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THE MYTH OF PROFILING

Pop psychology can lead investigators astray

By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. “That really ordinary guy living next door could be a serial killer.” Dave Shiflett of the *Bloomberg News* says that’s the lesson we can draw from “Inside the Mind of BTK,” John Douglas’s new book about the infamous serial killer [Dennis Rader](#), who tortured and murdered ten Wichita women between 1973 and 1991.

But, wait! John Douglas is the most famous FBI profiler ever, an author of several true-crime best sellers and the model for Jodie Foster’s superior in “Silence of the Lambs”. If a sick puppy like BTK can seem so “ordinary”, how could he be identified through profiling?

That, according to a lengthy exposé in *The New Yorker* (“[Dangerous Minds](#),” 11/12/07), is the problem. John Douglas and his FBI colleagues told Wichita police that BTK was an American male with a decent IQ, that he drove a decent car, liked to masturbate, was selfish in bed, a loner (but could get along socially), uncomfortable with women (but could have women as friends,) maybe married, maybe not (but if married his wife was younger or older,) and so forth. Thankfully, officers managed to eventually solve the case *sans* profile. Rader was nothing like the FBI suggested. He was married, with children, active in his church and a pillar of the community.

Profiling is one of several psychological techniques, along with investigative hypnosis and the recovery of repressed memories, that gained popularity during the free-wheeling 80’s. Although the latter methods have been thrashed for over-promising, under-performing and generally leading investigators astray, profiling lives on, its findings so elastic that they can seldom be disproven.

It’s when profilers get specific that the nonsense becomes obvious. On the morning of January 21, 1998, [Stephanie Crowe](#), 12, was stabbed to death in her Escondido (Calif.) home while the family slept. Detectives soon zeroed in on her reticent 14-year old brother, Michael. After relentless interrogation, he confessed and implicated two friends. Both got raked over the coals; one confessed while the other didn’t. Police arrested all three. They and prosecutors remained confident in the case even after the coerced statements were suppressed. After all, didn’t the [FBI profile](#) conclude that the murder was planned? Didn’t profilers say that the killer had “familiarity, comfort and knowledge” of the residence and the victim’s bedroom?

Months later, while the boys awaited trial, a violent, mentally ill transient whom detectives originally discounted as a suspect (in part because of the FBI profile) was arrested when DNA testing revealed that those spots on his clothes were the victim's blood. Charges against the boys were dropped and the man was convicted and imprisoned.

On November 5, 2003 [Gary Ridgway](#), the "Green River Killer," pled guilty to murdering 48 women in KingCounty between 1982 and 1998. The investigation dragged on for twenty years and several FBI profiles, the first prepared by -- you guessed it -- the celebrated John Douglas. Their conclusions: the killer was likely an unemployed transient who had left the area and was either dead or in prison.

Fortunately, the cops had Ridgway in mind all along. Deputies knew that the married truck driver, a local resident, had a reputation for picking up prostitutes and playing rough. In 2001 new DNA techniques matched Ridgway to four of the victims. He got life without parole.

During the 1996 Atlanta Olympics a bomb exploded in a city park, leaving two dead and more than one-hundred injured. FBI agents immediately focused on [Richard Jewell](#), the security guard who found the device before it detonated and sounded the alarm, undoubtedly saving many. But the FBI didn't see him as a hero. Convinced that the chubby bachelor who lived with his mother fit the profile of a lone bomber, the Feds searched his home and conducted an exhaustive, highly public investigation. Jewell was cleared after two months. But the stain on his reputation never disappeared.

In 2003 police finally caught up with the man responsible. Eric Rudolph had used identical devices to bomb the park and a string of abortion clinics. He confessed and got life without parole.

It's the patina of science that makes profiling so disturbing, lending confidence in conclusions with no more factual basis than the prognostications of a horoscope. Although [recent studies](#) seriously challenge the technique's reliability, the FBI's thirty-odd profilers remain on the job, reportedly fielding more than one-thousand requests from local police each year.

More than twenty years after its inception profiling chugs on, the embarrassing detritus of a decade when overburdened police and prosecutors were seduced by the promises of pop psychology. Let's hope it doesn't take us another twenty to rediscover that it's shoe leather, not magic, that solves crime.