



Offender Profiling

This Factsheet summarises what offender profiling is, the history of offender profiling, the American and British approaches, inductive and deductive reasoning, inductive and deductive criminal profiling and a critique of offender profiling.

1. What Is Offender Profiling?

Offender profiling is used to help find suspects. It involves forensic, physical and behavioural evidence.

- **Copson (1996)** described offender profiling as a “*term of convenience*”. By this Copson meant that a technique is used to discover inferences about the behaviour of an offender and to draw conclusions about the type of person the offender is.



- **Turco (1993)** described offender profiling as “*the preparation of a biographical ‘sketch’ gathered from information taken at a crime scene, from the personal history and habits of a victim, and integrating this with known psychological theory.*”

So, we have a ‘sketch’ which can be used by police officers to help them with their enquiry. Offender profiling is different from ‘clues’ left at the scene (such as blood, hair, semen, saliva, etc) in that it provides the police with less visible clues at the crime scene (e.g., choice of victim, location, type of assault, anything said or not said to the victim).

What is the aim of offender profiling?

The overall aim is to help the police to narrow the field of investigation. The profiler is helping to put a personality to the offender and his/her motivations for committing the crime.

Holmes (1989) suggests that profiling is most useful when the crime scene reflects psychopathology (e.g., sadistic assaults) and 90 per cent of profiling attempts involve murder or rape.

What is the history of offender profiling?

Some of you may have heard of Jack the Ripper. His crimes are also known as the ‘Whitechapel Murders’ as they took place around the Whitechapel area of London. The murders caused great panic amongst society and mystified the police, who could not catch the killer.

The police surgeon at this time (1888) was Dr Phillips, and he drew some conclusions about the killer’s personality by examining the wounds of the victims. He concluded that the killer must have had some medical training because some of the victim’s organs had been removed with a skill that only a medical professional would have (incidentally, the police never found ‘Jack the Ripper’).

To bring you up to date, current offender profiling tends to follow one of two approaches; the American and the British.

2. The American Approach – ‘Top-down’ Approach

In 1979, FBI investigators interviewed serial killers and sex murderers. They interviewed 36 sexual murderers including Charles Manson and Ted Bundy (you might like to look their crimes up on the internet as it is always useful to know more than you need to know about your topic). They found that out of these 36 subjects, 24 were ‘organised’ and 12 were ‘disorganised’. A member of the investigating team was Ressler (1988) who concluded that sex killers tended to be white, unmarried males who were either unemployed or in unskilled jobs. They tended to have previous psychiatric or alcoholic histories, dysfunctional family backgrounds and had a sexual interest in voyeurism, fetishism and pornography. So, a picture of the type of person who would commit such crimes was built up.



Why is the American approach called ‘top-down’?

It is called ‘top-down’ because it builds a classification system using information that is already known (i.e., interviews with known criminals) together with a behavioural analysis of crime scenes and information from victims and witnesses.

However, the British profiler **David Canter** argues that it is not sensible to rely on interviews with convicted killers as serial killers could be manipulative and could be seeking attention.



3. The British Approach – ‘Bottom-up’ Approach

David Canter is the profiler most commonly known within the UK. He began working as a profiler in order to help the police in 1985 when they were looking for a serial rapist (the ‘Railway Rapist’) – see case study below. The profile Canter provided described the rapist and where he lived with astounding accuracy.

Case study – profiling the ‘railway rapist’ (adapted from Canter, 1994)

During the period 1982-1986, 24 sexual assaults and three murders were committed near railways in North London. Canter drew up a profile of the offender. He proposed that the offender: lived in the area circumscribed by the first three cases (1982-1983); probably lived with wife/girlfriend; possibly without children; mid-to-late-20s; right-handed; semi-skilled or skilled job with weekend work; knowledge of the railway system; and criminal record, involving violence.



John Duffy was arrested (November 1986). He lived in Kilburn (North London), was separated from his wife, was in his late 20s, right-handed and was a travelling carpenter for British Rail. He was known to the police for having raped his wife at knifepoint.

Out of 2000 suspects, Duffy was number 1505! However, Canter’s profile enabled the police to make an arrest!

Why is the British approach called 'bottom-up'?

The British 'bottom-up' approach, according to Boon and Davies (1992), involves working with detailed information gathered from the scene of the crime and from information about the crime. A picture of the criminal is then suggested.

Differences between the British and American approaches

Boon and Davies (1992) argue that the British approach is based on 'bottom-up' data processing (an analysis of existing evidence), the aim being to identify associations between offences and offender characteristics. The American approach is 'top-down' and uses subjective conclusions drawn from both experience of crimes and interviews with criminals.

4. Inductive Reasoning

Information from the environment and many other sources is weighed up, and then conclusions are drawn.

Inductive criminal profiling

Inductive criminal profiling uses statistics, especially correlations, in order to see whether there are shared characteristics between crimes. Generalisations are then made. The statistics tend to come from those who have already been convicted of crimes.

Important link to psychological methods: Criticise correlations (they do not show cause and effect).

5. Deductive Reasoning

Deductive reasoning is logical reasoning. It tends to be more definite than inductive reasoning.

Deductive criminal profiling

If the first statement is true, then the conclusion is also true. For example, Turvey (1999): The situation is that the offender disposed of a victim's body in a remote area and tyre tracks were found at the scene. The profiler could say 'if the tyre tracks belong to the offender, then the offender has access to a vehicle and can drive'.

6. Aspects Of Profiling

CORPUS DELICTI – the 'body of crime'

The facts! Evidence that show a crime has taken place (e.g., fingerprints, broken windows, ransacked rooms, missing items, victim's blood, weapon).

MODUS OPERANDI – the method of operation used by the criminal

All the actions and behaviours that were needed to commit the crime.

7. Criticisms including ethical problems

Profiling is not perfect! It can only lead to **suggestions**. In fact, Turvey (1999) warns against using profiling as anything other than suggesting probabilities. He cites the case of Rachel Nickell, studied by Kocsis et al. (1998). Look this case up on the internet for more detailed information.

Case study: the Rachel Nickell case (1992)

Whilst walking her two-year-old son on Wimbledon Common, Rachel Nickell was stabbed 49 times (in front of her son). Profiler Paul Britton prepared a psychological profile for the police. Colin Stagg fitted the profile. However, there was **No Evidence**. Working with Britton, a female officer went undercover and got to know Stagg in the hope of extracting evidence from him. Stagg was arrested. However, the trial showed many inconsistencies. For example, Stagg knew the location of the crime but said (incorrectly) that Rachel Nickell had been raped. These inconsistencies had been ignored by the police who were sure that the profiling had led them to the offender. The female police officer later resigned from her job. Turvey (1999) concludes that this is an example of profiling being taken too far.



Some successes of profiling

Copson and Holloway (1997) carried out a survey with detectives from 184 cases where offender profiling had been used. It was found that the police believed that profiling had led to the identification of the offender in 2.7 per cent of cases, and helped to solve 16 per cent of cases.

Pinizzotto and Finkel (1990) asked groups of detectives, students, profilers and clinical psychologists to look at two closed police cases and to draw up profiles. One case was a sex case, and the other was a homicide. Although the profilers produced more detailed profiles and were more accurate in the sex case, the detectives were more accurate in the homicide.

Example exam questions

1. Compare the British approach to offender profiling with the American approach.

Hint: Outline the main points of both approaches, and then make comparisons.

2. Give an example of where offender profiling may not be ethical.

Hint: Use a published study for this answer.

3. Critically assess the British approach to offender profiling.

Hint: Make links to other areas of psychology (e.g., the use of statistics).

4. Critically assess the American approach to offender profiling.

Hint: Make links to other areas of psychology, such as the use of interviewing and the pitfalls of generalisation.

5. Give one example of a case study where offender profiling has been used.

Hint: This answer is straightforward. However, do not spend too much time describing the study. Give the outcome of the profiling (e.g., was it helpful or not?).

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Worksheet: Offender Profiling

Name _____

Useful answers to useful questions!

Question	Your answer
What is offender profiling?	
What is the aim of offender profiling?	
What is the American 'top-down' approach?	
What is the British 'bottom up' approach?	
What are the key differences between the American and British approaches to profiling?	
What is the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning?	
What is an inductive criminal profile?	
What is a deductive criminal profile?	
What does Corpus Delicti mean?	
What does Modus Operandi mean?	