



Training Key® # 565

Personality-Based Interviews and Interrogations

The effectiveness of interviews and interrogations is largely a product of how well an officer can “read” an individual and then modify his or her style and methods to best capitalize on the subject’s personality traits and characteristics.

Introduction

“Why won’t my subject cooperate?”

If you think this often-asked question is the sole province of law enforcement investigators, you will be interested to know that it is just as commonly heard in psychologists’ offices. Any profession that relies on obtaining crucial information—clinical or forensic—from sometimes unwilling subjects will have to confront a variety of personal and situational impediments in the quest for clear and reliable information. Experienced law enforcement professionals have mastered the art and skill of getting people to open up and tell their stories. What behavioral science professionals can offer the law enforcement interviewer is a more fine-grained analysis of the intricacies of human nature that can sometimes frustrate this important police activity.

Criminal Organizations and Their Members

An organization can be characterized as a family, a tribe, or a culture. In the close-knit tribal clan groups that humans have lived in for most of our history, loyalty to one’s in-group and antipathy toward others served the adaptive advantage of mutual protection from the forces of nature and rival groups competing for resources. Since basic human nature has changed little in the past several thousand years, distinct remnants of this group loyalty remain hardwired in our psyches even in modern, industrialized societies. Whether we are talking about a baseball team or drug cartel, corporate enclave or terrorist cell, or police precinct or gang turf, humans will fiercely guard their territory and band together with their comrades against outsiders. Law enforcement professionals who are trying to extract intelligence from apprehended subjects in order to solve a crime or prevent future violence are the “outsiders,”

and thus there will be tremendous internal and external pressures on the interviewees to remain silent.

Criminal organizations can be divided into two main categories. Ideologically driven organizations, which include most domestic and international terrorist groups, are motivated by some higher religious or political cause, such as white supremacy, Islamic jihad, radical environmentalism, or world socialism. In contrast, primarily mercenary driven organizations are involved in crime purely for monetary gain, such as Mafia-type organizations, drug cartels, outlaw motorcycle gangs, and urban street gangs. Many criminal or terrorist enterprises contain elements of both ideologically driven and mercenary driven criminal organizations as exemplified by tax scams and bank robberies committed by North American white power groups, the political connections of many Latin American drug cartels, and religious affiliations of narcotic growers and arms smugglers in the Middle East.

To further complicate matters, group and family loyalties may comprise fluid categories. For example, a suspected Al-Qaeda operative who joined the organization less than a year ago out of fiery passion and personal devotion may be more than willing to give his life rather than betray his comrades or holy mission. Conversely, the second- or third-generation scion of an established mob boss might not have the slightest interest in going into the family business. However, when push comes to shove, blood is blood, and he will keep his mouth shut. These factors thus confound the efforts of law enforcement officers to question suspects and obtain reliable information.

Just as basic human nature has remained relatively stable through the ages, so has the natural composition of clan groups continued to depend on a kind of psychological division of labor among its members. Most groups—criminal or

legal—usually contain a basic, standard set of members,¹ including one or more leaders, who direct the operations of the group and who may provide a religious or secular focus of allegiance for group members to rally around. A cadre of workers carry out the everyday maintenance and support functions of the organization, while a select group of soldiers perform the necessary intimidation, coercion, enforcement, and if necessary to achieve the groups goals, violent retributive or terrorist acts. Worker and soldier roles may be strictly demarcated or they may overlap, with organization members cross-trained for various roles.

Interview and Interrogation Strategies

The current standard protocol of interview and interrogation relies on a progressively narrowing or “funnel-shaped” model of information gathering.² One or more specialized techniques, such as visualization or backwards narrative, may be used according to the circumstances and experience of the interviewer. Following an initial stage of rapport building, which should be maintained throughout the interview, subjects are first asked to describe events in their own words, without direction or interruption by the interviewer. Next, the interviewer poses general questions to fill in any missing data or resolve any glaring discrepancies in the narrative. More focused and detail-oriented queries are then used to help “tie up any loose ends” in the narrative and obtain a clear, overall picture of the subject’s knowledge. Finally, rapport is reestablished at the close of the interview and the subject is asked to contact the interviewer if he subsequently recalls anything relevant.

While this model is generally effective with most of the everyday suspects and witnesses encountered by police, it may be less useful with the kinds of personality types who comprise most extremist organizations and hard-core criminal gangs. Accordingly, an understanding of this aspect of criminal psychology can lead to practical strategies for refining the interview and interrogation model for maximum effectiveness with these groups.

Personality: Traits, Types, and Disorders

Everyone has personality traits. For example, some people are outgoing and gregarious while others keep to themselves. Some people are orderly and meticulous, while others enjoy life spontaneously and are unable to organize their lives. Some are open and trusting while others are cynical and suspicious. Some people are characteristically egocentric, seeing things only from their own perspective, and they often lack impulse control, which compels them to meet their own needs at the expense of others. Others may be overly self-deprecating, never seeming to effectively assert themselves or stand up for their rights.

When these personal quirks begin to affect others harmfully or significantly derail the person’s success, psychologists regard them not just as personality traits, but also as personality disorders. The official diagnostic definition of a personality disorder is “an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual’s culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment.”³ It is thus the extremes of their self-perception and conduct toward others that distinguish personality-disordered individuals from those with milder traits.⁴

The subsequent sections present criminal typologies based on current behavioral science and psychological insight into personality and psychopathology.⁵ Tactically, such a formulation can be useful both for profiling and identifying criminal suspects and for developing targeted interrogation strategies for gathering intelligence and other information. Note that a psychological approach to criminal behavior does not imply that such behavior is committed only by mentally disordered persons. Rather, psychological traits occur along a continuum, from normal variations on the theme of human diversity, to extreme aberrations of thought, feeling, and action. Accordingly, a person’s personality may influence the course and direction of an otherwise perfectly rational and volitional choice to commit criminal acts in the name of either ideology, personal gain, or some combination of both.

Personality-Based Interview and Interrogation

Criminal Leaders: Narcissistic and Paranoid Personality.

The Narcissistic personality is characterized by a pattern of grandiosity, sense of entitlement, arrogance, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others’ feelings or opinions. This personality type is the classic cult leaders who is convinced of their own authority and infallibility and believes he is “above the law” because of what he perceives to be his special powers of perception, insight, and judgment in matters of absolute truth and justice. These persons are often engagingly charismatic and able to ensnare impressionable devotees with their unshakable confidence, conviction of infallibility, and infectious zeal for the cause. These are the criminals who give the orders and expect followers to obey without question.

The *paranoid personality* is characterized by a pattern of pervasive distrust and suspiciousness, so that others’ actions and motives are almost invariably interpreted as deceptive, persecutory, or malevolent. Aside from the narcissistic personality type discussed above, the paranoid personality type represents the other main group of extremist organization leaders. Indeed, it is not uncommon for such leaders to combine the mental elements of both the narcissistic and paranoid personality types. A paranoid is unlike the “pure” narcissist, who primarily wants to be liked and admired. Instead, the paranoid leader’s philosophy is more likely to have a racial or religious exclusionary focus as well as a darkly conspiratorial tinge.

The paranoid may be the most dangerous type of criminal or extremist group leader because perceived external threats and the group’s mission justify committing any kind of violent act to further his dogmatic religious or political philosophy. Thus, terrorist acts against perceived religious infidels, political rivals, or racial inferiors are justified as perfectly legitimate defenses of the faith, social structure, or ethnic purity. As such violent acts continue, the world actually does come to hate the extremist group and everyone connected with it, thus confirming the paranoid’s conspiracy theory.

Paranoid subjects are not likely to alter their fixed beliefs, which at times may attain a delusional quality, thus rendering them impervious to logic or intimidation. During questioning, they will typically either give interviewers the silent treatment or pelt them with a rambling philosophical diatribe. The best an investigator may be able to do is piece together some coherent threads of fact from the paranoid that can later be corroborated.

Narcissistic underbosses or lieutenants may cooperate with law enforcement authorities if they can be persuaded that their own superior knowledge or talent has been squelched by less worthy leaders who have unfairly thwarted their rise to power in the group. Potential narcissistic leaders may be convinced that even greater fame and notoriety can be achieved by using their gifts in the service of a new noble cause, such as the courageous crime fighter or antiterrorism crusader. The key is to allow the narcissist to perceive a new and improved outlet for his own self-importance that involves cooperation with the authorities. Act impressed—narcissists love to “blow their own horn”, and if allowed to hold forth uninterrupted during the initial open-ended phase of the interview, they may ultimately reveal a great deal of information.

True Believers and Cold Deceivers: Borderline and Antisocial Personalities

Borderline personalities exhibit a pattern of erratic and intense relationships, alternating between over-idealization and devaluation of others; self-damaging impulsiveness; emotional instability, including inappropriately intense anger and/or depressive mood swings and suicide attempts; persistent identity disturbance in self-image and interpersonal relationships; and a chronic feeling of emptiness that may lead to stimulation-seeking through provocation or escalation of conflict. Initially, borderlines may form ferociously powerful allegiances to group leaders and their ideologies. Even though the erratic nature of their attachments makes them unreliable long-term loyalists, their intervals of intense devotion to the cause, and willingness to take great risks in its service, may make them useful—and expendable—functionaries for dangerous terrorist or criminal operations.

The changeability of the borderline personality’s attachments may work to the advantage of law enforcement authorities should he become disillusioned with the group’s ideals, and especially if he feels slighted by the leader. If this occurs, their fierce devotion may turn to rabid resentment and they will come to loathe the group with the same intensity with which they once adored it. This transitional juncture is when authorities should step in and convince the borderline that his cooperation will “right the wrong” that has been done to him. If, during the rapport-building phase and throughout the interview, an investigator can form and maintain a strong bond with the subject, this may encourage him to reveal intimate details of the group’s plans and activities because he now feels the investigator is “on his side.”

The interviewer must not be patronizing, however, because the borderline may later turn on the interviewer with equal intensity if he feels misused or rejected. Several up-and-down cycles of this pattern may occur in the course of intelligence gathering, which will prove maddeningly frustrating to interviewers who want to gather factual information quickly. In addition, because of the borderline personality’s emotional instability, they are at risk for impulsive suicide and thus should be kept under careful observation while detained.

The *antisocial personality* exhibits a pattern of consistent disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others. The antisocial is typically associated with impulsive conduct; criminal behavior; sexual promiscuity; substance abuse; and an exploitive, parasitic, and/or predatory lifestyle. While possessed of similar qualities of entitlement and self-importance as the

narcissist, antisocial personalities are distinguished by their complete lack of empathy and conscience that allows them to treat other people solely as sources of their own gratification. They may join terrorist or criminal organizations for the sheer thrill of being able to wield gratuitous power over inferior, helpless beings and are often the skilled assassins, enforcers, network operators, or general-purpose organizational “muscle” of the group. Antisocials can be shrewd “con men” and the more intelligent among them may accumulate considerable fiefdoms of wealth and power or rise to positions of great authority within the criminal organization.

Unlike the narcissist or paranoid type, however, for the antisocial member there is no true loyalty—for him, it is all a game. True identification or commitment to a single person or an ideal is alien to his nature; therefore, in a tight spot he will easily betray his compatriots in order to save his own skin. Paradoxically, this most cold-blooded of all the criminal personality types may actually be the easiest to flip in that authorities may exploit his self-serving nature by offering a deal in exchange for intelligence. The investigator must be careful, however, when trying to make such deals because antisocials believe that they are more clever than everyone and thus may try to manipulate authorities by planting misleading information or attempting to use law enforcement to strike back at their own enemies. In short, any information obtained from the anti-social personality should be viewed with total skepticism until it can be independently corroborated.

Although they lack a sense of loyalty, the one thing an antisocial does respect is power. Consequently, sometimes a more forceful interrogatory style may intimidate the antisocial into “spilling his guts.” But this is likely to work only as a short-term strategy because these individuals easily recognize the traditional “good cop-bad cop” routine. And, once the antisocial has exposed any weak chink in an investigator’s tough-guy demeanor, all leverage may be lost, so this is a tactic that should only be used as a last resort.

Loyal Troops and Worker Bees: Avoidant and Dependent Personalities

The *avoidant personality* is characterized by social inhibition, feelings of inadequacy, and hypersensitivity to criticism. The avoidant approaches even relatively neutral interpersonal interactions or confrontations with trepidation. Although it is unlikely that many individuals with this personality pattern would knowingly choose a criminal or violent lifestyle, some members may have initially been attracted to the social justice aspects of the religious and/or political organization as a form of self-therapy or to garner goodwill and admiration from citizens and camaraderie with fellow group members. Indeed, the structure, order, predictability, and ideological certainty offered by many extremist organizations affords the avoidant personality a respite from the moral ambiguities of the outside world, while allowing them to perform a useful function within a group of comrades. Often it is only after they have become enmeshed in the organization that they become fully aware of their violent nature.

Alternatively, in the case of dynastic criminal syndicates like the Mafia, the avoidant personality may simply have been born into the organized crime family and is expected to make his contribution. Avoidant members are unlikely to be on the

front lines but often provide valuable assistance in support and supply roles that do not require physical confrontation.

Earning the investigatory cooperation of avoidant subjects usually occurs in proportion to the amount of security and support that law enforcement authorities can provide to them. Many disillusioned avoidant subjects are relieved to free themselves from the extremist group and will willingly provide information in exchange for a guarantee of safety and acceptance. Thus, a collaborative and supportive interview style is the most productive approach to employ with these types. While it may appear that the avoidant member is holding back information and not cooperating, actually their innate reticence often make⁵ it very difficult for them to articulate a coherent narrative. If this is the case, the interviewer should employ a direct and structured questioning protocol that will allow the avoidant member to reveal their information in a piecemeal fashion that investigators can tie together after the interview has concluded.

The *dependent personality* exhibits a pattern of submissive and clinging behavior that stems from an excessive need for care and nurturance. Whereas avoidant subjects fear people and prefer to avoid them, dependent personalities desperately need others and fear rejection or inadequate support. Dependent personalities look to others for guidance and direction, thus making a charismatic cult leader or omnipotent criminal boss the perfect object of their devotion. As long as independent decision-making is minimized, dependent members of terrorist and criminal groups make good and dedicated soldiers. Dependents are hungry for validation of their usefulness and worthiness, and as such they take their interactions with leaders and other members personally. Group leaders eagerly exploit the dependents' emotional neediness and while their daring is usually not as great as the borderline or antisocial members', the dependent members' loyalty and perseverance is dogged and persistent.

When questioned by authorities, dependent personalities may retain their loyalty to the extremist group because of the sense of meaning, purpose, and validation the group has given them. If the investigator can present evidence or otherwise persuade the dependent that he has never been regarded as a respected group member, but rather has been duped and exploited by the group leaders, his allegiance may be weakened, or conversely, his commitment may become more entrenched in order to protect his fragile self-image.

A more effective strategy may be to assume a supportive, collaborative approach to the interview, similar to that suggested for interviews with avoidant personalities, but in this case, the interviewer should allow the dependent subject to gradually see himself not as a criminal suspect in a hostile environment, but as a valued member of an important new "team" or "family": the law enforcement agency, and the accepting community it represents.

Limelight Seekers and Loose Cannons: Histrionic and Schizoid-Schizotypal Personalities

The *histrionic personality* is characterized by excessive emotionality, attention-seeking behavior, a need for excitement, flamboyant theatricality in speech and behavior, an impressionistic and impulsive cognitive style, and the use of exaggeration to maintain largely superficial relationships in which their emotional needs are met by being admired and

cared for by others. In short, the histrionic personalities are the "showboats" of any organization who enjoy being the center of attention. They are not as willing as other personality types to "get their hands dirty" nor are they as disciplined, so criminal and terrorist organizations may use these individuals as front-men in the legitimate realms of entertainment, the media, business, or politics to make their case public or to infiltrate mainstream organizations. However, the histrionics' hunger for recognition may eclipse their loyalty to the group, thus drawing too much attention to the group's activities and making them an expendable liability rather than a "public relations" or "insider" asset. In addition, histrionic members may be the most likely type to drop out when "it's just no fun anymore" thus become an expendable liability.

The histrionics' appetite for attention is an advantage to law enforcement authorities, who may be able to barter the promise of heroic media exposure for valuable information on the extremist group. Thus, similar to the narcissist, the promise of positive public attention, combined with credible security against retaliation from the group, may render the histrionic individual a cooperative subject for law enforcement. As stated earlier, however, any information once again should be independently corroborated, due to the histrionic personality's tendency for embellishment and self-aggrandizement.

The central characteristics of both *schizoid* and *schizotypal personalities* include avoidance of others, severe deficiencies in social skills, generalized withdrawal from life, and sometimes impairment in perceptual and cognitive skills. The *schizoid personality* is detached from social interaction and possesses a restricted range of emotional expression. They are perfectly happy being left to themselves. The *schizotypal personality* shows more serious disturbances of thinking, possibly in the form of delusions, and exhibits bizarre behavior. These two personality disorders represent points on a continuum that ranges from schizoid to schizotypal to outright schizophrenia, the latter of which is characterized by severe distortions of thought, perception, and action, including delusions and hallucinations. In fact, schizoid and schizotypal personality disorders may episodically deteriorate into psychotic states, especially under stressful conditions.

While such individuals are not typically joiners, the unstable identity structure of many schizoids and schizotypals may lead them on philosophical and spiritual quests that end up in their joining social, political and/or religious movements with criminal extremist ties. They will be the "oddballs" of the group who mainly keep to themselves, but may show fierce commitment if the movement's philosophy appeals to their idiosyncratic world view. However, they may have a tendency to deteriorate and become delusional under prolonged, intense stress, and are then more likely to become an expendable liability to the group.

If the goals and beliefs of the terrorist organization are in sync with the schizoid or schizotypal's idiosyncratic world-view, these individuals may be as stubbornly resistant as the paranoid member to betray the group. Even where they choose to cooperate with authorities, the sometimes bizarre and delusional nature of the information they provide may compromise its validity and usefulness. Encouraging a free narrative will likely yield an incoherently rambling stream-of-consciousness or a rigidly obsessive reiteration of key ideas or phrases. Instead, a firm and directed interview approach may be the most effective in eliciting information and obtaining an

swers by focusing the schizoid member's attention on simple, precise questions. These queries should be designed to yield specific, concrete bits of information that can then be painstakingly fitted together to create a coherent narrative of useful information and intelligence.

Acknowledgement

Laurence Miller, PhD is a clinical and forensic psychologist, and an independent consultant to several law enforcement agencies in the South Florida area. He is a forensic examiner for the Palm Beach County Court, and an instructor at the Criminal Justice Institute of Palm Beach Community College. He can be reached at (561) 392-8881 or at docmilphd@aol.com.

References

- ¹ Hacker, F. (1976). *Crusaders, Criminals and Crazyies: Terror and Terrorism in Our Time*. New York: Norton.
- June, D.L. (1999). *Introduction to Executive Protection*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Lyman, M.D. & Potter, G.W. (2003). *Organized Crime*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Pitcavage, M. (2003). Domestic extremism: Still a potent threat. *The Police Chief*, August, pp. 32-35.
- Ronczkowski, M.R. (2003). *Terrorism and Organized Hate Crime: Intelligence Gathering, Analysis, and Investigation*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Scoville, D. (2003). The enemies within. *Police Magazine*, September, pp. 44-50.
- Silke, A. (2003) (Ed.). *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Smith, B.L. (1994). *Terrorism in America: Pipe Bombs and Pipe Dreams*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Strentz, T. (1988). A terrorist psychological profile. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 57(4), pp. 13-19.
- ² Bull, R. & Milne, R. (1999). *Investigative Interviewing: Psychology and Practice*. New York: Wiley.
- Sandoval, V.A. (2003). Strategies to avoid interview contamination. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, October, pp. 1-12.
- Zulawski, D.E. & Wicklander, D.E. (1993). *Practical Aspects of Interview and Interrogation*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- ³ American Psychiatric Association (1994). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.). Washington DC: APA.
- ⁴ Millon, T. & Davis, R. (2000). *Personality Disorders in Modern Life*. New York: Wiley.
- Sperry, L. (1995). *Handbook of the Diagnosis and Treatment of the DSM-IV Personality Disorders*. New York: Brunner-Mazel.
- ⁵ Miller, L. (1990). *Inner Natures: Brain, Self, and Personality*. New York: St. Martins Press.
- Miller, L. (1998). *Shocks to the System: Psychotherapy of Traumatic Disability Syndromes*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Miller, L. (2003a). Personalities at work: Understanding and managing human nature on the job. *Public Personnel Management*, 32, 419-433.
- Miller, L. (2003b). Police personalities: Understanding and managing the problem officer. *The Police Chief*, May, pp. 53-60.
- Miller, L. (in press). *Practical Police Psychology: Behavioral Science for Effective Law Enforcement*. Springfield: Charles C Thomas.
- ⁶ Bohm, J. & Alison, L. (2001). An exploratory study in methods of distinguishing destructive cults. *Psychology, Crime, and Law*, 7, 133-165.
- ⁷ Meloy, J.R. & McEllistrem, J.E. (1998). Bombing and psychopathy: An integrative review. *Journal of Forensic Science*, 43, 556-562.

questions

The following questions are based on information in this *Training Key*. Select the one best answer for each question.

1. Which of the following statements is *false*?

- (a) *Humans guard their “territory” and often band together with comrades to protect against “outsiders.”*
- (b) *Criminal organizations can be divided into two primary groups: ideologically driven organizations and mercenary driven organizations.*
- (c) *Mercenary driven organizations include most domestic and international terrorist groups.*
- (d) *None of the above.*

2. Which of the following statements is *true*?

- (a) *Personality “traits” are characterized as personality disorders when they become harmful to oneself or others.*
- (b) *The narcissistic personality is characterized by a sense of entitlement, arrogance, and a need for admiration.*
- (c) *The narcissistic personality is the classic cult leader.*
- (d) *All of the above.*

3. Which of the following statements is *false*?

- (a) *The paranoid personality may be the least dangerous type of criminal or extremist group leader.*
- (b) *During questioning, the paranoid will typically either give interviewers the silent treatment or pelt them with a rambling philosophical diatribe.*
- (c) *A collaborative and supportive interview style is most productive for dealing with avoidant personality types.*
- (d) *The histrionic personality type is the “showboat” of any organization.*

answers

1. (c) Mercenary driven organizations are involved in crime purely for the monetary gain, such as Mafia-type organizations or drug cartels.
2. (d) All of the statements are true.
3. (a) The paranoid personality may be the most dangerous type of criminal or extremist group leader.

have you read. . . . ?

“Fundamentals of Interviewing,” *Training Key* #268, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Alexandria, VA 22314

This document provides an overview of traditional and time tested interview and interrogation techniques.

