

Criminal Profiling: The FBI Uses

Criminal Investigative Analysis

TO SOLVE CRIMES

By Mary Ellen O'Toole

Violent crime scenes tell a story — a story written by the offender, the victim and the unique circumstances of their interactions. Behavioral “clues” left at a crime scene can provide insights not only into the crime itself, but also into the type of person responsible for the crime, his or her motivation, lifestyle, fantasies, victim selection process, and pre- and post-offense behavior.¹

Criminal profiling is a process now known in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as criminal investigative analysis. Profilers, or criminal investigative analysts, are highly trained and experienced law enforcement officers who study every behavioral aspect and detail of an unsolved violent crime scene in which a certain amount of psychopathology has been left at the scene. Psychopathology is an offender's behavioral and psychological indicators that are left at a violent crime scene as a result of his physical, sexual and, in some cases verbal, interaction with his victim(s). Violent crimes can be profiled only if residual offender psychopathology can be identified. Such crimes include homicides, sexual assaults, kidnappings, extortions, bombings, product tampering and threats. A profile, or criminal investigative analysis, is an investigative tool, and its value is measured in terms of how much assistance it provides to the investigator.

Police reports, crime scene photographs, witness statements, forensic laboratory reports and, if the case is a homicide, autopsy photographs are provided by the investigating law enforcement agency and are carefully examined for the smallest behavioral detail or nuance. Through this intense review process, a “behavioral” blueprint of the crime and the offender can be constructed. This blueprint allows a profiler to recreate what happened at the scene.

A profile can provide a wide range of information concerning the offender and his or her lifestyle including race and gender, emotional age (rather than his chronological age), marital status, level of formal education or training, and occupation and work history. It also can include details about the offender's ability to relate and communicate with others, the likelihood of prior criminal activity, the presence of mental deterioration, feelings of remorse and/or guilt concerning the crime or the victim, the likelihood of committing a similar crime again and sexual dysfunctioning,² which is an impairment either in the desire for sexual gratification or in the ability to achieve it.

When beginning to construct a profile, one must complete a comprehensive review and a close examination of case materials. These case materials include police reports, witness and victim statements, the victimology or extensive background information on the victim, results of the neighborhood investigation, medical examiner's report if applicable, forensic reports and a comprehensive series of photographs of the crime scene, including autopsy photos, if the case is a homicide. This in-depth review allows the profiler to begin to reconstruct how the crime most likely occurred, and the interaction between the offender and the victim.⁴ The profiler then examines the crime scene to identify all of the behaviors which, taken as an aggregate, can be interpreted and extrapolated into investigative suggestions and profile characteristics.



Profiler Characteristics

What qualities or traits constitute a good profiler? Contrary to the current television and movie depictions in which a profiler can "just see it happening," a successful profiler is not psychic. An experienced and well-trained profiler is intuitive, has a great deal of common sense, and is able to think and evaluate information in a concise and logical manner. A successful profiler also is able to suppress their personal feelings about the crime by viewing the scene and the offender-victim interaction from an analytical point of view. Most important, a successful profiler is able to view the crime from the offender's perspective, rather than his or her own.⁵

In addition, the successful profiler possesses an in-depth understanding of human behavior, human sexuality, crime scene investigation and forensics, and has extensive training and experience in studying violent crimes and providing interpretations of his or her insights and observations to investigators.

Profiling is not a new concept. Variations of profiling have been used for many years in an effort to understand particularly heinous individuals, such as Adolph Hitler, or to attempt to resolve a baffling crime or series of crimes. During the 1950s, several bombings occurred in New York City, and the unknown offender ultimately became known as "The Mad Bomber." Despite intense investigative efforts, law enforcement officials were unable to identify this individual. Dr. James A. Brussel, a New York psychiatrist was brought into the case to "profile" the personality of this unknown offender. Brussel studied the facts surrounding this series of bombings, and from this review developed an assessment of the offender's personality. His assessment was remarkably accurate.

In addition to other characteristics, Brussel opined that the offender would be between 40 and 50 years old, of Eastern European heritage, living in Connecticut with a maiden aunt or sister, and have a paranoid personality. However, the most remarkable characteristic that Brussel offered investigators was that when they identified their offender, not only would he be dressed in a double-breasted suit, but all of the buttons on his suit coat would be properly buttoned. When police eventually arrested George Metesky, not only did he fit the profile provided by Brussel, but he was wearing a double-breasted suit — with every button properly buttoned.⁶

It was not until the mid 1970s that profiling started to become a more refined process. Research conducted by the FBI into serial murderers and rapists provided a much greater understanding of these offenders and the often complex, curious and unique behavior they display at their crime scenes.

Behavioral Characteristics

Several behavioral characteristics which can be gleaned from dynamics identified at the scene include: 1) amount of planning that went into the crime; 2) degree of control used by the offender; 3) escalation of emotion at

the scene; 4) risk level of both the offender and victim; and 5) appearance of the crime scene (disorganized vs. organized).

Level of Planning. One of the behavioral indicators that can indicate the offender planned out some or many aspects of the crime is the lack of physical evidence found at the scene. The lack of physical evidence suggests that the offender considered what precautions to take so he or she would not leave a forensic trail, such as fingerprints, semen, hairs, etc. A well-planned crime can suggest a sophisticated and/or experienced offender.⁸

Level of Control. The amount of control the offender exercises over the victim can often be seen in markings or impressions found on the victim's body left by bindings and/or ligatures used to restrain the victim. If the bindings or ligatures appear to be excessive and/or unnecessary, experience with prior similar bondage behavior suggests the offender could be a sexual sadist and looking for other indicators or "red flags" of this paraphilic behavior becomes extremely important.⁹

Level of Emotion. Injuries and physical trauma suffered by the victim can suggest the amount of emotion the offender brought to the crime scene, or the anger he or she developed once at the scene. For example, if the offender is extremely angry at the victim at the time of the assault, the resulting injuries to the victim will frequently appear to be excessive, extensive, even lethal. "Overkill," which is "excessive trauma or injury beyond that necessary to cause death," frequently is the result of a very angry offender.¹⁰

Escalation of an argument or fight also can be detected at a crime scene. Battery to the victim's face, and trauma to other parts of the body, including defensive injuries on the victim, can indicate there was an escalation of emotion during the crime. Escalation suggests the offender and victim began their interaction with a verbal altercation, followed by a physical assault, in some instances resulting in death. Knowing how to interpret escalation from the scene becomes very important for the investigator because the reason for the argument becomes a critical part of understanding the motive for the crime.¹¹

Offender and Victim Risk Levels. Both the victim and the offender's risk levels are important components in a crime scene and important for the profiler to understand when assessing or profiling the crime. Victimology is the study of the victim(s) of a violent crime or crime series. The premise in developing a victimology is that the more that is known about the victim, the greater insight investigators will have about the offender.¹² The profiler must ask, how likely is it, considering the victim's lifestyle, family, friends, habits, behaviors and environment, that this person would have become the victim of a violent crime. To answer this question, the risk level of the victim must be assessed to determine whether the victim is a high-, medium- or low-risk victim. A low-risk victim, for example, is the homicide victim with an ordinary background, who works during the day inside his or her secured home located in a low crime area, with a protective dog in the backyard. The likelihood of this victim randomly encountering a murderer in this environment is very low. It is much more likely this victim knew his or her offender.¹³

A high-risk victim can be a prostitute, drug dealer, hitchhiker or anyone whose lifestyle exposes him or her to exponential dangers. Crimes involving high-risk victims are extremely difficult to profile because these people could be victimized by any number of people.¹⁴

Understanding the risk level of the offender also is important. How much risk did the offender take in committing this crime, in terms of where the crime occurred, the time of day it occurred and the type of victim the offender selected? If a review of these variables suggest there is a high level of risk for identification, apprehension, etc., to the offender, the question must be asked, "Why did this offender take this kind of risk?" especially if other aspects of the crime suggest that he or she planned the crime well. Two possible explanations are that 1) the offender targeted that particular victim, or 2) this offender needed an element of high risk/high thrill in the crime to be emotionally or psychologically satisfied. Either conclusion reached by the profiler can be extremely helpful to investigators. If the first determination is made, i.e., this offender wanted and targeted a particular victim, an even more intense investigation of the victim and his or her background would be extremely important, since some type of relationship likely existed between them before the crime occurred. On the other hand, if the offender needs a sense of risk or thrill in his or her crimes, that "need" could be present in other unrelated crimes in his or her background, which might otherwise be overlooked by investigators.¹⁵

Organized and Disorganized Homicide Crime Scenes.

Homicide scenes are behaviorally categorized according to whether they are an organized or disorganized scene. No homicide scene is exclusively one way or the other. It is based on a preponderance of the behavioral characteristics observed at the scene. An organized homicide scene suggests "... a semblance of order existed prior to, during and after the offense."¹⁶ An organized scene suggests a carefully planned crime that is aimed at deterring detection. A disorganized homicide scene gives the impression that "the crime has been committed suddenly and with no set plan of action for deterring detection"¹⁷

The degree of organization or disorganization can provide tremendous insights into the level of sophistication of the offender, including the approach used in accessing the victim, the style of attack, the relationship of the victim to the offender, and the type of interaction which likely took place at the scene between the offender and the victim.¹⁸

Interpretation Process

The interpretation of behavior observed at a crime scene is extremely difficult. It is not a science or psychic guesses, but rather a process. Profiling is based on research and years of experience in reviewing similar cases with similar psychopathology and offender characteristics. A successful profiler must be able to read all of the behavior and behavioral clusters present at the scene in order to understand the dynamics that took place there. This is the only way a profiler can make behavioral interpretations, which will help the investigator to limit the suspect pool and structure investigative strategies.

The experience of the FBI's research of violent offenders strongly suggests that "similar crimes committed for similar reasons generally are perpetrated by similar offenders."¹⁹ In other words, "If you want to understand the artist, you have to look at the painting," and "To know the offender, you have to look at the crime."²⁰

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Douglas, J., A. Burgess, R. Ressler, 1988.
- ² Burgess, A., R. Hazelwood, 1987.
- ³ Coleman, J.C., et al., 1980.
- ⁴ Ressler, R., A. Burgess, J. Douglas, 1992.
- ⁵ Burgess, A., R. Hazelwood, 1987.
- ⁶ Pinizzotto, A., 1984.
- ⁷ Ressler, R., A. Burgess, J. Douglas, 1992.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Hazelwood, R., A. Burgess, 1987.
- ¹⁰ Douglas, J., A. Burgess, A. Burgess, R. Ressler, 1992.
- ¹¹ Ressler, R., A. Burgess, J. Douglas, 1988.
- ¹² O'Toole, M., 1995.
- ¹³ Ressler, R., A. Burgess, J. Douglas, 1988.
- ^{14, 15, 16, 17, 18} Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Hazelwood, R., A. Burgess, 1987.
- ²⁰ Douglas J., M. Olshaker, 1995.

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