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MOTIVATIONS OF CRIMINAL INFORMANTS

By JAMES T. REESE
Special Agent, Behavioral Science Unit, FBI Academy, Quantico, Va.

The use of informants is not new to law enforcement or to society in general. The recorded history of informants spans the time from Judas in the New Testament to the present day, and their uses are as vast as the entire area of responsibility for law enforcement. Informants may fall into many categories: Known, confidential, specialized, general, one-time, permanent, paid, unpaid, and others. This article, however, does not center on the types or uses of the informant, but discusses the psychological motivations of an individual who provides information to law enforcement authorities. These motivations will generally apply to all types of informants, including the concerned citizen, witness, and criminal. Emphasis will be placed on causes concerning the psychopathic criminal as an informant.

The Foundation for Information

Gregariousness, while not being an instinct of the human species, is obviously one of our common traits. People form groups, much like animals do, for safety and for psychological comfort. It may be fair to say that this gregariousness provides the nuclei for informant potential, if the informant is lonesome by nature, the task of law enforcement would be inconceivably difficult.

These affiliations among people are based on a variety of similarities and needs, among which are values, personalities, goals, activities, income, and others. Their gregariousness is the cornerstone by which societies are built, and “by its very nature, society not only provides for the needs of its members but also controls its behavior as well.” A large part of this control today apparently stems from law enforcement’s role in society and is enhanced by its proper use of informants.

The informant has been defined as “a person who informs or prefers an accusation against another, whom he suspects of the violation of some penal statute.” This definition is altered somewhat by the labels placed on the informers by the criminal world. Among these labels (or titles) are “snitch,” “squealer,” “rat,” “rat fink,” “stool pigeon,” and “scab,” to name but a few. Unfortunately, these titles, originated by the criminal world with whom the informant has provided information, are used frequently by law enforcement officers when referring to their own sources of information and by society in general. It is fair to say that many officers look at the informant as a “snitch,” accept them due to their value in the solution of a crime. The Anchorage Daily Times summed it up in 1974 with the title to an article, “Police Use Informants as Necessary Evil.” Still other headlines that lend credence to the value of informants in a more dignified manner are “Police Departments Would Be Lost Without Informants,” and “Police Informers Play Leading Roles.” Needless to say, law enforcement and the solutions of crimes, in general, would suffer drastically if informants were to stop providing information. The law enforcement profession would be wise to look at its use of these slang titles as self-defeating behavior.

Brief History

The late J. Edgar Hoover, former Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, said that furnishing information was “one of the citizen’s obligations.” In the early histories of England and America, this obligation was referred to as the “Hue and Cry.” Historically, police officers basically functioned as “watchmen,” it was not necessarily the officer’s responsibility to catch criminals. He was, however, expected to “give Hue and Cry” so that the criminals could be apprehended by other citizens in the general vicinity. Quite the opposite role has evolved since that time, and more and more frequently, police are being challenged to solve more crimes and make more arrests.
During the period of hue and cry in England there existed the common law
misdemeanor of felony. Failure to inform, especially when witness to a
felony, was an equally serious offense. The crime of homicide was taken
seriously. It is questionable whether this offense ever had any meaningful
existence in the modern police practice. Wilson defined it as "gathering
information from others, information which directs the informing
officer to the commission of a crime, and which is necessary for the
officer to obtain a confession of the crime committed."

Some informants' motivating factors, delineated by Charles E. O'Hara
and E.J. Horgan, were:

1. Strong belief in the right and need to prevent the crime
2. A desire to bring to justice those who committed the
   crime
3. A desire to protect others from the criminal
4. A desire to avenge
5. A desire to gain

Motivation has been defined as an internal condition which information
receives as a stimulus to action. There is no clear distinction between a
stimulation of a person and their action. A person may be motivated to
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Informant Potential

Who are criminal informants? Criminal informants can be anyone, in
that no category of individual or occupation is exempt. Obviously, the
best informing police officers are those who possess certain qualities.

A study of the inmates of Sing Sing Prison in 1983 by J. Gasparro
Chief of Psychiatric Services, Sing Sing Prison, Cleveing, N.Y., revealed
that 35 percent, the largest percentage of any category of the
prison population is made up of a psychopath who makes up the
majority of all crime. They tend to feel little, if any, guilt and cannot
feel important to the community. Gratitude or Gain-efforts to express
appreciation or earn favor.

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Generally speaking, the investigator is now armed with information concerning informant qualities, targeting, developmental, usage, and interviewing. Numerous motivations for informing were defined, which should prove helpful when attempting to collect information. Caution should be taken, however, when interviewing someone whose behavior resembles that of the psychopath. This caution should take the form of being a good listener, not being gullible, and being willing to verify every bit of information obtained through active investigation. Once again, the officer should continually remind himself that the psychopath is a manipulator, a con artist, and a liar.

Following his arrest, the motivations of an apparent psychopath may differ somewhat from those of the average person. His providing information may be due to his envy of those not arrested (accomplices), his attempts to eliminate criminal competition, but foremost, his efforts to avoid punishment. He will feign repentance for his acts and may plead for probation, stating that he has "learned his lesson." We now know better. The psychopath does not learn from his mistakes or from punishment. Recidivism is high in this category of personality. If he is given probation, it is very likely that his criminal activities will continue, and due to his cunning ways and manipulation, may become an officer's favorite probationer. Many authorities agree that the only way to stop his criminal behavior is to incarcerate him. They contend that incapacitation is the answer must recidivism.

A last reason the psychopathic type may provide information is to turn the focus of an investigation away from himself, a motivation wrenched by this writer on several occasions. On one occasion, the entire thrust of a bank robbery investigation was shifted in the wrong direction due to information provided by an informant. The information was simple, logical, and extremely believable. It was given with a certain note of sincerity. A short time later, this informant was arrested and convicted for the crime about which he had provided information. The informant's motivation was to prevent, or at least delay, the authorities from focusing on him as the principal target. By providing false information, the use of the motivational factors listed and the informant's own personality traits, made even the false information useful. Needless to say, many man-hours were expended in attempting to verify or corroborate the information. The lack of adequate corroboration was one of the keys to his eventual arrest. This case provided a good example of using the information provided, but be true or false, to the investigator's advantage.

Another case pitted one brother against another in a criminal matter. Whether psychopath or not, there appeared a lack of loyalty between them. During their recent transaction, Edmund Kemper stands out as one of the most excellent examples of the dangers involved in using the psychopath. He was in an interview with his grandmother and grandfather in cold blood. He was hospitalized for mental treatment and eventually released. Following his release he killed eight others, which included decapitating his own grandmother.

"Thou Shalt Not Kill," a special report for publication by the National Broadcasting Company, focuses on an interview of two persons on "death row," Lance Kelbach and Keisha Kelbach. Prior to this interview, Lance and Keisha had been imprisoned in Utah. After a parole release from prison, they murdered numerous people for no apparent reason. These two psychopaths talk about the murders freely and without remorse.

On occasion, they gin and laugh about the murders and admit that he have no remorse concerning them. Keisha, however, deals with the one trait of substance, that (they the victims) were going to die anyway and they (Lance and Keisha) were not going to say anything bad about them for a very good reason. This behavior is high in this category of personality and should be treated with caution. Lance has a perfect interview. He is a perfect interviewee. A short time later, this informant was arrested and convicted for the crime about which he had provided information. The informant's motivation was to prevent, or at least delay, the authorities from focusing on him as the principal target. By providing false information, the use of the motivational factors listed and the informant's own personality traits, made even the false information useful. Needless to say, many man-hours were expended in attempting to verify or corroborate the information. The lack of adequate corroboration was one of the keys to his eventual arrest. This case provided a good example of using the information provided, but be true or false, to the investigator's advantage.

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