Flaw and Order: The Science and Mythology of Criminal Profiling

Somewhere between hard forensic science and Hollywood-cop psychobabble, criminal profiling struggles to find a legitimate place in law enforcement’s investigative toolbox.

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Here’s a common television drama scenario: a body has been discovered in a neighborhood, and it seems to match a pattern of previous homicides.

“Looks like a serial killer,” mutters one beat cop to another. “Better call in [your favorite TV detective’s name here].” Cue the somber yet wistfully hopeful music as the experienced criminal profiler enters the frame and scopes out the crime scene, analyzes the evidence, interviews witnesses, and ultimately develops a behavioral profile that leads to the killer’s capture and conviction. Everybody has seen stories like this, but what is their basis in reality? Is criminal profiling a valid law enforcement tool or a fictional forensic fad?

Information from books, TV shows, movies, and the media’s general fascination with the dark side of human behavior have all combined to produce an explosion of interest in the field of criminal profiling over the past decade (Douglas and Olshaker 1998; Ressler and Schactman 1992). In academia, too, a growing number of masters and doctoral programs are allowing students to do research and dissertations in this area (Dowden et al. 2007). Behavioral profiling research is being accepted for publication in many prominent psychology and criminal justice journals, and the field has spawned at least one periodical entirely devoted to this topic, the Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling.

However, a number of forensic skeptics have expressed concern that the popularity and enthusiastic application of what variously has been termed behavioral profiling, psychological profiling, offender profiling, or criminal profiling have far exceeded the evidence for its scientific validity (Dowden et al. 2007; Hicks and Sales 2006; Kocsis 2009; McCann 1992; Muller 2000; Palermo and Kocsis 2005; Snook et al. 2007). This article provides a concise description of the practice of criminal profiling, addresses the questions of both its theoretical validity and practical utility, and makes some recommendations for how to rationally and usefully integrate the art and practice of criminal profiling into the fields of scientific psychology and criminal justice.

Criminal Profiling: What Is It?
All professionals who work with human beings, whether medical doctors, psychologists, business managers, or police detectives, do some kind of profiling in their daily work. Understanding both the commonalities and differences in human behavior enables these professionals to individually tailor their services to diverse types of people. Clinicians need to know how different patients will respond to different medical procedures or forms of psychotherapy. Law enforcement officers need to know how different suspects will behave under varying circumstances.

Although various terms and definitions have been proposed, the term behavioral profiling is generally understood to refer to “a technique for identifying the major personality and behavioral characteristics of an individual based upon an analysis of the crimes he or she has committed” (Douglas and Burgess 1986, 405). Thus, the basic idea is that certain personality types express themselves by the individualized way they commit a crime, and that analyzing the particular pattern can provide clues to the killer’s identity.

While some form of profiling has always been a part of criminal investigation, efforts by the Federal Bureau
of Investigation to develop and implement a formal and systematic process for crime scene profiling began only as recently as 1978, with the formation of the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit, or BSU, which evolved into the Profiling and Behavioral Assessment Unit (Douglas and Burgess 1986; Geberth 1996; Homant and Kennedy 1998; Ressler et al. 1988). Initially, the process was developed specifically to deal with cases of serial homicide and serial rape. Although the official FBI term for this activity is criminal investigative analysis, the more colloquial term criminal profiling has become entrenched in both the academic and popular literature. With some slight differences in approach, profiling has also become popular in Canada, Great Britain, and the Netherlands (Dowden et al. 2007; Palermo and Kocsis 2005).

Despite the emphasis on psychology, however, profilers as a group have not articulated a uniform theory of human behavior that guides their investigations, and it is often unclear as to whether they are trying to reconstruct the personality of a given offender or merely generating a loosely connected series of psychologically descriptive statements concerning the interpersonal style and the underlying motives of the suspect.

Working the Case: How Profiles Are Developed
The FBI’s model of criminal profiling typically follows a sequence of stages (Geberth 2006; Kocsis 2009).

Preliminary steps. The first officer who discovers the crime scene endeavors to preserve the scene and, if possible, to hold any witnesses or suspects for questioning. The on-scene officer initiates a log or timeline that accounts for all activities at the scene and the people and vehicles that have had access to the area. The on-scene officer then contacts the special investigator, or “profiler.”

Initial procedures. The investigator first assesses the area as a whole to take in the “big picture”—neighborhood, roadways, pedestrian pathways—before focusing on the crime scene itself. In an initial survey, or “walk-through,” of the scene, the investigator takes notes, photos, and videos for later processing and
ascertains whether there is any fragile or perishable evidence that needs to be collected and preserved right away.

Describing the scene. The investigator records a complete description of the victim and the surrounding area, including: age, sex, body type, skin and hair coloring, clothing or missing clothing, positioning and location of the body, obvious or unusual weapons in the vicinity, obvious signs of violence such as bullet holes, shell casings, blood stains, bottles, or syringes, evidence of premortem injury or postmortem mutilation, and any other evidence that could yield clues as to cause of death. At some point, physical evidence is collected from the crime scene, either by a special evidence collection team (in larger police agencies) or by the investigator him- or herself (in smaller departments).

An important aspect of on-scene homicide investigation is an analysis of crime scene staging, in which the offender manipulates the crime scene in an attempt to confuse or misdirect law enforcement investigators from the true cause of death or motive for the killing (Hazelwood and Napier 2004). Common scenarios include revenge homicides staged to look like suicides or accidents, domestic homicides staged to look like robberies, or sexual homicides staged to shock or taunt police and the media (Miller 2000; Miller 2012). In such cases, the investigator considers who would benefit from the scene being staged or what psychological gratification might be obtained by the perpetrator.

Forensic interviews. Any potential witnesses are interviewed at the scene to take advantage of their fresh observations and recollections. Some witnesses may be transported to the department for further questioning. Follow-up interviews may be scheduled at later dates as more evidence comes in.

Victimology. A thorough understanding of who the victim is, where he or she lived and worked, his or her background, and social relationships are often viewed by profilers as a vital first step in ascertaining why he or she was victimized, who the killer was, and what may be his or her preferred type of victim (Joyce 2006; Napier and Hazelwood 2003). Types of victim information include injuries sustained (methodical execution or violently rageful attack?), location of the victim (what was he or she doing away from work in the middle of the afternoon?), victim’s occupation (what type of people would he or she likely run into?), family and friends (recent romantic breakup or harassment by creepy neighbor or workmate?), and legal history (clean-cut preppie found in “druggie” neighborhood?).

This information is combined to develop the victim profile, which in turn is supposed to yield clues to the offender’s modus operandi, or MO, that is, his or her particular and individualized methodology of committing crimes (this is distinguished from the signature, which reflects the offender’s deliberate manipulation of the crime scene).

Developing the offender profile. When all this data has been collected, the FBI’s Crime Scene Analysis consists of six steps: (1) inputting the profiling data; (2) developing decision process models to discern patterns and commonalities; (3) reconstructing the crime scenario, i.e., exactly how the suspect killed the victim; (4) construction of a criminal profile that incorporates the motives, physical qualities, personality, and behavioral tendencies of the perpetrator; (5) targeted investigation of a narrowed pool of suspects who fit the profile and use of the profile in interviewing and interrogating likely suspects; and (6) apprehension of the offender. This process strives to be a cyclical and flexible one, so that the profile may be modified as new information comes in from the ensuing investigations.

Note that the overall rationale of the FBI’s criminal profiling approach is not to identify airtight, idiosyncratic markers that can zero in on a single specific perpetrator but to develop a suite of identifying characteristics that can be compared to other offenders already in the database. If the suspect is previously unknown to law enforcement, there will be nothing to compare the profile with. The preternatural discernment and apprehension of a previously unknown suspect living down the street is something that happens in Hollywood, not in real-life law enforcement.

But Does It Work? Evidence for the Validity and Usefulness of Criminal Profiling
Even within the limits described, there are quite a number of cases where
criminal profiles have proven to be inaccurate, unhelpful, or frankly misleading in solving crimes (Muller 2000; Rossmo 2009; Snook et al. 2007). This has led the pendulum of opinion to swing in the other direction, with some critics asserting that behavioral profiling is little better than astrology (Ainsworth 2001), while others take a more middle ground position in the debate over whether behavioral profiling is mainly a highly skilled art (Douglas and Burgess 1986; Turvey 1999) or should aspire to be a replicable, scientific technique (Canter 2004; Kocsis 2009; Palermo and Kocsis 2005)—in essence, the same debate that surrounds almost every area of applied psychology, including forensic psychology (Miller 2006; Miller 2012).

One problem is that most research and writing on psychological profiling has not been done by psychologists but by law enforcement investigators, who tend to take an intuitive case-study approach rather than a skeptical scientific orientation toward their subject (Dowden et al. 2007). Over the past two decades, a number of forensic psychologists have attempted to examine the empirical basis for criminal behavioral profiling.

Law enforcement investigators and profiling. In an early study, Anthony Pinizzotto (1984) surveyed local law enforcement officers who had asked the FBI’s BSU to develop a total of 196 offender profiles to assist in their investigations. Most of the officers reported that the profiles were of some use in focusing their investigation, but less than half considered the profiles to be significantly helpful in solving their cases, and in only 17 percent of cases did the profiles lead to the actual identification of a suspect.

A subsequent study (Pinizzotto and Finkel 1990) presented a previously solved murder case and rape case, in which the outcome was already known, to five different groups: (1) “expert profilers” (i.e., instructors in the FBI’s BSU); (2) “trained profilers” (i.e., law enforcement investigators who had undergone training from the BSU); (3) police detectives with no formal training in profiling; (4) psychologists; and (5) university students. The expert and trained profilers wrote longer and more detailed offender profiles, and their profiles were ranked higher in overall usefulness by an independent panel of detectives. However, the profiles of the expert and trained profilers were actually the least useful in predicting the actual characteristics of the murderer, although they did somewhat better than the other groups in predicting the rapist’s characteristics.

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Psychologists and profiling. What do psychologists think about psychological profiling? Curt Bartol (1996) found that 70 percent of a large sample of self-identified police psychologists seriously questioned the validity and usefulness of criminal profiling. However, in another study (Torres et al. 2006), simply changing the nomenclature from criminal profiling to criminal investigative analysis yielded a sharp increase in perceived scientific validity among surveyed psychologists. Although the authors did not address this, I think the term profiling has accreted an unfortunate burden of prejudice, as it has been used pejoratively to describe unwarranted stigmatization of certain demographic groups, and this attribution may be unfairly tainting the term in other contexts as well.

Whatever the name, even if psychologists could overcome their skepticism, might their unique training and knowledge about the human mind confer some advantage in creating a profile? Richard Kocsis and colleagues (2000) directly compared the profiling skills of psychologists to that of police officers and found that the only significant differences were that psychologists more accurately predicted the offender’s physical features and offense behaviors. In fairness, however, should psychologists who don’t specialize in forensic analysis be expected to have any special skills in that area based on their general knowledge of human behavior? For that matter, should police officers who are not trained profilers be assumed to have such specialized abilities just by virtue of working in a law enforcement field?

Craig Bennell and colleagues (2006) mince no words in categorically rejecting the idea that psychologists have any special insight into the criminal mind or any special skills with regard to criminal profiling. They point out that in other forensic contexts, such as psychological evaluations for the courts, psychologists typically show marked disagreement with one another and specialized training seems to have no appreciable effect on the accuracy or usefulness of their reports.

This, however, may be generalizing from a few sensationalized “battles of the experts” that receive glaring media attention and that are dramatized on TV cop-and-lawyer shows. In my experience as a forensic examiner, if provided with sufficient background data and a comprehensive clinical interview, it is rare for truly honest and objective evaluators to come up with diametrically opposed conclusions in forensic evaluations. Examiners may disagree on the precise diagnosis (schizophrenia vs. schizoaffective or bipolar disorder) or the exact relationship of the clinical criteria to the legal standard (subject was paranoid at the time of the offense
but was able to control his actions vs. subject was powerless to disobey command hallucinations).

However, most evaluations of the same subject will yield a rough consensus because the examiners are using well-validated principles of psychological investigation combined with their own knowledge and experience to produce a credible assessment. The same probably applies to skilled criminal profilers: of course they’re not always right, and different profilers may disagree on assorted details, but it would be surprising if, given the same data and using the same methods, they came up with widely diverging profiles, especially on a consistent basis.

Criminal behavioral profiling will no doubt ultimately be found to occupy a middle ground somewhere between infallibility and psychobabble.

Criminal Profiling: Where Are We?

At present, the evidence for the overall validity of criminal profiles in solving serial homicides and other crimes appears weaker than at first suggested by the initial flush of enthusiasm. Probably, this represents expectable weakening as the initial excitement fades and the reality of the limitations of profiling begins to be appreciated. For example, a recent study of the validity and utility of profiling by Snook, Eastwood, Gendreau, et al. (2007) found that while profiling is helpful in narrowing the suspect pool, it is not as reliable as some profiling experts had claimed.

References


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