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GROOMING

The long approach: what research says about grooming

Grooming is the slow work before abuse: access, trust, isolation, secrecy. Offenders describe it plainly. Researchers find almost nobody can see it while it happens.



On 15 December 2017, after five years, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse handed its final report to the Governor-General of Australia. It ran to 17 volumes. It made 189 new recommendations, 409 across all its reports. Survivors had told the Commissioners what happened to them in 8,013 private sessions (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).

Thousands of accounts, from schools, churches, sporting clubs, children's homes and youth groups. The places differ. The order of events, again and again, does not. Someone is given access to children. That person becomes trusted, first by the adults and then by the child. Time alone follows. Then secrecy. The abuse comes late in the sequence, after the ground is prepared.

Researchers call this preparation grooming. The word is everywhere now, used loosely, which makes it worth going back to what the research actually found.

What offenders say they did

For a study published in 1995, researchers in Britain interviewed 91 people convicted of sexual offences against children, drawn from treatment programmes, probation, secure hospitals and prisons. They asked how the offenders found children, how they chose them, how they kept them as victims, and what would have stopped them (Elliott et al., 1995).

The answers were practical. Offenders gained access through caretaking, such as babysitting. They targeted children with bribes, gifts and games. They kept children compliant with force, anger, threats and more bribes. They desensitised children step by step, through touch, talk about sex and persuasion. Nearly half said they had no bad feelings about what they had done (Elliott et al., 1995).

None of this describes a stranger. It describes someone who is already there, or who arranges to be there, and who is welcome.

Three targets, not one

When Craven, Brown and Gilchrist reviewed the literature in 2006, the first problem they found was that nobody agreed on what grooming meant. Studies used the word for different things, and the main theories of child sexual abuse barely mentioned it (Craven et al., 2006).

Their review sorted the behaviour into three kinds, by who it works on:

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The second kind matters most for prevention, and it is the one most often missed. A child cannot be groomed in private by someone the adults keep at a distance. The adults are groomed first, and they are groomed with the same thing that makes communities work: trust in people who help.

A sequence of decisions

Leclerc, Proulx and Beauregard reviewed research on the modus operandi of offenders against children: the concrete steps of how an offence happens, as opposed to why the offender wanted it to (Leclerc et al., 2009). Seen this way, abuse is not one act. It is a run of decisions: getting access, getting trust, getting the child alone, getting compliance, keeping the secret.

That framing carries a quiet piece of good news. Every decision point is a place the sequence can fail. Routine activity theory, developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson for crime in

general, makes the same point at the level of the situation: an offence needs a likely offender and a suitable target to meet without a capable guardian present (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Take away the unsupervised meeting and the sequence stalls, whatever the offender intends.

The experiment that should worry everyone

If grooming follows a pattern, it seems it should be recognisable. Georgia Winters and Elizabeth Jeglic tested that. Participants read one of six short descriptions of an adult's behaviour with a child, each matching a different stage of grooming. They then rated how likely the adult was to be a child molester and to commit abuse (Winters & Jeglic, 2017).

The ratings did not differ between any of the conditions. People reading the early stages, and people reading the late ones, judged the adult about equally likely to be an abuser. The authors' conclusion: people may be unable to identify potentially predatory behaviour before it ends in abuse (Winters & Jeglic, 2017).

This is the centre of the problem. Each grooming behaviour, alone, looks like something good. Paying special attention to a child is what good teachers and coaches do. Giving a lift home is a kindness. Being the parent's friend is ordinary. The pattern only shows when it is read backwards, after the abuse is known. Hindsight makes it look obvious, and that look of obviousness is what leads people to believe they would have seen it.

The same process, online

Helen Whittle and colleagues reviewed the research on online grooming in 2013. The medium changes the speed and the reach: an offender can contact many children at once, and private messages reach a child without passing through the adults around them (Whittle et al., 2013). The underlying sequence, trust then isolation then secrecy, is recognisably the same. What disappears online is the second target. There is often no environment to groom, because the adults are not in the room.

Why spotting the predator is the wrong plan

The common picture of child sexual abuse is the dangerous stranger. The research points the other way: offenders mostly reach children through relationships and roles that give them legitimate access (Elliott et al., 1995). The same pattern holds across crime more broadly, as horror films tend to discover the hard way: the masked stranger is the rarest killer in the data.

Put the two findings together. Offenders work through trusted access. Observers cannot tell grooming from kindness while it happens. A prevention plan that depends on someone recognising the predator therefore depends on the one thing the evidence says people cannot do.

What works does not require reading minds. It changes the situation so that the sequence cannot complete:

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The Royal Commission's recommendations run along these lines: they are about how institutions are built, not about how to recognise a type of person. That is where the evidence leads. Grooming succeeds because it uses trust. The defence is to arrange things so that trust is never the only safeguard.

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PSYCHOPATHY

Forty points: how psychopathy is measured, and who holds the pen

The Psychopathy Checklist is scored from 0 to 40 by a person, from an interview and a file. The same file can come back with different numbers depending on who is paying.



The experts were paid to do what they did every working week: read an offender's case file and score it on two standard risk instruments. There were 108 of them, forensic psychologists and psychiatrists. The files were the same for everyone. One thing differed. Some had been led to believe they were consulting for the prosecution. The rest believed they were consulting for the defence (Murrie et al., 2013).

Those who thought they worked for the prosecution gave the offenders higher risk scores. Those who thought they worked for the defence gave the same offenders lower ones. The differences were not trivial: effect sizes reached d = 0.85, a large effect by the usual conventions. Daniel Murrie and colleagues called it an allegiance effect (Murrie et al., 2013).

One of the instruments was the Hare Psychopathy Checklist–Revised, the PCL-R. It is one of the most widely used measures of psychopathy, and it is offered in court in decisions as heavy as civil commitment and capital sentencing (Boccaccini et al., 2008; DeMatteo et al., 2020). To understand what a score on it means, it helps to know where it came from and what it actually counts.

From a book of case histories to a checklist

In 1941 the American psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley published *The Mask of Sanity*, a book of detailed case histories of patients who presented as charming, intelligent and untroubled, and who lived lives of repeated, purposeless harm with no apparent remorse (Cleckley, 1941). Cleckley's portrait was clinical and literary. It was not a measurement.

Robert Hare turned the portrait into a research instrument. In 1980 he published a checklist for assessing psychopathy in prison populations (Hare, 1980), which became the PCL-R. The current manual sets out 20 items: among them glibness and superficial charm, a grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, conning and manipulation, lack of remorse or guilt, shallow affect, callousness and lack of empathy, impulsivity, poor behavioural controls, juvenile delinquency and criminal versatility. A trained evaluator scores each item 0, 1 or 2 using a semi-structured interview and a review of the person's records. The total runs from 0 to 40 (Hare, 2003).

Read the list again and notice how many items are judgements about a person's manner. "Superficial charm" and "shallow affect" are not facts sitting in a file. Someone decides whether they are present, partly present, or absent, and that someone is a human being sitting across from another human being in a particular role.

The evaluator effect

Murrie's experiment was controlled. Marcus Boccaccini, Darrel Turner and Murrie had earlier looked at what happens in the field. They gathered PCL-R scores for 321 sex offenders assessed by 20 different state-contracted evaluators, as part of screening for civil commitment as sexually violent predators (Boccaccini et al., 2008).

More than 30% of the variation in scores was attributable to differences between evaluators. The mean scores given by two of the most prolific evaluators differed by almost 10 points. For 22 offenders scored on two or more occasions, agreement between evaluators was low, with an intraclass correlation of .47 (Boccaccini et al., 2008).

Ten points is a quarter of the whole scale. In research on the PCL-R, a total of 30 is commonly used as a threshold for the label "psychopath". An offender can cross that line, or not, depending on who is assigned to the case.

None of this means evaluators are dishonest. In the allegiance study the experts were simply misled about who had hired them, and the effect still appeared. It is what happens when an ambiguous, high-judgement task is done by people who know which side they are on. The instrument is reliable in research conditions, with trained raters scoring independently. The courtroom is not research conditions.

A measure is not the thing it measures

A deeper problem sits under the scoring. Jennifer Skeem and David Cooke warned in 2010 that the field was in danger of treating the PCL-R as if it were psychopathy itself. Factor analysis of the checklist's items, done without a theory of what psychopathy is, cannot reveal what psychopathy is. And because several items record criminal history, a score can rise because a person has offended a lot, which makes the link between "psychopathy" and offending partly circular (Skeem & Cooke, 2010).

Their reading of the evidence was that criminal behaviour is better understood as something that goes along with psychopathy, not one of its defining parts (Skeem & Cooke, 2010). That distinction sounds academic. It is not. If a measure partly counts past crimes, and is then used to predict future crimes, part of what it is doing is restating the record in clinical language.

How well does it predict?

Min Yang, Stephen Wong and Jeremy Coid compared nine commonly used violence risk tools in a meta-analysis of 28 reports. All nine predicted violence at about the same moderate level. The exception was Factor 1 of the PCL-R, the interpersonal and affective traits most people think of as the core of psychopathy, which predicted violence among men at chance level. The authors' advice was blunt: the tools are essentially interchangeable for predicting violence, and their accuracy is not high enough for them to be used alone for decisions such as preventive detention (Yang et al., 2010).

In 2020, thirteen researchers, among them some of the most published names in PCL-R research, published a joint statement on its use in US capital sentencing, where it had been offered as evidence that a defendant would be violent in prison. Their position was that the evidence does not support using it that way (DeMatteo et al., 2020).

Psychopathy outside prison

Psychopathic traits are not confined to people with criminal records. Delroy Paulhus and Kevin Williams described the "Dark Triad" in 2002: narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, three overlapping but distinct sets of traits measurable in ordinary samples of people (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Most people with high scores on these measures are not offenders. The traits are dimensions on which everyone sits somewhere, not a category that some people belong to.

That matters for how the word "psychopath" is used. It turns a position on several continuous scales into a kind of person. Labels like that shape how everyone afterwards reads the person's behaviour, a process sociologists have studied for a long time, and one that horror fiction acts out: how societies decide who the monster is.

What a score is

The PCL-R is a serious instrument with a large research base. It identifies a cluster of traits that is real and that matters. The research on it, much of it by the people closest to it, also says plainly what it is: a structured clinical judgement, made by a person, from an interview and a file.

Read that way, a score carries three questions with it. Who scored it, and in what role? How much of it comes from the criminal record the decision-maker already has? And is it being used for something it was shown to do? The 108 experts in the allegiance study were skilled, qualified and acting in good faith. Their numbers still moved with the side that hired them (Murrie et al., 2013). The number is only as neutral as the conditions it was made in.

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VICTIMOLOGY

The walk: how offenders read a stranger, and what that does not mean

In 1981 researchers filmed people walking down a New York street and asked inmates convicted of assault who they would pick. Their answers were consistent. The research is about the reader, not the walker.



The camera was set up in an area of New York City with a high rate of assaults. It recorded more than 60 people, chosen at random, walking past. Betty Grayson and Morris Stein then showed the footage to 53 inmates who had been convicted of assaulting strangers, and asked them to rate how easy each pedestrian would be to attack (Grayson & Stein, 1981).

The inmates tended to agree with each other. Age played a part: older people were rated more likely targets than younger ones. When the researchers analysed the footage, the clearest difference lay in how each person moved. Walkers whose movement looked less whole and less organised were rated as easier targets than those who moved in a coordinated, consistent way (Grayson & Stein, 1981).

The study is famous now, often retold as advice: walk with purpose and you will not be chosen. That reading gets the research backwards, and it is worth seeing why.

The reader, not the walker

Grayson and Stein measured what offenders *perceive*. Their data are judgements made by people who had committed assaults, looking at strangers on a screen. Nobody in the footage was attacked. The study tells us something about how a particular kind of offender reads a street.

Later work followed that thread into personality. Wheeler, Book and Costello showed short clips of people walking to university students who had completed a self-report psychopathy measure. Students with higher scores judged the walkers' vulnerability to victimisation more accurately, measured against the walkers' own reported histories of victimisation (Wheeler et al., 2009).

Book, Costello and Camilleri then ran the same task with 47 inmates of a maximum-security penitentiary in Ontario. Higher scores on the interpersonal and affective factor of the PCL-R were related to more accurate judgements. Those inmates were also more likely to say, unprompted, that they were reading the person's gait (Book et al., 2013).

Put together, the finding is narrow and unsettling. Some people are better than others at reading vulnerability in a stranger's movement, and the ones who are better at it tend to score higher on traits associated with exploiting others. It is a finding about a skill, and about who has it.

Where victimology came from

The study of victims has an uncomfortable history. Hans von Hentig's 1948 book *The Criminal and His Victim* treated the victim as a participant in the criminal event rather than only its object, and sorted victims into types by the characteristics that, in his view, exposed them to crime (von Hentig, 1948). The insight was real: crimes are interactions, and who is harmed is not random. The framing aged badly. Typologies of victims shade easily into the idea that victims bring harm on themselves.

Modern victimology kept the insight and dropped the blame. The question is not what the victim did wrong. It is how events come together, so they can be prevented.

Three things in one place

Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson gave that question its most useful form in 1979. Direct-contact predatory crime, they argued, needs three things to meet in time and space: a likely offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. Remove any one and the offence does not happen. They used the idea to explain a puzzle: US crime rates rose sharply after 1960, during years when incomes and education were improving. Their answer was that daily life had moved away from the household. More homes stood empty in the day, and more people spent more time among strangers, so offenders and targets met more often with nobody watching (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

Seen through routine activity theory, the walking studies are about one of the three elements, the offender's perception of a suitable target. Guardianship, the third element, is where prevention lives. A street with people on it, a shop with staff who look up, a transport system with visible staff: none of these require the potential victim to change anything about themselves.

Once bitten

The other great finding of victimology is concentration. Graham Farrell and Ken Pease, in a 1993 report for the UK Home Office, set out the evidence that being victimised is one of the best predictors of being victimised again, and that repeats often come quickly (Farrell & Pease, 1993). A burgled house is at raised risk of burglary in the weeks that follow. A person harmed once by someone they know is at risk of being harmed again by the same person.

This has a practical consequence that is easy to state. Because harm falls repeatedly on a minority of people and places, protecting the people who have just been victimised prevents a share of crime far out of proportion to the effort. Prevention can follow the victim, not in order to judge them, but because that is where the next offence is most likely to land.

The stranger problem

Stories about predators are mostly stories about strangers: a person picked out of a crowd by someone who has never met them. The walking studies feed that picture, because a stranger on a street is exactly what they test. The crimes people fear most are often not like that. Much serious harm comes from people the victim knows, and public fear tends to run toward the rare stranger instead. Criminologists have traced how fear of strangers can grow into a moral panic about strangers poisoning children without a single confirmed case behind it.

So the research on gait should be held at its true size. It shows that some offenders are skilled readers of strangers, and that the skill tracks with certain traits. It does not show that victims choose to be victims, and it does not show that changing a walk prevents crime. No study in this line followed walkers to see whether training them reduced assaults.

What follows

Victimology at its best keeps two things in view at once. Victims are not random, and patterns in who is harmed are real and worth knowing. Responsibility for an offence belongs to the person who commits it. The patterns are for prevention: for putting guardians where targets and offenders meet, and for protecting people who have already been harmed once. The person walking down the street in 1981 was being read. The research is a study of the reader.

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INVESTIGATIONS

The print on the bag: how investigations go wrong

In 2004 the FBI matched a fingerprint from the Madrid train bombings to an Oregon lawyer. Four experts agreed. It was not his. The Inspector General's report shows how good examiners talked themselves into it.



On 11 March 2004, bombs exploded on commuter trains in Madrid, killing about 200 people and injuring more than 1,400. Spanish National Police found fingerprints on a bag of detonators connected with the attacks and sent images of them through INTERPOL. In Washington, the FBI Laboratory ran one of them, latent print 17, through its automated fingerprint system, which searched the prints of more than 47 million people (Office of the Inspector General, 2006).

On 19 March the FBI Laboratory identified the print as belonging to Brandon Mayfield, a lawyer in Oregon. A supervisory examiner made the identification. Two more examiners agreed. The FBI put Mayfield under 24-hour surveillance. It learned that he was Muslim, and that he had represented a man convicted of a terrorism offence in a child custody dispute (Office of the Inspector General, 2006).

On 13 April the Spanish police laboratory reported that its own comparison was *negativo*: the print was not Mayfield's. The FBI sent an examiner to Madrid to explain its identification. On 6 May the FBI arrested Mayfield as a material witness. In court that day he said the print was not his and that

he had no idea how it could be. He was held in a county detention centre. On 17 May the court appointed an independent fingerprint expert, who on 19 May agreed with the FBI (Office of the Inspector General, 2006).

That same day, the Spanish police told the FBI they had identified the print as belonging to someone else: an Algerian national, Ouhnane Daoud. Mayfield was released to home detention on 20 May. After examining Daoud's prints, the FBI Laboratory withdrew its identification of Mayfield on 24 May (Office of the Inspector General, 2006).

Four qualified examiners had looked at the same print and seen Mayfield. The US Department of Justice's Office of the Inspector General spent the next year and a half working out how.

What the Inspector General found

The report did not find a conspiracy, and it did not find that the examiners lied. It found a sequence of ordinary errors, each making the next one easier (Office of the Inspector General, 2006):

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The report also considered Mayfield's religion. It concluded that it was not the reason for the original identification, but that it may have contributed to the examiners' failure to revisit their conclusion once doubts were raised (Office of the Inspector General, 2006).

Same expert, same print, different answer

Itiel Dror, David Charlton and Péron used the Mayfield case to run an experiment that is hard to forget. They took five experienced latent print examiners and, without telling them, showed each a pair of prints that the same examiner had earlier identified as a match in a real case. This time the

prints were presented as the notorious Mayfield prints, an example of a mistaken match (Dror et al., 2006).

Four of the five no longer reported a match. The prints had not changed. The examiners had not changed. What changed was what they had been told before they looked (Dror et al., 2006).

Saul Kassin, Dror and Jeff Kukucka later gathered the research on what they named the forensic confirmation bias. Context, they found, shapes forensic judgement across domains: knowing that a suspect has confessed, or what the detectives believe, can tilt how an examiner reads ambiguous evidence, and how lay witnesses perceive and remember (Kassin et al., 2013). In 2009 the US National Research Council had already reported that much forensic pattern-matching evidence rested on a weaker scientific foundation than courts assumed (National Research Council, 2009).

Prime suspect

Bias in the laboratory is a special case of something broader. Barbara O'Brien gave participants a mock police file and asked some of them to name a suspect early, before they had read everything. Those who committed to a suspect early went on to favour evidence that fitted that person and to discount evidence that did not. A simple counter-measure helped: asking participants to argue why their suspect might be innocent reduced the effect (O'Brien, 2009).

Keith Findley and Michael Scott call the whole pattern tunnel vision. In their account it is not the work of corrupt investigators. It grows from normal features of human thinking, confirmation bias, hindsight bias, the pull of a story once it has a shape, and is then hardened by institutions: pressure to solve a case, the cost of admitting error, and roles that reward building a case rather than testing it (Findley & Scott, 2006).

Once an investigation narrows, its products can look like independent confirmation when they are not. A confession can come out of an interrogation built around the suspect police already believe guilty. The research on false confessions identifies the risk factors: youth, intellectual disability, mental illness, long interrogations, the presentation of false evidence, and minimisation of the consequences (Kassin et al., 2010). A forensic examiner who knows about that confession then reads ambiguous evidence in its light (Kassin et al., 2013). Two pieces of evidence that seem to support each other may both trace back to a single early belief.

The fixes are procedural

The research is consistent on one point: the answer is not to tell investigators to try harder to be objective. The Mayfield examiners were experienced and conscientious. The fixes are about what people know, and when (Kassin et al., 2013):

These are cheap. They ask people to accept a less dramatic picture of themselves: as instruments that can be miscalibrated by what they were told first. Without them, a justice system can produce guilt built at scale from parts that each looked sound.

Brandon Mayfield's print was close to the real one. The real one was in Madrid all along. Between them stood several careful people who had already seen what they expected to see.

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INTERROGATION

The ALT key: how innocent people come to confess

In 1996 two psychologists crashed a computer, blamed the student at the keyboard, and asked them to sign a confession. Most did. Some came to believe it. The research since shows which questions build a confession and which find the truth.



The student sat at a keyboard, typing letters as another student read them aloud. Before starting, they had been warned: do not press the ALT key, or the computer will crash and the data will be lost. Partway through, the computer stopped. The experimenter accused the student of pressing ALT. Every student in the study was innocent; the crash was rigged. Every one of them denied it at first (Kassin & Kiechel, 1996).

Saul Kassin and Katherine Kiechel then changed two things. For some students the letters came quickly, so they could not be sure what their fingers had done. For some, the person reading the letters, who was working for the researchers, said she had seen them hit the key. Then the experimenter wrote out a confession and asked the student to sign it (Kassin & Kiechel, 1996).

Students who were rushed and had a "witness" against them were the most likely to sign. They were also the most likely to believe it: to tell someone afterwards that they had hit the wrong key,

and to supply details of how they did it. Nothing had happened. They remembered it anyway (Kassin & Kiechel, 1996).

The stakes were a broken computer. In an interview room they are years of someone's life.

Three kinds of false confession

The study's title names what it found: compliance, internalisation and confabulation (Kassin & Kiechel, 1996). They map onto three ways an innocent person ends up saying "I did it".

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A team of researchers who study confessions, Kassin, Steven Drizin, Thomas Grisso, Gisli Gudjonsson, Richard Leo and Allison Redlich, gathered what is known about when this happens in real cases. In the person: youth, intellectual disability and mental illness. In the room: long interrogations, police presenting evidence that does not exist, and minimisation, the quiet suggestion that confessing will go easier (Kassin et al., 2010).

The deal that makes truth harder to find

Melissa Russano and colleagues built a second experiment to test two of those tactics on guilty and innocent people side by side. Students worked on problems in pairs. Some were drawn into helping their partner, which broke the study's rule; others were not. Then everyone was accused of cheating (Russano et al., 2005).

The guilty confessed more than the innocent, as they should. But minimisation and an explicit offer of a deal each raised confessions from both groups. The tactics pulled out more true confessions and more false ones at the same time (Russano et al., 2005). A confession produced that way tells an investigator less than one produced without it. The authors advised police to avoid any technique that implies or promises leniency, because it lowers the value of the confession it obtains (Russano et al., 2005).

Nobody can tell by watching

A false confession would matter less if experienced people could spot one. Kassin, Christian Meissner and Rebecca Norwick tested that. Ten prison inmates were recorded confessing to

crimes. Five confessions were true. Five were made up for the study. College students and police investigators watched or listened and judged each one (Kassin et al., 2005).

The students were more accurate than the police. The investigators were more confident, and they leaned towards calling confessors guilty. When the researchers told a second group that exactly half the confessions were false, the investigators' lean towards guilt disappeared, but their accuracy did not improve and their confidence did not drop (Kassin et al., 2005).

Once a confession exists, it travels. Forensic examiners who know a suspect has confessed read ambiguous evidence differently, and so do witnesses (Kassin et al., 2013). One manufactured statement can recruit the rest of the case to agree with it.

Two ways to question a suspect

Meissner, Redlich, Sujeeta Bhatt and Susan Brandon reviewed the research for the Campbell Collaboration. They describe two broad methods. The accusatorial method, used mainly in the United States and Canada, is built on accusation, confrontation, psychological manipulation and refusing to accept denials. The information-gathering method, used in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and much of Western Europe, is built on rapport, seeking the truth and active listening (Meissner et al., 2012).

In the field studies, both methods produced confessions at similar rates. In the experiments, where the researchers knew who was guilty, information-gathering raised true confessions and lowered false ones (Meissner et al., 2012). The review calls the finding preliminary, because there were only five field studies and twelve experiments to pool (Meissner et al., 2012).

What protects the innocent

The fixes come from the same research, and none is expensive (Kassin et al., 2010; Meissner et al., 2012):

Each one assumes something uncomfortable: that a confession is evidence like any other, made by people under pressure, and that the people applying the pressure cannot see its effect. Without them, a justice system can produce guilt built at scale one signature at a time.

The students in 1996 never touched the ALT key. Some of them could tell you how they did it.

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PREDATORY VIOLENCE

Cold and hot: the two kinds of violence

Most violence is hot: a threat, a surge, an attack that is over in minutes. A smaller share is cold: planned, quiet, aimed. Forensic science treats them as two different things, and the difference shows up in the files.



Michael Woodworth and Stephen Porter went to the files. They gathered the records of 125 offenders in Canada who had committed homicide, assessed each offender for psychopathy, and coded each killing for what it looked like: was it planned, was it for an external goal, did a burst of emotion come first, or was it what courts and novelists call a crime of passion (Woodworth & Porter, 2002)?

They had a prediction, and the files bore it out. Of the homicides committed by psychopathic offenders, 93.3% were primarily instrumental: premeditated, motivated by an external goal, and not preceded by a strong emotional reaction. Of the homicides committed by the other offenders, 48.4% were (Woodworth & Porter, 2002). The paper's title put it plainly: *In cold blood*.

The study sits on top of an older idea, one that forensic psychiatry has spent decades testing. Violence comes in two modes, and they are different enough to be treated as different things.

Two modes

The psychologist J. Reid Meloy set out the distinction in his 1988 book *The Psychopathic Mind* and reviewed the evidence for it in 2006 (Meloy, 1988, 2006). He calls the two modes affective and predatory.

is the familiar kind. It is a response to a perceived threat. The body is in high gear: heart rate up, a surge of autonomic arousal, the person consciously feels anger or fear. It is reactive and immediate, often preceded by public posturing, aimed at reducing the threat, and over quickly. Attention is heightened but scattered. The target can shift to whoever is nearest.

looks almost opposite. Arousal is minimal. There is no conscious emotion driving it. It is planned or purposeful, there is no imminent threat, and the attention involved is heightened and narrowly focused on one target. It is not limited to a moment; it can be prepared over days, sometimes with private rehearsal (Meloy, 2006).

Meloy's review draws on several lines of evidence: animal research, where different patterns of attack, a loud defensive display and a quiet stalking strike, can be distinguished in behaviour and in the brain systems that drive them; neurochemistry; psychophysiology; and forensic case material. His conclusion is that the bimodal theory is empirically valid and belongs in forensic practice (Meloy, 2006).

Why the difference matters in court and in prevention

The two modes call for different responses. Affective violence is about situations: threats, provocations, alcohol, crowded places, arguments that escalate. Reducing it means reducing the triggers and giving people ways out of confrontations before they peak.

Predatory violence is about planning, and planning leaves traces. A person who intends harm has to research, prepare, approach and wait. Each of those steps takes time and happens in the world, which means each is a point at which someone might notice, or at which the situation can deny the opportunity. Routine activity theory frames this from the other side: an offence still needs a target without a capable guardian at the moment of contact (Cohen & Felson, 1979). A predator can plan for that moment. A guardian can make it fail to arrive.

The distinction also changes how an act is read after the fact. A killing that looks like rage may be predatory, staged or rehearsed. A killing that looks cold may be the end of a long, hot conflict. Meloy's 2006 paper sets out observational and self-report measures for making the call from evidence rather than impression (Meloy, 2006).

The half the headline leaves out

The striking number in Woodworth and Porter's study is 93.3%. The more important number may be 48.4%. Nearly half the homicides by people who did *not* meet the criteria for psychopathy were also primarily instrumental (Woodworth & Porter, 2002).

That means "predatory" is a description of an act, not a species of person. Ordinary people plan harm for gain, revenge or control. People with high psychopathy scores are more likely to act in the cold mode, and much less likely to kill in the hot one, but they do not own the cold mode. Reading predatory violence as the signature of a monster is the same mistake that makes the stranger in the dark the centre of public fear. The serial killer, horror's favourite predator, turns out to be a far rarer figure than the genre suggests, and rarer now than a generation ago: the near-disappearance of the serial killer is its own story.

A predatory mind

The phrase "a predatory mind" suggests something fixed: a person built differently, who hunts. The research supports a narrower and more useful claim. Some acts of violence are predatory in their mode: planned, unaroused, aimed. People differ in how readily they act that way, and psychopathic traits are one of the strongest markers of that difference. The mode is measurable from evidence. And because it depends on preparation and opportunity, it can be interrupted.

A heron standing still in shallow water looks calm. It is the opposite of calm. It is doing the thing it is for, with complete attention, and the stillness is the method. Predatory violence is like that: quiet on the surface, focused underneath. The quiet is not a reason to think nothing is happening. It is the signal to look for the preparation.

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PROFILING

The profile and the common: what offender profiling can and cannot do

In 1992 a psychologist's profile shaped a London murder investigation around the wrong man. The research since says most claims in real profiles cannot be checked, and profilers barely beat everyone else.



On the morning of 15 July 1992, Rachel Nickell, who was 23, was walking on Wimbledon Common in south-west London with her two-year-old son and their dog. She was attacked and killed there. Her son survived. The investigation that followed became one of the most examined in British policing, not because of how it ended, but because of the method it used to get there.

The Metropolitan Police asked a clinical psychologist, Paul Britton, for a profile of the offender. A suspect emerged, Colin Stagg, a local man. There was no forensic evidence connecting him to the killing. Police then used Britton's advice in designing a covert operation, later known as Operation Edzell. An undercover officer, using the name "Lizzie James", wrote to Stagg over a period of months, inviting him to share sexual fantasies, in the hope that what he wrote would match the profile and amount to a confession.

It produced no confession. Stagg was charged anyway. In September 1994, at the Old Bailey, Mr Justice Ognall ruled the evidence from the operation inadmissible, describing it as deceptive

conduct of the grossest kind. The prosecution offered no evidence, and Stagg was acquitted (*R v Stagg*, 1994).

Fourteen years later, in December 2008, Robert Napper, a man already detained for other killings, pleaded guilty to the manslaughter of Rachel Nickell on the grounds of diminished responsibility (*R v Napper*, 2008). What led police to him was not a profile. It was a cold-case review of the forensic evidence using newer DNA techniques.

A profile is a prediction

An offender profile is a set of claims about the unknown person who committed a crime, inferred from the crime: age, background, habits, personality, where they live. Fiction has made it look like a special kind of seeing. Research treats it as what it is, a prediction, and predictions can be tested.

Brent Snook and colleagues did that in 2007. They reviewed the profiling literature and ran two meta-analyses of the studies that compared profilers with other groups, such as detectives, psychologists, students. Their narrative review found that the case for profiling rested largely on commonsense justifications: anecdotes, testimonials and the reputation of practitioners. Their first meta-analysis found that self-labelled profilers and experienced investigators did not outperform comparison groups at predicting offenders' cognitive processes, physical attributes, offence behaviours or social history, and were only marginally better on overall offender characteristics. A second analysis, with profilers alone, was more favourable on some measures, but the authors flagged the methodological weakness of the data underneath (Snook et al., 2007).

Claims that cannot be checked

Laurence Alison and colleagues took a different approach. They collected 21 real profiles, written for major investigations in the UK and elsewhere, and broke them into individual claims: nearly 4,000 of them. They then asked of each claim whether the profile gave any grounds or reasoning for it, using a standard framework for analysing arguments (Alison et al., 2003).

Nearly 80% of the claims came with no grounds, no warrant, no backing and no rebuttal at all. They were simply asserted. And fewer than 31% of the claims were falsifiable, meaning that if the offender were caught, the claim could be shown right or wrong (Alison et al., 2003). A claim such as "the offender will have difficulty with relationships" cannot fail. It also cannot help.

How a profile shapes an investigation

The research on tunnel vision explains why a profile can do harm even when nobody intends it. Once investigators commit to a picture of the offender, they tend to read new information in its light and discount what does not fit (O'Brien, 2009). A profile is exactly such a picture, delivered

early, with the authority of an expert. If it is vague enough to fit many people, it will fit whoever the investigation is already looking at, and it will seem to confirm that suspect.

That is the mechanism in the Wimbledon Common case, as the court saw it. The operation did not test whether Stagg was the killer. It tested whether Stagg could be drawn into producing words that resembled a profile, and treated resemblance as evidence. Findley and Scott describe this pattern as the institutional side of tunnel vision: once a case is organised around a suspect, the system's effort goes into building that case rather than testing it (Findley & Scott, 2006).

What responsible advice looks like

None of this means behavioural science has nothing to offer an investigation. It means the useful parts look less like a portrait and more like statistics and logistics: which offences are likely to be linked, which areas to prioritise, which lines of inquiry the base rates support. The standard Alison and colleagues proposed is a reasonable test for any profile (Alison et al., 2003):

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Advice that meets that standard can narrow a search without choosing a suspect. Advice that does not meet it is a story, and an investigation can follow a story a long way down the wrong path. On Wimbledon Common, it took sixteen years for the path to reach the right man.

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