

Understanding Criminal Behaviour: Beyond ‘Red Dragon’

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Abstract

Few applications of forensic psychology attract more public interest (and spawn more misconceptions) than *offender profiling*. This paper gives an introductory overview of offender profiling, considering the nature and extent of approaches to profiling before proceeding to evaluate and discuss their effectiveness and overall utility. The position taken by the present author is that although there certainly is a limited place for offender profiling as an ancillary tool to police investigations (albeit for a restrictive range and type of crime) we ought to treat with caution declarations or claims to the validity and successes assumed of current incarnations of profiling. While its immense popularity may be welcome in drawing attention to the work of forensic psychologists more generally, failure to critically consider the practice, extent and accountability of offender profiling (and also the profilers) may have unfortunate repercussions for the broader development of forensic psychology.

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, forensic psychology has enjoyed an exponential rise in popularity both in academic settings and in the popular media. Indeed, this is such that it is now the fastest growing speciality within the discipline of psychology. The primary driving force behind student and public interest has been the plethora of popular crime fiction since that period, especially in film and television. Hollywood blockbusters such as “Silence of the Lambs”, and more recently “Red Dragon” have successfully whetted the appetites of would-be investigators drawn to psychology with expectations of becoming the next Will Graham or Clarice Starling, regardless of what knowledge they possess of what it is psychologists actually do. The Department of Applied Psychology at UCC often receives enquiries from people seeking advice on ‘how to get a career in profiling’. It can come as a bitter disappointment to some then that offender profiling – generally the practice of deducing behavioural characteristics of an unknown offender based on aspects of that offender’s crime – is neither readily transparent, clearly successful, widely practiced, or indeed available as an actual career.²

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² Indeed, the closest semblance of ‘full-time’ profiling is associated with the FBI’s Investigative Support Unit at the organisation’s training academy in Quantico, Virginia. It appears however, that not even these profilers spend more than a few years engaged in this activity.

In order to discuss the nature and effectiveness of offender profiling, as well as approaches to it, we first ought to consider what exactly is meant by forensic psychology.

Forensic psychology for the most part involves the application of psychological theories, principles and evidence to legal issues at a variety of levels of the criminal justice system. Forensic psychologists, may, for instance, assess a defendant's pre-trial fitness to plead, advise legal professionals on the nature of interview strategies to be used with particular kinds of witnesses or suspects, deliver expert testimony within the courtroom, and sometimes advise on interview strategies used by the police in the interrogation of suspects and witnesses. While some forensic psychologists assist in the recruitment and/or training of police officers, others provide counselling and psychotherapy services in the context of occupational management issues, sometimes for problems such as post-traumatic stress or duty-related victimisation. The forensic psychologist may also assist police in their enquiries during a criminal investigation. It is in this context that forensic psychologists may be 'called in' to provide an offender profile.³

Understanding Criminal Behaviour

It should come as no surprise that the task of 'understanding' criminal behaviour poses significant challenges. Since the development of criminology in the mid 19th century, a variety of theories exist with which we might endeavour to comprehend, and consequently predict future instances of, criminality. Some of these have included theories proposing the existence of genetic factors, 'hardwired' urges or instincts, and physical or mental abnormalities with which we might distinguish criminals from non-criminals. Other theories have proposed the existence of specific personality disorders or more general traits associated with specific offender behaviours, while other approaches again suggest ways of understanding the acquisition and development of criminal behaviour in terms of environmental influences.

The possible contributing factors to criminal behaviour are as complex as they are numerous and explanations frequently incorporate the following: early childrearing practices, peer group pressure and the related effects of deindividuation (where one's self-awareness and self-consciousness becomes subverted into the collective authority and character of the group), the presence of aggressive cues (e.g. guns, which in turn may be linked to cultural arguments about trends in violent behaviour between and within countries), frustration, provocation, the role of alcohol and other drugs, social learning, violent television, films, videos, and computer games, temperature changes (e.g. heat),

³ Forensic psychology is still in its infancy in Ireland although it thrives in the United Kingdom, mainland Europe, the United States and Australia. In Ireland, forensic psychologists are currently found working in academic settings engaged in teaching and research (on areas such as the victimisation of children, child pornography, terrorism, delinquency, eyewitness testimony etc.), or for the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, prison and probation services in the assessment, treatment and management of offenders.

environmental changes (e.g. pollution, noise, overcrowding), as well as broader changes in societal structures and influences.

Problems with the direction of many approaches to understanding criminality reflect two basic trends:

- The persistence of (unrealistic) attempts to explain all forms of criminality with reference to one exclusive theory of criminal behaviour, and
- More general propensities to explain complex behaviours in linear, static terms.

Contemporary accounts, fortunately, are more promising. The reality of more recent approaches to understanding criminal behaviour reflect the complexity of criminality and an acknowledgement that we must be able to separate conceptually the causes of involvement in crime from those factors that sustain and encourage the commission of individual criminal acts. It is also common for contemporary analyses to advocate crime-specific approaches, a practice with which predecessors to modern theories of criminal behaviour have failed to grasp.

Within the context of criminological history more generally however, offender profiling is a very recent development and its thrust into the media glare has been nothing less than phenomenal, although unfortunately serving to rather obscure the true extent of the encouraging progress of forensic psychology.

Offender Profiling

Offender profiling is currently a term that refers to a variety of activities, all of which entail a psychologist or some other 'external' agency engaging at some level with a police investigation. While a multitude of definitions exist, a useful summary is provided by Copson (1995), who defines offender profiling as:

“Any predictions, recommendations and observations based on the inference of offender characteristics from behaviour exhibited in a crime or a series of crimes, and offered to the investigators as the product of either statistical analysis of collected police data on past crimes or of relevant clinical expertise, typically as a psychologist or psychiatrist.”

The logic of offender profiling, in the main, is that behaviour expressed in relation to the commission of a criminal offense (which may be revealed before, during and after the crime itself) enables the ' profiler' to draw conclusions about the dynamics of that person's behaviour and personality (Michaud, 1986; Porter, 1983). In other words, features of the crime scene are assumed to reflect features of the offender's behaviour and personality, such that understanding the nature of the crime scene and offence, we presumably understand something of the offender (Davis, 1999). This may reveal clues as to how the offender behaves in everyday life, as well as tell us something about what is

motivating him to offend in particular ways. A principal task of the profiler then is to dilute such deductions or inferences into a usable form for the police investigators.

More formally, offender profiles tend to be constructed for one or more of the following objectives:

- 1) The development of a **description of an unknown offender**, based on an interpretation of crime scene elements of the unsolved offence (this is perhaps the broadest, and most common purpose of profiling);
- 2) Establishing the **probability of a future offence** from the same offender based on the crime scene analysis;
- 3) The **linking of a series of unsolved crimes** that appear to share distinct features (e.g. in what we call ‘signature aspects’ – essentially personalized offender-specific behaviours that reflect individual interpersonal behaviour and/or offender fantasy);
- 4) Again, based on a psychological portrait inferred from an analysis of the crime scene and/or statistical data from offenders thought similar to the unknown subject, the development of an **interrogation strategy** to assist police in ‘asking the right questions’.

The profile then is the production of this and other kinds of information for the police in the hope that it will somehow assist their efforts, even if only to help narrow down a list or ‘type’ of potential suspects.

It should be pointed out that the profiling lends itself to use in a rather narrow type of investigation. Profiles appear in cases of child abuse, abduction, but most typically in serious crimes of a serial nature (including burglary, rape, arson, and murder). In the main, profiling appears to be most useful in cases that suggest some psychological disorder in the offender (especially in attempting to ‘profile’ personality from crime-specific behaviour), or in a series of unsolved crimes that suggest patterned crime-specific behaviours. Indeed, given these limitations, current concerns about the broadening remit of profiling may be warranted in light of existing efforts to assert its validity even within the remit of a relatively small number and type of offences.

It is something of a myth that psychologists regularly visit crime scenes, although it does happen from time to time. For the most part however, psychologists are consulted in the later stages of investigation, examine the crime scene from a distance via materials provided by the police, and often (but not exclusively) when police leads have been exhausted.

Typically, the information made available to a profiler will include case documents on the crime scene, victim-related information, forensic information (including a pathologist’s report), preliminary police reports, and a variety and range of photographs

(e.g. from photography of the immediate crime scene and of the victim to the surrounding areas).

The profiler will also draw on a degree of personal experience or expertise (relating to knowledge of both the type of crime in question as well as the type of criminal suggested from the analysis of the crime), and is likely to possess criminological knowledge (central to suggesting probable demographic attributes). In some cases, the profiler (if a psychologist) will rely on personal experience from clinical case studies, statistical models of offending and other potentially useful contributions. Overall, however, the profile is basically a summary document (often not more than 6-10 pages) rooted in personal judgements, a degree of educated guesswork, common sense and logic, and statistical and clinical probabilities: the profile is certainly not predicated on any specific 'absolutes' (Ainsworth, 2000, p.105).

Profiles normally contain estimates of information as the offender's sex, approximate age, race and other general characteristics. Usually, profiles contain some suggestions related to whether or not the offender is likely to strike again, whether or not the offender may be forensically aware and in cases involving a sex offence (e.g. rape or murder with a sexual element), information that might suggest details of the degree of sexual maturity of the offender (Turvey, 1999): with this last point in mind, and in a very practical sense, profiles may often also contain information related to the offender's likely responses to police questioning and can result in the profile providing suggestions about the interrogative strategy to the police.

An important step in the production of a profile entails a reconstruction of the offence. The focus here is on the interaction between the offender and victim. Victim statements can thus be critical in order to ascertain the nature of verbal and physical behaviour displayed by the offender. The profile may then convey some form of classification of the offence. This can be important in indicating the likelihood of a re-offence in the future, so that the police and other agencies involved in the investigation may develop an intervention strategy aimed at warning a potential victim or group of victims (which may be symbolic or otherwise representative of the first known victim of a possible series).

The above description of what profiling involves and the kind of information provided probably represent a non-controversial view of profiling. Whatever the differences that might exist among the offender profiling community about some specific features of profiling, there are some fundamentally critical points we need to bear in mind.

Any profile must exist solely as an ancillary tool to a police investigation: it is essential that the profile is viewed as such and its limitations recognised (both by profilers as well as the police). In its current major form, the methods and subjects of offender profiling do not easily lend themselves to objective, empirical evaluation. In some cases, this is due to the wide variety of practices and procedures (let alone the different weights attributed to specific features of both the crime scene and its subsequent deductive/inductive conclusions) that may constitute 'offender profiling' per se, as we will see below. It may well be the case that an attempt to evaluate the success of profiles may tell us more about

differences between the training, background and professional orientation of the profilers themselves than any firm conclusions about assumed uniformity in the practice of profiling.

Given the multivariate nature of approaches to profiling, it is worth briefly describing the principal approaches currently dominating the practice. These are, in order of their development: the FBI approach, the clinical psychological approach, the statistical approach (often encompassed under 'investigative psychology' in the UK), and more recently, the geographical approach.

1. The FBI Approach

The FBI's Behavioural Science Unit, now its Investigative Support Unit, is the United States' best-known clearinghouse for investigative queries that merit the production of an offender profile (Michaud, 1986; Porter, 1983). Typically such queries derive from exhausted investigations at local levels, or involve the flagging of a series of unsolved crimes (typically murder) that spans two or more federal jurisdictions.

The Behavioural Science Unit, and the FBI's entire approach to offender profiling developed from research conducted from the 1970s through to the early 1980s that saw FBI agents interview and conduct detailed research on 36 imprisoned murders (Ressler, Burgess and Douglas, 1988). This is the data pool from which the logical underpinnings and statistical assumptions made about unidentified offenders (i.e. the unknown subject of the profiles) were derived. All were male, and while 29 of the 36 were classified as serial killers, all of the offenders were suspected of having killed multiple other victims. The nature of these offenders' crimes is what allows them to be typified as a relatively homogenous group: often their murders involved elements of sexual sadism, mutilation and often bizarre and/or ritualistic imagery or behaviour, the relevance of which is unclear to local law enforcement investigators (apart from suggesting some broad 'psychological problem').

In general, the FBI dichotomised the crime scenes of this group of offenders into two broad categories – organised and disorganised (Ressler et al, 1988; Turvey, 1999). Organised crime scenes reflected an overall level of control and planning (in other words, these offenders knew what they were going to do, and thought about how to do it), with offenders bringing their own weapons with them and generally coming 'prepared'. The organised offender may carefully plan his offence, and may use restraints in subduing the victim. Further reflecting an overall level of organisation, the organised offender may take care to transport the victim to a predetermined location, both in the execution of the victimisation or sometimes, post-mortem to hide the location of the body. The victim of the organised offender is 'personalised', in that while the victim may be a stranger, they may represent the realised aspects of an offender's fantasy. Given this level of planning, the organised offender's crime scene may reveal little practical information other than to suggest the level of planning involved, and care taken to avoid detection (Ressler et al, 1988).

Disorganised crime scenes on the other hand reflect almost polar opposites. The crime often appears the result of an unplanned, spontaneous 'blitz'-style attack, which often results in greater levels of exhibited violence (reflecting an overall lack of planning and forethought). The overall crime scene may be 'chaotic', with little effort made to conceal either the victim, or materials used in the offence (e.g. weapons).

These distinct crime scenes were then correlated with some broad 'personality' features within members of the offender sample. Offenders who displayed organised crime scene behaviour were found to have an average or above average intelligence level, were socially and sexually competent, often living with a partner, mobile (with a car), with a degree of negative stress precipitating the crime itself (e.g. through strife at home, at work, etc.). The organised offender would not only follow the reported progress of the criminal investigation through the media, but might even change jobs or leave town as a result.

Offenders who displayed disorganised crime scene behaviour, on the other hand, were found to have below average intelligence levels, were socially, sexually and occupationally unskilled, were reported to be quite anxious during the commission of the crime, lived alone, and would not bother to 'follow' the news reports or make subsequent efforts to purposely avoid detection (Ressler et al, 1988).

While the organised offenders' behaviour and personality is assumed to reflect psychopathic behaviour, the disorganised offenders were more typically representative of the presence of some psychotic disorder.

It is generally recognised that the FBI approach does not easily conform to the rigours of scientific research (Godwin, 1998), and the dangers of both overgeneralisation and oversimplification are clear from the nature and extent of the research from which this dichotomy arose. Trenchant criticism is offered by Turvey (1999), who asserts that the organised-disorganised dichotomy is essentially a false one, arising from "mistaken ideas about the developmental nature of criminal behaviour and the value of crime-scene reconstruction" (p.148). This, Turvey argues, can lead to confusion during the process of profiling as well as a failure to understand how a particular offender's behaviour may develop over time (p.148). The problem of the categories not being mutually exclusive is also an issue raised by Godwin (1998), with the FBI developing a third category ('mixed') into which some offenders who display elements of both 'organisation' and 'disorganisation' are put.

That being said, FBI agents themselves do not make any aspirations to science or psychology, instead emphasising the primary role of basic 'on the job' experience as the best predictor of success in dealing with such crimes, and Howitt (2002) reminds us that we should in fact praise what in essence is a valuable body of knowledge from such a small sample size of offenders.

2. The Clinical Psychological Approach

This form of profiling typically is done by clinical psychologists or psychiatrists who will rely more heavily on clinical data and models of offending, although as Silke (2001, p.245) points out, the clinician will tend to regard each case as unique and deserving of a case-specific analysis and classification. Less of an effort is made to fit the offender into some of the more rigid classification types.

Instead the clinician relies on drawing inferences from expertise or experience with similar crimes and offenders (e.g. rapists, arsonists, serial sex murderers etc.).

Given the increasing specialisation engaged in by psychologists (and forensic psychologists in particular), this form of profiling may on the surface appear quite valuable. If the police consider the input from a psychologist on a rape investigation, they will approach the rape ‘expert’; if the case involves serial arson attacks, the arson ‘expert’ will be consulted and so forth. Individual skills and specialities are therefore exploited to their fullest potential.

It is not uncommon, however, for clinical profilers to arrive at different profiles from the same profile inputs. This can reflect differences in the professional backgrounds and training of the clinicians as well as differences in their theoretical orientation within the discipline of psychology. The result is that different amounts of importance may be placed on interpreting aspects of the crime scene, and of course, in the context of efforts to establish the scientific bases to offender profiling efforts as “scientific”, the clinical approach could be criticised as conceptually weak as a result (i.e. in attempting to evaluate the clinical approach, we may in fact be simply identifying differences in the styles and procedures of individual profilers).

Another limitation in any realistic appraisal of clinical profiling is that as with such an individualistic approach, there is often little sense of transparency regarding how the profiler arrives at his/her conclusions.

3. The Statistical Approach

This approach is synonymous with the efforts pioneered in the United Kingdom by Professor David Canter at the University of Liverpool, and often is part of what is termed ‘Investigative Psychology’.

Canter (1989; 1994) is the leading advocate of an empirical approach to profiling based on the collation of offence and offender characteristics in the context of statistical analysis. The technique employed by Canter and Heritage (1990) is known as ‘smallest space analysis’ – this essentially is a categorisation system of offender behaviours across a number of dimensions (e.g. violent behaviour, impersonal behaviour, intimacy behaviour etc.) thought to be crucial to understanding the interaction between offender and victim. SSA uses multivariate statistical modelling particularly to attempt to link a suspected series of offences: where some surface elements may ‘flag’ a possible series,

SSA attempts to assert the statistical probability of the offence being committed by the same offender, owing to similarities and trends in offender-victim interaction styles, before, during, and after the commission of the offence (also see Canter and Larkin, 1993).

On the surface, the fact that an approach to profiling has proceeded with due caution paid to developing a theoretical basis (inherent in SSA) is regarded as a positive development. Such an approach, if valid, would ensure that the relative subjectivity of clinical judgement is removed from the profiling process owing to the fact that the profile rooted in empirical research and statistical probabilities derives, like the FBI approach, from a pool of known offenders. What distinguishes the statistical approach however, and this is indicative of how openly critical Canter is of the FBI approach, is explained by Howitt (2002): the objectivity of such an approach may indeed represent a favourable feature, but the conclusions from such profiles may “not necessarily [be] more helpful to the investigators” (p.219), with the possibility of missing “salient features of individual cases” (Silke, 2001, p.245) an inevitable result of generalising across such large datasets (also see Turvey, 1999, p.266).

4. The Geographical Approach

This approach is probably the most recent, and is most commonly associated with the work of Kim Rossmo (1995).

The basis for geographical profiling is that it may be possible to locate the probable residential or employment base of a criminal based on an analysis of apparent patterns in the criminal’s offence characteristics. The theoretical underpinnings of this approach essentially borrow, as above, from mathematical and statistical models, but are interpreted on an individual basis through the filters of environmental and cognitive psychology.

The approach involves assumptions about the spatial dimensions to behaviour (not necessarily ‘criminal’), and as such Rossmo’s method is typically associated with the need to understand the relevance of factors such as routine behaviour patterns of victims, the location of the offence, demographic attributes of the surrounding environment etc. (Woodhams, 2001, p.35-36).

Encouragingly, geographical profiling does incorporate findings from other approaches. We know from Canter and Larkin’s (1993) work on serial rapists for instance that some serial offenders (the ‘marauders’) tend to hunt in areas with which they are familiar, while others (the ‘commuters’) will travel to a ‘target location’ both to hunt for and victimise targets. Both groups of offenders, however, share the need to attempt to hide their ‘base’ location but operate according to known geo-spatial principles that are thought to limit such behaviour in everyone.

There are now a variety of computer software packages that will produce a colourful geo-spatial map of an area once the profiler has inputted the locations of a series of crimes.

One of these is the *Rigel* program (see Woodhams, 2002), which takes the profiling input details of several crimes and presents then a 2D or 3D surface map, displaying the “probable location of offender residence or employment using different colours” (Woodhams, 2002, p.36).

Apart from the program taking an incomprehensible two weeks to deliver its surface map, Turvey (1999) chastises the method for being about as “enlightening” as sticking pins on a big map and points to the perpetual error made by this and other forms of profiling in that an attempt is made to infer “meaning” from behaviours which are often taken “out of the overall behaviour and emotional context that it was produced in” (p.262). Nevertheless, geographical profiling represents an interesting development.

Does Profiling Work?

This question is not as easy to answer as we might imagine, and indeed we may be forced to consider this question from a variety of perspectives, agendas and outcomes. A direct answer assumes that profiles have explicit objectives and that there is a sense of rigour associated with the refinement and development of profiling practices. Unfortunately, neither represents the current reality of offender profiling and numerous practical, conceptual and theoretical issues contribute to the complexity of any attempt to evaluate the effectiveness and utility of offender profiling.

To begin with, we ought to perhaps reiterate the immense task faced by the very prospect of profiling. The profiler is essentially constructing a set of subjective judgements and offering hypotheses about a person whom the profiler has never met. The potential for failure is therefore quite high (failure to adequately predict behaviour is already a problem in clinical assessment cases even when the psychologist has access to the subject or client) and hence some of the more careful critiques of profiling remind us of the highly experimental nature of many of the methods involved, as well as their less than publicly acknowledged limitations. We ought to bear in mind also of course that cases in which profilers are active, are usually high-profile criminal investigations with an unrelenting glare on any technique used by the police: the need for transparency and clarity is therefore of paramount importance for several parties.

It may not be so difficult to answer why there are so few profiling cases made available for subsequent dissection and analysis – we rarely hear of or see the failures. It is essential for the development of profiling that the nature of the items provided in profiles must be individually assessed following the conclusion of an investigation to check for instance, which aspects of the profile have been correct, and which have been incorrect. It is inevitably the ‘hits’ we hear about through the media, but the ‘misses’ still tend to be shrouded in secrecy and embarrassment. Without access to failures as well as successes, however, our conceptual development of this area will remain limited, particularly regarding how we might refine the nature of profiling objectives to more discrete, and possibly as a result, more achievable goals.

With this in mind, we should also note that the simplicity of definitions of profiling can be deceptive in evaluating the effectiveness of the practice(s) of profiling (Howitt, 2002, p.214). After all, all of the practices described in these forms of profiling reflect extremely complex psychological issues that relate to behavioural consistency (i.e. the assumption that we can actually derive any meaningful deductions or inferences at all from crime scene 'behaviours' that enlighten us as to what 'type' of person the offender might represent AND the assumption that there is consistency in certain behaviours and personality traits more generally), the homogeneity of types of offenders (a point certainly represented in the FBI approach), and a host of other issues that without empirical research and hypothesis testing leave aspirations to the scientific bases of profiling wide open to easy criticism.

Even if such assumptions are empirically tested, there are a variety of practical matters we must consider in relation to strengthening the reliability of the methods used in profiling and the processes that underpin them. For a start, the quality of the information provided to the profiler (aside at all from any conceptual issues arising from inferring motive or deducing behavioural characteristics from behavioural 'indicators') is absolutely crucial to the process of producing a valid profile. And, as with the criticisms levelled at the clinical approach, it is inevitable that some data sources will play a more significant role for individual profilers. It is not inconceivable that single pieces of profiling input data may serve to skew the direction, nature and results of any particular profile, regardless of what 'kind' of profiling produced it.

Perhaps the most significant appraisal of offender profiling is that produced by, helpfully, a police officer. In 1995, Gary Copson, of the Metropolitan Police Service in London, conducted a 'consumer survey' of profiling activities. Copson closely examined over 180 cases in which police investigators made use of offender profilers (all psychologists or psychiatrists). In general, just over half the sample of police officers felt that they had received 'some additional information', although when pressed, this amounted to 14% of the sample agreeing that the profile had actually contributed in a practical way towards solving the crime in question.

Corroborated in Copson's analysis is the fact that profiles therefore, rarely lead the police to the direct or immediate identification of an offender: although this remains one of the core myths of profiling, Copson reported only 3% of cases in which this appeared to happen.

The results are not all so negative however. One positive finding from Copson's study was that over 60% of police officers surveyed felt that it was helpful to have the profiler present. Many of these officers reported having been given a sense of reassurance and encouragement in the formulation of their own opinions and decisions, and having an 'expert' on hand to reinforce those judgements seemed helpful. Consequently, about the same number of officers reported that they would certainly consult a profiler in future (Copson, 1995).

The issue of difficulty in establishing the criteria for success was certainly illustrated in the Copson study. In the main, the profilers' information (most of whom would have identified with the 'clinical' approach) was correct in over 2/3 of the data provided, but unfortunately, and again owing to the lack of empirical work on such cases following the conclusion of investigations, we are not clear on what kinds of information (and what patterns if any exist within and between them) the 1/3 of incorrect data consisted of.

Conclusions

According to Silke (2001, p.243), offender profiling has currently somewhat of an identity crisis. Descriptions synonymous with 'offender profiling' include: "psychological profiling, criminal personality profiling, criminal personality assessment, criminal behaviour profiling, offender profiling, criminal profiling or investigative profiling". Taken together with the multitudinal range of objectives expected (and proffered) within and from offender profiles, it is little wonder then that offender profiling remains "neither a readily identifiable nor a homogenous entity" (Gudjonsson and Copson, 1997, cited in Ainsworth, 2000, p.103; also see Homant and Kennedy, 1998 for suggestions to encourage distinctions between profiles in relation to their objectives). Although a sense of diversity in the area is important for theoretical progress, Bekerian and Jackson (1997) warn that too much diversity can lead to – and in the case of offender profiling to date, has led to – unintentional fragmentation and confusion. Given the relatively mixed results of profiling to date, we need to point to other influences to explain why offender profiling still occupies its distorted reputation and rather undeserved recognition.

A frequent essay title for forensic psychology students is: "Offender profiling: science or art?" The current reality of profiling, and 'current' is emphasised, probably reflects an uneasy and perpetually shifting combination of both – the amount of each tends to alternate, sometimes dramatically so, from profiler to profiler and case to case. For a person to claim competence at any activity that might constitute the description of 'profiling', an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the specific type of offender under scrutiny, as well as issues relating to the offence, is essential. Dr. Julian Boon, a forensic psychologist at the University of Leicester remarked at a 2001 conference on offender profiling that profiling contains elements of 'art' in that experience and creative talent play strong roles in the process of deducing a profile (Woodhams, 2002).

The profiler should certainly clarify to the investigation team exactly what information he or she is likely to be able to offer and what the implications of that information might entail. This assumes, of course, that the profiler is very clear on what information is likely to be of use to the police. Sometimes profiles contain such jargon as to be of little practical relevance for the investigation team. In view of one notorious high-profile murder case involving a forensic psychologist (for a discussion, see Wilson and Soothill, 1996), the importance of recognising and acknowledging one's limitations is crucial as well as the systematic documentation of how conclusions leading to the construction of a profile develop. According to Turvey (1999, p.266), investigators should only "enlist the

services of competent professionals who are willing to engage in frank discussions about the limitations of their method”.

Of course, it is unrealistic for any person, psychologist or otherwise, to possess an expert level of knowledge and understanding of every type of offence and offender. There have been past instances where profilers have been quick to offer assistance to any number and variety of offences, and the consequences have been damaging to existing attempts to develop the scientific qualities of profiling. Typically, profilers in the United Kingdom are specialised across areas of serial rape, arson, and murder involving aspects of sexuality, among others.

According to Silke (2001), less than about 2% of all forensic psychologists will ever engage in offender profiling. The reality of profiling remains such that although Ainsworth (2000, p.103) describes the rate of profiling as increasing on an annual basis, it is still not nearly as common as we might like to imagine. Although the FBI's Investigative Support Unit consistently develops profiles in quite a systematic fashion, offender profiling the UK and mainland Europe is somewhat more contained and confined.

And while it may be at least of some comfort that the majority of the media-friendly profilers offering their unbridled assessments on the recent Washington snipers case were not psychologists, it can only take one public relations disaster to call into disrepute not only offender profiling, but the parent speciality or even discipline espoused by the profiler. In one such case in the UK, as discussed by Wilson and Soothill (1996), the implications surpass the interests of individuals, and can serve to damage efforts at encouraging the development of forensic psychology more generally.

One thing that unites all critics (constructive or otherwise) of offender profiling is the unerring lack of empirical research that we need to develop offender profiling as a scientific endeavour. This of course, reflects an assumption that integration of scientific principles into profiling approaches are essential if we are to continue to develop such methods, but the present author believe this to be an inevitability if forensic psychology should continue to be associated with profiling in any way.

Given the infancy of forensic psychology in Ireland, confusion and false expectations in relation to the potential development of forensic psychology represent issues that neither the police nor psychologists can afford to entertain. We only continue to do so through lack of openness and basic communication. As Ainsworth (2000, p.120) reminds us, although there is strong evidence to support the increasingly steady relationships between psychologists and the police, the expectations of police investigators of offender profiling, as well as the psychologists who engage in it, must be realistic, the process must be transparent, and the results open to scrutiny. Anything less than this should be dismissed by both psychologists and the police.

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