

Higher education profile

Crime

Two brains

John Crace talks to David Canter, the man police forces around the world turn to for advice

John Crace

@JohnJCrace

Tue 2 Nov 2004 01.49 GMT

-
-
-

Shares

0

Most professors would be happy to be considered a pioneer in just one discipline. Sitting in David Canter's office at Liverpool University, surrounded by the academic by-products of crime, it is easy to forget that he has actually managed it in two.

Since the early 1990s, Canter's name has been synonymous with investigative psychology.

It was Canter who came up with the idea that you could pull together a lot of different strands from the social sciences, psychology and geography to feed into the criminal investigative process. It was Canter who coined the term "investigative psychology" and established the postgraduate course in the subject. And it was Canter who had both the clout and the funding to insist that Liverpool took not only him, but also his colleagues Ian Donald and Margaret Wilson, when they poached him from the University of Surrey.

Advertisement

In the past 10 years, the subject has picked up a momentum of its own. Canter's ideas have been followed and developed in universities and police forces around the world; investigative psychology even has its own publication, the Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling; and only last week he got an email telling him there is now an Italian Association of Investigative Psychology. Yet in the world of offender profiling, Canter is still the man with the highest profile.

But it was in the evolution of environmental psychology - the study of the impact of buildings on people and how people make sense of place - that

Canter first made his name, back in the 1970s. The central thesis of his 1977 book, *The Psychology of Place*, has become a standard text and has even been cited in the Scottish law courts.

Even now, Canter keeps his hand in. He has studied patterns of behaviour in fires and emergencies, most notably the King's Cross tube disaster - "It was fascinating to see how some people's behaviour remained consistent with the patterns dictated by their understanding of place to the point where they were consumed by smoke and died" - and has just recently been awarded an Engineering and Physical Science Research grant to study the evacuation of the World Trade Centre.

Research for research's sake has never been of much interest to Canter. The main reason he morphed into investigative psychology was that he felt environmental psychology had talked itself into an academic cul-de-sac. "We had some influence in the way architects thought about what they were doing," he says, "but the reality is that we had little overall impact. "Our failure was not to get to grips with what architects do. Instead, we thought about what was of interest to us and studied that. It's no wonder that psychology has now been dropped from almost all architecture courses.

"When I started investigative psychology, I wanted it to engage directly with the police investigative and decision-making process. The work should be about understanding how the police work and providing them with useful tools to filter data in the course of an investigation; it's not about being an outside expert offering a Sherlock Holmes-like opinion that the police decide how best to use."

Predictably, though, it was the Holmes stereotype that proved irresistible to the media and the public imagination, and gave rise to TV programmes such as *Cracker* and any number of experts queuing up to offer their opinions on unsolved criminal cases. One such voice was Paul Britton, a forensic psychologist with no academic track record, whose advice led to the police entrapment exercise that culminated in the collapse of the Colin Stagg trial for the murder of Rachel Nickell.

Canter accepts a small part of the blame for the fixation with the rent-a-shrink approach. He got into investigative psychology through his work in the late 1980s on a series of sexual assaults, rapes and murders committed by a man the police identified as the Railway Rapist. Canter's scientific analysis of the crimes and their locations led him to hypothesise where the culprit might live, and as a result John Duffy was caught and convicted.

The problem was that at the same time as he provided the scientific data, Canter also produced a plausible psychological narrative for the

progression and escalation of the Railway Rapist's crimes. This explanation proved to be uncannily accurate, and it was that which stuck in everyone's memory, rather than the more important data on the relation of geography and location to offending.

Offender profiling lost much of its media appeal after the Stagg fiasco, but Canter's reputation remained intact. He had always kept apart from those he described as "serial bullshitters" and even his 1994 best-selling book, *Criminal Shadows*, which won the Gold Dagger award for crime non-fiction, was uncompromisingly scholarly: lurid details of crimes were kept to a bare minimum and, unlike many of his US counterparts, he virtually wrote himself out of the story, refusing to position himself as the hero.

Canter appreciates the anonymity, though he recognises that the media's love affair with profiling prior to Stagg gave him tremendous bargaining power in his move to Liverpool. "I knew that all universities get excited by something new and gradually lose interest over time," he says. "I expected Liverpool to chip away at any deal it made. So I made sure I negotiated a deal that would leave me with enough even after it had been eroded."

Not that he's complaining. Well, not too much. He is irritated that the university refused to countenance the expansion of the department even after he had submitted a business plan that showed he could produce £250,000 pure profit each year after three years.

The department receives over 200 applications a year, but can take only 16 postgraduate students, even though it acts as a magnet for research funding. While many departments are struggling, Canter has four PhD students on grants from the Economic and Social Research Council, and outside funding from such disparate groups as the police, insurance companies and others. The returns are just as good for the students. "Of the members of the police we have taken on, all have become superintendent within two years," he says, "and anyone who leaves with a PhD can take their pick of an academic post."

This is not said boastfully, but as a simple matter of fact. Now aged 60, he's too long in the tooth to bother to engage in academic hyperbole and there is still far too much work to do to allow many outside distractions. After some early advances in the study of offending patterns, his research has become ever more complicated and many of the conventional wisdoms have been turned on their head.

"The idea that you can say something about the personality of an offender by the nature of the crime has proved to be unsubstantiated," he says. "And I've come to realise that the real power of investigative psychology is in the

study of volume crimes, such as robbery, car theft and burglary, rather than the more bizarre crimes that make the papers.

"In fiction, it is quite easy to link crimes because someone comes in and says they're linked, but in reality it is far harder to make those jumps. So much of the work is about establishing consistency in offending behaviour."

Canter's aim is to provide the police with tools, including software, to enable them better to focus their investigations. This is well illustrated by the failure of the Jill Dando inquiry.

The police knew, almost from day one, that the killer had escaped on foot. Had Canter been consulted, he could have told them that over 80% of killers who escape on foot live within 525 yards of the crime. It took the police over a year to question and arrest Barry George, a man with a record of stalking celebrities. He lived within the 525-yard radius.

"The point is not that it was Barry George and that I turned out to be right," he says. "The point is that, with a focused investigation, the police could have got to him a great deal earlier than they did and eliminated him if necessary." It's a generous disclaimer, but as with much of Canter's work, the results speak for themselves.

The CV

Name: David Canter

Age : 60

Job : professor of psychology and director of the centre for investigative psychology, Liverpool University

Before that: professor of psychology, University of Surrey; managing editor, Journal of Environmental Psychology

Publications : Psychology for Architects (1974); Psychology of Place (1977); Criminal Shadows, (1994); Interviewing and Deception (1999); Mapping Murder (2003)

Likes: composing music

Dislikes: jobsworths

Married : with three children