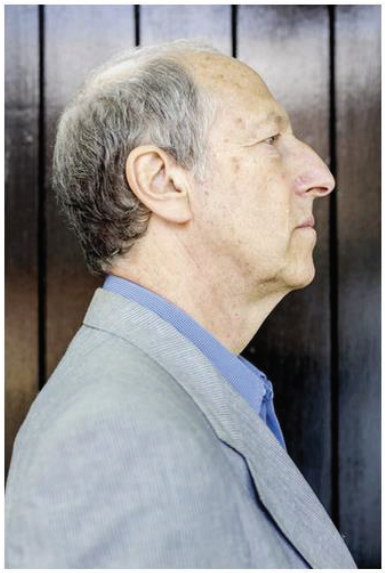
brand eins
Wirtschaftsmagazin

15. Jahrgang, Heftig 8 – August 2013 (pp. 50-55)

Der Fährtenleser

The 'Track-Reader'



Every criminal tells us about themselves by the way in which he commits his crime.

This provides /investigators prosecutors with a first trace.

the psychologist David Canter explains how to read these traces…

Translated From Original Language by Dirk Fassbender and Laura Hammond

In a letter to the chief of the London criminal investigation department, Thomas Bond described a culprit as follows; 'The murderer must be a powerful man, bold and daring. He must, in my opinion, suffer from attacks of lust for murder, and must be obsessed with erotic fantasies. The way in which he violates his victims leads to the conclusion that he might have a morbid (abnormal) sexual desire. The murderer is probably a harmless looking man, probably middle-aged, orderly and smartly-dressed. I think he is wearing a cape or a coat. He wouldn't have escaped attention on the streets if the blood could have been seen on his hands or clothes. Assuming the murderer is a man, as I just described him, then he's a lonely man, and eccentric in his habits. He is also a man without regular occupation but with a little income or allowance (pension)'.

The murderer Bond was chasing is Jack the Ripper. That psychological analysis was written in November 1888. It counts as one of the first offender profiles that is available. At that time Jack the Ripper tormented London's East End and murdered prostitutes in a beastly manner. Today the case is still unsolved, the offender unknown…

Q: Mr Canter; Does this description make the right conclusions?

A: I'd say that it is coherent and precise.

Q: But Bond hardly knew anything about Jack the Ripper… in that case isn't it a bit daring to argue that he didn't have regular work/got a pension (for example)?

A: We know that he was evil, and went through the streets at night-time to attack women. This reveals a lot about him. Firstly, he had a problem with women. Then he is on the street after midnight, so he's got some freedom or liberties and is not missed at that time. And he doesn't have to recover from his day-time job, because he possibly doesn't work. Nevertheless he is dressed smartly – where does he get the money for the clothes from? These are a few conclusions that you can draw from the offences.

Q: So he didn't only leave traces such as fingerprints or stab wounds? You can also interpret his behaviour?

A: It is about drawing conclusions from the decisions the criminal made. We don't know the man, but he reveals lots about himself: The murders were committed in the London borough of Whitechapel in the East End. If you mark the crime locations on a map you see that there is a centre which the man might have operated from. This centre is only a few steps away from Middlesex Street, where the merchant James Maybrick apparently rented an apartment. Maybrick is one of the suspects - a diary was found that allegedly belonged to him, and this address is noted in there. If the diary is a fake the given address is chosen very well. If the diary is genuine it means that James Maybrick's behaviour, if he really is the offender, is similar to lots of serial killers: they are often active in a certain area or radius, often near to home or a base of operation.

David Canter (69) knows something about serial killers. He was a Professor of Psychology at the University of Liverpool and coined the term 'Investigative Psychology'. It tries to give a scientific basis to the work of the police (to investigative work). It all began in the year 1985. At that time Canter was invited to have lunch with two detectives from Scotland Yard. The two of them wanted to know if studies of general behaviour generally might help them to solve crimes. The possibility, with the help of details of how someone committed a crime, of drawing conclusions about a criminal's personality fascinated Canter.

A few months later, in January 1986, he was sitting on a train from London to Guildford reading the Evening Standard. In there he found an article about a series of 24 rapes. The first victims survived. The later victims were killed. In the article there were precise details (descriptions) of the dates and times of the crimes. Canter got his biro out of his pocket and

tried to work on a pattern. To him something was obvious (he noticed something): all offences were committed near railway stations.

He created a timeline and noted all of the crimes in it. He sent this to the investigators. Following that he was invited again. He was in a room full of investigators and police officers, the walls full of notices, pictures and maps. And again, Canter tried to find a pattern. His hypotheses: the offender was in his late 20s, had fair hair, was right-handed. He had a steady job, and had to work regularly at the weekends. Due to his work he didn't have much work with other people. He knew the railway network inside out. He had already been arrested before, but not because of sexual offences.

Q: So you developed a complete profile of the offender?

A: I don't like the term 'profile'. My approach is essentially much broader than that which is commonly presented in crime series as 'profiling': the image or portrayal of a genius investigator who is highly intelligent and is able to put themselves in the offender's mindset and then says what kind of chap it is. This idea comes from the Sherlock Holmes novels of Conan Doyle which I loved to read as a child. Fictional stories need such a figure. But an FBI agent I once met said about that: 'Do you want a profile or help to solve the case?' I try to use scientific methods. We try to simplify the decision-making processes of the police by working systematically. We assume that all men have routines and habits that govern their behaviour. This is no different with violent crimes.

Q: Isn't that very ordinary investigation work?

A: I'm afraid not. I'll give you an example: If there is a series of rapes where the offender breaks into the victims flats, the first thing the police do is to go through their databanks of sexual offenders. That's how it happened in a case in the Midlands. In that case we did very intensive research, and were able to show that many rapists don't have police records for sexual offences. In this instance it makes more sense to look for a criminal history of burglary. Where does someone acquire the skills to break into houses unnoticed?

Q: What does the behaviour of a criminal tell you?

A: There are actions that characterise a person. How does somebody confront or interact with their victim? Which victims do they choose? What times of day are they active? How do they gain compliance from their victims?

Q: But we don't always behave in the same way… it strongly depends on the situation…

A: I'd say that the context is very important. The context needs to be included, and then the investigation gets more complicated. We are sitting here face to face in hotel and holding an interview. In this context I speak most of the time. But when I'm home for dinner I often don't say a word. Then only my children are talking. That is a different context. Added to that: we change and develop – we learn. An example; an offender assaults a women and she screams. As a result of this experience he will cover her next victims mouth or find another way to silence her. He learns to become a more effective criminal. Or a burglar; if he is

experienced he will open the drawers of a dresser from bottom to top, not from top to bottom. Then he doesn't have to shut them and more and is quicker and more efficient in his search. Or in prison; a new criminal does not know anyone when they come in – when they leave they have a whole notebook of accomplices and knows new tricks…

Q: Then you know that somebody is experienced?

A: Hang on – we're not that far yet. All these are aspects you can use to exclude suspects with. After a while a picture of a person develops. For instance; if somebody has a weapon it is important how he holds it. If he holds it close to the body then he probably doesn't have experience in using guns, otherwise he'd know that he has to reach out his arm. If he does know then there is a question – where did he learn that? And anyway, how did he get the weapon? That's not easy in Great Britain… This way you can narrow down possible offenders. An important factor you can read from crime is intelligence. Especially in cases of fraud, where this plays a key role. Fraud is only possible if somebody understands how a system works and discovers where it's vulnerable. Nobody who was seen as unintelligent and unskilled in school by their teachers could do that.

Q: But then you're still in the dark…

A: We already know quite a lot about him. And now there is a decisive element: what places are familiar to him? Which areas are familiar to him? Crimes are often committed where the offender is taking part in their everyday activities. So, where he lives, works, or regularly spends his time… Earlier we were talking about Jack the Ripper. Criminals want to minimise the risks of apprehension. That's why the operate in places they know well. Would you drive a long way to commit a crime? You would enter uncertain terrain: then you don't know the narrow side streets. You'd be more noticeable as a stranger and more vulnerable. Once we were after a young man who raped elderly women in a social housing complex in Birmingham. He waited for them at the door, dragged them to the lift, and then pulled them onto the roof via the fire ladder. In doing this he revealed lots about himself; the special architecture of English social housing was familiar to him. He knew there was a lift, that you're unlikely to be disturbed on the roof, and that no-one will hear the screams of the victims. Though he never wore a mask, he was never recognised. We draw the conclusion from that that he must live in a neighbouring settlement. From all the different crime scenes we could find the settlement where no crimes took place (nothing ever happened). And indeed, that's where he lived.

The man the papers soon would call the Railway Rapist – Canter's first case, lived close to his crime scenes. Out of 2000 suspects the police were pursuing, initially he was in place 1505 of the possible offenders. But he was the only one who lived in the area of Kilburn, where the first crimes were committed. Later he travelled further. All his crimes he committed in places he knew from visits at friends or relatives. Over the years (in the run of the time) he changed. Initially just a burglar, he turned into a brutal killer. Canter believed that he must have been a criminal before the series of rapes commenced, because the offender

knew how to fool the police well. He was experienced. He was arrested after being put under surveillance for a period of time.

Q: Before committing a crime, I must be aware that my behaviour will betray me, so I can adjust it?

A: You need to be a professor of psychology not to leave traces by your behaviour and your customs. You can wear gloves, a mask etc. But you stay the same person. It is very difficult to deliberately act haphazardly (randomly). But some are able to: a man blackmailing supermarkets leaving tiny glass shards in baby food knew what he was doing. He used the shards of many different bottles so that the police couldn't trace them. That showed a very good understanding of the investigators work – indeed, the man was a policeman himself. He worked in a unit responsible for blackmailing. He was caught too, when handing over the money.

Q: So there are still successes in the classic 'manhunt'?

A: Sure. Of course. Just think about the Yorkshire Ripper: the man was caught when his car was parked in a car park famous for prostitution activities. In a routine check a policeman discovered that the number plate of his Rover actually belonged to a Skoda. When the driver was interrogated at the police station he denied everything. Then the officer remembered that the suspect, shortly before being driven to the police station, asked for an allowance to pee in the bushes. The officer drove back and found right at that place a knife and a hammer, the weapons used in the murders. Sometimes the only thing you need is an attentive and alert policeman.

Q: Today are you trawling through the internet instead of bushes? These days you find lots and lots of information about people on the net…

A: That has made investigative work much easier. The police use this information systematically. During the riots in England in the year 2011 the officers were screening facebook profiles, and through this identified some of the offenders. There are cases like that. Many people use this technique but don't understand it. Even my students wanted to open a facebook group for our research work – we work on criminal cases! The students are not allowed to talk to anybody about these confidential things – but they want to discuss it on facebook! I'm on facebook, because I want to know what's happening there. But I don't reveal anything personal there. I never say when I'm going on holiday. I don't offer anything.

Q: You insisted on us meeting in a Hotel, not at your home. Are you overly cautious?

A: Not necessarily. But I'm aware. Not because I fear somebody could take revenge on me. But I've seen so many crimes and that's why I'm a bit more cautious. I was very angry when I discovered my house on Google Streetview – anyone who finds out my address (and that's not very difficult these days) can find my house and can have a close look at it.

Q: You're dealing with violent crimes for about 30 years – are you obsessed with it?

A: To be honest I'm not interested in crimes. Many crimes are banal. The psychological side of it all is boring too. I worked on several hundred cases, and the same things are repeated time and time again. But what I'm fascinated in are the patterns of human behaviour. That indeed is something I can't let go…

Q: You have coined the term 'Investigative Psychology' – in the meantime there is a chapter on that in every introductory forensic psychology book. There is a journal…

A: …Yes. The term is now really popular. If I had the chance to copyright it in those days, today I might get licence fees and might be very rich. But a short time ago something curious happened; the Dutch police called me and asked for help with a case. They asked me how much money I would take. Just imagine! The British police have never asked me that in all the years I've worked with them…