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Criminal Profiling



How effective is criminal
profiling?

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How effective is criminal profiling?

Introduction

The issue of 'criminal profiling' is one with which most of us are familiar. Its recent appearances in the media have certainly raised the profile of criminal psychology and a number of students are keen to work in this area. "Numerous TV programmes and documentaries have also in recent times focused around the assertion of criminal profiling, including Millennium, profiler and even The X-Files" (Muller, 2000:234). Unfortunately, the media portrayal of criminal profiling has often been far from accurate. The basic reason for this is because they have a tendency to imply that profiling is a perfect skill to some extent comparable to a precognitive clairvoyant capability (Muller, 2000). As a result of the general popularity of criminal profiling, much has been written on this topic and a comprehensive review of the literature is beyond the scope of this paper (Muller, 2000). Profiling has its proponents among those who understand the process and have had successful experiences with it (Ault et al., 1994; Douglas and Burgess 1986; Douglas et al., 1986; Geberth, 1996). The understanding of profiling as an investigative technique is still not well known by many law enforcement professionals including criminologists, and behavioural scientist (Cook and Hinman, 1999). According to different authors including forensic psychologist and FBI-trained profiler, criminal profiling can be a very useful tool in the investigation of very violent crime. The present development of criminal profiling has been said to be more art than science. "Most criminal profiling uses information drawn from forensic and behavioural science, but the scientific merit of profiling has not yet been demonstrated in a systematic fashion" (Cook and Hanman, 1999: 231).

What is criminal profiling?

Criminal profiling is the inferring of an offender's characteristics from his or her crime scene behaviour. According to Douglas and Olshaker (1995)"Criminal profiling is the development of an investigation by means of obtainable information regarding an offence and crime scene to compile a psychosomatic representation of the known architect of the crime." (Douglas and Olshaker, 1995 quoted in Muller, 2000:235). For example, a profiler might try to infer a criminal's age, gender or employment history commencing from the manner he or she have performed throughout the period the crime was carried out. This practice has been referred to by names including offender profiling, psychological profiling and specific profile analysis. Criminal profiling is typically used with crimes where the offender's identity is unknown and with serious types of crime where the offender's identity is unknown and with serious types of crime, such as murder or rape. Profilers are also likely to work on crime series, which are collections of crimes that are thought to have been committed by the same offender (Bull et al., 2006). The different types of criminal profiling can be

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broken broadly into two types: geographical profiling (which is how the offenders got to and from the crime) and the profiling of an offender's personal characteristics. The latter is what people most commonly associate with the term criminal profiling (Bull et al., 2006; Muller 2000).

The types of tasks that a criminal profiler might be asked to complete depend on the type of profiler they are. A geographical profiler could be asked to identify the likely location of an offender home from the geography of his or her known offences. A criminal profiler might be asked to construct a profile of an unknown offender giving details of his or her likely characteristics as inferred from the offender's behaviour at the crime scene. When a criminal is apprehended the profiler might also be asked to advise the police on the way that particular suspects should be interviewed. From all indications, criminal profiling is therefore an umbrella term for a number of different practices (Ainsworth, 2001).

Having identified what criminal profiling is, we should address the question 'Who are criminal profilers?' In 1995, Gary Copson investigated this issue and found that the majority of profilers in Britain were typically academic or criminal psychologists. Psychiatrists, police officers and police civilian staff were also represented within his sample of offender profiler: clearly criminal profilers are themselves a varied group of people. The media has portrayed criminal profiling as a job in itself, but in reality, only few individuals, within the United Kingdom at least, conduct criminal profiling full-time. Most offender profilers are called in as consultants: the role is not as widely practised as the media portray. For example, Copson's study found only seventy-five instances of offender profilers giving advice in 1994, and this was the highest number recorded in one year for the time span of his study (Copson, 1995). A number of different materials can be used by a criminal profiler in constructing a profile or in geographically profiling an offender's likely home. One of the most important sources of information for constructing a profile would be the victim's or witnesses' accounts of the crime. In some types of crime it is possible that a victim's account may not be available, for example in the case of murder. In such cases, an offender profiler might instead have to rely on post-mortem reports, sketches of the crime scene and accounts from others about the victim. Regardless of the documentation used in constructing the profile, a criminal profiler has a lot of information to absorb and process when trying to profile the offenders or their location (Bull et al., 2006).

Geographical profiling is typically used to identify the likely area of an offender's residence from the location of the crime. Such an approach can be very useful in narrowing down a pool of suspects or enabling the police to prioritize an area for investigation or DNA sampling.

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Geographical profiling has its history in environmental criminology. The aim of environmental criminologists to identify areas where criminals were likely to offend from the locations of the offender's residence: the aim of geographical profiling is the reverse. Using the locations of an offender's crime as his or her starting point, the geographical profiler tries to predict the area in which the offender lives (Canter, 2000). Routine Activities Theory and Pattern Theory are relevant to geographical profiling. This suggests that criminals will offend in an area with which they are familiar. In other words, while criminals are going their daily life, they will notice potential targets. The area with which criminals are familiar and which surrounds their residence has been called the 'home range', while the area in which they commit crimes has been called the 'criminal range'. These theories also relate to the idea in geographical profiling that offenders have a cognitive or mental map of their (Familiar) geographical areas. These theories have led to the development in criminal psychology of geographical profiling principles and definitions of types (i.e. typologies) of offenders. Two researchers have been largely responsible for these developments: Dr Kim Rossmo and Professor David Canter. Both have developed typologies of offenders which have some similarities (Canter and Alison, 1999; Rossmo, 2001).

Research with stranger rapists (rapists that attack victims previously unknown to them) and serial arsonists has confirmed that for these types of criminals, the marauder pattern of offending is more common, whereas the pattern for serial burglars is less clear. However, research has suggested that offenders may change their geographical pattern of offending, sometimes behaving as marauders and at other times behaving as commuters. One study examined a serial who offended in Italy over a considerable number of years and it revealed that the offender sometimes behaved as murder but at other times as a commuter. Clearly it would be unwise to assume that offenders fit on typology or another (Grubin et al., 2001). Geographical profiling principles have been developed in England for the marauder type of offender by Professor David Canter and colleagues. These are based on the Circle Theory of Environmental Range which predicts that all things being equal, the shape of an offender's criminal and home range will be circular, with the home itself being located in the centre of the circle (Rossmo, 2001). As well as relying on statistical approaches for geographical profiling, geographical profilers also consider issues such as the offender's likely motivation for the offences and the characteristics of the physical environment in which his or her offending takes place. Such factors could skew an offender's journey to crime and therefore affect the appropriateness of statistical models (Jackson and Bekerian 1997).

The effectiveness of geographical profiling has not received a great deal of attention, though there are some reports regarding its accuracy. For example, between 1991 and 2001 Rossmo's

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geographical profiling system, *Rigel*, was used in the investigation of 1,426 crimes. Its effectiveness was assessed by comparing the size of the total area over which the offences occurred to the (smaller) size of area beginning to be searched on the basis of the geographical profile. On average, the offender's residence was currently identified having searched approximately just the central five per cent of the offence area. Its effectiveness seemed to vary depending on the type of crime, with it being most effective for arson (Alison et al., 2002).

In asking how effective criminal profiling is, they should be an establishment with some reliability of whether Profiling is of any importance or advantage to us first. Several law enforcement officers including the police have revealed an immense agreement of doubt about profiling, to some certain extent that can be due to the fact that they see apprehending criminals as their particular area of proficiency, but also because it is still such an inadequately developed field (Davies, 1994). Modern studies such as those conducted by Pinizzotto and Finkel (1990) suggest that profiling to some extent valid. The effectiveness of criminal profiling in reality relies on the extent of which profiling has actually been performed in practice. “Wilson et al. (1997) propose, to some extent idealistically, that subsequent to focusing at the track documentation of profiling so far the proposition is that it works. They have concentrated their claim on a case study of carefully selected high profile crimes; however do not provide whichever references or source for the data. The major predicament in the company of this claim is that it is entirely unreliable. associated to that is the dilemma of reporting bias, for the reason that what is principally prone to be heard is all with reference to cases in which profiling has been used if the case was lucratively and productively resolved with a success story and of which the profile was close to perfect” (Muller, 2000:259). The organisation of FBI is one of the investigating team that is justifiably, unwilling to make public let go of the exact figures on the successes and failures of the profiles that they present. “According to Ressler & Shachtman (1992), data’s such as an 80% achievement rate have been circulated, there has yet to be any statistics put forward to authenticate this claim” (Muller, 2000: 259).

Clearly an inaccurate criminal profile has the possibility to give the wrong impression about the investigation; however this possibly will only be a setback if the police consign a superior quantity of confidence in the criminal profile *than* they do in their personal investigative skills. “For instance, Pinizzotto found that from 192 requests for criminal profiles, only 17% in fact were used to help recognize the suspect. More positively, 77% of the respondents reported that the profile had helped them to focus their investigation” (Muller, 2000: 259-260). Overall, if consistently profiles are found not to be correct in some aspects, it may lead to police loosing absolute faith in their worth.

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A very crucial criticism of criminal profiling is the fact that there are no much studies showing or demonstrating the techniques of profiling to be dependable and valid. “The majority of the 152 police psychologists surveyed by Bartol (1996) reported that they were sceptical about the validity and usefulness of profiling.” (Cook and Hinman, 1999: 236).

For now, it seems impossible to no how effective criminal profiling actually is. This is mainly because it's based on too much assumption. For instance, when profiling the characteristics of a person, the profiler is assuming that the behaviours shown at the crime scene are a result of the person characteristics rather than determined by the situation. To successfully profile personal characteristics from crime scene behaviour there would have to be some elements of the crime scene behaviour that are more indicative of the person than of the situation. In recent studies, one task for researchers of criminal profiling is to determine which behaviours these are. Typically, the types of characteristics described in a criminal profile are demographic. In such situations the profiler is therefore assuming a relationship between behaviour and demographic characteristics. Some researchers have however, questioned whether a criminal demographic characteristic would influence their behaviour and queried their inclusion in criminal profiles. Instead, as suggested by personality psychologists, it is more likely that a person's thoughts, goals, emotions and past experiences will affect their behaviour in a situation. Criminal profiles that infer how a criminal will perceive situations or infer his or her likely past experiences might therefore be more valid than those inferring demographic characteristics. However, it is questionable how useful such information would be to the police (Alison, 2005; Rossmo, 2001; Bull et al., 2006).

Researchers from personality psychology have spent a great deal of time investigating the effectiveness of some of these assumptions and criminal psychologists have also begun to test them empirically. In the published literature and on the internet it is easy to find case studies of successful applications of criminal profiling to real criminal investigations. At face value this is indeed good news. However, when reading such reports it is important to remember that the successful cases are those most likely to be publicized. While it is very positive that profiling has been successful in specific practice that its effectiveness is demonstrated through empirical research.

Some empirical evaluations of criminal profiling have been conducted. Two studies attempted to profile stranger rapists' criminal histories from their crime scene behaviour and both reported some limited success. A study that tried to predict the characteristics of burglars from their scene behaviour also achieved some success in predicting characteristics such as criminal demographics

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and previous criminal history. These studies have searched for relationships between criminal characteristics and actions at the behavioural level. Other recent studies have investigated such relationships at a thematic level: themes that describe the actual behaviours, for example, pseudo-intimate behaviours, are developed (Bennell and Jones, 2005).

As well as actually testing whether criminal profiling is effective, some researchers have conducted consumer satisfaction surveys, asking the users of criminal profiles to rate their usefulness. In Britain, Gary Copson found that over seventy-five percent of the police officers questioned found the profilers' advice useful. This was mainly, because they said it increased their understanding of the offender or supported their perceptions of the offence/offender. However, only three percent said the advice had helped identify the actual offender. Most of the police officers did say that they would seek the advice of a profiler again (Copson, 1995). A similar study was conducted in the Netherlands, where only six profiles existed which could be assessed. In contrast to the British study, the feedback from the police officers was negative. Most complained that the advice in the profile was too general or was not practical given the resources the officers had available to them. Some indicated that the profiler's advice was ignored because it did not match their own opinions. These findings cannot be given too much weight, however, since they are based on a very small sample of officers (Jackson et al., 1993).

Conclusion

Criminal profiling has captured the interest of the public and students of criminal psychology alike. In contrast to its portrayed in popular media, it is a field in its infancy which still requires a lot of development, particularly in relation to establishing a solid theoretical base and evaluating its effectiveness in a methodologically rigorous way (Bull, 2006). The effectiveness of a criminal profile is incorrect or even to some extent may inadequately mislead police, allowing the criminal to escape detection for a little while longer and an innocent person may be dead as a result. However, this does not imply that profiles should be ignored or should never be used by police again, but that profiling should be approached with caution. Criminal profiling should not be blindly accepted or should not be relied on because it may be something that may not have any relationship to the real truth (Muller, 1995).

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