

Understanding the Organized/Disorganized Dichotomy: An Investigators First Step in Violent Offender Profiling

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Over the past few decades, the emergence of novels and movies such as “The Silence of the Lambs” has created the image in the public’s eyes of profilers being superhuman men and women capable of ungodly leaps of almost psychic intuition which lead to the magical capture of the villain. While (unfortunately) no such person exists, the science of criminal offender profiling has developed considerably over the past hundred years from a series of inconsistent investigative leaps of intuition to an evolved science. This empirically-based science now allows investigators to understand various behavioral characteristics about violent offenders based on analysis of both offender behavior and physical evidence at the scene of the crime. While there are a myriad of subtopics which could be explored along those lines, this article will focus specifically on the dynamics of the Organized and Disorganized Offender and how an understanding of these concepts can be integral to drastically narrowing down the suspect pool for violent crime investigations.

The classification of the Disorganized/Organized dichotomy is a simplification of the psychiatric terms “psychotic” (disorganized) and “psychopathic” (organized) for the benefit of law enforcement investigators (O’Connor, 2005). The idea of organized/disorganized dichotomy was developed by the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit in 1974 in order to more effectively investigate serial rapes and homicides (American Psychological Association, 2004). Generally speaking, organized criminals “are antisocial but know right from wrong, are not insane and show no remorse” (APA, 2004). Their crimes are carefully planned, premeditated, and staged to prevent the police from finding any evidence on-scene which reflects their intelligence usually measured at an over 120 IQ. In contrast, Disorganized Offenders tend to be young and sloppy; often under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or a mental disorder. Because their

crimes are unplanned, they tend to leave lots of evidence on-scene, such as fingerprints or blood reflecting their intelligence which is usually within the 85-90 range on the IQ scale (APA, 2004).

The importance behind determining whether an offender is “organized” or “disorganized” lay in research-based generalizations regarding the behavior of that offender. Consider the following observations by Owen (2004): DISORGANIZED OFFENDERS tend to be of below average intelligence and range in age between 16 and their late thirties. They tend to be among the younger of siblings and have fathers with poor employment history who used harsh discipline. The disorganized offender may himself have a poor employment history in an unskilled occupation which would have been picked up after dropping out of school. They tend to live alone or with older family members and have low self-esteem and poor hygiene. They tend to be very reclusive, except for with family members or anytime after dark. They also tend to work or live near the scene of the crime and have either no personal transportation or badly maintained personal transportation. If the crime is committed during a period of high stress, the result can be behavioral changes such as a sudden turn to religion or an increase in alcohol or drug use.

Disorganized offenders characteristically conduct blitz attacks on their victims due to a lack of social adequacy needed to verbally subdue their victims. They tend to have poor personal hygiene and are very reclusive (O'Connor, 2005). A disorganized rapist will often blindfold his victim or batter her face in an effort to depersonalize him or her (Owen, 2004). Any sexually sadistic acts would be committed after the victim is killed and the body will be left in plain view if still at the crime scene (Owen, 2004). Some disorganized killers take trophies or souvenirs of the victims in order to re-experience the events of the rape. Finally, a ‘disorganized’ crime scene will contain a myriad of fingerprints, footprints, and/or weapons used in the assault, making it much easier for investigators to narrow down the suspect pool by way of crime scene analysis.

In contrast to the disorganized offender, the ORGANIZED OFFENDER conducts extensive planning for the crime and staging of the crime scene to avoid detection and identification. Some of this staging will include removal of evidence such as weapons and restraints used in the attack. He tends to personify victims and is fairly adept at

striking up conversations in order to lure their victims into submission. He very specifically chooses his victims by age, appearance, gender, lifestyle, occupation and other details which would be trivial to anyone but him. This offender's lifestyle can be characterized as 'put together'. He lives with a spouse or long-term partner, has a steady skilled job, and quality personal transportation. Physically, he is generally of above average weight and height and presents himself as non-threatening. FBI Special Agent John Douglass notes that "general organized offenders are hypothesized to kill after undergoing some sort of precipitating stressful event, such as financial, relationship, or employment problems" (Canter, Alison, Alison, & Wentink, 2004, p.2). Finally, the organized offender generally ranges in age from 18 to 45 years but is usually under the age of 35.

You may notice the phrase "tend(s) to" is used often here. This is due to the fact that the aforesaid generalizations are exactly that: generalizations. Offenders can learn over time; therefore, these general descriptors do not unequivocally describe every disorganized offender. While there are definite differences between both types of offenders, there are some commonalities which should be recognized as well. While both types of offenders are loners, organized offenders are loners due to his feelings of superiority over other. Both also have fathers who were inconstant in childhood discipline; however, the organized offender's childhood is much more stable and 'upper class' than that of a disorganized offender (Owen, 2004). While the disorganized offender has no interest in the media, the organized offender will keep track of the goings on in the media in an attempt to keep up with police and media coverage of the crime (Owen, 2004). They may even go to the extent of keeping directly in touch with the local newspaper. As a precaution, organized offenders may even move or switch jobs to avoid being caught.

The most important factor to consider when comparing and contrasting both types of offender is that the concept of organized and disorganized offenses should be viewed as a continuum rather than in black and white (Turvey, 1997). Turvey (1997) points out that "[t]he more experienced an offender is, the more skillful he may become; the more planning, the more patient, the more organized he may become. It's not so much then about age as it is experience and personality". In fact, the ability for a disorganized

offender to learn and become more organized in practice is the primary reason the organized/disorganized dichotomy is among the most criticized of typologies (Canter et. al., 2004). Resourceful offenders (organized and disorganized alike) often use to enhance the effectiveness of their MO includes television shows such as CSI or Crime TV as well as the internet. Bearing this in mind, it's important to understand that most offenders will display a mix of organized and disorganized behavior. However, there will be an obvious but gradual evolution in the offender's MO if he or she is a serial offender.

While the Organized/Disorganized dichotomy is helpful in investigations of violent crime, it should be used with caution. This dichotomy in and of itself is incomplete as a whole as most offenders will fall somewhere between organized and disorganized in practice. It also fails to take into consideration why a particular crime may have occurred.

Investigators must also be careful to understand that this dichotomy is meant to make behavior and lifestyle-related deductions, not medical evaluations such as deducing that a given disorganized offender "must" have a mental illness of some sort. Finally, as with the case with all other types and dynamics of offender profiling, the organized/disorganized dichotomy must be used in concert with other forms of forensic analysis (e.g., crime scene investigation, interview/interrogation, et cetera).

As mentioned before, profiling allows investigators to understand various behavioral characteristics about violent offenders based on analysis of both offender behavior and physical evidence at the scene of the crime. Understanding where an offender falls along the organized and disorganized continuum can reveal everything from hygiene habits, general radius of work and living locations as related to the crime scene and a myriad of other pieces of helpful information for the investigator to consider. When used in combination with other law enforcement disciplines, the organized/disorganized dichotomy in violent crime investigations can be an invaluable tool in the quick resolution of your violent crime investigation.

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