

Investigative Psychology

Investigative psychology is the application of psychological knowledge, methodology, and theory to reasoning about criminal activities and the investigative process as well as to criminal and civil judicial proceedings. Its emergence is largely due to a fruitful interplay between scientific research and application. Investigative psychologists regularly assist the police and other agencies with their investigations, and this interaction shapes the academic and theoretical endeavors of the field. David Canter coined the term investigative psychology during the early 1990s as a label to describe the growing contributions several British psychologists were making to policing.

Since the early 1990s, the focus of investigative psychology has grown to capture a wide range of topics in “investigation.” These include attempting to provide cogent information about an offender’s likely characteristics, advising on the structure of an investigation and decision making, guiding the interviews of witnesses and suspects, assessing the veracity of testimony, and post-event debriefing of investigators. The scope of investigative psychology overlaps with, but is distinct from, that of forensic psychology, which centers more on the treatment of offenders after the judicial process is complete. The scope of investigative psychology also embraces a range of disciplines and research methodologies from fields as diverse as sociology, geography, and computer science. Nonetheless, the central focus is on the psychological processes--usually cognitive processes--that can assist an investigation. This focus is set apart from earlier influence by its distinct effort to base contributions on inferences from rigorous, empirical analysis of the available data.

Searching for Clues in Behavior

A simple example of the inferences that characterize investigative psychology, which also illustrates the value of applying psychology to investigative problems, is research on the spatial behavior of offenders. One aspect of geographic profiling involves examining the distribution of crime locations to predict the likely location of an offender's home residence. Investigative psychologists have learned to solve this problem by relying on a consistency in behavior known as "distance decay," which predicts that the likelihood of an offender living in an area will reduce (decay) with increasing distance from the offender's crime scenes. This consistency has proven effective, reducing the area typically searched for an offender's home by about 87 percent for serial rapists and 89 percent for serial murderers.

Some types of offenders, however, do not commit their crimes in areas close to home, but instead "commute" into a region from a different location. These offenders act in a way distinct from the majority of offenders, and this difference associates with further dissimilarities in the offenders' personal background and offense intentions. These observations illustrate a second tenet of investigative psychology--differentiation. In addition to uncovering the consistencies that allow inferences about offenders and their activities (for instance, where they live), investigative psychologists are also interested in features that differentiate individuals or investigative material, since these differences may allow inferences about other aspects of the offender (for example, criminal record) or investigative material (such as genuine versus deceptive).

Differentiating Criminals and Criminal Behavior

The possibility of behavior providing a basis for differentiation and inference underlies an area of investigative psychology that scholars call offender profiling. This area concerns inferences about offenders (whether they knew the victim, have previous convictions, etc.) from the way in which they committed their crime. This is a two-stage problem, involving the identification of the salient behavioral features of the offense, and then relating these features to differences in the offender. For example, in one of the earliest papers in this area, Frank Nutch and Milton Bloombaum revealed that gang member offenders' behavior typically fell into one of three distinct types, and that several background features including previous convictions characterized each type. In essence, then, actions at a crime scene can represent offenders' interpersonal tendencies in other aspects of their lives, such that analysis of offense behavior may allow inferences about offenders' background, personality, and experience.

Since this early work, investigative psychologists have classified the offense behavior of serial murderers, domestic burglars, arsonists, hostage takers, and others. In all of these cases, research essentially followed Nutch and Bloombaum's method of collecting data on offense behavior (typically crime-scene behavior recorded in investigative files), and examining the co-occurrences of these behaviors in an effort to differentiate types of offending or offenders. In recent years, scholars, often working with David Canter, have called these co-occurring sets of behaviors "themes" to distinguish them as fuzzy trends in behavior, rather than absolute categories. These themes have emerged in a remarkably consistent manner. In some cases, an offender's behavior remains

consistent in theme over time, thereby allowing investigators to use behavior to link a series of crimes to a single offender.

Groups and Social Networks

The efficacy with which analysis has revealed salient patterns in offense behavior has prompted some investigative psychologists to consider the actions of criminal groups, crowds, and even the organized criminal community. In this context, the challenge of predicting behavior is a multilevel problem, driven by factors such as leadership, group identity, personal roles, and interpersonal dynamics. For example, one study found a remarkable similarity in the relationships and organization of work among commercial burglars and the activities of equivalent legal groups, suggesting the application of work psychology to investigation tasks may yield benefits.

Examining crowd behavior has been equally fruitful. Using both computer modeling and observation of actual crowds, investigative psychologists have been able to map out the ways in which a crowd reacts to different forms of authority intervention. This has provided evidence of the most effective crowd control strategies, some of which officials currently employ in the control of public events and in military peacekeeping scenarios.

The notion that investigators may draw inferences not only from an individual's behavior, but also from the interaction of many individuals, is perhaps best exploited in research examining criminal networks. By adapting the sociological method known as social network analysis, investigative psychologists have begun to uncover the patterns of relationships and interactions that support criminal activities such as organized crime and terrorism. The result

is a web of connections that, on closer inspection, can help reveal the vulnerabilities, leadership hierarchies, and flow of goods and information within criminal networks. They also help researchers build a detailed picture of the social processes that underlie the development and economy of criminal activity.

The Investigative Process

While many efforts within investigative psychology support police work by analyzing offender behavior, an equally important area of work has focused on what constitutes good investigation. The management of critical incidents, such as terrorist attacks and child abductions, require key individuals to make difficult decisions in an environment that is complex, uncertain, and dynamic. Recently, investigative psychologists have taken to untangling the many strands of action that make up this dynamic environment in an effort to help investigators identify and understand the salient features, reoccurring patterns, and turning points that might occur in future incidents.

A second concern in studying the investigative process is what constitutes good investigative behavior. Current evidence suggests that investigators achieve their tasks by drawing on at least two layers of cognitive architecture. The first is that investigators structure available evidence around internalized cognitive frames or heuristics based on experience. The second is that officers draw inferences about a situation from externally imposed legal scripts, which help to shape the likely courses of events in an inquiry. Identifying how officers achieve this, and in particular understanding how effective investigators outperform others, provides a scientific base to investigator training.

Conclusion

Investigative psychology is an evolving blend of social and forensic psychology. As law enforcement agencies and the intelligence services increasingly recognized its value, the questions posed to psychologists are inevitably going to become greater in number and more diverse in nature. This growth is apparent in the increasing number of specialist graduate programs and international conferences, the emergence of dedicated research centers, and the publication since 2004 of the periodical Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling.

Ian J. Donald
Professor of Psychology and Head of School
University of Liverpool
United Kingdom

Paul J. Taylor
Lecturer in Psychology
University of Liverpool
United Kingdom

See also

Further Reading

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