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Offender Profiling in Todays’ Crime Scene Investigations

The logic is simple. How can you quickly and efficiently find and catch a criminal? If you could get into the brain of a criminal and predict their next move or target, would you? This is how today’s law enforcement is advancing to adeptly get ahead of criminals and stop them in their tracks; a tool called offender profiling. Offender profiling is a relatively recent approach to investigative science, and thus the least trusted and most analyzed method in predicting a criminal’s behavior or personality. Although offender profiling is generally accepted and used in many different countries, recent criticism argues that profiling is no more significantly accurate than common knowledge due to the lack of scientific and empirical evidence in this field. The glamorization of criminal profiling in television and cinema also brings somewhat of the wrong idea to the general public about this branch of investigative science. However, with law enforcement endorsing this investigative tool and the international popularity of profilers as an asset to criminal investigation the question is whether or not offender profiling is an accurate and reliable tool to analyze and predict criminal behaviors.

Offender profiling, or criminal profiling, is a psychological and investigative tool which can be traced back to the middle ages, but only officially began in the 1970s. This tool helps investigators accurately predict and profile the characteristics of unknown criminal subjects. Gekoski explains that police officers often seek the input of criminal profilers for investigations when all other resources have been exhausted or unhelpful to their investigation. Profilers examine the scene of the crime and analyze similarities between victims in order to proficiently predict the characteristics of the offender based on the things done or left at the crime scene. Profilers can often find evidence or clues that local police may have overlooked or found insignificant, which can steer an entire investigation to a new direction. According to Brent Snook, the majority of approaches to criminal profiling assume that criminal behavior is determined by underlying dispositions within the offenders that make them behave in a particular way. This theory assumes that offenders will act similarly across their offenses which then become traits that profilers use to determine the offender’s behavior.

America brought our attention to this new investigative tool in the 1990s with the release of the movie *The Silence of the Lambs* and the television shows *Law & Order: Criminal Intent,* and *Profiler* which all portray the job of a profiler and showed viewers a radical new view to criminal investigation. Suddenly, viewers could observe the actions and motives of the criminals – the new focus of these shows – rather than focusing exclusively on the police and prosecutions. Everyone became intrigued with this new approach to criminal investigation. It was almost psychic the way that profilers seemed to intuitively know what an offender was thinking or planning. Although profiling suddenly became so popular in media, Muller states that “most people have no idea how effective profiling is, let alone how it works, apart from what they have picked up from the media” (235). “Most people” does include local law enforcement. The power of profilers have been magnified and exaggerated through the media to the point of complete and utter (willing) surrender of power by an investigative team to a single profiler. Gekoski exposes this sad truth in a study of 11 police officers, all of whom had previously worked with an offender profiler. Some of these cases showed that “detectives were so overawed by the profiler that they sidelined — or even entirely abandoned — their own professional judgment and usual investigative strategy” or in even more extreme cases, “the profiler was effectively running the investigation: dictating lines of enquiry, creating suspect elimination criteria and determining the direction of interviews with suspects” (Gekoski 108). This misdirection of faith towards offender profilers due to media and popular belief have caused failed investigations when police officers relinquish their effort from an investigation in hopes that a profiler will be able to singlehandedly magically conjure up a suspect list and determine which suspect is the offender. It is dangerous to assume that a profiler will always be correct; especially within an investigation that local law enforcement has already exhausted all other leads. It is also scary just to think that an entire police force would willingly give up all their other resources and power in their faith of a single profiler, especially if the profiler does turn out to be wrong or unsuccessful.

However, offender profiling is the single most versatile investigative tool used in todays’ crime scene investigations. This new investigative tool can be used in literally every aspect of the investigation from determining initial suspects to years later, deciding whether or not an inmate is a threat to him or herself or society. In his notes, James Aaron George mentions, “The goal of the profile is to narrow a pool of suspects, sift through thousands of leads, or provide new leads” (227). This was the original plan for offender profiling within investigations and it worked. Profiling allowed police to focus on more empirical evidence once the offender profilers narrowed down the suspect pool to a more manageable amount of people. Police no longer had to worry about doing the job of several men all at once. If local law enforcement needed assistance in an investigation that stretched the limits of an ordinary investigation, the FBI and the offender profilers were there to help. Yet over time, profilers began to expand their skills and use their techniques for purposes other than simply narrowing down suspect pools. More and more police departments began calling on profilers “to provide interrogation strategies to law enforcement, to assist prosecutors in developing cross-examination strategies, to determine the seriousness of threatening letters, or to set traps in the media to flush out offenders” (George 227).

Although many critics claim that offender profiling should not be considered a science due to the lack of scientific and empirical evidence used in this approach, profiling may overcome this obstacle in the future. Muller tells us that, “there are various aspects to this technique that may be amenable to investigation” and this would make offender profiling more widely accepted and trusted through science (248). The growth of offender profiling within the investigative world shows a lot of promise for the advancement of profiling to move out of investigative psychology and into investigative science. With profiling encompassing so many aspects of the investigation, this movement towards more empirical data is both a great addition to the many techniques of profilers and a potential security risk for future investigations. Offender profiling already does so much for our modern crime investigations that it’s difficult to imagine how to make this tool even better. Offender profiling “does have the potential to be scientific (with some work), but the main problem seems to be that it does not want to be scientific”; and with good reason (Muller 250). Much like the “CSI effect” discovered in 2006, too much public or easily accessible knowledge of how crime scene investigations actually work does have a negative effect on the outcome of these investigations. Many criminals watch crime shows or are knowledgeable of which pieces of evidence left at a crime scene will blow their cover. The way that offender profiling goes around the rules of empirical data allows law enforcement to continue an investigation with the investigative psychology of profiling. Just like Muller points out, “revealing too much about how profiling is, one might reveal to offenders ways in which they can avoid being apprehended” which is exactly why offender profiling is a reliable and safe investigative tool within crime scene investigations (250). Sometimes, a good thing doesn’t need to be fixed and criminal profiling seems to be doing just fine as it is.

Since the 1970s, profilers have put their lives and careers on the line in order to create this new investigative tool to potentially make catching criminals quicker and easier. Profilers seem to care even more about the justice of a criminal investigation – possibly because they understand what really is going on inside the mind of both the offender and the victims. Two members of the Behavioral Analysis Unit with the FBI began informally interviewing prisoners “to ascertain their motivations and learn about their behavior both before and after their offenses” (George 226). After these initial interviews, the BAU began a project to collect data about violent criminals and their crimes to create an investigative framework from which investigators can classify and organize the type of crimes committed based on information about the victims, crime scene, and interaction between the victim and the offender. This new information propelled the effectiveness of local investigations by allowing police to understand the motives of each criminal and thus helping police determine the actions of an offender before they commit a new crime. Profiling has reduced the time and effort needed in modern investigations but with the same result. Today, we know what to look for when looking for different pathologies within humans thanks to all of the dedication and work of these profilers.

Given the potential dangers to the misuse of offender profiling within law enforcement, can you really trust this tool in a crime scene investigation? If local law enforcement continued to do their job with both the faith and skepticism towards profiling as they would when approaching any other organization for assistance, perhaps more investigations would be solved. Profiling may be the single most useful investigative tool that is used in criminal investigations today. Nearly every aspect of the investigation uses the work of profilers to help police officers and prosecutors do their job even more efficiently. The investigative psychology within offender profiling was designed from the beginning with science in mind, which is promising for the acceptance of profiling into the scientific community as a reliable and accurate tool when examining evidence and apprehending suspects. With the extent of research done by the founding investigators of the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit, we now know how to get inside the mind of a criminal and therefore get one step ahead of them. With the growth of this investigative tool, we can finally understand why offenders behave the way they do and how to explain their motives and manipulate them.

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