 Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.
What can be deduced from these findings is that each cohort, whether directly or indirectly involved in the shooting, had separate and unique accounts regarding how the event was experienced. For example, the Present cohort reported greater memories of the day of the shooting than did the Enrolled or High School cohort. As explained by past research (i.e., Dirnberger et al., 2012), this could be explained by the emotional responses elicited by the traumatic event. Additionally, each cohort remembered differences in their experiences based on their physical location at the time of the shooting. Lastly, all participants reported the importance of their cell phones during the time of the event, either as a means of obtaining information, or relaying information to friends and family.

**Views on Victimization**

In an effort to best understand participants’ views on victimization following their experience in the Dawson College shooting, I analyzed two general themes elicited by the participants’ responses: perceptions of victimization following the event and the reasoning driving these viewpoints. All three cohorts will be analyzed as a whole in attempt to discriminate the overarching themes that came up on the topic of victimization.

Outlined in the research on victimology is the difficulty individuals have in integrating their traumatic experiences with their life schemas. As stated by Janoff-Bulman (n.d., p. 22), following traumatic events (be it through crime, disease, natural disaster, etc.), “victims’ views of the world and themselves are seriously challenged, and the assumptions that formerly enabled them to function effectively no longer serve as guides for behaviour”. Through various techniques, survivors of trauma can learn to either deny victimhood (e.g., through redefining their experience) or, once they recognize their role as a victim, integrate
their experiences to fit the assumptions of the world they previously held (e.g., by finding meaning) (Janoff-Bulman, n.d.).

As it turned out, almost all participants included in this study, regardless of their physical or emotional proximity to the event, did not consider themselves victims of the Dawson College shooting. Overwhelmingly, this was explained by one common theme: each participant who reported that they were not victims of the incident made reference to the idea that their experiences could have been worse. Of importance, this theme emerged regardless of where participants had been located in relation to the shooting: those who were in classrooms at Dawson, on their high school’s lunch break, in the comfort of their homes or in the atrium, alike, reported this reasoning. For example, one participant remembered standing at the De Maisonneuve entrance to the college, the location where the shooting spree commenced, during the time of the shooting. While she acknowledged that she was close to the shooting—in fact, as she was attempting to escape the scene, she was standing behind and individual who she believes was shot in the neck—she downplayed her experience to the students’ that were inside to the college. She explained: “And the people who were in the classrooms? They must have been terrified because they’re locked in classrooms, and they don’t know if someone’s going to come to the door and just kill them. […] What are they going to do? […] They must have been terrified. At least I was running away. You know? I was outside.” (Interview 9). With regard to victimhood, another participant said: “Yes, I will admit that I was in shock and that I was confused, but I did not get hurt in the slightest. None of my family members or close friends did. To compare myself to a victim would be insensitive.” (Interview 15).
This notion of ‘my experience could have been worse’ is concurrent with previous research in the field. As stated by Janoff-Bulman (n.d.), in an effort to distance themselves from victimhood, one of the methods utilized by survivors of trauma is by “downward comparison”: comparing their victimizing experiences to those of the less fortunate (Taylor, Wood & Lichtman, 1983). As explained by Taylor et al. (1983, p. 27), “downward comparisons have the psychological advantage of making one feel good about one’s situation relative to the comparison other, although they have the potential disadvantage of providing little useful information for improving one’s own outcomes”. As such, victims tend to utilize such methods “whenever self-esteem needs take precedence over informational needs” (Brickman & Bulman, 1977 as cited by Taylor et al., 1983, p. 27).

In an explicit example of downward comparison, one participant stated: “It just sort of felt like literally anyone else’s experience was worse than mine.” (Interview 21). In each cohort, the participants made their efforts of downward comparison clear. In doing so, the participants simultaneously processed and denied their victimizing experiences in an effort to preserve their previously formed schemas of the world, or of Dawson.

Expanding on this perception of others having fared worse, many participants alluded to the idea that they didn’t have the ‘right’ to feel victimized. For example, one participant said: “I wasn’t hurt, I was lucky enough. Unfortunately, people I know got hurt, and that makes them the victim. I would never take the attention away from, I guess, the real victims.” (Interview 2). Another participant said: “I think I was having that common feeling of feeling horrible about [the shooting], but also feeling guilty because nothing happened to me.” (Interview 19). In each case, it is clear that the participants are trying to distance themselves from victimization in an effort to respect the experiences of others.
Once again, the research on downward comparisons informs these perceptions. As hypothesized by Wills (1981, as cited by Taylor et al., 1983), comparing oneself to those less fortunate can occur both passively and actively. While it is possible to compare one’s situation to a “general” experience (as had been described in the previous quotes), it is also possible to “actively seek a target to derogate so as to create distance between the self and the other” (Taylor et al., 1983, p. 27).

Ironically, the method of actively seeking a downward comparison presented itself in this study through a more passive aggressive form as well: several participants made reference to one particular individual, claiming that this person ‘played victim’ under circumstances that, they felt, were unwarranted. To illustrate, one participant remarked:

“You know, they’re the type of person that will cry during a math exam. Fake passing out so that they don’t have to write the exam. I don’t even think they were at school [on the day of the shooting], but they were in articles. People knew their story; people knew that they needed time. They were playing a victim. They victimized themselves.” (Interview 5). Here, as was the case in the handful of other interviews that mentioned this individual, the participant actively chose a target to deviate from in an effort to further distance himself from feelings of victimization. While he utilized the downward comparison method, it was used passive aggressively; the participants were using the individual as a comparison of a worse-off situation, as the model of an inappropriate reaction that they were choosing to distance themselves from.

To note, while it is possible that the person in question that the participants were referring to was inflating his or her experience of victimization, another interesting finding

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15 The pronoun in the quote was changed to a gender-neutral pronoun by the researcher, in an effort to maintain the individual’s anonymity.
emerged: when I contacted this individual to recruit them to participate in the research, they declined. What is interesting about this series of events is that had the individual truly been seeking attention for their experiences, one would assume that they would have been eager to discuss the shooting with me, in an effort to gain sympathy or pity, for example. Instead, the exact opposite happened: the individual told me that they were unwilling to discuss the event, because it would be too emotionally taxing for them. As such, it is possible that some people who didn’t make it into my sample may have felt more victimized than the individuals I interviewed. The implications of this will be further discussed in the limitations section of this paper.

**Unique contributions.** As was previously noted, almost all participants included in this research did not consider themselves to be victims. Nonetheless, a handful of participants did. For the most part, these individuals were from the Present cohort, but one individual from the High School cohort recognized her role as a victim as well. Interestingly, she did so only after careful consideration (and after first having responded that she was not a victim). This participant said: “I mean, maybe if I really think about it, then yes. […] I guess anyone who was affected negatively by [the shooting] is technically a victim. So I guess in that respect, yes. But at the same time, I feel like there are people who experienced so much more and who were affected so much more about it, that they really are the victims.” (Interview 17).

Coming back to research on victimology, Janoff-Bulman (n.d.) postulated that once survivors of trauma recognize their victimhood, they attempt to find meaning in their experience. This idea was evident in the previous quote: while the participant acknowledge that, by definition, she was probably a victim of the Dawson College shooting, she was able
to find meaning in her experience by, ironically, using downward comparison. In doing so, the participant might have successfully integrated her experience of victimization into her life assumptions by finding meaning within the entire context of the event: while she might be a defined victim, others were more victimized than she was.

Another participant, who also considered himself a victim, saw the event in a positive light: though he had a friend who was shot by Gill, and while he had to barricade himself in a classroom during the shooting, he was proud of the way he had proactively handled the situation. He said: “For me, the biggest takeaway was just seeing how I dealt with the situation at the time. […] when someone asks me ‘what’s something really interesting about you?’, that’s usually the story that comes to my head first. So, I learned that about myself.” (Interview 27). As was the case in the previous example, while this individual recognized his victimhood, he was able to find meaning through his experience. As such, his experience with the shooting at Dawson College might have been better assimilated into his life schema.

Taken together, these findings illustrate the similarities experienced by each cohort with regard to views on victimization. For the most part, participants did not claim victimhood—a finding that was true regardless of physical or emotional proximity to the shooting. Generally, the reasoning behind this was that victims either believed their situations could have been worse, and, as such, the participants didn’t feel that they had the ‘right’ to feel victimized. When participants did consider themselves victims, they tended to give meaning or context to their experiences. Research in the field supports these findings: “downward comparisons” and finding meaning in traumatic events are typical mechanisms utilized by victims to process their traumatic events (Janoff-Bulman, n.d.).
Coping Mechanisms

To gain a better understanding of the methods in which participants used to cope with the event, I analyzed a variety of themes related to how the participants dealt with the shooting: feelings about coping, psychological reactions, substance use, social support, and therapy. Once again, the predominant themes that emerged between each cohort will be central to the main discussion of this section. Incongruences will be explored separately.

For the most part, participants were satisfied with the way they coped with the shooting\textsuperscript{16}. While the participants might have been negatively affected by the shooting in some cases, they did not feel like these changes significantly impacted their lives\textsuperscript{17}. For example, one participant stated: “I think [coping] was kind of average. I didn’t find it particularly hard to deal with. For about a week I’d say, I felt…a bit weird, and not myself. And obviously it was on my mind. But I don’t know, I had a lot of friends and family that I could talk to about it […]” (Interview 18). One participant attributed this resilience as a result of not having witnessed any of the shooting: “I didn’t see anything. I didn’t see anything, and I think that was a major factor in how I dealt with it. I know that people who directly saw something had a much, much more difficult time dealing with it, because they saw things.” (Interview 16). As was the case in the views on victimization section, it seems that the participant in this case utilized the method of downward comparison to help him make sense of the way he coped with the event.

Of the psychological changes that were discussed, the majority of participants reported similar experiences. For example, common changes included being fearful of loud noises,

\textsuperscript{16} Common responses were “fine”, “average” or “well” with regard to how participants coped with the shooting.
\textsuperscript{17} Discussed below, in the Interpretation of the Event section.
being more cautious in open, public places, concern over another shooting happening, impatience with people asking about it and visualizing their experiences that day. The majority of participants reported that these changes were only temporary, with the exception of being fearful in public places. These psychological reactions will be further explored in the section on Perceptions of Safety, below.

The majority of participants reported experimenting with drugs and alcohol at this point in their life, and noted no increase or decrease in substance use, as a result of the shooting\textsuperscript{18}. While at first glance this may seem positive, this finding deserves caution. Insofar as most participants did not report significant changes in substance use, the majority stated that the event happened around the time that they were experimenting with drugs and alcohol to begin with. As such, it could be that though participants weren’t consciously turning to drugs and alcohol, their usage might have been masked by the fact that they were already binge consuming.

It should be noted that this finding challenges what researchers Miquelon et al. (2014) discovered with regard to substance use: namely, that their sample of the Dawson College community saw an increase in both alcohol and drug dependence. It is important to note, however, that Miquelon and colleagues (2014) assessed substance use using a formal diagnostic interview (from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (DSM-IV)). In contrast, the participants in this study were casually asked whether or not they saw an increase in their own usage. It is possible that had the participants in this study reported their drug and alcohol use more formally, the results might have been different.

\textsuperscript{18} The legal drinking age in Quebec is 18 years old. Most participants, during their time at Dawson College, would have been between the ages of 16 and 20.
As was briefly discussed in the aforementioned literature review, social support “is one of the most important protective factors against progression to psychopathology following trauma” (Shultz et al., 2014, p. 9). Additionally, numerous researchers have discovered that obtaining social support is critical in reducing the presence of PTSS, and that a loss of social support is related to an increase of PTSS (e.g., Shultz et al., 2014; Suomalainen et al., 2011; Grills-Taquechel, Littleton & Axsom, 2011). In line with this, almost all participants in this study reported turning to friends to help them cope, when needed. In addition, several participants also reported their parents as being central to their support system. As described by one person:

It was just a network or blanket of comfort and safety. If you want to talk about it, you can talk about it. If you didn’t want to talk about it, we’re not going to talk about it. It was super cool. We’d have vent sessions- we’d be at the bar, at the gym, and we’d have a little 30 second talk and be like ‘man, that’s [expletive]. I can’t believe that happened.’ So there was a lot of support and a lot of love, which was good. And then after some time, instead of [the shooting] being in colour and right in front of you, it was black and white in the back of your mind. (Interview 10).

Here, the participant is clearly highlighting the benefits and informalities of social support. For example, he recognized that there was a mutual understanding between him and his support group- if you wanted to talk, the option was there; if not, that was fine too. As he states, through the support and love he received from his social network, where the shooting had once held a central position in his mind, he was eventually able to put the event to the back of his mind and carry-on with life.
Importantly, almost all participants reported not seeking help from a professional. This is interesting because most participants reported negative psychological reactions following the event and psychological services had been readily available to the participants: Dawson College provided free, on-site, psychological services to students and staff following the event (Donna Varrica, personal communication, January 28, 2015). While I did not ask any follow-up questions regarding why participants did not consult a professional, other researchers in the field have. As previously mentioned, researchers in Quebec evaluated the psychological intervention at Dawson College following the event (Séguin et al., 2013), and their findings might help to inform the reluctance to seek help that was reported by this sample. To begin with, mental health services were set up in semi-open cubicles in the library at Dawson as soon as the college re-opened (Séguin et al., 2013; Donna Varrica, personal communication, January 28, 15). Here, students and staff were welcome to drop by to speak to a professional, under what the intervention team hoped would “set a tone of openness to the consultation and encouraged an attitude of nondramatization and normalization to the consultation process” (Séguin et al., 2013, p. 272). While some individuals felt comfortable with the semi-confidential nature of the mental health services, others did not (Séguin et al., 2013). Instead, “some people chose not to consult, concerned with the lack of confidentiality” (Séguin et al., 2013, p. 272).

Additionally, Séguin et al. (2013) found that the participants in their sample most often cited reasons of acceptability as explanations for not seeking professional help; specifically, these individuals learned to cope with their negative symptoms and assumed that the problem would go away by itself, eventually. Coupled with Séguin et al.’s (2013)
previous finding, it is not particularly surprising then that participants might not have sought help: between feeling uncomfortable with the therapeutic setting and the assumption that the negative symptoms would disappear on their own, Dawson College students might not have been willing to speak to a professional about their experiences.\footnote{While this may be true for the small sample included in this study, it was probably not the case for all Dawson College students: there was a great enough demand for psychological services at the college that support staff remained at Dawson for the six months following the shooting (Séguin et al., 2013).}

**Unique Contributions.** While the majority of participants reported coping well with the event, a few participants felt like they didn’t have to cope with it at all; their experiences didn’t affect them enough to give them a reason to cope with anything. Additionally, one participant felt that he coped poorly:

> See that’s the thing. After the event I thought I was fine, I really, really, really thought I was fine. And then looking back on it now, I failed that semester. Hardcore. I got like 15% averages in 3 or 4 of my classes. I changed programmes. I ruined every relationship with pretty much everyone I was close to after that. Whether that be my parents (my parents hated me for a time after that), my ex-girlfriend, her girl friends, just anyone, whoever I was close to. But ya, so how did I cope with it? Not great. And I didn’t seek help because I was convinced I was fine even though I remember my mother specifically pointing out that I wasn’t. (Interview 4).

In line with this, a few participants reported not seeking help from a professional but looking back, wished they had. Taken together, these findings suggest that it’s possible that participants didn’t quite realize that they might have needed to speak to a
professional at the time of the event. In support of this are the findings reported by Séguin et al. (2013, p. 272): “many [students and parents] recognized the need for help and consultation only months, even two years, following the event. In many cases, the disorders were not temporary, and the need for support that was clearly identifiable in the first days, even in the first months […]”.

In addition, the majority of Enrolled and High School participants reported no psychological consequences in response to the shooting. However, this finding is not particularly surprising: while PTSS can extend to a greater community, the symptoms are most likely to affect those directly involved in the trauma more severely (Thoresen et al., 2002).

In all, the experiences that each cohort reported regarding coping mechanisms underlines both the group and individual experiences that the participants endured in the aftermath of the shooting. For example, participants reported similar feelings concerning coping, substance use, social support and help-seeking behaviours following the shooting at Dawson College. In contrast, only the Present cohort reported significant psychological changes in relation to the shooting. As illustrated by prior research as well, this could be the case because those with more direct experiences to trauma are most likely to experience PTSS following the traumatic event.

Perceptions of Safety

In this section, the participants’ senses of safety were analyzed, specifically with regard to returning/entering Dawson and perceptions on and off campus after the shooting.
Because each cohort reported unique experiences here, the Present cohort served as the primary discussion (since they make up the majority of the sample). The experiences of the Enrolled and High School cohorts were analyzed in the unique contribution subsection, instead.

The majority of participants reported neutral feelings about returning to Dawson following the shooting. While many participants didn’t remember any details that stood out about that day, some reported that they were anxious going in, but soon realized it wasn’t as bad as they had anticipated. A few participants reported that they felt uncomfortable returning to school; they felt that it was ‘strange’ or ‘weird’ to be back at Dawson. Lastly, a few participants felt that their experience returning to Dawson was positive. For the most part, this was explained in relation to a ceremony that Dawson held on the day that the college opened; a ceremony that several participants referred to very positively in their memories of their return to the college. As described by one participant:

And for me, the movie moment was when I walked in […]. When we walked in, they had all the teachers, support staff, admin staff, just clapping. And that’s when I realized what we had been through. […] When [Dawson staff] were clapping, I never felt so moved in my life. It was a strong, powerful moment. That’s when it hit me. […] I think the biggest thing was that walk back into school. […] I was very impressed with Dawson that day. […] it kind of showed the resiliency of the student body and the staff that runs and institution. [The shooting] just affects so many people. […] [the ceremony] was an enjoyable moment, because you felt positive about
something so terrible that had happened. It felt really good to know that there are great things out there. (Interview 10).

Correspondingly, another participant stated: “When they opened [the college] up, it wasn’t just another day at school. It was ‘we’re waiting. We wait for everyone, and we all go in together’. And that was really nice.” (Interview 20).

In line with this, literature in the field has recognized the importance that these ‘organizational rituals’ hold in promoting group solidarity after mass tragedy. As noted by Doka (2003), memorials and rituals established to cope with tragedy are an ancient practice, present since the Neolithic period. According to Doka (2003), these events are characterized by three common elements that serve to establish unity in survivors of tragedy. Firstly, public memorials and rituals “provide a socially approved forum for the outpouring of emotions” (Doka, 2003, as cited by Hawdon & Ryan, 2011, p. 1367). In addition, these activities are event-specific: they acknowledge the tragedy and what it means for the community (Doka, 2003). Lastly, public memorials illustrate the collective meaning of the tragedy; namely, that is has been experienced by the entire community, not just individually (Doka, 2003). As explained by Hawdon and Ryan (2011, p. 1367), these events “inform affected group members that “they are not alone” and that their group, although damaged, remains”. Because such events address and normalize the negative emotions associated with tragedy (e.g., sorrow, anguish, loss) while simultaneously promoting a collective experience, “public rituals promote a sense of belonging and social solidarity” (Eyre, 2007, as cited by Hawdon & Ryan, 2011, p. 1368).
With regard to perceptions of safety on and off campus after the shooting, only a few participants reported feeling unsafe. The participants remembered instances of visualizations, an immediate distrust in others (i.e., anyone could commit such a violent act) and feeling like ‘sitting ducks’ in open spaces. However, participants in this category overwhelmingly reported feeling safe— even safer— on campus after the event. These perceptions of safety were reasoned, in almost all cases, by the idea that ‘lightning doesn’t strike twice’. As one participant stated: “Statistically, when has a school ever had two school shootings? And secondly, when has a person ever been at school shooting, twice?!” (Interview 6). Another participant reasoned: “If someone wants fame, they’re not going to be the second Dawson shooter. Everyone wants to be the Dawson shooter, not the copycat. […] It’s not something I ever worried about happening again, so I was fine. I felt almost a little bit safer.” (Interview 13). These comments highlight the participants’ irrational calculations of the probability that they would be involved in a random, mass shooting again.

Researchers in the field have acknowledged that most individuals live their lives under an “illusion of invulnerability” (i.e., Perloff, 1983; Janoff-Bulman, n.d.). For example, though most individuals recognize that disease, disaster and crime do occur in the world, they tend to assume that they will never be affected by one of those tragedies. As described by Janoff-Bulman (n.d., p. 19), “people overestimate the likelihood of their experiencing positive outcomes in life and underestimate the likelihood of experiencing negative events”. Nonetheless, researchers have also noted that these illusions become shattered once an individual experiences an instance of
victimization (i.e., Perloff, 1983; Janoff-Bulman, n.d.). As stated by Janoff-Bulman (n.d., p. 19), victims are “no longer able to say, ‘It can't happen to me’”.

However, the findings in this research do not support the shattering of an illusion; here, despite being involved in the Dawson College shooting, participants reported feeling safer following the tragedy than they had before. I propose that this may be due to the fact that none of the participants included in this study were injured in the shooting. As such, it is possible that because participants were able to reframe their experiences by comparing themselves to people who were actually shot in the event, they allowed themselves to simultaneously deny victimhood while protecting their illusions of invulnerability.

Nonetheless, the majority of participants in this section, regardless of how safe or unsafe they felt in general, reported feelings of paranoia following the shooting; a realization that this kind of violent event can happen anywhere, under many circumstances. For example, in some participants, this paranoia appeared as a hyper-awareness of their surroundings. One participant stated: “Everywhere I was going I was looking over my shoulder- is there something weird going on here?” (Interview 12). In other participants, this awareness manifested through mentally preparing for a potential emergency: “It will just randomly hit in the sense that, if this were to happen right now, what would I do? […] If I’m in a crowded place, I know my exit points. I know what is made of marble or brick and could stop a bullet.” (Interview 20). Taken together, these quotes illustrate the general hyperarousal that participants experienced following the shooting: while one participant reported overt suspicion, the other reported emergency preparedness.
As outlined by the National Institute of Mental Health (n.d.), hyperarousal symptoms are one of the three posttraumatic stress disorder criteria (along with avoidance and re-experiencing). Typically, as was the case for the participants in this study, hyperarousal symptoms exist as a constant; one does not have to experience a direct reminder of the event to experience the symptoms, as is the case for re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). While these symptoms can become problematic and eventually lead to PTSD, it is natural to experience some of these symptoms following a traumatic event (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). For example, in a study on the psychosocial needs of victims of violent crimes, researchers Boccellari et al. (2007) found that 92% of their sample (N=541) reported symptoms of hyperarousal following their victimizing experiences.

It is important to note here that the purpose of this discussion is not to suggest that the participants in this sample have, or do not have, PTSD; because no formal testing method was utilized, it is impossible to draw a conclusion on this. However, it is important to note that PTSS (specifically hyperarousal) were present in a majority of the sample- a finding that is congruent with research on the psychological reactions to victimization (e.g., Boccellari et al., 2007).

**Unique Contributions.** While the Present cohort reported mostly neutral or positive feelings towards the event, the Enrolled cohort did not. Instead, these individuals reported a general unease with the idea of re-entering Dawson. As one participant put it:

> Going back to school after it happened, it was kind of like a sombre feeling. [Dawson] didn’t have that electric vibe when you walked into the cafeteria.
It was very sombre. For the rest of that year, it was very different. [...] You know when you’re stepping on ground that you know there was a pool of blood on…it’s hard to concentrate on school. It was tough. It was different. I didn’t spend nearly as much time in school as I did beforehand. (Interview 11).

I propose that this group might have been wearier of going back because neither took part in the aforementioned ceremony to help transition students back to Dawson. As previously discussed, the ceremony that Dawson put on served to promote a sense of community, pride in resilience and solidarity in survivors of the shooting. Since neither of the participants in the Enrolled cohort participated in this activity, they might have entered Dawson feeling more unsure or hesitant than those who were relieved to be part of the sense of community that appeared in the wake of the event.

With regard to hyperarousal symptoms, the Enrolled participants did not report experiencing any extra caution. In contrast, the High School cohort, like the Present cohort, reported becoming more aware of their surroundings once they entered Dawson. As one participant explained: “Put it this way- you wouldn’t walk with music in your ears when you walked in [to Dawson]. You check your surroundings in every way you could. And you don’t really trust anybody at that point. Kind of just like, watch out.” (Interview 8). While I recognize that PTSS can extend to secondary victims, as described in the literature, I do not believe that this was the case for this sample. I was drawn to this conclusion by the fact that none of the participants in the High School cohort reported hyperarousal symptoms relative to the shooting. Instead, I believe that the High School participants were reporting feelings of caution
once they entered Dawson as a function of entering a new school; at the time, these participants would have left their high schools (which they would have been at for five years) for an urban school setting, populated by 8,000-10,000 students from all over the island of Montreal. As such, I believe that these individuals would have experienced a change in their awareness as a function of maturing and entering an unfamiliar territory.

In all, this section highlights some unique experiences between cohorts with regard to perceptions of safety. For example, while the Present cohort reported mostly neutral or positive feelings about re-entering the college, the Enrolled cohort did not. Additionally, though both the Present and High School cohorts experienced hyperarousal symptoms, I believe that only the Present cohort was experiencing these symptoms in response to the trauma they endured with regard to the shooting. While research in the field helped to shed light on some of the findings that emerged in this section, this was not always the case (i.e., with illusions of invulnerability). While I attempted to rationalize this difference, it does merit special consideration that could be explored in future research.

**Interpretation of the Event: Then and Now**

In each of the interviews, participants were asked about their feelings about being involved in the shooting, both at the time, and now, 8.5 years later. Participants were also asked about whether they had suffered any long-term effects of being involved in the shooting and how, if at all, the shooting impacted their lives. Again, the overarching themes
that emerged from participants’ interpretations of the shooting will be analyzed, across all cohorts. Like in previous sections, unique responses will be analyzed separately.

With regard to interpretations of the event at the time it occurred, participants in all cohorts remembered a wide-range of feelings towards the shooting. For the most part, these interpretations are classifiable under two umbrella themes: dissociation from the event and negative feelings. To illustrate, one participant said: “It seemed like a reality very far away from my own. You know? School shootings in Canada…I mean, there are, but it just didn’t seem like something to happen in Montreal, you know?” (Interview 7). In contrast, several participants remembered feeling negative about the shooting. While this manifested as anger towards the shooter and frustration towards the gun laws in some participants, others reported feeling sad, scared, upset, shocked and confused with regard to the event. To highlight, one participant (who would have been entering the college the year after the shooting) reported: “Your impression is anger because you wanted […] your future experience [at Dawson] to be something of value, not something of fear.” (Interview 8). Here, the participant was alluding to his frustration that the event would cloud his experience at Dawson.

Almost a decade after the shooting, again, participants in all cohorts reported diverse feelings about having been involved in the shooting. For the most part, these interpretations were similar to those listed above: feelings of dismay, anger, guilt, frustration and disturbance that these events continue to happen. For example, one participant mention how we, as Canadians, can’t make excuses for why an event like this occurred in Montreal: “When [shootings] just happen on the news in the states and stuff, you’re like ‘whatever, they have lax gun laws’. You can make up all kinds of excuses why it would never happen here. But it
happened so close to home, and our gun laws didn’t change the fact that somebody walked in with a gun and tied to kill a bunch of people.” (Interview 3). In this passage, the participant was referring to feeling frustrated that many Canadians set themselves apart from the gun violence in the US, while simultaneously ignoring how Canadian gun laws have proven to be problematic as well.

Additionally, a few participants mentioned that they do not think about the shooting all that often. In line with this, a few participants brought up their efforts to move on from the event: “[…] it’s one of those tragic incidents that happen and you just gotta put it behind you and hope that there aren’t more people like that out there.” (Interview 11).

The interpretations listed by participants in this study regarding their feelings about the shooting are congruent with what other researchers have discovered on psychological reactions to crime (e.g., McBrearty, 2011, Willis, 2008, Wirtz & Harrel, 1987). In accordance to the psychological sequelae following victimization, Symonds (1975) outlines a four-stage model of victim response to violent crimes. Here, the researcher posits that victims first experience shock or denial, followed by feelings of fear (Symonds, 1975). Eventually, victims experience apathy or anger, and then victims either resolve or repress their experiences (Symonds, 1975). While the participants in this study did express feelings of dismay and other negative emotions, I did not ask them about the chronology of their emotions. As such, Symonds’ (1975) model cannot be entirely supported nor rejected by the findings of this study. Nonetheless, the participants’ interpretations of the shooting both at the time of the event and now, almost a decade later, do conform to the features listed in Symonds’ (1975) model.
As illustrated above, researchers have long since recognized the negative responses elicited by victimization, in part due to the mass amount of literature on both PTSS and PTSD (Linley, Joseph, Cooper, Harris & Meyer, 2003). However, additional research in the field has, more recently, begun to focus on another aspect of posttraumatic reactions to adversity: posttraumatic growth (PTG). PTG, which does not occur independent of posttraumatic stress (PTS), is classified as “self-reported positive psychological changes induced by the experience and processing of a traumatic event and its aftermath” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, as cited by Lowe, Manove & Rhodes, 2013, p. 877). While symptoms of PTS include re-experiencing, avoidance and hyperarousal (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.), PTG is characterized by “relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change and appreciation for life” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, as cited by Bensimon, 2012, p. 783).

The presence of PTS and PTG was evident in this study through participants’ responses regarding the long-term effects of having been involved in the shooting and the impact that the shooting has had on their lives. While it should be noted that the majority of participants did not report any long-term effects or impact, those who did, reported two general ideas: hyperarousal (PTS) and a better understanding of life (PTG).

As was explained in the section on perceptions of safety, many participants discussed their hyperawareness and emergency preparedness following the shooting. What was interesting in this section was the participants’ discussion of their new outlook on life, despite the hyperarousal symptoms. For example, one participant stated: “It was the first time that I had been confronted with something like that, where a peer was murdered. And it made me really cherish life. It made me realize how precious life is, how fragile we are, as
humans.” (Interview 12). In line with this, another stated: “It again just makes me appreciate being…just being alive. And then just how, you know, to live every day to the best that you can because things like this can happen.” (Interview 16). In both instances, participants describe the positive outcomes following victimization.

**Unique Contributions.** While the overarching themes in this section are ones of PTS and PTG, a few participants from each cohort reported responses regarding their interpretations of the event were too varied to classify. For example, one participant mentioned being proud of the swift actions taken by the police on the day of the shooting; he believed that had they not reacted the way they did, it is likely that others would have been injured or killed in the event. Another participant reported being happy that his friends were okay, and wanting to hear everyone’s stories that day. While it might seem likely that these participants were alluding to examples of PTG, neither mentioned especially trying symptoms of PTS. As such, I believe that instead, these individuals were speaking more of their abilities to reframe the victimizing scenario, as explained by Janoff-Bulman (n.d.): by focusing on positive aspects of the event, both victims were able to diminish their victimhood in the event.

In all, this section highlights the generally similar experiences of the three cohorts. With regard to interpreting the event both then and now, participants from each cohort reported a variety of responses. Nonetheless, these responses could be categorized by two general themes for both current and past interpretations (negative feelings and dissociation from the event), and impact on life (hyperarousal and renewed appreciation for life). Though the responses in each cohort were varied between participants, the general findings support

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20 Remember that, as previously mentioned, PTG emerges in response to PTS.
those of other researchers (e.g., Symonds, 1975; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, as cited by Bensimon, 2012). In addition, even the “outlying” responses reported by participants support findings from other researchers with regard to how individuals process victimization (i.e., Janoff-Bulman, n.d.).

Discussion

The current research seeks to address a gap in knowledge regarding school shootings. In a general sense, the study was designed to explore personal narratives of experiencing the Dawson College shooting of 2006 from three separate and distinct groups of individuals- students who were physically present at the time of the shooting, students who were enrolled at Dawson but not present during the shooting, and students who would be entering the college the following year. In order to best understand the participants’ experiences in their entirety, five general topics were explored: experiencing the shooting, views on victimization, coping mechanisms, perceptions of safety and interpretations of the event, both past and present. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 participants, a variety of themes emerged that help to shed light on how individuals experience a shared event.

As it stands, the research here suggests that school shootings are experienced both on an individual and collective level. The participants in this study not only reported unique experiences on the day of the event, but distinctive perceptions of safety following the event. In contrast, each cohort reported similar experiences regarding views on victimization and interpretations of the event. Lastly, the cohorts appeared to experience a combination of both similar and unique features with regard to coping mechanisms.
For the most part, the research presented here was in line with what other researchers have discovered regarding a victimization more generally, including: memory of traumatic events (e.g., Dirnberger et al., 2012), the desire and mechanisms utilized to distance oneself from victimhood (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, n.d.; Taylor, Wood & Lichtman, 1983), psychological reactions to crime (e.g., Suomalainen et al., 2011; Suomalainen et al., 2011; Mercer et al. 2012; Lowe et al., 2013; Bensimon, 2012) and social support and help-seeking (e.g., Murtonen et al., 2012; Séguin et al., 2013; Grills-Taquerel et al., 2011; Shultz et al., 2014). In addition, some of the features of experiencing a school shooting were similar to what researchers have discovered with regard to other crimes, including psychological reactions to personal victimization in a hate crime (i.e., Willis, 2008), hyperarousal symptomology following instances of personal victimization (e.g., McBrearty, 2011; Boccellari et al., 2007; Willis, 2008; Barnes & Ephross, 1994) and emotional responses to terrorist attacks (i.e., Thoresen et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, various findings here contradicted the findings of other researchers, including the desire to defend victimhood (i.e., McBrearty, 2011), substance use post-shooting (i.e., Miquelon et al., 2014), and preserving an illusion of invulnerability (i.e., Perloff, 1983; Janoff-Bulman, n.d.). For the most part however, I was able to pull findings from other researchers to help explain these discrepancies (i.e., desire to defend victimhood, illusions of invulnerability) or by citing general methodological differences between studies (i.e., substance use). As such, this implies that the findings presented here aren’t entirely incongruent with previous research in the field.
Limitations

While this study does help to enrich the pool of knowledge of school shootings, certain limitations must be addressed. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, while the sampling method of this study allowed for contact with a population that might otherwise have been hard to find, it also allowed for interviews with participants who shared social networks. This, in turn, may have led to various biases. For example, it’s possible that participants may have discussed their experiences regarding the shooting prior to meeting me for the interview. Consequently, this may have led to a misinformation bias, whereby a participant might report information that they had obtained from another participant.

Secondly, the convenience sampling used in this study may have promoted a social desirability bias in participants, whereby participants were eager to refer individuals who they believed had ‘good stories’ with regard to their experiences. In turn, this led to an overrepresentation of the Present cohort. While this may not have been problematic had the sample size been larger, in this case, it lead to a very modest sample of Enrolled and High School participants; in fact, at times, the cohorts were combined as it didn’t make sense to analyze their findings separately. For this reason, the findings reported for both cohorts may not be generalizable and should be approached cautiously.

It is also possible that those who did experience trauma and negative impact following the event may not have a wide social network and may not be connected to people from Dawson from many years ago. In addition, as was evidenced by one case, it is possible that participants who were very affected by the shooting would not want to talk about it, or that their friends would not refer them to me. As such, it is possible that this sample is biased towards including only psychologically stable respondents.
Lastly, participants were asked to remember details about an event that occurred almost a decade before the time of the interviews. While this has obvious memory implications, it is also important to keep in mind that participants would be interpreting past feelings and experiences at a time when they more mature. While precautions were established to avoid any complications this might entail (i.e., participants were told that it was okay to not remember an answer), it is possible that the participants might have felt differently at the time of the event, than what they had reported in their interviews. For example, it is possible that participants remembered events as they were later framed by the media or by Dawson College.

**Implications and Directions for Future Research**

Taken together, the findings described here suggest important policy implications. While it may be natural for educational institutions to reach out to its students as a whole, following a crisis like a school shooting, this may not always be in the best interest of the pupils. Instead, it may be valuable for crisis aftercare workers to individually tailor the care they provide in an effort to best attend to the distinct consequences and processing that the students may be experiencing, perhaps influenced by their physical, geographical and psychological proximity to the event. As noted by other researchers as well (i.e., Séguin et al., 2013), it is imperative that crisis aftercare workers also be sensitive to the long-term needs of survivors of rampage school shootings; as evidenced by this research, certain consequences of experiencing a school shooting continue to linger today, almost a decade later.

It is important for workers in the field to appreciate the traumatic nature of the event and the impacts this might have one the community as a whole, not just for those directly
involved. As was demonstrated in this research and others (e.g., Thoresen et al., 2011; Brener et al., 2002; Fast, 2003 Flannery et al., 2013), even individuals who were not at Dawson College were faced with the challenges associated with coping with a traumatic event. As such, crisis aftercare work should extend to the general community surrounding the event, in an effort to minimize the aversive consequences experienced by secondary victims.

The exploratory nature of this study allows for the development of basic knowledge on the subject, which I believe provides an excellent base for future research in the field; not only does the present study address a gap in general knowledge regarding both school shootings and victimology, it also taps into a population that is not frequently studied. Additionally, the qualitative nature of this research allows for an in-depth analysis of what it is like to experience a school shooting—something that has not yet been explored through research in the field.

Future research should continue to study the experiences of individuals involved in school shootings, while taking into consideration the limitations of this study. For example, it would be valuable for researchers to look at the features of experiencing a school shooting in a larger, more representative sample. In addition, it would be interesting for researchers to study data obtained from both standardized psychological assessments and personal narratives in an effort to collect a greater breadth of information on how school shootings are experienced. In turn, researchers would begin to better understand the intricacies of enduring such trauma in an effort to best prepare crisis teams, academic professionals and healthcare workers in the event that another incident like this happen in the future.
References


consequences after four months. *European Psychiatry, 26*, 490-497.
doi:10.1016/j.eurpsy.2010.07.007


### Table 1

Demographics of Study Sample by Cohort

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*Note: Cohort definitions in Table 1 are consistent with those defined in text*
### Table 2

*Emergence of Codes by Section*

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