Fishing the Science Out of the Hype in Criminal and Behavioral Profiling

A Review of

*Criminal and Behavioral Profiling*

by Curt R. Bartol and Anne M. Bartol


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Reviewed by

Troy W. Ertelt, Kristin E. Matson

The word *profiling* evokes a variety of heated and controversial reactions. On one hand, profiling can bring up images of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents poring over crime scene photographs and creating a description of an offender in extreme detail. Perhaps the most well-known depiction in this vein is the dramatization of the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit in the film *Silence of the Lambs*. Popular television programs such as *Profiler* and *Criminal Minds* suggest that individuals trained in profiling can determine unique and discreet information about an offender, such as age and employment, by the type and location of the crime and the victim.

On a recent episode of the television show *Criminal Minds* (Davis, Harrison, & Alcala, 2014), the profiling team is called to consult on a case in which women are discovered murdered with ligature marks on their necks and wrapped in shower curtains. On the basis of this evidence, the team determines that the ligature marks mean the offender kills out of rage and that the lack of sexual assault suggests that the offender is impotent, making the murder itself sexually gratifying. They also suggest that the victims are wrapped in shower curtains because the offender feels remorse for the murders. Of course, this televised depiction is far from reality, even for those who have made a career in criminal profiling.

The previously described episode presents a fast-paced, adrenaline-filled career; however, profiling as a profession is surrounded by lack of regulation, confusion regarding duties, and controversy over the scientific evidence of its effectiveness (Winerman, 2004). In *Criminal and Behavioral Profiling*, Curt Bartol and Anne Bartol provide an in-depth account of both the historical underpinnings of criminal psychological profiling and the current evidence questioning its validity as a practice.

The book begins, like many others on this topic, with an account of James Brussel’s profile of George “Mad Bomber” Metesky in 1956. However, unlike many other texts on psychological profiling, Bartol and Bartol give ample space to the controversy of profiling and the problems inherent with the practice, with specific mention given to the work of
David Canter and colleagues. They present current research that suggests that typologies are limited in usefulness and that forensic classification in general is fallible due to the significant amount of individual variance that each offender brings to a crime scene.

The authors also present the concern that criminal profiling does not provide significant incremental validity related to other measures taken by law enforcement to solve a crime (i.e., interrogation and investigation). However, the book does explain how the field of psychology’s reliance on statistical measures has influenced profiling practitioners to take a more scientific approach to creating a profile, such as accounting for base-rate information (see Silver, 2012, and Gigerenzer, 2003 for plain-language discussions about explanations of the base rate problem) and confirmation bias (see Kassin, Dror, & Kukucka, 2013, for a discussion of confirmation bias in forensic psychology) when interpreting crime scene data.

A second common image that surrounds the word profiling involves Transportation Security Administration (TSA) or law enforcement officers observing and detaining an individual based on the notion that specific behaviors and personal characteristics indicate a greater threat to the public. A recent review of the TSA’s behavior detection program indicated that the roughly one billion dollars spent in training TSA officers to read body language cues that could indicate a security threat resulted in a relative shortfall of measureable success, with less than 1 percent of the 30,000 “suspicious” passengers necessitating arrest and none of the arrests being linked to any terroristic threats (Tierney, 2014).

Similarly, the colloquially known “stop-and-frisk” laws in cities such as New York City have led to the outcry that law enforcement is using racial profiling as a justification of unlawfully searching an overwhelmingly large group of African American and Latino individuals (Weiser & Goldstein, 2014). Although Bartol and Bartol do not take a side on either of these controversial topics, they do appropriately present the empirical basis for these programs, as well as the empirical evidence suggesting their misuse.

In general, Bartol and Bartol present an empirically supported account of both the benefits and the concerns of profiling while still including the exciting historical tales of profiling success that can entice many to pick up a book on this topic in the first place. Criminal and Behavioral Profiling will temper the needs of both the eager young criminologist and the cynical statistics professor.

The text should be useful for professionals in forensic psychological practice (especially the expanded discussion of psychological autopsies) or legal psychology research as well as advanced students with an interest in the area. The material in the text is clearly written, directed toward trained consumers of research, and would likely not meet the needs of general readers. The authors present readers with the necessary information to come to their own conclusions about the validity and efficacy of profiling programs, without pushing an agenda in the process. Although profiling will likely remain a widely used practice, Bartol and Bartol arm their readers with the knowledge necessary to determine whether they want to join the ranks of the elusive profession of profiling.
References


