Chapter 3: Nomothetic Methods of Criminal Profiling

SUMMARY
There are two main ways of viewing the application of logic to the development of scientific knowledge. The first takes the position that facts, appropriately shaped and organized, will show their connections to one another. These facts, under this system, are assumed to be evidence of truths and are separate from the desires of those examining them. Within this form of logic, it is believed that one should observe the facts and not taint them by forming hypotheses that go beyond the observable. In the second system, it is believed that science requires us to impose our own hypotheses and theories on a given set of facts such that they have meaning.

This text aligns more closely with the second view—that is, that the study of criminal behavior and the search for patterns is a directed one. As such, it is the job of the criminal profiler to draw on knowledge of how people think and act and to apply this in a meaningful way to theories based on the factual elements of a case. However, this knowledge of crime and criminal behavior is only useful in that it helps the profiler to develop theories about a given case and that these theories are just the start of the profiler’s work. Only through systematic and repeated testing do these theories become meaningful, and only when an attempt to disprove a particular theory has been fruitful do we come closer to discovering the meaning behind an act or behavior. Unfortunately, the application of the scientific method to the field of profiling has proved elusive, even to many practicing profilers.

Idiographic versus Nomothetic Study
The application of the scientific method creates the two different types of knowledge: idiographic and nomothetic. Idiographic knowledge refers to the study of the concrete—that is, the examination of individuals and the actual qualities of those individuals. Nomothetic (group) study results in knowledge about the characteristics of groups, which is not only useful but necessary when trying to define groups, solve group-related problems, or generate initial theories about issues in specific cases. Nomothetic offender profiles, therefore, are characteristics developed by studying groups of offenders. Furthermore, nomothetic profiles represent an average, or abstract.

Profiling methods are either idiographic or nomothetic in their application. An idiographic method concerns itself with the particulars of a given case and to determining the specific features of that case. A nomothetic method, on the other hand, examines general trend data—usually in the form of averages—to develop a generic picture of the current crime. A nomothetic profile is abstract in this respect, meaning that it contains elements that may or may not apply to the current case, only that the elements contained within the profile are probabilistic or likely. It is problematic when nomothetic methods are used to overstate a certainty or offer conclusive interpretations about what happened.

Nomothetic Profiling and Nomothetic Profilers
Nomothetic or group study results in knowledge about the characteristics of groups. This is useful not only for defining groups but for solving group-related problems or for generating theories that may be tested with the scientific method about a specific case. By extension, nomothetic criminal profiles offer characteristics by studying
Further, nomothetic profiles represent an abstract—that is, they do not define the characteristics of an actual offender walking around in the real world. They are theories and possibilities about what may be true. A nomothetic profiler therefore is someone who employs nomothetic knowledge about different types of criminal and groups of criminals.

There are a number of different types of nomothetic profiling methods, including criminal investigative analysis (CIA), diagnostic evaluations (DE), investigative psychology (IP), and geographic profiling. The idiographic method of criminal profiling, behavioral evidence analysis, is discussed in the next chapter.

Criminal Investigative Analysis
The profiling method used by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), criminal investigative analysis, is the most commonly known nomothetic method of criminal profiling. At its core is the widely used organized/disorganized typology, based on the FBI’s Criminal Profiling Project, a study of 36 incarcerated offenders and their 118 respective victims conducted between 1979 and 1983. Despite its notoriety and use by law enforcement, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its methods have been widely debunked in the published literature as lacking accuracy, efficacy, and utility.

In practice, FBI profilers now refer to themselves as criminal investigative analysts or criminal behavioral analysts, while they refer to their profiling method as criminal investigative analysis or crime scene analysis. Interestingly, when questioned under oath, these profilers state that they aren’t profilers at all and that what they are doing isn’t profiling.

The CIA is nomothetic because it is built primarily on the study of groups or, to be more accurate, the study of one group. This method arose primarily from the FBI’s Criminal Profiling Project, mentioned earlier. The goal of this research was to see if there were differences between offenders and offenses that may be useful in classifying future offenders and offenses. Although the terminology was in use before this study was conducted, its use in this case is most often viewed as the beginning of the organized/disorganized dichotomy.

The application of this dichotomy is relatively simple. The profiler starts by classifying the crime scene as organized or disorganized, which leads to the offender being classified as organized or disorganized. An organized crime scene is one in which there is evidence of planning, where the victim is a targeted stranger, where the crime scene reflects overall control, where restraints are used, and aggressive acts occur prior to death. These factors suggest that the offender is also organized, is average or above average in intelligence, is socially competent, prefers skilled work, has a high birth order, has a controlled mood during the crime, and may also use alcohol.

By contrast, a disorganized crime scene shows spontaneity: the victim or location is known, the crime scene is random and sloppy, there is sudden violence, minimal restraints are used, and there are sexual acts after death. These factors suggest the offender is below average in intelligence, is socially inadequate, has a low birth order, is anxious during the crime, and is unlikely to use alcohol. Despite there being discrete categories, it is generally acknowledged that no one offender will be wholly
organized or wholly disorganized and that most offenders will fall somewhere in between. These offenders are called mixed. There is a further implication that an organized offender is psychopathic, whereas a disorganized offender is psychotic.

This classification system is somewhat seductive as it is easy to use and can be applied with almost no critical thinking, no formal training in psychology, and little or no investigative experience. This dichotomy epitomizes the inductive/nomothetic approaches.

The authors do not agree with or advocate the use of the organized/disorganized approach. This is largely because it is a false dichotomy resulting from misplaced ideas about the development of criminals and the role of reconstructing the crime. The following arguments support this conclusion:

- As stated, most crime scenes and offenders fall somewhere along the continuum of organized and disorganized—that is, they are mixed.
- Only a competent forensic analysis performed by a qualified forensic scientist can give insight into how and why a crime happened.
- It is not generally possible to discriminate between the origins of criminal behavior that result in “disorganization.” Consequently, crime scenes involving intimate partners, drugs or alcohol, or mental illness can be difficult to distinguish with respect to their shared disorganized characteristics.
- A crime scene evidencing organized characteristics does not automatically suggest a psychopathic offender.
- Using a simplistic label cannot account for offender development over time. Some offenders will become more experienced and competent, leaving less evidence and engaging in more precautionary acts, whereas others will become less so, leaving more evidence and engaging in less precautionary acts.
- The use of the organized/disorganized dichotomy relies inappropriately on determinations of modus operandi. It examines what happened but not why, and it may therefore lump all behaviors of the same type together regardless of the reason they occurred.
- Because of the implication that organized and disorganized offenders are psychopathic and psychotic, respectively, the organized/disorganized dichotomy undeservedly empowers those who use it to speak on clinical issues that have implications in court.

The CIA ideally involves a number of steps or stages that involves the collection of evidence and determinations about its relevance and meaning. Despite having a distinct process, there is some concern that not all practitioners follow it closely. Furthermore, there is some discrepancy between the practitioners themselves as to what the steps are and what is involved. For example, in Sexual Homicides: Patterns and Motives, Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas argue for a six-step method including profiling inputs, decision process models, crime assessment, criminal profile, investigation, and apprehension.

In an article preceding Sexual Homicides, Douglas and Burgess (Criminal Profiling: A Viable Investigative Tool against Violent Crime) suggest a seven-step process, which includes the following:
1. Evaluation of the crime itself
2. Comprehensive evaluation of the specifics of the crime scene(s)
3. Comprehensive analysis of the victim
4. Evaluation of the preliminary police reports
5. Evaluation of the medical examiner’s autopsy protocol
6. Development of profile with crucial offender characteristics
7. Investigative suggestions predicated on the construction of the profile

Diagnostic Evaluations

Diagnostic evaluations (DEs) are not a single profiling method or representative of a unified approach. This term refers to a generic description of the services offered by medical and mental health professionals relying on clinical experience when giving profiling opinions about offenders, crimes scenes, or victims. DE profiles are commonly offered as a footnote to a primary report, such as those related to mental health evaluations, personality inventories, or autopsy findings.

One study by Bartol (Police Psychology: Then, Now and Beyond), showed that on average, 2% of the total monthly workload of in-house psychologists was spent on time profiling, and 3.4% of the monthly workload of part time consultants was spent on profiling. Of most interest, though, was the finding that 70% of those surveyed did not feel comfortable providing profiles or that the process was questionable.

It is not just those employed in the mental health professions who can provide a diagnostic evaluation though. More than a few forensic pathologists have displayed a willingness to engage in profile-related activities. For example, Vincent DiMaio testified for the defense in the trial of Phil Spector with redress to victimology and victim profiles, as well as nomothetic data on suicides (which he argued the victim had committed).

Because a diagnostic evaluation is highly idiosyncratic, there is little, if any, literature that describes a process. As a result, individual practitioners are left to rely on their own education, training, and experience to dictate the approach taken on a given case. This approach may be defined by their experience with mental disorder and personality theories. Although these theories may be useful in assessing aspects of the offender’s behavior, an overreliance on these theories may be counterproductive, as will be the case with the application of any general or average types—they may apply in some cases and not others.

McGrath (Criminal Profiling: Is There a Role for the Forensic Psychiatrist?) suggests that forensic mental health experts may be well suited to criminal profiling for the following reasons:

- Their background in the behavioral sciences and their training in psychopathology place them in an enviable position to deduce personality characteristics from crime scene information.
- The forensic psychiatrist is in a good position to infer the meaning behind signature behaviors.
- Given their training, education, and focus on critical and analytical thinking,
forensic psychiatrists are in a good position to “channel their training into a new field.”

While their training may position them well, it should also be noted that because of the sporadic nature of the involvement, mental health experts may lose touch with the requirements of a police investigation and therefore fall into the trap of offering vague or irrelevant characteristics. For example, while the inner workings of the offender’s mind may be interesting or tantalizing, this feature may do little to advance an investigation to the point of identifying a suspect pool, as these mental processes are not necessarily directly observable.

Although there is no one “diagnostic evaluation,” Copson and his colleagues (Articulating a Systematic Approach to Clinical Crime Profiling) propose that each piece of advice should have the following characteristics:

- **It should be custom made.** The advice should not rely on the recycling of a generic violent antisocial criminal stereotype.
- **It should be interactive.** At a range of levels of sophistication, depending on the officers’ understanding of the psychological concepts at issue.
- **It should be reflexive.** The advice should be dynamic, in that every element has a knock-on effect on every other element, and evolving, in that new information must lead to reconsideration not only of the element(s) of advice affected but of the construct as a whole.

These authors also identify a number of dangers:

- There is an imperative to please, which must be recognized and overcome; otherwise objectivity will be undermined by tendencies toward overinterpretation and unequivocality.
- Close interaction with the officers leaves the profiler open to allegations of improper collusion, such as tailoring a profile to fit a known suspect or devising an interviewing strategy that is unethical or even unlawful.
- The mass of data that comes out of an interactive and reflexive process means that recording is an extremely difficult and time-consuming business, even to the extent that sometimes a written report never quite emerges.
- The reduction of a mass of data into a summary document—and more especially the failure to produce a summary document—leaves the profiler open to being misrepresented.

While cited within a specific discussion of diagnostic evaluations, these issues are not peculiar to DE profiles and will plague most methods.

**Investigative Psychology**

Investigative psychology (IP) purports to cover all aspects of psychology that are relevant to the conduct of criminal and civil investigations. It involves research of various offender groups. Commonly, the result is a profile that is more or less a literature review of published studies examining ostensibly similar cases. It is nomothetic, inductive, and largely dependent on the amount of data and the accuracy of data collected. While IP relies more on larger samples and robust statistical
analysis than other nomothetic methods, this does not guarantee that the results are any more conclusive than other statistical methods. Put another way, IP remains abstract and theoretical.

While the FBI approach uses the organized/disorganized model as part of its decision process, IP also relies on a number of theoretical constructs to assess offender characteristics. This is best known as the five-factor model.

*Interpersonal coherence* refers to the way people adopt a style of interaction when dealing with others, with crime being an extension of this everyday interaction style—that is, offenders treat victims in generally the same way that they treat others in their life. For example, a rapist who exhibits selfishness with friends, family, and colleagues in his day-to-day activities will also exhibit selfishness with his victims. This is not unique to IP though, and most profiling approaches rely to some degree on this concept.

The second component theorizes that *time and space* also reflect some aspects of the offender's personality and behavior—that is, offenders often choose the time and place that specifically constitutes part of their mental map.

*Criminal characteristics* give investigators insight into the type of crime they are dealing with. These characteristics are determined through an examination of research and interviews with criminals.

*Criminal career* refers to the way that offenders modify their behavior in light of experience. For example, an offender may bind and gag their victims based on the screams and resistance of past victims. This is essentially an evolution of MO displayed by many offenders that comes about as a result of experience.

*Forensic awareness* is similar to criminal career in that it reflects experience. Offenders may employ precautionary behaviors such as wearing masks or gloves or attempts to destroy physical evidence. A rapist may wear a condom to prevent the transfer of biological fluids.

**Geographic Profiling**

*Geographic profiling* focuses on determining the likely location of the offender’s home, place of work, or some other anchor point. It assumes that an offender’s home, or other locations that the offender is familiar with, can be determined from the crime locations. It is based on theories and assumptions built from group studies of offenders that do not necessarily hold true in individual cases. Ideally, a geoprofile should only follow from a full criminal profile, though Rossmo, the main protagonist, has also identified it as a form of criminal profiling.

The geoprofile is another form of decision support system used to estimate the offender’s likely residence or other areas the offender may be familiar with. These are called activity nodes. Despite the fact that modern approaches to geographic profiling utilize computer technology in their assessments, the theories on which it is based have been around for some time.

The first of these theories, the *least effort principle*, suggests that given two
alternative courses of action, people will choose the one that requires the least amount of effort—that is, people will adopt the easiest course of action. The arbitrary imposition of concepts of nearness onto crime is made difficult by the fact that the layout of the geographic environment is largely nonuniform. Not only does the layout of the physical environment impact on offender behavior, but the location of an individual in three-dimensional space affects decision making.

The second theory is distance decay, which suggests that the frequency of crimes will decrease the further away an offender travels from home. This does not mean that crime sites will be clustered immediately around an offender’s home, as this would constitute a threat to the offender’s anonymity and liberty. Therefore, geoprofilers incorporate a “buffer zone” around the home. Distance decay may also be affected by opportunity. That is, while some offenders may like to have a choice over the location in which they commit their offenses, this may not always be possible, or there may be instances in which victims of opportunity present themselves, or because of the random and unpredictable behavior of others in the offense area.

**KEY TERMS**

*Availability Heuristic:* The tendency to answer a question of probability by asking whether examples come readily to mind. What we recall becomes what we believe will be likely.

*Criminal Investigative Analysis (CIA):* An investigative process developed by the FBI that identifies the major personality and behavioral characteristics of the offender based on the crimes he or she has committed—in other words, the FBI’s term for criminal profiling. Despite being defined by the FBI as an investigative process, it is commonly used as the basis for expert forensic opinions by FBI agents in court.

*Diagnostic Evaluation:* Rather than being a single profiling method or unified approach, this is a generic description of the services offered by medical and mental health professionals relying on clinical experience when giving profiling opinions about offenders, crimes scenes, or victims.

*Distance Decay:* The theory that crimes will decrease in frequency the further away an offender travels from home.

*Geographic Profiling:* A method of estimating the likely geographic region of an offender’s home location, place of work, or other relevant anchor points based on nomothetic data and assumptions.

*Idiographic:* Refers to the study of the concrete: examining individuals and their actual qualities. Idiographic study concentrates on specific cases and the unique traits or functioning of individuals.

*Investigative Psychology (IP):* Defined broadly as the study of all aspects of psychology relevant to criminal and civil investigations. IP involves the study of offender groups, the patterns within those groups, and the application of that research to individual cases.

*Least Effort Principle:* More of a theory than a principle, it involves the belief that
given two alternatives to a course of action, people will choose the one that requires the least effort—that is, people will adopt the easiest course of action. Unless, of course, they are on methamphetamine, in which case they will take the course of action that involves disassembling the item with the most parts.

Nomothetic: Refers to the study of the abstract; examining groups and universal laws.

Nomothetic Offender Profiles: Offender characteristics developed by studying groups of offenders. Nomothetic profiles do not represent an actual offender that exists in the real world. They represent varying degrees of theory and possibility.

Organized/Disorganized Typology: The FBI’s binary crime scene and offender classification system. It assumes that crime scenes with characteristics they have designated as “organized” will reflect “organized” offenders; it further assumes that crime scenes with characteristics they have designated as “disorganized” will reflect “disorganized” offenders. This concept was developed as a simplified profiling tool meant for teaching law enforcement students and has been roundly debunked in the literature.

QUESTIONS
1. Idiographic profiling involves:
   a. Interviewing past offenders about what they did and how they did it as a guide to how future offenders will behave
   b. Studying groups of offenders to determine how an individual will behave
   c. Studying individual cases to determine how this offender interacted within this crime*
   d. Applying general crime statistics to the current case
   e. None of the above

2. Wilson, Lincoln, and Kocsis (1997) identified how many types of profiling?
   a. 1
   b. 2
   c. 3
   d. 4
   e. 5

3. The FBI’s method of profiling is called:
   a. Investigative behavioral analysis
   b. Investigative psychology
   c. Crime scene investigation
   d. Criminal investigative analysis*
   e. Behavioral profiling

4. Who is currently in charge of the International Criminal Investigative Analysis Fellowship?
   a. The FBI
   b. The Academy of Behavioral Profiling
   c. The National Institute of Justice
   d. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police*
   e. No one; it is a self-governing organization
5. The terms *organized* and *disorganized* first appeared in what year?
   a. 1980*
   b. 1970
   c. 1972
   d. 1985
   e. 1990

6. Turvey argues that the organized/disorganized dichotomy is problematic for a variety of reasons. These include:
   a. The majority of crime scenes will present somewhere on a continuum
   b. Only a competent forensic analysis will give insight into how and why a scene presents like it does
   c. It is generally not possible to discriminate between the origins of behavior that result in disorganization
   d. A crime scene evidencing organized characteristics does not automatically suggest a psychopathic offender
   e. All of the above*

7. Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas (1988) suggest that the CIA has how many steps?
   a. 3
   b. 4
   c. 5
   d. 6*
   e. 7

8. How many offenders did the FBI use in its original study?
   a. 22
   b. 9
   c. 36*
   d. 31
   e. 33

9. What evidence is there that the FBI is aware of the limitations of its profiling approach?
   a. The FBI has conducted research that focuses on efficacy.
   b. Others have conducted research that focuses on the FBI’s efficacy.
   c. The FBI no longer allows its agents to give evidence in court.
   d. The FBI uses a disclaimer on its profiles.*
   e. There is no evidence that the FBI is aware of the limitations.

10. The generic description of the services offered by mental health professionals when giving profiling opinions is called:
    a. Investigative psychology
    b. Criminal investigative analysis
    c. Geographic profiling
    d. Behavioral evidence analysis
    e. Diagnostic evaluations*

11. An offender who strikes out from a home base and then returns to this area is
called:
- A marauder*
- A commuter
- A least effort offender
- Organized
- Disorganized

12. Protagonists of geographic profiling identify it as:
- An investigative panacea
- A replacement for a full criminal profile
- A deductive method of criminal profiling
- A decision support system
- All of the above

13. What claims were made about the geoprofiling unit by the Vancouver Police Department?
- There is little evidence of enhanced policing outcomes.
- There is little evidence as to the validity and reliability of geographic profiling.
- There have been no definitive applications of geographic profiling in the Vancouver Police Department.
- Both a and b are true.
- Both a and c are true.

14. Which theory suggests that crimes decrease in frequency the further an offender travels from home?
- Distance decay
- The least effort principle
- The Zipf principle
- Circle theory
- The path of least resistance

15. According to the text, geographic profiling will suffer from:
- Poor validity until more research is conducted
- Limited scope to assist investigations
- The same problems as other inductive methods
- Limited validity until more powerful computers are built to run the complex algorithms
- None of the above

16. Knowledge derived from the study of groups may be referred to as _______________. (nomothetic)

17. Knowledge derived from the study of individuals may be referred to as _______________. (idiographic)

18. Nomothetic profiles represent a prediction regarding potential profiling offender characteristics, not an actual analysis. **True or false?**

19. According to a study by the FBI’s first profiler, Howard Teten, the FBI’s method
of profiling helped with the identification of the suspect only ____% of the time.
(17)

20. __________ involves the examination of spatial relationships between an offender’s home and the locations of the offender’s crimes. (Geographic profiling).

21. What reason does the text give for the FBI changing the name of its profiling approach in court?

22. Briefly explain each of the nomothetic profiling methods, identifying their main features and philosophies.

23. Provide some critiques of diagnostic evaluations.

24. What is the five-factor model, and what are the five components?

25. Describe the concerns listed in the textbook regarding geographic profiling.