

CRIME

Offender profiling

STUDY 144

Mokros, A., Alison, L. J., 2002, 'Is offender profiling possible? Testing the predicted homology of crime scene actions and background characteristics in a sample of rapists', *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 7, 25-43

Aim

To test the notion that the more similar the background characteristics of offenders, the greater the resemblance in their crime scene behaviour.

Method

Content analysis.

Participants

100 male British offenders convicted of stranger rape. 61 were assumed to be 'one-off' rapists (one victim statement in police records) and the other 39 were known to have offended more than once (more than one victim statement in police records).

Procedure

Crime scene actions were assessed from victim statements. Where more than one victim statement existed, the earliest and latest were used. In total, 139 victim statements were analysed using content analysis. 28 crime scene actions were coded and these included the use of disguise, the theft of personal property, verbal violence, apologies, use of blindfold, use of weapon and so on.

Information on the offenders' background characteristics, extracted from police files, included age at time of offence, ethnicity, employment status, educational level, marital status and previous criminal record (further analysed by type).

Results

No correlation was found between any of the variables. In other words, rapists who offend in similar fashions are not similar with respect to age, socio-demographic features or criminal records. The authors conclude that the notion of socio-demographic similarity is too simplistic and suggest that future research should consider a framework for offender profiling that is grounded in personality psychology.

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STUDY 145

Kocsis, R. N. *et al.*, 2002, 'Investigative experience and accuracy in psychological profiling of a violent crime', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 17, 8, 811-23

Aim To investigate the hypothesis that investigative experience gives individuals the ability to construct accurate psychological profiles. In other words, will experienced detectives produce better profiles than other groups?

Method An experiment with independent measures. The independent variable was occupation of participants.

Participants Six different groups of participants took part in this study, including 31 senior detectives, 12 experienced homicide detectives, 19 trainee detectives, 50 police recruits, 50 police students and 31 undergraduate students majoring in chemistry.

Procedure All participants were given a case description of an actual solved murder. This included details about the crime scene, sketches and photographs, forensic information and information about the victim. Once participants had read the material they were asked to complete a 45-item multiple-choice checklist, which asked them to assess the offender's physical characteristics, cognitive processes, offence behaviours and social history and habits. The participants were also asked to sign a declaration confirming that they had no prior knowledge of the case.

Results The results are surprising. The most accurate profiles were produced by the chemistry students, followed by the police recruits and then the experienced senior detectives. This would offer little evidence to suggest that 'investigative experience is the quintessential skill for effective psychological profiling'. Further, as both the chemistry students and the police recruits were studying at higher education level, there is the suggestion that the educational level of these groups may have some bearing on the results and further research into this variable is clearly required.



STUDY 146

Pinizotto, A. J., Finkel, N. J., 1990, 'Criminal personality profiling: an outcome and process study', *Law and Human Behaviour*, 14, 3, 215–33

Aim

To compare the accuracy of FBI profilers to detectives, psychologists and students.

Method

An experiment with independent measures. The independent variable was occupation of participants.

Participants


Four trained FBI profilers, six experienced detectives trained in profiling, six experienced detectives without profiling training, six clinical psychologists and six undergraduate students.

Procedure

Each participant was asked to draw up a profile for two crimes. These were solved crimes so that the accuracy of the profile could be assessed. The first crime was a sex offence and the second was a homicide.

Results

Overall, the researchers conclude that the profilers wrote richer profiles with more detail. Specifically, the profilers produced more accurate profiles for the sex offence case, particularly in relation to the sex, age and educational background of the offender. There were no significant differences in the profiles drawn up by each group for the homicide, although the detectives were slightly more accurate in identifying the employment status of the offender and his relationship to the crime scene. Therefore, this study would suggest that there is some evidence to support the notion that profiling training and detective experience lead to the skills necessary to identify offender characteristics.



Evaluating research into offender profiling

Effectiveness of profiling

There are mixed results here and it should be remembered that profiling is a relatively new science and is still being developed. There are a number of different profiling methods in current use (in particular, you should be able to compare the approaches used in the UK with those employed in the USA). It is also difficult to assess the effectiveness of profiling, with some surveys suggesting that profiling adds 'direction' to an investigation rather than directly identifying the offender. What do the studies summarized in this section tell us? First, it is clear that the results found by Kocsis *et al.* contradict the results found by Pinizotto and Finkel. Pinizotto and Finkel found that trained profilers produced more accurate profiles than less experienced police officers or naive participants. This was not a very strong finding, however, and was only confirmed in one of the two cases they used. Surprisingly, Kocsis *et al.* found that it was the chemistry students who produced the most accurate profiles in their research. It is interesting to note that the police officers used in this study were not trained profilers. It is not clear how these findings can be explained, although they clearly indicate the need for further research. The research

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by Mokros and Alison suggests that looking for socio-demographic similarities between offenders is too simplistic and they suggest an approach that is more grounded in personality psychology.

Ecological validity/validity of measurements

Is the type of research we are considering a valid way of testing effectiveness? This is a very difficult question to answer. The studies by Kocsis *et al.* and by Pinizotto and Finkel both asked participants to read case summaries and then produce a profile. Accuracy was assessed by the number of correct judgements made about the offender's personal characteristics. It may be that some of these judgements are more useful to police than others and it may be that experienced profilers/police are better at identifying certain pieces of information. For example, correctly identifying a number of socio-demographic variables may not be that much help to police, but correctly identifying geographic location or personality characteristics might be. Police surveys have revealed that often it is a single piece of information or the general direction given by the profiler that is useful rather than the number of accurate pieces of information identified. Finally, the investigations by Kocsis *et al.* and Pinizotto and Finkel were conducted as experimental studies, which may reduce their ecological validity somewhat (although the cases used were real, solved cases), whereas the research by Mokros and Alison was a statistical analysis of a large number of known offenders.

Ethics/ethical implications

The research described here does not raise a large number of ethical issues, although it could be argued that, particularly for the non-police, the case summaries may have been distressing as they included photographs and detailed information of sex crimes and homicide. However, the ethical implications of offender profiling do need to be assessed. The danger in developing a general profile of a serial sex offender, for example, could lead to innocent people being identified as suspects. Remember that if someone matches a profile, this does not mean they are the offender. Mokros and Alison's research highlights the need for more than socio-demographic variables to be included in a profile and this may help to prevent inaccurate accusations. There have been some notable cases in which the use of offender profiling has been heavily criticized (the 'entrapment' of Colin Stagg as a suspect in the murder of Rachel Nickell led to the case being dropped and the police and the profiler being severely criticized for inappropriate behaviour).

Of the three studies described here, one finds no significant correlation between variables typically used in profiles; one finds that experienced profilers write more detailed profiles than non-experienced people; and one finds that chemistry students do better than experienced police. Clearly, the ethical implications of using profiles at present should be considered very carefully indeed.

Usefulness

Despite all the criticism raised above, this research is clearly very useful. It suggests that there is some merit in the use of profiles but that further development of the techniques is still necessary. It is clear that trying to correlate socio-demographic variables with offences is overly simplistic. Profiling should be more firmly rooted in psychological theory and this is a criticism made of the FBI approach to profiling by



the UK's leading profiler, David Canter. Canter has also pioneered 'geographic profiling', which has had some notable successes.

The research described here highlights the fact that it is not clear what makes someone a good profiler. It would seem as though experience in police work does not necessarily help, whereas the ability to study at higher education level might. This is an obvious route for further research. If researchers could identify the cognitive processes used by those who create accurate profiles (including psychological variables), this could be incorporated into training programmes. In conclusion, remember that offender profiling is still developing and some of the research here should be seen as reflecting a stage in that development.