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The Illusion of Criminal Profiling:
What's Really behind the Smoke and Mirrors?

CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

"...the murderer...is a tall man, left-handed, limps with the right leg, wears thick-soled shooting-boots and a gray cloak, smokes Indian cigars, uses a cigar-holder, and carries a blunt pen-knife in his pocket. There are several other indications, but these may be enough to aid us..."

**Sherlock Holmes,
The Boscombe Valley Mystery**



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The Illusion of Criminal Profiling: What's Really behind the Smoke and Mirrors?



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From the Hollywood blockbusters *Silence of the Lambs* in early 1990s and *The Bone Collector* in late 1990s, to the popular multiseason television series *Profiler* in late-1990s and *Criminal Minds* since mid-2000s, the terms “criminal profiling” and “criminal profiler” have successfully caught the public imagination on this subject. These media programs typically portray a team of FBI profilers with a “unique” set of skills to “see” the world through the eyes of serial murderers and how criminal minds work, without being a “psychic.” As a criminologist with background in forensic psychology and research interest in offender profiling, it is always entertaining to watch how “great” and flawless these “profilers,” are portrayed in the programs, in working their cases. That is why the wild and unrealistic imagination the public has on this investigative technique – criminal profiling does not surprise me. But, is this the reality of criminal profiling? My task here is simple – is to take this opportunity to briefly explicate what criminal profiling is in the “real” world.

Criminal profiling (CP) – as one of the many investigative techniques – has grown steadily over the past 40 years, both in its use by law enforcement agencies and the research endeavors invested in its development. CP is the practice of inferring the behavioral, personality, and demographic characteristics of offenders of interest based on crime scene evidence. There is a growing belief that profilers could accurately

and consistently “predict” an offender’s characteristics based on crime scene evidence. This is in no way to postulate any psychical ability the criminal profilers have or “employ” in working their cases. Most of the skills employed are based on their extensive field experience and understanding of human behavior. In its early days, most profiling work is performed by a team of seasoned FBI agents through case submissions by local agencies as the last resort before the case turns cold. However, the profiling techniques are now expanded to the use in state agencies and are also widely practiced in countries such as the UK, Finland, Germany, Sweden, and South Africa. It is interesting to note that this widely accepted practice by police agencies around the globe is without compelling scientific evidence to support its reliability, validity, and utility. Why do people still believe in CP works despite its lack of scientific evidence? Is CP an “art” and not a “science?”

The most widely used offender classification is the FBI’s organized-disorganized dichotomy. The underlying assumptions of this classification are that, based on behaviors manifest at a crime scene, organized offenders are likely to plan for their offense (i.e., limited evidence left at the scene) while disorganized offenders’ offense are typically committed without prior planning (i.e., chaotic crime scene with lots of evidence left behind). Based on their background characteristics, organized offenders are high functioning individuals, whereas disorganized offenders are at the lower side of functioning. Could all offenders be perfectly classified as either organized or disorganized? How about a mixture of both? Although this typology has later been revised to explain the offending pattern on an organized-disorganized continuum scale, it is still the



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subject of empirical scrutiny as this typology is developed based on only 36 serial sexual murderers. Can findings derived from a small sample of sexually violent offenders be applied to other types of offenders?

Can profilers make accurate predictions? The process used by investigative profilers in developing an offender profile is relatively similar to clinicians in making a clinical diagnosis and treatment plan. It involves a process of brainstorming and intuition. Bearing in mind that the offender profile is generated based on subjective interpretation of the crime scene evidence through scientifically unsupported methods. Hence, there is a possibility that different profilers would generate different types of profile of the same offender in question. Recent empirical queries into CP have found that their error rate (i.e., making inaccurate predictions) often exceeds the accuracy rate. In a series of mock profiling experiments, forensic psychologist Richard Kocsis and colleagues found that although profilers/investigators are slightly more accurate than nonprofilers on

the overall measure of profile accuracy, the predictive accuracy of profilers/investigators is marginally worse or no better than nonprofilers in predicting the cognitive processes, offense behaviors, and social history/habits of the offender.

Given the apparent empirical limitations of CP, why do people still believe that it works? There are several possible reasons. Most published accounts of CP rely on successful cases to illustrate the utility of this technique in apprehending offenders. It is also likely that repeating the message that CP is an effective investigative technique leads to the CP illusion. Overemphasis on correct predictions combined with under emphasis on inaccurate predictions could also lead to the overestimation of the profile accuracy and its potential utility. Finally, the myth that investigative profilers are experts with specialized skills and knowledge beyond that of regular police officers might contribute to the perception that their opinions are trustworthy and reliable, the “expertise heuristic” – in which experts’ statements can always be trusted.

That said, is CP really that unreliable? Promisingly, efforts have been made to scientifically develop this technique over the years. With pioneering work by David Canter and colleagues in the development of investigative psychology, CP (or offender profiling as it is alternatively termed now) has finally evolved from an “art” to a rigorous “science” based on increasingly rigorous empirical methodological research. The offending pattern and characteristics, and the behavioral consistencies (or inconsistencies) of the offenders in a single or series of offenses are inferred through statistical methods. In other words, probability of an event to occur under such circumstance is calculated. Not only these, a whole lot of other offending profiling work (e.g., linking a series of offenses based on similar crime scene behaviors) could be achieved using this empirically rigorous methodology. It is promising that the question of validity and reliability of the offender profile is no longer a key criticism of the profiling work. However, more work needs to be done to establish a solid foundation for profiling research, which will eventually take the field of offender profiling forward.



By Dr. Heng Choon (Oliver) CHAN,
Assistant Professor of Criminology

“HOPE for the Homeless, a Hong Kong for Me and You”



organizations have created many obstacles in community-based support and long-term service planning. Thus, City-Youth Empowerment Project, together with community partners Society for Community Organization (SoCO), Salvation Army, and St. James' Settlement – conducted a city-wide homeless street count – the Homeless Outreach Population Estimation (HOPE Hong Kong 2013) on August 21. It was the first time in Hong Kong for community organizations that serve the homeless join forces with a university service-learning platform to conduct a city-wide homeless street count. The purpose was to collect numbers and data of street sleepers in order to facilitate better allocations of resources amongst community organizations and social workers that serve the homeless population, and to improve resources and to enhance the effectiveness of services offered to the homeless. With accurate numbers and information, community organizations can then advocate for appropriate and effective resources on both individual and systemic levels to help the homeless get out of such destitution.

We were also hoping, through participating in HOPE HK 2013, students would not only get to understand the needs of the street sleepers and gain knowledge of effective helping skills on an individual level, they would also explore the systemic and structural causes of homelessness - rather than understanding homelessness on just the individual level and seeing it as mere predicaments caused by individual failings. The goal is to enhance volunteers' understanding of homelessness as a social issue, and to enhance their civic engagement. The data collected on the public's attitudes toward the homeless would also inform community organizations on how to and how necessary it is to raise public awareness on the issues of homelessness.

Homelessness is one of the most desolate human conditions where safety, personal hygiene, human dignity, and basic human needs such as food and shelter are at stake. Yet, homelessness remains one of the most common social problems in many cities all around the world. Although the United Nations recognizes that safe, affordable, and stable housing as a basic human right, in a city with an annual GDP of over \$2,000 billion, over half of the homeless expressed that the inability to afford rent is the main reason to their homelessness. Over 40% of them are not receiving government welfare, and mainly survive on unstable low-paying jobs, support from non-governmental organizations, and scavenging. Over the past year, volunteers of City-Youth Empowerment Project, in collaboration with our partner organizations (SoCO, Salvation Army, and St. James' Settlement), have participated in numerous services and activities with the homeless. Outreach visits to the homeless took place in Sham Shui Po, Yau-Tsim-Mong, Wanchai, and the Eastern District. Additionally, CYEP volunteers have formed the City-Youth United Soccer team, and through regular soccer matches with Dawn Soccer Team (a team of former and current homeless men who have represented Hong Kong to compete in the Homeless World Cup) in the past year, CYEP aimed to foster a community-to-community relationship through sports.

The lack of manpower of community organizations and governmental support has led to the lack of accurate statistics and data that community organizations desperately need in order to enhance service effectiveness and advocacy efforts. The discrepancies in numbers between SWD and community





Results of the H.O.P.E. HK 2013 Street Count

On 21st August, a very hot summer night, over 300 volunteers (from CYEP, SS department, partner organizations, and friends and family referred by some of our volunteers and students) were mobilized to cover all the identified locations in the entire Hong Kong City. Divided into 50 teams, volunteers went to over 180 locations to conduct the street count and collect necessary data. The street count started at 7pm (with hours of preparation prior), most of the volunteers did not finish their shift until at least 2am. Not once was a complaint of heat or fatigue heard due to their tireless effort and civic passion – and apart from carrying out the tasks of the count and collecting data, the volunteers were able to be firsthand witnesses and listeners to the stories of the street sleepers. Many of the

volunteers reported gaining a much more intimate understanding of not only the street sleepers' struggles - but more importantly, admiration for the resilience of all, positive attitude of most, and sense of humor of some. Just like what Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." With renewed hope and utmost gratitude to the efforts of our volunteers, our partner organizations, and the CYEP team, here are our preliminary count numbers – in the street count on 21st of August and a complementary and unduplicated count that took place within the following week at a group of 24-hour chain restaurants, we gathered a number of 720 "street-homeless" people (with an addition of 279 empty bed spaces on the streets). On the night of 21th August, a total number of 415 people stayed at the city's temporary shelters – thus, our initial count numbers have indicated at least a total of 1,135 people who are without a stable home.

✳ *Remarks: Up until July 2013, the latest number of registered street sleepers with the Social Welfare Department was 648.*



By Ms Constance Ching,
Project Officer
City-Youth Empowerment Project

Learning Excellence (Project X) Look Ahead: Serving the sophomore in Project X (Stage 2) and overview of 5-year development

By Ms. Ali Cheung, Project Officer, Project X

Introducing Project X (Stage 2)

Under the new 4-year curriculum, the department welcomed the first cohort of year two students in September 2013. While the changing education system offers more choice and learning opportunities to undergraduates, it has also brought new learning needs and adjustment issues. Different from the old admission system for A-level students, the new batch of DSE students are first enrolled to the College before choosing their major in the second year of university learning according to their preference and academic performance. Thus, students are facing two critical transition periods, the first from secondary education to university learning, and the second from College to their major studies at different Departments. Project X (Stage 2) is launched to facilitate the adjustment of year two students in four interrelated areas, including psychological, academic, social and cultural adjustment. Building on the experience and success of Project X over the past five years, a series of discovery-enriched co-curricular activities will be organized, including major-specific training camps, major-specific learning community, competence-based workshops, student advising, community awareness project, student leaders training scheme and X-Gala throughout the academic year. We will also extend our support to non-local students in order to facilitate meaningful cultural exchange through study tour and global buddies' scheme.

X-Gala 2013 "Individual Access to City"

To celebrate the five year development of Project X, more than 110 SS students, alumni, and teachers, external guests from units in CityU, NGOs and other institutions gathered in the Wei Hing Theatre on 20th May. The presentation theme was "Individuals Access to City". We were delighted to invite Professor Wing Lo, Head of SS, to give a remarkable welcoming speech and Professor

Arthur Ellis, Provost, as officiating guest sharing the idea of Discover-Enriched Curriculum. Throughout the students' presentation, they demonstrated participation in Project X using three concepts: (1) GROWTH - how students discovered their talents and potentials as students in social science discipline; (2) NETWORK - where students learnt to develop their identity in SS and CityU; (3) DEVOTION - how students were facilitated to be community contributors. By the end of celebration ceremony, Dr. Alice Chong, Project Convener, gave a presentation on the results of a three-wave longitudinal research conducted over the previous five years. Significant results demonstrated out-of-classroom experience brought positive effects on self-efficacy in learning and sense of belongingness respectively.

A milestone of students' achievement

A report magazine of 5-year review on Project X and a student-initiated Project X activity manual (in Chinese) were also published and disseminated at the X-Gala 2013. Here are three feature stories from the magazine.





I still have a green bottle with "Project X" wording on. Some students might think it is an ordinary gift from the university so they abandon it. However, the usefulness of the bottle depends on whether you make it full and carry it along with you. During my three years in university, I had experienced a lot of personal development from Project X so my bottle is now fully filled up. It prevents me being shallow and it saves me in critical moments.

By SUM Wing-shan, Zan (BSocSc in Applied Sociology, Cohort 2008)



Project X is the cradle of student leaders, where I found to be the most secure and comfortable place to test my limits and try new challenges. I remembered every valuable experience that I had for these years, like participating in the leadership training and community awareness project, being an organizer and student mentor of the training camp, being a representative to present in a conference, working with my buddies to create our own learning community, and more. I had found the courage I need, the friendship I cherish and opportunities I seize. Project X is a place where I develop the sense of belongingness and bonding with other friends gradually.

By HO Ching-chi, Maria (BSocSc in Social Work, Cohort 2010)

I have joined the mentorship training programme for 2 years, and have organized the Psychology Training Camp and the Community Awareness Project, hoping to raise the awareness of whole person development, and the attitude of learning from different experiences with different people in other majors. Apart from the activities held by Project X, I had also initiated activities such as Christmas Party for three years and Study Tours for the Psychology programme. None of them was either credit-bearing, or bringing any benefit to me. Many of us contribute simply because of the love from our senior mentors, and since I am already a final year student, it is hoped that this passion can be passed onto the next cohorts, where they can bring larger impacts to the Psychology programme and make their future blossom.

By LIU Ka-kei, Jacky (BSocSc in Psychology, Cohort 2010)

Words from the Head

As a centre of research, knowledge development and transfer, the mission of SS is to create and apply knowledge to support social advancement. Against this background, we organise seminars, symposia and conferences, with the aim to provide a platform for academics, professionals and practitioners to learn from each other, to exchange experiences, and to examine and develop policy initiatives and actions. Examples of such activities include International Conference on Asian Organized Crime, International Symposium on Restorative Justice, Seminar on China-Indonesia Cultural and Educational Relations, and NGO Forum. These activities were co-organized with a number of international and community stakeholders, such as the Australian National University, Correctional Services Department, and Hong Kong Society for Indonesian Studies, etc. Moreover, we also aspire to become a gateway for easy access to these valuable resources. As such, we have launched the Social Work and Counselling book series with the City University of Hong Kong Press, and are planning to run the Routledge Studies on Asian Social and Behavioural Sciences. In the area of research, we are pleased to have six projects funded by the highly competitive and prestigious UGC General Research Fund, with a total of \$2,737,571. The projects cover the diverse disciplines of SS: psychology, criminology, social work and sociology.

Practicum education has been identified as the signature pedagogy in the context of professional education across disciplines in social work and counseling in SS. It is indeed a central form of teaching and learning to socialize students to perform the role of a professional practitioner that contains pedagogical norms in connection to integrate theories through reflective practice adhered to the professional values and ethical standards. Currently, we are running six practicum courses in four professional programmes. We have revived our fieldwork coordination mode and strengthened Discovery Enriched Curriculum in practice-based learning, with rigorous assessment methods and continuous evaluation of students' development of professionalism throughout their study.

As a social sciences department, we emphasize on the values to care and to contribute. In addition to academic learning and knowledge building, we aim to promote among our students positive values, cultivate a caring culture and a commitment to contribute to social advancement. Our department continued to receive funding to launch two flagship student projects, Project X and City Youth Empowerment Project, with the aim to facilitate students' whole person development and to empower them to become life-long learners, critical thinkers and youth leaders.

Our achievements in student learning and knowledge transfer are witnessed in a number of awards received by faculty members. Dr Alice Chong has reached a plateau of her academic and professional career. She won the UGC Teaching Award 2013 after winning the CityU Teaching Excellence Award this year. This prestigious award testifies Alice's excellence in the teaching and learning of students. Alice was also awarded the Medal of Honour by the Hong Kong Government, another testimony to her continuous commitment in community service that was fully recognized by the government and stakeholders.

In addition, Dr Annis Fung was presented the Hero Award at the National Antbullying Summit in USA for her extensive research and effective interventions on school bullying Hong Kong. Four other faculty members, Dr Esther Chow, Dr Sylvia Kwok, Dr Nancy Yu and Dr Elaine Au were awarded the CLASS Knowledge Transfer Award 2013. Their achievements add colors to the dynamic academic activities of SS, and further confirm our commitment in supporting social advancement through knowledge development and application.



Prof. Wing Lo
Head, SS Dept

Mr. Tsang Wai Wing, a final year BSS Applied Sociology student, has recently been awarded several prizes, namely: 1) CityU Outstanding Service Award; 2) SS Prize for Community Services; and 3) The Hong Kong Award for Young People (Gold Medal). The Award aims at encouraging and motivating young people aged between 14 and 25 to undertake a variety of voluntary and challenging activities. Being awarded the Gold Medal reflects TSANG Wai Wing attitude of commitment, perseverance and spirit of self-challenge. He will be presented with the

award in a ceremony officiated by the CE of the HKSAR Government in early December 2013. In a similar vein, his award for CityU Outstanding Service Award and SS Prize for Community Services are a reflection of his significant contribution to community services within Hong Kong. We are very proud of his achievements!!



Mr. Tsang Wai Wing
BSS Applied Sociology student