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OFFENDER PROFILING & RISK ASSESSMENT – OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

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Assessing risk of re-offending, we all know, is a big responsibility. Especially in crimes such as serial sex offending. The consequences of an assessment that does not flag up a risk carries with it an impact that is not only one that can destroy the life of a potential new victim, but which can also affect the agency or practitioner team involved in the assessment. The use of empirically validated tools is therefore integral to enable more valid and reliable predictions about the risk of future offending.

Clinical risk assessment is a process that aims to determine, based on specific psychological measurements, the likelihood that an offender is going to commit a crime. The field of risk assessment has focused on which offender characteristics are predictive of reoffending, and several tests are employed now in this process. An additive process is used to determine which of these factors increase the risk level of reoffending. As a result of this process, offenders that have more risk-related characteristics are placed into a higher risk level category than those who have fewer of these characteristics. Recent research has however shown that the current process involved in risk assessment has had difficulties in reliably assigning offenders to risk levels that can adequately predict their likelihood of re-offending, and that there is variability in offenders who receive similar “scores” in terms of whether they go on to re-offend or not. One avenue we may want to explore could be on a more detailed understanding of an offender’s behaviors at the crime scene and how we can use this information to help refine and increase the reliability of risk predictions.

Offender Profiling is another field has been developing alongside the field of risk assessment. This process can be seen as the flipside of the risk assessment coin, in that instead of predicting unknown future behavior from characteristics, it aims to characteristics of an unknown offender from the known actions they engaged in at the crime. As part of the process, offender profiling aims to examine the actions at the crime scene and categorize them into different behavioral sub-types, which are predictive of separate and distinct sets of offender characteristics. In serial crimes, the examination of whether offenders are consistent in their behavior over their series, or whether they change, escalate or whether they engage in predictable trajectories over time has been added to the process of categorizing offences into different sub-types. The overall aim is to use this information to help narrow down and prioritize the most likely characteristics of potential suspects.

Joining Forces. These two fields have to date been separate. Yet both bring important pieces to the same equation. Adding behaviors found useful in distinguishing sub-types of offending, to the risk assessment process, will provide a substantial expansion of the understanding of the relationship between psychological measurements of risk and behavior at the time of the crime, and ultimately may help construct better predictions of re-offending and recidivism. At the same time, adding a detailed psychological assessment of an offender to the profiling equation will allow for a much richer understanding of offender characteristics that may be related to certain crime scene patterns

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