Prospects of criminal profiling: A critical review of the BRACE Character Profile

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Introduction

The prevalence of violent and serial crime is a growing concern in South Africa and elsewhere. Despite the widespread use of criminal profiling in serial crime investigations, the practice continues to endure fierce criticism from researchers, who almost unanimously agree that profiling lacks scientific foundation and depends on flawed methodology. As a result the validity and utility of criminal profiling is compromised to the extent where evidence is not admissible in court, and serious miscarriages of justice are caused. The challenge therefore exists to establish an empirically credible instrument to standardize and benchmark behavioral profiles.

The BRACE Character Profile® is a powerful analytical tool that is designed to profile the core human nature of a known or unknown subject (UNSUB), and provides a rich narrative of a subject's profile across three domains, namely cognitive, behavioral, and existential-motivational. The ways a person thinks, desires, and acts are reflected in graphical format and interpreted in a systematic manner that are structured according to the prototypical personality disorder types of the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Objectives

The objectives of the current study are to (1) briefly address the potential of offender profiling and current shortcomings, (2) introduce the BRACE Character Profile instrument, and explain the rationale and basic methodology, (3) establish independent accuracy of BRACE, which is compared to published averages achieved with traditional profiling methods, and (4) highlight the potential applications and focus areas for future study.

Materials & Methods

The BRACE Character Profile® input form consists of 75 vignette-like questions designed to rate behavioral aspects of a know or unknown subject in terms of severity and role in the core character. The questions are clustered in matrix format across three core character types, namely Types A, B, and C, and three domains of eight or nine variables each, namely cognitive, behavioral, and existential (R. L. Smith, presonal communication, May 15, 2011). By referencing the strength of scores related to their type-domain characteristics, the likely triggers and expressions of maladaptive behavior is identified, which can be applied to a variety of settings and objectives. The matrix structure and associated characteristics are illustrated in Diagram 1 below.

Diagram 1: *BRACE Character Profile® matrix structure*

Type / Domain	COGNITIVE	BEHAVIOR	EXISTENTIAL
TYPE A SAFETY & SECURITY (RISK MANAGEMENT) (FEAR) AMORAL (THE SIMPLE) Strong's 6612	*9 items* too open-minded, poor judgment, dysfunctional, simplistic thinking	*8 items* shallow, impulsive, time and stimulus bound, undisciplined, immature	*8 items* deluded values, poorly developed social conscience, limited interests, short-sighted, unsophisticated
TYPE B POWER & CONTROL (OPPOSITION-DEFIANT) (ANGER) ANTISOCIAL (THE SCORNER) Strong's 3778	*8 items* defensive, controlling, paranoid, calculating, subversive, manipulative	*9 items* acted-out force and violence, noncompliance, rebelliousness, defiance, competitive	*8 items* desire for power and control, high sense of entitlement, low empathy, aversion to limits
TYPE C PLEASURE & COMFORT (SELF-SERVING) (DESIRE) PRO-SELF (THE FOOLISH) Strong's 3684	*8 items* deifies self, proactive fantasy, preoccupation with self-serving desires	*8 items* self-serving, pleasure seeking, attention seeking, poor boundaries, lies and deception, dramatic	*9 items* selfish motives and values, situational ethics, desires excitation and self-expression, fluid sense of self

The questionnaire results are processed in an Microsoft Excel-based macro and portrayed visually in a graphical presentation supplemented by detailed scores that indicate the presence or absence of prominent features at each matrix cross-section. A quick visual comparison of the subject profile is presented with the ten personality disorders specified in the DSM-IV-TR (2000). A typical graphical presentation of the results is illustrated in Diagram 2 below.

Diagram 2: *Graphical overview presentation of BRACE Character Profile results*
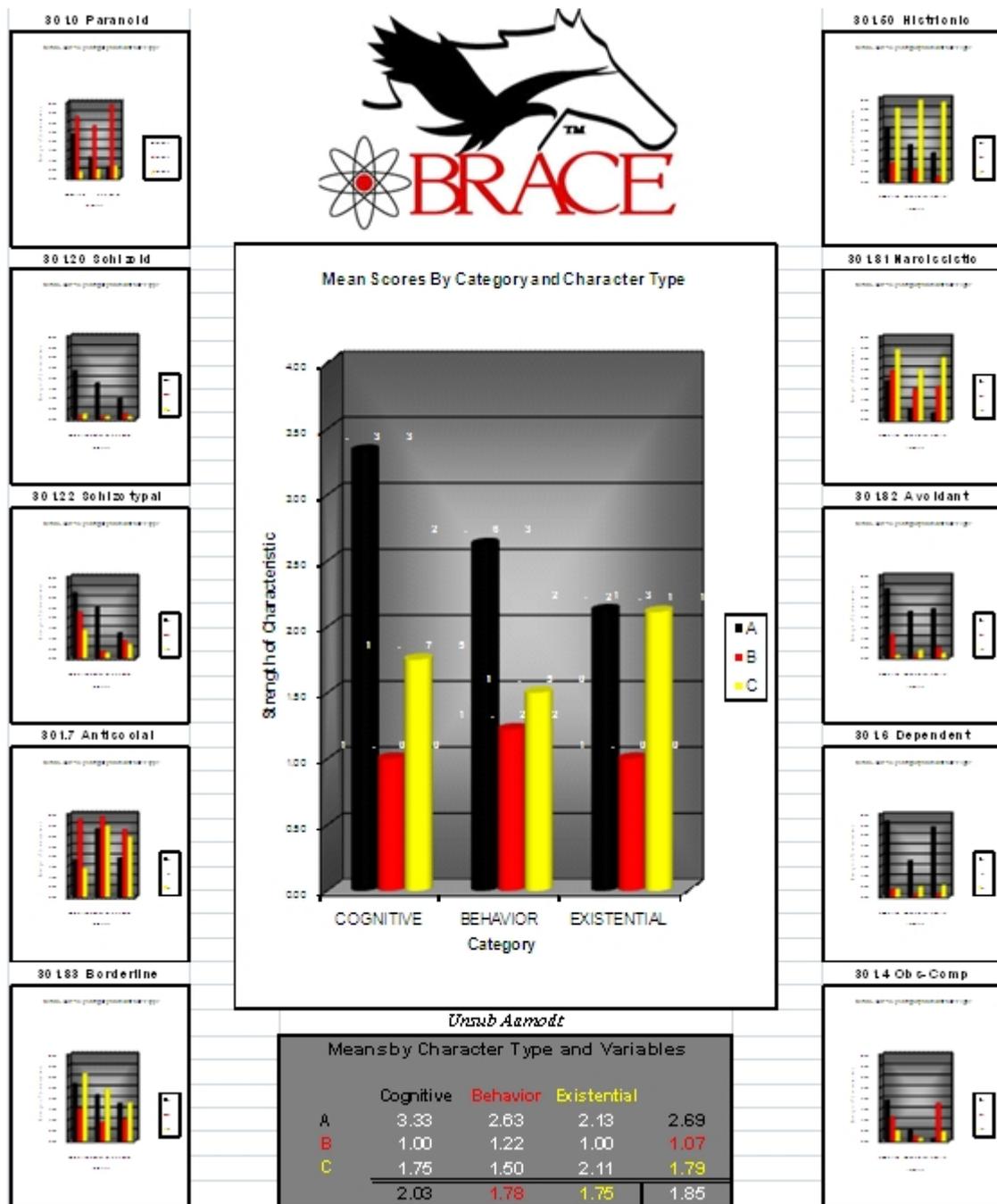
Another useful feature of the BRACE Character Profile is that the questionnaire input and profile inter-petration tasks may be done by different parties, including teams, which implies that the data capturer, who is typically an investigator in criminal settings, does not require specialized nor psychological train-ing. For the purpose of establishing the validity and utility of the BRACE Character Profile four question sets have been completed with the subject identity not revealed. These were analyzed and interpreted by Russell L. Smith, and after the subject identities were made known, the statements that made up the behavioral profile were compared to available information about the real subject identity.

Results

The results that were achieved with the BRACE Chacater Profile is presented in Diagram 3 and compared with published benchmarks that mostly examined traditional narrative-type or actuarial profiles.

Diagram 3: *BRACE Character Profile Accuracy Results*

PROFILE NO.	RATER / REFERENCE	DESIGNATION	SUBJECT	ACCURACY
1	Prof. M. Aamodt	Prof. Emeritus at Radford University, VA	US Male Serial Killer	76%
2	John Douglas (Smith, 2008)	Profiler & Ex-FBI Chief	US Male Serial Killer	"right on the money"
3	Joan Swart	Psy.D. Student	US Female Serial Killer	92%
4	Joan Swart	Psy.D. Student	SA Male Serial Killer	89%
5	Joan Swart	Psy.D. Student	Corporate Manager	93%
6	Alison, Smith, & Morgan (2003)	Researchers	Benchmark Average	16% to 31%
7	Kocsis (2006)	Researchers	Benchmark Average	50%
8	Petherick (2009)	Researchers	Benchmark Average	66%

The subject identities are not revealed in publication, as the inmate population in the U.S. and other countries are classified as a vulnerable population. Of particular note is that statements that were deemed as not accurate in these benchmark studies were mostly entirely incorrect or misleading, compared to no statements that were found to be incorrect in any of the BRACE profiles, but only partially correct, which was mainly due to a lack of information to confirm accuracy. Therefore, in terms of accuracy the BRACE Character Profile instrument has promising potential to be developed as part of a standard and scientifically accepted process of criminal profiling.

The limitations of the current study are availability of a limited data sample, the setup did not test interrater reliability, the potential effects of interpreter variability remain unknown, and the comparison between profile elements and real subject charateristics were done qualitiatively. Despite the promising results regarding profile accuracy, the utility or usefulness of the BRACE Character Profile methodology has to be established across the range of potential applications.

Conclusions

The BRACE questionnaire takes upwards of 30 minutes to complete depending on the need to gather additional information, and demands an intimate, in-depth knowledge of the subject's behavioral traits and wants-acts dynamics, which is useful for knowledge sharing and strategy planning in an investigative team. The current study establishes the accuracy and validity of the BRACE methodology, but utility and cost-benefit ratio has to be examined in practice across the various potential applications. A common criticism that can be addressed by the BRACE methodology is the reported lack of scientific grounding, emprirical evidence, and standardization of narrative-type profiles (Dowden, Bennell, & Bloomfield, 2007), and the one-size-fits-all approach of actuarial profiling methods (Harcourt, 2009).

The BRACE methodology has had exposure in forensic activities of UNSUB profiling, psychological autopsies, cold case reviews, interrogation strategy, risk of violence determination, and defense or prosecutor strategy, but the need to qualify the usefulness in each area has to be addressed to ensure practical effectiveness and evidentiary acceptability, and entrench the methodology more widely.

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Russell L. Smith, M.S. is a Certified Health Services Provider-Psychological Associate (HSP-PA) with over 30 years of experience developing and implementing individual, group, and system wide programs in mental health institutions and community-based settings. Russell developed the BRACE Character Profile instrument, of which various applications have been presented at local, state, and national levels in the U.S.

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