Investigative (Psychological) Profiling

Criminal profiling, referred to as offender profiling, psychological profiling or criminal personality profiling, is the derivation of inferences about a criminal from aspects of the crime (s) that he or she has committed. Available information from a crime and crime scene theoretically should point to a psychological portrait of the unknown perpetrator inferring such things as the offender’s motivation for the crime and production of a description of the type of person likely to be responsible. The profiler, based on his or her technique and investigative experience, examines pertinent data from a specific crime scene including, but not limited to, crime scene photographs, detailed photos of bodily injuries to victims, photos of any mutilation evidence, information related to the condition of the victim’s clothing or absence there of, information regarding whether the crime scene was altered or unaltered, types of weapons employed, the medical examiner’s report and opinion, and any other relevant information concerning the crime. Additional information utilized in criminal profiling can involve geographical analysis of the crime and the areas beyond the immediate crime scene, including maps of the area, tracking data on how the perpetrator got to and from the crime scene, and relevant aspects of the residential location of the victim. Depending on the profiling technique, specific data collected is then categorized to produce predictive information regarding the suspect’s likely age, sex, race, weight, height, physical, mental, or psychological condition, and likely area of residence; as well as whether the victim was known to the offender, whether the suspect had a prior criminal record, and other details. Despite differences in profiling, the goal of the profiling process is to deduce enough behavioral,
personality and physical characteristics about an offender so that he or she may be apprehended by authorities. Rarely will a profile be so accurate that it points to a particular individual, rather it helps the police by narrowing down the list of possible suspects who may have committed the crime (Bennett and Hess, 1991; Muller, 2000).

Popular films such as *Silence of the Lambs* or television programs such as *Profiler* or *Millennium* depict horrible crimes such as serial murder, rape and kidnapping committed by calculating pathological offenders who appear unable to be apprehended by traditional law enforcement methods. As a last act of desperation and usually under protest by local detectives, a criminal profiler (e.g., an agent from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) or a psychologist) is brought in to help catch the offender before he or she can commit other grisly crimes. Unfortunately, the role of the profiler and the techniques employed in the media suggest that criminal profiling is more of a science than it is in actual practice. Many law enforcement agencies remain skeptical of the work of profilers and do not fully understand how the techniques work. Most criminologists who study criminal profiling likewise question the validity and reliability of profiling techniques in the identification and apprehension of violent offenders and point to the lack of scientific studies to support the claims of profilers. Nevertheless, criminal profiling has great potential and is believed by many to be an aid to understanding the make-up of offenders who commit certain types of criminal behaviors and to informing investigation and apprehension of the perpetrators of these crimes.
According to some experts, criminal profiling is not applicable to all types of criminal situations but rather lends itself to cases where the offender is unknown and has reoccurring patterns of violent behaviors. For example, profiling can be useful in cases involving lust and mutilation murder, serial murder, rape, sadistic torture in sexual assaults, satanic and ritualistic crime, bombings, and pedophilia (Holmes and Holmes, 1996).

Types of Profiling

Criminal profiling is not one specific type of technique. Two major types of criminal profiling, crime scene analysis (CSA) and investigative psychology (IP), have developed rather independently albeit employing somewhat similar procedures. Crime scene analysis, made popular by the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI in their efforts to solve particularly violent crimes such as serial murders, rapes, and child molesting cases in the 1970s is what most people probably think of when they hear of criminal profiling. Law enforcement agencies who desired a criminal personality profile from the FBI had to meet certain criteria for a case to be analyzed. The case had to involve a crime of violence, the offender had to be unknown, and all major investigatory leads had to be exhausted.

Investigative psychology, an approach developed by British psychologists such Dr. David Canter, utilizes a practice of linking the dominant themes in an offender’s crimes to characteristic aspects of their lifestyles and offending history (Muller, 2000). British
profilers have worked closely with the police and have sought to establish an empirical, rather than intuitive, basis for offender profiling (Grubin, 1995).

Two lesser techniques, diagnostic evaluation and geographical analysis remain in the exploratory realm of profiling. Diagnostic evaluation as a form of criminal profiling relies exclusively on the clinical judgement or assessment of a practitioner (e.g., trained psychiatrist) and has therefore remained eclectic in its presentation of significant behavioral manifestations and associated interpretations. Very early efforts at profiling were based primarily on psychoanalytic principles and conclusions based on large amounts of individual practitioners’ clinical intuition. Geographical profiling examines the spatial decision making process of offenders in relation to their selection of crime victims and crime scene locations. Clues to how offenders hunt for their victims and seek suitable targets can be derived by developing geographical profiles (Holmes and Holmes, 1996).

**Crime Scene Analysis**

The written works of several former FBI profilers such as Robert Ressler (1988,1992), Roy Hazelwood (1993) and John Douglas (1997,1999) have publicized the use of criminal personality profiling in the investigation of serial and spree killers, mass murderers, bombers, rapists, and hijackers. While these books make for exciting reading, and give some insight into the types of data that the profilers collected and examined, they offer very little detail of the precise methodology or technique employed. Hazelwood and his colleagues report that successful profilers are experienced in criminal
investigations and research but that they also possess common sense, intuition, and have the ability to isolate their feelings about the crime, the criminal and the victim. In addition, they are able to think and reason like the criminal who committed the crime (1993). This description of a profiler suggests that some things other than the scientific method are at root in deriving psychological profiles of offenders that might be of use in their eventual apprehension. In essence, FBI profilers do not suggest that their techniques are exclusively scientific; rather they describe investigative profiling as a strategy enabling the police to narrow the field of options and generate educated guesses about the perpetrator (Douglas, et al, 1992). Early efforts of the FBI Behavioral Science Unit, however, did incorporate techniques based on the systematic collection of large amounts of information about known violent offenders and their crimes. The study of violent offenders by the FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime in Quantico, Virginia has also resulted in efforts to refine the investigation of major crimes by the examination of clues and crime scene indicators common to each type of crime. The publication of the Crime Classification Manual: A Standard System for Investigating and Classifying Violent Crimes by John Douglas and his associates (1992) serves to formally classify the critical characteristics of the perpetrators and victims of three major violent crimes – murder, arson, and sexual assault.

The crime scene analysis approach to profiling assumes that the crime scene reflects the personality of the offender. Through their work, FBI profilers have identified the characteristics of organized and disorganized murders, particularly those murders which involve sex as a primary motive (Ressler, et al., 1988). By using information gathered at
a crime scene and by examining the nature of the crime itself, agents have constructed psychological profiles of the offenders which are in turn classified as organized and disorganized. An organized murderer is often profiled as being highly intelligent, socially competent and charismatic, whereas the disorganized murderer is profiled as being of average intelligence, socially immature, and a loner. The level of planning of crimes including the selection and treatment of victims, method of death, and crime scenes of organized and disorganized offenders likewise suggest significant differences between the two types of offenders. Organized murderers reflect more methodical patterns of behavior and well organized plans, carefully selecting strangers as victims, demanding victims to be submissive, taking great care in the actual methods of death, leaving little evidence at the crime site, and even killing at one site and dumping the body at another site. On the other hand, disorganized murderers commit their crimes more spontaneously with little planning; they may actually know or be aware of their victims, and they often kill in surprise or blitz attacks which result in the crime scenes that reveal a great deal of physical evidence.

A well accepted description of the crime scene analysis profiling technique applied to murder is given in an early work written by Robert Ressler, Ann Burgess and John Douglas (1988). The authors describe the criminal profiling techniques according to a six stage process. In the first stage, profiling inputs, profilers collect all information connected with the case including such things as crime scene photographs and diagrams, police reports, victim data and forensic data. The second stage, decision process models, all data and information are examined and organized and a preliminary analysis is
completed. At this stage the nature of the homicide is categorized (e.g., single, mass, or serial murder) along with other information such as the intent of the offender (e.g., whether the crime was the primary objective or whether it was committed while conducting another crime), the nature of the victim (e.g., whether the victim was a high or low risk target), and the degree of risk that the offender subjected himself or herself to in committing the crime. The location(s) of the crime and other pertinent information are also determined (e.g., where the victim was abducted and where the victim was murdered) as well as the possible length of time that was taken to carry out the offense(s). In the third stage, crime assessment, the profiler attempts to place himself or herself in the role of the offender and, so to speak, think like the offender or utilize the offender’s reasoning processes. The crime is categorized as organized or disorganized and the profiler addresses such things as the motivation of the offender, the selection of the victim, whether the crime was planned or spontaneous, how the crime was executed, whether aspects of the crime scene were staged (i.e., aspects of the crime scene were altered to confuse or fool the police), the nature and the types of wounds on the victim, and any ritualistic actions such as displaying or positioning the body of the victim in a certain manner. In the fourth state, criminal profile, the investigator coalesces all of the information and data heretofore collected as well as drawing upon his or her experiences with other crimes and constructs a criminal profile. The report, ranging from a few paragraphs to several pages, describes the type of person who most likely committed the crime including physical features such as age, gender, race and appearance of the offender as well as possible occupation and employment, military service, education, residence, familiarity with the crime scene area, and relationship history with other
individuals. Projections about the offender’s personality (e.g., psychopathic, and other special fetishes or pornographic interests) are made. In addition, the profiler offers strategies for identifying, interrogating, and apprehending the criminal. The fifth stage, investigation, is the submission of the profile report to the respective law enforcement agency that is investigating the crime. The profile is judged to be successful if an offender is identified and confesses to the crime. If, on the other hand, new information is obtained about a case, the profile is considered open and a reevaluation of the original profile takes place. Apprehension of the perpetrator makes up the sixth stage. The accuracy of the profile is assessed and the case data is added to the existing body of knowledge for use by future profilers (Muller, 2000).

Investigative Psychology

Pioneered by British environmental psychologists such as Dr. David Canter at the University of Liverpool, investigative psychology attempts to introduce a scientific basis to previously subjective aspects of criminal detection, crime scene analysis, investigation, apprehension and prosecution of the offender. Rather than offering a comprehensive methodology, investigative psychology represents a collection of theories, hypotheses and results of studies of the history and patterns of behavior as they relate to certain individual characteristics. Canter (1989) argues that crime is an interpersonal transaction, usually between the criminal and the victim, within a social context. To this extent, criminals are performing actions that are direct reflections of the sorts of transactions they have with other people in more normal circumstances. The role of investigative psychology is to determine which aspects of those criminal transactions can
be linked to other aspects of the offender’s past and present life. More importantly, which of them can be determined to be clearly unique to the individual offender as opposed to the social groups that he or she is a member. Canter proposes five approaches based on psychology which can be used to profile offenders and hopefully lead to their successful apprehension. These include: (1) interpersonal coherence; (2) significance of time and place; (3) criminal characteristics; (4) criminal career; and (5) forensic awareness.

The first approach, *interpersonal coherence*, is based on the hypothesis that offenders select victims with key characteristics similar to significant people in their lives outside of crime. For example, American research results on serial murders suggests that serial murderers generally select victims sharing their same ethnicity. Similarly, targeted victims may have special other personal significance for the offenders. For instance, Mark Essex, an African-American seaman, perceived himself unable to move through the ranks in the U.S. Navy because he was black. His killing spree targeted types of individuals, chiefly whites, resembling those who discriminated against him. The second approach, *significance of time and place*, suggests that the time and place for a violent crime has special meaning for the perpetrator. Offenders who have a job or occupation that allows them to observe potential victims over time in their own settings becomes a prime hunting ground for the potential targets. Additionally, offenders knowledge of the geography or spatial patterns of an area has a particular bearing on their perception of where it is possible to commit certain types of crimes and even dispose of victim’s bodies. Canter believes that individuals make such decisions based on “mental maps” or
internal representations of the terrains that they operate in. The third approach, *criminal characteristics*, involves empirically examining categories of crimes and offenders and developing typologies or classification schemes based on psychological, behavioral, modus operandi, and other types of variables. Many current classifications of offenders such as serial murderers (Holmes and DeBurger, 1988), pedophiles (Knight, 1988) and rapists (Groth and Birnbaum, 1979) rely heavily on psychological clinical-categorical underpinnings. The fourth approach, *criminal career*, looks at the longitudinal sequence of offenses committed by an offender over time in an effort to see various aspects of the crime, e.g., target selection, method of committing the crime, and location, change over time or consistency over time. Canter notes that a later crime may differ based on what happened to the offender in the commission of earlier crimes. The progression or evolution of criminal careers makes it possible to extrapolate back to earlier crimes carried out certain offenders and to examine evidence which can be of use in solving more current crimes. The fifth approach, *forensic awareness*, points to the fact that offenders who have committed prior crimes and have direct contact with the investigative techniques of the police may be very astute leaving no forensic evidence at a crime scene. Canter reports on cases where rapists force their victims to take baths after the crime, or who comb their victim’s pubic hair, as is done in a forensic investigation, so that no incriminating evidence will be left. The significance of these practices tells the profiler that this particular offender has had past contact with the police and may be found in official records.
The Success of Profiling

Research on the validity and reliability of criminal profiling is mixed. According to the FBI, in a study of 192 cases where profiling was performed, 88 cases were solved. In 15 cases (only 17 percent of the solved cases and 8 percent of the total cases) profiling turned out to be useful in the actual identification of a suspect (Holmes and Holmes, 1996). In one of the few studies that empirically tests profiling techniques, Pinizzotto and Finkel (1990) asked groups of profilers, detectives, psychologists and college students to examine closed police cases to determine whether professional profilers were more accurate than nonprofilers in generating personality profiles and correctly identifying known offender characteristics for one sex offense and one homicide case. While the professional profilers scored significantly higher in the number of correct responses for the known sex offender, there were no significant differences for the homicide case. The profilers did, however, appear to process all of the information given to them qualitatively different from the other groups perhaps suggesting experience is an important ingredient for profiling. A great deal more social scientific research is necessary, especially research which is carried out in collaboration with law enforcement agencies.

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Further Reading


Groth, Nicholas, and Birnbaum, Jean H., Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender, New York: Plenum, 1979


