University of Huddersfield Repository

Canter, David V.

Offender profiling

Original Citation

Canter, David V. (2010) Offender profiling. In: The Cambridge Handbook of Forensic Psychology. Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology . Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp. 236-241. ISBN 9780521701815

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/8796/

OFFENDER PROFILING

Those investigating crimes have always tried to formulate some idea of the characteristics of unknown culprits as an aid to finding and convicting them. This parallels the generals of Ancient Rome building a picture of the Barabarian leaders they would face in battle. It is therefore not surprising as discussed by (D. Canter, 1995) that as long ago as 1888 when *Jack the Ripper* stalked the streets of London that some attempt was made to produce a description of the person who had committed these still unsolved crimes.

By the 1970's, as(Blau, 1994)   makes clear, police forces throughout the USA were referring to the process of speculating about the characteristics of offenders they were looking for as 'offender profiling'. The utility of this activity was recognised by those Special Agents at the FBI training Academy in Quantico, Virginia, who were tasked with improving the effectiveness of the many thousands of law enforcement agencies across America. However, it was only when Thomas Harris made the process central to his plot in his thriller *The Silence of the Lambs* (Harris, 1988) that it came into public awareness. Thus accounts of 'offender profiling' have always been confused by the mixture of myth and reality that exist within Harris' and many subsequent fictional portrayals.

The device that so attracted Harris was the possibility of using an offender, in the guise of the serial killer Hannibal Lector, as the tutor for the novice profiler, Clarice Starling. The idea for this device was derived from interviews that the FBI special agents had carried out with serial killers and rapists (Hazelwood, Ressler, Depue, & Douglas, 1987). As many people have pointed out (Jackson & Bekerian, 1997) these interviews were rather unstructured and never reported systematically in any detail so could not be recognised as valid scientific studies. As a consequence many of the generalisations derived from them, such as the typical high intelligence of serial killers and their being nearly always white have been shown to be invalid. It is more appropriate to see them as having followed the practice of detectives that can be traced back at least as far as Francois Vidocq (Edwards, 1977) a 19th Century French detective who talked to and got to understand criminals as an aid to guiding the investigative process. However, by the 1980's when the interviews were being conducted, a loose psychological perspective pervaded many areas of American life and some of the FBI agents had taken courses in counselling and related subjects. Therefore, although these interviews had no theoretical basis the FBI Agents who conducted them derived from their meetings with the offenders the proposition that a careful consideration of what went on in a crime could be a fruitful basis for formulating a view of the offender.

This approach was systematised into sets of typologies. The most widely cited of these is the suggestion that serial killers are either organised or disorganised (Ressler, Burgess, Depue, Douglas, & Hazelwood, 1985) and that this aspect of an offender's life style is reflects in a crime scene that is either organised or disorganised. As Canter & Wentink (2004) have demonstrated Holmes'   more refined typology of serial killers is merely an elaboration of the original FBI dichotomy. Careful studies of both the original FBI dichotomy (D. Canter, Alison, Alison, & Wentink, 2004) of Holmes typology (D. Canter & Wentink, 2004) have demonstrated that these classification schemes of serial killers do not withstand close empirical test.

Drawing on a background in social and environmental psychology Canter demonstrated in his award winning book *Criminal Shadows* (Canter 1995) that the central question of Offender Profiling is to establish the basis for making inferences from offence actions to offender characteristics. He proposed that this may be fruitfully thought of as the need to solve what he called the A $\Rightarrow$ C Equations: The formal scientific framework used to represent the relationships between a set of actions in a

crime (the As) and the set of characteristics of the offender (the Cs)(D. V. Canter, 1995). As Youngs has elaborated (Youngs, 2007) these equations are canonical in the statistical sense that there may be many different sets of variables that typify the Actions which may relate in a variety of ways to a mixture of offenders Characteristics. There is no expectation that there will always be a simple one to one relationship between any given Action and any given Characteristic. As a consequence, it is argued (D. Canter & Youngs, 2002) that these A $\Rightarrow$ C Equations cannot be solved by purely empirical means because there are just too many possibilities of what may relate to what under differing circumstances. Instead, some form of theoretical framework is needed that will guide the search for possible correlations between Actions and Characteristics.

The basis for much offender profiling has typically been clinical or other professional experience, making judgements about the personality traits or psychodynamics of the likely perpetrator of a crime under investigation. From the perspective of scientific psychology, such a process is flawed in its reliance on clinical judgment rather than actuarial assessment. These flaws have been shown in extensive studies reviewed by Meehl (Meehl, 1954). The clinically derived theories upon which much 'offender profiling' has relied are equally questioned by research psychologists.

The range of scientific questions inherent in offender profiling have been shown by Canter (2004) to be a subset of a broader range of issues in psychology that are relevant to police investigations. This places offender profiling within a more general field christened **Investigative Psychology**. Interestingly, this more academically grounded approach, rather than moving away from operational concerns, is opening up the potential applications of psychological science.

The inferences that detectives make in an investigation about the perpetrator's likely characteristics will be valid to the extent that they are based on appropriate ideas about the processes by which the actions in a crime are linked to the characteristics. A number of potential processes are available within social and psychological theory. These include psychodynamic theories and personality theories, as well as frameworks drawing on interpersonal narratives and on socio-economic factors. Any or all of these theories could provide a valid basis for investigative inferences if the differences in individuals they posit correspond to variations in criminal behavior. One general hypothesis here is that the offender will show some consistency between the nature of their crimes and other characteristics they exhibit in other situations. This is rather different from psychodynamic models that attempt to explain criminality as a displacement or compensation activity, resulting from psychological deficiencies.

Valid inferences also depend upon an understanding of the way in which a process is operating. Conceptually there are a number of different roles that a theory can play in helping to link an offender's actions with his/her characteristics. One is to explain how it is that the offender's characteristics are the cause of the particular criminal actions. A different theoretical perspective would be to look for some common third set of intervening variables that was produced by the offender's characteristics to cause the particular offending actions. Yet a third

possibility is that some other set of variables is the cause of both. The evidence so far is consonant with this general consistency model, suggesting that processes relating to both the offender's characteristic interpersonal style and his or her routine activities (Clarke & Felson, 1985) may be particularly useful in helping to infer Characteristics from Actions.

From an applied perspective, it is also important that the variables on which the inference models draw are limited to those of utility to police investigations. This implies that the A variables are restricted to those known prior to any suspect being identified, typically crime scene information and/or victim and witness statements. The C variables are limited to those on which the police can act, such as information about where the person might be living, his/her criminal history, age or domestic circumstances

These inference models operate at the thematic level, rather than being concerned with particular, individual clues as would be typical of detective fiction. This approach recognizes that any one criminal action may be unreliably recorded or may not happen because of situational factors. But a group of actions that together indicate some dominant aspect of the offender's style may be strongly related to some important characteristic of the offender. Davies (Davies, 1997) study showed the power of this thematic approach. They demonstrated from their analysis of 210 rapes that if the offender took precautions not to leave fingerprints, stole from the victim, forced entry and had imbibed alcohol, then there was a very high probability, above 90%, that the offender had prior convictions for burglary.

The most developed empirical examination of thematic inference hypotheses is the study of arsonists by (D. Canter & Fritzon, 1998). They drew on Shye's (Shye, 1985) **Action Systems** model of behavior to identify four styles of arson, resulting from differences in the source of the objectives for the action (Expressive or Instrumental) combined with differences in the direction of the effect of the action (Person or Object). They developed scales to measure these four Expressive Person, Expressive Object, Instrumental Person and Instrumental Object themes in the actions of arsonists. Their table relating measures on all four background scales to all four action scales showed that the strongest statistically significant correlations were, as predicted, between actions and characteristics that exhibited similar themes, and lowest between those that did not.

Studies of inference need to recognize the social or organizational context in which the criminal operates. The social processes that underlie groups, teams and networks of criminals can reveal much about the consistencies in criminal behavior and the themes that provide their foundation. A clear example of this is a study looking at the different roles that are taken by teams of 'hit and run' burglars (Wilson & Donald, 1999). They demonstrated, for example, that the offender who was given the task of driving the getaway vehicle was most often likely to have a previous conviction for a vehicle related crime. In contrast the criminal assigned the task of keeping members of the public at bay, or controlling others who might interfere with their crime, the 'heavy', was most likely to have a previous conviction for some form of violence offence.

These results of consistency between social role and other forms of criminal endeavor are thus in keeping with the general thematic framework that is emerging through the studies of actual actions in a crime. They lend support to a general model of criminal activity that recognizes the specific role that criminality plays in the life of the offender.

References

Blau, T. H. (1994). *Psychological Services for Law Enforcement* New York: Wiley.
Canter, D. (1995). *Criminal Shadows*. London: HarperCollins.
Canter, D. (2004). Offender Profiling and Investigative Psychology. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling., 1*, 15.
Canter, D., Alison, A. J., Alison, E., & Wentink, N. (2004). The organanized/disorganized typologies of Serial Murder: Myth or Model? . *Psychology, Public Policy and Law, 10*(3), 29.
Canter, D., & Fritzon, K. (1998). Differentiating Arsonists: A model of firesetting actions and characteristics. . *Legal and Criminal Psychology., 3*(7), 73.
Canter, D., & Wentink, N. (2004). An Empirical Test of Holmes and Holmes's Serial Murder Typology. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 20*(10), 26.
Canter, D., & Youngs, D. (2002). Offender Profiling: The need for an Investigative
psychology. In R. Bull & D. Carson (Eds.), *Handbook of Legal Contexts*. West Sussex: Wiley & Sons.
Canter, D. V. (1995). The psychology of offender profiling. . In R. Bull & D. Carson (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology in legal contexts.* (2 ed., pp. 343-355). Chichester: Wiley.
Clarke, R. V., & Felson, M. (1985). Routine Activity and Rational Choice. . *Advances in Criminological Theory. , 5*.
Davies, A. (1997). Specific Profile Analysis: A Data-based Approach to Offender Profiling. . In J. L. Jackson & D. A. Bekerian (Eds.), *Offender Profiling: Theory, Research and Practice. *. Chichester.: John Wiley and Sons.
Edwards, S. T. (1977). *he Vidocq dossier: The story of the world's first detective*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Hazelwood, R. R., Ressler, R. K., Depue, R. L., & Douglas, J. E. (1987). Criminal personality profiling: An overview. In R. R. Hazelwood & A. W. Burgess (Eds.), *Practical Aspects of Rape Investigation: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (pp. 137-150). New York: Elsevier.
Jackson, J. L., & Bekerian, D. A. (Eds.). (1997). *Offender profiling: Theory, research and practice*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.
Meehl, P. E. (1954). *Clinical versus statistical prediction: A theoretical*
analysis and a review of the evidence. Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press.
Ressler, R. K., Burgess, A. W., Depue, R. L., Douglas, J. E., & Hazelwood, R. R. (1985). Classifying sexual homicide crime scenes. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 54*(8), 6.
Shye, S. (1985). Non-metric multivariate models for behavioural action
systems. In D. V. Canter (Ed.), *Facet theory: Approaches to social research* (pp. 97–148). New York: Springer-Verlag.
Wilson, A., & Donald, I. (1999). Ram raiding: Criminals working in groups. . In D. V. Canter & L. J. Alison (Eds.), *The social psychology of crime: Teams, groups, networks.* (Vol. lll, pp. 127–152). Dartmouth: Aldershot.
Youngs, D. (2007). Contemporary Challenges in Investigative Psychology: Revisiting the Canter offender Profiling Equations. In D. C. a. R.Zukauskiene (Ed.), *Psychology and Law: Bridging the Gap* (pp. 23-30). Aldershot: Ashgate.