

Can psychiatrists ever help to catch killers?

Mental profiles of criminals owe more to detective novels than real police work, **Simon Wessely** writes

Psychologists have a long-standing role in the criminal process, helping courts in evaluating the reliability of testimony, or helping witnesses to recall half-forgotten memories. But recently psychologists have become more directly involved in catching criminals by using what is known as "offender profiling".

The idea is not new — a psychologist produced profiles of Adolf Hitler during the war, and another took part in the hunt for the Boston Strangler. But it has now captured the public imagination and is soon to receive the ultimate accolade: Robbie Coltrane will play a police psychologist in *Cracker*, a new television series this autumn.

Offender profiling is based on the theory that criminals leave not only forensic clues, such as fingerprints, but behavioural clues. The way in which a crime has been committed can be analysed in relation to known behavioural patterns of similar offenders.

Using this method, a description — or profile — of the perpetrator's probable characteristics can be assembled.

In Britain, Professor David Canter of the University of Surrey, is the principal exponent of profiling, particularly since publicity he attracted for helping the police to catch John Duffy, who had been dubbed the "Railway Murderer". Despite this success, the usefulness of psychological profiles is still not established.

usually unavailable. Everything depends on the accuracy of the data recorded by the police at the crime scene, and on witness testimony. Both are notoriously fallible.

Profiling is also of most use if the offender has not only a criminal record, but also other more detailed information on file. If the perpetrator has no record, the task is almost impossible. It is no use the psychologist reporting that the possible criminal is male, tall, single, violent and living in south London, unless that data can be linked to

tween statistical inference and common sense.

One paper on profiling rapists noted that most operate in a familiar neighbourhood, and do not travel long distances to commit their crimes, presumably because they need to be familiar with the terrain and possible escape routes. The type of victim chosen may have some psychological links with someone important in the rapist's past. Both seem plausible, but hardly profound. Profiling research also suggests that rapists who force their victims to wash themselves after the attack may have some familiarity with forensic methods, and hence may have a police record.

In the Duffy case, Professor Canter suggested that the criminal may have had a background in martial arts, inferred from the manner in which he tied up his victims. He was correct — but was this based on statistical or psychological research?

Psychological research is valuable to the police. A detailed study of jailed rapists, carried out by Don Grubin and John Gunn, of the Institute of Psychiatry, involved interviews, psychological tests and extensive record searches. The results challenged many stereotypes. Rapists are not sex-starved lone males — most were involved in relationships with women when they offended. The results should be, and are, part of police training.



When psychiatrists are asked to assess the motives of an offender in custody, they can draw on a detailed interview with the suspect, discussions with relatives and school, hospital and social service records. Even then, assessing and interpreting motive is not easy.

The profiler is being asked to carry out a more difficult job in which the prime source of information (the offender) is

Series thriller: Coltrane plays a police psychologist

known criminals on file.

Neither can profiling be used to secure a conviction. No matter how brilliant the psychological detail, it can never replace normal police work — nor, to be fair, is that intended.

A more fundamental problem lies in the nature of psychological research itself, and the role of probability. Profiling is little more than the assembling of a database, and then, after statistical manoeuvres, the production of a list of probable characteristics that seem to go together. A 66 per cent chance that an offender has a certain attribute means there is a 33 per cent chance that he does not. There is thus a danger that the occasional investigation will be not helped, but misled. The ordeal of the six wrongly convicted of the Birmingham pub bombings began when they tested positive for explosives. What was forgotten was that the test indicated only an increased probability of handling explosives. The police, given what they were told was objective scientific evidence, were then convinced that they had the criminals, with tragic consequences.

There is a danger that offender profiling will possess some of the aura of laboratory scientific evidence, which can itself err. In practice, offender profiling hovers uneasily be-

ing. They can also be led into the computers used in major enquiries. But the research provides only general pointers and probabilities, and cannot be extrapolated to specific unsolved cases.

There are other reasons why profiling may work. Psychologists are called in for complex, unsolved enquiries, usually those in the public eye. The simple act of obtaining advice from a well-informed professional may help the police to take a fresh look at information they already have.

Lucy Taylor, of the Institute of Criminology, has suggested another benefit. As any psychologist or psychiatrist knows from personal experience, a big section of the public continues to believe that such people possess mystical abilities, such as being able to read the minds of others.

Overall, profiling owes more to a literary, not academic, source. I have not seen Mr Coltrane's performance as a police psychologist. However, I predict his character will have certain features. He will possess a broad knowledge and intuition. He will also have some character eccentricities, some unusual talents, and may not be the easiest of fellows. He will always get his man.

This is not a profile of any psychologist I know, but of the real father of offender profiling — Sherlock Holmes.

● *The author is senior lecturer in psychological medicine at the Institute of Psychiatry.*

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