What is Forensic Psychology? It's Not Silence of the Lambs!

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Forensic psychology is one of the fastest growing areas of psychology as suggested both by an increase in the practice of clinical psychology within our legal system and the increasing interest expressed by undergraduate and graduate students. However, students often become interested in the field because of sensationalistic media portrayals that may not be accurate nor offer realistic employment opportunities. Students may become disheartened to learn that certain media depictions are less than realistic but should be excited to learn about the real possibilities forensic psychology has to offer. This article will attempt to describe the field of forensic psychology, identify possible careers, and suggest relevant training opportunities.

It's difficult to turn on a television, go to the movies, or walk through a bookstore without running across a fictional portrayal of a crazed but brilliant serial or mass murderer being tracked by a psychologically sophisticated and deductively sound hero. Popular movies such as Silence of the Lambs and Hannibal and television shows like Profiler often depict the intersection of law enforcement and psychology in sensationalistic and dramatic fashion. If you watch the news or read a newspaper you can hear about the psychological "sketch" offered by a forensic psychologist in the latest Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Kaczynski, or Michael McDermott trial. Our society has become increasingly fascinated with individuals who seemingly are able to perpetrate the most heinous crimes imaginable. Now is this stuff interesting?

Sure it is! Similar things got me interested in forensic psychology! We are horrified but drawn to these scenes much like we are drawn to the aftermath of a car accident. Are these depictions accurate? Probably not. Are they accurate depictions of forensic psychology? Almost never. Forensic psychologists are not able to become psychically linked with a particular killer and visualize their next move as the heroes in the movies or on television seem to do. Forensic psychology is a discipline based on the scientific practice of psychology. So, while forensic psychologists get the cool jobs, they are far from the situations often portrayed.

So What is Forensic Psychology?

If someone told you he or she was a forensic psychologist, what would you think they do? Do they have something to do with the high school speech and debate team? Do they perform autopsies on homicide victims? If you are like most people, these thoughts probably immediately came to mind. However, the origin of the word forensic comes from the Latin word forum. Forums were the public gathering places in the Roman city-states where much of the judicial process took place in the form of debates. As a result, forensic psychology deals with the intersection of psychology and the legal process.

There continues to be debate in the field about the definition and breadth of the term forensic psychology. Some professionals apply the term broadly to describe any intersection of the legal system and psychology (Wrightsman, 2001). However, others use the term to specifically describe the clinical practice of psychology in legal contexts (e.g., Melton, Huss, & Tomkins, 1999). For example, the American Board of Forensic Psychology and the American Psychology-Law Society (1995) define forensic psychology as:

the professional practice by psychologists within the areas of clinical psychology, counseling psychology, neuropsychology, and school psychology, when they are engaged regularly as experts and represent
themselves as such, in an activity primarily intended to provide professional psychological expertise to the judicial system. (p. 6)

Such a definition focuses the field on the mental health aspects of psychology and the law and away from the more experimental areas of jury selection and eyewitness identification. When I speak of forensic psychology, I will be focusing on the intersection of mental health, or the clinical practice of psychology, and the law. Moreover, when I speak of the law, I do not simply mean law enforcement but the legal process itself. Working with law enforcement is just one activity a forensic psychologist may undertake in a routine day.

Clinical psychologists are broadly concerned with the assessment and treatment of persons with mental disorders. They interact with people suffering from a variety of mental health problems ranging from the less severe (marital difficulties and adjustment problems) to the more severe (e.g., schizophrenia, posttraumatic stress disorder, major depression, or bipolar disorder). Clinical psychologists specializing in forensic psychology work with individuals who may present with a variety of mental illnesses and mental health issues within the context of the criminal or civil arenas of the law. Civil matters usually involve civil litigation in which a plaintiff usually brings forward a suit because they believe someone else has physically or emotionally injured them. Examples may include personal injury suits, civil commitment proceedings, child custody disputes, or workers’ compensation cases. Criminal areas of forensic psychology include those situations in which an individual has committed a crime against society. Examples that necessitate the involvement of a forensic psychologist may include pleading insanity, raising issues of competency to stand trial, assessment of future violence potential during sentencing, or treatment of sex offenders.

Careers in Forensic Psychology

So what can a forensic psychologist do besides track down the bad guys and hang out with "crazy" people who eat their relatives? Forensic psychologists can be employed in a variety of settings including jails, prisons, state hospitals, federal and local law enforcement agencies, community mental health centers, juvenile detention facilities, private practice, or colleges and universities. Forensic psychologists are likely to perform a myriad of roles in these settings that are only limited by time and imagination.

For example, let's take a brief snapshot of the possible tasks a forensic psychologist may perform. Let's say a man --we'll call him Charlie--is accused of brutally murdering a family while they slept. Before he enters a plea, the court may be interested in whether Charlie possesses sufficient intellectual ability (i.e., is competent) to enter a plea (e.g., guilty or not guilty) at his initial arraignment. A forensic psychologist may be called to ascertain whether Charlie has sufficient cognitive ability to understand the nature of the charges against him and can assist in his defense. So, let's assume the court finds Charlie competent to enter a plea and stand trial for the crime. Charlie may suffer from paranoid schizophrenia, and his defense attorney may be interested in using an insanity defense. Again, you might be asked to assess whether at the time of the crime Charlie was suffering from a mental illness that made it impossible for him to understand the quality of his actions or the difference between right and wrong. Assume the outcome did not go well for Charlie and he was convicted of the murders. Before the court decides whether to sentence him to a particular period of time behind bars, you might once again be asked to evaluate him regarding his potential for future violence. The court, in deciding his ultimate sentence, may take into consideration whether it is probable and under what conditions Charlie is likely to commit future violence. Finally, it appears that Charlie has been sentenced to serve his time in the same institution where you work. It is now your job to design and implement a treatment program for Charlie in order to stabilize him while he is incarcerated and improve his chances if he is ever released. It is not likely that a forensic psychologist would be involved in every aspect of this example case, but it does give you some idea of the possibilities.

It's clear that with Charlie, forensic psychologists are asked to really get inside the mind of someone. You may have to assess an individual's current cognitive and mental abilities. You may have to play detective and attempt to assess their mental status at some point in the past. You may even be asked to predict someone's future behavior. How good of a job does your local meteorologist do at predicting whether it will rain tomorrow or not? Can you imagine how difficult it is to predict the behavior of a human being over the
next 20 years of that individual's life? However, it's these challenges that offer the most excitement for students entering the field of forensic psychology.

One of the biggest enticements for students to become interested in forensic psychology is their interest in "criminal profiling." The reality is that most law enforcement agencies do not use criminal profiling procedures, and those agencies that do use similar procedures are more likely to employ law enforcement personnel than they are to employ a forensic psychologist. Criminal profiling is much more of a law enforcement technique and art form than it is a scientific process (Wrightman, 2001). Students interested in these types of careers should have a broad interest in law enforcement and not simply intend to work as a profiler, because these employment opportunities are extremely rare. Again, the sensationalistic portrayals fall a little short of the reality. Criminal profiling was conceived out of years of law enforcement experience with serial offenders and is not rooted in psychological principles. Thus, most people who conduct "profiling" are law enforcement personnel who may or may not have formal training in the behavioral sciences. More importantly, many graduate programs in forensic psychology do not favorably evaluate applications from students whose sole interest is in criminal profiling.

Training in Forensic Psychology

There are almost as many ways to be trained in forensic psychology as there are possible tasks for forensic psychologists to perform. However, the first thing that should be noted is that in order to be a forensic psychologist you have to be a good clinical psychologist. Also, by saying clinical psychologist I mean someone who practices psychology in some sort of mental health setting, not simply someone who has received a graduate degree in clinical psychology (see Norcross, 2000, for the distinction between clinical and counseling psychology). What I mean is that in order to become a good clinical or practicing psychologist you need a basic understanding of psychopathology, clinical assessment, and psychotherapy. You need to be able to tell the difference between a criminal and a noncriminal. The best training programs allow you to gain experience with both. Students who are only interested in learning about forensic clients and are not interested in more traditional clinical psychology areas could have some difficulty succeeding in quality clinical or counseling psychology programs. However, there are certainly programs available that will allow you to focus on forensic populations while limiting your experience with nonforensic clients.

You may have already guessed that in order to obtain a career in forensic psychology you will probably need a graduate degree, either a master's or a doctorate. You certainly might be able gain employment in an entry-level position at a forensic hospital or prison (e.g., psychological technician), but you will be very limited by your lack of education. As a result, a number of graduate programs are increasing their offering of forensic course work and practica (Bersoff et al., 1997). The number of programs specific to forensic psychology are also increasing at both the master's and doctoral levels (Melton et al., 1999).

There are several master's programs in forensic psychology at institutions such as Castleton State College, the University of Denver, John Jay College, Marymount University, and the Sage Colleges. Of course, these programs are likely to vary in quality and focus of their training. For example, some of these programs identify themselves as "forensic" psychology programs, but their focus is on the broader psychological field and not on the clinical practice of psychology. Students interested in forensic psychology should do a thorough job of investigating a program and asking difficult questions. How long does it take students to graduate from the program? Do graduates of the program obtain the types of jobs in which I am interested? What types of job placements or clinical practicum experiences are available? If you eventually want to obtain a PhD, is the program successful at placing students in quality PhD programs?

There also are a number of doctoral training programs at schools such as the University of Alabama, the University of Arizona, the University of Nebraska, Sam Houston State University, and Simon Fraser University, to name a few. A more comprehensive list of graduate programs in forensic psychology can be obtained by checking the American Psychology-Law Society website at www.unl.edu/ap-ls/gradp.htm and www.unl.edu/ap-ls/CAREERS.htm [WEBMASTER NOTE: This material can now be accessed at www.ap-ls.org/students/graduateIndex.html]. At the doctoral level, forensic programs can be very diverse. Programs may offer joint degrees in both clinical psychology (PhD or MA) and the law (JD or MLS) or simply offer specialized course work and clinical experience on the way to a PhD. It is certainly not necessary to receive
a law degree in order to be a forensic psychologist. However, joint degree programs may offer some advantages to particular students. Melton et al. (1999) offer a more comprehensive discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of doctorate programs in forensic psychology.

Remember that in order to be a good forensic psychologist, you must first be a good clinical psychologist. In order to become a competent and successful forensic psychologist, you do not have to enter a forensic psychology program, though it is preferred. In fact, most forensic psychologists have not received their education in one of the select few forensic psychology programs. Obtaining admission to any APA-approved clinical or counseling doctoral program is an achievement! If you decide to pursue your training in a program that does not have a specific focus in forensics, you can obtain predoctoral training in forensically focused clinical placements. You can seek forensic training at forensic predoctoral internships such as with the Federal Bureau of Prisons or a number of mental hospitals around the country. There also are a number of postdoctoral fellowships that can be obtained after you have completed your PhD (see Bersoff et al., 1997, for a comprehensive list).

**Conclusion**

Simply put, forensic psychology is an awesome field! While you are probably not going to become like Special Agent Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs*, there are a number of opportunities available for forensic psychologists. It's hard for me to believe that my original interest has ultimately paid off, and I get to continually learn and teach about the things that I find so interesting and challenging. Furthermore, forensic psychology has not even approached its potential. The next generation of students has a very bright future ahead of them.

**References**


For more information, visit the American Psychology-Law Society website: [www.ap-ls.org](http://www.ap-ls.org)