

## Forensic Psychology Practice

Jane Pyler

*Department of Psychology, La Sierra University, California, USA*

### DESCRIPTION

Forensic psychology has surged in recent years, primarily due to such television programs as “Criminal Minds,” where criminal profilers have an almost psychic ability to give elaborate personality and behavioral descriptions of perpetrators (UNSUBs). This is a misconception of the role that forensic psychologists play and leads to confusion about who is a forensic psychologist. Since forensic psychology is a relatively new field within psychology, it is still having growing pains. Thus, it would probably be best to start with a definition.

Most forensic psychology textbook authors describe forensic psychology as having a broad definition and a narrow definition. Forensic psychology, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is the application of clinical specialties to the legal arena. This definition emphasizes the application of clinical psychology to the forensic setting. Christopher Cronin, who has written a well-known textbook on forensic psychology, defines it as “The application of clinical specialties to legal institutions and people who come into contact with the law” again emphasizing the application of clinical skills such as assessment, treatment, evaluation to forensic settings. This is considered a narrow definition. The broad definition of forensic psychology emphasizes the application of research and experimentation in other areas of psychology (e.g., cognitive psychology, social psychology) to the legal arena. This would include applying results from studies in areas such as cognitive psychology to legal questions. Two good examples include Elizabeth Loftus’ many studies on eyewitness identification and Stephen Ceci’s research on children’s memory, suggestibility and competence to testify. Cronin labels this definition “legal psychology” or “The scientific study of the effect of the law on people, and the effect people have on the law.”

Thus, the practice of forensic psychology, and perhaps the most frequent duty of forensic psychologists, is the psychological assessment of individuals who are involved, in one way or another, with the legal system. Therefore, although it is necessary to have training in law and forensic psychology, the most important skills a forensic psychologist must possess are solid clinical skills. That is, skills like clinical assessment, interviewing, report writing, strong verbal communication skills (especially if

an expert witness in court) and case presentation are all very important in setting the foundation of the practice of forensic psychology. With these skills forensic psychologists perform such tasks as threat assessment for schools, child custody evaluations, competency evaluations of criminal defendants and of the elderly, counseling services to victims of crime, death notification procedures, screening and selection of law enforcement applicants, the assessment of post-traumatic stress disorder and the delivery and evaluation of intervention and treatment programs for juvenile and adult offenders. The practice of forensic psychology involves investigations, research studies, assessments, consultation, the design and implementation of treatment programs and expert witness courtroom testimony.

Arguably one of the most interesting assessments for a forensic psychologist is assessment in “mens rea” (insanity) cases. In the U.S., a person cannot be held responsible for a crime if he/she did not possess a “guilty mind” (mens rea) at the time the criminal act was committed. There are several conditions in which the law recognizes that a guilty mind is absent (e.g., self-defense). “Insanity” is not a psychological term but a legal one. The standard for insanity is determined by each state, and there is also a federal standard. A common standard is whether the person knew what he/she was doing was wrong. The forensic psychologist has to determine not how the person is functioning at the present moment, but his/her mental state at the time of the crime. Thus, much of the forensic psychologist’s work is retrospective and must rely on third-party information, collateral contacts and written communications (e.g., statements made at the time of the crime).

Although there are master’s level degrees in forensic psychology, all forensic psychologists must have either a PhD or a PsyD degree from an American Psychological Association (APA) accredited or Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)-accredited doctoral program. They must also have the equivalent of two years of organized, sequential, supervised professional experience, one year of which is an APA or CPA accredited predoctoral internship. Often there are other requirements as well. The candidate can apply for licensure and sit for an oral or written exam (depending on the state where the candidate will

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**Correspondence to:** Carlos Roberto, Department of Psychology, La Sierra University, California, USA, E-mail: pylerj@yahoo.com.br

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be practicing). Practitioners can also become board certified (as diplomates) by the American Board of Forensic Psychology.

Forensic psychology has grown in the past 20 years. It is a broad applied field that offers numerous opportunities to the practitioner. Forensic psychologists work in many different legal environments, writing reports, giving testimony, doing direct treatment or working with therapeutic communities. In his

book "Trials of a Forensic Psychologist: A Casebook," Charles Patrick Ewing gives a clear picture of what it is like to evaluate, write and give testimony in court on difficult criminal cases. In many of Stephen Ceci's and Elizabeth Loftus's studies, forensic concerns change the nature of how we conceptualize memory and miscommunication. Forensic psychology is definitely here to stay.