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The Firesetter
A Psychological Profile (Part 2)

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A profile is defined generally as a "concise biographical sketch depicting a personality by vivid outlining and sharp contrast." Its purpose is to provide a distinctive and narrative portrayal of an individual.

A psychological profile, more precisely, is a description of the salient psychological and behavioral characteristics of a person. It portrays the individual psychologically by identifying personality and behavioral traits or patterns (trait clusters) that uniquely classify and distinguish him from members of the general population.

Behavioral scientists, including psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, have long used profiling techniques in their diagnostic assessment and empirical study of psychopathology. Profiles drawn from such studies have often aided in the understanding and treatment of mental illness, emotional disorders, and personality maladjustment. Crime "profilers" have also applied profiling strategies to their study and classification of known offenders.

Psychological profiling appears to have legitimate and practical application to selective criminal investigations. Its employment in matters of this nature, however, is often predicated on a need to identify an unknown subject who has demonstrated some form of psychopathology in his crime—serial torture in sexual assaults, evasiveness and post mortem slashing and cutting in homicides, and motiveless harassing.

The projected profile of the offender in these instances serves to support the investigative process by aiding in the identification and apprehension of the offender.

The propriety of psychological profiling pivots on three critical issues.

First, it must be determined whether the crime suitably lends itself to psychological analysis. Crimes against the person appear to be best suited for criminal psychological profiling.

Second, psychological profiling should be applied only to those cases in which the unknown subject demonstrates some form of mental, emotional, or behavioral disturbance in the crimes. Unless there is perceptible psychopathology present in the crime, a profile cannot be rendered on an unknown subject.

The third factor to be considered concerns the potential value of the profile in aiding law enforcement in its identification of unknown subjects. If only vague generalizations can be drawn from the crime scene about the subject's behavioral style, then the efficacy of the psychological profile is considerably diminished. For this technique to be an effective tool, it must assist the investigator in focusing his investigation.

The purpose of criminal psychological profiling, then, is to provide the investigator with a personality composition of the unknown subject that will aid in his swift and judicious apprehension.

The Firesetter
David Berkowitz, the confessed "Son of Sam" mass murderer who terrorized New York City during 1976 and 1977 by killing five young women and a man and wounding seven other young people, also reportedly informed his attorneys that he set over 2000 fires and made 137 false alarms in New York City from 1974 through 1977. On almost every occasion, he reportedly called in the fires to the police as the "Phantom of the Bronx."
Investigations for centuries have intrigued behavioral scientists and incendiary? What are the primary questions remains uncertain. More vital and detailed information concerning the psychological and behavioral aspects of firesetting must be collected and assessed if we are to classify and profile more accurately the arsonist and significantly impact his firesetting. Understanding his behavior preceding, during, and after his firesetting experience will greatly enhance the investigative process and possibly accelerate identification and apprehension.

**Common Characteristics of the Firesetter**

According to Jesse James in his article, "Psychological Motives for Arson.", "Neither sex, age, education, intellectual level nor economic status in any way limits the possibility of any individual to engage in arson. On the other hand, from a study of large samples, it does appear that, statistically, persons of certain ages and with certain characteristics are more apt to set fires than are others."

**Age**

Studies have consistently found that firesetters tend to be young, with a high rate of incidence around 17 years of age. Macdonald reports that the highest frequency of pathological firesetters is between ages 15 and 19. According to figures available in the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), arrested arsons aged 20 and under comprise 65.8 percent of the total arson arrests and those 13 to 19 years of age account for 42.8 percent.

**Sex**

The overwhelming majority of known arsonists are male. This has been supported in clinical and empirical research studies of known arsonist populations and demonstrated in the statistical incidence of arrests for arsonists.

**Race**

According to statistical evidence, arrest figures are predominately Caucasian. However, there is no evidence that race is a correlate to arson.

**Intelligence**

A large number of studies have indicated that firesetters tend to be mentally deficient or of below-average intelligence. Yet, it has been suggested that possibly it is the mentally deficient firesetter or at least the less intelligent one who is most often identified or studied. The more intelligent arsonist may avoid detection. Although a large number of studies have identified intellectual difficulties among firesetters, they have not conclusively demonstrated that intellectual impairment or low basic intelligence is a precursor to firesetting.

**Academic Performance**

Studies of firesetters have consistently found a history of poor academic achievement, severe scholastic retardation, and significant grade failures among arsonists. This may be due not necessarily to intellectual impairment but to social and personal maladjustment. Environmental stress, lack of parental or adult guidance, may produce learning difficulties. Whatever the reason, firesetting children tend to have problems in school.

**Rearing Environments**

Firesetters appear to come from disrupted, frustrating, harsh, broken, or unstable home environments. Often their families are large and within the lower socioeconomic level, and it is not uncommon to find one or both parents frequently absent. Some studies have noted that repetitive child firesetters are often middle children; whereas, adult arsonists are likely to have been the first born, last born, or an only child. It has been frequently noted that firesetting children come from father-absent and mother-dominated (overprotective, rejecting, or abusive) environments.

**Sexual Disturbances**

Firesetting has been universally associated with sexual perversion. Researchers who are psychologically oriented have postulated that "fascination functions as a sexual substitute... ." The pyromaniac has even been alleged by some investigators to receive sexual excitement in setting and watching his fires. Arsonists as a group have been reported to experience sexual maladjustment and to have an urethral-erotic trait. However, the actual extent of sexual deviation in firesetting is unknown.

**Behavioral Disturbances**

Firesetters typically experience difficulties in social relationships, especially with women. Because their rearing environments have not fostered normal social development, they generally lack the basic social skills necessary for good interpersonal relations. They have been generally described as socially maladjusted and socially isolated.

**Marital Ties**

Numerous studies have reflected that firesetters typically experience poor marital adjustment. Few are known, in fact, to have marital ties. This possibly stems from their difficulties in developing and maintaining close interpersonal relationships and being reared in mother-dominated environments. Many have intellectual difficulties in understanding female characteristics, and it is not rare for firesetters to be married to women. Because their interpersonal relationships and actual sexual potency are suspect, firesetting is often looked upon as a substitute for sexual behavior. As well as premeditation, firesetting appears to be associated with pathology. As well as premeditation, firesetting has been described as psychopathology and, for the firesetter, as psychopathic personalities. This is supported by the firesetter's self-destructive behavior. As well as premeditation, firesetting is described as psychopathology and, for the firesetter, as psychopathic personalities. This is supported by the firesetter's self-destructive behavior.
Prior Criminal History  Vissel and Walker have reported that most of the studies of institutionalized (imprisoned and hospitalized) arsonists and nonarsonists as groups show both having extensive histories of criminal and antisocial behavior. However, their particular patterns of criminally appear to be characterized by different. Arsonists as a group consistently perpetrate a significantly greater number of crimes against property and fc or crimes against persons than nonarsonists, though this pattern seems to change after mid-twenties. Lowes and Yamnell report that arsonists under 25 years of age indulge chiefly in property offenses. After age 25, they appear to become more inclined to engage in interpersonal violence.

Firesetting Targets  There has been little data collected on the types of structures which are generally high-risk targets for firesetters. A number of studies on adolescents quantifies tests indicate, however, that churches and schools are frequent targets. Although child, female, and psychotic firesetters tend to set fires at home, they are also known to set fires away from their premises. Horley and MacAunl are, for instance, found that psychotic arsonists had most frequently targeted commercial property, with churches second, in a U.S. population study. In the U.S. population study, schizophrenic arsonists were more likely to set fires in unoccupied structures than nonpsychopathic arsonists. The revenge firesetter, generally targets the property of an old or imagined enemy, and although the pyromaniac compulsively sets fires, he may be selective in his choice of property.

The Typical Arrested Arsonist  In an effort to determine a profile of the average arrested arsonist by age, sex, and race, a review of the U.S. Bureau of the U.S. Prison Reports for 1969 through 1978 (10-year period) was conducted, which revealed that 89 percent of those arrested for arson were male and approximately 76 percent were white. However, it should be noted that race has not been demonstrated as a significant variable in predicting firesetting. When arson arrests were examined by age, it was determined that 54.6 percent of arrests were under 18 years of age. Almost 43 percent were 13 through 17 years old, and those 10 and under comprised 11 percent of the total arson population. It was also found that the proportion of arrests for blacks was significantly higher for the 18- and over category than for those under age 18. The arrest rate was found for arrested white arsonists. Seventy-five percent of nonarsonists and incarcerated nonarsonists. The sample population included 68 arson offenders and 57 nonarsonists.

The Study revealed no significant differences between incarcerated arsonists and incarcerated nonarsonists.

The mean age of Wolford's incarcerated arsonists was 26, which is significantly older than the typical arrested arsonist according to UCR. In addition, only 7 percent of his arrested population were white, as compared to 76 percent represented in UCR statistics. Coupled with this is the fact that Wolford's imprisoned arsonist had approximately two prior felony arrests and a mean number of four previous incarcerations. In light of these facts, it appears that this arsonist sample population reflected the recidivist and not the typical arson offender.

The mean age of the median incarcerated arsonist in Incardi's study is comparable to the age of Wolford's incarcerated arsonist, but again is much older than the typical arrested arsonist. The profiles depicted by Wolford and Incardi also appear comparable in IQ level, all of which are low, marital status, and criminal histories. However, Incardi notes that they do not provide adequate criminalistic data on which to base a definitive conclusion about the personalities of his subjects.

The Adult Revenge Firesetter  Revenge appears to be one of the more significant motivational factors in arson. Some researchers believe that it is the underdog in most, if not all, destructive firesetting. Incardi contends that the revenge motive was represented in 58 percent of his sample population. However, Nolan D. C. Lewis and Helen Yamnell in their study of 1145 pathological male arsonists determined that only approximately 15 percent of those expressed revenge as a primary motive for firesetting.

Table 1  Total Arson Arrests by Age Group 1969-1978*  |  |  |
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Groups</td>
<td>Total Arrests</td>
<td>Percent of Total Arrests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>76,507</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 and under</td>
<td>13,766</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>11,523</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>19,950</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>9,849</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>8,509</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>6,610</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 18 Years of Age and Over</td>
<td>57,008</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages do not add to 100.0 percent, due to rounding.

**Less than one-tenth of one percent.

The Volunteer Fireman

This category also represents an inadequate, attention-seeking male. Lewis and Yarnell identified 51 cases (4 percent) fitting this description within their adult male sample population. Although this group appears to be relatively small in number, it has the propensity for serious destructiveness.

The Fire "buff" Firefighter

The fire "buff," like the police "buff," is an enthusiastic "hanger-on." He generally represents a frustrated would-be fireman or would-be policeman. Although many buffs are civic-minded and constructive in their associations with the police and fire service, others are characteristically immature, inadequate, and underskilled. The fire buff who sets fires is seeking attention and attempting in a pathological way to win praise and social recognition for his alertness and heroism in reporting fires and giving assistance in fighting them.

The Pyromaniac

This pyromaniac differs characteristically from the other arsonists in that he lacks conscious motivation for his firesetting in fact; he is motivated by many to be motiveless. Pyromaniacs have been described as: 66 "offenders who set their fires for no practical purpose and received no material profit from the act, their only motive being to obtain some sort of sexual satisfaction." 67 They found this type arsonist (excluding volunteer fireman and fire "buff") to represent approximately 6 percent of their adult male sample.

Some researchers have postulated that this behavior is the release of sexual tension. Gold agrees that sexual tension may be a motivational factor in some incendiarism but rejects it as a major causal factor. 68 Lewis and Yarnell found of only a very small percentage of those who claimed to have received some sort of sexual gratification from their firesetting.

The Excitement Firesetter

According to J. H. Magee, the excited firesetter is allegedly motivated to set fires because of a craving for excitement. His satisfaction comes not from seeing the flames but from mingling in the crowd which has gathered at the scene of the fire. According to Inglis, however, the incentive inducing this type of firesetter is the need to experience the fire and to watch the operation in order to become acquainted with the equipment. Some researchers have interpreted incidents of "excitement firesetting" to closely resemble the pyromaniac; however, because of insufficient data on incidents of this type, a definite conclusion cannot be reached.

A Typical Female Firesetter

The female arsonist appears to direct most of her firesetting against her own home or neighborhood, and some participated in mutual masturbation, sodomy, and fellatio. 70 Boys who were enuretic also frequently demonstrated passive traits. 71 Many experienced learning disabilities. 72 Some had physical handicaps. 73 They also demonstrated other forms of sexual behavior in addition to firesetting, i.e., thieving, stealing, runaways, hyperactivity, aggressive behavior, and antisocial behavior. 74 Some were orphans and institutionalized children. 75 Their rearing environments were pathological or broken. It was not uncommon for them to come from father-absent or insubordinate-father homes. 76 They also lacked a sense of security, love, and attention. 77

The Child Firesetter

Authorities on firesetting behavior believe that repetitive or chronic firesetting by children represents a severe behavioral symptom and an observable symptom of psychological disturbance. For the disturbed child, firesetting becomes an instrument or outlet for venting hostile, revenge, resentment, and defiance of authority. 78 Yarnell in her study of 60 cases of child firesetting determined that 60 percent were between 6 and 9 years of age. This group demonstrated the following characteristics:

1. They set fires with associated fantasies to burn some member of the family who had withheld love or was a serious rival for parental attention.
2. Most fires were started in the home or within the immediate vicinity.
3. They had a history of serious abuse or neglect.
4. The child often had terrible dreams and fantasies of the devil and ghosts.
5. They suffered acute anxiety over these dreams and fantasies, as well as their sexual preoccupations.
6. All experienced sexual conflicts. Most actively engaged in masturbation and some participated in mutual masturbation, sodomy, and fellatio.
7. Boys who were enuretic also frequently demonstrated passive traits.
8. Many experienced learning disabilities.
9. Some had physical handicaps.
10. They also demonstrated other forms of sexual behavior in addition to firesetting, i.e., thieving, stealing, runaways, hyperactivity, aggressive behavior, and antisocial behavior.
11. Some were orphans and institutionalized children.
12. Their rearing environments were pathological or broken. It was not uncommon for them to come from father-absent or insubordinate-father homes.
13. They also lacked a sense of security, love, and attention.

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most, as well as Lewis and Yarnell, has purported that adolescent firesetting is generally committed for decorative rather than for destructive reasons.17

Yet, whatever the specific motive, vandalism fires appear to represent 80 percent of juvenile firesetting.17 The adolescent firesetter generally works in pairs or groups, since this provides support for his behavior and encourages the act. These pairs or groups were essentially one boy who assumes a dominant role and others who accept a submissive role.17

The Schizophrenic Male Firesetter

Psychosis is generally defined as a severe form of personality disorganization characterized by marked impairment of contact with reality, emotional blunting, and bizarre behavior which may also be present in varying degrees.17

The most serious of all psychotic disorders is schizophrenia, which has been defined as "a group of psychotic disorders characterized by gross distortions of reality, withdrawal from social interaction, and disorganization and fragmentation of perception, thought and emotion."18 The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III), schizophrenia includes several specific subtypes, each with its own specific symptomatology which may uniquely characterize and distinguishes it from other forms.19

Lewis and Yarnell in their study of 1143 male firesetters found that 154 of them could be diagnosed as schizophrenics.20 They represented 13.4 percent of their total sample population—a small fraction of the total incidence of firesetting.21

In describing the psychosis, Lewis and Yarnell noted that "they seemed distinctive, in that their fires were set for suicidal purposes, their motives were apparently delusional in character or they manifested bizarre behavior either during or immediately after the firesetting.22

Though the psychotic appeared distinctive in that his firesetting was suicidal and delusional, he was found to fall naturally within other firesetter categories, i.e., revenge firesetters and pyromaniacs. Consequently, Lewis and Yarnell included the majority of psychotic firesetters in other subgroups rather than deriving a special classification for them. Eight percent of these psychotic firesetters were classified as pyromaniacs, and approximately 90 percent of the male psychotic were diagnosed as schizophrastics.20

Virkkunen's study of 30 schizophrastic and nonpsychotic firesetters revealed that both groups were characterized by pathological firesetting tendencies. The schizophrenic subjects typically set fires outside of the community in general. Their target selection was often an unoccupied structure. The nonpsychotics tended to direct their firesetting against relatives or acquaintances and set fires to residential houses. The nonpsychotics were likely to be under the influence of alcohol when setting fires, whereas the schizophrenics tended to set fires as a result of delusions and hallucinations.21

A Review

The section on "Profiling the Firesetter" briefly discussed many of the common and salient characteristics associated with pathological firesetting. In addition, reference was made to a number of specific firesetter profiles in an effort to provide the reader with a better understanding of the various types of arsonists and their etiological, psychological, and sociological bases, as well as their distinguishing characteristics.

It is interesting to note that pathological arsonists frequently manifest the following cluster characteristics:1

1. Under 25 years of age,
2. Victims of pathological and distressed rearing environments,
3. Come from father-absent homes,
4. Mother-dominated,
5. Academically retarded,
6. Slightly below-average intelligence,
7. Emotionally and psychologically disturbed,
8. Socially and sexually maladjusted,
9. Unmarried,
10. Psychologically inadequate and insecure, and
11. Maladjusted.

Their firesetting is often immediately preceded by a precipitating stressful situation or experience. Although pathological firesetters share many common characteristics, a "typical" firesetter just does not exist. Each example is unique and motivated by a multiplicity of factors. These types of arsonists do not appear to be representative of those engaged in arson-for-profit schemes, although they are represented in all cases.

In preparing a psychological profile of a firesetter, the following variables should also be analyzed:

1. The structure type (structure burned, location, fire history, ownership, and recent structure history);
2. Time factors (date and time of fire);
3. Identity of reporting person (resident, neighbor, unknown caller, law enforcement officer, etc.);
4. Use or lack of devices or accelerants;
5. Type of devices and accelerants;
6. Style of fire (hastily or methodically set);
7. Occurrence factors (occurred or unaccompanied at time of fire and description of occupants—eloped; women, mental, or vegetable patients, etc.);
8. Burn pattern and points of origin (number of points of origin, exact location of points of origin, and burn pattern);
9. Modus operandi;
10. Evidence of forced entry;
11. Evidence of presence of preparation for structure burning;
12. Presence of other crimes; and
13. Evidence of similar fires in the community (structures, time variance, and similarities and differences in those fires).
END