

Psychological profiling

In harrowing rape and murder cases, profiling can be a valuable way of focusing investigations. It uses offenders' behavior to model their lives, motives, and backgrounds. But the public image of profilers bears little resemblance to the reality: they are not psychics, and their work involves much more science than glamor.

Studies suggest that a strange and ugly compulsion drives criminals who kill or rape repeatedly. It makes the public fear them, the press sensationalize them, but it also affects their behavior in a way that can ultimately lead to their capture.

Psychological profiling (also known as offender profiling, criminal profiling, or just profiling) analyzes habits and rituals of serial criminals. Forensic psychologists use behavioral science to study common factors that link serial crimes. They speculate on peculiarities of the offender's lifestyle that, when made public, may be recognized by colleagues or neighbors.

History

Basic profiling began over a century ago (see box below). But it emerged as a distinct discipline in the 1950s. Former FBI employees began to interview imprisoned offenders to look for common factors that linked their crimes.

Intriguing patterns emerged from the studies of serial killers. They were often victims of child abuse. This could then

lead to abnormal behavior such as fire-starting and cruelty to animals or other children, then to petty crime and defiance of authority. Most embark on an escalating pattern of serious violent crime in their mid- to late twenties.

Manipulation and domination drive them, and their motives may be sexual, even if no sexual element appears in their crimes. They find murder fulfilling; it gives them a sense of control and success previously lacking in their lives. Some revel in notoriety, collecting cuttings and taking trophies such as clothes, jewelry, or body parts to relive their triumphs.

Profiling in practice

Methodologies differ, but profilers use either inductive or deductive approaches. Inductive profiling assumes that criminals will have backgrounds and motives similar to those of other serial offenders who have behaved in the same way. For example, a serial rapist targeting white women is unlikely to be black, because similar past crimes rarely crossed racial lines. Such



Artist's impression of the murderer Jack the Ripper

JACK THE RIPPER was the nickname of the serial killer who murdered seven prostitutes in London's Whitechapel neighborhood in 1888. His grisly signature was the partial dissection of his victims, and this triggered the first attempt at psychological profiling. George B. Philips, a police surgeon, noticed the neat removal of the organs of Annie Chapman, the third victim. Philips concluded that only someone with medical training could have made the incisions so precisely. This observation did little to help the investigation. Despite police receiving taunting notes signed "Jack the Ripper," the killer was never caught.

CASE STUDY

The rampage of the "Washington sniper," who killed nine people in fall 2002, illustrates both the attraction of profiling, and the limitations of the inductive approach. Like many serial killers, the sniper committed crimes in a "comfort zone." His behavior became increasingly arrogant and reckless over the three weeks of the attacks, taunting police with notes and telephone calls. With nothing to go on but deaths and matching bullets, investigators resorted to profiling. The result was a search for an angry, intelligent, white male without children. But when arrested, the suspects were black, not especially bright, and one had four kids. Profiling apologists cautioned that unusual features of the shootings made deductions inherently unreliable.



CASE STUDY

assumptions are widely challenged, and inductive profiling has suffered some well-publicized setbacks (see case study box).

Deductive profiling, though still based on likelihoods, avoids averages and generalizations. Instead, it studies subjects in great detail, adapting deductions with each fresh piece of evidence.

Usually, deductive profiling follows the strategy established by the FBI (see above right-hand box). An offender profile is built based on their actions before, during, and after the crime. For example, if a murderer uses an improvised weapon, it suggests that the crime was impulsive.

Deductive profiling builds on inductive knowledge and couples theories from past studies with evidence found at the scene.

FBI'S PROFILING STRATEGY

- 1 **PROFILING INPUTS** Collate information about the crime.
- 2 **DECISION PROCESS MODELS** Look for a pattern: classify crimes, judge criminal and victim risk, look at actions before and after the crime.
- 3 **CRIME ASSESSMENT** Reconstruct offender's behavior: what does it reveal about their character?
- 4 **PROFILE** From the results of the crime assessment, build up a description of the most likely suspect: probable race, sex, age, lifestyle, beliefs, values, and criminal record.
- 5 **INVESTIGATION** Profiler's report can be used to help police narrow their search for the suspect.
- 6 **APPREHENSION** Good interview technique may elicit a confession.

For example, serial murderers can be either "organized," carrying out planned, premeditated attacks on strangers, or "disorganized," committing unplanned killings and behaving haphazardly.

Other clues—or lack of them—identify organized killers. They often hide their identities by wearing gloves and a mask, and may carry a "toolbox" containing, for example, duct tape and rope for restraint.

CRIME KIT ▲

Careful preparations, including tape and rope, suggest the criminal fits the "organized serial rapist" stereotype. Here, the victim is represented by a model.

Comfort zone

As well as highlighting personality types, profiling can involve a geographical element. Serial killers first commit crimes in a neighborhood they know well, their "comfort zone," and travel farther as their sense of power grows. An important task of a profiler is to look for the earliest crimes bearing the offender's "signature." A signature is a ritual or behavior pattern that, though unnecessary, fulfils the killer emotionally. Investigations are more successful if they trace this signature back to the earliest crime in a series.

BUNGLED BURGLARY ►

Inept rifling of a victim's home after rape or murder suggests the criminal does not have past burglary convictions. Experienced burglars would open the bottom drawer first, then work upward to save time.