

# LESSON 1 INTRODUCTION

A profile of an individual at its most basic is an outline of what a person is really like in terms of their personality traits and characteristics. The most widely known form of profiling is that which is used to assess criminal behaviour. This is largely due to the popularity of TV shows and books which include criminal profiling.

When we hear the term “psychological profiling”, we often assume it is in relation to criminal behaviour, however profiling can be used for a wide range of reasons, such as:

- Assessing a person’s suitability for a specific role or profession.
- Determining a specific characteristic in a person, such as intelligence or neuroticism.
- Determining someone’s personality.
- Determining a person’s mental health state.

- Diagnosing clinical conditions.

We often also see tests online and in magazines that are termed “psychological tests”, purporting to tell you the type of person you are by answering a few questions. Whilst these may be based upon some known pattern of traits, determining an individual’s profile is much more involved than this, and such tests only provide an indication at best.

In light of its media and television popularity, psychological profiling has become well-known and accepted over recent years.



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## Suggested Tasks: ▼

*Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.*

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### Suggested Tasks

Consult any lifestyle magazines you may have or look online and search for questionnaires relating to personality, relationships, intelligence, and so forth. There are many of these ‘pop psychology’ quizzes you might find, such as:

- Who is my ideal partner?
- Are you a psychopath?
- How smart are you?

Look at how the questions are phrased.

## WHAT IS PROFILING?

Profiling is essentially building up a picture of an individual's characteristics such as likely behaviours, attitudes, personal traits, unique skills or capabilities, and so forth in relation to norms of the general population. It is an assessment carried out by a skilled psychologist, using techniques and tools from psychology to learn general and specific facts about a person. In other words, a profile is a comparison of one person's traits and behaviours to those of everyone else. It is a picture of how similar or different someone is, how well or poorly they perform, on a range of characteristics in relation to the average scores and performances of the general population.

A profile is sometimes referred to as a profile analysis. It can be simply represented as a graph of scores achieved by an individual on a particular test or group of tests, or it could be presented as a general summary of a person's traits and behaviours. The psychologist aims to find out how the person functions and also, through understanding the person's traits and characteristics, it is possible to predict how they might behave and function in future situations. For instance, if a profile indicates that someone has good problem-solving and leadership skills then we might assume that they would be able to cope well in a managerial role.

Assessments are usually used as a point of diagnosis or classification. They may place a person into a loose or strict definition of a specific category of people, for example, neurotic, extrovert, or introvert. This allows us to understand what they are like in general and assess other relevant characteristics based on people that

are similar to them. For example, one way of categorising people's personality types is as a type A (uptight) or type B (easy-going). If we determine that a person has Type A behaviour through assessment, we will then determine that they are likely to show certain behaviours usually associated with people with Type A behaviour, such as competitiveness, occasional aggressiveness, occasional hostility, liking control, perfectionism, a constant sense of time urgency, and so on.



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## ADDITIONAL READING >>>

Conduct an internet or library search to find out more about psychological profiling.

Try searching for “what is a psychological profile?” and “what are psychological profiles used for?”  
Make notes.

This is not to say that *everyone* who has Type A behaviour will behave in the same way, just that they *might* demonstrate some of the behaviours usually associated with Type A behaviour.

Also, all behaviour is on a continuum. Someone may be assessed as having Type A behaviour, but they may show minimal aggression or only appropriate aggression (for example in sport), whereas another person with Type A behaviour may show high levels of aggression. Also, people with Type A personalities will not always exhibit behaviours associated with Type A personalities. In some circumstances they may display behaviours associated with Type B personalities which is more relaxed, reflective, easy-going and less competitive. Type A and Type B personalities are just one way of segregating people, and as you will appreciate placing people into two broad groups does not tell us an awful lot. There are, of course, many other ways in which personalities may be broken into groups with similar traits.

## PERSONALITY

Before going further though, we should clarify exactly what psychologists mean by personality. In layman's terms, we might view personality as a general characteristic – “They have a good personality” meaning they are fun and friendly. “They have a dull personality” meaning they are a bit boring and probably not much fun. Psychologists are a bit more specific in what we mean by the term personality.

A personality is made up of a person's unique characteristic feelings, thought patterns, and behaviours. A personality comes from within the person and is

fairly consistent throughout their life time. Indeed, one of the main problems in treating people with personality disorders is the enduring nature of personality.

Aspects of personality will generally include:

- Consistency – an individual's behaviour is usually in a recognisable order, and regular. People tend to act in the same way or similar ways in a variety of situations.
- Impact on behaviours and actions – an individual's personality influences how they move and respond in their environment, but also causes them to act in certain ways.
- Psychological and physiological – a personality is a psychological construct but research also suggests that it can be influenced by a person's biological needs and processes.
- Multiple expressions – an individual's personality will be displayed in more than just behaviour. It will also affect their feelings, thoughts, social interactions and close relationships.
- Results from assessments and profiles should be treated with caution. Whilst they provide a good indication of an individual's enduring traits and behaviour patterns, and a good indication of how they are likely to behave, they are not going to be 100% accurate 100% of the time. We will return to the use of results from psychological profiles and assessments frequently throughout this course.

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### Suggested Tasks

Think of several people you know well. Try to decide whether they have Type A or Type B personalities (include yourself if you like).

From what you know of these individuals, do they consistently behave like someone would in the category you have assigned them to? Have you witnessed them behave outside of the expected behaviour profile for someone in this category? In light of your observations, how useful do you think Type A and Type B is as a means of segregating personality?

## TYPES OF PROFILING

There are many different types of profile which might be undertaken depending on the nature of the profile required. The rationale behind psychological profiling is that we can measure traits such as intelligence and then perhaps use that information to predict future and current behaviour. But again, difficulties with this will be discussed later. We will now discuss some of the different forms of psychological profiling:

### Forensic Profiling

This type of profiling may be used by a clinical or forensic psychologist. It is also known as offender profiling and, as mentioned above, is sometimes simply known as psychological profiling (even though the final term covers a wider range of profiling other than just criminal behaviour). Forensic profiling has become popularised by the current genre of television programmes and books which make use of forensic profiling to find criminals. However, most countries do not have specific units of psychologists working as offender profilers tracking down serial killers. Typically, a forensic or clinical psychologist will provide a written report to police, courts, or other authorities based on data gathered through various sources. This data may related to an offender in prison or one who is yet to be sentenced.

Forensic profiling involves gathering information from various sources such as interview data, observations, psychological tests, and inventories. For instance, a forensic psychologist will interview a person to find out about their background in terms of education, upbringing, mental and physical health, culture, and so forth.

They will also conduct a mini (or full) mental state examination (MSE) which provides an indication of their mental health state at the time of the interview. Whilst this is going on they will also be making observations of the person in terms of their speech, behaviour, body language, appearance, and so forth. All this information is brought together as part of the assessment. In addition, they may ask the person to undertake a personality test, intelligence test, or complete an inventory relating to a specific suspected disorder. All this information may be collated over a number of interviews.

Once tests have been scored and results finalised it is possible to write up a report giving an indication of the person's characteristics. These findings are compared to characteristics that would be expected in the general population, and hypotheses about criminality or abnormal behaviour may be inferred. For example, an individual might be diagnosed with an antisocial personality disorder (formerly known as sociopathic personality, or psychopathic personality) and this information might be used to try and help explain why they behaved in a particular way to a court of law. It might also be used to give an indication as to the individual's likely tolerance level of a prison environment, their chances of rehabilitation, their likelihood of re-offending, and whether or not their behaviour was an aberration.

In this way, the forensic psychologist's report, and their evidence as an expert witness in a court of law can influence whether an offender receives a prison sentence, the length of a sentence, whether an individual receives any therapy or ongoing psychological support, the types of interventions they may experience, and so forth.