Comparing And American Approaches To Criminal Profiling

When evaluating offender profiling as a discipline of forensic psychology, it is important to consider that there are two different methods used by police across Britain and America as means for characterising offenders, however its usefulness has been questioned. The Approach uses patterns that exist in within related crime scenes to identify offenders. Contrastingly, The American Approach categorises offenders as either organised or disorganised based on their typologies and is heavily based on FBI experience. Despite there being two different techniques, Kocsis (2006) notes that “criminal profiling is a process whereby behaviours or actions exhibited in a crime are assessed and interpreted to form predictions concerning the characteristics of the probable perpetrator of the crime.”:

Support for the bottom up approach is fostered within Canter and Heritage’s (1990) study of 66 sexual offences by 27 different offenders. Small Space analysis was used to pinpoint characteristics that offenders possessed, and the researchers identified variables that were central to many of the cases. These included surprise attacks and lack of empathy shown to victims. Further to this, the use of computer databases alongside small space analysis as a tool is more scientific than tools used within top down approaches, which makes this approach more scientific, logical and so more accurate. Such a study provides profilers with information to construct an outline of an offender from very little information, thus crediting Approach.

Geographical Profiling is an element of The Bottom Up approach which is used to estimate the area in which an offender lives, especially within connected series of crimes. This is particularly important at mapping the areas in which criminals operate, as according to Rossmo (1997), the areas where previous crimes have occurred give an indication as to where future offences will be carried out, particularly with burglaries. Evidential proof that illustrates the efficacy of Geographical profiling comes from Lundigran and Canter’s (2001) study that involved 120 murder cases. They identified that on every occasion, the offender resided within the centre of the pattern of crime scenes. In turn, this provides credit for Canter and Larkin’s Circle Theory (2003) which provides a picture of the differences between marauders and commuters. It is easy to conclude that the bottom up approach has substantial strengths in that it is applicable to various crimes, not just minor offences such as burglaries. Therefore, geographical profiling is a useful tool for police forces to use when attempting to identify offenders.

Despite such strengths, the bottom up approach can feasibly be criticised for overreliance on consistent habits possessed by the offender. If habits and traits did change, then the profiler may not be able to follow patterns and would not be able to identify the perpetrator. In addition, unless an offender was already identifiable via a police database, bottom up profiling is unlikely to be able to reliably pinpoint an exact offender, it would only allow for a narrow profile of traits to be created. Additionally, approach can also face criticism for being subjective, in that criminal traits and habits may just be based on opinions of a profiler. Again, this would make identifying a criminal a difficult task as profilers all have their own opinions. This brings into question the reliability of bottom-up profiling when it comes to identifying potential suspects, and in turn the usefulness of it as a tool for the police as profiles can be time consuming to construct.

The Top down approach is favoured by the FBI for categorising offenders and proved its strengths in the Ted Bundy case, however there are weaknesses to the method too. The American approach is over simplistic by just defining offenders as being organised or disorganised based on their traits. This is very much a downfall as in cases where multiple offenders are involved, profilers may be confused by traits of offenders within both categories. Similarly, an experienced offender may leave clues that would fit into both categories in order to intentionally throw a profiler off their trail and avoid being identified or even develop from being a disorganised offender to organised as a result of experience and a changed Modus Operandi. Moreover, Keppel (1999) noted that the top down approach tended to identify an offender's motive and not than their type, especially in cases of murder, again illustrating weaknesses to this method and consequently raising the question of its applicability to certain crimes.

Moreover, there is also reason to question top down approach as there has been suggestion that it is outdated. Alison et al (2002) suggests that situational factors have great influence on offenders, and as such factors are constantly evolving with crime, the division of organised and disorganised offenders may be irrelevant. This also brings into question whether offenders' personalities are somewhat dismissed within investigations, and so may deem the approach as unreliable when identifying possible perpetrators. For these reasons, it is questionable whether the top down approach should be used by police and profilers today.

In conclusion, it is evident that both approaches can be credited and criticised as there is wealth of evidence to be applied to each of the two techniques. Despite weaknesses, both the bottom up and top down theories continue to be used by police forces and criminal profilers across Britain and America. Within significant investigations, the usefulness of both tools has been proven to be an invaluable support to police.