

Profiling the criminal mind: does it actually work?

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Although psychological profiling is frequently presented as a recent and revolutionary technique for the investigation of aberrant violent crime, the notion of predicting characteristics of offenders based upon their behaviour is, in reality, old and symbolic of a long-held fascination with attempting to classify and predict criminality. It has long been thought that physical features may be an expression of an individual's personality. One of the earliest examples comes from the poet Homer, who described the character of Thersites in the *Iliad* as an ugly and malformed man whose appearance was suggestive of a criminal disposition. Indeed, similar notions emerged with the development of phrenology, most notably in the work of the criminologist Cesare Lombroso. Although such anatomical associations have long since been discarded, the fundamental idea that human behaviour is in some capacity a reflection of personality forms one of the fundamental cornerstones of the modern-day science of psychology.

One of the first applications of this behavioural tenet in the context of investigating violent crime arose with one of history's earliest serial killers, Jack the Ripper. Confronted by a series of violent murders in the Whitechapel area of London, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in 1888 consulted the physician Thomas Bond to provide a description of the offender based on the behaviours shown in the murders. About 60 years later, across the Atlantic Ocean police investigators would consult psychiatrist James Brussel after a series of bombings in New York City, which had begun in the 1940s and continued through to 1956. Brussel predicted several features about the bomber, such as his being an unmarried man of European descent about 50 years old. But the magnitude of Brussel's foresight in predicting the characteristics of the offender became apparent only upon the bomber's apprehension in 1957. Brussel believed from the nature of the bombings that the offender possessed a meticulous personality with a proclivity for wearing suits with the buttons neatly fastened. When George Metesky was arrested for the bombings he was found to be an unmarried man of European descent in his 50s who at the time of his arrest was wearing a blue suit (the colour Brussel thought the bomber would prefer) with all the buttons neatly done up.

Inspired by the prowess of Brussel in the mad-bomber case and later in the case of the Boston Strangler, in the 1970s agents in the US Federal Bureau of Investigation training academy began to formally develop a small programme designed to emulate the success of Brussel. Its goal was to provide a profiling service to police personnel throughout the USA who

were confronted with sexually violent crimes. From these somewhat modest beginnings a veritable profiler industry has proliferated among law-enforcement communities throughout the world. Police agencies in many countries now have their own profiling programmes or units, and virtually all police agencies have access to the larger, more established programmes, which offer their services internationally on a consultancy basis.

Despite the remarkable growth and popularity of the practice of profiling violent crimes, until quite recently very little independent and scientifically vetted evidence existed to support the contention that profiling actually works. Unlike virtually any other scientific endeavour, the popularity of profiling appears to be premised more upon anecdotal examples and popular-media portrayals such as movies and true-crime novels (commonly written by profilers themselves) rather than on any controlled experimentation or peer-reviewed systematic trials.

The need for such critical assessment became more apparent and urgent when examples of profiling failures began to emerge. The police investigation into the bombing at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, GA, USA, involved profiling that suggested Richard Jewel, a security guard present at the time of the bombing, was the likely offender. After a media spectacle lasting several months and questioning of Jewel by police investigators, forensic evidence established that it was highly unlikely that he could have been the bomber. In a similar circumstance, the investigation of a young mother, Rachel Nickell, who was murdered in 1992 on Wimbledon Common in southwest London, also involved profiling and resulted in police focusing on Colin Stagg as a suspect. On reviewing the available evidence at Stagg's trial, the Central Criminal Court—the Old Bailey—dismissed all charges against him and lambasted the prosecution, especially for the methods the police relied on in focusing their investigation on Stagg.

These and other high-profile criminal cases from around the world in recent years have called into question the validity of profiling, especially the extent to which profiling can assist investigators in accurately identifying the perpetrator of a crime. I have analysed the accuracy of profiling and its requisite skill base (see further reading). Using actual case materials from a closed murder and a closed arson investigation I developed test instruments to gauge a person's ability to assess these materials and predict the characteristics of the probable offenders. These instruments involved case materials the police investigators had on hand before the offenders were apprehended and an

accompanying questionnaire in which respondents were required to articulate their predictions of the likely offender based on this material. Because these cases had been solved, the identity of the offenders was known to me; thus, model answers to the questions could be developed to score objectively the accuracy of a respondent's answers to the questionnaire—ie, their constructed profile of the probable offender.

Over 6 years nearly 450 participants were tested, including various skill-based groups such as professional profilers, police detectives, fire investigators, psychologists, university students, and even psychics. The results supported the practice of profiling. The mean accuracy scores of each group showed that the profiler group surpassed the other groups in the ability to predict accurately the characteristics of an unknown offender. Rather than serving as an unequivocal endorsement of profiling, however, this research yielded a number of unanticipated results. The study also found that profilers as a group possessed the highest degree of statistical variance in their predictions. Consequently, not all people in this group were equally proficient. This observation is generally consistent with findings in other professions and vocations, in that practitioners within each group often differ markedly in terms of their individual competency and aptitude.

Another feature of the findings that came as a surprise concerned the skill basis for profiling. It had been thought that experience in law-enforcement investigation was the quintessential skill for accurate profiling. The findings of the study, however, indicated otherwise. Proficient profiling was most likely to arise from an individual's fundamental capacity for logical and objective reasoning. Indeed, in a number of embarrassing instances profile predictions by some of the sampled university students who had no experience in law enforcement were found to surpass predictions of some of the seasoned detectives.

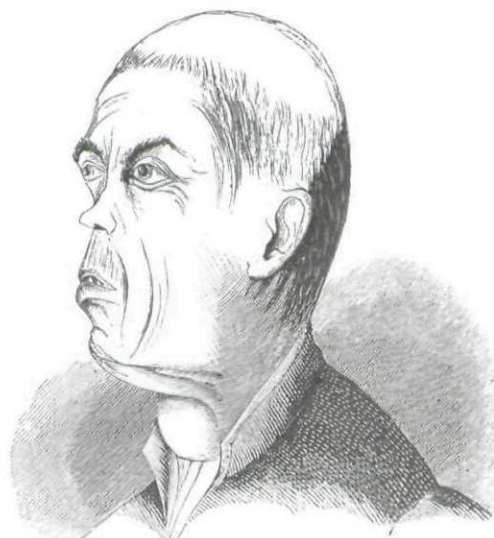
These findings provide some long-awaited scientific evidence to support the validity of profiling. On the one hand, this is an encouraging finding, but it is seriously at odds with the industry of expert profilers, a group that frequently emphasises that its proponents have extensive experience in criminal investigations. Indeed, the practice of profiling has grown such that many training and accreditation programmes have sprouted up around the world, ostensibly orientated more towards the organisational development and promotion of personnel within policing agencies than the

C. LOMBROSO -- *L'Homme criminel*.

PL. IV.



1. Trococéphale violeur, de Ravenne.



2. Voleur milanais, condamné 13 fois.

The criminal man by Cesare Lombroso

scientific advancement of the practice of profiling. Thus, these findings present a challenge to those expert profilers who market years of investigative experience as the main source of their expertise. Consequently, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which these findings will be integrated into the scientific development and practice of profiling in the future.

Further reading

Kocsis RN. Criminal psychological profiling: validities and abilities? *Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol* 2003; 47: 126-44.

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