

SCHOOL SHOOTERS: VICTIMS OF UNHEEDED PSYCHOLOGICAL TURMOIL

Langman, P (2009) **Why kids kill: Inside the minds of school shooters**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-0-230-60802-3 hbk. Pages xii + 231.

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Peter Langman is the director of KidsPeace, an organization that treats at-risk youth. In **Why kids kill** he brings over 20 years of experience to understanding school shootings and the psychological profile behind such devastating homicidal attacks. He bases his ideas on the case histories of ten school shooters, including the two students who killed 13 people and wounded 23 in the well-known Columbine High School shootings.

Langman concedes that the answers to why these school shootings occur are far from straight forward and do not hinge on some kind of rigid formulation. He is clear to caution in his preamble that influences like parenting, the media, rejection, depression, retaliation, exposure to violence etc, may be important, but cannot be isolated as primary “causes” for such attacks. His argument here relates to the basic fact that most individuals exposed to violence, media, and so forth, do not end up killing. In general, this approach finds Langman in the company of many prominent authors in the field (e.g. Meloy, 1992; Hare, 1999; Gilligan, 2000; Twemlow, 2000; Newman, 2004). The book appears to be written for a wide audience and is therefore intentionally thin on theoretical engagement and development.

The first half of the book is spent exploring the case histories of school shooters in order to comment on their psychological profiles. Langman sets himself the task of trying to understand “what it was like inside the minds of the school shooters. How did they see the world? How did they understand their homicidal urges” (pxii). Because most school shooters typically kill themselves after the act, Langman has to rely on court transcripts, journal entries and other secondary sources published by other authors. Despite this, his case reconstructions offer textured and detailed accounts of teen shooters’ perspectives on motivations for violence, their sense of self and perceptions of humanity, their attitudes towards school, family, sexuality, friendship and emotional expression.

Taking the reader behind the scenes, Langman works to challenge the idea that school shooters are quiet, shy, withdrawn kids who simply react to bullying or humiliation. His

central thesis is that these students are victims to disturbing, unbearable, often encapsulated, psychological problems that are minimized or misunderstood:

“These are not ordinary kids who were bullied into retaliation. These are not ordinary kids who played too many video games. These are not ordinary kids who want to be famous. These are simply not ordinary kids. These are kids with serious psychological problems. This fact has often been missed or minimized in reports on school shooters” (p15).

With this in mind, Langman develops a typology for school shooters, dividing them into three categories: Psychopathic, Psychotic, and Traumatized. The divisions appear to be somewhat useful in terms of understanding different motivations: whereas psychopathic offenders appear motivated primarily by sadistic ideologies, psychotic shooters are motivated by paranoid delusions, and traumatized shooters are motivated by reactive hostility and shame.

There are some interesting case observations along the way. I found Langman’s exposition of Eric (one of the Columbine shooters, classified as a psychopathic shooter), particularly interesting. We learn that he was extremely self-conscious about his own “bodily defects” and found refuge in identifying strongly with Hitler’s “biological superiority” ideology as a means of escaping his own insecurity. Langman notes the importance of these “supporting” ideologies in psychopathic shooters. Eric himself specifies that it is his ideology that motivates his killing: “The power of ideology to drive behavior should not be underestimated” (p32). There is a need, Langman contends, for absolute control through the use of “omnipotent” ideologies in order to transcend human limitations. The selected journal entries describe well a desperate need for recognition and respect that psychopathic shooters crave and perversely achieve through extreme destructiveness. Although categorized as psychopathic, and unlike general views on the treatment of this population, Langman argues that these kinds of shooters do respond to treatment. He bases this on the observation that they are able to engage with feelings of inferiority (unlike typical psychopaths) and therefore can overcome and relinquish violent defensive solutions.

The limitations of the typology used in the book are fully acknowledged: “Most people who are psychopathic are not mass murderers. Most psychotic people do not commit murder. Most traumatized people never kill anyone, the labels themselves do not explain why these youths became killers” (p131). To move away from these generalizations he does offer some specific observations within these categories. He finds that the high levels of sadism and exposure to gun culture separates psychopathic shooters from general psychopathy. Excessive substance abuse and parental rejection appear to be the primary distinguishing features of psychotic shooters. On the other hand, traumatized individuals who are at risk are more likely to have had violent fathers and are vulnerable to peer pressure when deciding to act on violent ideas.

Perhaps more interesting than the typology itself is Langman’s intention to debunk shaky assumptions often linked to impulsive or explosive homicidal acts. For example, the perception that these youngsters were mistreated, abused, humiliated is not supported in most of the case histories. Langman argues that this is only accurate for “traumatized shooters”. The other teens came from relatively intact family backgrounds. Further, the idea that these shooters were “alienated students who had no connection

to, or involvement with, their schools” (p8) is not supported, as Langman provides evidence for a great deal of involvement with school and friends. The idea that attacks of this nature are always motivated by vengeance towards specific individuals is also questioned as shooters did not appear to target only those who had “crossed” or offended them.

The latter part of the book represents an attempt to “look beyond the typology for additional factors that make the shooters different ...” (p131). In search of more general trends, Langman explores the gradual loss of empathy that occurs in the build-up to the shootings as common to all shooters. He believes too that these offenders are not simply angry at people or events, they are possessed by what he calls “existential rage”, an all-consuming rage at life and the world. The teen shooters were also found to display “extreme reactivity” to ordinary life conflicts. Often this was found to be rooted in a “desperate hopelessness”, and a deep sense of shame about a “failure of manhood” (p147) which were associated with insecurities about physical appearance and the failure to form intimate relationships. This appears to lead to profound envy directed at peers who seem unaffected by personal turmoil and difficulty. It seems to me, following Langman’s descriptions, that even psychopathic shooters, less distressed about their “failures”, appear to want to make the “unaffected” world notice them through grandiose violent actions. Overall, anger and envy directed at the existing social order (as represented by the school environment) is used to explain why these attacks take place at school.

Langman seems to suggest that at the time of the shootings, the above factors reach breaking point. In other words, he uses a “crisis” model for understanding the final motivation. He also believes that such shootings can be prevented if the “crisis” is arrested and the individual supported through it. In his words they are “at-risk teens [but this] does not mean at risk for life” (p175). Despite the final crisis and violent attack, it is clear that these students planned their attacks for long periods beforehand. The need to maintain a “vengeful state of mind” (Lansky, 2007: 571) seems important here as it appears to hold a particular function: to maintain some form of personal integrity in the face of extreme narcissistic vulnerability.

The whole issue of access to fire arms and the influence of broader socio-cultural issues on violence are not really explored in any consolidated manner. There is little critical comment, for instance, on what the “gun culture” reflects of the “American” psyche and the possible consequences of this. It was certainly surprising to read about how easily guns were available to these teens. They were able to borrow them from neighbours, buy them, and amass huge arsenals. Drew, at age 11 (with 13-year-old accomplice), killed 4 school girls and a teacher in 1998. We learn that he was given a gun for his sixth birthday! Surely this reflects something deeply disturbing about parental and societal values. It is also difficult to understand how the actions and perturbances of these students went relatively unchecked by family and significant others. Although Langman contends that most of the shooters came from relatively “normal” intact families, we are not given a compass to understand what “normal” might mean in these contexts.

The final chapter attempts to address parents, teachers, health care workers, about what can be done to prevent school shootings. It is structured in the form of ten “lessons” such as “eliminate easy access to guns” and “assume threats are serious

until proven otherwise". I found this to be the least helpful part of the book and the lessons appear to state the obvious and add little to the previous chapters. All in all, **Why kids kills** offers a useful and engaging reconstruction of the lives of school shooters and will be of interest to those wanting to gain some insight into the subjective states of teen offenders. Although the book does not deal with treatment issues per se, the typology and descriptions of some of the hidden internal struggles that these teens endure, are potentially useful aids for focused clinical attention and intervention. The book offers much less by way of academic and theoretical exploration of salient issues related to the causes of this kind of violence or locating "school shootings" in broader political, social and cultural contexts.

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