profiling personal characteristics.

The profiling of someone’s personal characteristics is more commonly associated with offender profiling and is the practice most often portrayed in the media. The types of characteristics profiled (as shown in the media and in published reports of profiling) include demographic characteristics such as an offender’s gender, age, ethnicity, educational and employment history. This approach assumes that the way a crime is committed is related to the characteristics of the person, which enables the profiler to draw inferences about the characteristics of a criminal from the way in which he or she behaved during the crime.

The different approaches to this type of profiling can be broadly broken down into three categories. The first is what is known as statistical profiling. This approach aims to generate statistical relationships between actions displayed at crime scenes and offender characteristics and is carried out through the use of large-scale databases of solved crimes. For example, such researchers might find that 85 per cent of rapists that use a condom during a rape (e.g. to avoid leaving semen to be DNA tested) have previously had contact with law enforcement for their sexual offending, be that a conviction or just being arrested. When such a relationship has been established and validated, the statistical profiler can analyse the circumstances of an offence and, using these statistical relationships, can make probabilistic inferences about the likely characteristics of the offender responsible.

An alternative approach is clinical profiling. Clinical profilers, rather than using databases of offences, develop their inferences about an offender’s characteristics from their clinical experience of working with apprehended offenders. They are therefore acting in a similar way to statistical profilers, but their inferences are based on their own personal experience and, of course, rely on their accurate recollection of these. This approach to profiling has been criticized by advocates of statistical profiling. They argue that the profiles produced by clinical profilers could vary as a result of the individual nature of each clinical profiler’s experience.

Another approach to profiling is that of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States. On the basis of interviews with serial offenders, FBI profilers have developed typologies of offenders that are thought to differ in their offending behaviour and therefore in their characteristics. One such example is the distinction made between disorganized and organized murderers, and another, the four typologies of rapist: power reassurance, anger retaliation, power assertive and anger excitation. This approach has continued to develop with time, but other profilers have criticized the empirical basis of this approach because of the small number of offenders on which the typologies were initially developed. Also this approach relies on the accounts of apprehended offenders for the development of inferences. It is quite possible that apprehended offenders differ in the way they commit their offences from offenders who remain at large. It would be extremely hard to address this criticism due to the ethical difficulties and practicalities surrounding interviewing unapprehended offenders about their criminal histories.

Having considered this criticism, we now move on to consider the assumptions underlying the profiling of personal characteristics from crime scene behaviour.

the assumptions of offender profiling.

When profiling the characteristics of a person, the profiler is assuming that the behaviours shown at the crime scene are a result of the person’s characteristics rather than determined by the situation. It is quite clear that this cannot be entirely the case: in some types of crime the involvement of another person, such as the victim, will mean that the offender will also to an extent be reacting to this person’s behaviour. However, to successfully profile personal characteristics from crime scene behaviour there would have to be some elements of the crime scene behaviour that are more indicative of the person than of the situation. One task for researchers of offender profiling is to determine which behaviours these are.

There must therefore be stable relationships between characteristics and behaviour for profiling to work. Typically, the types of characteristics described in an offender profile are demographic. In such situations the profiler is therefore assuming a relationship between behaviour and demographic characteristics. Some researchers have queried whether an offender’s demographic characteristics would influence their behaviour and have questioned their inclusion in offender profiles. Instead, as suggested by personality psychologists, it is more likely that a person’s thoughts, goals, emotions and past experiences will affect their behaviour in a situation. Offender profiles that infer how a criminal will perceive situations or infer his or her likely past experiences might therefore be more valid than those inferring demographic characteristics. However, it is questionable how useful such information would be to the police.

An offender profiler making inferences from crime scene behaviour as to how the offender might behave in their daily lives is assuming the existence of stable relationships between characteristics and behaviour. Assuming a degree of behavioural consistency across situations is termed ‘cross- situational consistency’.

If it is being assumed that offenders’ characteristics will influence the way they behave during a crime, then it follows that this should be the case across all their crimes. In other words offenders will, to some extent, be consistent in the way they behave across crimes of the same type. Professor Canter called this the ‘offender consistency hypothesis’ which has its roots in personality psychology. Consistency across crimes is a special case of cross-situational consistency.

In addition to assuming consistency across crimes, if it is believed that certain crime scene behaviours are related to certain offender characteristics, then it follows that offenders displaying similar crime scene behaviours should have similar characteristics. This has been termed the ‘homology assumption’.

Researchers from personality psychology have spent a great deal of time investigating the validity of some of these assumptions and criminal psychologists have also begun to test them empirically. Their findings are reported in the next section.

As noted above, there are three assumptions that underlie the practice of offender profiling. Some have been adapted from personality psychology, others relate directly to this particular criminal psychology practice. These are now explained in turn and the evidence supporting their validity outlined.

cross-situational consistency.

The study of behavioural consistency, including cross-situational consistency, has been a focus for personality and social psychologists for decades. However, none of this previous research on cross-situational consistency considered criminal behaviour.

Whether offenders show similarity between the way they behave during their crimes and the way they behave in noncriminal situations is a question that has yet to be researched in criminal psychology. However, some studies in the personality psychology literature seem promising. Some recent research has found that the more psychologically similar the situations being compared, the greater the behavioural consistency observed. This has been demonstrated with aggressive behaviour, which could be considered closer to criminal behaviour than other types of behaviour psychologists have investigated.

Researchers of personality psychology have explained that psychological similarity relates to what a situation means to us and what feelings, thoughts, expectations or goals it triggers. The psychological similarity of situations is increasingly recognized as an important factor in determining the likely degree of behavioural consistency. However, how someone interprets a situation is likely to be quite idiosyncratic, depending on their own cognitive abilities and past experiences. (You might be able to think of a situation where you have interpreted someone’s behaviour in a way which was different from a friend’s interpretation.)

the offender consistency hypothesis.

The assumption of consistency across crimes appears to be faring well. This may be because an offender’s crimes represent psychologically similar situations. Psychologists studying non- criminal behaviour have suggested that some types of behaviour show more consistency than others. Essentially, research has suggested that behaviour generated by the individual shows greater consistency than behaviour elicited by the environment. The former is viewed as self-generated, reflecting personal goals and desires, and involves acting on the environment. Such behaviours are therefore hypothesized as relating to the psychology of the individual.

From these findings, it seems quite logical to hypothesize that criminal behaviour, which could be considered need or desire driven, would show consistency. It could also be hypothesized that more interpersonal types of crime would show less consistency, because the additional environmental stimulus of victims or witnesses introduces more potential for variability.

Criminal psychologists have only recently started to investigate whether criminals are consistent in their offending behaviour. The types of crime that have been investigated include arson, stranger sexual assaults, commercial and residential burglary, commercial robbery and murder. Although the number of studies conducted is small and hence the findings are far from conclusive, so far the research supports the assumption that offenders show a degree of consistency in their offending behaviour. As with research into non-criminal populations, what is also evident is that consistency varies depending on the type of behaviour being observed. In the studies conducted so far, behaviours relating to distance travelled to commit crimes and controlling the victim show the greatest consistency.