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College Writing and Research—Section 03

2 April 2013

Criminal Profiling: Is This the Right Profession for Me?

What comes to mind when you hear the term *CSI*? For me, words such as exciting, heart pounding, criminal-catching, and profiling pop into my head. I can remember the first time I watched an episode of *CSI*. It was nighttime, and I was lounging on the couch with my mom, having some quality mother-daughter time. Then I heard it—“who are you; who, who, who, who.” That immediately caught my attention because of the upbeat tone of the song, and for the first time, my eyes were glued to the TV for an entire episode of a show. From the beginning to the end, I was fascinated by the methods the characters used to catch criminals, and I have been a dedicated watcher ever since.

What I already know and don't know about my topic: Unfortunately, I do not know much about criminal profiling beyond what I have seen on *CSI* or even *Law and Order: SVU*. Before I researched this topic, I believed profilers reviewed information regarding the crime scene to see if any information is available to help them to determine who might be a suspect. They tried to find anyone who may have had a grudge against the person, such as a family member, and determine whether the actual place of the crime held any significance for the victim or potential offenders. If there does not seem to be an obvious answer as to who committed the crime, I know a profiler can make a profile on the criminal to determine what qualities the perpetrator may possess.

Now, there are many things I do not know. How do profilers actually generate profiles on criminals? How do they know what qualities the offender may exhibit by analyzing the crime scene? What resources do profilers use to conclude where the criminal may live? More simply, what educational background do they have? These are critical questions I need answered.

Why I want to answer this question/understand this topic: I just began my college career, and I know I am majoring in psychology, but I decided I want to double major. The first thought that came to my mind was profiling. Just by watching those TV shows, I knew psychology and profiling would go hand-in-hand. Even though I am fascinated by the profilers I have seen in TV shows, I have no factual information about profiling. This information is critical for me to acquire so I can make my decision on whether profiling is an occupation suited to me and my strengths. By researching this topic for my essay, I hope to gain in-depth knowledge about profilers and the skills they need to possess.

Story of my Search. The first thing I did was go to the Rod Library website and search for some journal or encyclopedia articles that could help me obtain a general understanding of what criminal profiling entails. Fortunately, the first article I clicked on allowed me to dig right into what a criminal profiler does. Heath Grant, who has written numerous books on criminology and social sciences, describes how profiling is not considered necessarily a science but rather an art form, which caused me to be relieved because I am not too interested in pursuing a structured scientific major (376). He continues to discuss how the psychological profiles these people generate are based off of offenders who have committed similar crimes, so investigators can narrow the list of potential perpetrators. The profile of the perpetrator is developed by a “psychological assessment of the crime scene” (Grant 376), which means profilers interpret the crime scene and the evidence in a way that can indicate certain aspects of the perpetrator’s

personality. This depends on the type and amount of evidence the offender leaves behind, but Grant lists possible components of a perpetrator's profile—the individual's race, sex, age, marital status, general employment, degree of sexual maturity, whether the individual may strike again, possibility the individual has committed a similar crime in the past, possible police records, etc. I never knew such a wide range of information about someone could be gleaned from the evidence or the crime scene, which just makes profiling even more appealing! Profiles can possibly be used to connect unsolved cases to the current offender. What I found extremely interesting was profiles can suggest possible interrogation methods to use to extract critical information from the suspect! This sounds like something I would be adept at because of my desire to learn more about why people behave in certain ways, how to change their behavior, and what methods of behavior modification are the most effective. To generate profiles, I would have to possess the ability to analyze people, their behavior, and their overall personality to really grasp why they committed the crime, and I believe my focus in psychology would certainly allow me to be successful at this.

Another important factor laid out in this article is the process of producing a profile. It seems some elements are considered necessary—appraisal of the crime and crime scene, complete evaluation of the crime scene(s), thorough analysis of the victim(s), evaluation of preliminary police reports, assessment of the medical examiner's autopsy, development of a profile with critical offender characteristics, investigative suggestions derived from similar offenders profiles, and possible suspect apprehension strategies (Grant 377). Before reading this article, I never imagined there would be such a large amount of assessment and analysis involved in profiling. Even though profile generation sounds as if it would be useful in most criminal cases, Grant points out profiling is most useful when the perpetrator seems to possess a

pathological personality condition, which means it is evident the offender is mentally disturbed in some way. As stated previously, situations where profiling would be most beneficial are sadistic torture in sexual assaults, evisceration, postmortem cutting and slashing, motiveless fire setting, rape, lust and mutilation murder, satanic and ritualistic crimes, stalking, some forms of terrorism, and pedophilia. This portion of profiling causes me to hesitate a bit; I am not sure I could handle such disturbed people, but I am interested in personality disorders more than any other portion of psychology. I want to gain an understanding of not just the “normal” people but also the mentally ill or so called “crazy” ones, too. Criminals who commit those types of crimes would certainly showcase this abnormal behavior, so while I may be hesitant, I believe I would be up for the challenge.

There is one other part in this article I find intriguing. In profiling, a distinction is made between the traditional methods of operation (MO) and the signature left behind by a pathological perpetrator. The MO of an offender is any action or behavior needed to commit a crime while the signature of an offender goes beyond that in the sense the individual uses violent and often repetitive behaviors to divulge his or her brutal fantasies (Grant 377). While reading this part of criminal profiling, I find myself a little overwhelmed. Some of the crimes committed by mentally disturbed people are horrifying, and I am unsure of whether I am strong enough to view such a crime and then go on to analyze it. Profiling certainly encompasses more than I suspected. It is not only about analyzing the offender but also the crime scene itself and the evidence left behind.

I continued to look through the articles offered on the Gale Virtual Reference Library, and I found another encyclopedia section on geographic profiling, one of the parts of profiling especially compelling. Geographic profiling deals with sketching out the probable area

containing the residence of an unknown perpetrator who committed a series of crimes (LeBeau 380). This area is found by examining the locations of where the series of crimes had occurred, which makes it extremely useful in serial homicides, rapes, and arsons. Surprisingly, geographic profiling utilizes concepts from a wide variety of fields, such as computer science, environmental criminology, environmental psychology, geography, information science, mathematics, statistics, and transportation planning. I am shocked by what this all incorporates, and I certainly do not believe this would fit my strengths very well. I am only passably efficient with computers and geography is not one of my strongest areas. Geographic profiling systems plot the locations of the crime onto a digital map, use mathematical functions called distance decay functions and approximate the travel behavior of the perpetrator between his home and the crime scenes, and possible areas of the offender's residence is figured. People who can use these systems have to understand the science behind them completely so they can do the required training and effectively use the software (LeBeau 381). Geographic profiling is an intriguing software system, but I never knew how complicated it and the mathematic formulas employed were. While I certainly find geographic profiling appealing, I do not possess the correct skills to effectively use this software.

Those two sources offered me quality information on profiling, but I still had much to learn. Next, I went to Rod Library and searched the stacks for some books that might offer more information on this subject (I found out how difficult it is to maneuver around what seems hundreds of stacks of books!). Thankfully, I was able to find one book that seemed promising. Ronald Holmes, who wrote *Profiling Violent Crimes: An Investigative Tool*, described how there are two types of profiling: inductive and deductive. Inductive profiling involves exercising the assumption if certain crimes committed by different people are similar then the criminals must

share some corresponding personality traits (Holmes 5). These types of profilers do not need any special knowledge or skill; the information they gather comes from past crimes, known offenders, and other sources of information, such as media reports. Deductive profilers use a different approach. They perform a thorough analysis of the crime scene and the evidence to formulate a picture of the unidentified offender. These profilers also focus on victimology, which means discovering as much information as possible about the victim because it seems the more they know about the victim, the more they know about the offender. I had no idea this was such a huge part of profiling, and it was shocking to read about how much the victim's information can help determine more about the offender. Even though deductive profiling seems more beneficial, there is a major downfall to it—the profile generation is an extremely long process. That is why it is imperative to utilize both inductive and deductive methods to gather information efficiently but also in-depth enough to provide analyses crucial to finding the unknown offender (Holmes 7).

Ronald Holmes continues on to describe how a profiler reconstructs the personalities of offenders who commit crimes such as rape, child molestation, torture, etc. (37). Each person has a unique personality, and to help make an accurate sketch of one, profilers must look at the biology, culture, environment, common experiences, and unique experiences these offenders have. Even though this is true, profilers have to understand people who commit these crimes did not go through life the same as others in society; they are completely different than the average person (Holmes 40). I wondered why people commit such heinous crimes, and it is exciting to think by using these tools, I could finally begin to understand their behavior and find ways to prevent it. Just as Heath Grant said, these offenders have a pathological personality that shows itself throughout the crime scene; if the crime scene is violent, it reflects the violent personality

the offender possesses. This is not a giant leap in logic, and it would not make sense to even construct a profile if the crime scene did not demonstrate the personality of the offender because it would not be an accurate description of him or her.

This book also pinpoints a false idea many people have. While it may seem as if profilers must know exactly why people behave the way they do, this is simply not true. The theories profilers use are based on a series of educated guesses (Holmes 47). It is not as if they can magically determine a reason as to why a person acts a certain way. I have noticed people have misconceptions such as this all the time, especially in terms of psychology. Psychologists cannot read people's minds; they just have a much better understanding of people and their behavior. Another point the authors made was there is no one answer that can be used to determine reasons for all violent behaviors, so successful profilers must use a multidisciplinary approach, which will help them not focus on one aspect of a crime more than another (Holmes 69). If they did not use this approach, profilers would miss crucial information imperative to solving the crime. When I read these parts, I first thought profiling sounded awfully difficult, but I looked more closely at the information, and I determined a profiler has to possess the ability to think outside the box and become engaged in the actual investigation instead of staying on the sidelines. This would fit me well. If I am part of something, I want to offer unique ideas as well as be completely involved in the project.

Holmes' book had great information, but I wanted to know more about where profiling is used and the type of experience people need to become profilers. Thankfully, one of my psychology professors had recently taught a section on forensic psychology, so I thought she might have some good ideas on where to go next. She told me about this website dedicated to forensic psychology that would include quality information on criminal profiling. The author of

the website, David Webb, describes profiler positions within the FBI. He states there is not an actual job position available called “FBI Profiler.” Instead, special agents who work at the National Center for Analysis of Violent Crimes (NCAVC) in Quantico, Virginia generate profiles on unknown offenders. Unfortunately, it is not as simple as applying to work here. To become part of this unit, one would have to serve as a FBI special agent for at least three years; however, so many agents apply for this job that one would normally be a special agent for up to ten years before being allowed the opportunity to work within this center (Webb)! I have to admit I was shocked by this information. How could it possibly take so long? If profiling is something I decide I want to do for my career, I do not think I could wait ten years to start. While people may think there are other routes for me to take, that is not true. Profiling is not used often outside of the FBI. Those are not the only stipulations. The FBI also prefers one has an advanced degree in behavioral or forensic science, and they desire these employees to have experience with investigating violent, sexual crimes and abductions. Academically, I would have the qualifications, but I now know I would have to pursue a more criminological career along with my psychology degree to be able to gain the experience with the crimes stated above. Besides these two specifications, the FBI requires their special agents to take a variety of written and psychometric tests. To even be qualified for appointment, one needs to meet the FBI’s specific standards for these tests. Webb continues on to discuss how there are support positions available at NCAVC that do not require one to be a special agent. These include intelligence research specialists, violent crime resource specialists, and crime analysts. Unfortunately for me, these support positions require a solid foundation in research, which is not the part of psychology I am most interested in. This website certainly caused me to really think about whether profiling

is something I want to do. It takes much more experience than I was expecting. While I may find this profession to be fascinating, it may not be the right path for me to take.

The final part to my search was to find someone I could interview who has experience with profiling. Unfortunately, that was much harder to do than I expected. First, I went to one of my psychology professors and asked her whether she knew someone who could be considered an expert on profiling. She told she had someone in mind, but she needed to see if she still had that person's e-mail address. A couple days later I e-mailed my professor, and she told me she could not find the e-mail address, but she did give me a name, so I searched her on Google. Her name was affiliated with a couple of colleges, so I called the numbers given on the websites to see if I could get a hold of her. No one picked up at either school, so I decided I had to find someone else.

Next, I looked up the Cedar Falls Police Department on Google to determine whether or not someone there could answer my questions. One person, Investigator Brian Shock, seemed as if he might have some answers, but I could not get a hold of him, so I tried another route. I went to the UNI homepage and searched through the Criminology faculty department. There were a couple of professors I thought might have knowledge about profiling, so I e-mailed one of them, Richard Featherstone, to see what he had to say. He responded quickly, but he could not answer my questions. Thankfully, he gave me the name of another professor at UNI, James Wertz, a retired FBI Special Agent, who he thought might be able to help me. I e-mailed Wertz, and he agreed to do an interview. Finally someone who could answer my questions! To allow him time to think about his answers, I sent him the questions I developed. A few days later I went to Wertz's office to conduct the interview. He looked at me and said, "I cannot answer these questions. Sorry." Frankly, I just stared at him, shocked. "But," he said, "I contacted an old

friend in the FBI, and he said he knows a profiler from Iowa who is working in Quantico at NCAVC.” He gave the FBI my e-mail address to pass on to the profiler. Yes! I was ecstatic I would have the chance to talk to an actual profiler. It is unfortunate I do not have the information yet to put in this essay. While I may have a much clearer view of what profiling entails, talking to someone who knows exactly what it is like to be a profiler will allow me to understand more fully what an average day looks like for a profiler, how involved one is in cases, and the knowledge and skills most beneficial to profilers.

What I learned. Criminal profiling involves much more than I ever expected. Not only do profilers analyze the psychological state of the perpetrator, but also the crime scene, evidence, victims, police reports, etc. They are only involved in cases where pathological behavior is observed. I thought this part of it was a little frightening due to the brutal crimes this encompasses, but I thought I would be interested in doing this because of my desire to work with abnormal behavior patients. Then there was the curve I was not expecting—it can take up to ten years before I can actually get into a profiling center! Even though that applies to the FBI, there are not many other options for profilers. This showed me profiling might not necessarily be the direction I take for my career. Besides that, it was extremely difficult to find someone I could talk to about profiling. Unfortunately, this is not a career many people pursue in this area of the country, which hindered my ability to do a job shadow. Actually, it was hard enough to find someone knowledgeable enough to interview. I learned so much about profiling through this search, and I believe I have found the answer I was looking for. The reason I conducted this I-Search was to determine whether profiling would be a profession that would fit with my strengths, and while there are portions of it I truly believe I would be great at, there may be too many drawbacks for me to take my career in this direction, but I have learned I am interested in

the criminological aspect of profiling, which I hope to learn more about when I talk to the profiler from Quantico. While this I-Search did not lead me to deciding profiling was right for me, it did lead me to a new interest area I am excited to explore.

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