

Psychological profiling: Investigative implications from crime scene analysis

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Psychological profiling—often referred to as behavioral, criminal or investigative profiling—began informally in the late 1940s when members of law enforcement were unable to make an arrest involving serial crime. This presentation describes the six stages of profiling, as well as other important aspects such as victim and offender characteristics, escalation, time and location factors, modus operandi and signature, and staging. The organized vs. disorganized dichotomy is discussed as well as how personality is an intervening variable and how crime scene analysis reveals aspects of personality. But for profiling to gain general scientific acceptability, a higher level of empirical validation and general scientific acceptance of this technique will be necessary.

Psychological profiling—often referred to as behavioral, criminal, or investigative profiling—began informally in the late 1940s when members of law enforcement were unable to make an arrest involving serial crime. Since most serial

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crimes are sexually motivated, the authorities often consulted mental health professionals (MHPs) who were affiliated with sex offender programs and had experience with repetitive offenders who often targeted strangers, especially women and children. The MHP's typical profile was usually couched in psychological terms and unhelpful to investigators. For example, the MHP would often say the sex offender they are looking for probably has low self-esteem, social introversion, and conflicts with members of the opposite sex, all of which may have been true but of little practical help in an investigation.

In the mid 1950s, New York City was shaken by an individual who set bombs at various landmarks such as Grand Central Station, Radio City Music Hall, as well as theaters and libraries. The Mad Bomber—as he was called by the media—planned his offenses with such a high degree of detail that he went undetected for about 16 years. Out of frustration, the New York Police Department consulted psychiatrist James Brussel, who reviewed all of the information available, including letters the unknown offender had sent to the police, photographs of the crime scenes, and descriptions of the home-made bombs. After analyzing this information, Brussel concluded that the individual they were looking for was of Eastern European descent, over 40 years old, lived with an aunt or sister, had a serious illness such as paranoia, attended church regularly, was soft spoken, polite, and exceptionally neat in appearance. A profile written by Brussel was published in the New York Times on Christmas day, 1956, the following being an excerpt:

Look for a heavy man. Middle age. Foreign born. Roman Catholic. Single. Lives with a brother or sister. When you find him, chances are he'll be wearing a double-breasted suit. Buttoned (Brussel, 1968).

As a result of Brussel's profile, the police narrowed their investigation to George Metesky, a disgruntled former Con Edison employee. When they went to arrest Metesky, they found he fit Brussel's profile in amazing detail. Not only did

he have all the characteristics that Brussel described, but he wore a double-breasted suit that was buttoned!

The uncanny accuracy of this profile caught the attention of the FBI, which was eager to learn how Brussel arrived at his findings. The psychiatrist described his thought processes as a series of *deductions*. He noted that MHPs typically evaluate people and offer predictions regarding how such individuals might behave in the future. For example, after an evaluation an MHP might conclude that the patient is likely to experience depression, make unsuccessful suicide attempts, have difficulties with authority figures, and problems at work. In fact, these types of predictions are rather ordinary in mental health practice. But in drawing a profile of an unidentified offender, Brussel explained that he simply reversed the process. Instead of offering predictions about a person he examined, Brussel offered deductions about the kind of person who would have carried out a crime in a particular way.

An individual's personality is generally consistent across situations. For instance, a person with a compulsive personality—who is neat, orderly, and somewhat rigid—is likely to behave this way in different aspects of his life: his apartment, car and desk will be neat, and his appearance clean and tidy as well. If such an individual were to commit a crime, he would probably do so in an orderly, planned fashion. The compulsive individual would not likely change his pattern of thought and behavior and commit an impulsive, unplanned and spontaneous criminal act. When Brussel reviewed the crime scene information in the Mad Bomber case—and noted the extensive amount of planning that went into the offenses—he correctly concluded that the offender must have been a compulsive personality type, who would dress and behave accordingly.

Brussel's reasoning process formed the basis of what later became known as psychological, behavioral, criminal, or investigative profiling. This technique is used mostly by

members of law enforcement, especially the FBI, when they assist in investigations. Profiling has been used not only in identifying unknown offenders in serial crimes—such as serial murder, rape, and arson—but with other crimes as well, such as hostage negotiation, anonymous letter writers (Casey-Owens, 1984), threat assessment (Miron & Douglas, 1979), and the like.

Profiling basics

Douglas, Ressler, Burgess, & Hartman (1986) described six stages of the profiling process: (1) input: collecting crime scene information; (2) decision process: arranging the input into meaningful patterns and analyzing victim and offender risk; (3) crime assessment: reconstructing the crime and the offender motivation; (4) criminal profile: developing these specific descriptions of the offender (Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, & Kessler, 1992); (5) investigation: using the profile as an aid or adjunct in investigation; and (6) apprehension: checking the accuracy and the description against new information that emerges in the investigation and changing the profile accordingly.

The profiler needs to review all of the information in the investigation except for the suspect list, which could unwittingly influence his opinion. After assessing all of the crime scene and forensic evidence including autopsy reports, crime scene photos, and other forensic information, the profiler focuses on several specific areas which are important in constructing a psychological profile of the unidentified offender (Napier & Baker, 2005).

Victim risk

Victim risk refers to the amount of risk (high, moderate, or low) a victim placed her/himself in to become a victim (Douglas, Ressler, Burgess, & Hartman, 1989). High risk victims place themselves in vulnerable situations, such as engaging in prostitution; low risk victims' occupation and lifestyle do not lend themselves to being targeted as victims. Different types of offenders target different types of victims; therefore, determining the level of risk the victim engaged in helps us gain an understanding of the unidentified offender.

- Offender risk** Offender risk refers to the level of risk (high, moderate, or low) an offender places himself in that might lead to his apprehension (Napier & Baker, 2005). For example, abducting a victim in broad daylight with many people around is high risk behavior with a high likelihood of getting caught. Low risk behavior involves an abduction where the chances of apprehension are slight, such as at night with no obvious witnesses. Different types of offenders engage in different types of risks; therefore, an assessment of this type provides an understanding of the kind of offender that is being sought.
- Escalation** Most individuals who commit crimes begin with less serious offenses and, over the years, their level of criminality increases, or escalates. In addition, offenders often escalate their behavior within a series of crimes so that they may begin with voyeurism, progress to burglary, then assault, rape, and murder. Inferences about the unidentified offender can be made from examining the level of escalation in the crimes being investigated (Douglas et al., 1992).
- Staging** Staging is the alteration of a crime scene in order to re-direct the investigation away from the offender (Douglas et al., 1992). Staging is important in crime scene analysis since many individuals attempt to make crime scenes appear as if the motivation for the offense was different than it actually was. For example, a husband who kills his wife during an argument may arrange the body to make it look as if a sexual crime occurred, in an attempt to redirect the investigation away from himself.
- Time and location factors** Various time elements in criminal conduct are revealing of the unidentified offender's lifestyle or occupation (Douglas et al., 1992). In addition, how long the offender spent with the victim provides additional insight into the crime and the criminal, since the longer an offender spends with the victim, his risk of apprehension increases.

Where the offender apprehended the victim, how he got the victim to go with him, where the victim was killed, as well as body disposition are all indications of an offender's thinking processes and capabilities. In some instances the body is left at the murder site; in other instances the victim is abducted at point A, killed at point B, and the body is disposed of at point C. Whether or not a vehicle was used can certainly be inferred from this type of body movement.

**Modus Operandi/
signature**

The offender's Modus Operandi (M.O.)—method or technique of carrying out the crime—can change over time (Douglas et al., 1992). As an individual gains more experience, he often adapts his criminal technique in order to increase his efficiency. For example, a burglar, through experience, can learn more sophisticated burglary methods and reduce his chance of apprehension (Schlesinger, 2000). Since the offender's M.O. can change, it is often not a useful method for linking (or connecting) a series of crimes to the same offender. Examination of the offender's engagement in repetitive-ritualistic behavior at the crime scene is often more important in linking crimes to the same offender than by only considering his criminal technique (Hazelwood & Warren, 2003).

Many serial offenders engage in repetitive-ritualistic behavior at the crime scene since the offense itself is insufficient in providing enough psychosexual gratification. Thus, an offender may engage in a unique set of acts with each victim which can serve as his *signature* or *calling card*. Examples of signature behavior are postmortem body positioning, mutilation, symbolic gestures, written statements left behind, various insertions, and the like (Keppel, 2000; Douglas & Munn, 1992).

**Crime scene
patterns and
personality
inferences**

Hazelwood and Douglas (1980) found that crime scenes of violent sex offenders and sexual murderers could be divided into two general groups: those that are organized, reflecting a great deal of planning in which little evidence is left behind, and those that are disorganized, reflecting an impulsive, unplanned crime with a lot of evidence left. Individuals who

leave highly organized crime scenes seem to have distinctly different personality characteristics and behavioral patterns than individuals who leave highly disorganized crime scenes. Organized and disorganized offenders display different approaches to crime as a result of their different personality make-ups (Ressler, Burgess, Douglas, Hartman & D'Agostino, 1986).

Organized crime scenes reflect a high level of control by the offender where restraints are used and the body is disposed of in a thought-out manner, usually transported to another location from where the murder took place. Organized offenders are often socially competent, intelligent, live with a partner, follow the crime in the media, and change locations after the offense. They are apt to have psychopathic (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 1993), manipulative or narcissistic (Schlesinger, 1998) personalities, and can be charming, neat in appearance, physically attractive, and able to speak with ease to members of the opposite sex.

Disorganized crime scenes reflect impulsivity and lack of planning; the victim is often known to the offender, bodies are left in plain view (typically at the death scene), and a weapon of opportunity (rather than a specific weapon brought with) is used (Ressler et al., 1986). Disorganized offenders often have poor work histories, live alone and near the crime scene, have little interest in the media's coverage of the case, do not change their lifestyle following the crime, and are much more mentally unstable. They may be schizoid, schizotypal, borderline and sometimes schizophrenic. Such individuals may be unattractive physically, have little experience with members of the opposite sex, and live alone because others find it difficult to tolerate their eccentric behavior (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988).

After evaluating the crime scene as highly organized or disorganized, inferences regarding the personality and behavior patterns of the offender can be drawn (see Table).

The profiler cannot say—and is not expected to say—who committed the crime, but rather the kind of person who was likely to have committed this type of offense. Accordingly, a profile can help those conducting the investigation narrow the field of potential suspects.

TABLE **Characteristics of organized and disorganized offenders**

<i>Organized offenders</i>	<i>Disorganized offenders</i>
CRIME-SCENE BEHAVIORS	
Plan in great detail	Do not plan
Choose low-risk abduction	Choose high-risk abduction
Display control during crime	Behave haphazardly during crime
Cleverly manipulate victim	Rarely manipulate victim
Transport body	Leave body where killed
Bring restraint devices	Do not bring restraint devices
Torture before death	Mutilate after death
Stage the crime scene	Do not stage the crime scene
Often inject themselves into investigation	Rarely inject themselves into the investigation
Geographically mobile	Geographically stable
PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS	
Psychopathic, antisocial, narcissistic	Borderline, schizoid, schizophrenic
Pleasant looking and physically attractive	Strange looking, often odd, unkempt, and disheveled
Have wives, girlfriends, and experience with females	Have little experience with females
Live with a woman	Live by themselves or with family members
Good verbal skills	Poor verbal skills
History of behavior problems	History of psychiatric treatment and conflicts with authority suicide attempts

SOURCE: L. B. Schlesinger (Ed.). (2000). *Serial offender: Current thought, recent findings*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Personality
as an
intervening
variable

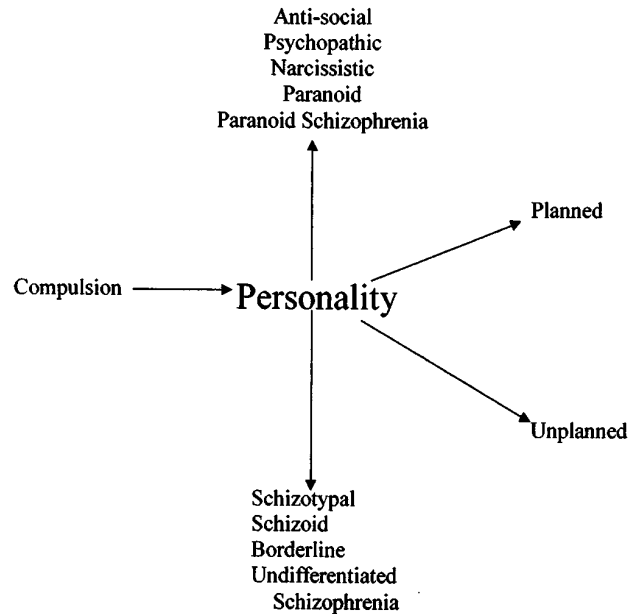
Behavior is largely shaped by personality. People with fairly intact personalities and minimal overt disturbance typically carry out their lives in an orderly and thoughtful manner. And when such individuals commit crimes, they do so in a logical, methodical way, consistent with their personality. Thus, serial offenders who commit planned offenses typically have personality disorders that do not disorganize their thinking and behavior (Schlesinger, 2004). They are manipulative and deceptive, but they are not distracted by interfering overt psychopathological symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions.

Offenders who act in unplanned, spontaneous ways do not do so because of a different underlying motivating dynamic; instead, they act spontaneously because of their personality make-up (Schlesinger, 2004). They often have more overt psychopathological disturbances such as impulse control disorders, borderline, schizotypal or major mental illnesses. Their disorganized personalities frequently prohibit thoughtful and careful planning. And they lack, to a large extent, the control and defenses necessary to contain their behavior. Thus, if their fantasies build to a point where the compulsion to act out becomes overbearing, they often behave in a high risk thoughtless manner that is likely to get them caught.

There are a number of exceptions to the general notion that severe psychopathology results in unplanned crimes and the absence of severe psychopathology results in planned crimes. For instance, two severe forms of mental disturbance—paranoid personality disorder and the paranoid form of schizophrenia—do not disorganize the underlying character structure. The behavior of individuals with these types of conditions is typically organized, systematized, and thoughtful. In addition, individuals with intact personalities can act in an impulsive manner if they are intoxicated. The Figure illustrates personality as an intervening variable, guiding how an internal compulsion to act out is released, and an offense is carried out.

FIGURE

Personality as an intervening variable guiding how a compulsion is released and a crime is carried out.



Comment The process of psychological profiling is much more involved than simply matching a list of crime scene features with corresponding personality characteristics and behavior patterns. Profiling does not determine specifically who did the crime, only the type of person who may have done it, unlike what is portrayed in the media. Most crime scenes are neither highly organized nor highly disorganized; instead, they present a mixed picture (Schlesinger, 2004). Crime scenes, like most other phenomenon, fall on a normal distribution with highly organized and highly disorganized on the extremes. FBI profilers deal mostly with highly organized crimes, since these are the cases that local law enforcement refers to their agency. But serial offenders often commit crimes in a less than organized fashion, leave evidence at the scene, and are frequently apprehended after the first, second, or third offense so that the FBI is not consulted.

Some researchers (Canter, Alison, Alison, & Wentink, 2004) argue that the FBI approach to profiling is not scientific enough and relies too much on clinical experience, rather than on empirical validation. They argue for the development of empirically generated profiles and question the validity of the FBI profiling method. But notwithstanding the lack of strong and consistent empirical validation for profiling, some studies (Pinizzotto & Finkel, 1990) have demonstrated its usefulness, particularly when employed by those who are experienced in the process. But for profiling to gain general scientific acceptability—so that its results, for example, can be admitted routinely in court—a higher level of empirical validation and general scientific acceptance of this technique will be necessary.

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