

Offender profiling – the pros and cons

Offender profiling (also known as criminal or psychological profiling) has been popularised by books, films and TV series such as *Cracker*, *Criminal Minds*, *Hannibal*, and more recently *Mindhunter* on Netflix. The term offender profiling was first coined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the 1970's (Canter & Allison, 1999). It is defined by Ainsworth (2001) as “the process of using all the available information about a crime, a crime scene, and a victim, in order to compose a profile of the (as yet) unknown perpetrator” (p.7). It combines law enforcement and forensic psychology to narrow down an investigation when the offender leaves no physical trace (American Psychological Society, 2004 as cited in Douglas & Olshaker, 1999), as it enables the Police to narrow down the investigation (Douglas & Olshaker, 1999). According to Holmes and Holmes (1996) there are three major goals of profiling, these are: to evaluate psychological and social characteristics, to evaluate possessions (souvenirs) found at suspects homes (Canter, 1994) and the final goal is to provide effective strategies once the suspect has been arrested (Canter & Heritage, 1990). It is however, important to recognise that profiling is not appropriate for all crimes, but is most effective with crime scenes that indicate psychopathology, contact crimes, crimes that are part of a series, attacks on strangers and violent crimes (Holmes & Holmes, 1996). There is also some recognition that profiling is not without its flaws as it is argued that it lacks empirical testing. This paper will therefore explore previous high profile cases that have utilised a profiler and consider the strengths and weaknesses of profiling along with some consideration of the effectiveness and how this has been previously measured.

One of the earliest reported cases of profiling was that of the 'mad bomber' who had committed crimes over an eight-year period in the 1950's. Dr James Brussell provided a profile of an individual who was eastern European, in his 40's, obsessional and paranoid, and living with a sister or aunt in a neighbouring state. Brussell used his personal intuition, psychiatric knowledge, along with medical and police records to formulate his profile. This profile proved extremely accurate as the detail matched that of Metesky the man arrested and later charged with the offences (Pinizzotto, 1984). However, even though the profile proved accurate, it is not known how useful this profile was in the arrest of this individual. As these early profiles were based on psychoanalytic premises, and intuition of clinicians, they were not without error as documented by Brussell himself, as he stated that he had made several mistakes by deducing information and analysing facts incorrectly (Canter, 1994).

It was not until the 1970's that profiling became a considered tool for aiding in law enforcement. It was during this time that several serious crimes had been committed and the FBI had become increasingly frustrated with the lack of physical evidence in providing clues to the sort of person that should be searched for. Due to this, the FBI developed a systematic 'top down' approach to offender profiling in which profilers utilised psychological theory and research that focused on offender behaviour (Grubin, 1995; Ressler et al., 1993 as cited in Grubin, 1995). They also used previous cases from incarcerated murderers and sexual offenders for evidence (Grubin, 1995) as these enabled profilers to formulate a picture through making comparisons (Weber, 2010). Research was conducted to strengthen the approach

by interviewing 36 serial killers, some of whom were high profile killers such as Bundy and Manson. Findings revealed that there were two different types of offenders, these were known as organised and disorganised types. They argued that this was an important finding as these two different types of offenders have very different demographic and personality characteristics. Organised murders for example, would be typically intelligent, living with a partner, socially and sexually competent and possibly a psychopath with a tendency to follow their crime in the press. Whereas, a disorganised offender would be more likely to live on their own, have low intelligence be socially and sexually incompetent, probably suffered sexual and physical abuse as a child and have mental illness (Ainsworth, 2001).

This approach was first used by the FBI in 1973 when a 7-year-old girl named Susan Jaeger went missing whilst on a camping holiday with her parents. Police could not find the girl for a year, then in 1974 they uncovered the charred remains of an 18-year old girl close to where Susan had been abducted (Ainsworth, 2001). Police suspected one killer and asked the FBI to assist by drawing up a profile for the likely killer. The profile suggested that the killer would be a white male who lived near the camp, and a loner who was likely to have been arrested before. This profile fitted David Meirhofer, he was arrested and questioned but later released as there was no physical evidence linking him to the crime. However, later Meirhofer anonymously telephoned the mother of Susan stating he had abducted Susan. The mother had recorded the call which prompted Police to search the house, whilst doing so they found souvenirs of the crime, he later admitted both crimes along with two others then he killed himself in his cell (Canter, 1994).

However, although there is evidence of positive outcomes the validity and reliability of this approach has been called into question. For example, the usefulness of obtaining offender information during interviews (Grubin, 1995) as they may have provided information that was favourable to their own case, or that was used by their lawyer or psychologist involved in their trial. Therefore, this information may not have provided the true motivation for the crime which would immediately impact on the accuracy of the dichotomy. The ability of the interviewers has also been called into question, as some of the questions were too instructive. As such, the UK adopted a bottom up approach, utilising Circle theory which has a key assumption being that of the criminal consistency hypothesis, which suggests that criminals stay consistent throughout their career. It consists of two parts, one being interpersonal consistency which argues that criminals will only commit crimes that match their social competence; and spatial consistency which suggests that criminals will commit crimes in areas known to them, usually around their home or base (Canter & Heritage, 1990).

One of the early profiling cases in the UK, was undertaken by Britton in 1984, when he was asked to assist in a case involving a 33-year old woman named Caroline Osborne. Caroline's body was found with her hands and feet bound and seven stab wounds. Britton created a profile by studying the crime scene photographs and autopsy report and suggested the killer was a young male possibly early twenties, sexually immature, lacking in social skills and living at home with parents, strong athletic, manual worker, and had forensic awareness. Several months later another murder occurred, this had several differences, however Britton stated that the murders had been committed by the same man. Following the profile,

Paul Bostock was arrested and later he confessed to the two murders (Britton, 1997). This heightened Britton's profile and made him the person to call when the Police had no physical evidence.

In 1992, Britton was again called upon to profile in the Rachel Nickell case. Rachel was a 20-year old model who was murdered whilst walking her dog and two-year-old son on Wimbledon Common in London. Police initially arrested Colin Stagg but due to a lack of physical evidence later released him. However, on the advice of Britton, Police undertook a sting operation in which an undercover police officer began a relationship with Stagg with the hope that Stagg would implicate himself. Stagg lied to impress the undercover Police officer by stating that he had murdered someone in the New Forest, Police were unable to find any evidence of this so the undercover Police officer was asked to confront Stagg. It is suggested that she encouraged him to confess to committing the Wimbledon Common murder by assuring him that there would be no repercussions. Stagg stated that he was not involved in that murder, but because he fitted some of the profile he was charged. Gisli Gudjohnsson the psychologist representing Stagg argued that Britton's profile was speculative and based on intuition, rather than empirical evidence. The judge ruled the whole case as unfair and stated that there had been deceptive conduct committed (Turvey 1999). Due to this, Britton's career was severely impacted and the usefulness of offender profiling was called into question; as it was evident following this case, that profiles could lead to false arrest and ultimately miss capturing the real offender leading to possible further crimes (Turvey, 1999).

Following this case, an investigation into the effectiveness of offender profiling was conducted by the Metropolitan Police as there were concerns regarding its reliability and validity (Alison & Rainbow, 2011). Arguably, Britton appeared to adopt a top down approach rather than bottom up, as he used intuition when profiling the Nickells case, as such it is difficult to argue effectively against the usefulness of the bottom up approach to profiling. However, not only have the UK raised concerns about profiling, the United States (US) have also, particularly in regards to the typologies of organised and disorganised offenders. Canter, Alison, Alison and Wentink (2004) tested the reliability of organised and disorganised typologies by utilising a content analysis using a psychometric method of multidimensional scaling (MDS). They investigated published accounts of serial killers in the US which had been collected over many years by various researchers. They used the crime classification Manual (Douglas, 1992, as cited in Canter et al., 2004) to classify organised or disorganised. Findings identified twice as many disorganised as organised crime scenes, only two crime scene behaviours co-occurred within the organised typographies which was body concealed at 70% and sexual activity at 75%. They found that only sex acts and vaginal rape occurred in two thirds of disorganised crime. However, further statistical analysis failed to separate organised and disorganised variables. They therefore concluded that there was no real distinction as all serial murders have an organised element so concluded that it would be more beneficial to consider individual personality. Following this, the FBI acknowledged that the concept was too simplistic and that most offenders had characteristics in both categories, therefore, the typologies should not be classed as boxes that offenders should fit, instead, they should be considered as “waypoints on a multi-axis continuum of different behaviours” (Lord & Morton, 2005, pp 51-55). By

adopting this stance, it enabled justification of the dichotomy as it identified that the system was not incorrect if offenders did not fit neatly into one of the typologies, instead it reflected perfectly the complexity of human behaviour. As such, the FBI now acknowledge that the goal of the profiler should be to use what is known about the different typologies, rather than trying to place an offender into a specific category. By doing so, it will enable the profiler to reach some conclusions about the type of offender.

It is clear that there are some issues with offender profiling, this may be due to a lack of knowledge base for profiling expertise (Grubin, 1995). However, it is difficult to measure the validity of profiling as it is difficult to assess the extent to which profiles contribute to arrests. Usually a randomised control trial would be utilised, however this is not appropriate as it would be difficult to tell a detective that he could not have a profile if he wanted one. Instead, it may be possible to perform a retrospective evaluation measuring the closeness of fit between offenders and profiles, however a number of variables are contained within profiles, but it would be difficult to state how many correct variables a profiler must identify. Also, a lot of the information is provided from eye witness reports, but reported as if known, it is difficult therefore retrospectively to know how much is speculation (Grubin, 1995). Nonetheless, there appears to be some evidence for the success of offender profiling, such as that experienced in the Osbourne case. Profiles are also often favoured by Police, as they state that they are useful in focusing their inquiries. However, it is also understood that profiles can have detrimental effects if they stray from providing a supporting role, as clearly seen within the Nickels' case.

Although there have been significant efforts made to increase the validity and empirical foundation upon which profiling is based, many of the concepts developed by early profilers were based on assumptions that had not been subjected to rigorous scientific testing such as the organised/disorganised typologies. As such, it is essential that research is continued in the field of profiling. The FBI are demonstrating commitment to this by assigning a full time research co-ordinator to work closely with a network of outside academic researchers in a variety of fields. The UK have also made significant changes as it was identified that there was no training available for profilers and that there was no regulation of professional or ethical standards (Alison & Rainbow, 2011). As such, the term offender profiler was changed to Behavioural Investigative Advisor' (BIA) with training available and suitable regulations in place.

It is evident from this paper that profiling is not without issues both at a practical and empirical level. Nonetheless, it has appeared useful in capturing serious offenders both in the US and UK, and is still regarded as a useful tool in enabling the Police to narrow down their investigation when the offender has left no physical trace. As such, it is fundamental that research continues into profiling, and that regulations around profiling remain in place. This will ensure that profilers work within ethical boundaries and that the reliance on intuition is secondary rather than a primary approach. By doing so, it should ensure that there are no further incidences such as that seen in the Nickell's case and that profiling becomes a highly regarded tool in law enforcement.

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