

Offender classification and geographic profiling theories



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A critical evaluation of offender classification and geographic profiling theories with reference to the Baton Rouge serial killer

Offender profiling is the process of inferring the characteristics of an offender from the way that offender acted when committing the crime (Canter, 1995). These suppositions can help investigators to focus on only the most likely culprits from a number of possible suspects, achieved by providing an indication of the characteristics that would distinguish the offender from other people whom the police are considering (Salfati & Canter, 1999). Four profiling theories have been developed of which the FBI dichotomy, The Holmes and Holmes typology and geographic profiling will be discussed and critically evaluated with reference to the Baton Rouge serial killer, Derrick Todd Lee;

Lee is a convicted murderer nicknamed the Baton Rouge Serial Killer and was linked by DNA to the deaths of seven women in the Baton Rouge and Lafayette areas in Louisiana, and convicted in 2004 for the murders of two more women. Newspapers suggested a link with other unsolved murders in the area, but the police lack DNA evidence to prove these connections. Lee already had a string of offences against him ranging from burglary, robbery, assault and peeping to 2nd degree murder. The murder method varied with nearly each case and included stabbing, strangulation and bludgeoning. Similarities between the crimes include the removal of phones from the victim's belongings, as well as other personal items, and the lack of forced entry. There was some debate as to whether Lee was incompetent to stand trial, having scored an average of 65 on various standardized I. Q. tests. He

was sentenced to die by lethal injection in 2004, and is currently on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola (Layman et al., 2006).

The dichotomous classification of serial killers into either Organized or Disorganized is one of the most widely cited classifications of violent, serial offenders and was introduced by agents of the FBI Training Academy upon examination of lust and sexual sadistic murders (Canter et al., 2004). 36 serial killers were divided into Organized or Disorganized categories based on examination of the crime scene, the victim and forensic reports.

Organized offenders are described as leading an orderly life, to be of average to high intelligence, socially competent, likely to have skilled employment, to plan offences, use restraints, bring a weapon to the crime scene, and take the weapon away after the crime has been committed. They are hypothesized to kill after a stressful event, and more likely to use a verbal approach with victims prior to violence. Disorganized offenders kill opportunistically with little or no planning, and often live near the crime scene. They are thought to be socially incompetent, with below-average intelligence, and may exhibit sexual ignorance, with the potential for sexual perversions. Evidence such as blood, semen and the murder weapon is often left behind. There is minimal use of restraints and the body is often displayed in open view. A third category, the Mixed offender, was also introduced (Douglas et al, 1992).

If the FBI approach was used in the case of the Baton Rouge Killer it would be difficult to ascertain whether Lee falls into the Organized or Disorganized category. From an Organized point of view: Lee was married with children and was sporadically employed as a truck driver, pipe fitter and laborer. He <https://assignbuster.com/offender-classification-and-geographic-profiling-theories/>

can be described as socially competent, and there is evidence that some of his victims were approached verbally. The murders reflect a certain amount of pre-planning; Lee stalked his victims, drove to the crime scenes, abducted some of his victims from their homes, and took a knife with him at times. Some of the attacks occurred after stressful events (e. g. days after losing a job), but others within days of finding employment. From a Disorganized point of view: Lee's employment record was patchy and he was not employed for any lengthy period of time. He also lead a disrupted life, and was arrested and jailed on several occasions. A couple of the murders seem opportunistic in nature, i. e. killing a jogger. Lee scored only 65 on an IQ test, a below-average IQ score. He left a trail of evidence behind and was linked by DNA to seven of the murders. Although sometimes left in secluded locations, all the bodies were left in open display. Lee did not always take a murder weapon with him, at times using whatever he could lay his hands on.

Following the FBI dichotomy would not have lead to the arrest of Lee due to the offender exhibiting various characteristics from both categories in this case. Many methodological flaws have been identified with regards to the reliability and validity of the 36 interviews conducted by the FBI to develop the Organized/Disorganized dichotomy. Canter and colleagues examined this typology using a sample of 100 solved serial murder cases by determining the extent to which organised and disorganised crime characteristics co-occurred. They conclude that serial killers are likely to exhibit both organised and disorganised characteristics within any given crime scene, and that many typically organised behaviours are present in most serial homicides, as also reflected in the case of the Baton Rouge Killer. According to Canter, the

term ‘ offender profiling’ was created by the FBI, but that in doing so, they “ created the impression of a package, a system that was sitting waiting to be employed, rather than the mixture of craft, experience and intellectual energy that they themselves admit is at the core of their activities”(Canter, 2004). This is reflected in the lack of structure of the interviews, the size of the sample, the ad hoc fashion in which the interviews were conducted and the way in which the sample was specifically drawn up to illustrate this dichotomy. Ressler states that the simplistic dichotomy was to enable police who had little or no knowledge of psychological jargon to understand what the BSU thought was a basic differentiation between two distinct groups of offenders (Ressler & Shachtman, 1992). Alternative approaches to classification based on more empirical support would argue that human beings rarely fall into distinct types. To this day, the FBI do not make any aspirations to the development of profiling as a scientific endeavour, instead emphasising the primary role of basic ‘ on the job’ law enforcement experience as the best predictor of success in dealing with such crimes (Horgan, 2003). Wilson et al. (1997) claim that it is actually more of a continuum between organized and disorganized

than two distinct types, with many offenders falling into the mixed category that displays features of both the organized and disorganized offenders.

Research is needed to extend the research base of FBI profiling appropriately. By focusing on FBI profiling concepts, researchers would more rapidly make progress in understanding just what there is of value in that approach. Unfortunately, little work has been done in this spirit (Howitt, 2009).

The Holmes and Holmes typology can be seen as a division of an Organized/Disorganized continuum, with the Visionary and Mission killers sharing characteristics of the Disorganized type of killer and the Thrill and Power/Control category overlapping with the Organized killer (Canter & Wentink 2004). Holmes and Holmes (1998) developed their classification after studying the case material from 110 serial murders, and taking into account background characteristics, psychological motivation, crime scene evidence such as victim characteristics and methods of killing, and the offender's spatial behavior. The following a brief description of the five types of killers as classified:

Visionary: the visionary serial killer murders because he has seen visions or heard voices telling him to kill a particular individual or particular types of people. His quick, act-focused killings are seen as a job to be done.

Mission: The mission killer is focused on the act of murder itself. He is compelled to murder in order to rid the world of a group of people he has judged to be unworthy or undesirable.

Lust: The lust killer kills for sexual gratification; sex is the focal point of the murder, even after he has killed the victim. This type of murderer derives pleasure from the process of the murderous event. Various acts such as cannibalism, necrophilia, and dismemberment are prevalent in this type of murder.

Thrill: The thrill killer murders for the pleasure and excitement of killing. Once the victim is dead, this murderer loses interest. This type of killing often involves a long process involving extended acts of torture.

Power/Control: This killer derives pleasure and gratification from having control over the victim, and considered to be a 'master' at what he does. His motives are driven by the need for power and dominance and he derives pleasure from extending the process of murder.

Applying the Holmes and Holmes typology to Lee would place him in three of the categories; lust, thrill and power/control. He exhibits mostly aspects of the Lust category, seeing that sexual assaults occurred in all the attacks, and considering that he had sex directly after death with 1 – 3 of the victims (Layman et al., 2006). Sexual obsession is also reflected in the way Lee stalked victims, and in multiple previous arrests for peeping/stalking behaviour. Power/control seem to have been a motive of Lee's. This is reflected in the pre-planning involved in most of the attacks, the collection of information prior to attacks by stalking, and also by killing, or attempting to kill, every single victim. The amount of excessive violence in most of the killings (i. e. cutting a victim's throat, multiple stabbings, severely beating victims) reflects a powerful need to dominate. Lee also falls into the Thrill category, deriving pleasure and excitement from killing, as well as from torturing victims. Due to the overlap between these categories, it would not have been able to place Lee in one distinct category, making it hard to identify him as a suspect. Focusing solely on the Lust category would have been the most effective, had investigators focused most of their attention on

offenders in the area with histories of stalking/peeping behaviour- considering Lee's multiple previous convictions.

In the only empirical test of the Holmes and Holmes typology by Canter and Wentink it was found that an MDS analysis of data from the crime scene information of 100 US serial killings showed that the higher frequency characteristics of the crime scenes could not be used to distinguish between offences or to support the proposed types. They also found no systematic account of how the material was used to devise a system of classification, and that the characteristics describing each of the types varied from being described in much detail for some (such as the lust type) to being very sparse for other types (such as mission). Although Holmes and Holmes recognize that certain offenders will show characteristics from more than one type, no criteria is given to determine under which type those offenders should be categorized. The Power/control features were found to be present in more than 50% of cases, and can thus not be seen as a distinct type, and the Mission killing type proved extremely difficult to relate to identifiable crime scene variables other than those associated with the form of weapon used to murder (Canter & Wentink, 2004). Like the FBI dichotomy, the Holmes and Holmes typology needs to be subjected to more scientific rigor and scrutiny, and apart from Canter and Wentink's study it has not been sufficiently critically evaluated.

While the better known psychological profiling process is concerned with the "who", geographic profiling is concerned with the "where" (Rossmo, 2005).

The primary objective of a criminal geographic profile is to analyze the

distribution and pattern of linked crime scenes in order to estimate the likely
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residence of a serial offender. In general, environmental criminology theories can be summarized into three basic concepts. First, most crimes occur relatively close to the offender's residence. Second, the frequency of crime decreases as the distance from the offender's home increases. Finally, different crimes will exhibit different spatial patterns (Kent & Leitner, 2007). Centographic techniques characterise phenomena by providing a single measure of central tendency, and constitutes a spatial distribution strategy. This strategy is based on the assumption that a serial offender will commit crimes within an area that is relatively close to their home. The most common measures of central tendency include the geographic mean, median and center of minimum distance (Kent, Leitner 2007). One such example which will now be discussed is the Circle theory. According to the Circle theory, the majority of offenders' residences can be located within a circle with its diameter defined by the distance between the offender's furthestmost crimes (Kocsis, 2006). The Circle theory makes a distinction between Mauraunders; criminals who tend to offend within a circular area around their home or anchor point, and Commuters; offenders travel to commit their crimes, and anchor points are outside of the circular area identified by the crimes. In a simple world the criminal cannot travel very far without getting into unknown territory and running into unknown risks. (Canter, 2006).

Had investigators linked Lee's main anchor points and the killings the Circle theory would have been very effective. Although Lee used a vehicle to drive to- and from crime scenes, he can be categorized as a "maurauder", considering that the vast majority of the crimes were committed close to

anchor points. Lee lived in St Francisville with his family, but also had a long term girlfriend in the Baton Rouge area and at least four of his nine victims were killed within a 15 – 30 minute drive from where she lived. Significantly, these four killings are all scattered between two companies for which Lee used to work at different points during the times of the murders and his girlfriend's house. Victims one and two, and victims three and five lived within easy walking distance of each other. Both Lee's places of work and his girlfriend's house were located within 15 minutes of the Louisiana State University, with which three of his victims had connections. With the exception of the second last victim- abducted outside the Baton Rouge area- all Lee's victims were either attacked/abducted from their homes in the Baton Rouge Area.

Canter and Larkin (1993) examined the accuracy of a circle strategy. They found that 87% of serial rapists from the UK had their homes located within their circle. Fewer than 10% of offenders are described as having “ no fixed abode” (Canter, 2006), and a criminologist, Hickey, studied over 200 serial murderers and found that only a quarter of these could be classed as travelers (Hickey, 1991). Although subsequent research in Australia supported this finding for serial rapists (71% found within the circle) and arsonists (82%), lower percentages have been reported for US serial rapists (56%), Australian burglars (48%) and Japanese arsonists (51%) (Snook et al., 2005). Considering these high numbers of the commuter type Paulsen (2006) argues that “ research into determining marauder offender type before conducting a geographic profile is acutely important given the inability of current geographic profiling software to accurately profile

commuter series and the high number of offenders that are commuters”.

According to Paulsen, police agencies can expect a failure rate of as high as 50% simply due to not profiling cases that fit the criteria to be profiled (Paulsen 2006). Paulsen studied 106 crime series and loaded the anchor points as well as crime scene location information into the geographic information system (GIS). The resulting circle was an estimate of the criminal offense zone and 64 maurauder type offenders, and 42 commuter type were identified. These results suggest a significant improvement over the 60% accuracy rates provided by the best guess results. The most common way of making these predictions is to use mathematical functions, which are typically incorporated into computerized geographic profiling systems (Rossmo, 2000; Taylor et al., 2002). Despite the use of geographic profiling systems, simpler strategies are available to make these predictions and some evidence suggests that they can be just as accurate (Snook et al., 2002). Bennell et. al (2007) summarised this debate and also provide evidence that human decision making can be just as accurate as actuarial methods, although acknowledging the need for further research. The most appropriate method seems to be entirely dependent on context.

It conclusion, it would appear that although the FBI’s approach to profiling has considerable intuitive appeal it is all but impossible to assess its real value objectively and scientifically (Howitt, 2001). This is particularly worrying when one learns that most other countries have adopted the FBI’s approach and use similar methods (Jackson & Bekerian, 1997). With regards to the Holmes and Holmes typology, Canter and Wentink’s findings indicate that the simple typology lacks sufficient clarity and empirical justification to

be used without further modification (Howitt, 2009). Geographical profiling seems promising, but on their own these simple measures are seldom able to reflect the inherent complexities of either the landscape or an offender's perception of place (Canter & Hodge, 2000).