the homology assumption.

The question of whether offenders who behave in a similar manner during their crimes also share similar demographic characteristics has been examined using a sample of stranger rapists, but the study found no evidence to support this.

Having now considered the three assumptions that underpin the practice of offender profiling, it is clearly of concern that thus far it is only the offender consistency hypothesis that shows evidence of sound empirical support. Despite this, much more research would need to be conducted before concluding that the theoretical basis for offender profiling is unsound. In the next section we move on from the assumptions of offender profiling to consider the research that has evaluated the actual practice of offender profiling.

evaluations of offender profiling in practice.

In the published literature and on the Internet it is easy to find case studies of successful applications of offender profiling to real criminal investigations. At face value this is indeed good news. However, when reading such reports it is important to remember that the successful cases are those most likely to be publicized. While it is very positive that profiling has been successful in specific cases it is important for the acceptance of profiling as a scientific practice that its effectiveness is demonstrated through empirical research.

Some empirical evaluations of offender profiling have been conducted and these will be briefly mentioned here. Two studies attempted to profile stranger rapists’ criminal histories from their crime scene behaviour and both reported some limited success. A study that tried to predict the characteristics of burglars from their crime scene behaviour also achieved some success in predicting characteristics such as offender demographics (e.g. age) and previous criminal history. These studies have searched for relationships between offender characteristics and actions at the behavioural level. Other recent studies have investigated such relationships at a thematic level: themes that describe the actual behaviours, for example, pseudo-intimate behaviours, are developed. Unfortunately, the findings are modest with a few associations being found between behavioural themes and previous criminal histories. It is possible that stronger associations between characteristics and behaviour would be found were more personality related factors investigated.

As well as actually testing whether profiling is possible, some researchers have conducted consumer satisfaction surveys, asking the users of offender profiles to rate their usefulness. In Britain, Gary Copson found that over seventy-five per cent of the police officers questioned found the profilers’ advice useful. This was mainly, they said, because it increased their understanding of the offender or supported their perceptions of the offence/offender. However, only three per cent said the advice had helped identify the actual offender. (Fifty-seven per cent of the cases had been solved.) Most of the police officers did say that they would seek the advice of a profiler again.

A similar study was conducted in the Netherlands, where only six profiles existed which could be assessed. In contrast to the British study, the feedback from the police officers was negative. Most complained that the advice in the profile was too general or was not practical given the resources the officers had available to them. Some indicated that the profiler’s advice was ignored because it did not match their own opinions. These findings cannot be given too much weight, however, since they are based on a very small sample of officers.

As well as measuring satisfaction, the British study assessed the accuracy of the profilers’ advice. This was done with a sub-sample of cases since only fifty-seven per cent had been solved. The comments made by the profiler were assessed against what was known about the apprehended offender. Of the comments made in these profiles, only a third could be verified. On average, approximately two comments were correct for every comment that was incorrect. Clinical profilers were more accurate than statistical profilers with seventy-nine per cent of their verifiable comments being correct. On the face of things this seems very positive, but this figure also means that twenty-one per cent of the advice given was incorrect and could have potentially misled an investigation.

case linkage.

In this section we consider a less publicized way in which criminal psychology can aid police investigations case linkage. Case link- age refers to the identification of offences believed to be commit- ted by the same offender based on their behavioural similarity. This practice, like offender profiling, is known by other names including comparative case analysis and linkage analysis. In contrast to offender profiling case linkage is more widely practised, although little has been reported about it in the popular media. In research terms, it has not received the same degree of attention as offender profiling. While the first study to consider whether crime series could be identified through their behavioural similarity was published in 1976, it is only since 2001 that it has been researched with any fervour.

As we saw above, offender profiling is typically conducted by consulting psychologists, whereas police personnel such as crime analysts usually conduct case linkage. While it is often used in the investigation of serious crimes, such as stranger sex offences and murder, case linkage is also applied to volume crime such as robbery and burglary. The police can use it for several purposes. First, it can increase the efficiency of police investigations, allowing police officers to work together and combine their investigative efforts and resources. Second, it can and has been used as similar fact evidence in Court (which relates to the issue of whether several crimes were perpetrated by the same person).

Case linkage has also been applied to the historical and infamous case of Jack the Ripper in an attempt to determine how many of the Whitechapel murders this mysterious character committed.

This case study illustrates some of the key processes involved in case linkage: the crime analyst must consider the similarities and differences between each pair of crimes in order to assess the likelihood of their being linked. The researchers analysing the Whitechapel murders also considered the rarity of the behaviours displayed in the murders. This is an important step in the case linkage process. While there might be obvious similarities between a pair of crimes if the shared behaviours commonly occur, this does not strongly suggest that the crimes were committed by the same person. Because we may have misconceptions about which behaviours are a rare or common occurrence for a type of crime it is important to work this out statistically by consulting databases of crimes.

As with offender profiling, if case linkage is to be considered a scientific practice it is important that it has a sound theoretical basis. It is to the psychological assumptions of case linkage that we now turn.

CASE STUDY.

Linking the crimes of Jack the Ripper.

In the late nineteenth century in London, eleven women were murdered in an area called Whitechapel. At the time this was an area of poverty and disease and the gruesome murders caused great fear among the local people. The murders occurred at night, most outside on the streets of Whitechapel although one occurred inside a house in the area. The man thought responsible for these murders has never been identified but has been given the name Jack the Ripper.

There has been a great deal of speculation about the true identity of the murderer. A quick web search indicates this, resulting in numerous web pages where you can find details about the various suspects. How many of the eleven murders can be attributed to Jack the Ripper has also been debated.

Recently, academics from the University of Washington and Sam Houston State University, in the US, have tried to answer this question by analysing the newly released police files on these murders. Through focusing on the behaviours of the perpetrator(s) the researchers linked six of the eleven murders together based on the similarity of behaviour. The careful planning that had gone into them, the extensive cutting of the victims, the mutilation of the victims’ bodies, and the posing of their bodies in sexually degrading manners in preparation for their discovery, were highlighted as the consistent and distinctive features. Such behaviours were not apparent in the other five murders that occurred in the Whitechapel area at that time. On comparing this collection of behaviours to a database of US murders, the specific combination of behaviours displayed in these six murders was found to be very rare and hence the researchers concluded that six of the eleven murders could be attributed to Jack the Ripper with some confidence.

assumptions of case linkage.

The theoretical grounding of the practice of case linkage comes from personality psychology. To be able to identify a series of offences committed by the same offender based on the behaviour displayed requires the offender to be consistent in his or her offending behaviour. Case linkage, like offender profiling, therefore rests on the Offender Consistency Hypothesis. As noted above, the evidence supporting this assumption is growing.

In addition, case linkage assumes that offenders’ offending behaviour will be distinctive from one another’s. (If all offenders were consistent in their behaviour but in the same way it would be impossible to distinguish one offender’s crimes from another offender’s crimes.) To test this second criterion for case linkage, researchers have tried statistically to distinguish pairs of crimes committed by the same offender (linked pairs) from pairs of crimes committed by different offenders (unlinked pairs). Samples of linked offences have been developed by sampling the offences of serial offenders. ‘Linked’ offences are therefore those that are known to have been committed by the same offender, usually as a result of conviction. (Clearly there is potential for error with this indicator).

Researchers using various statistical techniques have investigated whether linked pairs could be differentiated from unlinked pairs based on measures of behavioural similarity. In all studies conducted thus far this goal has been achieved. The research has also striven to identify whether linked and unlinked offences can be differentiated using similarity in certain behaviours compared to other behaviours. Similarity in behaviours related to controlling the victim/witnesses and the distance travelled to commit crimes have performed better as predictors of linkage than variables relating to how the target was selected, the planning of the offence or the property stolen.

As noted above, one common limitation of offender profiling techniques is that the relationships between offender behaviours and offender characteristics have been developed from samples of known offenders. This is also a limitation of the research for case linkage.

evaluations of the practice of case linkage.

Research into case linkage is really only just beginning, which is surprising since it is widely practised and has been for some time. While no studies have examined its effectiveness prospectively, and no consumer satisfaction surveys have been completed, one study looked at the decision-making of investigators conducting case linkage. Four groups of participants were asked to try and identify which of fifteen car crimes belonged to which of five offenders (each offender had committed three car crimes). They were then asked to repeat this task with a different set of fifteen car crimes belonging to five other offenders. All participants were provided with the police crime reports and maps of the relevant crime scenes. One group consisted of experienced car crime investigators, another of experienced investigators of another type of crime, the third group consisted of inexperienced investigators, and a fourth of naïve/lay people. During the linking task participants were asked to articulate the decisions they were making and they were also later questioned on this topic. The naïve group was significantly less accurate at linking than the other three groups who did not differ from each other.

In relation to the information processed, the experienced car- crime investigators focused on a smaller number of variables for linkage than the other groups. On examining which variables were associated with the correct linking of cases and which were associated with incorrect linking, more context-dependent variables resulted in less accuracy (e.g. property taken). In contrast, the use of behaviours that could be considered more inherent to the offender, such as type of vehicle targeted and time of taking, was associated with more accurate linkage.

Conclusions.

Criminal psychology is an exciting field in which to research and work. Offender profiling in particular has captured the interest of the public and students of criminal psychology alike. In contrast to its portrayal in the popular media, it is a field in its infancy which still requires a lot of development, particularly in relation to establishing a solid theoretical base and evaluating its effectiveness in a methodologically rigorous way. Similarly, while case linkage has also received research attention it is a developing field and one that perhaps does not lend itself as well to exciting dramatization: hence its absence from popular media. Research to test its assumptions is showing promising results. However, practitioners of offender profiling and case linkage should proceed with caution until further research is conducted.