

How thinking about murderers as hunters could help the police

March 5 2018, by Jessica Leigh Thornton



Credit: Faruk Tokluoğlu from Pexels

Psychological profiling, also called criminal personality assessment, is a useful weapon in the armoury of an investigator trying to solve a crime. It's a process that involves what Richard Kocsis, a forensic psychologist

and criminologist, [describes as](#) collecting "leads and biological sketches of behavioural patterns, trends and tendencies".

By interpreting certain types of evidence at a [crime scene](#) investigators can, as experts have [explained](#), receive information about "the kind of person who is capable of committing it, allowing for leads to be pursued even if there is a lack of the actual identity of the offender".

The information includes potential criminal history, age ranges, marital status and other important details about potential suspects. The psycho-social data are then matched against similar cases.

But there are problems with this approach. The first is that any profile is only [as good as the data](#) that precedes it.

This becomes a major concern when there is already limited criminal data to compare profiles across various murder cases. That is the case because analysing the components of criminal data found at a [crime scene](#) is not the priority it should be in South Africa. Out of the 52 murders per day, only 10% of cases are psychologically profiled.

The second is that most [police officers](#) in South Africa, and across the continent, simply aren't trained to understand the dense, complex language and analysis used in psychological profiling.

My [ongoing research](#) explores whether insights and approaches drawn from anthropology could further assist law enforcers in solving murders. I'm focusing particularly on whether different traditional and cultural styles of hunting can be anthropologically applied as a classification grid for offenders.

It uses the act of hunting, a well known concept, to describe a murder. This would describe the murderer as a particular type of hunter.

Stalking, baiting, trapping and making use of camouflage are terms that may be used to describe the action.

Investigators will get insight into the offender's pre- and post-murder behaviour, their "hunting" grounds, and who they may choose as a victim. Using a grid of this kind improves the readability of the profile for police officers, as it describes the offender in ways that are familiar to them.

The classification grid is easier for officers to relate to, since they too are "hunting" – for the killers.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Terrain</i>	<i>Desire</i>	<i>Action</i>
<i>Trophy Hunter</i>	Knows terrain	Knows what he wants	Active in getting want
<i>Mimic</i>	Doesn't know terrain	Knows what he wants	Active in getting want
<i>Baiter</i>	Knows terrain	Knows what he wants but may get something else	Passive in getting want
<i>Camouflager</i>	Can make use of any terrain	Knows what he wants and will wait for	Passive in getting want
<i>Driver</i>	Knows terrain and uses it to advantage	No preference to what he wants	Active in getting but is more opportunistic
<i>Flusher</i>	Doesn't know terrain	No preference to what he wants	Passive in getting want
<i>Poacher</i>	Knows his terrain but it is not his	No preference to what he wants	Active but more opportunistic
<i>Scouter</i>	Knows his terrain but it is not his	Knows what he wants	Active in getting want
<i>Stalker</i>	Not his terrain but gets to know it	Knows what he wants	Passive in getting want
<i>Trapper</i>	Knows his terrain	Knows what he wants	Passive in getting want
<i>Tracker</i>	Knows his terrain and can adapt to other terrains	Knows what he wants but is less rigid in his choice	Active yet more opportunistic

Categories of Murderers as Hunters.

Killer as hunter

I'm conducting my research in the Eastern Cape province. It has the highest murder rate in South Africa, which is itself recognised as an [extremely violent](#) country.

The country's murder rate climbs each year, suggesting that attempts to reform policing are reactive and piecemeal. Progressive approaches are needed – such as teaching cops to think like anthropologists. As things stand, police training often leads investigators to operate in terms of protocols which exclude factors that might otherwise emerge from a more lateral focus.

An anthropological approach may possibly assist police officers by providing a more holistic narrative of the surrounding elements. This could in turn contribute to solving more cases in the various sectors and procedures of a criminal investigation.

Officers at the crime scene would be required to embed crime in a specific social and cultural context. They would do this by giving detailed reasons to the social motive, cultural method, and mode of the crime.

Also, any post-offence behaviour would be noted. This would include – but is not limited to – the suspect's interest or lack of interest in the investigation, or even pretending to be a witness to the murder.

Consider a strangled female body, clothed in sports gear, found 1km from a running track. It could be deduced that the offender may have used the running track in the past. He could have stalked the victim, or he could have been waiting for the victim to run past. This suggests the

offender knew the area or lived nearby; he may even have known the victim. The possibility of stalking points to a proactive killer.

These insights would place the offender into one of three hunting categories of a possible eleven: a camouflager, scouter or tracker. Using the classification grid while profiling a suspect can situate the offender in relation to traditions of hunting. This will provide direction in lagging investigations because it is a tool to narrow down the pool of suspects.

Anthropological insights

The basic premise is that behaviour reflects "[personality](#)". That is, examining a crime scene can identify unique behavioural representations such as the modus operandi, signature, and fantasy behaviours. These behavioural patterns such as sexual gratification, brutality, selfishness, and ritual can be used to determine the unique features of the murderer that could be indicative of their personality.

Crime scenes therefore hold evidence that can be profiled because offenders may leave traces of them satisfying their complex psychological needs at the scene.

These acts may leave behind clues relating to why the scene looks the way it does, why a specific victim may have been chosen, and whether there was fantasy involvement in how they proceeded with the act. All of this allows for anthropological insights into the crime.

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