

# Typological offender profiling

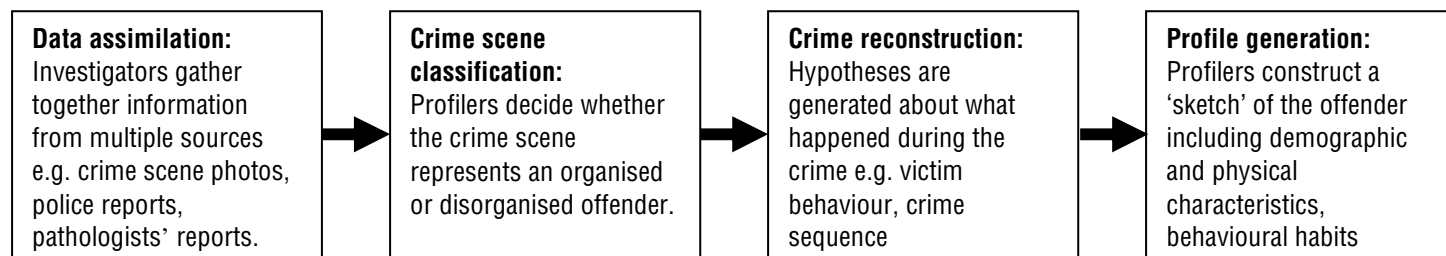
## How is typological profiling different from geographical?

Both typological and geographic offender profiling represent attempts to work out the characteristics of an offender (or offenders) from the characteristics of their offences. As such, both can be used as an adjunct to conventional police work to help police link crimes, focus their investigation and narrow the suspect field. However, they are quite different in how they are applied to crimes and the types of information they (potentially) provide about offenders. Unlike geographic profiling, which looks at the distribution of series of crimes, typological profiling focuses primarily on behavioural evidence obtained at the scene(s) of specific crime(s). Evidence about how the offender committed the crimes is used to assign them to a particular category of offender. Different categories of offender are believed to have different psychological characteristics. Category information is combined with other insights to build up a picture of the sort of person who committed the crime(s). Unlike geographical profiling, which potentially can be applied to all sorts of crime, typological profiling tends only to be used in cases of stranger murder and rape where several offences are connected in a series. Some other differences are outlined in the table.

Typological	Geographical
Favoured in US	Favoured in UK
Originates in law enforcement expertise	Originates in psychological expertise
Based primarily on qualitative data and experience.	Based primarily on empirical, quantitative, statistical methods

## The FBI's approach to profiling

The most influential typological profiling approach was developed by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation in the late 1970s. It was originally based on interviews with 36 convicted serial killers and rapists, combined with insights from many crimes investigated and solved by the FBI. The cornerstone of the FBI approach is the classification of crime scenes (and hence offenders) as either *organised* or *disorganised*. FBI profiling is a four-stage process (Howitt, 2009):



The determination that a crime scene is organised or disorganised is 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. The profile eventually constructed will often go beyond the typical characteristics of organised/disorganised offenders and include information extrapolated from the crime scene about the offender's physical characteristics, employment/skill set, sexual history, age and ethnic group (which are usually similar to the victim's).

Type of offender	Evidence from crime scene	Likely characteristics of offender
Organised	Weapon brought to scene Evidence removed Control of victim	Unknown to victim Socially & sexually competent Normal to high intelligence Angry/depressed
Disorganised	Weapon improvised Evidence left at scene Little control of victim	Possibly known to victim Socially & sexually inept Low intelligence Severely mentally ill

## **Strengths of the FBI's approach**

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.

## **Problems with the FBI's approach**

The FBI's approach to profiling has, however, come in for severe criticism from several quarters. Attacks have generally centred 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.

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. Canter (2000) points out 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. Additionally, 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.

There are a number of problems with the data on which the FBI's typologies were originally based. The sample of 36 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. The data were obtained by interviewing offenders who may well have a distorted recall of their own crimes and who are known for being manipulative, raising questions about the data's validity. Ainsworth (2001) points out that there have been few serious attempts to establish the validity of the FBI's offender types using scientifically verifiable methods. Howitt (2009; p.269) calls the evidence base 'glaringly minimal'. The evidence that has been presented in favour of the FBI system has largely been narrative, in popular accounts of offender profiling. The obvious problem is that profilers are far more likely to report their successes than their failures, which may give a distorted view of how often profiles contribute to the successful apprehension of offenders.

## **How useful is offender profiling?**

There remain serious questions about how useful offender profiles actually are. Police may give favourable opinions of profiles even when they are completely wrong (e.g. Alison et al, 2003). An analysis of offender profiles by Snook et al (2007) found that they were based on scientific argument and evidence only a minority of the time, leading to the suggestion that most profiles contain little more than common sense. A significant problem is that it is not clear how the usefulness of a profile could objectively be measured. If a profile contains 20 statements, only 10 of which are accurate, is it a success or a failure? A related issue is the specificity of the information in the profile. Like a newspaper horoscope, a profile could be sufficiently vague to be 'right' no matter what the offender turns out to be like, but clearly a profile that vague would contribute little to solving a case. Ultimately, whilst most agree that profiling has the potential to assist police investigations there is little agreement about precisely how far it may be able to help.