

# Fact or fiction?

Is criminal profiling really the key to solving some of the most heinous crimes, or is basic police work teamed with psychological profiling the best method of solving cases? Peter Riley writes

Most people have seen the likes of the ITV series *Cracker*, about a psychologist who uses profiling techniques to catch serial offenders. But in the real world of serial killers, bombers and serial arsonists, just how accurate is it?

One man who believes that our television heroes are not showing the true nature of profiling, is Professor David Canter, director of the Centre for Investigative Psychology at Liverpool University. He said: "Public awareness of the contributions that psychologists can make to the investigation of crimes grew out of the general fascination with serial killers. These vile and determined murderers have become the stuff of

urban myths. They are the mainstay of fictional crime drama and are guaranteed to steal the headlines if they break into fact."

These are strong words from a man who became the first person in the UK to provide offender profiles to the police and who has contributed to over 150 investigations. He has also written a book, *Mapping Murder, The Secrets of Geographical Profiling*, looking at the parallels between the criminal's psychological journey and the actual geographical paths he follows.

Prof Canter believes that what currently passes off as fact about serial killers has its origins in the fascination that Hollywood has with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and far outweighs their validity.

"Out of this 'Hollywood effect', of gracing personal opinion with dramatic illustration and giving that opinion inappropriate validity, have emerged a great range of statements about serial killers. Not one of the statements survives close scientific scrutiny," he says.

He added that his view is often preceded by the basic question to police forces 'Do you want a profile or help in solving the case?' which may seem a strange question to ask, but Prof Canter points out, that in many cases, the police investigation of major crimes could best be served by more effective record keeping, better police training and integrating police methods with investigative psychology.





The general belief is that serial killers, for example, are deemed to be above average intelligence and are a modern phenomenon but, according to Prof Canter, this is untrue. Psychological profiling, in a much cruder form than today, took place back in the gas-lit streets of Victorian London when Jack the Ripper, long regarded as the first 'modern' serial killer, struck down a number of prostitutes and grossly mutilated them. Attempts were made by local physicians Thomas Bond and George Phillips to put a recognisable handle on the methods used by the Ripper. Despite coming up with a profile of sorts, including a generally fair description of what Jack looked like, the Scotland Yard detectives investigating the crimes failed to identify the killer.

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In retrospect, it could also be fair to compare the lack of attention to detail of the Ripper inquiry with Prof Canter's current opinion about police training and proper record keeping. It was one vital piece of evidence, the finding of some handwriting close to a Ripper murder scene, that was ordered to be wiped out by Sir Charles Warren, Met police commissioner, at the time of the investigation.

In 1974, the FBI formed its Behavioral Science Unit to investigate serial crimes following a number of major cases which hit the newspaper headlines at the time, including the notorious 'Son of Sam' killings in New York. One man at the forefront of establishing the unit was former FBI

supervisory special agent Roy Hazelwood, who served with the agency for 22 years and specialised in focusing on sexual crimes. Today he is affiliate professor of administrative justice at George Mason University.

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Mr Hazelwood said: “In my opinion profiling, which is the study of a crime and its behaviours in an attempt to arrive at an opinion about the characteristics and traits of an unidentified offender, is merely another tool in a criminal investigation. It is not the definitive answer to solving a crime or series of crimes, and a profile should not be prepared until all aspects of a major investigation have been completed.”

He also believes that the media, particularly television, has made the criminal profiler a type of super hero in the investigations of murder and rape. But, he added, the truth is that ‘investigations solve crimes, not criminal profilers’.

He says: “We are there to assist in getting the truth, but it is my firm belief that all other avenues of investigation, in other words good police work, should be tried first, including the examination of scenes of crime, toxicology reports, statements of potential witnesses, and so on. But I accept that profiling has its uses, indeed it is very important when you have an unidentified suspect in a series of crimes.

“However, I would not assist in a case until all major investigative work

has been carried out first. In some cases we have been asked to provide the profile of a possible suspect when there hasn't even been a complete scenario for us to work on. That is like being asked to identify a serial killer or rapist when there has been only one crime. How can you profile someone when there is not enough material evidence to work on? Criminal profiling is a tool, but it is certainly not the final answer.”

Professor Canter is the author of a number of books, including *Psychology of Offender Profiling and Criminal Shadows*, 1995.

Roy Hazelwood is the author of a number of articles on profiling and is co-author of a number of books on the subject, including, *Practical Aspects of Rape Investigation, Deviant and Criminal Sexuality* and *The Evil That Men Do*.

