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The Black and White of Profiling: Sniping on the Sniper Case

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Abstract. This article analyzes the construct of profiling in the aftermath of the arrest of two suspects in the recent sniper attacks perpetrated in the greater Washington, D.C. area.

The construct of profiling can denote the development of a combination of characteristics that are more likely to be possessed or manifested by an individual or group of people than other individuals or groups. The individual group of interest may be constructed through non-behavioral characteristics: e.g., age, geographical origins, ethnic or racial identification, or ideology, or behavioral ones: e.g., accountants, murderers, vegetarians, or cannibals. Once an individual or group of interest is constructed, then yet another set of characteristics, those associated with the construct of profiling as opposed to those intrinsic to constructing the individual or group to be profiled, is constructed.

The characteristics developed through profiling are sometimes assumed to be causal agents leading to becoming the individual or group of people that has been constructed. This is especially the case when the constructed individual or group is based on behavioral characteristics and salient questions include why the behavior occurs and how the behavior can be stopped, increased, or otherwise modified. At other times, the profile of an individual or group is developed to identify members of the constructed individual or group who are purposely attempting to remain unidentified as that individual or group. For this latter case, law enforcement and intelligence officers are often the most common profiling consumers.

So, how are the characteristics that become an individual or group profile constructed? One method is to use reason and logic and assume a rationalist stance, i.e., embrace a belief that reason and logic can be the royal road to the Truth of profile development. The problem with this method is that one person's reason and logic is another person's unreason and illogic. The manifestation of this problem can be exemplified when one profiler's conception of pieces of information that seem to go or not go together is (through reason and logic) countered by another profiler's conception.

Another method is to use faith and authority and assume an other-directed stance. In this case, an individual or group must obviously be associated with a set of characteristics because they obviously must be. The obviousness is founded on the assumed credibility and wisdom of some source, e.g., a profiling book about some individual or group of interest, God, a religious text, or a talking head on national television. Problems with this method include the fallibility of sources assumed to be infallible, the difficulty in interpreting sources assumed to be infallible, and the difficulty in achieving an optimal communication experience with some infallible sources, e.g., God or the talking head.

Yet another method of profiling is to depend on empiricism and experimentalism. With varying degrees of controlled and systematic observation and statistical analysis, these profilers provide mean, median, and/or modal sets of characteristics for various individuals or groups of interest. Problems with this method include error-prone sensory and perceptual abilities; inappropriate cognitive heuristics; incomplete sets of data; and magical beliefs concerning the assumptions, power, and meaning of inferential statistics.

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It should also be noted that rarely do or can profilers rely only on one profiling method. Empiricists use reason and logic. Espousers of faith award faith to statistics and/or reason and logic.

With the above primer on profiling, one might now consider the many profilers who were publicly associated with the recent sniper attacks in the greater Washington, D.C. area.

First, the construct of profiling was attributed a sense of certainty by some profilers and their official, e.g., law enforcement officers, and unofficial, e.g., television viewers, consumers. Such a sense of certainty should have been unwarranted given the vulnerabilities of profiling's epistemological underpinnings. This sense of certainty also was nurtured by a magical sense that the world is essentially predictable and nonrandom and that one can easily enough know where, when, why, how, or for whom or what to look. As an example, many mass media representatives and law enforcement officers were looking for the "right profile," as if such a perfect snapshot of reality makes epistemological sense. As a consequence, dueling experts engaged in "trotting out their stuff" and vying for the prize of Truth.

Second, the construct of profiling, when attributed not to a sense of certainty but of likelihood, was still often misconstrued as a functional certainty by profiling consumers. As but one example, a mean, median, or modal perspective was taken as what to look for. As an example and consequence, white people, a politically correct group of alleged perpetrators, were largely assumed as perpetrators as opposed to a politically incorrect notion of a politically correct constructed group, viz., people of color. Here, white people are most represented in a frequency count of serial murderers even if per capita racial and ethnic estimates are more murky because, seemingly, all criminal justice systems function as if some racial, ethnic, and class victims warrant less investigation than others. (As another example and consequence of likelihood assumptions, one person was commonly being looked for as opposed to two or more.)

Third, the psychological and social transformational properties of profiling often were ignored by some profiling consumers. The communication of profiling data can influence the very reliability and validity of the profile, i.e., public information can affect private and public intrapsychic and behavioral functioning related to violence. The two main examples of this include the induction of a reactance leading to a member or members of a profiled group behave contrary to a significantly valid profile and the induction of identification, introjection, internalization, and various compliance phenomena with violence leading to an inflated profiling validity estimate. Such transformational properties can affect how the past is interpreted for matters relevant to the present profiling task, how reliable and valid present profiling turns out to be, and the incidence and prevalence of characteristics that will be associated, causally or otherwise, with future non-behavioral and behavioral characteristics of interest. Perhaps, sleeping in an automobile without an adequate mass media source generating transformational phenomena was a saving grace for law enforcement and intelligence officers in the sniping case.

Fourth, the potential material and other instrumental benefits of being identified as a profiler may have mitigated against and may continue to mitigate against the notion that profiling is anything more than a ?big business.? This paradoxical consequence may be founded on a functional and incestuous relationship between people who cry out to be profiled and the profilers crying out to meet the cry.

For now, the recent sniping case is largely closed. An associated public discourse on profiling may open up but remain within a closed conceptual container. (See Alison, L., Bennell, C., Mokros, A., & Ormerod,

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D. (2002). The personality paradox in offender profiling: A theoretical review of the processes involved in deriving background characteristics from crime scene actions. *Psychology, Public Policy, & Law*, 8, 115-135; Kocsis, R. N., Cooksey, R. W., & Irwin, H. J. (2002). Psychological profiling of sexual murders: An empirical model. *International Journal of Offender Therapy & Comparative Criminology*, 46, 532-554; Palermo, G. B. (2002). Criminal profiling: The uniqueness of the killer. *International Journal of Offender Therapy & Comparative Criminology*, 46, 383-385; Post, J.M. (2002). Ethical considerations in psychiatric profiling of political figures. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 25, 635-646.) (Keywords: Profiling, Sniping.)