
Luke Woodham

The Search for Justification

PETER LANGMAN, PH.D.

Langman Psychological Associates, LLC

The biggest challenge in researching school shooters is in finding reliable information. All too often people accept a simple explanation rather than delving into the complexity of a situation. The fact that a shooter makes a statement justifying what he is about to do, is doing, or has done, does not mean that his statement is true. Even if the statement *is* true, it may not be the whole truth.

Prior to his school shooting on 1 October 1997, Luke Woodham wrote a “manifesto” that has been widely quoted as the justification for his attack: “I killed because people like me are mistreated every day. I did this to show society ‘push us and we will push back!’ ... throughout my life I was ridiculed. Always beaten, always hated. Can you, society, truly blame me for what I do?”¹

Luke’s statement has been used as compelling evidence that bullying causes school shootings. The case is not that simple, however, and Luke made other statements about why he committed murder, some of which are mutually exclusive of each other. This article examines Luke’s justifications and compares them to what is known about Luke and his attack.²

Bullying vs. Unrequited Love and Mistreatment by Mother

As is often the case with school shooters, it is difficult to determine the accuracy of claims of mistreatment. There are certainly reports that Luke was made fun of by his peers, but there are also reports that he wasn’t treated as badly as he claimed, or as badly as other peers were treated. Even if he had been the victim of significant harassment, this does not mean that the harassment caused his attack.

First, millions of kids have been picked on — many of them more than Luke — without resorting to murder. Second, and more pertinent to Luke’s case, are the facts of what he actually did. The only two people he targeted for death were his mother and Christina

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LUKE WOODHAM

Perpetrator Dossier

Attack date	1 October 1997
Attack site	Pearl High School
Location	Pearl, Mississippi, United States
Age at incident	16
Killed	3
Wounded	7
Outcome	Prison
Shooter population	Secondary school
Psychological type	Psychotic
Attack type	Mixed

Menefee. Christina was his former girlfriend who broke up with him and refused to get back together despite Luke's attempts at reconciliation. The date of Luke's rampage was the one-year anniversary of the breakup. In addition, after he was apprehended and was riding in a police car, he told police that his feelings for Christina constituted the primary reason for his attack. During his taped confession, he said his rampage was committed because of jealousy over the breakup with Christina.³

Luke did not attack bullies at school. He did not attack the alleged people who had "always beaten, always hated" him — it is not even clear that such people existed. Luke killed the two most important female figures in his life. He might have felt mistreated by them, but they were not the bullies whom Luke seemed to blame for the attack.

Regarding his relationship with his mother, Luke's statements fluctuated wildly.

In one breath, Luke says that his mother deserved [to be killed]. "She never loved me. Always told me I wouldn't amount to anything, that I was fat and lazy," he said in his confession to police. Then, as if remembering 50-year-old Mary Woodham calling him her "darlin" and "baby," Luke breaks down. "I loved my mother. I know she forgives me."⁴

Luke talked about his mother as having been so absent as to be neglectful and so involved in his life as to be smothering. Friends of his testified that Mrs. Woodham was "just a normal mom."⁵ The psychologist who evaluated Luke after the attack concluded that Luke had "psychotic processing" and thus misinterpreted reality.⁶

Despite Luke's conflicting reports about his mother's behavior toward him, he confessed to the police: "I didn't want to kill my mother, I do love my mother. I just wanted revenge on Christina and my mother, like she wouldn't just say 'go ahead, take the gun, take the car.'"⁷ Thus, during his confession, the only reason he gave for killing his mother is that she would not have let him take a gun to school and drive her car. He said nothing about killing her as revenge for mistreatment.

Luke presented further contradictions regarding his mother. During his trial he at one point claimed to have no recollection of killing his mother. On the day of the attack,

however, shortly after he had been apprehended, an officer noticed a cut on Luke's hand and asked how that had happened. Luke said, "Killing my mom."⁸ In addition, Luke wrote a "voluntary statement" in which he reported, "I woke up this morning, got a butcher knife, and a pillow. I got into my mother's room at about 5:00 a.m. I put the pillow over her head and stabbed her."⁹ During his trial, however, he told the prosecuting attorney, "Sir, I don't know if I murdered her."¹⁰

Luke not only made contradictory statements about his mother's treatment of him, his feelings toward his mother, and why he killed her; he also made contradictory statements about even knowing whether he killed her or not.

Insanity as Justification

In the same passage of Luke's manifesto that was quoted above, he stated, "I am not insane! I am angry."¹¹ After the attack, however, he claimed that demons influenced him to commit murder: "I remember I woke up that morning and I'd seen demons that I always saw ... They said I was nothing and I would never be anything if I didn't get to that school and kill those people."¹² Thus, he claimed to be sane before the attack but after the attack claimed that he was psychotic. As discussed elsewhere, it isn't clear if Luke had auditory and visual hallucinations or if he invented these symptoms after the attack in order to plead insanity, though there is evidence that Luke experienced some level of psychosis prior to the attack.¹³

During his trial, Luke talked about his belief in magic and demons: "One second I was some kind of heart-broken idiot and the next second I had power over many things ... You can send demons to go and do things. I've seen them."¹⁴

If he went on a rampage because demons told him to, then what do we make of his claim that the attack was caused by mistreatment by his peers? He could, of course, have been both psychotic and mistreated, but his statement "I am not insane! I am angry" clearly places the blame on his rage, with no reference to demons. Luke's contrary statements suggest he was making multiple excuses for himself and/or that he was extremely confused about himself and reality.

Following Orders

Was Luke psychotic or sane? Was the attack retaliation for bullying or revenge for rejection by a girl? Or did the real motivation for the attack lie elsewhere? I think that perhaps the most important factor in understanding Luke's rampage was the influence of his older friend Grant Boyette. Grant was the leader of the Kroth, a group of peers whom Luke affiliated with. The group had a variety of interests, including the occult, black magic, and Satanism.

The full quotation cited above about the demons mentioned Grant:

I remember I woke up that morning and I'd seen demons that I always saw when Grant told me to do something. They said I was nothing and I would never be anything if I didn't get to that school and kill those people.

Thus, Grant told Luke what to do. Grant told Luke to kill his mother, and he did. Grant also told Luke to kill Christina Menefee, and he did. As Luke stated,

Everything I did was influenced by Grant ... I tried so hard to get his acceptance ... cause he was the only one who accepted me ... He just put a lot of bad things into my head and it built up after time, the pressure of everything on top of that I just couldn't take it anymore.¹⁵

What were the "bad things" Grant put into Luke's head? Luke testified in court about Grant's directives: "He told me I had to kill my mom. He told me I had to get the gun and the car and get my revenge on Christy and cause a reign of terror."¹⁶ Grant reportedly hammered these ideas into Luke, repeating them for hours.

Without Grant's influence, it seems likely that Luke would never have committed murder. If this is true, then the other justifications Luke offered were at best secondary. Yes, he was hurt by Christina, and perhaps by his mother, as well as the kids who picked on him, but without Grant commanding him to kill he may never have gone on a rampage. And the demons? They may have been an invention for his defense, or perhaps he really was psychotic. As discussed elsewhere, it seems that there is sufficient evidence to classify Luke as a psychotic shooter,¹⁷ but this does not mean that all his statements about seeing and hearing demons were true.

Conclusion

This brief review of Luke's claims and justifications shows how difficult it is to understand the causes of a school shooting. It also shows that statements by school shooters cannot be assumed to be accurate.¹⁸ Anyone who takes Luke's statement that he murdered because he was mistreated at face value is missing all the nuances and complexities of the case.

Luke appears to have been a lost and lonely boy who suffered overwhelming distress as an adolescent. He experienced ups and downs with his mother, was rejected by the girl he believed he loved, and struggled to find a peer group. He attached himself to an older, more dominant figure. When this person told Luke to commit murder, Luke did as he was told. The pair of Boyette and Woodham is reminiscent of the pair of Harris and Klebold. In each case, an older, dominating young man influenced a floundering peer to commit murder. The primary difference was that Harris led Klebold in the attack, whereas Boyette gave the commands to Woodham without committing violence himself.

Notes

- 1 "Luke Woodham's Writings," *School Shooters .info*.
- 2 For more details on Luke, see "Expanding the Sample: Five School Shooters," *School Shooters .info*.
- 3 CNN (11 June 1998), "Teen killer sobs as confession played in court," *CNN*.
- 4 Popyk, Lisa (9 November 1998), "I knew it wouldn't be right," *Cincinnati Post*.
- 5 Popyk, "I knew it wouldn't be right."
- 6 Popyk, "I knew it wouldn't be right."

- 7 Popyk, “I knew it wouldn’t be right.”
- 8 Woodham v. State of Mississippi.
- 9 Woodham v. State of Mississippi.
- 10 Woodham v. State of Mississippi.
- 11 “Luke Woodham’s Writings.”
- 12 CNN (4 June 1998), “Teen blames ‘demons’ in Pearl, Mississippi, killings,” *CNN*.
- 13 Langman, “Expanding the Sample.”
- 14 CNN (11 June 1998), “Woodham testifies he was involved in satanism.” *CNN*.
- 15 Associated Press (11 November 1997), “Teen apologizes for school killings,” Associated Press.
- 16 The New York Times (23 July 1998), “Conspiracy charges are dropped in Mississippi school shootings,” *The New York Times*.
- 17 Langman, “Expanding the Sample.”
- 18 See also “Eric Harris: The Search for Justification,” at *School Shooters .info*, for a similar analysis of Eric’s statements about the causes of his attack. SS.I