

The real Boon

How accurately do you think you and your profiling techniques were portrayed in *The Real Cracker* – was that ‘The Real Boon’?

The ‘Boon personality’ was deliberately de-emphasised, mostly because of personal safety, and a desire to protect my family from publicity. But in the series we’re filming now they will be focusing a bit more on my lifestyle – though not pictures of us at home eating breakfast! As for the profiling techniques, what you saw was a bit like watching edited highlights of a Formula 1 race – you get the bits which are going to be of interest. They’re going to want to put in what people on the ground floor are thinking, but it may not be reflective of what the senior officer and the profiler are thinking.

Julian Boon’s work with the police has been the subject of a Channel 4 series. JON SUTTON met him to discuss his approach to offender profiling.

to be a very salient detail to profiling the crime and the perpetrator, but if you’d seen the house it was four stories high and had a huge number of rooms in a tremendous state of disarray. When it gets condensed in a programme, people say ‘anyone would have noticed that, anybody would have interpreted that as being a cue to the motivation of the offender’, but the reality is other people had been to that scene before and had not looked upon it with a psychological eye and had not drawn any such conclusion. And yet when it is condensed from six months of an

crime scene – the infinite array, not the distilled presentation – suggested that it was not someone who was acting out of delusion, or deranged, or acting out of drug-induced behaviour, but someone who had a very strong purpose. That is something that comes with the psychological appraisal rather than the investigative appraisal of the details. This didn’t make sense to the police officers initially, but ultimately it did turn out to be the case.

It seemed to me that the more experienced police officers were simply seeking confirmation from you.

Then you’ve been misguided in that regard. With every single officer I am most particular to explain two things. One is to say ‘I ain’t God. What we’ve got here is a situation where I am coming at this from a very different angle than you – it’s neither better nor worse.’ If you’re looking for the lost kid on the hills and you get two compass fixes you can get some sort of lock on him. Now if they have a different view from me or I have a different view from them, then the next stage is to discuss why it is that we have these differences, what are the ramifications, how can we take things forward, and that means new questions, new answers, new ideas, new thinking. But one is based in investigative experience, and one is rooted almost purely in an appraisal from a psychological perspective. It is the difference which makes the value.



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Beyond that, we can all say ‘that’s easy’. We all know about creeping determinism and the ‘knew it all along’ effect, but it goes beyond that – in the programme you see the end result snapshots, whereas the profiler, when analysing the scene, has an infinite variety of detail. One example is that in one of the documentaries they showed a drawer that had been opened and only half of the contents had been removed. That proved

investigation into an hour, it’s correspondingly elevated in terms of its appearance.

So the police missed these salient points as well?

Interpreted them differently. In that particular incident the front-runners for suspects were someone who was looking for money for drugs or someone who was severely deranged. Everything about the

Do you think the investigative approach of the police and your approach are starting to meet in the middle?

I don’t think so – there is overlap, but the techniques and the approaches are very different indeed. There are also divergences in profiling practices. Mine is principally drawing on personality theoretics and research to look at why it is that a given crime has occurred, why a victim has been selected – what are the characteristics of the victim, what are the characteristics of

the crime, and then draw backwards into understanding what has gone on.

I had a case where someone was threatening to put AIDS-infected semen into supermarket sausages. There's no way you can call up PsycLIT for an exact hit on that. What you can do is look at exactly the mentality and the thinking that's gone on in the threat letters, drawing in my case on personality theoretics to be able to look and see exactly what you can say about the motivation of the offender and answer particular questions that the police have – will he do it or not? Is it a he? Has he/she done this sort of thing before?

How can you address the public perception, and even the perception amongst psychologists, that you're not just going in there like Cracker and saying 'Got it. He was an unemployed loner who lives with his mum...'

I say it's not reality. It's not what happens. I really don't care if people are going to persist in saying what's not true, I can only tell you it's not reality. If that's not enough, I would ask why do people not want to believe it?

Perhaps because we've got to the stage where people have seen so much about offender profiling, be it realistic or not, that people think they have a good idea about what person commits a crime.

I'm an old hand now and I can tell you that 'twas ever thus – 'I'm sure it was the son who did it', 'I'll bet anything you like it was the boyfriend'. People are themselves natural psychologists. You're always going to get that and everyone's entitled to their opinion in that regard. Yes, everyone's an offender profiler, that's absolutely the case. But everyone's an economist, everyone's a medic and chemist, a politician, a better than average driver, and so on. That doesn't mean they have specialist knowledge beyond simple, straightforward, natural psychology.

But are they getting more of this knowledge over the years?

The detail of that knowledge isn't something that you can read in a quick chapter and then apply, it is something that is very deep in terms of understanding of psychology. It's not something you could just buy over the counter with a quick course. Sure, you could pick up the symptoms and the signs, but the implications of a perpetrator with, say, an anal sadistic personality and how they are going to operate afterwards and the

rationale for why they had done such a thing are extremely deep. With this extreme depth comes a great deal of consideration, thinking and application.

Your other interest is love and personality; you teach that an understanding of sadism and necrophilia is important for understanding psychology as a whole. In what way?

The very need for you to ask that question shows the difference between not just police and profiler, but between most psychologists (who are not interested, bizarrely, in personality) and the profiler. It is bizarre to me and some others – for example Jim Baxter from Strathclyde University – that the vast majority of psychologists are not interested in personality. I would say that personality research should be psychology's central purview.

'who's old Ma Hindley, who's old Ma Teresa, and why did they develop like that?'

In understanding human personality it is necessary to look at both the positive actualising and negative gratification patterns of growth in the behavioural and psychological spectrum. On the negative side first of all antisocial, then sado-maso, then on to necro. Without that compass rose to interpret behaviour it's impossible to even begin to get a handle on the infinite stimulus array and work out what's gone on. How many people in police circles know about Erikson, Freud, Fromm, Maslow? All of these things could be so helpful, but it's impractical to say that an officer who is carrying a ridiculous caseload of nine or ten murders at any one time can simply be sent off to pick up that kind of information – that would take in my view the best part of two or three years to get under your belt. It's just not practical or resource-efficient. That's why they come to people with an alternative perspective. That's where the value comes in.

What happens next for profiling?

I think profiling can make a contribution, but it must always be at the discretion of the senior investigating officer of the day. Is the profile judged to be helpful? If not, don't use it. I can say that the precision that my colleagues and I can offer has grown over the last ten years, and as a consequence I think our role is more

effective than it was before. And now that the profiling work is audited with peer review under the auspices of the National Crimes and Operations Faculty it should develop further in a unified way.

It's also a reciprocal relationship, in which we've learnt more about personality. You can't get data like these from taking two dozen first-year psychology students and testing them with items on questionnaires. This is a unique source of data and it's uniquely educative, propelling you forward in terms of understanding psychology – not only on the negative front but also the positive, asking who's old Ma Hindley, who's old Ma Teresa, and why did they develop like that?

And finally... which psychologist do you most admire?

Norman Wetherick. His contribution of highlighting the futility of adopting the empiricist approach for studying the unique preserve of psychology has been immense [see *The Psychologist*, January 2003, p.22]. The fact that few have taken any notice of what he's been saying with razor-sharp logic for decades is a great mistake. Until more people take the time to understand his view that it is essential to adopt a realist approach to the scientific study of psychology, then the vast majority of the future will just be more of the same: a whirligig of data-collection, loads more papers which will be forgotten about fast, and virtually no evidence of unified growth which should be a hallmark of our science. His way is much more difficult to do – but far more rewarding in terms of any genuine development and understanding of psychology. I think he's very incisive in encouraging psychologists to think what's going to become of their research papers 20 years down the line. Will they become a relic from a research seam which people have long since got bored with, or will they form part of a unified, truly scientific way forward for psychology?

So yourself in 20 years time – do you think you will be remembered?

I shouldn't think so for a second. But in 20 years time I would like to think that I had at least taught a little bit about what could be usefully done at crime scenes and had learnt a deeper understanding of the psychology and motivation of those that commit the crimes. I'd like to think that this would have both applied and academic consequences for understanding personality. Meantime I'll plod on to my rapidly approaching senescence!