



The Role of Forensic Psychology in Insanity Defense Cases

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DESCRIPTION

The insanity defense remains one of the most controversial and complex aspects of criminal jurisprudence, situated at the intersection of law, psychology, and societal norms. Rooted in the principle that criminal liability requires both a wrongful act and a culpable mental state, the insanity defense allows for the acquittal of defendants who, at the time of the offense, were unable to understand the nature or wrongfulness of their actions due to severe mental illness. This legal doctrine is not a loophole or a path to impunity, as is often misunderstood in public discourse, but rather a safeguard to ensure that individuals are not punished for actions committed under conditions of profound psychological dysfunction.

Historically, the foundation of the insanity defense can be traced back to the M'Naghten Rule, established in 1843 following the case of Daniel M'Naghten, who was found not guilty by reason of insanity after killing the British Prime Minister's secretary under a delusional belief. This rule introduced the criteria that a defendant must be suffering from a "defect of reason" due to a "disease of the mind," rendering them incapable of understanding the nature and quality of the act or recognizing that it was wrong. Though the M'Naghten Rule continues to be influential, jurisdictions vary significantly in how they define and apply insanity standards, with some adopting alternative models such as the Irresistible Impulse Test or the Model Penal Code's substantial capacity test.

Modern forensic psychology plays a pivotal role in the application of the insanity defense. Expert evaluations are important in assessing the mental state of the defendant at the time of the offense. These assessments often involve extensive interviews, psychological testing, review of medical and legal records, and collateral information from family or law enforcement. The forensic expert must determine whether the individual's mental disorder was severe enough to impair their cognitive or volitional capacities, guided by the legal standard applicable in the relevant jurisdiction. These evaluations aim to

be objective, but they are often subject to scrutiny and contestation in adversarial court proceedings.

Public perception of the insanity defense is frequently shaped by high-profile cases, which can lead to misconceptions about its prevalence and efficacy. Contrary to popular belief, the insanity defense is rarely used and even more rarely successful. Studies have shown that it is raised in less than 1% of felony cases and is successful in only a fraction of those. Moreover, individuals found not guilty by reason of insanity are typically committed to psychiatric institutions for durations that may exceed the length of a conventional prison sentence. The focus shifts from punishment to treatment, with periodic evaluations to determine ongoing risk and the potential for reintegration into society.

Despite its limited use, the insanity defense continues to generate ethical and legal debates. Critics argue that it may be exploited to evade accountability, while proponents emphasize its necessity in upholding humane and just legal standards. The challenge lies in balancing individual rights, public safety, and the integrity of the legal system. Advances in neuroscience and psychological research offer potential to refine our understanding of criminal responsibility, but they also raise concerns about determinism and the limits of legal concepts such as free will and intent.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the insanity defense underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between law and psychology. It demands rigorous evaluation, thoughtful jurisprudence, and informed public dialogue. As forensic psychology continues to evolve, the defense must adapt to incorporate scientific developments while maintaining its foundational commitment to justice and mental health awareness. Its application may remain controversial, but its existence reflects a legal system striving to account for the complexities of human behavior in the face of severe mental illness.

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