



# Offender profiling

## Estimation or guesstimation?

Offender profiling is not a new concept. Its roots can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when the study of individual differences was very much in vogue. Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911), for instance, spent much of his time researching the link between body size and intellectual functioning. Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828) used the 'science' of phrenology — the method of interpreting personality characteristics based on the size and shape of bumps on the head.

Offender profiling draws upon implicit knowledge of personality and utilises the statistical methods typically adopted by personality researchers (psychometric testing and multi-dimensional scaling). Computer programs have been developed to deal with the nature of data collection used by profilers and have played a major role in police investigation. But what exactly is offender profiling?

### What is offender profiling?

Offender profiling is defined by Geberth (1981) as 'An educated attempt to provide investigative agencies with specific infor-

mation as to the type of individual who committed a certain crime.'

Clearly, Geberth makes no attempt to disguise offender profiling as a scientifically foolproof method of working. He is further quoted as saying in a personal communication to Holmes and Holmes (1996), 'Criminal profiling is an excellent law enforcement tool. However, it is just one of many tools and does not replace good investigative techniques.'

Offender profiling is best applied to certain types of crime (lust and mutilation murders; rapes; motiveless fire setting; postmortem slashing and cutting; evisceration; sadistic torture in sexual assaults and satanic and cult murders) and to cases where there have been multiple attempts. These crimes reflect pathology in the offender and it is this knowledge that offender profilers rely upon. Additionally, profilers offer insight from the evidence at the crime scene as to the nature of the pathology manifested through the crime.

When considering different crimes, investigators use a hierarchical template of decision making. For instance, the obvious questions are: what class of crime



(property or person oriented), what type of crime (robbery or rape), what criminal actions occurred and what method of criminal operation was in use? In other words, what were the *modus operandi*? Such information helps profilers to develop a criminal signature.

One way of understanding the concept of a criminal signature is to consider the following case of the American Edmund Kempler. Since the young age of ten, Kempler had had fantasies of killing his mother using a hammer. It took the killings of ten other people, using a hammer, before he succumbed to murdering his mother. His fantasies took over and became more and more elaborate until he mutilated and dismembered his victims, had necrophilic relationships with them and disposed of their body parts in his mother's house. The sheer escalation of his fantasies meant that he became less careful and therefore vulnerable to capture.

Another example is William Heirens, known as the Boston strangler, who would pose as a utility man with a forged identity badge. He also had the gift of the gab and talked his way into women's homes, where he would then strangle them using their own ties. In both of these cases, profilers can identify a *modus operandi* and a criminal signature unique to the killer.

Obviously in cases of serial murder, where there are no surviving victims to

provide eyewitness testimonial accounts, the crime scene becomes the main source of evidential information.

### Assumptions of the profiling process

The crime scene is of paramount importance, as it reflects the personality of the offender. This connection between crime scene and personality is particularly pertinent to the profiling process used in the USA. The theoretical assumption here is that the central core of our personality does not change dramatically in a short space of time. This also applies to criminals and criminal behaviour. A criminal lifestyle does not develop overnight, nor does it change as suddenly. And multiple killing is like an addiction, in that the inherent details of the crime tend to remain constant and are repeated across crime events. It is not only personality characteristics that can be deduced from the crime scene, but the behaviour of the offender during and after the offence, and it is this behaviour which helps investigators decide whether the case is suitable for profiling (Holmes and Holmes 1996).

### Analysis of a serial killer's psyche

Despite the diversity of *modus operandi* and criminal signature displayed by serial killers, Holmes and Holmes (1996) point out that the experience of the process of

violence is similar. The model of personal violence proposed by Holmes and Holmes embraces a psychoanalytic stance. It depicts a five-stage process which can be influenced by external forces, whether real or imagined by the perpetrator.

During stage 1 (distorted thinking) the perpetrator is in a positive psychological state, whereby the consequences of his or her deviant thoughts are ignored. This temporary state of psychological equilibrium soon gives way to stage 2 (the fall). There is no return to distorted thinking once the fall has been initiated. It is during this phase that the perpetrator stores incidents, imagined or real, deep within his or her psyche. Often these incidents are perceived by the perpetrator as negative and ego-threatening and are believed to warrant a violent reaction. Stage 3, referred to as the negative inward response, is where the perpetrator must deal with feelings of inadequacy. This he does by confronting negative reality messages and restoring the ego through actions of violence, which are carried out in stage 4. The perpetrator has now progressed from mental preparation to the negative outward response — the act itself. A victim has to be found in order to subdue any more negative reality messages. By stage 5, the perpetrator's status has been restored and concerns are now focused towards victim disposal. This completes the cycle and the perpetrator then returns to stage 1.

The implications of Holmes and Holmes' model of personal violence is twofold. It provides investigators with a time frame of when the killer is likely to strike next. Furthermore, it informs investigators of how the perpetrator's killing career is developing. Often the distorted thinking escalates and the *modus operandi*, although consistent, becomes more elaborate and bizarre with time and frequency of killing. Killers become careless and it is this that often leads to their capture.

The American serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer, demonstrates this clearly. Police were alerted by a man called Tracy Edwards, who had managed to escape from the clutches of Dahmer. Edwards explained how he was drugged but awoke to Dahmer's advances. He tried to leave, but Dahmer handcuffed him and made him watch *The Exorcist*, with a butcher's knife to his chest. Dahmer told Edwards that he was going to kill him, take his heart out and eat it. Edwards took the police to Dahmer's apartment. They were taken aback by its horrible smell and when they



William Heirens, the Boston strangler



questioned Dahmer, he became hysterical and struggled with them. In the apartment the police found human remains in varying stages of decomposition and body parts in his fridge, ready for eating. This is how the police found out about Dahmer's years of killing. Dahmer became careless, and in so doing, enabled his victim to escape. Furthermore, the time frame between stages 1 and 5 decreased as his killing spree continued. Body disposal was barely successfully concluded before the next killing. The model of personal violence can be very informative in understanding the psyche of a serial killer.

How does offender profiling operate?

There appear to be different approaches to offender profiling which dictate how it is defined and used.

The US experience

The FBI headquarters in Quantico, USA, has a special section known as the Behavioural Sciences Unit. It was here that Ressler developed offender profiling and coined the term 'serial killer'. Ressler's Criminal Personality Research Project started in 1978, during which he interviewed over 100 infamous offenders.

Much information was collected through interviewing offenders, reviewing police files and examining crime scenes. The effort of collating all this information led to a **psychological typologies approach** — namely the differentiation between organised non-social and disorganised asocial killers. Killers belonging to these two typologies would lead very different lifestyles, have different personality traits, leave very different crime scenes, demonstrate different post-offence behaviour and require different interview tactics from the police (see Box 1). Differences in the personalities of the organised non-social and the disorganised asocial offender should be reflected in the crime scene. Thus those organised in life will be organised in crime, and this is reflected in the meticulous way a crime is planned and carried out. The organised person will leave the crime scene with very little incriminating evidence.

Holmes and DeBurger (1988) have outlined further typologies based on interviews of serial killers incarcerated in US prisons. These include: visionary, missionary, hedonistic (lust- or comfort-oriented) and power/control killer (see Box 2). Peter Sutcliffe is an example of a visionary killer,

Box 1 Psychological typologies

Organised non-social

- Personal characteristics
- Socially adequate
- Sexually competent
- Controlled mood
- Charming
- Model prisoner
- Geographically/occupationally mobile
- Follows media
- Egotist
- Masculine image
- High IQ
- High birth order
- Lives with partner

Post-offence behaviour

- Returns to crime scene
- Volunteers information
- May move the body
- May dispose of the body to advertise crime
- Police groupies
- Anticipates questioning

Interview techniques

- Use direct strategy
- Must be certain of details
- Offenders will admit only what they have to

Disorganised asocial

- Personal characteristics
- Socially inadequate
- Sexually inadequate
- Anxious mood during criminal activity
- Poor hygiene
- Lives and works near crime scene

Low IQ

- Lives alone
- Significant behavioural change
- Secret hiding place
- Unskilled work
- Nocturnal

Post-offence behaviour

- Returns to crime scene to relive event
- Attends funeral, places a memoriam

Keeps diary/news cuttings of events

May change abode, job and personality

Interview techniques

- Empathise with offender
- Use counsellor approach
- Indirectly introduce evidence

Night-time interview

Box 2 Further typologies defined by Douglas et al. (1992)

Typology	Mental state	Method
Visionary serial killers	Psychotic; hear voices and see visions propelling them to kill	Little crime scene planning, quick kill (act focused)
Missionary serial killers	Not psychotic, self imposed duty to eradicate a specific class of people	Act focused, organised or disorganised
Hedonistic serial killers		
I Lust or thrill	Make connection between personal violence and sexual gratification, pleasure derived from killing	Killing is long drawn out process (process focused), involves domination, torture, fear instilling
II Comfort-oriented	Make connection between killing and obtaining personal gain	act focused
III Power/control serial killers	Psychopath, make connection between sexual gratification and domination over victim, pleasure derived from power and control	Process focused



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Offender profiling on the television; Robbie Coltrane in action as forensic psychologist Dr Eddie 'Fitz' Fitzgerald, in the series *Cracker*, which attracted an audience of 15 million viewers at its height.

who claimed he was instructed by God to rid the streets of prostitutes. Killers like Ken Bianchi and Angelo Buno in the USA are examples of lust killers, who tortured their victims through suffocation and prompt resuscitation for the thrill of it. Herman Mudgett, on the other hand, illustrates the comfort-oriented killer who killed his wives, fiancées and employers to gain property and money. Harold Shipman, who watched his vulnerable old patients die by lethal injection, and Myra Hindley and her partner in crime, Ian Brady, who tortured and murdered children, are typical power/control killers or psychopaths.

Inherent within these typologies is the dimension of spatial mobility, which also features strongly in the British approach. A geographically stable murderer lives in the same area for a substantial period of time, and therefore kills and disposes of bodies in the same area or in a nearby area with which he is familiar. John Gacy, Bible John and Harold Shipman are examples of geographically stable murderers. Geographically transient killers, on the other hand, are constantly travelling to far-ranging areas, as did killers like Ted Bundy and Peter Sutcliff.

#### The British experience

One of Britain's leading investigative psychologists is David Canter, who has written many books detailing the profiling perspective in Britain today. He has outlined the usefulness of using the **Radex model** to challenge the over-simplistic American approach of having a limited number of criminal typologies. The application of the Radex model is straightforward. If perceived as a series of concentric circles, the inner circle would hold all actions that typify criminal behaviour and are shared therefore by the majority of criminals. Within the second circle, criminal actions become less generic and more specific to certain types of crimes and *modus operandi*. Very specific and less frequently encountered criminal actions would be even further away from the inner circle or the core of generic criminality.

In Britain, the emphasis is less on pigeonholing serial killers into one of two categories based on personality typology and more on the notion of behavioural consistency in terms of habits, attitudes to others and skill. Behavioural consistency occurs in criminal behaviour too, as in *modus operandi*. A modern development

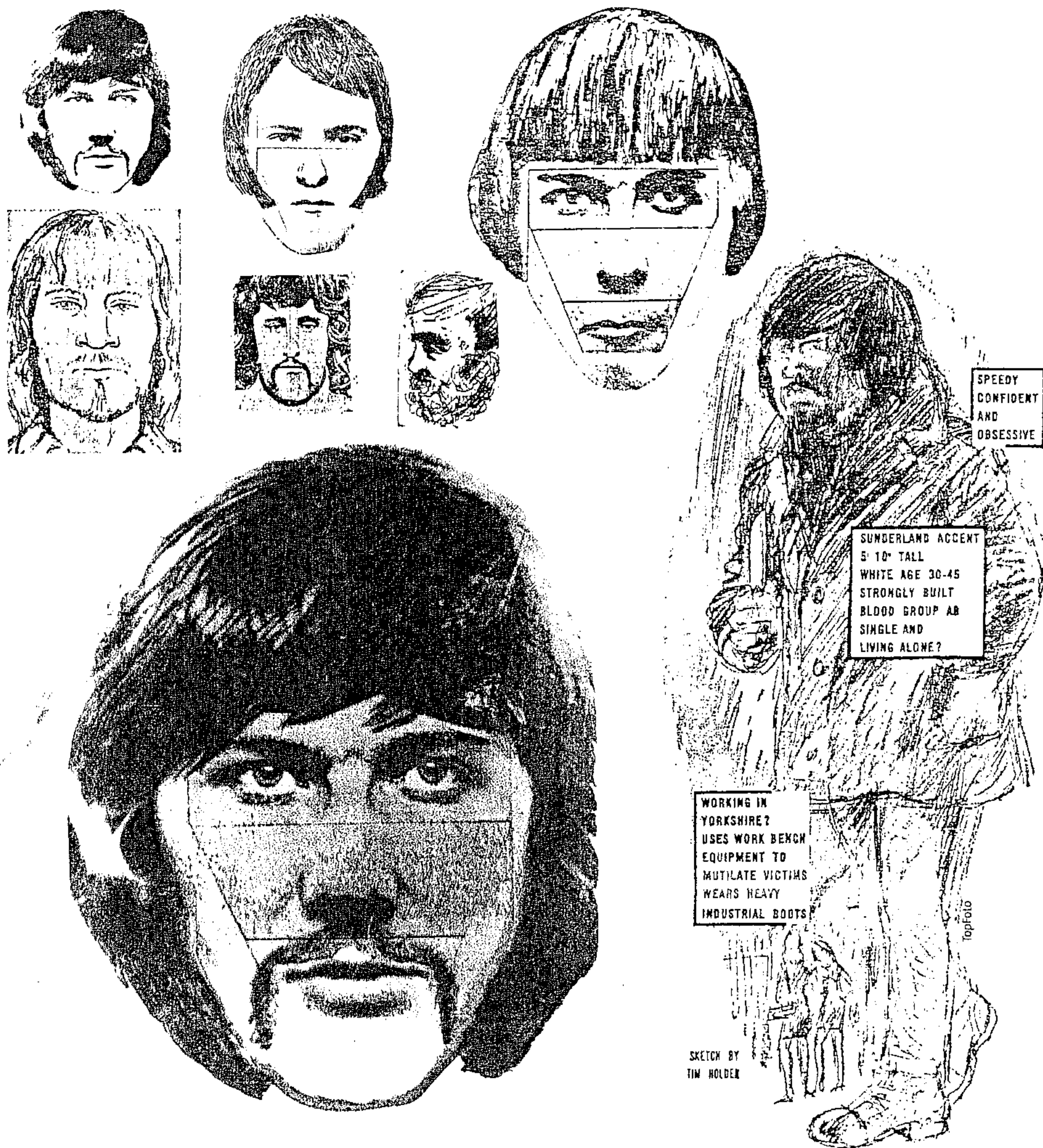
used by police investigators is **crime analysis**, which has been defined as

The analysis of every crime with every other crime and with criminals to identify links that are not evident from routine police enquiries. In psychological research terms this may be translated into the analysis of a set of behaviours with other sets of behaviours and the individuals who may be responsible.

(Merry 2000, page 302)

The crime analyst utilises information about behaviour derived from the crime scene and information of geographic demography. These two sources of information help us understand how people operate within their geographical area. Crime analysis enables investigators to deduce information from three working models referred to by Merry (2000) as comparative case analysis, suspect identification and target profiling. An abundance of useful information can be obtained about the similarity of *modus operandi* across similar and non-similar crimes. Furthermore, information about the comings and goings of a suspected offender within a specified location can be mapped using multi-dimensional scaling technique such as smallest space analysis (SSA).





Building up an identikit of Peter Sutcliff, the Yorkshire Ripper, using crime analysis

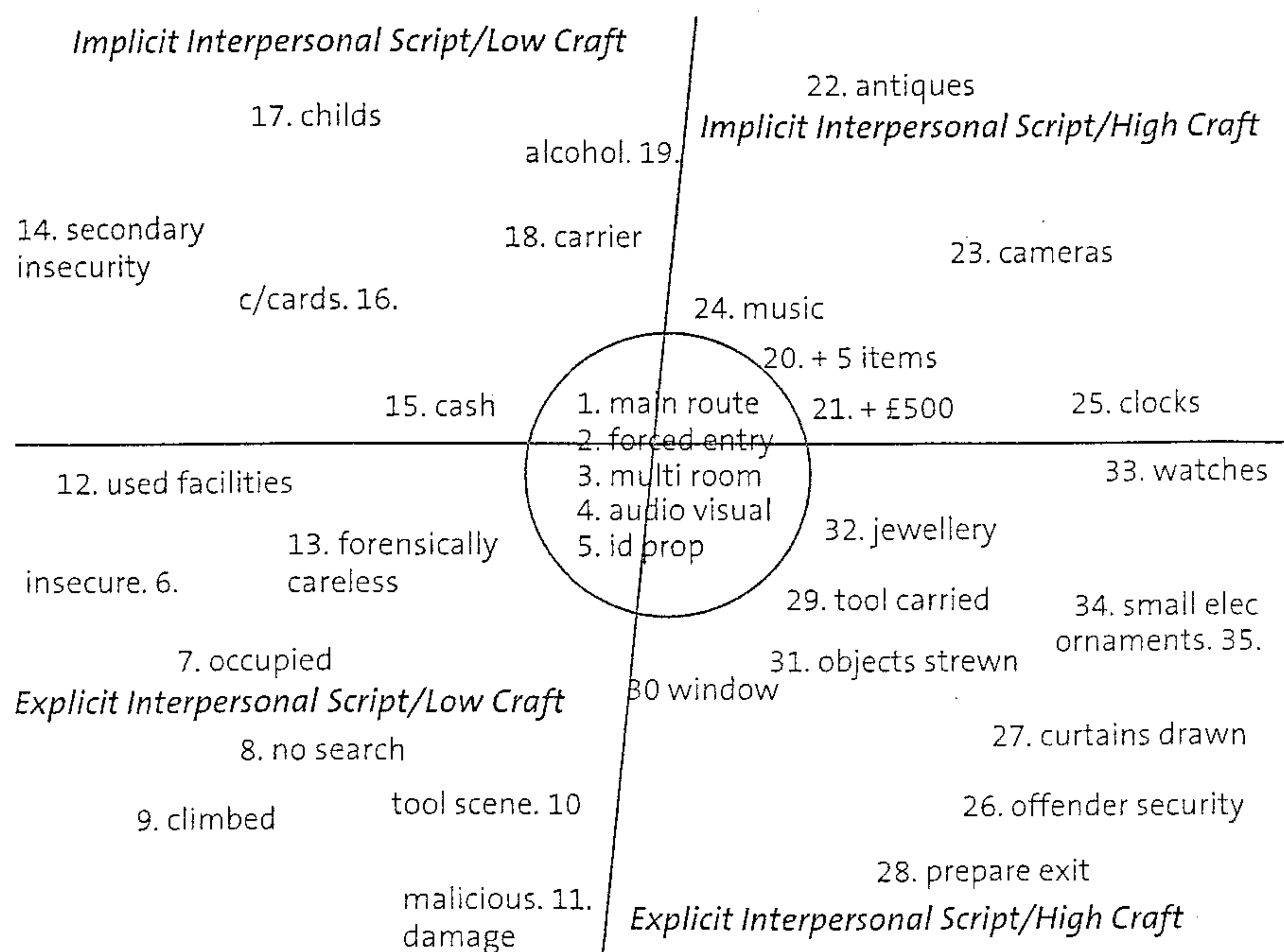


Figure 1 An example of the data output profilers might obtain when using the statistical procedure known as smallest space analysis. The figure refers to the output of smallest space analysis and 35 variables located in accordance with their co-occurrence; themes of behaviour can be teased out from the wider collection of activities present within the crime

Similar mappings can be obtained for suspect identification and target profiling (see Figure 1 for an example of this mapping).

### Concluding thoughts

Offender profiling is a useful method of working and, coupled with computer technology, it might prove to be a methodical asset to crime investigators. Perhaps it may also prove useful in helping to solve crimes other than murder. According to Canter and Alison (2000) this has been shown to be true. So we can see that there are differences between the US and British methods of profiling and although the US way may seem more exciting, it has not been without criticism. ■

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Key concepts	➤ Definition of offender profiling
	➤ Offender pathology
	➤ Hierarchical template of decision making
	➤ Criminal signature/ <i>modus operandi</i>
	➤ Model of personal violence (Holmes and Holmes)
	➤ Psychological typologies approach
	➤ Spatial mobility
	➤ Radex model
	➤ Crime analysis
	➤ Three working models (Merry)