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## Profiling to Screen Non-Immigrant Visa Applicants: The Best and the Worst of Applied Social Science?

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Abstract. This article identifies some significant Issues for the applications of profiling and highlights the example of screening non-immigrant visa applicants. Some of these Issues may be related to conscious and unconscious biases, including those towards race, ethnicity, and culture.

The development of physical, environmental, social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological indicators that are associated with, allegedly cause, or help predict problematic social behavior is often called profiling. As described previously in IBPP, the indicators are developed through combinations of conceptual, empirical, and experimental analysis. Most problematically, even if indicators allow one to identify those who have, are, or will commit problematic social behavior more often than without the indicators--suggesting a higher sensitivity and a true positive rate--these same indicators usually are accompanied by very large rates of erroneously identifying others as problematic--suggesting a lower specificity and a higher false positive rate. (As an example, one might claim that a profiling system allows one to identify 20% more problematic individuals, but one may also be forced to claim that the same profiling system is associated with falsely suspecting 90% more individuals.) Moreover, without an ongoing intelligence capability to continually assess the various reliabilities and validities of the indicators, the true estimates of true and false positives eventually become unknowable. In addition, given that the very notion of problematic social behavior changes with time, the whole enterprise of profiling can become an exercise in delusional thinking that may have devastating effects not only on the delusional, i.e., the developers, implementers, and policymakers supporting a profiling system, but on their victims as well. (Much as with detractors of the scientific legitimacy of the polygraph, some analysts might posit that a publicly announced policy of instituting a profiling system will have a deterrent effect on problematic social behavior by anyone who believes in that system's reliability and validity.)

With the significant challenges described above and the concurrent United States Government (USG) policy demand to staunch the flow of illegal immigrants and political attractiveness of nativist posturing, one should not be surprised at a report in The New York Times concerning the profiling system supporting denials of non-immigrant visas allegedly employed by the United States (U.S.) consulate in Sao Paolo, Brazil. Indicators allegedly related to the degree of risk that individuals might exploit their visa status in the US--and thus merit a denial of a visa request--have included skin color (dark is suggestive of high visa risk), ethnic background (a Korean or Chinese look or last name is suggestive of past visa fraud), clothing apparel, jewelry, place of birth (from towns "known for fraud"), and subjective impressions, e.g., "slimy looking," "looks tough," or "looks poor." A U.S. District Court Judge has termed this profiling system as "illegal"--a violation of Federal immigration law. (IBPP notes that the Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs continues to state that nothing illegal has occurred.)

Profiling can be a valuable adjunct to the development and implementation of many social policies. However, it also can exemplify the most insidious aspects of social science history, viz., exclusion of certain social groups--of racial, gender, ethnic, national, and sexual orientation identities--from full human, civil, or civic rights. Those guilty within the social sciences might include a psychometrician

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advancing a political ideology, a political analyst developing a scientific schema, or a political functionary advancing an ideology or satisfying the exacting task of fairly hearing individual cases through ethnocentric and idiosyncratic heuristics. Unfortunately, the self-styled righteous and patriotic can be the most egregious reinforcers of the image of the Ugly American. (See Aviation terrorism: The development of terrorist profiles. *IBPP*, 1(12); Blackburn, R. (1971). Personality types among abnormal homicides. *British Journal of Criminology*, 11, 14-31; Critiquing critiques of profiling in aviation security screening programs: Why the ACLU has it wrong. *IBPP*, 4(1); Landau, S.F. (1975). Pathologies among homicide offenders: Some cultural profiles. *British Journal of Criminology*, 15, 157-166; Ryan, M. (January 28, 1998). Letter to the editor. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Shenon, P. (January 23, 1998.) State Department illegally denying visas, judge says. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Sreenivisan, S., Kirkish, P., Eth, S., Mintz, J., et al. (1997). Predictors of recidivistic violence in criminally insane and civilly committed psychiatric inpatients. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 20, 279-291; White, J.M., & Jones, R. M. (1996). Identity styles of male inmates. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 23, 490-504; Young, G.L. (1991). The role of stereotyping in the development and implementation of the DEA drug courier profiles. *Law and Psychology Review*, 15, 331-350.) (Keywords: Profiling, Typology..)