

Science Radio: Eureka

BBC Radio 4

Presenter: Barbara Myers

Speaker: Professor David Canter

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MYERS:

David Canter is frequently called in to help police with their enquiries. As Britain's leading expert in psychological profiling, he delves deep into the criminal mind, probing the psyche of the violent offender on the evidence found at the scene of the crime. But though his insights have helped catch a number of rapists and murderers, his real mission is to develop a science of investigative psychology. Professor Canter do the police need a scientific discipline to help them, catch villains?

CANTER:

A lot of police officers are really hungry for a sort of input we can give because the fascinating thing is that the police never get a systematic training in the understanding of criminal behaviour, they get a training in the law and increasingly they get a training in the sort of computer systems and forensic procedures that they need to have, so that they're always very aware that they have a sort of experience of criminals that comes from their day to day contact but they have no way of systematically looking at that and knowing whether the particular criminal they have is typical of those sorts of criminals or is actually something very unusual that they need to understand in another light.

MYERS:

So it's the art of detection that you'd like to make into a robust science?

CANTER:

Absolutely. Since Sherlock Holmes said that detection should be a science the police have been struggling to turn their intuitions and insights into something much more organised and much more systematic but it's only in the last few years that they've had that fundamental basis to doing that which is the understanding of the criminal mind, if you like, and the patterns of behaviour that criminals typically perform when they're committing their crimes.

MYERS:

We'll talk more about that in just a moment. But you didn't begin life as a criminologist, you didn't have any particular angle on the study of crime, certainly as an undergraduate even as a postgraduate. You were interested in environmental psychology in the 60s when the environment wasn't quite such an issue, so what were you studying and why at that point?

CANTER:

In fact my early interest, my first interest and in the sense my pet first love was actually in The

psychology of art in aesthetics and the way in which this curious phenomena of the way in which a physical object can have an emotional impact. I can understand how people can influence each other but I don't think psychologists have still answered the question of how it is marks on a piece of paper can have such a power and such an influence. That's what I really wanted to study. There was no finding to support that then, as there still isn't today. And I was nudged off to look at the design of buildings being told that here was an artistic form in which I could explore my psychological interests. And once I became involved in studying architecture in a school of architecture, I began to realise that there were many more day to day practical problems about buildings and about the environment in general that psychologists could contribute to and that's how I drifted off into the studies that eventually became called environmental psychology.

MYERS:

One of your first studies was in the open office and how that enabled people to do their jobs better or more productively. What did you find about open office planning?

CANTER:

Well that was an exploration of the ways in which the open office could help or hinder performance and activities within the office and what I really discovered was that people selected the sort of environment they wanted to work in. So that we found very different sorts of people accepting jobs in open plan offices to the sorts of people who accepted jobs where they were assigned their own individual office. And it made me realise that people are much more active agents in shaping their lives and that they get hold of their surroundings and impose themselves on their surroundings in a way that fits in with the way they want to do deal with each other and the things they want to get out of life. And really the data taught me to give much more respect to the people I was studying than the tradition that came from the psychological laboratory, where you flash lights at people and you get them to press buttons and you see how they behave and you treat them as sort of automaton rather than as an individual who is really taking hold of their life and trying to make sense of it.

MYERS:

This business of how we behave and what sense we make of places and spaces led you onto very interesting studies to do with how we behave in emergencies in public places in, for example, fires. How do we behave? What did you conclude about that?

CANTER:

The bridge there is quite, from the early work, is quite interesting because what we discovered was that a lot of the design of buildings that we were trying to suggest was relevant for people to be able to use them more effectively was being inhibited and stymied by the fire regulations. When we looked into the fire regulations we found that there were all sorts of assumptions there about the way people would behave in an emergency that had no basis in any scientific research at all, it was just a few odds and ends of case studies and views that fire engineers had offered. So we started to look at what really went on in fires.

MYERS:

The assumption being that presumably people just get out when there's a fire...

CANTER:

Well the assumption is that the minute anybody has a whiff of smoke or sees a flame they run out screaming in panic. Which of course is not what happens at all. People try and cope with emergencies in the most remarkably sensible way, they may be very very anxious and they may do things, because its a very confused situation, very ambiguous situation, they may do things which afterwards seemed to them to be very emotional and very irrational but actually at the time, in terms of what they understood of what was going on, is a reasonably sensible thing to do. And really what you need to do is to shape buildings and the whole management process to take account of the fact that people will try to make sense of whats going on and do the most effective thing they can in the light of the knowledge that they have.

MYERS:

How did this kind of expertise lead you in to football grounds as public space, which can be both exciting and dangerous, clearly dangerous, why bring together the idea of the fire at Bradford City Football Ground and the sort of violence that you see, or we did see, at the Heysel Stadium for example?

CANTER:

Well studying behaviour in fires clearly took us into the whole exploration of emergencies and as part of that we began to look at other big emergencies and I was asked to give advice on government enquiries looking at these problems. And what we found that really reached its head with the Taylor Enquiry after the Hillsborough Disaster was that football grounds were not being thought of as recreational facilities, where people would come with their families to enjoy an afternoon out, they were being thought of as arenas for battling teams of players. And so what we realised is the whole way of thinking about what it meant to go to a football match had to be radically changed, you had to start thinking of these as recreational facilities. I mean we had the amazing situation in Britain that a recreational industry had killed ten times as many people over this century as had been killed in the steel industry which is potentially an enormously dangerous environment. So these were all the issues that we brought to the surface through interviewing supporters and talking to management and soon and out of that came up with the view that football stadium really had to become totally different sorts of places and the effect has been that football, which was losing attendance, is now gaining in attendance.

MYERS:

Now its this kind of work that earned you the chair at Surrey University. And it was there when you were working on environmental psychology that the police first came knocking. What did they want in That first instance of you a psychologist, professor of psychology?

CANTER:

What had happened was that some senior police officers in Scotland Yard had become aware that the American police forces seemed to be using psychological ideas to help solve very serious cases,

particularly cases to where you have a series of killings and going on, apparently being committed by the same individual. And I think quite appropriately they were very suspicious, these British police officers, that there was any real science behind what the FBI were doing, so they just wanted to know whether or not it was possible that psychological ideas could be relevant to police investigations.

MYERS:

And having raised the question was there an obvious and immediate yes, yes, there is an answer we can help. Or was it a question that raised the problem for you for the first time?

CANTER: As you mentioned I came to crime very late in life. I looked at it as a problem in decision making support really, looking at the police as people who have to collect information, have to sort out the different possibilities and have to make some sort of judgements, some sort of inferences about what might be possible. So I thought the sort of techniques that we'd been developing would be very relevant to that but that because I knew nothing about the way the police went about their job and nothing above the sort of systematisation that might be available I just simply said to them, "give me a case that you're not looking at any more, so that there's no pressures, so that we can just examine the sort of material you have, we can look at the underlying pattern and see if there's anything is thrown by that about the criminal's behaviour that we think might be useful to us'. So they gave me a series of cases that they'd told me hadn't been solved but that the offender had stopped offending and therefore they were no longer interested in it. I later discovered that they were suspicious that these series of rapes had been committed by a police officer, so that was the first lesson I learnt at dealing with the police, that you always have to be very cautious about what they say to you, that they said they were no longer interested in it but clearly they were wondering whether I would come up with the view that it might have been a police officer who had done it. But the great advantage of that was that we were able to explore the material to see whether it was strong enough, clear enough as data to do analysis on, whether the patterns that came out made any sense to us as psychologists. And I gave them back a report with that sort of perspective and really heard nothing more after it but they seemed to have been interested that it was possible to work with that material and that's how we left it.

MYERS:

So that didn't lead to a conviction, it wasn't really designed to I take it?

CANTER:

That's right yes.

MYERS:

But it led onto what did lead to a conviction, this was the case of John Duffy, the railway rapist. Now he's known as the railway rapist now but he wasn't then and he's known now to have committed his crimes along the railway because of the way you were able to help police look at their evidence, analyse it, reinterpret it. So what was your input to that case? How did it lead to really a very good conviction?

CANTER:

That was a very complex investigation and at one stage they had something like, well over 20 or 30 offences that possibly were committed by the same individual, a number of rapes, a number of murders. There were a number of police forces involved, three separate police forces were all looking at these in a linked enquiry. When the police did a simple computer search of people with previous criminal histories and people who'd been named as part of the enquiries they came up with something like 2,000 possible individuals to look at. So the problem the police have in an investigation like that is how do they systematise it, how do they reduce it to a few key individuals? Now the way they tend to do it is by having a number of teams looking at very suspicious looking suspects, so that they ended up with perhaps half a dozen different suspects, that different groups of police officers were saying, "this is our man, this is the guy that we're really looking for". And what I did was to, working with police officers, was to take a whole range of information and to systematise it in terms of the styles of behaviour that were revealed in those different cases and to draw out in those behaviours that had similar style the descriptions that were assigned to the offender and also to look at the process of change and development in that style overtime to see that the offender had become much more determined, much more committed and in fact some quite fascinating modifications in his behaviour, like the fact that he started offending at the weekend and later offences were during the week, which implies much more of a commitment to the offence rather than the more, if you like, casual thing that he might be doing when he's not doing other things, And as part of the whole process of looking at the sort of person that was revealed through his actions and tying that into where the crimes were committed we were able to give an indication of the priorities that should be assigned in relation to the known suspects, in relation to where they might be living, what their background might be, the way other people may have thought about them, the developments in their life over the years that the crimes had been going on. So this gave a set of priorities really to the senior police officers, who were then able to choose amongst the various suspects and because they have limited resources, decided to put their main surveillance activity on to the individual that came closest to what I've been talking about and that turned out to be John Duffy.

MYERS:

So at that stage little did you know that in a way you were coming up with the first, in this country, serious offender profile and it paid off. A surprise to you as much as to anyone else? I mean it was early days, almost a pilot study in a way in terms of the scientific approach to the subject and yet you got your man?

CANTER:

I still remember the sensation at the back of my neck, the sort of prickling feeling when the senior police officer phoned me up, once they'd arrested Duffy and said, "I don't know whether it was all flannel Prof. Canter but what you said to us was very useful indeed", those were his very words. And it was at that point I began to realise that here was the basis of a whole new science. I do remember saying to colleagues at the university when we were doing the research that if this works it's going to be a breakthrough into a whole new area of the applications of scientific psychology. And in that way it's more important not to think of it as the first profile because I wasn't an experienced investigator, I hadn't worked a lot with criminals, so the opinions I offered were not based upon my experiences of

talking to crimes and criminals. And many who give advice to the police do have experience of interviewing offenders and soon and many senior police officers with a lot of experience can give advice to other investigators. The whole point is I did it from first principles, I did it from scientific psychological ideas and that meant that when it was successful I had a basis to go back to, to look at well what assumptions did we make there? What data did we have to test that idea out? And so that it had the seeds in it of the development of a whole scientific activity rather than it being just an indication that I was a bright guy, who had some interesting ideas.

MYERS:

So it wasn't just intuition, the sort of thing that is used and is very valuable, used by police officers who know a lot about crime, you were really talking about a science. But what now, 10 years on, can you say about investigative psychology and what it can definitely tell about criminal activity, what are the basic tenets, if you like now of investigative psychology that were not understood then? Can you elaborate them now?

CANTER:

Well this is a bit like that exercise that is given to the rabbis in the Talmud where they have to summarise the whole of the bible whilst standing on one leg. To summarise it all now is very difficult because since that time we've had at least a hundred studies, there are now something like a dozen police forces around the world that employ people who studied with me. So there's a huge range of activity in investigative psychology. To try and summarise it, one of the major points that emerges is that if the police get their systems of information correctly organised the intelligence that they collect and the crime analyse that they do, if they do that effectively with a real understanding of criminal behaviour then they can actually reduce the incidence of serious crimes. So that's as, if you like, an organisational, almost a management product from this, that a lot of the people who studied with me now go and work in police forces just looking at the day to day patterns of criminal activity.

MYERS:

Isn't one of the simplest things though that I've understood to have emerged from this procedure is that you can say criminals don't necessarily change by going out and raping or mugging or killing someone, it's part of the story of their lives that there's a continuity of behaviour and purpose and motivation, whether they're at home with their families or at their job or out on the streets attacking someone?

CANTER:

One of the fascinating discoveries of 20th century psychology is how consistent we all are and this process of getting into habits of dealing with the world, dealing with each other in more or less the same way is really what makes scientific psychology possible. What we've been able to do is to show that that principle which applies to the non criminal population also applies to the criminal population. It's very interesting if you interview bank robbers, some bank robbers will take over the interview, you just ask them to tell you about their lives and they will just, you sit back, and they will talk endlessly. Other bank robbers you have to draw it out of them, they don't have much to say about themselves, they don't see their life as forming any pattern. Now the first group, the sort of dominating group, if you

asked them how they commit their crimes or indeed you get records of how they commit their crimes, you will often find they are the ones who go into the bank, they've thought it all out beforehand, they have, they've made sure they've got weapons with them, they've made sure there's enough of them to do it, they will dominate the situation and take over. The other individual the more reticent, the less capable, socially capable individual, he's the sort of individual who might go into a bank, push people out of the way, thump people, shout at them, stay around longer than is safe for him to do and actually, generally speaking, deal with the crime as a much more ineffective social process. So these sorts of consistencies we are finding right across the board, in many different types of crime.

MYERS:

A criminal who might start with opportunist thieving, is the same criminal who ends up as a serial murderer?

CANTER:

Well indeed many serial murderers will continue to carry out opportunistic thieving during the period of time that they're carrying out their murders. I mean a high proportion of people who rape strangers, for instances, 80 per cent or so have a criminal history for non sex related crimes. So the idea that there are very distinct types of criminal is something that mainly has been fed by the fictional media.

MYERS:

Fiction clearly has had a field day with this whole subject. People will know of television's interest in this kind of psychology, forensic psychology, and people like Cracker for example, have become huge folk heroes. Are you the original Cracker?

CANTER:

Well these inventions. are always inventions from a mixture of sources that owe more to the script writers having watched other television films and read a whole series of detective stories in their day. I think Cracker owes far more to Sherlock Holmes, as the sort of insightful, outsider, who has difficulty relating to others and who gets involved in the investigation because of the ineffectiveness of the police and all they've done is they've loosely hung onto it some popular, usually rather inappropriate, psychological type of jargon, I mean when you look at Cracker in operation There's absolutely no way of knowing that he's a psychologist. I mean there's nothing that he does that enables you to say, "oh that's what a psychologist does" except for the sort of vocabulary he uses from time to time and the fact that he goes in and does these intensive totally illegal bullying sort of interviews. And he comes up from time to time with an idea about the offender that is actually, if you look at it, of more value to move the plot on than it is in terms of any real insight that he could possibly have had from the details he has of the crime.

MYERS:

Dealing with some of the grizzly and gruesome details of the offences, the violent offences That are presented to you for examination, brings you in very close contact with a world that's very different, I'm sure, from the life of the university professor. Does it enhance your life in any way to see the seamy side

of life? Or does it diminish you and everyone else around who has to look at those sides of life?

CANTER:

I think it makes me very aware of the advantages and benefits that I've been given and the delights of my family circumstances, It makes me very aware of the very different sorts of lifestyles that people live and how we just can't take for granted the sort of social ways of dealing with each other that is part of our daily life, I always make a big point with my students that they must talk about their anxieties and concerns and that if any of them do have nightmares which they do from time to time because of the material that we're looking at, that they should recognise that as a very healthy response and that it is something that if they become too bland, too inured, too just totally dismissive of what they're looking at then they can't do their job properly. We have to find professional ways of distancing ourselves from what's going on and of course the whole business of systematising it, assigning offences to categories, turning it into numbers so it's handled in the computer and that these patterns that come out that we look from the computer patterns of numbers and soon, give us a distance from the material

MYERS:

At the end of the day though how do you escape from it all? How do you put it aside? What do you enjoy doing? Leisure and pleasure?

CANTER:

You have to escape from it all and I go back to my early interests in the arts, I try to play music, I've got very caught up in trying to compose music which is a fascinating challenge. And I actually very consciously now, particularly when I'm working on some very distressing cases, I very consciously have in my study compositions or sketches or paintings or whatever that I will break and go away to and do in between reading this, I mean it does get to you sometimes, of course, and if I feel an emotional reaction to the material I will make some notes and then have a very real break and go to another part of my study and work on something that is totally different and is totally intuitive, that is one of the important parts of it, it is something that I don't have to explain to myself, I don't have to defend in terms of any sort of logic.

MYERS:

Is this work though that you will stick with? Do you see this as early days in investigative psychology and you want to push it forward as far as possible in the next few years? Do you think it's something that is fashionable that will come and go? With investigative psychology and you?

CANTER:

Well investigative psychology is taking off at a very rapid rate much more rapidly than I'd ever anticipated, I have contacts all over the world now who are trying to establish investigative psychology departments, this year we have students from six or seven countries from around the world and the applications for our masters course are continuing to grow. So there seems to be a tremendous amount of interest in this.

MYERS:

Can I ask you a final question and it's not meant to be impertinent but you talk about criminals leaving shadows and you profile them from the behaviour at the scene of the crime, I wonder it's not just criminals who leave their shadows, we all do, as you've suggested, what sort of shadows do you leave? How would we know it was you David Canter? This of course is the question that some of my braver students feed back to me from time to time and they do point out certain patterns of my behaviour that I actually hadn't recognised.

MYERS:

Such as?

CANTER:

I'm very often late for things. I try desperately hard not to be but there's something about the way I deal with the world that makes it actually quite difficult for me to do everything I want to do in the time available and so there's that side of things. The other thing about my general activities is I find it very difficult to have only one ball up in the air at any point in time. I find it even with something like musical composition, I will get started on two or three different things at once rather than making one thing actually work, it's a sort of parallel processing that I'm involved in all the time. And of course that's the excitement of this field to me is that you can explore all sorts of different issues, I mean, one student comes in wants to talk about serial killers, another one comes in and we're talking about fraud, a third one wants to talk about the interview process and how police officers deal with informants and then we've got somebody else looking at a coroner's decision making about suspicious suicides. So there's a huge range of activities and they all, some of them are to do with social psychology, some of them to do with methodologies and statistics, so that huge range of things is I thoroughly enjoy, So I think my shadow in that sort of metaphor would have a very muddy edge to it, that there is a focus to it in terms of the particular interest in the, patterns of human behaviour and how people make sense of the world but the edges spread out in a sort of penumbra, in a sort of vague greyness into all sorts of other areas and I think that would, what is probably other people see as characteristic of me too.

MYERS:

Professor David Cantor thank you very much indeed.

CANTER:

Thank you.