

8-4-2010

The Profiler's Story

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2010) "The Profiler's Story," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 22 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol16/iss22/1>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Profiler's Story

Author: Editor

Volume: 16

Issue: 22

Date: 2010-08-04

Keywords: Profiling

Abstract: Courtesy of commercial television, we better be good. Or else the profilers will get us. It turns out that applied science and its sidekicks intuition and psychism (what psychics do) have our number. One step out of line and our number will be called, and we'll be served our due comeuppance and just desserts. But is profiling more dessert or desert—or upon close inspection fated to desert us as a valuable tool in deterring or identifying perpetrators of egregious misbehavior? This article describes some implicit assumptions—as contradictory and interdependent as some may be—on which profiling often rests. For these purposes, profiling is defined as applying information presumed to be characteristic of a behavior for the purpose of deterring or identifying perpetrators of that behavior. Where will this profile on profiling lead?

Here's how profiling seems to begin and may have begun. Through analysis of a behavior—e.g., murder, espionage, extortion—some information seems to be present or absent with said behavior more often than not. The former will be presumed characteristic of the behavior's occurrence and more associated with the behavior's perpetrator. The latter will be presumed characteristic of the behavior's nonoccurrence and more associated with individuals who are not perpetrators. There are no necessary or sufficient suppositions that the information has any causal relevance to the behavior. Only a correlational relationship between the information and a behavior's occurrence or nonoccurrence is presumed.

There's a problem with this approach. The profiler is left with deciding how big the correlation needs to be for use in a specific case. Or in percentage terms, does the information need to be present or absent 100% of the time to be used in deterring or identifying the perpetrator? 90%? Less? What's the tipping point? Even with a 99% estimate, 1% of the relevant population may be mishandled—either treated as guilty when innocent or innocent when guilty. Depending on the size of the population to which the estimate is applied, the 1% can add up to a huge amount of people. And complexities abound when it is realized that the information associated with the behavior also is associated with many other kinds of behaviors each of which may be somehow related to the behavior in question.

So, the profiler then takes a step towards causal hypothesis. At this point, the information is assumed to be linked to the behavior not just statistically, but also as to what Aristotle might have termed efficient cause. That is, the very presence of the information ineluctably leads to the behavior because of some putative mechanism that is then explained. For example, it might be the case that 80% of murderers are angry when they kill. This would be a statistical association. The causal hypothesis might be that anger ineluctably leads to murder if the victim is the object of anger. The problem still remains that there are murderers who are not angry at the time of the murder, and there are angry people who don't murder whom they're angry at.

So, the profiler takes the next step towards narrative construction. In essence, the profiler develops a story which includes correlational and assumed causal linkages. If the story works, the alleged perpetrator becomes the perpetrator according to formal social authorities with decision-making power including the power to punish—at least within a representative democracy. (In totalitarian societies, the

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

need for a story to ‘work’ is still present as validated by 20th century Communist show trials and the briefest of summations before summary executions beyond the Communist world.) For the story to work, combinations of fact and fiction are used to weave that which is compelling—be it tragedy, satire, farce, epic, comedy, and the like. Does it feel right? Does it make sense? Is there enough evidence to support the story? Often enough, are the powers-that-be satisfied that their power is increased, maintained, or at least not unduly disrupted? The effective profiler becomes, ultimately, a rhetorician who successfully influences and a semiotician who successfully ascribes meanings to a story as a whole and its parts. The profiler constitutes the Word.

That the profiler is, well, profiled as someone who can break the code and read it is a story all its own. There may well be no code to break. Or the code may be transient and only partially breakable. Predictability, order, determinism, randomness, the hypothesis of other minds as well as our own, subjectivity as agency and as object to another subject, and other epistemological constructs are story-making devices. As in stand-up comedy, slam poetry, or classical recitation, the competition between and among profilers is not to find the truth but to win.

Implications for the education and training of the profiler? Statistics and statistical analyses of databases on behaviors of interest. Epistemological tactics and strategies including deductive and inductive logic. Scientific thought processes and the philosophy of science. Somewhat farther afield, approaches to interpretation and meaning of text taken from hermeneutics and from literary criticism. The study of stories from analysis of cultural products—e.g., film, poetry, novels, sculpture, painting. Historiography, in that the profiler is an historian who develops a story of the past.

And to the mindset of the profiler? Certainly the rigorous and objective data hound who sniffs the trail that data sets. But how about the mystic attuned to trance? The intuitionist attuned with the stars? Perhaps, the profiler also is a poet. Maybe the French poet Arthur Rimbaud was on to something in his letter to Georges Izambard in 1871: “ Je veux être poète, et je travaille à me rendre voyant : vous ne comprendrez pas du tout, et je ne saurais presque vous expliquer. Il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens. Les souffrances sont énormes, mais il faut être fort, être né poète, et je me suis reconnu poète.” (My paraphrase of this is Rimbaud writing that he wishes to be a poet and a visionary and a seer and how he struggles to do this cannot be completely understood or communicated. But to arrive at the unknown, it’s necessary to disorder and derange all his senses. This causes suffering and pain but of this will come the birth he craves.). Is this the to-hell-and-back described by Homer’s Iliad and Dante’s Inferno, timeless truth-tellers and winners?

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Keywords: Profiling