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The Anonymous Letter Writer— A Psychological Profile?

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ABSTRACT: Anonymous letters fall into many categories—threats, obscene messages, racial slurs, extortion demands, guilty conscience statements, stool pigeon letters, robbery or burglary notes, and so forth. These are examined by the document examiner for any information that may lead to the identity of the writer. Such examinations involve unusual aspects of paper or envelopes, watermarks, detection of indented impressions, and so on, and also a comparison with previous anonymous submissions. Several cases will be discussed where, additionally, psychological profiles of the writer were produced by a psychiatrist and a psychologist, based upon the content of the letters.

KEYWORDS: questioned documents, psychiatry, anonymous letters, authorship, psychological profile

The document examiner studies anonymous letters as a part of his work, generally for the purpose of finding evidence leading to the originator of the communication. He examines the paper, envelope, and attachments for a source of identity; looks for indentations from a previous writing; determines and, if pertinent, classifies the writing medium; and may process the documents for latent fingerprints. The anonymous letter is searched and compared with previous similar submissions in an effort to effect identity. The document examiner also observes the written contents of the communication: the general tone and theme, word usage, grammar, punctuation, spelling, arrangement, and any unusual markings. Any of these examinations may provide information of some value in the investigation.

Anonymous letters can usually be classified into categories according to their theme or tone; for example, threatening, obscene, racial, extortion, nuisance, stool pigeon, or guilty conscience. Robbery notes and burglary notes are considered anonymous communications and treated similarly. If two letters or notes are associated through a file search, an eventual suspect may be tied in to more than one offense.

In addition to the possibility of general categorization, anonymous letters may sometimes be further divided into those that relate a general message, those that carry a personal or specific message, or those that are sent to a certain grouping of individuals or businesses. In the experience of this writer, most anonymous letter writers remain anonymous. Once in a while, the person who pens the personal or specific message is identified because the recipient suspects a certain individual. This is usually due to a circumstance such as a personal encounter, irritation, financial difference, and so forth. In a few cases, a letter writer gives a

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clue to his identity. Some clues are as obvious as a return address; others are couched in a signature code or similar latent manner. This latter circumstance is truer in cases in which letters are sent to certain groups of individuals, such as political figures, or to business people.

The purpose of investigating anonymous letters is to determine the identity of the author. The investigator gathers his information by interrogation, while through examination of the evidence the document examiner provides direction to the investigator where possible. The examiner seeks some degree of uniqueness or individuality in the evidence. For example, the paper may disclose an uncommon watermark, a printing code, removal or obliteration of printed matter, a size, color, thickness, design, or quality specific to certain uses. Indentations from a previous writing may disclose a name, address, or other pertinent information. Typewriting may be classified to provide data on the machine used. The discovery of latent fingerprints are a potential value. In some cases, the written word may give direction.

Practically speaking, it is possible to review the contents of an anonymous letter and, to the experienced examiner, possibly make some judgments concerning age, education, nationality, background, or intent of the writer. Such information is gleaned from aspects of the writing style; consistency within the writing; elements of word usage, grammar, structure, and so forth; items discussed; general tone; and even the type of paper and writing instrument. A person experienced in examining anonymous letters and with a suitable background in this area may offer some insight to the author of such communications, but, hopefully, with a reserve based upon some reasonable evidence or data. Even then, there is a small world of anonymous letter writers, most of whom will remain unidentified.

At times, anonymous communications generate outrageous psychological profiles, unfortunately from educated individuals who overestimate their area of expertise. Persons with degrees in psychiatry and psychology have provided written formal reports detailing psychological profiles of the authors of anonymous letters based strictly on the contents of the letter. What makes the profiles so outrageous is the specificity of the information. Granted, such individuals have a better than average knowledge of human psychology and its accompanying nuances, but such knowledge is apparently misused in this area.

Two cases will be used to illustrate this point. A series of anonymous handwritten letters (four envelopes with letters, four envelopes with only an obscene playing card) were sent to the president of a large medical facility between 1979 and 1981. The letters have since stopped. Two of these letters, generally representative of the four, read essentially as follows:

Dear C_____.²

We will put a bomb in your car, in your office and in your home and we will put poison in your food.

We will put bombs in the _____ Medical Center and burn the place down.

Yor dopey old C_____.²

This message is from all the Negro employees.

Dear Cheap A__.*

Pay us a decent salary or we will shit on you and quit. or not come in to fill out an application Employees and applicants and Nurses and other from _____ Medical Center.

Further, an anonymous letter to a high ranking church official was identified by us as the same writer. This letter read:

I am going to shoot _____. He is a no good son of a bitch c_____.²

He hates all of us Japanese spies and those who planned the attack on Pearl Harbor.

from
Nurse _____

²Obscene term—dashes indicate number of letters.

A request was made by the Chairman of the Psychiatry Department of the Medical Center to a psychiatrist acquaintance in a well recognized medical facility in another city to interpret the letters. The psychiatrist's report reads in part:

My speculations on the threatening letters received by the President of your medical center:

- 1) They are the product of one person, although I must admit the handwriting varies. Perhaps this is due to medication effect.
- 2) This person is a 40-50+ year-old white male.
- 3) He is a chronic schizophrenic: isolated, withdrawn eccentric, hallucinating and delusional.
- 4) The delusional thinking is not well organized. This reduces the likelihood of any action on his threats.
- 5) He had a poor occupational adjustment with probable employment in such areas as house-keeping, laundry or maintenance. He is currently unemployed and state supported.
- 6) He was hospitalized for psychiatric treatment, or on medication, mid 1978-late 1979, and the last half of 1980; but not at the present.

In addition to a couple of other comments regarding possible suspects and risks, the report concludes:

I need not emphasize psychiatrists' inability to predict behavior, even if they have examined the patient, much less when they base it on a few letters. Use this information accordingly.

A rather interesting response to the author of this report by the requesting psychiatrist reads in part:

I have passed the information on, and all are equally appreciative. I am more than impressed with some of your conclusions, and when we are together sometime, I want to discuss them with you.

Between the medical facility and the police department, no effort was spared to identify the perpetrator. The letters ceased in mid 1981 and the writer still remains anonymous.

The second case involved a nurse in her early 20s. She had a brother who was a police officer and she was dating a police officer. Numerous letters and notes were either sent to her home or left on the windshield of her car outside the hospital where she worked. The letters covered a period of several months and all were signed with a cross (+). A sampling of the handwritten and hand printed communications are:

We decided we must meet to talk face to face
It will sure seem a shame to end this merry chase
The time date and place have not been decided yet
But we are going to meet and that is a sure bet
Jesus will triumph

We hope you're enjoying our little game
It seems to be bringing you lots of fame
But this is your penance
And we know you want to be forgiven
Its by the power of the Lord that we are driven

The pigs cant even help you. You are doomed.
You see we know a lot about them. We must take action now before it is too late. First we must purify you. Then mark you with the sign of the cross. + Our sacred blades are ready to drain the unpure blood from your body. You must die and be born again. You must be sacrificed so others may see the light.

Copies of some of the notes were taken to a man whose letterhead reads "Ph.D. Registered Psychologist" by an interested party in the case. This man rendered a very lengthy report that appears to lean heavily on personality assessment through handwriting, commonly referred to as graphology or graphoanalysis. Some excerpts from this report are:

This writer is definitely more of an introverted type of personality than extroverted, signifying a personality that tends toward aloofness, unemotional involvement on any large scale, more the loner type, i.e., . . .

This writer is endowed with strong deep feelings, an indication that he/she has a high energy level, strong constitutional strength making for a personality that is very impressionable, very sensitive . . .

The writer has a good mind being by nature an analytical, comprehensive and exploratory thinker. With this syndrome of intellectual endowment . . .

It is clear that the individual is somewhat lonely and desirous of making more friends. The individual is a good listener . . .

It is clear that the individual lacks social and sexual fulfillment, . . .

There are indications of an individual who may be the manic-depressive type, i.e., . . .

The concluding paragraph of the analysis is an inane as the foregoing part.

In short the individual is more of a follower than a leader type of personality, but may fantasize being a leader or one who is capable of attracting a lot of people toward his/her beliefs and philosophies.

The letters and notes stopped after a four-month period and the writer remains anonymous.

An article in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Sept. 1979 [1], described an investigative technique of analyzing threatening communications through a combination of psychology and linguistics disciplines, termed psycholinguistic analysis. The technique seeks to characterize the communication by the total manner in which the message is presented. The authors, Miron and Douglas, discuss the technique and their analysis in terms of background knowledge, research, and experience over a period of years and admit caution in its application. Quite a contrast to those who soar beyond the confines of their knowledge and experience, and even their discipline.

Certainly these comments are not meant to be a belittlement of these professions—nor of the possibility of some validity to such assessments, such as was discussed earlier in this paper. The point is that such profiles be based upon some explainable criteria by persons having the necessary background, knowledge, and experience in such matters. The concept of multi-disciplinary cooperation is still a good one, one person working with another within the area of each one's expertise.

Reference

- [1] Miron, M. S. and Douglas, J. E., "Threat Analysis: The Psycholinguistics Approach," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Sept. 1979.

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