

# Profiling and investigating serious crimes criminology essay



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The attempt to locate an offender is one of the most important functions of a criminal investigation, geographic profiling is based on the assumption that victim selection is spatially biased toward an offender's home location. It will also explore the strengths, weakness and the criticisms of geographic profiling. In order to do this it will critical analyse the theoretical underpinnings of geographical profiling, such as: rational activity theory; crime pattern theories. The rational activity theory is based on the idea that an offenders perceptions of the environment is very important in the decision making process. Is important to include the 'least effort principle', is based on the idea that an offender is more likely to act on the first or the closest opportunity. Crime pattern theory is based on the idea that an offender emphasizes the interaction of awareness of space or mental map of the spatial surroundings, and the distribution of suitable targets. According to Cohen and Felson (1979) this type of decision are not chosen randomly. This essay, will consider potential difficulties which may occur though the use of techniques in geographic profiling. It will also look at the use of statistical programmes to analyse spatial behaviour, and it will take into consideration the reliability, validity and utility of the application of this method. It will also exam the 'Rail Rapist' case to illustrate how effective geographic profiling techniques it will be compared one of the best-known offender profiling failures in Britain which was the case of Rachel Nickell in 1992.

According to Rossmo (1995, cited in Canter and Young, 2008, p. 97) "geographical profiling is a method through which target location patterns of serial violent offenders are used to establish spatial information about the

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offender, generally about the location of future offences or the offenders residence". Rossmo's (1995, cited in Canter and Young, 2008) method of offender profiling tends to emphasize cases of serial nature only (i. e. murder, rape, arson, bombings). However, Ainsworth (2001, p. 87) argues that:

This technique will only be truly effective when the police have accurate data on each and every crime in a 'series'. If not all crimes are recorded accurately, or are not recorded as having been committed by the same perpetrator, the technique will be much less useful.

Geographic profiling can be seen as an outcome of environmental criminology, which tend to focus on how the perpetrators and their targets come across each other in time and space, this approach has little interest on the offender's motivations to engage in such activities (Bottoms and Wiles, 1992). Environmental criminology owes much to the concepts of social geography, particularly that of cognitive mapping; the process by which individuals learn about, remember and use knowledge about an area (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1984; Canter and Young, 2008).

However, Rossmo (1999, p. 88) indicates that this is not fully the case and proposes that:

The representation is of the individual's subjective image of place (not a conventional map) and not only includes knowledge of features and spatial relationships but also reflects the individual preferences for attitudes towards places. ... The product of this process, at any point in time, is a

mental or cognitive map and can be shown cartographically as a perception surface.

In this way individuals store subjective information about their spatial environment; every individual has their own mental map which is developed from their childhood to adult life, as they become more experienced the more extensive their internal map is going to be.

Furthermore, most offenders prefer to carry out their activities in very familiar areas and through their routine daily activities, such as: where they work, friends and family homes, where they socialize, previous home address) individuals are likely to become very familiar with their neighbourhood, in this context an offender has to know well particular area before he decided to 'act' (Rossmo, 1998). It is clear that some types of offences happen more often in certain places and at certain times.

Furthermore, Cohen and Felson (1979) suggests that routine activity theory is based on the idea of that for a crime to be committed there must be a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of a suitable guardian against a violation. The implication is that, the manipulation of any of these elements will change people's behaviour and also might prevent crime.

Another factor which can strongly influence crime site choices is known by psychologists as the least effort principle or known by geographers as nearness principle. The principle of least effort, might suggest that people restrict their outputs of energy, both mental and physical, the minimum compatible with achieving his ends (Martinet, 1962, p. 139). For example, people tend to go to nearby shops wherever possible, and they are less likely

to visit relatives or friends that live far away, this is because of the time and effort involved in the journey from their own homes to their destination.

However, if people have something in particular or special to buy they are willing to make an effort to go somewhere else to get it, even if that means travel longer than usual, the same principle applies to offenders they are also willing to travel longer distances, if the reward is greater.

One of the strengths of crime place theories is that it can be easily used to assist police investigations, for example, Rossmo (1995) has suggested that a careful consideration of the exact location of a series of crime can be helpful in identifying the most likely area in which an offender lives or works. The aim of geographic profiling is not to give the specific identity of the offender; instead the aim is to narrow the field of the investigation and suggest the type of person who committed the crime (Douglas et al, 1986). Rossmo's (1995) work established that a computer mapping system known as Criminal Geographic Targeting (CGT), which assesses the spatial characteristics of a crime based on these principles, could indicate the area in which a serial offender is likely to be living. Rossmo (1995) indicates that the crucial constants and exponents in the decay functions on which his software is built are " empirically determined". The programme predictive power is related to the number of crime sites, and the more sites the better.

However, Rossmo (1995) does not provide full information on what the empirical basis of this determination is nor does he make it clear if the same exponent is used in all calculations. As Turvey (1999) suggests, geographical profiling, like trait analysis or future crime prediction, relies heavily on a particular manifestation of behaviour for example, offence location selection)

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and attempts to infer meaning from the overall emotional context. He believes that, geographical profiling cannot differentiate between two similar offenders working in the same area and might wrongly allocate crimes to the wrong person. As an implication, it can make the Criminal Justice System ineffective. Therefore, this type of technique can be only truly effective when the police have an accurate data of each and every case of crime in series.

To support Rossmo's (1995) arguments of the success of geographic profiling, this essay it will exam at the case of John Duffy the so called 'railway rapist' (cited in Ainsworth, 2001, p. 9). Duff had committed a series of rapes and three murders in the Greater London area between 1983 and 1986, the police resources devoted to the task of solving these crimes were enormous, yet little real progress had been made in the hunt for the attacker. Psychologist Canter (1994) cited in Ainsworth (2001) was called in to aid the police investigation, Canter had little to go in terms of where to start, yet he used a number of psychological principles and sifted though the large amount of data collected by the police.

He eventually, produced a profile of the sort of individual whom he felt the police should be looking for. Canter suggested that the attacker lived in the area near to area of first crime; probably live with a woman; in his mid to late 20s; right-handed; semi-skilled or skilled job with weekend work; great knowledge of railway; had previous criminal record (maybe arrested between October 1982 and January 1984). It turned out that the offender lived in the area suggested by Canter; aged late 20s; recently separated from his wife; right-handed; travelling carpenter employed by British Rail. Canter (1994), believes that through the crime essential clues are left behind and the <https://assignbuster.com/profiling-and-investigating-serious-crimes-criminology-essay/>

unique personality of the offender shows through in some ways. Thus, it is thought that the way in which the crime is committed is in part a reflection of the everyday behaviour of the individual.

Ainsworth (2001, p. 95) points out, that “ considering the case of John Duffy, we can see how a detailed knowledge of the patterns of his crimes was helpful in understanding his behaviour. Canter (1994), was able to establish that the three first crimes formed a triangle within which he probably lived.

In contradiction, one of the best-known offender profiling failures in Britain was the case of Rachel Nickell. Rachel Nickell was a young woman who was brutally murdered in mid-morning while walking on Wimbledon Common in south London in July 1992. As part of the investigation into the killing, a profile was commissioned from Paul Britton, a clinical psychologist (cited in Ormerod, 1995). A suspect was eventually identified and it was noted that he seemed to fit the profile well. An elaborate operation, drawing partly but not only on the profile, was put together in which a police woman befriended the socially isolated and inadequate suspect, offering the promise of an intimate relationship in exchange for descriptions of his sexual fantasies and a confession that he murdered the woman on the Common. The confession was not forthcoming, but he was still arrested. The case fell apart because of the lack of evidence and because the psychological profile did not work in this case. As an implication, geographical profiling involves objective measures, it still relies on individual interpretation, which makes it subject to the interpreter's knowledge and expertise.

The Duffy example shows that in some cases but not all, profiling can be beneficial, however it not right to assume that the results are always going to be successful in every single case.

Holmes and Holmes believe that offender profiling tend to be more useful when there is a psychopathology involved, for example; a sadistic assault, and go even further by stating that:

Profiling has three major goals. These attempt to provide the criminal justice system with information, especially; first, a social and psychological of the offender; second, a psychological evaluation of possessions found with suspected offenders; third, consultation with law enforcement officials on the strategies which might best be employed when investigating suspects.

(Holmes and Holmes, 1999, p. 156)

It is very difficult to predict when a case is going to be successful or not, however even if a profiler proves to be fifty per cent correct, how can this be counted as success or failure? And what if any other information used in the investigation provided by a profiler it helps in catching a criminal is this considered successful?, even if the rest of the information provided have no use for the investigation?

To conclude, this essay has provided relative information about how geographic offender profiling and criminal mapping have to offer to its practitioners. This idea of crime mapping it can be seen as relatively new, and have been only made possible thanks to the introduction of software programmes such as, Criminal Geographic Targeting (CGT), however some



authors suggested that crime mapping is experiencing a large amount of interest among professional and academics. This essay considered how important the relationship between crime, space and time are which can be seen as strength or a criticism at the same time, because it moves away from the offender and focus in the location where crime occurs.

However, as suggested in this essay, is very difficult to collect a complete accurate picture, this approach tends to rely on exact amount of data collected by the police, sometimes public may not report the crime accurately or not report it at all or even the police might also fail to record or even miss-record crime on its real location. Another criticism is that while geographical profiling involves objective measures, it still relies on individual interpretation, which makes it subject to the interpreter's knowledge and expertise. It is clear that some offences happen more often in certain places and at certain times, and the way in which crime occur is rarely random, is important to have a better understanding of why offenders tend to offend in particular places at certain time.

By examining the ' Railway Rapist' case is obvious that a better understanding of patterns of his crime helped Canter to establish a profile, however is important to establish that geographic profiling is not always successful.

The way in which individuals store subjective information about their spatial environment; every individual has their own mental map which is developed from their childhood to adult life, as they become more experienced the more extensive their internal map is going to be.