

John Crace, *Inside the criminal mind; forensic psychology*, NEW STATESMAN & SOCIETY, Feb. 17, 1995, at 29

Last year's botched Rachel Nickell inquiry was the worst possible advertisement for forensic psychology. On the advice of Paul Britton, the police psychologist, **Colin Stagg** was relentlessly pursued in an entrapment exercise for no better reason than he happened to fit a **profile** Britton had compiled. Stagg was charged with Nickell's murder, but once the details of the investigation and the lack of any corroborative evidence were made known in court, the case was summarily dismissed. For the general public, whose knowledge of offender **profiling** was confined to *The Silence of the Lambs* and a few episodes of *Gracker*, the Rachel Nickell fiasco may have signalled **profiling's** death knell, but as far as David Canter, professor of investigative psychology at Liverpool University and the UK's leading expert on **profiling**, is concerned, it may have been able to sing in disguise. "No one wants an innocent person to get hurt, but if the case has highlighted the difference between those psychologists whom I call serial bullshitters', who talk with seemingly absolute confidence about things that we know we cannot be confident about, and those who are prepared to use a scientific methodology, then it may have served a purpose. "

Offender profiling is the science of making logical deductions about possible suspects for any given crime based on shared patterns of behaviour of those who commit certain crimes. Traditionally, the only valuable clues at a crime scene were hard evidence like blood, semen and fingerprints. Profiling proposes that there are also less recognised clues--the choice of victim, the location, the nature of the assault, what is and isn't left behind, what is and isn't said to the victim, whether or not the victim is killed--which also define the offender. The problem is to interpret these clues correctly.

Canter's early work had little to do with forensic psychology, but his research into the impact of building design on its inhabitants together with his analyses both of people's behaviour during fires and the psycholinguistics of hoax calls to the fire brigade proved a fertile source of ideas and methodology for his later work. Canter came to the notice of the police in 1985 and he was invited to Scotland Yard to examine the possibility of using behavioural psychology to help investigations. A year later came the first real success, the "Railway Rapist" case.

Over a period of four years, a series of sexual assaults and rapes, culminating in the murder of three women, had been committed in the London area. The police had linked all these crimes to the same man but, despite extensive inquiries, had failed to make an arrest. Canter went through each case in detail, looking at the location, time of day, and the nature of the victim, and drew up a profile of the likely suspect, including where he was likely to be living. As a result of this profile, the police were able to focus their investigation on John Duffy, a man who had previously ranked no

higher than 1,505th on the list of possible suspects and, within a comparatively short period of time, had gathered enough evidence to convict.

The Duffy case brought profiling into the mainstream of police and media consciousness but, in some ways, success was a mixed blessing. Although Canter had to apply proven behavioural psychology to the inquiry, there was so little known data that, inevitably, he found himself working on little more than conjecture from time to time, and his inexperience told in the presentation of his findings to the police. Instead of highlighting those areas he considered worthy of further exploration, he delivered a "pen portrait" of the suspect. This turned out to be uncannily accurate and, not unnaturally, it was this that drew the bulk of media attention when the details of the case were made public.

Canter was widely hailed in the press as a latter-day Sherlock Holmes. No one was interested in the science, or lack of it, inherent in the Duffy profile; all that mattered was the spectacular result, and what the lay public inferred from it was that a bright psychologist armed with a little knowledge about criminal behaviour could make stunningly accurate predictions about likely offenders for any given crime. Unfortunately for the reputation of forensic psychology, a number of psychologists and policemen came to exactly the same conclusion.

"Various professionals stepped forward to offer their opinions on inquiries, based on nothing more than personal experience," says Canter. "They had talked to various criminals over the years, but their ideas were determined by what they happened to remember, the cases they happened to have worked on, and the importance they had placed on characteristics they had noticed, and often it was hard to see how they had reached their conclusions. The police would probably have got just as much help in identifying likely offenders by talking to a top crime reporter who could remember umpteen similar cases."

However, while a few psychologists were grabbing their moment of glory, Canter and his research team, backed initially by the Home office, and latterly by the US Army and the Economic and Social Research Council, set about establishing a more scientific basis for offender profiling. They examined hundreds of solved crimes in the minutest detail to collect a database of information which was then used as a testing ground for various hypotheses and explanations that recommended themselves from the initial correlations.

The circle theory, which held that, if all the crime scenes of an offender were placed within a circle, the offender would be found to be living within that circle, possibly close to the centre, emanated from the Duffy inquiry and was subsequently validated by a study of burglaries. Other ideas have been disproved. For years it was widely believed that burglars who moved on to rape would choose to commit their crimes in indoor settings that were consistent with previous offences, but this has not been borne out by the evidence.

Canter's aim is to break down the traditional ways that crime detection is approached in this country and to encourage those involved to take a broader view of their work. "Criminologists have always tended to focus on the differences between offenders and law-abiding citizens, rather than those between different types of criminal, and the

law has always divided criminal activity into functions--murder, rape, burglary etc. My work centres more on the style of offending. A man who kills his wife may be treated very differently by the police and courts to a man who kills someone in a pub brawl, but there may well be great similarity in the chain of events leading up to both acts. Likewise burglars and rapists who use involved confidence tricks to get their victims into vulnerable situations may have more in common with one another, than with those who commit the same offence using different tactics. Often, it is the style of the offence that gives the best clue to the previous crimes, education, and lifestyle of the offender because it shows how he relates to the rest of the world."

The importance of this approach was illustrated when Canter was called in to help solve a series of ten rapes in the Midlands in 1988. Although there was no forensic evidence, there were sufficient similarities for the police to believe that all had been committed by the same man. All the victims were women students who had been attacked while sleeping alone and, on all but two occasions, the attacker had asked his victim for help with penetration. Canter, too, initially assumed that all attacks had been committed by the same man. However, when he studied the evidence he began to suspect that more than one person might have been involved. While consistently asking for help with penetration might seem damning evidence of a single assailant, there were no statistics to prove it. If it was common during rape, then it would not be a pointer to anything.

Before he had reached a definite conclusion, DNA evidence confirmed that two rapists were involved. That still left the matter of identification. Canter and his team analysed every attack in detail and were able to ascribe each to a particular assailant. One, dubbed "The Wimp" clearly sought to have some sort of relationship with his victims, while the other, whom they nicknamed "Macho Man", sought to control them. Working on expected lifestyle and behaviour patterns of both types, Canter drew up a profile of each and predicted where they might live. In June 1989, two men were arrested and later convicted for their part in the rapes. Both had conformed to the profile and lived in the areas predicted.

Using this and other evidence, the team of 18 researchers has identified different styles of rapists, arsonists, and murderers, and there are also studies into robbery and fraud. Canter has been involved in many high-profile cases since the Duffy inquiry, but is increasingly reluctant to hand out juicy sound bites for the media, lest he be identified with some of his self-styled colleagues.

"I like to think of myself as part of a Silent Revolution'. Many of my students have come from the police, and have used and developed my ideas on their return to the force. They understand that the purpose of profiling is not to produce a flashy psychological Identikit that looks good on Crimewatch and in court, but to focus and prioritise an investigation. Hopefully, as time goes on, and these become integrated into police procedure, the whole idea of an independent outside profiler will become redundant."