Compare and contrast two main approaches to criminal profiling (2011)

Discuss the statement that profiling is no more than “an educated attempt to provide investigative agencies with specific information as to the type of individual who would have committed a certain crime” (Gerberth, 1996), with reference to the two main approaches to psychological profiling (2013)

Criminal profiling is the practice of predicting a criminal’s personality, demographic and behavioural characteristics based on crime scene evidence (Douglas et al., 1986). Compare and contrast the FBI and geographical methods of profiling (2014).

Forensic – Profiling

The goal of creating a profile is to gain an idea of the physical, behavioural and demographic characteristics of the offender, what their behaviour is likely to be after committing the crime and when they might strike again. The profile may also provide useful information for interrogation methods after the offender is identified and apprehended (Keppel & Birnes, 2003). Criminal profiling has a long history. It was used as early as the 1880’s, when two physicians, George Phillips and Thomas Bond, used crime scene clues to make predictions about British serial murderer Jack the Ripper’s personality. Currently, profiling rests (somewhat uneasily) somewhere between law enforcement and psychology. As a science, it is still a relatively new field with few set boundaries or definitions. Its practitioners don’t always agree on methodology or even terminology. The term "profiling" has caught on among the general public, largely due to movies like “The Silence of the Lambs” and TV shows like “Profiler”, “CSI”, “Criminal Minds” and the like.

Forms of profiling have been referred to as ‘criminal investigative analysis’, ‘investigative psychology’ and ‘crime action profiling’. Despite the different names, all share a common goal: to help investigators examine evidence from crime scenes and victim and witness reports to develop an offender description. The description can include psychological variables such as personality traits, psychopathologies and behavior patterns, as well as demographic variables such as age, race or geographic location. Investigators might use profiling to narrow down a field of suspects or figure out how to interrogate a suspect already in custody. Still regarded as much an art (based on experience and intuition) as a science (based on empirical research that generates falsifiable hypotheses), psychologists – together with criminologists and law enforcement officials – have nonetheless begun utilising psychology’s rich statistical and research methods to bring more science into the art. This essay serves to compare and contrast two main approaches to criminal profiling, namely FBI profiling and geographical profiling, with the former considered more of an art, and the latter representing the scientific approach.

FBI Method Of Profiling

The cornerstone of the FBI approach is the classification of crime scenes (and hence offenders) as either organised or disorganised. To do this FBI profiling involves a four-stage process including (1) data assimilation, (2) crime scene classification, (3) crime reconstruction, and (4) profile generation. During data assimilation investigators gather together information from multiple sources such as crime scene photos, police reports, pathologists’ reports, witness testimonies, etc. Following this the crime scene is classified based on evidence of planning on the offender’s part. A disorganised crime scene suggests unplanned, chaotic behaviour, whereas an organised one suggests control and forethought (Geberth, 1996).

During crime reconstruction, attempts are made to understand the crime event as a dynamic process involving a minimum of two people (offender and victim) and hypotheses are generated about what happened during the crime. The information gathered during data assimilation is crucial for this process. Finally, the ultimate profile is constructed. It will often go beyond the typical characteristics of organised/disorganised offenders and include information extrapolated from the crime scene about the offender’s psychological characteristics, employment/skill set, sexual history, age and ethnic group (which are usually similar to the victim’s) (Holmes & Holmes, 1996).

As the first systematic approach to offender profiling, the FBI’s approach has been enormously influential. It has been adopted by law enforcement agencies all over the world, many of whom, like the NCID Offender Profiling Unit in the Netherlands, have adapted and enhanced it. Ainsworth (2001) suggests that offender typologies are potentially very useful in allowing offences to be linked and facilitating predictions about the timeframe of the next attack and how the series of offences is likely to develop. FBI-inspired attempts
to obtain and organise data about different types of offender have been important in challenging the stereotypes that investigators may hold about offenders and which may mislead investigations. For example, Clarke and Morley (1988) interviewed 41 convicted rapists responsible for over 800 offences and found that, contrary to the stereotype of an inadequate loner, they were typically very average men, living in normal family circumstances, often intelligent and in skilled employment.

The FBI’s approach to profiling has, however, come in for severe criticism on how objective the process is, the scientific status of the evidence on which it is based, and the usefulness of the profiles it generates. In strict social scientific terms, the procedures employed by the FBI team while first developing ideas about serial killing were not the most rigorous. Indeed, one of the most remarkable things is the extent to which so much information about offender typologies emerged out of a study of just 36 offenders, who may well have a distorted recall of their own crimes, on purpose or accidentally, raising questions about the data’s validity. (Howitt, 2009). This sample of offenders is very small considering the use to which the data have been put and it is not obvious that the methods and motives of the very rare types of offender interviewed generalise readily to other offenders. Ainsworth (2001) points out that there have been few serious attempts to establish the validity of the FBls offender types using scientifically verifiable methods. Additionally, Canter (2000) notes that the crime scene evidence on which profiles are based is often incomplete and ambiguous, which means judgements based on the evidence are necessarily speculative. Furthermore, it is up to the profiler to decide which aspects of the crime scene evidence are important in determining the profile. Consequently, different profilers may reach different conclusions from the same evidence. Finally, a typological approach to profiling assumes that offenders are one thing or the other and that this is stable over time. Wilson et al. (1997) suggest that neither assumption is correct: most offenders show both organised and disorganised features in their crimes and that they may shift from one to the other between crimes. This obviously limits the usefulness of such profiles. Thus nowadays the FBI style of profiling is presented more as a ‘special art’ (Canter, 2004) rather than a scientific endeavour.

Geographical Methods of Profiling

Criminologists have long recognised the importance of environmental factors in crime. As early as the 1940’s, the Chicago School of Sociology established that offenders tend to be concentrated in particular zones or “hot-spots” of a city which attract much police attention relative to the size of the area (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Sherman et al., 1989). This idea has subsequently been applied to the individual level for geographic profiling, which blends environmental criminology and mathematics in its statistical analysis of sites where victims’ bodies were found (Godwin & Canter, 1997). In keeping with Circle Theory, the location of offences can provide inferences for the operating home base of the offender (Rossmo, 2000). With each offence committed, the location of the offender’s base can be estimated with increasing specificity (Godwin & Canter, 1997). These additional crimes spread out from a central location and, using the distance from the two furthest locations as the diameter, a circle can be drawn encompassing most of the offence locations and the home base.

The tendency to remain centralised demonstrates activity decay, common to both criminal and non-criminal behaviour, whereby the frequency of actions decreases as the distance from home increases (Laukkanen & Santtila, 2006). Often articulated as the least effort principle, the falling frequency of offences demonstrates the tendency of individuals to select nearby sites for behaviour, with other factors being equal and the exception of a buffer zone around the home where few, if any, offences occur (Godwin & Canter, 1997). Snook et al. (2005) demonstrated these ideas in a study which examined the way in which a group of 53 German serial killers’ decision making in relation to offence location, was mediated by their social, economic, and cognitive characteristics. In 63% of murders the killer lived within 10 kilometres of the place where the body was found.

Although much less common, not all offenders commit crimes near their homes. There is still however, information to be gleaned from studying the geographical location of crimes. When there are no geographic commonalities between the home base and the area of offending, access to some method of transportation, whether a privately owned automobile or public transport system, must therefore be necessary in order to move from one area to the next (Young, 2006). Thus even though investigators may not be able to identify the offenders home base, they may still gather useful information about their movements and factors that affect their execution of offences. For example, young serial killers and those with their own transport travelled further to commit murder than those with access to public transport only (Snook et al., 2005). In some cases, the area that the offender travels to may also represent a place that is emotionally/personally significant or makes the offender feel comfortable because he or she is familiar with the location’s activities (Kocsis & Irwin, 1997).

As with FBI profiling, the assumption of geographical or statistical profiling is that features of the crime scene contain evidence of salient behaviours carried out by the offender while carrying out the crime.
These then may help reveal the distinguishing features or characteristics of the offender. The essential difference between FBI profiling and statistical profiling is that the latter concentrates on establishing the relationships empirically using statistical techniques which identify patterns in large data sets whereas FBI-style profiling lacks this empirical core (Howitt, 2009). Thus, statistical profiling is based on its own distinct ethos despite the overlaps between it and the FBI profiling approach. It is much more empirical and is nowhere near so reliant on intuition and clinical insight.

Statistical profiling cannot tell police exactly who committed an offence, but it potentially can make predictions about the characteristics an offender is likely to possess. This can help police target their investigation more effectively and prioritise suspects once they have been identified. Salfati and Canter (1998) examined the relationship between murder crime scenes and the murderer’s characteristics. A major hypothesis was that the murderers would show similar modes of interaction during the homicide as in much of the rest of their lives. A sample of 82 British homicides in which a single offender attacked a stranger was studied. These were murders in which the police did not know the assailant at the time of the discovery of the crime. From their work a number of informative features of the crimes emerged: the homicides often took place in the evening (66%) and the victims’ bodies were left at their place of death (76%). The majority of offenders were male (72%) and/or were local or familiar with the area in which the crime occurred (79%). Additionally, the use of small space analysis by the researchers allowed them to group the crime scene characteristics and the corresponding offender characteristics into three major crime groups based on whether an offence/offender displayed instrumental opportunistic, instrumental cognitive, or expressive impulsive qualities. Two-thirds of the homicides studied could be readily classified into each of the three categories (Salfati & Canter, 1998). As such, the contribution of profiling to a case is to help the police narrow down a list of thousands of suspects and to target their subsequent investigations more effectively.

Statistical profiling has abandoned many of the shibboleths of FBI-style profiling. This can be seen most easily in the much wider range of types of crimes which it covers compared to FBI profiling’s emphasis on serial violent sexual crimes containing ‘bizarre’ elements. So statistical profiling is increasingly likely to look at crimes such as arson and fraud which are very different from the focus of the original FBI profilers. Statistical approaches to pattern finding are also characteristically a little inaccessible. Consequently, there is a great deal of work to be done if the statistical approach is to inform police investigations in ways as influential as those of the FBI profilers.