

# Offender profiling



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## **Separating Fact From Fiction: Where Do Peoples Beliefs About Offender Profiling Come From?**

### **Chapter I: Introduction to the Study**

Historically offender profiling has often been seen as more of an art than a science (Muller, 2000; Ressler & Shachtman 1992) leaving it prone to rejection within academic journals (Dowden 2007).

However within recent years there has been a sharp increase in the public's interest due to the media spotlight offender profiling has received in the way of films and television shows. This in turn has led to more research being done within the field and can clearly be seen by the significant rise of articles published since 2001 (Dowden 2007). This explosion of interest now makes it the ideal time for research to be conducted. Well known journals are now more frequently accepting articles on offender profiling and in 2004 David Canter launched the Journal of investigative psychology and offender profiling.

In spite of this the content of the majority of research published still remain discussion pieces regarding what offender profiling is and its usefulness etc with hardly any containing statistics or formal analysis. For these reasons this research will focus more so on the public's beliefs of offender profiling and how it is they acquire them. The recent development and interest in offender profiling has led to people developing false beliefs. Kocsis (1999) stated that the media's portrayal has produced a situation in which "a gross disparity has developed between profiling's reputation and its actual capabilities". This research proposes five possibilities of how people acquire their false beliefs (media, experts, reasoning error, social contagion and

confirmation bias) with the objective of finding which one has the biggest influence upon forming beliefs.

## **Chapter II: Review of the Literature**

### **2.1 History of Offender Profiling**

Although many definitions have been given for offender profiling it is generally agreed that it is “ a technique for identifying the major personality and behavioral characteristics of an individual based upon an analysis of the crimes he or she has committed” (Douglas et al 1986). It is not meant as a tool to identify the offender implicitly, but rather serve as an indication as to the type of person they are by focusing on their behavioral traits and personality characteristics. It is particularly useful in seemingly motiveless crimes whereby it allows the analysis of similarities and differences to take place. This in turn uncovers information on the perpetrators personality and behavior, which is essential due to the fact that the “ random” crime and victim may not at all be random to the offender. The victim may have been chosen symbolically due to the fantasy occurring within the offenders mind (Ressler et al 1985).

Offender profiling is used within a variety of settings and not just a tool used solely for homicides. These techniques have been used in hostage taking situations (Reiser 1982), serial rapists (Hazelwood, 1983), identifying anonymous letter writers (Casey-Owens 1984) as well as those who make written or verbal threats (Miron & Douglas 1979).

Due to this ability to transfer profiling techniques into a variety of situations, its methods have been used throughout the world (e. g., Asgard 1998; Collins et al 1998; Jackson et al 1993). However Holmes and Holmes (1996) <https://assignbuster.com/offender-profiling/>

stated that offender profiling is only called upon when all other leads have been exhausted. This in turn questions its popularity, is offender profiling being used throughout the world due to its effectiveness, or as a last resort?

Many feel that the latter is the case and criticise offender profiling on the grounds of scientific reliability. Much of the literature published is often plagued by low levels of validity making the results found questionable. Furthermore is the difficulty in obtaining reliable and accurate data. Very few researchers rely on primary data such as interviews with serial offenders and even when they do the offenders testament should be treated as suspicious due to the known fact that offenders often lie about there behavior (Porter and Woodworth, 2007). This leads to a limitation in the literature, with very few authors publishing three or more articles and only 34% of these articles being written by psychologists (Dowden et al 2007).

As well as criticism regarding literature methodology, offender profiling as a whole has also raised much disapproval. Pinizzotto and Finkel (1990) argue that many profilers do not specify the behavioural, correlational or psychological principles they rely on and it is therefore difficult to distinguish if specific profiling techniques are being adhered to, or if simple intuition and opinion are being used.

However, regardless of the criticism offender profiling has received; it has still continued to grow in popularity throughout the years (Dowden 2007) resulting in an upsurge of interest and media attention.

## 2. 2 The Rise to Popularity

Offender profiling is by no means a new technique with one of the first recorded practice being in 1888 in the notorious Jack the ripper case. Dr Thomas Bond, a British physician is regarded by many to be the first offender profiler (Newburn, 2007; Petherick 2005; Kotake 2001) linking together five of the Whitechapel murders and giving an eleven point profile on the personality and behavioral traits of Jack the ripper. Although this is sometimes classed the beginning of offender profiling, it wasn't until 1957 that profiling took a leap forward and grabbed the publics attention.

New York City's Mad Bomber terrorized the city for a period of sixteen years, planting a total of thirty-three bombs in public buildings. With public hysteria being high and police reaching a dead-end, Dr James Brussel (a criminologist and psychiatrist) was called in to help on the case. After reading the letters sent to the press and examining the case files, Brussel created his profile of what kind of person the police should look for:

“ Look for a heavy man. Middle-aged. Foreign born. Roman-catholic. Single. Living with brother or sister. When you find him, chances are he'll be wearing a double-breasted suit. Buttoned” (Brussel, 1968). This profile was then submitted to the newspaper and days later the offender, George Meteky was arrested matching Brussels's description. In fact the only variation to the profile was that he lived with his two sisters. This apparent accurate profile ignited the public's interest in offender profiling. However due to the media frenzy surrounding the case, facts were often missed out and an inaccurate account was given. For example, Metesky was known to follow media reports (Berger, 1957) and so his behaviors may have been consciously or

subconsciously affected. Furthermore the profile itself did not solve the case as often implied; in fact it was background checks on disgruntled employees that led to the arrest (Kocsis, 2004). And despite the popular myth that Metesky was caught in a double breasted suit, he was actually arrested wearing faded pajamas (Brussel, 1968). This popular and often cited case is an excellent example of how offender profiling is often misrepresented and how that in turn leads to people developing false beliefs regarding it.

Nonetheless, the Mad Bomber case is often thought of as a turning point in offender profiling history and that it was at this point that both the public and law enforcement developed an interest. In the 1960's Howard Teten started to develop his approach to offender profiling, and as a special agent in the FBI during 1970 he started teaching his approach to fellow agents. In 1972 Jack Kirsch started the Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) and gave Teten the freedom he needed to create profiles and continue his research. The word spread and soon police departments were making daily requests for profiles (Turvey 2001). The BSU underwent several changes throughout the 1990's and is now known as the National Centre for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC). However it is not just America who's interest in offender profiling was sparked. Much like Brussel it was one particular case that seemed to ignite the public's fascination with profiling within the UK. In 1985 David Canter was asked to help with the investigation into two murders and over thirty rapes, which the media dubbed as the Railway Rapist (cited in Egger 1999). Canter's profile was remarkably accurate and proved a useful tool in the investigation. However yet again, the profile alone wasn't what led police to John Duffy, it was his refusal to supply a blood sample. Similar to America,

the British Press reported Canter's involvement in an exaggerated fashion which in turn gave Canter much publicity and recognition.

Interestingly, although offender profiling gained publicity within America and UK in a similar fashion, they have completely different profiling techniques. The American FBI approach, created by the BSU, relies heavily on crime scene analysis (CSA) (Wilson, Lincon & Kocsis, 1997) and is the approach that has been popularized within the media. The approach places offenders into categories according to the crime scene, either organized or disorganized. This approach has been heavily criticized by the likes of Ressler (1992) who states that the simplicity of the system was to enable police without a psychological background to understand it.

The UK approach relies more on statistical analysis, obtaining facts and characteristics from solved cases to provide a general framework for each crime (Aitken et al 1996). However in more recent times Canter has developed an investigative psychology approach to profiling. This approach suggests that psychology can directly be transferred to crime, and that an interpersonal transaction is occurring between the offender and the victim. Canter created five approaches which can be used to profile criminals directly using psychology (Canter 1994). The approach that Canter has received the most attention about is that of space and time which has been empirically tested and found to be useful (Wilson et al, 1997). Although Godwin and Canter (1997) demonstrate that investigative psychology can help the police, results have to be looked at carefully since it is unlikely that Canter will contradict his previous work.

Regardless of the different approaches offender profiling has, it has nevertheless reached a height of popularity. However, as widespread as profiling has now become, the public still seem to misunderstand it and hold false beliefs regarding it (Snook et al 2008 & Kocsis 1999). For this reason, this research will examine the different possible reasons why the public have developed these false beliefs.

### **2.3 The Mass Media**

This brief outline of offender profiling shows that the rise in public interest has correlated with major cases, which in turn causes sensationalism within the media. With the public buying into the media's exaggerations on the role of offender profilers, a perfect springboard was provided for many television shows and films to base their premises around these "incredible" profilers. Major films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* and television shows such as *Cracker*, *Wire in the Blood* and *Criminal Minds* have promoted the myth that profilers possess some sort of superhuman skill (Egger, 1999; Grubin, 1995; Alison & Canter, 1999). Fiction blurs with fantasy for the general public and they are left with false beliefs.

Grubin (1995) comments that offender profiling has always had a role within fiction and has always appealed to the imagination due to its ability to invoke the image of "the cerebral sleuth relying solely on his acute powers of observation and deductive reasoning to identify an elusive and much feared serial rapist". Many researchers (Balu, 1994; Campbell, 1976; Canter 2000; McCan, 1992; Muller, 2000) would in fact argue that this fictional image of a "super sleuth" such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes



or Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin is what inspired offender profiling to begin with.

Sagan (1996) agrees with Grubin, suggesting that people are often attracted to fantasy, more so than any other genre, because they often contain characters that have powers, which normal people lack but desire. Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004) concur, asserting that people seek out fiction rather than non-fiction for the simple fact that they want to be entertained.

However, unless people adopt a critical approach to the material they are viewing, their judgments regarding offender profiling will be based on the inaccurate and biased information they are being given, resulting in false beliefs (Stanovich, 1992). Second hand knowledge, such as that required from the media, rarely reflects the truth (Sprott 1996) and so this critical approach is essential.

The mass media doesn't just refer to television and films, the role stories play are equally important. Those who have experience in profiling often write books about their experiences (eg Paul Britton and David Canter) which creates to the reader, a personal story. These types of literature can be very convincing as they are often vivid and memorable (Borgida & Nisbett, 1977; Stanovich 1992) and assumed true in entirety by the reader. People are not trained to critically evaluate or to seek out objective facts and reliable evidence (Carroll, 2003; Gilovich, 1991; Sagan, 1996; Shermer, 2003) and take these anecdotes presented to them as truthful accounts allowing them to form the foundation of their beliefs. Even published accounts of offender profiling rely on these anecdotal evidence to convey the

message that they are trying to put across and illustrate the usefulness of profiling (e. g Canter, 1994; Cook & Hinman, 1999). Snook, Eastwood, et al (2007) found that out of 130 articles on offender profiling, 60% of them used at least one anecdote as a source of knowledge, such as the New York Mad Bomber's case.

Another problem faced is that all the portrayals regarding offender profiling convey the same message, the profiler catches the criminal and the case is solved. Although this is unrealistic, empirical evidence shows that the likelihood of people agreeing with a message correlates with how often the same message is repeated (Cacioppo & Petty, 1979). So if most of the media (eg, films, television shows and books) are all conveying the same message and no critical approach is taken, then individuals will be left with false beliefs.

However, are people that passive that they will believe everything they encounter in the media? This theory of a hypodermic-syringe model (Briggs & Cobley, 2002) whereby viewers are “ injected” with opinions and beliefs has been proven to be conceptually flawed in that it tends to ignore matters such as personal influence and interpretation (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Individuals are not passive creatures that are unable to form their own intelligent opinion. The media does not dictate a person's belief; in fact it can be argued that individuals use the media for their own gratification (Katz, 1959).

Therefore is it unfair and illogical to blame the media solely, for the misconceptions people have about offender profiling?

## 2. 4 Expertise

Experts are individuals who after an extensive period of practical and theoretical training have developed a professional capability within a specific area (Kurz-Milcke & Gigerenzer, 2004). Due to this definition, many people believe and accept the words of experts without question (Bochner & Insko, 1966; Milgram, 1964) and many believe that offender profilers are indeed experts.

In spite of this belief there is very little evidence to support this idea. If offender profilers are experts then they should be able to perform their job to a high standard, therefore creating accurate profiles. Snook et al (2008) conclude that any police professional could achieve the same level of success that profilers achieve, by relying on their basic criminological information. However, if this is the case why is it police still request profilers and add to the belief that they are accurate experts?

One reason could be because they actually believe that offender profiling works (e. g. Copson, 1995; Jackson et al 1993; Pinizzotto, 1984) but for those police officers who disagree, calling profilers in may simply be a way of doing their job. As a police officer it is their duty to make sure that they use all the available investigation techniques and some may think they have nothing to lose by calling in an offender profiler. However the public may view the fact police use profilers as a confirmation that offender profilers are experts and this in turn will affect their judgment.

An example of how the belief that experts are correct affects people's judgments can be seen in a study conducted by Kocsis & Hayes (2004). The

study found that police officers, who were told that the profile they read was created by an expert, rated them significantly more accurate than officers who were told that their profile came from a non-expert. These results appear to confirm that people believe and trust the information obtained from labeled experts more so than anyone else. However this result that Kocsis & Hayes found may be due to the police officers loyalty. They may believe that professional profilers are an important group that they identify with and feel loyalty towards, due to a belief that they are in the same line of work. Many studies have found that many police officers tend to develop an occupational subculture (DeMaria, 1999; Dempster, 1997; Wilson & Chappell, 1996; Wilson & Western, 1972) with intense loyalty shown to all those that belong to it (Chan, 1996, Finnane, 1995; Fitzgerald, 1989; Lusher, 1981; Wood 1997). For this reason, the discrepancy shown between the measures may be down to loyalty rather than expertise heuristic. However this loyalty should only be shown by those who identify with that subculture, therefore excluding the general public. So is expertise heuristic to blame for individuals false beliefs?

## **2. 5 Reasoning Errors**

People have the tendency to believe things that aren't true and a lot of time and effort has been put in by researchers to try and discover why it is people believe in unproven things (Gilovich, 1991; Hines, 1988; Vyse, 1997). One of the main outcomes found is that human beings evolved to be able to identify patterns among environmental occurrences, which as a result can lead to the identification of meaningless patterns (Shermer, 2002). It is this ability to identify meaningless patterns that can be argued contributes to people

thinking in things such as psychic abilities as well as their belief that offender profilers' predictions are valid. People like to find order in a chaotic world and then form beliefs that can guide future behaviors (Gigerenzer, 2002; Shermer, 2003). However, beliefs are just a cognitive process that picks up on information from the environment and if the information is wrong, so is the formed belief.

One form of this cognitive process is reasoning errors.