Behavior Analysis and the Patrol Officer

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Patrol officers, out of necessity, become students of human behavior, but the most effective police officers develop their observation skills and study of human behavior into a science. From the earliest days of policing, officers have been trained to watch for suspicious behavior, to look for that which is out of place, those persons “whose glances and actions betray possible criminal intent; persons who appear not to belong on the beat.” (O’Connor & Vanderbosch, 1967, p. 30) Over a period of time and with experience, officers active in patrol become adept at identifying individuals involved in or planning criminal behavior, as well as identifying persons in distress by their behavior characteristics. Behavior is said to be the major phenomenon that the police officer must deal with on a daily basis and the diligent patrol officer, when observing a particular behavior, will be asking himself, “why is this person doing what he is doing?” (Russell & Beigel, 1976, p. xi, 21) That being the case an officer must learn to observe, analyze and correctly act on human behavior because being wrong carries with it the possibility of civil or criminal liability.

Various training programs have incorporated aspects of observation techniques and some of the programs have refined those techniques to be easily utilized on the street, especially in practicing officer safety awareness. From Street Survival Seminars® and Calibre Press publications, most patrol officers have experienced or at least can describe the ‘thousand yard stare’ or identify an emotionally disturbed person by characteristics. Pierce Brooks, former Los Angeles Police Department investigator of the Onion Field police murder case and pioneer in officer safety awareness, advised officers to be alert for those things that do not look right. One of the 10 deadly errors he popularized was to watch a suspect’s hands as the likely point of attack (1975). Since then, officer safety awareness training has expanded on the observation of body language. Officers should watch for subtle, but significant moves which are often associated physiologically with a person’s preparation to attack (Remsberg, 1986, p. 445). These moves, including the boxer stance, the shoulder shift and target glance signal that the person may attack and where he intends to strike the officer (Remsberg, 1986, p. 445-446).

Experienced criminals also become adept at analyzing human behavior, especially for the purpose of targeting certain people for victimization; but also to learn to spot police officers, not so much from what they may be wearing, but by their actions or behaviors, especially their people watching behavior.

Reading behavioral indicators, such as these, is far from an exact science, but officers, find that most people do unconsciously give indications of their intention to assault (Remsberg, 1986, p. 445). To be safe and successful, an officer has to analyze these warning signs, but to complicate the matter even more, the analysis process may require rapid decision-making based on what he observes. The behavioral indicators that are being analyzed are not only from aggressive or potentially violent persons, but from those attempting to be deceptive. An officer’s day deals in communication with complainants, victims, witnesses, suspects and suspicious persons, many having motives to be untruthful. When an individual is trying to lie or evade answering questions, officers will observe deception cues such as, hesitancy in answering, stalling, memory lapses and other tactics (Remsberg, 1995, p. 195-199).

Behavior analysis is most effective when officers are serious students of human behavior; but a problem in studying human behavior is that an officer’s observations are directly related to his life experiences, education, personal beliefs and biases. Before acting on what he observes, an officer must make certain that his decisions are objective and based on behaviors that are widely accepted as suspicious or abnormal, all the while being cognizant of the influence of his own attitudes and opinions and keeping his evaluations and conclusions of the observations separate (Basinger, 1973, p. 3).

Officers must be aware that what they are observing may not always be what it appears. Experienced criminals can mask their behaviors so that even those closest to them are not aware of their criminal side. For example, many times serial killers live and function in society for years before being caught. Experienced criminals also become adept at analyzing human behavior, especially for the purpose of targeting certain people for victimization; but also to learn to spot police officers, not so much from what they may be wearing, but by their actions or behaviors, especially their people watching behavior (Green, 1976, p. 100). Patrol officers must be allowed the ability to make a flexible analysis of what is observed, but also specific enough that educated assessments of behavior can be made. Part of this assessment involves identifying groups or clusters of behaviors that are suspicious as a single suspicious behavior may not warrant further investigation, but several suspicious behaviors may.

This behavior analysis is similar in some aspects to the profiling made popular by the FBI. This criminal profiling is a process whereby the investigator infers the personality characteristics of those committing crimes (Turvey, 2002). Starting in 1978 to interview serial killers, agents in what was then the behavioral science unit, researched the lives of these killers and studied in depth the crimes and subsequent police investigations.

First called psychological profiles, they involved the analysis of unsolved murder cases by studying the case files, autopsy protocols, photographs and other records. This analysis allowed agents to arrive at a
'profile' or characteristics of the type of person who would commit such a crime. The FBI has profiled numerous cases of serial killers and rapists and several agents have written extensively of their successes and high profile cases. After 15 years of being victimized by 'the mad bomber,' New York City Police in 1957 enlisted the aid of Dr. James Brussel, a psychiatrist, to come up with a profile of the mad bomber. The profile turned out to be quite accurate and aided in the capture of George Metesky (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995, p. 33-34).

The US Secret Service, responsible for protecting the president and other public officials, found that a profiling system was not adequate for their needs. The Secret Service studied 83 individuals who attacked or came close to attacking prominent public officials and compiled characteristics of these individuals. These characteristics aid them in making threat assessments of individuals that may pose a threat to the president or other public officials (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). The Secret Service recently lent its expertise in threat assessments to the department of Education to study school shooters of the last 10 years. The study has lead to training for school officials to make threat assessments of potential shooters.

Profiling has not always been viewed in a favorable light. Negative connotations attached to what has become known as racial profiling, which is police initiated action that relies on race, ethnicity, or national origin rather than the behavior of an individual (Ramirez, McDevitt & Ferrell, 2000). This stems from a program started in the late 1980s by the Drug Enforcement Administration called 'operation pipeline.' This program involved specialized training which focused on indicators of narcotics trafficking in which officers would profile individuals based on their race and from where they lived or were traveling, especially what were considered drug destination cities. This police practice has been challenged in a number of jurisdictions and subsequently disallowed by lawsuits and legislation.

It has been shown from the information already presented that behavior analysis or criminal profiling is something patrol officers do daily, and have done for years. It is not uncommon to hear of an officer described as having street smarts or acting on gut instincts. I believe these terms provide some of the basis for behavior analysis for patrol officers. A police officer on the street is not in a position to make an in depth analysis of behavior, but instead must make profiles of individuals he encounters. These profiles aid in identifying individuals who may be violent, armed, wanted or pose a danger to the officer or others.

What has become the benchmark case of police behavior profiling began with the observations of Detective Martin McFadden, a 39 year veteran of the Cleveland, Ohio Police Department on the afternoon of October 31, 1963. Detective McFadden, on a beat that he had patrolled for many years watched two strangers alternately walk back and forth and pause to stare into the window of a United Airlines agency. These two men did this a number of times and then conferred with a third man on a corner. Detective McFadden testified that he had "developed routine habits of observation over the years and that he would stand and watch people or walk and watch people at many intervals of the day" and this situation "didn't look right to me at the time" (Terry v. Ohio, 1968). Based on these observations Detective McFadden stopped and frisked these individuals, finding two of them armed with guns. The US Supreme Court admitted in their 1968 decision that the questions raised in this case were of "a sensitive area of police activity—issues which have never before been squarely presented to this court (Terry v. Ohio, 1968). The US Supreme Court recognized then and periodically reaffirms that police officers deal with "rapidly unfolding and often dangerous situations on city streets and must have the tools necessary to deal with those varied situations (Terry v. Ohio, 1968).

Retired New York City Detective Robert T. Gallagher, another student of human behavior, refined techniques for identifying behavioral characteristics of armed individuals and became so proficient at it that in 1983 he alone arrested 190 armed felons in New York (Gallagher, 1995). Detective Gallagher observed and studied people, noting clothing characteristics and body movements of individuals carrying guns. From his surveillance he found that armed people demonstrate periodic protective movements, i.e., to ensure their gun is secure, a particular gait and wear clothing that does not fit the seasonal weather or that may be concealing a gun. During his observations, Detective Gallagher studied people to learn characteristics, such as their strong hand (Gallagher, 1995). These observations and subsequent training have helped police officers prevent crimes and identify and arrest armed criminals.

According to Gavin de Becker, an expert on threat assessment, we predict the behavior of other people based on our ability to read certain signals that we recognize (1999). To have this ability, we must become proficient observers, constantly learning all of the time. Former LAPD psychologist Martin Reiser advocated that officers need to be observant of verbal and non-verbal behaviors in detail so they can make "useful and valid assessments about what they are dealing with" (1973, p. 10). Because the nature of a patrol officers' job requires decisions to be made quickly, these threat assessments can not be complicated analytical procedures. The officer has to be able to quickly assess behavior, at times having only seconds to size up volatile situations; all the while, having a survival mindset.

While sizing up situations officers must have a plan of action and the most successful officers accomplish this by doing crisis rehearsals. On a suspicious person situation, an officer may want to observe an individual for several moments prior to action to reinforce whatever called his
attention to the person in the first place. This extra time may provide the reasonable suspicion or probable cause information necessary to stop or detain the person (Adams, Mcternan & Remsberg, 1980, p. 69). It also may help to determine that the person being surveilled does not know he is being watched, as people do not behave the same if they are being observed (Green, 1976, p. 99).

Currently the US Customs Service, the FBI and a number of airports are training officers in behavior analysis. The Israeli El Al Airline pioneered observation of behavior and body language in the 1970s and hasn’t had a hijacking in more than 30 years (Davis, Pereira & Bulkeley, 2002). US Customs revised their tactics to incorporate behavior profiling and saw their ‘hit rate,’ where they find drugs during searches, increase dramatically. Behavior analysis continues to be refined and with proper training patrol officers will find that they will become more effective by making informed and safe stops and arrests of suspicious persons and experience fewer complaints filed against them.

**References**


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**About the Author**

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