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Criminal Profiling: Art or Science?

Criminal profiling is an investigative technique that uses crime scene characteristics to generate probable descriptive information about the behaviours and the personality of an offender, narrowing the field of suspects, and aiding in apprehension efforts.

Since the beginning of its use within criminal investigation, profiling has been qualified by many as more an art than a science.

Probably one of the most popular profiles is that of New York's "Mad Bomber" George Metesky. Metesky terrorized New York City for 16 years in the 1940s and 1950s; he planted at least 33 bombs, of which 22 exploded. The explosives were planted in public buildings such as the New York subway, the Grand Central Terminal, and the New York Public Library.

The assistance of psychiatrist James A. Brussel was requested to profile the man responsible for the bombings. Among other things, Brussel predicted the bomber was a regular man, of ordinary fashions, who was foreign born and attended church regularly. But, more important, Brussel predicted he would be wearing

a buttoned double-breasted suit when apprehended by the police.

It has been reported that Brussel correctly predicted a number of factors such as Metesky's demeanor, social activities, health condition, and . . . the double-breasted suit! Rarely is it mentioned that the profile Brussel wrote was published in the *New York Times* during the investigation and that Metesky had been following the media reports.

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In addition to the success stories of criminal profiling, this tool has been popularized by movies such as *Silence of the Lambs* and television series such as *Profiler*, *Millennium*, and *Criminal Minds*. On television, the profiler is often described as having "visions," or knowing exactly what happened to the victim just by looking at the body or at some of the evidence found at the crime scene.

Unfortunately, that is not how offender profiling works. The fictional glamorization of the technique has overwhelmed the science underlying criminal profiling.

"Real" profilers use scientific knowledge about specific types

of offenders, their crime scene behaviours, and probable personality and characteristics to produce a "portrait" of the unknown suspect. Research undertaken at the School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, contributes to our understanding of criminal behaviour and improves profiling techniques.

For instance, two recent studies have looked at the hunting process of 72 serial sex offenders who have committed a total of 361 sexual assaults on stranger victims.

The term "hunting process" is used to describe the offenders' victim-search methods and attack methods. The first study examines the decision-making surrounding the hunting processes of serial sex offenders. Results show that despite the fact that not all serial sex offenders hunt for victims in the same way, decision-making fluctuates according to the offenders' strategies, type of victim, situational context of the crime, and the environment.

For example, a serial rapist may approach a victim using a ruse while in a bar but may decide to break and enter the victim's home while walking alone at night.

Until now, studies on criminal profiling have focused on the "how," the "where," the "when," and the "who" of the crime, but have neglected the "why." Our findings help us understand why serial sex offenders

acted the way they did during their crimes and provide criminal investigators with proactive strategies that might prevent another sexual assault.

Our model also shows the *modus operandi* of sex offenders is not immutable but, instead, is a dynamic process more influenced by situational factors than personal characteristics.

The second study identified three different profiles in the hunting process of serial sex offenders: **coercive**, **nonpersuasive**, and **manipulative**.

The “coercive” profile includes two main strategies.

- In the “outdoor rape” strategy, an offender hunts for a solitary victim and relies upon ambush or direct attack. All locations associated with the crime are outdoors. He generally commits his crimes within his city of residence and will attack his victims almost immediately upon encountering them, most often abducting them. This offender employs threats or physical violence during his approach, while taking the victim to the crime site, and during the commission of the crime.
- In the second type of strategy—the “home-intrusion rape” strategy—the offender operates by breaking and entering the victim’s residence. Offenders using this strategy do not abduct the victim but threats may be used to move the victim to the crime site.

The “nonpersuasive” profile includes only one strategy. The “direct action rape” strategy involves an offender hunting on the street for a victim who may or may not be alone. These offenders act directly to approach the victim, take the victim to the crime site, and commit the crime.

The third profile—manipulative—comprises two strategies. In the “sophistication rape” strategy, the offender hunts for victims through an occupation, or the prostitution market. He is an opportunistic offender who encounters his victims in the course of his routine activities but his attacks are committed at locations at which the

offender has a great deal of control, such as his residence or workplace.

He may use seduction or a con to approach and take the victim to the crime site. For the “family-infiltrator rape” strategy, the offender gains access to his victims by infiltrating families. Victims are usually not alone, and are encountered, attacked, victimized, and released in the same indoor private location, most likely the offender’s residence.

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Some offenders rely on a strategy of giving money or gifts to approach the victim, take him or her to the crime site, and commit the crime, whereas others use drugs or alcohol.

Again, these results show that target selection is highly dependent on the physical environment. The different profiles demonstrate that the types of locations are related to the types of strategies exhibited by an offender during the hunting process; conversely, some strategies might well be triggered by the types of locations at which the offenders and the victims meet.

As an illustration, the majority of child molesters will offend in or near their residences. The offender’s home appears to be the best possible location at which to commit an offence because it offers several advantages over competing locations. For example, children might feel more secure or more willing to participate in sexual contact.

The level of violence involved in the crime is positively associated with the distance travelled by the offender from his home to the target.

If child molesters are not able to find a suitable victim near their homes, they may have to go further. The farther they travel, the harder it becomes to convince a child to return

to the offender’s home, because few are willing to take a car trip with a stranger. Consequently, the offender has to adapt his crime strategies and use a more coercive approach.

Our findings regarding the relationship between offending and geographic behaviour may serve as the basis for integrated criminal-geographic profiling as a unique investigative strategy.

Our work with the Institute for Canadian Urban Studies (ICURS) in the School of Criminology hopefully will bring models of criminal profiling to a new level, taking advantage of the emerging and innovative field of computational criminology.

Having access to the latest developments in visualization, it will be possible to undertake simulation studies looking at offenders’ choices of behaviour under different conditions in a virtual environment.

Criminal profiling, is it art or science? We believe that to remain useful in complex criminal investigations, profiling needs to rely heavily on science. And that is what we do. ▲

Eric Beauregard, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University. While completing his PhD on the hunting patterns of serial sex offenders at the University of Montreal, Dr. Beauregard worked as a clinical criminologist for the Correctional Service of Canada. He has evaluated more than 1200 sex offenders and published a number of papers on sexual homicide and the offending patterns of sexual offenders. He is co-editor of *Sexual Murderers: A Comparative Analysis and New Perspectives*, published by Wiley in 2007. His current research interests include the analysis of the criminal event, the decision-making of sexual offenders, and geographic and offender profiling.

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