



David Canter

Meet the

Researcher

From environmental to investigative psychology: the journey of a lifetime

In 1985 I found myself in an office at a police training college surrounded by senior police officers. They had just decided that a series of rapes and murders, committed across London and the south-west of England, were the acts of one man. That morning they had set up a major enquiry linking together three large police forces to try to catch this serial killer. In a moment that would change my life, they turned to me and asked: 'Can you help us catch this man before he kills again?' My positive response set me on a path that eventually led to the development of the new field of investigative psychology.

ARCHITECTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

My willingness to take on such a daunting task was founded on 20 years of developing and applying psychology in many different domains. This had started in the unlikely context of studying the effects of open-plan office size on worker performance, which grew out of my interest in the psychology of art. I had been offered the opportunity to explore these matters in a School of Architecture, as part of the growing awareness among all sorts of designers that some understanding of human actions and experiences was of direct value in making their designs more humanly effective. These studies were originally part of a field known as architectural psychology, which was soon embraced under the broader umbrella of environmental psychology. Paradoxically, what emerged from these studies of the effects of the physical environment was the discovery that what people bring to the use of space and the sense they make of designs is far more powerful than how places influence people.

One fascinating consequence of this human agency is that people reveal something of themselves from the places in which they choose to be and how they modify those places. Indeed, one early finding from my study of teachers' satisfaction with school buildings was the counter-intuitive result that the more they modified the building, the happier they were with it. This also lays the groundwork for acknowledging that aspects of a person are reflected as much in what they do and where they do it as in how they may complete a personality inventory or answer questions in an interview. It was this awareness of how we all give away aspects of ourselves that led me to believe I may be able to help the police catch a serial killer.

GETTING OUT OF THE LAB

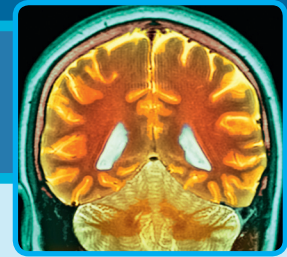
Before becoming involved with police investigations, I had followed the implications of the earlier architectural research by seeking to develop a focus for research that took account of the important methodological implications of the significance of human agency. It means that many carefully controlled laboratory experiments are very unlikely to have any general applicability outside of the bounds of their sterile settings. It is almost impossible to simulate the reasons a person has for being in a location, so what is being explored in a laboratory is how people play the role of being an experimental subject. This may just be relevant to analogous situations, like being a patient undergoing therapy or a soldier under interrogation, but is more difficult to generalise to broader contexts. As a consequence, my research thereafter tended to focus on issues that were very difficult to simulate in a laboratory, such as users' reactions to and satisfactions with their physical surroundings, how people behave in emergencies and subsequently the actions of criminals.

THE POWER OF HUMAN AGENCY

Beyond the methodological implications and the areas of research that I find of interest, the recognition of the power of human agency also has profound implications for the sorts of theoretical models that it is appropriate to develop. These are models of what people do and how they make sense of their context and act accordingly. George Kelly's 'personal construct psychology' is a powerful framework for considering many of these issues. This means that, although my work has often focused on human actions, the underlying assumption is that these actions are not merely habitual responses, but derive from the construct systems that give meaning to their interactions with others and the world around them (see Chapter 42).

HUMAN RESPONSES TO EMERGENCIES

The study of human actions in buildings on fire and other emergencies was greatly informed by this cognitive, behavioural perspective. Engineers seemed to think that human reactions could be understood as a very simple 'stimulus-response' systems (e.g. smoke will cause people to panic). My research showed that people seek to make sense of the



ambiguity of the early stages of an emergency and act in accordance with those interpretations. Furthermore, their understanding of the situation is strongly influenced by previous experience and the social processes in which they participate. It is only when cues build up to enable them to see that a radically different set of social rules are relevant that they change their normal actions and try to escape. This has significant implications for the management of emergencies, as well as for the development of emergency warning systems.



Would your escape plan be different if you'd already experienced a similar situation

The development of these studies of human activity was further enhanced by the possibilities I perceived in the evolution of Kelly's repertory grid methodology for studying conceptual systems. This was rooted in the excitement generated in many areas of psychology by the possibility of large-scale, multivariate statistical analyses, especially the power of factor analysis, which emerged with the availability of computers. It paralleled the seminal work of Charles Osgood, with his 'measurement of meaning', but got its greatest impetus from applications in intelligence and personality testing. All of these explorations recognised the utility of conceptualising the vast array of human experiences and behaviour as points within some multidimensional space. With his 'facet approach', Louise Guttman took this work to the logical point where the relationships between variables are distances in a notional space between points that represent those variables. The visual strength of this makes it particularly powerful for demonstrating complex relationships to people who are not statistically sophisticated, such as architects. I had even used this approach in market research studies (cf. www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKID6JS8Npk).

TRANSITION TO INVESTIGATIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The availability of these methodologies and the conceptualisations on which they were built, together with the experience of studying people outside of the laboratory, often in challenging and difficult situations, were all foundations for responding to the request to catch a killer before he killed again. I was able to think of the killer as a person trying to make sense of their surroundings and reduce the risk to themselves, who had a typical pattern of behaviour that would reveal aspects of his characteristics. The inferences I drew from this framework turned out to be of great help to the investigation, leading to an arrest and conviction.



Investigative psychology draws on a very wider range of psychological theories and methods to contribute to all aspect of criminal investigations from witness statements to providing evidence in court including trying to understand the actions of criminals in order to help to catch and convict them

I realised with this success that the problem-solving approach I had been developing for studying many aspects of human agency were of wide relevance across many areas of investigations. Therefore, after contributions to a number of other police enquiries and a variety of studies of crimes and criminals, I realised that a new area of professional psychology was emerging which I called investigative psychology (cf. www.i-psy.com; www.ia-ip.org). This has now developed into a wide-ranging area of psychology, with its own theories and methods (Canter and Youngs, 2009), which is growing in reach week by week.

Professor David Canter is currently Director of the International Research Centre for Investigative Psychology at the University of Huddersfield. David has published more than 300 or more academic papers and 50 books, including his award-winning *Criminal Shadows*, and has contributed to many TV documentaries.