



Study from Interviews with Criminal Investigators from KRIPOS, the national Norwegian unit for fighting organised and other serious crime

The role of intuitive feelings as a diagnostic tool in the criminal investigation process

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Abstract

Would documenting the criminal investigator's sudden intuitive feelings (hunches) in a computer based system for criminal investigation be useful? This question forms the main motivation for an investigation into the role that sudden intuitive feelings have in the investigation process. This preliminary exploration was derived from a guided introspective analysis by criminal investigators of their own cognitive and emotional processes during the course of an investigation. It is argued that this type of study could give valuable input to the translation process of hunches– from being something an investigator privately experiences - to something that can be documented for recognition and sharing amongst other investigators. Currently, hunches might be influencing the criminal investigator's decision making, but the documentation of hunches could exploit the hunches further by keeping potentially valuable data in the system. These data could be informing the other criminal investigators of a specific case, and be a contribution in the process of solving the case.

Introduction

This study aims to uncover the criminal investigators' own view on which role sudden intuitive feelings play as a diagnostic tool in the investigation process. How are the hunches communicated from one investigator to another, and how do the hunches influence the

decision making? Do the criminal investigators acknowledge that intuitive feelings play a role in the investigation process? In the criminal investigators' opinion, what role does experience play? Is the use of intuition based on talent, in addition to the tacit knowledge achieved? How can the investigators tell if something is strange, and that other things are not? Is this a special ability that criminal investigators develop after years of experience? Do they believe that intuitive feelings or hunches should be documented during the investigation process, and if so, how? And do they use the specific term 'intuition', or other similar terms like 'gut feeling' or 'hunch'?

An assumption in this study is that criminal investigators occasionally do experience sudden intuitive feelings – so called hunches. Elements like tacit and unconscious knowledge, experience and talent may be contributing to the occurrence of these hunches. The intuitive feelings might thereby be an important diagnostic tool in the criminal investigation process, particularly in decision making and in identifying 'strangeness', that is, identifying anything that stands out as unexpected, and that does not quite fit into the 'normal' pattern. The occurrence of these sudden intuitive feelings may be included in the criminal investigators' diagnostic ability – enabling the criminal investigators to see trouble, and to initiate the necessary actions.

Method

To find out how the investigators talk about possible hunches, depth interviews were performed. Eight criminal investigators from KRIPOS, and one private investigator were interviewed in March 2006. KRIPOS is the national Norwegian special unit for fighting organised and other serious crime. The goal with the interviews was to explore and describe the criminal investigators' own experience with and understanding of their use of hunches and intuition. The aim of this investigation was, thus, to gain a better understanding of what the phenomenon of 'hunches in criminal investigation' mean for criminal investigators when they report on it in an interview situation.

Qualitative depth interviews were chosen as a first approach to gain more understanding of intuition in criminal investigation. The qualitative study aimed to dive into the investigators' own relation to intuitive feelings through the investigation process. The goal was to see intuition through the investigators' eyes, not to get objective ontological answers, or to state

some new truths. This qualitative research design should later be supplemented by an ethnographic study, by observing how KRIPOS actually work over a period of time. A field study of this kind could give a deeper understanding of the role of hunch and intuition given by the criminal investigators themselves and hopefully add a new dimension to the study.

The informants were recruited partly strategically, and partly through ‘the snowball principal’. The strategy was to represent mainly experienced criminal investigators, but also that younger and not so experienced investigators should be represented. This would give a second opinion to the more experienced investigators. It was also a goal that investigators of both sexes should be represented. The ‘snowball principal’ was used to find the right investigators. The contacts in KRIPOS were asked if they knew of suitable informants, the informant candidates were asked if they again knew of any suitable candidates, and so forth. It was not a goal to have a largest possible variation among the informants, because the investigator environment in Norway is small and relatively homogenous anyway, for instance, most of them have the same police education. Therefore the number of 8 investigators seemed to be enough to get an impression of the investigatorss view on hunches and intuition.

The interviews were performed as informal conversations in the criminal investigators’ own offices. The interviews were recorded on an mp3-player with a permission from the investigators. All the investigators also agreed to be quoted directly.

Some open-ended questions were prepared in case the conversation stopped or went totally to other topics than those of interest. These questions were in some cases asked during the interviews, but the overall impression is informal and conversational.

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were analysed as a content analysis. Categorisation of phrases, statements and utterances into recurring topics has been performed. From the categorisation scheme several recurring themes emerge that are investigated further.

Findings

In everyday work intuitive feeling or hunches mostly seems to be called ‘gut feeling’ by the interviewed investigators. ‘Intuition’ is also occasionally used, and in a few cases ‘hunch’ is used. Other terms that could be related to intuition that occurred during the interviews were ‘I felt that...’, ‘I was certain that...’, ‘I just got the feeling that...’, ‘something told me that...’ etc.

The interviewed criminal investigators seem to agree to acknowledge the occurrence of sudden intuitive feelings, and believe that hunches play an important role in the decision making, for instance where to start a search, which tip to follow up etc. The investigators sometimes get a vast amount of tips, and limited resources make it impossible to follow up all of them. In many cases, the investigators claim, it is not a strict forward thing to prioritize between which tip to be followed up, and the hunches may be vital in the selection process. Sometimes the hunches have a normal explanation, but other times it may lead to important evidence findings in a criminal case. One of the investigators claims that it is ‘amazing how often a hunch is right’:

‘...This I trust is right, or this I feel is wrong. So then I just leave it. I have no time to spend resources on that, so I just have to put it away. You can do that. And then the gut feeling or the intuition is involved when prioritising your resources...’

One of the other investigators supports the view that the intuition surprisingly often lead to the right track:

‘...I very seldom miss. This may sound a bit bragging, but...It may not be correct to put it like this, but if I should do an evaluation afterwards, then I very seldom miss the most important, to follow the most important tracks.’

The technical investigators also stress the importance of hunches in their work. For instance, in a murder case, every piece of the crime scene should be examined. Not a square centimeter should be left unexamined by the investigators. But in larger geographic areas, it is not possible to examine to such a detailed extent. In that case there will be an issue of prioritising where to do a search. This is also a fight against the clock, since evidences are ruined over time. It may be of vital interest for the investigation which area is searched first. In this decision process, the hunches may be conclusive. As one of the technical investigators says: *‘...and then it might be a bit coincidental where the gut feeling tells you to start the search...’*

A private investigator pointed out how important intuition is for him when it comes to select the right time to start an activity:

‘...And something tells me that: WAIT!! - Timing is a concept. And I have often later experienced that it has been very right. To wait. And people don’t really see, why are you postponing this? And I don’t have a good explanation...’

The private investigator explains that he get hunches that tells him to wait to the right moment by initiating an activity. He is talking about “timing” as an important concept. His hunches

have later shown to be right, in the sense that it was right to wait with the specific activity. He has no explanation of why he experienced these hunches, and cannot answer people who ask about why he is waiting.

They all believe that experience is vital for experiencing hunches; however they seem to disagree on the role of which talent play. Some of the investigators claimed that young and inexperienced investigators might have ‘a better intuition’ than some of the older and more experienced investigators.

The interviewed investigators also disagree on the fruitfulness of documenting these intuitive feelings in systems for criminal investigation. All the criminal investigators reject that the use of intuition and observations of strangeness are documented *explicitly*. It is important for the investigators that all their reports are documenting objective findings during the investigation process. All their conclusions should be based on the objective results on the investigation process, to create the basis for creating evidence that should be presented in court. One investigator states that all the information about a case should be either verified or removed from the case:

‘If you can’t verify the information, you can’t use it either. Even though the gut feeling tells you that here is something wrong, but I can’t control it. Then you would have to put it away.’

In some themes the criminal investigators seem to experience the situation differently, for instance on how the intuitive feelings are communicated between the investigators. They seem to differ over a ‘scale of privacy’ of which level hunches are communicated. This scale goes from ‘not sharing hunches at all’ through ‘informal sharing of hunches between present team members’ to ‘formal oral sharing in morning meetings’. However, no formalised systems for documenting hunches are mentioned by the interviewed investigators, but some of them make notes of them in their private ‘blue book’.

Analysis

One of the findings was that the criminal investigators seem to differ on the view of how the intuitive feelings are communicated between the investigators. As stated earlier they seem to differ over a ‘scale of privacy’ of which level hunches are communicated. Though acknowledging the importance of hunches, some of the interviewed investigators claimed that intuitive feelings only are shared informally, if shared at all. Only one of the investigators

stated that sharing intuitive feelings were encouraged in more formal situations, like the morning meetings. This indicates that receiving information about other investigators' hunches in many cases could be coincidental, in the sense that these hunches currently not are formally shared. There might be reason to believe that the level of shared intuitive information in some sense is related to the level of privacy that characterise the specific communication. Put in another way, the level of privacy might be one of the factors that influence sharing of intuitive feelings. Other factors might be how much the investigators believe in their own intuition, to what degree the organisation are willing to accept and encourage the use of intuition, what response can be expected when sharing intuitive feelings etc.

In the study it was indicated that hunches and intuition are not explicitly documented during the investigation process. But among the interviewed investigators there seems to be a common belief that intuition and hunches play an important role when it comes to decision making during the investigation process. This leads to a reason to believe that intuition *indirectly* produces a lot of documentation. There are, according to the investigators' point of view, results of intuition documented several places, for instance activities that are initiated by a gut feeling. This could look like a paradox: Documentation of intuition and hunches are not accepted, but is still been done in an indirect way. Formally, intuition and hunches are not documented, but when looking deeper into the material, intuition and hunches form the basis of a lot of the documentation for instance when it comes to tips that are followed up, places that are searched etc.

Further work

The study will be supplemented by observing how the criminal investigators in KRIPOS actually work over a period of time. An observation could give a deeper understanding of the role of hunch and intuition play in criminal investigation as it occurs and is communicated to others in the everyday work setting. KRIPOS has agreed to a close monitoring of the investigation of the next serious crime.

The main part of the investigation will be an ethnomethodological membership

categorisation analysis (MCA) of the gathered data. Both data from the interviews and from the field observation study should inform the analysis. The purpose of using MCA is to hopefully gain a more structured insight in how criminal investigators talk about their work.