

Sipping Coffee with a Serial Killer: On Conducting Life History Interviews with a Criminal Genius

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As part of my Ph.D. research on criminal genius, I conducted 44 semi-structured interviews. One of the 44 subjects, in particular, stood out. This noteworthy individual claimed that he had killed 15 people. His story was particularly interesting because – unlike most social research involving serial killers – he claimed that he had never been arrested or convicted for his homicides. Compelled by his account, I met with this subject on five additional occasions, and gradually compiled his criminal life history. Ethical and legal considerations limited inquiry into several dimensions of this subject's life history, but over time, an interesting and richly textured narrative emerged. This article first describes the life experiences of this offender and then describes the methodological choices that shaped the research. Because criminologists almost never establish research access with offenders of this kind, his story – articulated here in the form of a criminal life history – is a valuable contribution to social science literature. Key words: Genius, Elite, IQ, Crime, Murder, Interview, Life History, Self-Report, Access, and Ethics

An Introduction to the Study of Criminal Genius

Official criminal statistics and self-report studies traditionally support the claim that the average criminal offender has a slightly subnormal IQ score – about 92, or eight points less than the population average (Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977). However, because criminologists have historically focused their research on vulnerable populations such as juveniles or prison inmates (Barnes & Teeters, 1959), almost nothing is known about the patterns of criminal behavior among gifted adults with exceptional cognitive abilities (Blackburn, 1993). Indeed, prior to this study, no criminological data had ever been gathered on adult offenders with IQ scores in the genius range.

Intrigued by this enigmatic topic, I studied the crimes of geniuses – offenses committed by people with IQ scores of 132 or higher (Simonton, 1994). Because I was trying to measure offending that did not necessarily result in arrests or convictions, official statistics would not suffice. Similarly, because I was interested in some offenses that did not produce knowing victims (i.e., consensual “victimless” crimes or crimes in which the victim is unaware that he or she has been victimized), victimization statistics would not suffice. Thus, I relied upon the self-report questionnaire (Huizinga & Elliott, 1986; Thornberry & Krohn, 2000) to inventory the offenses of my subjects. The self-report instrument is one of the only means to effectively study hidden offending (Hood &

Sparks, 1970). Using a newly designed self-report questionnaire, I collected extensive self-report data from 424 subjects in three different groups of geniuses:

1. Members of the International Society for Philosophical Enquiry [ISPE], an international elite high IQ society with a 150 IQ [99.9 percentile] admissions threshold
2. Undergraduate and graduate students at prestigious American and British universities
3. High IQ inmates incarcerated in American and British correctional facilities.

Sampling from these groups allowed me to tap all three categories of genius described by Towers (1990): the outsider (the gifted individual, who joins a high IQ society to find the mental stimulation that he or she cannot find through professional or social avenues), the conformist (the gifted individual, who finds sufficient mental stimulation through work and peers), and the dropout (the gifted individual, who cannot or will not abide by the norms and laws of society).

The questionnaire included 17 demographic questions, 72 different offense items (ranging in seriousness from the abuse of work privileges to homicide committed outside wartime), and asked subjects about the books, movies, and famous figures that had shaped their lives. Along with the self-report questionnaire, I also distributed the Eysenck Personality Scales [EPS], collecting data on key personality variables such as extraversion and psychoticism (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1996). Because the members of the ISPE were located all over the world, I distributed my questionnaires through international postal services (Scott, 1961).

The purpose of the research was to gather exploratory data about the crimes of genius (Oleson, 1998, in press). More concretely, I wanted to answer four principal research questions:

1. For each of the 72 listed offense items, what percent of those sampled had committed the offense [the prevalence rate] and how many offenses had each offender committed [the incidence rate]?
2. For each of the 72 listed items, how many offenses had led to an arrest, and how many of those had led to a conviction?
3. Were there significant relationships between patterns of offending and either demographic or personality characteristics?
4. What themes or patterns emerged in the descriptions that geniuses gave of their offending?

The heart of my study was quantitative: I recorded the offenses, arrests, and convictions of 424 subjects. I measured the prevalence and incidence of their offending and gathered their demographic information. I swam in numbers and was awash in statistics. But, I did not want my study to be a dry recitation of crime rates and correlations. Numbers and statistics alone could not capture the social realities of the offenses that I was documenting (Bryman, 1988). To do so, I needed qualitative results. I needed to write my subjects' stories, to describe their thinking and feeling, and to convey

some of the sensual aspects of their crimes. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1960), Agee wrote:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement. . . . a piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point. (p. 12-13)

Thrilled by Agee's vision of what research can be, I wanted my readers to actually hear the hoarse report of gunshots, to actually smell the stench of gunpowder and blood, and to actually feel the adrenaline-fueled tingling of "getting away with it" when I wrote about my subjects' offenses. I wanted to seize up what Katz (1988) called the "moral and sensual attractions of doing evil", and I was even interested in the idea of using novels, films, poetry, and artwork to write my dissertation (Brearley, 2000). But, I was justifiably anxious about deviating from the tried-and-true path of routinized quantitative analyses of survey data. More than once, I had been cautioned against taking an unorthodox approach in my dissertation (Smith, 1990), and I knew other graduate students, who had actually failed their viva voce examinations for ignoring academic conventions.

So, I settled for conducting semi-structured interviews with 44 subjects (Brenner, Brown, & Canter, 1985). I purposively selected interview subjects (Jupp, 1989), trying to gather qualitative data across the entire spectrum of offending. I visited an incarcerated child molester, talking with him for two full days, and interviewed a retired gentleman, who claimed to have never committed any of my 72 listed offenses – not even abusing work privileges or hedging on his taxes. I interviewed a marijuana harvester, an armed robber, and a car thief. Another man had once been on the FBI's ten most wanted list, and yet another had been arrested for building bombs in preparation for a "war against society" (Oleson, 1998). All 44 of the interviews were fascinating. Still, the interviews that I conducted with the subject I called "Mr. X" stood out from the others, intriguing me.

Criminologists sometimes see shadowy reflections of their own personalities in their research subjects and have occasionally written about a feeling of "there but for the grace of God go I" (e.g., Matheson, n.d.). When I met with the subject I called Mr. X, I was overwhelmed by the sentiment. Mr. X, who was not much older than I was, had been raised in a similar family environment and had been educated in some of the same gifted education programs as me. This made it somewhat easier to empathize with him and to establish a strong sense of rapport (Berk & Adams, 2001). It also made it frightfully easy to imagine myself in his shoes and to picture myself making the same choices that he had unwittingly made. In trying to understand what had led Mr. X to embrace crime, I was – I believe – simultaneously trying to understand what had insulated me from it (Patton, 2002, p. 11-12).

The six interviews that I conducted with Mr. X generated a wealth of qualitative data. Because research access to elite groups (like people with genius-level IQ scores) is often incredibly difficult to negotiate (e.g., Fussell, 1983; Nader, 1972), criminologists know virtually nothing about the crimes of the elite. In those rare cases where

criminologists do study the crimes of the elite, researchers almost always study known crime – offenses that have resulted in the arrest and conviction of the offender (e.g., Arnold & Hagan, 1992; Douglas & Olshaker, 1996; Flower, 1995; Kuntstler, 1961; Leopold, 1958). It is exceptionally rare to find an elite, who will discuss undetected offenses. To find an elite, who is willing to discuss undetected offenses – including murder, – is unprecedented. The criminal life history of Mr. X breaks new ground in criminology and raises a number of important issues for qualitative methodologists.

I will first recount the criminal life history of Mr. X. His account is broken into sections set off with evocative epigrams drawn from literature and philosophy that help to set the tone of his story. In the final section of the article (“Coda”), I will describe several of the methodological issues that shaped the interviews and will discuss the implications of the research.

Meeting Mr. X

He walked into the café where we arranged to meet. He had come straight from the office and was still wearing the starched shirt and silk tie that constituted his corporate uniform. At 31 years old, he was one of those young urban professionals, who rose from the ranks of the X Generation (Coupland, 1991) to succeed in the cutthroat job markets of California during the dot-com 1990’s.

He dressed in conservative labels, wore an old Rolex, scuffed, expensive leather shoes, and drove a nondescript luxury sedan. He was exceptionally bright, articulate, and had been educated at a prestigious university. Although he never actually joined, his college entrance [SAT] scores would have qualified him for membership in Mensa, the high IQ society (Hodges, 1996). He had also scored a 162 on a self-administered IQ test, placing him in the 99.995 percentile (Jensen, 1980), catapulting him well beyond the 132 IQ minimum threshold of “genius” (Simonton, 1994).

We met on six separate occasions. He had fascinating insights during our first interview, but he remained suspicious, aloof, and guarded. During the second interview, however, he began to describe his offenses and the antecedents that (he believed) led him to the commission of these crimes. By gradually collecting the details of this man’s life throughout the six interviews, I was able to assemble his life history (Atkinson, 1998; Sarbin, 1986; Shaw, 1930). It was a remarkable history.

Indeed, Mr. X was not entirely the affable genius he seemed to be. X had been shot three times. X also acknowledged smuggling thousands of kilograms of cocaine into the United States.

Could this explain why, at 31, he had the eyes of a fifty-year-old?

Furthermore, X claimed that he had killed 15 people. Such claims are not unprecedented: Gessen (1996) described not knowing whether or not to believe the Moscow office manager, who claimed to be a freelance killer in the booming crime-markets of the former Soviet republics. Crowther (2001) described meeting a taxi driver, who claimed to be a former gem dealer for the mob with six hits under his belt. Porterfield (1946) reported a killer in the groundbreaking self-report study he conducted with university students at a Texas Christian College. I was certainly not the first to face such a claim, but if his story was true, then X had killed more people than Nightstalker,

Richard Ramirez, Son of Sam killer, David Berkowitz, or Boston Strangler, Albert DeSalvo (Hickey, 1991; Jones & Collier, 1993).

While “serial killer” is a term typically used to describe individuals compelled to kill for sexualized power-seeking reasons (Egger, 1998; Hickey, 1991; Norris, 1988; Wilson & Seaman, 1990), if X’s claim was true, he qualified as a serial killer within the law enforcement taxonomy proposed by Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, and Ressler, “Serial murder is defined as three or more separate events in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling-off period between homicides” (1992, p.21).

In addition to murder and drug smuggling, X admitted to illegally manipulating bank accounts, forging official documents, fencing stolen goods and automobiles, and perjuring himself under oath.

And he’d gotten away with it.

Genius: Growing Up Different

“It is not easy for mental giants who neither hate nor intend to injure their fellow to realize that nevertheless their fellows hate mental giants and would like to destroy them”

G. B. Shaw, 1930, p. 5

Farrington (1994) identified several antecedent risk factors that appear to predispose young people to juvenile delinquency and adult criminality, including low intelligence, socio-economic deprivation, and poor parental supervision. The stereotype of the common criminal (Sarbin, 1969) – the young man calcified by years of deprivation and abuse into a remorseless criminal – appears to be, at least in part, supported by criminological research (e.g., Agnew, 1992; Shaw & McKay, 1972).

But X’s childhood could not explain him. X sprang neither from slum nor broken home but grew up in the bosom of a nurturing family. His father, a religious man, was a deeply principled civil servant, who had worked hard and raised his son to do so. His mother had worked as a schoolteacher but had retired when X’s sister was born. Their home had been comfortably middle-class, and X’s parents were unusually dedicated to their roles as caregivers. Disapproving of harsh or erratic discipline, they had taken great pains to foster feelings of competence and worth in their children. X still spoke of his parents with real fondness and referred to his boyhood home as a safe and protected place. He spoke of it fondly, “I can always go home.”

As a child, X demonstrated precocious maturation. He spoke, read, and wrote earlier than most children. When he was six, a teacher placed a series of numbers on the classroom chalkboard. X intuitively substituted letters for the digits, cracked the code, and raised his hand to read the message aloud.

Being such a bright boy had earned X the accolades of his teachers, but his precocity also came with a cost. When he was nine, X qualified for a gifted education program. The only boy in his class to qualify, he clearly remembered the hardship of leaving his peers behind. At once, he was stigmatized for his differences, branded as an outsider (Becker, 1963; Wilson, 1956). His peers immediately began to tease him about his new status, and X began to realize that his prodigious intellectual gifts could also be alienating and isolating (Hollingworth, 1942; Towers, 1990).

Margolin (1993) has described gifted children as “goodness personified.” Whereas early eugenicists retouched photos of impoverished “feebleminded” children, darkening their eyes to conjure evil from simplicity (Gould, 1981), the gifted were presented as neatly groomed and well-dressed little angels.

Hirschi’s control theory provides additional support for the notion of the angelic gifted child: “The academically competent boy is more likely to do well in school and more likely as a result to like school. The boy who likes school is less likely to be delinquent” (1969, p. 115). But by the time he was ten, X had figured out that “being the smart guy was bad.”

Being smart wasn’t smart at all. It meant social isolation and persecution as a nerd or a geek (Richardson, 1993). Accordingly, X cultivated a taste for heavy metal music, began to dress in black t-shirts and blue jeans, and downplayed his intellectual abilities at every available opportunity. Although his parents worried that X might become involved with drugs or delinquency, they remained confident in his values suspecting that it was all merely a phase.

It was. When X was fourteen, his father was transferred from a Midwestern city to a small California town. Concurrent with that move, X made the decision to re-invent himself as a totally different person. He exchanged heavy metal t-shirts for the garish colors and thin neckties that characterized the early new wave counter-culture (Brake, 1985). In so doing, he made a considerable impact on the sleepy California community. Girls liked this new boy; boys competed against him. X had learned that there were many ways to be different. One could be smart without being a nerd. One had only to choose one’s battles.

He chose them carefully. Once he reached high school at the age of fifteen, X was an honor student, averaging a 3.6 grade-point-average on a 4.0 scale. But, his teachers were indifferent. “No one cared,” he said flatly. One teacher, outraged that X dared to question her authority, constantly humiliated him in class, desperate to teach this impertinent teenager a lesson that he’d never forget. His reflections on school mirrored Maria Montessori’s condemnation of a stultifying education:

Children are repressed in the spontaneous expression of their personality till they are almost like dead beings. In such a school, the children, like butterflies mounted on pins, are fastened each to his place, the desk, spreading the useless wings of barren and meaningless knowledge which they have acquired. (in Sanderlin, 1979, p. 70)

His teachers failed to cultivate his aptitudes, and X grew bored and impatient. Socially, he still struggled against the stigma of being too smart or too good. Although a helpful older girl had walked him through his first sexual encounter at fifteen, adding a bit of a swagger to X’s step, he still felt nervous around girls and remained uncomfortable with the widespread underage drinking that plagued the community. X remained – fundamentally – the same bright [but awkward] angel that he had been at six years old.

He would soon lose that innocence.

A Chance Encounter

“The truth is that every intelligent man, as you know, dreams of being a gangster and of ruling over society by force alone”

Camus, 1957, p. 42

At seventeen years old, while a junior in high school, X went to visit a friend in a Los Angeles suburb. His friend suggested going to a nightclub that didn't enforce the twenty-one-year-old drinking age, and X reluctantly agreed to the idea. Arriving at the club, X realized that it wasn't what he had anticipated – it wasn't a “nightclub” at all – it was a sleazy bar. Still, he'd arranged to meet his friend inside, so he ignored his apprehension and went inside.

X said that it was immediately apparent just how out of place he was. The patrons of the bar were working class men, who came to drink and to forget their problems. Underage and dressed in flashy clothes, X stood out like a lamb in the company of wolves. And one of the wolves spotted him immediately. An antagonistic man in his late thirties, drunk on bottled disappointment, staggered up to this lamb at the bar.

X said that he surveyed the room for his friend, but it was filled with unfamiliar faces. The drunkard towered over X and laughed at his clothes. He made fun of his age. Growing abusive, he began to shove X's shoulders, calling him names, trying to provoke a fight. “Leave me alone,” X pleaded, trying to conceal his rising fear. The drunk slurred, “What'samatter?” X looked for an understanding eye, but the other patrons studiously ignored the situation not wanting to get involved (Rosenthal, 1999).

Then there was a flash of movement. X glimpsed a large Italian man walk through the room with surprising speed and agility. Before X completely understood what was happening, the mysterious stranger had seized the bully by the hair and bounced his face off of the bar. X said he heard the distinctive snap of a nose breaking. The Italian then half-dragged, half-carried the drunk to the door and expelled him into the parking lot. The patrons ignored it. No one breathed a word.

X remained visibly shaken, and his new benefactor tried to put him at ease. He asked X, “So, can I buy you a drink?” and without waiting for an answer, ordered X a beer and a shot of whiskey. Unaccustomed to the bite of hard alcohol, X winced as he swallowed the whiskey but washed it back with the beer. The stranger introduced himself as Vincent, and the two began to talk. X told Vincent that he was a university student. Although Vincent's eyes sparkled at the lie, he did not contradict X.

Hours passed, and X's friend never arrived. After midnight, they gave up waiting. Vincent took X to a nearby all-night diner and bought them both breakfast. When they rose to leave, Vincent tossed a \$100.00 bill onto the table. X, accustomed to teenager's wages, was overwhelmed by such extravagance. He didn't know who Vincent was, but he was anxious to find out. So, when Vincent offered X his business card, encouraging him to telephone the next time he was in Los Angeles, X tucked it safely away. He intended to do exactly that.

The Art of Murder – Learning to Kill

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass darkly”
1 Corinthians 13:11-12

Months later, X returned to L.A., visiting several of the universities to which he was applying. He also contacted Vincent [now “Vince”] and arranged to meet Vince and some of Vince’s friends for dinner. When they collected X in a high end Mercedes, he found himself wondering again just who this mysterious Italian was.

Vince introduced X to his wife, Jill, and to Daniel, an employee in his security company. Jill was exceptionally pretty, a model, and B-movie actress. X had never seen any of her films, but this neither surprised nor bothered her. Daniel was as ugly as Jill was beautiful, a bull of a man with a paranoid intensity. X later learned that this had something to do with Daniel’s expansive cocaine habit.

X said that between visits to the campuses, he spent a great deal of time with Vince. X was keenly interested in Vince’s money, his fast-track lifestyle, and his enigmatic business associates. Vince, in turn, had been interested in X’s mind. Vincent was an irreligious man, a pragmatist in everything he did; X, on the other hand, was governed by deeply held Catholic values. Vince was intrigued, both by X’s beliefs and by the fact that X didn’t judge others by those beliefs.

X began spending more time in Los Angeles, visiting Vincent and Jill on weekends, staying in their expensive home, and assisting Vince with the security company. He also met the other regulars in Vincent’s home: Carlo, Mario, and Bunny. Carlo had been Vince’s close friend since childhood. Like X, he was an ardent Catholic but had a fiery temper. Mario had a phenomenal head for business, but he had no sense for people. Both Carlo and Mario shared Vince’s dark Italian features and massive physique. X said that Vince, Carlo, and Mario each stood well over six feet high and weighed close to two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. Bunny’s real name was Carol. X said that when he met her, she was working as a stripper and dating one of Vince’s employees. She had a serious cocaine habit and [usually] a razorblade wit but somehow seemed to always have a kind word for X.

X was slowly seduced into crime (Katz, 1988). He recounted the first time Vince allowed him to carry a handgun. X described it as a coming of age moment, vital, like a religious confirmation. The rigging for a shoulder holster had been draped across a chair in the security company’s office, and Vince suggested that X try it on. That night, for the first time, X wore a concealed pistol. It was all a fantastic game. Vince and the boys appreciated X’s quick mind and liked the fact he didn’t permit himself to be afraid. Only eight years older than X, Vince took X on like a little brother, inducting him into the mysteries of his lifestyle.

X finally learned that Vince was a career criminal, who managed a large-scale cocaine smuggling operation and who also dealt opportunistically in stolen cars, assault rifles, and military ordnance. Although Vince dressed his operation in some of the trappings of the mafia and talked about having individuals “whacked” or being “made guys,” the 1983 L.A. cocaine market was a capitalist free-for-all, and Vince’s crew had nothing to do with the mafia. Their security operation did a legitimate business, but

Vince's security company was primarily a front for smuggling. Carlo, Mario, and Danny functioned as Vincent's principal agents distributing to approximately 30 upper-level coke dealers. They moved a good product, purchasing up to 100 kilograms each week, and making their operation one of the largest in L.A. at the time. They bought from two large South American cartels, paying between 5 and 25 thousand dollars per kilogram of eight-step grade cocaine and selling the smuggled product for anywhere between 20 and 50 thousand dollars per kilogram.

X asked Vince's wife what she thought of this. Jill was captivated by the life of easy money and glamorous appearances. She told X that Vince was "very powerful and scary, but not to me." In fact, she found it pleasing that Vince would be willing to kill for her. In her eyes, it was proof of his love and his loyalty.

The remark proved to be prophetic.

One night, X and Vincent drove up the coast from Los Angeles to a nightclub for an evening out. As they left the club, on their way down an alley to the parking lot, two small-time criminals tried to rob them. The first robber pointed a pistol at Vincent's face, but instead of handing over his wallet, Vince knocked the gun away and attacked the man. The second robber began to reach for his weapon. X was wearing a shoulder holster, and this time it was not a game; he drew more quickly than the robber, hesitated for an instant, then pulled the trigger, firing a single hollow-point bullet.

"There was a lot of blood," X said, remembering it. A red mist clouded the air where the man had fallen. X was certain he'd killed him, since at that time he believed, "If you get shot, you die." In truth, X had merely wounded the man. But the moment remained strange and unreal for X even as he told me about it – like swimming in a dream –, and he could scarcely remember Vincent driving them home. X said that he could still see the image that had burned into his memory – the robber falling back while the bloody mist hung heavily in the air. X said that he was sick for hours. Even when there was nothing left to vomit, he wretched with dry heaves. And when X slept, he was plagued by panicky nightmares that "they" were coming after him.

Vince knew that this had been difficult for his young friend, so he exercised his considerable talent for rationalizing. He blamed the victim (Sykes & Matza, 1957) and told X that "the guy was so stupid he'd gotten everything he'd had coming to him." He assured X that the man had lived but made a joke of it and told X that next time he'd be a better shot and that next time he'd make a real kill. Like a proud father, Vincent told X that he was now "made" and rewarded him by calling in an attractive prostitute.

X said that he remembered a couple days of severe guilt, of wrestling with the shooting, which he describes as "shedding his belief system." But, he knew the next time it would not be so difficult.

X also fell in love with Bunny. X had watched with amazement as she kicked cocaine on her own, and late one night, she told X about the wicked stepfather, who got her addicted to cocaine at fifteen, who used to trade lines of coke for sex with her, and who had raped her on those occasions when she didn't feel like trading. She told X about running away from home at seventeen years of age, coming to L.A., and doing soft-core pornography, modeling for the advertisements in the back of men's magazines.

Bunny had a quiet strength about her and aspired to an apple-pie life of husband, children, and home. X said that she was not afraid of anything and became a kind of

“house mother,” frowning on drug use and initiating a regular “vest check” for body armor when anyone went out on business.

X was simultaneously still in high school, skipping an extraordinary amount of school, traveling to Los Angeles on the weekends, and using extracurricular academic projects to conceal his double-life. And while X was falling in love with Bunny, he was falling out of love with a girl named Lindsey. She [and a few of his other friends] knew that X had become involved in something questionable, but they had no idea how serious things had become.

To remain sane, X dissociated the two warring aspects of his identity, living as an increasingly distracted high school senior during the week and as a foot soldier in Vince’s crew on weekends and stolen days. Even at the time of our interviews, when X thought of his time with Vince and Bunny, it was very difficult for X to connect it back to his home life.

X had split his two worlds like Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1994). And Hyde was taking over.

Little Big Man

“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”

Proverbs 16:18

It had become clear both to X and to the boys that Vincent was grooming X for lieutenant status. He constantly asked X questions about people, challenging him to identify the undercover policemen or to pick out the one in a crowd, who couldn’t be trusted. X recalled one occasion where he managed to pick out a cop, only to later learn that he was a dirty cop, already on Vincent’s payroll. Still, Vince was impressed with X’s keen observations.

Vincent tried to teach X everything. He explained tests to determine the purity of a bag of cocaine and showed him how to conduct currency transactions in Caribbean banks, which border crossings were easy to smuggle product through, how to conceal drugs in an automobile, and how to cross a police checkpoint. An eager pupil, X spent time at the firing range until he could shoot the center ring out of a paper target.

X soaked up his lessons like a thirsty sponge.

Dissociation wasn’t the only psychological aberration X developed. He also developed an invincibility complex. The wealth of new knowledge made X arrogant. X was only eighteen years old, but he paid for breakfasts with hundred dollar bills, carried a concealed pistol, and could access hundreds of thousands of dollars in offshore accounts. He believed that he was invulnerable, and he was certain that Vincent was.

One night, a man pulled a gun on Bunny. X jumped at the gun without thinking, completely oblivious to the risk. X emphasized the point: this was not done out of courage – acting in spite of one’s fear – this was merely the absence of fear.

To maintain appearances for his parents and friends, X decided to enroll at one of the prestigious California universities that had offered him a place. X’s parents were exceedingly proud of their son, but Vincent disapproved. He told X to stop wasting time and to come into business.

X continued to maintain his turbulent double-life, enrolling at the university as an undeclared freshman in September of 1984, driving and sometimes flying to L.A. as his schedule permitted.

But, it was increasingly apparent that X could not continue to maintain the facade of normality. When X's father sat down with his son to fill out the financial aid paperwork required of each incoming student, X had far too much money in his savings account to explain away. X's principled father did not ask where the money had come from, did not want to know, and chose to accept the situation without question. But at the time of our interviews, X still believed that his father knew there was something amiss.

Later that year, when X visited his parent's house during a school holiday, he accidentally left a pistol lying out on his bed. When he came home, his mother asked him to explain. He lied and told her that he was holding it for a friend. She asked him to remove it from their home and nothing more was ever said, although X still wondered if she had suspected something.

X was a disappointing college student. In this, he was not unique: many of the freshmen in X's class struggled to balance required coursework against the newfound freedoms of parties and dating. But, it wasn't parties or young women that made it difficult for X to concentrate; it was the smuggling and the killings.

X was still reluctant to discuss any of his murders in detail. When the subject was raised, his voice trailed off into papery whispers, and he turned his eyes away. He often mumbled. Most of his killings occurred in L.A., although a few took place elsewhere. X insisted that he had killed only when business necessitated it and claimed that the majority of his victims were competitors in the drug trade.

X claimed that he had never killed an innocent individual, though he acknowledged such killings are sometimes required in the underworld. He said in very matter-of-fact tones that such matters are regrettable and that reparations are made whenever possible but that business remains business and casualties are a necessary and acceptable consequence of business. Intrigued, I presented X with Hare's (1980) psychopathy checklist. X checked off most of the items but wondered if these were inborn traits or the consequences of too many hardening events. "Can you learn to be a sociopath?" he asked with a wry smile.

While he did not like discussing the details of his executions, X had applied his own penetrating intellect to the sliding standards of morality that characterized his experience. Killing, according to X, is an exercise in rationalization. He may have been right. According to Sykes and Matza (1957), criminals are not involved in criminality all the time and do not conceive of themselves as "criminals." Offenders drift back and forth between conventional and criminal behavior by invoking five powerful techniques of neutralization: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties.

X employed a similar form of rationalization to reduce the dissonance between his idea of himself [i.e., a good person, a good friend, a good Catholic] and his actions [i.e., killing another human being]. This rationalization allowed him to commit villainous acts without conceiving of himself as a villain. According to X, each time he killed, he convinced himself, "I had to," although the reason that "he had to" grew flimsier and flimsier with each progressive murder. X experienced five discrete stages:

1. Self-defense
2. Defense of others
3. Defense of livelihood
4. Defense of status quo
5. Defense of reputation

It was not just the first shooting that proved difficult for Mr. X. Interestingly, X claims that the first couple of killings in each category were difficult. Whether this incremental model could be valid for all professional killers (Gessen, 1996) or is somehow unique to X is unknown, but it is remarkable that this brilliant man was eventually able to justify murdering another human being to merely safeguard his reputation.

In 1985, when X was busy studying freshman composition, Mario – Vincent’s employee with a head for business but little sense for people – was killed during a transaction that went awry. This precipitated a disastrous cascade of events. Vincent did not make Mario’s execution personal – it remained a matter of business, – but he struck back hard, employing his infamous ten-for-one rule. Vince farmed out several contracts and waited for the bodies to pile up. But, the situation backfired and escalated. Shortly after he had taken out the contracts, Vince was – himself – shot in L.A. Jill pleaded with her husband to retire, to take the small fortune he’d made, and to get out of the business. Vincent took Jill to Italy to recuperate and to discuss the possibility of retiring. Days after arriving, they were shot to death in Naples.

X refused to accept it. He had honestly believed that Vincent was invulnerable and that he couldn’t be stopped. Now Vincent was dead, and X had to come to grips with his own vulnerability. At school, he fell behind in his coursework and failed tests. His professors asked if he was having family problems. X tried to fill Vince’s absence in Los Angeles by assuming responsibility for the boys, but he lacked Vince’s experience, connections, and confidence.

The illusion of invincibility had worn off. Suddenly, X understood just how vulnerable he truly was.

Disintegration

“I managed to erase in my mind all human hope...I called up executioners to bite their gun-butts as I died. I called up plagues, in order to suffocate myself with sand and blood.
Bad luck was my god”

Rimbaud, 1962, p. 3

Very quickly, the ground began to fall away. Scarcely passing his freshman classes, X’s first-year marks were uniformly poor. He retaliated for the deaths of Vincent and Jill, but in so doing, X had to entrust a great deal of responsibility to Danny and Carlo. X simply lacked the time and resources to be the powerful leader that Vincent had been. He turned to Bunny for understanding and emotional support, but she was limited in what she could do for him.

Three days before he turned twenty, while still a college sophomore, X flew to Brazil for a weekend of business. Bunny, Carlo, and Danny accompanied him. Bunny

had just told X she believed she was pregnant, and although X was unsure about their future, he – too – had started imagining an apple-pie existence, with Bunny as his wife. Bunny had given him several birthday presents, and X felt good about the upcoming transaction.

Deciding to take the group out to celebrate, X telephoned California to finalize some business details with an attorney, who worked for the security company, gathered up the drug-money in a briefcase, and after Bunny did her customary vest check, they set off.

X said mirthlessly, “Things just went poorly after that.”

As soon as the group had stepped out the car at the restaurant, they were ambushed. X said that the air was filled with singing bullets and strangled human cries. He couldn’t even tell where the shots were coming from, and before he could react, he had been shot in the chest. He was thrown violently back by the impact of the bullet and hit his head, losing consciousness. The others were systematically killed.

Aftermath

“The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst are
full of passionate intensity”

Yeats, 1983, p. 187

X claimed that he clawed his way out of a Demerol haze only to find himself handcuffed to the rail of a hospital bed. An armed federal policeman in a pressed uniform sat next to the bed. The policeman, seeing that X had awakened, began to ask questions about his identity, his nationality, and the others. When X didn’t reply, the policeman turned on a videotape. A tourist’s tape had been confiscated as evidence – initially, it was footage of a woman on holiday – but when the bursts of automatic gunfire barked out, the camcorder lens jerked, and X saw Danny’s lifeless body next to the car. He saw his own seemingly lifeless body lying nearby. He saw Carlo repeatedly shot, pinwheeling before he collapsed. And he saw Bunny shot once – just once – but fatally, in the head. He watched and wished that he had died beside her.

The policeman repeated his questions, but he sounded miles away. Presumably, the lawyer had set them up. But why? The policeman played the tape, repeated the questions, and played the tape again and again showing X’s friends dying in front of him until X glanced away and noticed the briefcase in a chair across the room. He was still carrying an extraordinary amount of money.

X said that he bought his way out of Brazil. It took most of his cash to bribe the policeman by his bed and nearly all of what remained to pay off the immigration official at the airport. X’s ribs were badly cracked and the flight into Mexico City was excruciating. When he examined his chest in an airport mirror, X found three bruises like radiating stars.

He boarded a redeye flight to L.A. and arrived in the middle of the night without a single piece of baggage, shell-shocked, ragged, and broken. From the airport, X called a college friend, spending a few days recuperating in his apartment before returning to the university.

X’s life had shattered into a thousand jagged shards.

For months, X said that he would awaken from horrible nightmares, reach out for Bunny in the dark, and then remember that all the nightmares were real. X was deeply depressed and when he finally relented and went to see one of the university psychologists, he discovered that he fit most of the criteria for major depression and for post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] (American Psychological Association, 2000). X considered seeking treatment, but the school psychologist made him nervous. She asked too many questions, and X stopped visiting her offices.

X tried hard to put his shadowy life behind him, once again using his dissociative splitting as a safeguard against the depression and PTSD symptoms and applied himself diligently to his studies. His marks improved, and although his grade-point-average remained stubbornly average, X was once again enjoying the process of learning when he graduated from college in 1988.

He worked briefly in retail, then languished for a couple of years in a clerical position and was beginning to consider going to graduate school for a master's degree when he interviewed with the sales department of a large corporation. He accepted a position and worked furiously at it, putting in grueling hours, and working harder than anyone else in his division. Looking back on that time period, X believed that he was probably avoiding the past. X was quickly promoted and rapidly advanced to a managerial position within the company.

At the time of our interviews, X had settled comfortably into his life. He said that he still worked hard at his job, that he was involved with a wonderful woman that he'd dated for two years and suggested that at some point he'd like to go back to school for either a master's or a law degree. Yet, while X claimed that he did not really regret the events of the past, he spoke of them with a grave sadness.

X said that he tries not to think about the past, not to let it haunt him, but sometimes he sees ghosts. Sometimes, X confessed, he still wondered if Vincent was actually dead, if maybe he merely faked his death so that he could retire in safety. X had once believed that Vincent was invulnerable, and he still struggled with that belief. Recently, X told me, he had been driving to work and had spotted a man behind the wheel of a Mercedes. For just a moment, X admitted, he was certain that it was Vincent and that Vincent was smiling.

Coda: After "X" Comes "Why?"

This was our sixth and final interview. I had originally been put in touch with X through a network of snowball sampling (Sudman, 1976) – he had heard about my research from the friend of a friend of a friend of one of the members in my initial sampling pool and thought it sounded interesting. The first time we met, X was exceptionally guarded in what he said. Although he clearly knew a great deal about the inner workings of narcotics trafficking, he spoke exclusively in generalities and abstractions. It was not until our second meeting that he was reassured that I was not an undercover police officer, he began to open up.

At first, I could not understand why he was willing to talk to me. It was easy to understand why I was excited about our meetings. These interviews were unprecedented research, and while I was initially apprehensive about meeting with X [a self-described

killer] in anonymous locations (Williams, Dunlap, Johnson, & Hamid, 2001), the research was worth the risk. Yet, what was X getting out of our meetings? Why would such an intelligent individual knowingly confess to fraud, forgery, smuggling, and drug trafficking? Why would such an intelligent individual admit to murder, a crime for which there is no statute of limitations (California Penal Code § 799) and for which – at least in California – the offender can be executed (California Penal Code § 190(a))?

Gradually, I realized that X was willing to speak with me because he needed to confess. X needed to talk about his history to make sense of his history. Nichols argues that, "Few motives in human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood. Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are known and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters" (1995, p. 9). While I could not absolve X of his sins, and while I was not equipped to provide him psychotherapy, I could listen to his account. Indeed, I wanted to listen to his story.

Furthermore, I could help him try to understand why he had become immersed in an underworld of crime. In this, our interests were closely aligned. I, too, wanted to understand what had transformed a sensitive and precocious adolescent into a dispassionate killer.

X seemed eager to make sense of his experiences, and when I described criminological or psychological theories for him, he demonstrated unusual self-awareness in applying them to his own life. Once I described concepts like post-conventional morality (Kohlberg, 1984) or dissociation (American Psychological Association, 2000) to him, X incorporated these terms into his vocabulary and implemented them in making his confession.

Confessing to me, however, was a risky endeavor for X, for aside from my promise of confidentiality; he had no way of knowing that I would not report him to the police. And as Polsky sagely observed, a researcher's good intentions are not always enough.

If one is effectively to study law-breaking deviants as they engage in their deviance in its natural setting, i.e., outside of jail, he must make the moral decision that in some ways he will break the law himself. He need not be a 'participant observer' and commit the deviant acts under study, yet he has to witness such acts or be taken into confidence about them and not blow the whistle. That is, the investigator has to decide that when necessary he will 'obstruct justice' or be an 'accessory' before or after the fact, in the full legal sense of those terms. He will not be enabled to discern some vital aspects of criminally deviant behavior and the structure of law-breaking subcultures unless he makes such a moral decision, makes the deviants believe him, and moreover convinces them of his ability to act in accord with his decision. The last-mentioned point can perhaps be neglected with juvenile delinquents, for they know that a professional studying them is almost always exempt from police pressure to inform; but adult criminals have no such assurance, and hence are concerned not only with the investigator's

intentions but with his sheer ability to remain a ‘stand-up guy’ under police questioning. (Becker, 1963, p. 171-172)

X’s confession also entailed significant risks for me. I worried that my research data might be seized by the police (Sonenschein, 2001; Traynor, 1996). I had read about Rik Scarce. In 1993, Scarce spent 159 days in jail for refusing to violate the American Sociological Association’s Code of Ethics provisions prohibiting the sharing of confidential research data with law enforcement (Scarce, 1995). Moreover, Scarce was not the only doctoral student to face this dire situation. Richard Leo, another Ph.D. student, had faced an identical dilemma – whether to honor the sociologist’s duty of confidentiality or to comply with the legal mandate of a subpoena (Leo, 1995).

The idea that my notes could be seized or that I, like Scarce, could face contempt charges if I refused to cooperate with a grand jury terrified me because – given the volatile and high-profile content of my research [criminal genius] – such legal compulsion seemed like a very plausible threat.

I implemented proactive measures to eliminate the risk of data seizure (Oleson, 1999). I employed a link-file system (Astin & Boruch, 1970), keeping my subjects’ identifying data firewalled from my research findings, cross-referenced by one file that I kept on an encrypted floppy disk, out of my hands and out of United States jurisdiction.

I studied relevant law trying to ascertain what kind of conduct was permitted and what kind of conduct was prohibited – and constituted obstruction of justice or made one an accessory to crime (Teitelbaum, 1983). I discussed the matter with X, explaining the link-file system to him, demonstrating to him that I was serious about safeguarding his confidentiality, and showing him that even though there was no academic privilege under law, I could be trusted.

I had deliberately structured my interviews with X so that he could contact me by telephone or letter naming a time and meeting place so that I had no viable means of contacting him. I intentionally avoided learning his name, his address, or his place of business. I knew many things about his past but few specifics about his present circumstances. The arrangement protected us both. It protected X from subsequent identification and [theoretically] protected me from legal coercion.

I was especially cautious about the research process because there was a chance [however small] that X would regret talking with me and would hurt me – perhaps even kill me. He seemed like an honorable individual, like the kind of person, who would extend me the same loyalty that I showed him, but on the other hand, as he’d told me before: “business is business.” And, I did know a great deal about his history.

Certainly, if I had been subpoenaed, and if I had provided information to law enforcement authorities, I believe that X might have retaliated against me. To do so would be just in his worldview. So, the remote threat of physical harm further raised the stakes of a subpoena making me doubly diligent about ensuring confidentiality.

Interestingly, the same measures I took to guarantee confidentiality caused me serious difficulties with gatekeepers (Broadhead & Rist, 1976). One well-known high IQ society denied research access on the grounds that its officials would never frustrate a law enforcement investigation. Yet, because I believed in what Polsky wrote, and because I believed that a researcher’s promise of confidentiality trumped a citizen’s duty to comply

with a police investigation, I was sharply denounced by the gatekeepers of this organization as “unethical” and denied research access (Oleson, 1998).

But, I prevailed. I found other subjects, maintained the moral integrity of my research design, and successfully coordinated research interviews with subjects like Mr. X.

It was fascinating research.

At our sixth and final meeting, X asked me if I had enough material and if I had any additional questions. I thought about the interviews that I’d conducted with him. I had already amassed a tremendous amount of information. Although X had [understandably] refused to participate in tape-recorded interviews, I’d managed to effectively transcribe our exchanges. I was careful to keep my focus on X and our conversation and did not try to take verbatim notes (Lofland, 1971), but I’d scratch a few hasty notes during each of our meetings, outlining the flow of the conversation, and noting any important or unusual phrases. Then, after arriving home, I would immediately transcribe the interview as accurately as possible, using the notes as an outline to recreate the interview in my mind.

X knew that I took notes and knew that I went home to transcribe our conversations. He knew that I would include his account in my dissertation and knew that I was interested in writing a research article – this research article – about the process of gathering his life history. He was agreeable to this but would sometimes state that a story or a theme was “off the record.” At that point, I would lay down my pen and listen, disappointed that this aspect of his account would not be documented.

X also asked that I change a small number of identifying details in my notes so that his family and friends would not recognize him if they read the research article. I consulted with him about this and then made those changes.

In general, I believed that X had been very open with me. We had an excellent rapport. He was happy to help me with my research question and was comfortable with the publication of his criminal life story (as long as it did not identify him). I was happy to listen to his story and to try to help him understand the man that he had become. But, frankly, one question nagged me: Was it all true?

Throughout the interviews, I had tried to assess the reliability of X’s story by revisiting the details of his narrative across several interviews. The specifics of his first shooting were consistent the first, second, and the third times we talked about it, which left me convinced that X truly remembered the shooting as he described it.

He’d also brought me a scatter of documentation to verify his story. The printed screen from an Internet IQ test claimed a 162 IQ. Several yellowed newspaper clippings referred to the shootings he’d described. Still, I had no way of knowing that it was X, who took the IQ test. I had no way of knowing that he didn’t just make up stories to fit the newspaper accounts. Although the documentation further collaborated his account (Jupp, 1989), it remained a rather fantastic story. Some aspects of his narrative simply seemed a little too neat, a little too tidy.

At the end of our final interview, I bluntly asked X if he was telling the truth.

“I’ve been as honest as I can be,” he said enigmatically. I couldn’t tell if X was hinting at the corruption and cover-ups to which he’d only dared allude, if he was referring to his deeply ingrained habits of dissociation and self-deception, or if he was admitting to intentionally and deliberately falsifying aspects of his account.

I never found out, either, for he tossed a \$20.00 bill to the table [I actually expected it to be a hundred as it fell] and walked out of the café. Even now, I don't know how much of what he said is true, and in a way, it doesn't matter. If half [or, indeed, even a tenth] of what X said was true, criminology can profit from his story.

Mr. X's life history has a number of important implications for criminology. First, it suggests that serial killers – those, who kill multiple victims with a cooling off period between murders, (Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, & Ressler, 1992) – are not always lust killers (Hazelwood & Douglas, 1980). They do not always fit the addiction model of homicide advanced by some criminologists (e.g., Giannangelo, 1996; Norris, 1988). They do not always emerge from a childhood of abuse (Sendi & Blomgren, 1975). They do not always exhibit the oft-mentioned “homicidal triad” of warning signs: bed-wetting, animal cruelty, and fire-starting (Douglas & Olshaker, 1999). On the contrary, X's story suggests that they may hail from good families, from good schools, and exhibit none of the telltale signs of latent psychopathy.

Second, confirming the data collected from the 423 other gifted subjects, X's life history suggests that intelligent individuals – even individuals with genius-level IQ scores – sometimes become involved in serious crime (Oleson, 1998). Criminologists believe that criminals, on average, have subnormal IQ scores (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). This may be so, but since we seldom arrest criminals except the poor and inept, we know a great deal about the failures of the criminal world (McCall, 1978) and know almost nothing about criminals of intellect and advantage (Barnes & Teeters, 1959).

Third, X's life history indicated that several personal and social factors combined to catalyze criminal behavior. X suggested that social stigma associated with high IQ and academic motivation alienated him and estranged him from his peers (Hollingworth, 1942; Towers, 1990). This had the compound effect of simultaneously making him contemptuous of social norms and desperate for social approval. At an age when offending is common among young men (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983), X was vulnerable to the seductions of crime, susceptible to the camaraderie of the gang, and infatuated with excitement and the allure of criminal activity (Katz, 1988). It is hardly surprising that X embraced the life that Vincent offered him. His high IQ made him a better criminal, and his successes in crime made him feel infallible deepening his involvement in crime. Criminologists know very little about successful criminals like X. Research access to elite populations is often difficult to obtain, especially for outsiders, and this problem is especially serious when criminologists try to measure undetected offending (Oleson, 2003). This is why research with subjects like X is so vitally important.

The research with X also highlighted several methodological considerations. First, his life story emphasized the importance of using qualitative methods in the study of elite crime. While the quantitative data from the self-report questionnaire were interesting and yielded a rich vein of data for future analyses, they could not tell a human story. Patton (2002) writes:

Qualitative data describe. They take us, as readers, into the time and place of the observation so that we know what it was like to have been there. They capture and communicate someone else's experience of the world in his or her own words. Qualitative data tell a story. (p. 47)

Without the interview data to illustrate the statistical relationships, my investigation into high IQ crime would have been a far less meaningful endeavor.

Second, the interviews with X underscored how fundamental research access is to a scientist's inquiry (Hamm, 2001) and confirmed that the reason we know so little about elite populations is because elites have the ability to shield themselves from the prying eyes of journalists and social scientists (Fussell, 1983; Nader, 1972; Undheim, 2003).

Third, the interviews suggested a reason why elites might be reluctant to participate in social science research. There are grave risks inherent in participating in a study for any individual, who has committed a serious crime and who has eluded detection, arrest, and conviction. In many cases, only the integrity of the researcher stands between the admission of a felony and prosecution. The researcher also faces potential risks – from their subjects and from law enforcement subpoena.

Fourth, the interviews with X underscored the ethical dilemmas associated with the use of qualitative methods (Oleson, 1999). If I had conducted an anonymous self-report survey, my investigation would have been less controversial. Because I wanted to talk with offenders, including offenders, who had “gotten away with it,” I had to implement several techniques to safeguard the identity of my subjects. This was necessary to conduct ethical research. But, my adoption of these anonymizing techniques was denounced as unethical and used to justify the revocation of already-conferred research access.

Fifth (and finally), the interviews reminded me that qualitative methods can provide a valuable validity check on qualitative data (Shapiro, 1973). I could have greater faith in my quantitative results because some of the claims made in numeric form were substantiated by narrative accounts during the interviews. This is a particularly important point, with tremendous implications. When Porterfield (1946) conducted his groundbreaking self-report study with official delinquents and with students from Texas Christian University, one of his male university students reported a murder.

Yet, because his study was wholly quantitative in nature, there were no available means to retroactively verify the claim or to gather details about the offense. It was tempting (and easy) to dismiss the report as adolescent bravado or a recording error. Subsequent researchers dismissed the homicide claim as not credible and noted that – tautologically – ever since self-report questionnaires omitted the homicide item, research subjects have stopped reporting murders (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1979).

I sometimes think about the Porterfield (1946) study and wonder if criminology would be different today if Porterfield (1946) had included a qualitative aspect in his research. What if he had recorded the murderer's life story in the same way that Clifford Shaw (1930) recorded the life story of a jack-roller delinquent? Would other researchers have believed the account of his Mr. X? Would subsequent criminologists using self-report questionnaires have retained the homicide item and measured serious felonies as

well as petty delinquency and status offenses (e.g., Short & Nye, 1957)? Would we now know more about the crimes of respectable elites?

Porterfield (1946) studied his university students almost 60 years ago. Polsky challenged sociologists and criminologists to get their hands dirty 40 years ago. Perhaps, today's criminologists will follow their leads, will make better use of the qualitative methods that are currently available, and will uncover an unexplored world of criminal offending.

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