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Profiles in Murder

The Art of Psychological Crime-Solving is Evolving Into a Science

By Susan Okie

SHE WAS baking a cake when her killer arrived. The ingredients and the mixing bowl were still on the kitchen counter when her body was discovered hours later. Neighbors heard nothing of the bloody struggle that unfolded that afternoon last year inside the new two-story townhouse in a small Southern city. When it was over, she had been raped and repeatedly stabbed.

She was what law-enforcement experts call a "very low-risk victim": a plain, quiet young woman with no enemies, no old lovers, no dangerous habits. When detectives on the case ran out of leads, they turned for help to a unit of the FBI that specializes in compiling psychological portraits of the country's most elusive murderers.

Of the approximately 23,000 murders in the United States last year, about 25 percent are unsolved. Sooner or later, many of the most puzzling killings are referred to the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit, 10 special agents who use crime-scene evidence to piece together a "profile" of the likely criminal.

"For someone to kill somebody is not the easiest thing in the world," says John Douglas, the unit's chief. "It's an interaction between two people. You need to know what the victim would do. You can't get that from a cookbook."

"Profiling" is an odd mixture of detective work and psychology, Sherlock Holmes-style deduction spiced with unexpected insights drawn from years of experience tracking murderers. Several years ago, in one of the most unusual research projects ever undertaken by the federal government, the unit interviewed some of the country's most notorious killers—Ted Bundy, Richard Speck, Charles Manson, Sirhan Sirhan—to learn details of why and how they committed their crimes. The unit's collective knowledge continues to grow along with its caseload. The unit now consults on more than 1,000 homicides a year, and also probes kidnappings, child molestation, terrorism, bombings. "It's not necessarily the specific crime," says Douglas. "It's the behavior."

The profilers' predictions, used to devise strategies for tracking, interrogating and prosecuting criminals, have paid off in hundreds of cases, sometimes with spectacular success, as in the case of Wayne Williams, convicted in a string of killings of Atlanta children. The recent movie, "The Silence of the Lambs," is based on a novel about FBI profilers tracking a serial murderer.

The profilers deal with the kind of oddball killings

that homicide detectives seldom encounter in an entire career. Dietz said systematic study of such cases has revealed some startling, often enormously helpful patterns.

For instance:

■ Sexual sadists usually are also people who like to drive a lot.

■ A single neat feature such as a carefully cleaned bathtub in a bloody murder scene makes it likely the criminal was released from a mental hospital within six months.

"That's precisely the kind of correlational informa-

Susan Okie, who reports on science for The Washington Post, is on leave.

tion that helps one to get on track in devising a profile," Dietz said. "For someone who doesn't have a headful of [such] information, this looks like it must be sheer guesswork. And to someone who believes in pure science, this looks like mushy art. But the fact is, this brings to investigations a kind of knowledge base . . . that goes a long way toward helping to solve crimes."

"The more 'behavior' there is at a crime scene, the more helpful we can be," says Douglas. "The longer the killer stays at the scene, stays with the victim, the more forensic evidence he leaves."

There was plenty of "behavior at the scene" of the townhouse rape-murder when four FBI agents—profilers Judson Ray and Thomas Salp, and profilers-in-training David Gomez and Greg Cooper—convened at Quantico to sift through the traces the killer had left behind.

The evidence suggested the woman had been raped on her bed. The killer had then stabbed her, at the top of the stairs, wounding her in the neck, chest and arms. There was blood on the wall and steps. The agents puzzled over a purplish ligature mark around her neck, finally concluding it had probably been made when the murderer grabbed her by the neck of her T-shirt as she tried to flee.

The first thing that struck the agents was that nobody in the townhouse complex had noticed anything amiss. The complex was still under construction; workmen had been in the area. Ray said that made him suspect a neighbor, a workman, a maintenance man—"someone" who had reason to be in the neighborhood. His presence doesn't attract attention.

The killer took his time leaving. He carefully posi-

tioned the body. He stole a few selected items—a towel, the bed quilt, some cash, the woman's engagement ring. Seemingly strangest of all, he took a shower in his victim's bathroom.

"Time after time, when we see that, it means something more than washing off the soils of crime," said Ray. While the significance is sometimes psychological, he said, more often, it suggests the murderer must show up at work or face someone to whom he must account for his actions.

The agents concluded that the killer had planned in advance. He apparently brought a knife with him, since no knife was missing from the townhouse. He probably had a car to transport stolen items. The profilers agreed he had stalked his victim and knew in advance she would be at home alone.

"When you see the time of day, the risk he's taking—he feels pretty comfortable in that area," said Salp.

The agents next considered why the woman was killed. Did her attacker want to protect himself from being identified? Was the murder sexually motivated? Or did he react violently to something she said or did? Gomez, who had reviewed the case, told Ray the victim was not a fighter. Relatives described her as gentle and submissive.

"Why all this anger?" Ray wondered aloud. "Obviously, there's a lot of anger in the type, number and severity of the wounds. My position would be that he needed this. There's a good bet that a lot of this is lashing out at this girl, provoked by her actions . . . It's likely, though, that this girl would have died no matter what she did."

Slowly, an image of the killer emerged. The quilt theft—potentially incriminating evidence—suggested to the agents this was not his first crime. "He certainly raped people before," said Ray. "He probably had a record." If so, he added, it was likely he had recently been released from jail. Ray said statistics show that if a jailed rapist is going to strike again, it usually happens within 90 days of release.

His age? Studies of similar crimes help the agents specify a likely range. "I would be surprised if he were over 30 or under 20," said Ray. "If I really wanted to be cocky, I'd say 26."

Education? "High school at most," said Salp. Job history? Probably unemployed or working as an unskilled or semi-skilled laborer.

Marital status? "I would think he is not in a long-term sexual relationship," ventured Gomez.

Ray agreed. "Not married on the day he did this—but if he is married, it's fraught with all kinds of problems. He probably has a history of trying to dominate and control women. I would say he's not that experienced a killer. But I guarantee you one thing: If we don't catch him, he'll do it again."

The team's predictions were used to help draft a formal FBI profile for detectives on the case. Salp said a profile's accuracy depends greatly on the quality and completeness of the local investigation. The agency cautions police departments against being too ready to discount suspects who do not seem to "fit" the official

FBI profile.

Many of the agents' comments sounded like snap judgments, and Ray acknowledged that the predictions were a combination of intuition and past experience. "Intuitiveness grows out of just looking at cases like this," he said. "We deduce from deeds what sort of person could be responsible," Ray said. The case remains open, as yet unsolved.

Many deductions are based on findings of a research program that began about seven years ago, in which FBI profilers first studied the crimes of convicted killers and then interviewed them in detail. Douglas said no one had ever tried this before—perhaps because it was so frightening.

"You're walking right in with all these murderers," he said. "That's why you don't see too many psychiatrists doing this kind of thing. You sign a statement saying that you are not negotiable in a hostage situation."

Douglas recalled interviewing Richard Speck, who killed eight Chicago nurses in 1966.

"As he saw us approaching his jail cell, he went crazy, he went nuts like an animal," he said. "We sat down real low on chairs, he sat up on top of a desk." He added that Speck began to cooperate after the agents told him, jokingly, that "he took away seven good women from the rest of us."

"He started laughing and said, 'You guys are pretty good,'" Douglas recalled. "Then he opened up."

The killer who probably taught the FBI the most was Ted Bundy, killer of perhaps 36 women, who talked repeatedly with profiler William Hagemeyer over several years.

"Bundy was a thinking man," said Douglas. "He could articulate and intellectualize things that other serial killers wouldn't. People spend time in different ways on death row. One of the things he did was to study other killers."

Bundy would compare his crimes with those of other serial killers, pointing out differences and explaining why he made certain choices. During a hunt for one such

criminal, he advised agents to stake out locations of the murderer's former crimes, predicting the killer would revisit them to relive the experience and look for mementoes. The profilers have since used the techniques in other cases—and with good results.

Douglas said the expertise of the FBI unit often can recognize the work of a serial murderer today much more quickly than when Bundy was at large in the 1970s. But he added that, occasionally, the behavior of a killer does not seem to fit a coherent profile. This was the situation with serial killer Richard Ramirez, the California "Night Stalker." His victims and killing methods were so varied, said Hagemeyer, "You would never suspect one person of doing it."

It was not a psychological profile that cracked the case, but a common footprint found at most crime scenes.

When a profile is on target, its usefulness can extend beyond the suspect's arrest. Douglas said FBI profilers frequently advise police about the most effective way to interrogate a suspect and even work with prosecutors to "break down" suspects on the

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witness stand.

"Any interrogation is nothing more than a seduction process," he said. "We look at the crime, determine what kind of personality is involved, and from that determine the best interview approach." Confrontational interrogations, he said, are a "last resort."

That approach succeeded spectacularly during the 1982 trial of Wayne Williams. Douglas's profile was instrumental in Williams's arrest because it had predicted the killer was black, even though most serial murderers in sexually motivated killings are white.

On trial, Williams was a smooth witness, and the prosecutor became discouraged. Douglas suggested a new interviewing technique.

"I told him to use a very quiet, controlled voice, to physically touch him, to hold his hand, to say in a low voice, 'Wayne, what was it like when you killed that boy? Did you panic, Wayne?'"

The prosecutor tried it.

"He [Williams] said, 'No,'" Douglas recalled. "Then he caught himself. Then he went crazy. He says, 'I know you have an FBI profile over there. You're not going to get me to fit it.' He screamed. He yelled. He was fitting the profile."

The case brought the unit national recognition and swelled its caseload. Now faced with a growing caseload, the FBI has set up a computerized data base for unsolved murders, the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program or VICAP. The system aims to store standard data on the estimated 50,000 unsolved murders from the past decade, automatically search for similarities with new unsolved murders and generate up to 10 "best matches" to aid investigators.

Ideally, such a system could link crimes committed by the same killer in different regions of the country, allow police departments to compare evidence and perhaps provide the breakthrough to crack some of the country's toughest murder cases.

Computer program problems and a slow response to the FBI's 189-item VICAP report by local police departments—many of them overwhelmed with work—have delayed getting VICAP off the ground.

But criminologists believe such information-gathering is crucial to future criminal profiling. The more we learn about how murderers think, the better we will be at catching them, said James Luke, former D.C. medical examiner and a consultant to the Behavioral Science Unit.

"It's an art, I think, evolving into a science," he said.

Drawing the Wrong Portrait

THE FBI'S Behavioral Sciences Unit usually receives high praise from law enforcement agencies for its psychological profiles of criminal suspects—but not always.

Perhaps the most bitter public controversy to date about a profile is the storm over an FBI psychological assessment used by the Navy to implicate an enlisted man in the fatal explosion on the battleship USS Iowa that killed 47 sailors two years ago.

The explosion occurred during a training exercise in a turret containing three of the battleship's 16-inch guns. After an intensive investigation, the Navy pointed an accusing finger at Clayton M. Hartwig, a gunner's mate who died in the blast. The Navy based its finding in part on a psychological profile of Hartwig drawn up by the FBI to evaluate the sailor's frame of mind at the time of the explosion.

Hartwig's family bitterly assailed the Navy, and the profile was challenged by mental health experts last year at a congressional hearing. Eight of 12 psychologists who independently reviewed the material used to evaluate Hartwig's state of mind disagreed with the FBI report's conclusion that he had probably caused the explosion in order to kill himself and damage his ship.

Indeed, the Behavioral Science Unit's success rate has never been measured. When a profile is on target, the perpetrator gets caught and the agency can point to another success story. But when a profile goes astray, the

murder is likely to remain unsolved, leaving errors in the profile unrecognized. In the worst-case scenario, mistakes in a profile could even contribute to the arrest of the wrong person.

Agents acknowledge that when a profile yields no suspect or solution, lack of feedback between the unit and local police departments compounds the problem. "We don't have the luxury of doing the quality follow-up that we would like to," said David Gomez, a profiler-in-training. "When they [profiles] are right on, we get called. When they're partly responsible [for an arrest], sometimes we'll get a call. When they're totally wrong, we need to know how often they're totally wrong."

With computer programs that generate profiles and a new national data base on unsolved murders, the FBI is trying to standardize the unit's techniques and make them more widely available. But those familiar with the profiling unit doubt that the skill can be easily taught.

"One knowledge base without which the work would be impossible is vast experience with criminal behavior," said Park Elliott Dietz, a psychiatrist who assisted in the government's prosecution of John Hinckley, the man who shot President Reagan. Dietz, who serves as a part-time consultant to the FBI, said the Quantico unit has become to criminology what a research hospital like New York's Memorial-Sloan Kettering is to cancer treatment: a "referral center for unusual unsolved crime."

—Susan Okie