

# To Profile a Murderer, You Have to Identify With Him

Why people with a tendency toward depression are better police profilers, and do murderers always leave a signature? A conversation with the profiler Dar Peleg

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Dar Peleg. Tomer Appelbaum

*Becoming a police profiler is an interesting career choice. What made you decide on it?*

I have degrees in law and social psychology, and I'll soon be finishing a Ph.D. in social psychology. At some point, the head of the profiling unit of the Israel Police gave a talk at the university. I was enthralled. I simply couldn't believe that anything like that existed. After the talk, I ran after her in the rain and told her that this was what I wanted to do. She said there was no chance, I was too young, there were no openings, and so on. But I didn't relent, and I got the unit to interview me. I told them that no matter what, I would be a criminal profiler – and like in the movies, one day I got a call asking if my dream was still alive. I did a whole series of tests and an officer training course, and then I began working in the unit.

*The Investigative Psychology Department in Forensics – a very small unit.*

Fewer than 10 people, all cool. Some have a police background, others an academic background. I started in the polygraph unit before qualifying for profiling. I left the unit at the end of 2015.

*Otherwise we couldn't be having this conversation. You now work in the private market, but we'll talk about your police career. To start, what is investigative psychology?*

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It's an applied branch of psychology. The idea is to help investigative teams solve cases by means of the polygraph, the cognitive interview – which aims to help trauma victims retrieve information from their memory that was repressed due to the trauma – and through profiling.

*Most people have a clear image of the profession, but how close is that to the reality?*

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I show my students a segment from “Criminal Minds.” One of the characters explains to her colleague what she inferred about him from his behavior. And I say to the students, “Nice, right? But it's not really like that.”

*Then what is it?*

Actually, we all engage in profiling all the time. You and I are doing it about each other now. Trying to characterize. That's what profiling is, but methodically and scientifically. The profiler doesn't whip out all kinds of diagnoses about people, like in the movies or on television. It's an in-depth analysis, compiling people's behavioral fingerprint by using a range of sources.

*Such as the scene of the crime.*

The scene of the event is the primary source. We deal with serious crimes: murder, rape, rape-murder. The profiler comes to the scene and tries to understand what kind of person committed this act, in order to help the investigative team apprehend him. Naturally, we don't say, like in the movies, that he's 35 years old and two meters tall. We can say whether he owns a car, what his educational level is, whether his job requires intellectual skills and so on.

*Sherlock Holmes would find a chewed cigarette stub and say: It's a redheaded woman with a gap between her teeth and one of her gloves is torn.*

Sherlock draws only on the event itself, but profiling involves work in two directions: by inferring from the event and the site, and also by using the body of research knowledge that concerns the behavior of murderers or rapists in similar arenas. The most significant element of profiling is the criminals' interactions with other people. The working assumption is that people's behavior at the scene of the crime is the same as in their private life.



A crime scene in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. \ GORAN TOMASEVIC/ REUTERS

*Can we really expect behavioral consistency?*

There is strong evidence to the effect that activity at the scene is a product of personality traits. It's stronger than the person. For example, we had a case of murder where the victim's throat was slit. Sounds like an expression of great anger, right? Of an assailant who wanted revenge on the victim. But in this case the murderer was simply a butcher. He did what he knew how to do. He was consistent.

*Still, can't the crime be episodic? Divorced from reality?  
Disconnected from me and from my everyday behavior?*

Because I deal with social psychology, I can say that current research shows that the circumstances possess tremendous power, and can even overcome personality. But as a principle, people want to be consistent. In fact, we have to be consistent, to be what we think we are. Once we have accepted that everyone – our friends, our peer group – thinks that they are moral people or very smart people, for instance, we work to hang on to that, even if it doesn't always suit us.

Even if we don't feel like being, say, vegans just now. The need for consistency is beyond our control, and profiling exploits that consistency for its own benefit. How did the assailant speak to the rape victim? Did he curse or was he polite? The aggressive rapist differs from the rapist who's looking for warmth and intimacy. They are two very different emotional needs, and from this you can understand a great deal about the person himself.

*When you enter a murder scene, what are you looking at?*

The investigator wants to understand what happened; the profiler wants to understand how it happened. He will do a behavioral reconstruction. The investigator will examine evidence; the profiler will ask what it means that the assailant held the pistol at a certain angle. Did he want physical contact with the victim? The profiler looks for interaction. Were the clothes taken off the victim [in an orderly manner] or ripped from him?

*But that question is also relevant for the investigator.*

He's looking for evidence, I'm not. He will take into account that the clothing was ripped off but he won't focus on that. I will place the emphasis on that alone.

*But both you and the investigator will understand, from the fact of the ripped clothing, that whoever did it is physically strong.*

Yes, but I will connect that with the curses he uttered and I will understand that there's a lot of anger there. That delayed gratification is involved. The profiler has to enter the mind of the perpetrator and not judge him.

*Not judge? That sounds like the mother of all hollow clichés.*

Even so, it's true. When I ask students what they thought about murders they read about, they usually say that the killer was a psychopath. That's not profiling. Profiling involves trying to understand, for example, what in the victim stimulated the murderer to act as he did. Being capable of thinking like that calls for a great deal of openness. It's character. I, for example, was orphaned at a very early age. I tell that to my students and ask where they place my views on the political spectrum. They ask what the connection is. But there is a connection. Get to know the murderer. But don't diagnose his personality. Live his story. You tell me – what do you think about my political views? Am I an extremist or a moderate?

*An extremist.*

Good. Why?

*Because of the contrast between your being neat, measured, meticulous – which manifests both in your behavior and manner of*

*speaking and in your outward appearance – and your attraction to the dark side.*

That shows you have congenital profiling skills. Most people get tripped up by the question, and many don't understand the connection even after I explain it. You did a complex weighting of all kinds of details, both those I gave you and others that you gathered by yourself. Among them, I surmise, is how important it was for me to let you know I'd be late.



Dar Peleg. Tomer Appelbaum

*Thanks, but I think it's mostly intuitive with me.*

That's what profiling does, it follows the thread of your thoughts.

*But it aspires to get away from the intuitive.*

Certainly, but it starts with a certain skill, which you either have or you don't. That you were able to understand something like that about me shows high awareness. Sensitivity. That you're not locked into yourself, that you're versatile enough to externalize.

*Now let's come back to earth and get on with the interview.*

The profiler has to be aware, in order to separate between himself and the criminal when he's writing about him and characterizing him, and in order to synchronize with him fully when he's trying to think like him. That requires self-awareness bordering on the pathological, extreme conceptual flexibility. It really is a matter of character traits. You either have them or you don't. That's another difference between a profiler and an investigator. The profiler at the crime scene is a real actor. He will do the whole show: Enter like the criminal, stand where the criminal stood. A good profiler has to

understand all the areas – pathology, blood stain analysis – and he has to be capable of grasping the big picture.

*It must be very difficult mentally.*

Definitely. You see brutal things. For example, think of how many dead bodies I've seen. So many. You need a strong stomach to hang in there. It's also difficult because you have to set aside many feelings that arise in you. When you enter the scene your instinct is to judge. To be angry. To want to catch the person at any price. But you can't let emotion direct you – that will affect the work.

*It's actually more than just not judging – it's identifying.*

Identifying is cardinal. When my students talk about the criminal as "him," I bring them back: it's not him, it's you. In the first class, I have them plan a murder and show them how their personal life trickled into the crime, even though they didn't intend that. Some choose to present a very dramatic murder, to photograph the victim etc. A dramatic crime scene shows the assailant's loneliness, his need for attention.

In this exercise I show people how their personality is reflected in the crime. Think of the "how": Do I shoot someone, stab him or poison him? The use of poison, for example, is a more feminine element. How much risk was involved is also significant. How sure he is of himself, his level of criminal consciousness. How much contempt he has for the police. Maybe he actually wants to be caught. When you understand the person's style, you also know how to talk to him during the interrogation. For example, some people who commit a crime are very hurt if someone else is suspected – they feel that something has been taken from them.

*Someone didn't understand their creative work.*

Yes. It's their creation, it's the meaning. You even see it in the positioning of the body. The more I humiliate the victim, the more I elevate myself, and when I see a humiliated victim I know that in the interrogation I have to elevate and glorify the person in order to get him to confess. I also look for personality conflicts. At the level of values, I look for a clash – let's say, competitiveness versus a need for love and acceptance. A conflict like that follows a person for his entire life. It controls him.

*Can you give an example of how that conflict may be manifested in the crime scene?*

Think of a body that's left covered, protected. You want to respect that person, but on the other hand you murdered him. The conflict between the act and the desire to safeguard the victim; maybe you're even a bit remorseful. If so, we will look for someone close to the victim: family, friends.

*I came across a 2007 study in which people were asked to analyze solved cases, and criminal profilers didn't fare better than regular people. I also know there are studies that assert the opposite, that what counts is how skilled the profiler is.*

That's the answer. Polygraph, interrogation strategy, cognitive interview – they all depend on the person who carries them out. There's no insurance policy, no guarantee. Often we can upgrade the intuitive hypothesis, but to say that we offer a complete solution? No. We don't. So it's important who the expert is, how many studies he's familiar with.

*Do you make use of your profession in your private life?*

I once tried to analyze something about my wife's laugh, and she immediately shut me down. I know how to adjust myself to others, to adapt the tone of speech or the language or even the way I dress, to the person I'm sitting opposite. A bit of an actor. It's part of who I am.

*It's this matter of nuances.*

I believe in the small details and I like small details, but many times I will avoid including them in my report, so that profiling will remain a field of knowledge that can be relied on, and not a pseudoscience or a product of gut feeling.

*I understand that there are sensitivities, but try to convey the general feeling. When you said that you can know whether the criminal needed intellectual skills for the job, how do you infer that?*

From a few sources. Such as how sophisticated the crime itself was, whether he made use of manipulation or just charged ahead.

*Whether he broke down the door or persuaded the victim to open it.*

Yes, and from there it can branch off into all kinds of directions. Whether he simply succeeded in persuading the victim to open the door, or constructed a whole story and utilized props. Maybe he said his car broke down and he needed to wash his hands and is holding a jerrycan. What his level of criminal awareness is. From that I can arrive at a sense of whether he wanders the streets alone or with a group, and if the latter, whether he's in the center or on the margins. The idea is to reduce the pool of suspects to a general profile that can be worked with.

*Is profiling dependent on the type of crime? After all, a crime of passion is substantially different from a mob hit.*

I won't analyze a crime-organization hit because the perpetrator is a mercenary, and I have no way of knowing whether I'm analyzing his method of operation or that of whoever sent him.

*Can you tell that it's a contract killing?*

Yes. There is a clear pattern to such operations, and there's almost nothing to analyze, because the level of criminal awareness is extremely high and almost every incriminating detail gets removed from the scene. So I'll tell the investigators: Guys, it was a contract. It's the same if it's suspected that there was more than one murderer, because then you don't know whom you're analyzing.

*What can be predictive of effective profiling?*

The more emotional elements there are at the scene that are related to the assailant's behavior toward the victim, the better the profile I will come up with. The cleaner the scene, the less I can do.

*Can you explain what "signature" and "method of operation" are?*

Method of operation refers to the minimum number of actions needed to perpetrate the deed. I want to kill someone? I have a pistol? I'll shoot him. All that's needed, technically, to commit the act. Signature is an emotional need that can't be overcome, something that you will always need more and more of. A need for control. For closeness. Everything that is fundamentally emotional. For example, overkill: You came to murder someone and shot him 147 times. It wasn't enough for you that he die. You wanted him to disappear. That's signature.

*Does signature always exist?*

Yes, but you aren't always able to identify it. The method of operation is almost always clear. To separate the signature is more complex. Bites, for example. Biting is emotional. If you see bite marks on a body, that belongs to the signature. Where were the bites? The closer they are to the face, the more intense the emotion.

*God. Of all the horrors we talked about, that's the best illustration of the emotional burden of the job. Why did you leave the police?*

Think how hard I worked to get in, and suddenly I dump it all. I think that in the end I realized that it's a pity to limit profiling to the criminal context alone

*So leaving was a process. Where did it begin?*

I think it was in one of the investigations. We achieved a very good characterization of a person. In fact, we changed something in his behavior. We understood that he had a certain need, and we used it to produce behavior that led us to the solution.

*A bit scary, something godlike.*

Absolutely. You also have to beware of that completely. Profiling has to be very moral. A lot of genuine humility, not fake, because what if you point the finger at the wrong person?

*What about the danger that you're leading the investigator to a completely wrong place?*

That's constantly in my consciousness. The fear of misleading the investigators. Everything meaningful that's said has to be super well-based.

*Did you have snafus like that?*

I don't know, but I'm sure I did. One of the problems of the profession is that you don't get feedback. You just don't know. Possibly you constructed a good profile and the person apprehended fits it; but by the same token, maybe I was totally wrong. It's also possible that I was accurate but the suspect had a superb lawyer and got off. There's no knowing.