

## Clinical Forensic Psychology

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### INTRODUCTION

Forensic psychology makes it both a challenge and a blessing, the description of forensic psychology is very straightforward but also complex. At a very basic level, forensic psychology is the application of psychology to the legal system. However, there has been a great deal of debate about the breadth of topics that such a definition includes. Some believe that forensic psychology refers only to the clinical aspects of psychology, such as the assessment and treatment of mental illness. Others believe that forensic psychology should be interpreted more broadly and include nonclinical topics, such as eyewitness identification and jury decision making. Our focus will be on only the clinical aspects of forensic psychology, so our definition of forensic psychology is the application of the clinical practice of psychology to the legal system. You already may be saying to yourself, "For such a sexy topic, this definition does not seem very sexy to me." So, why is forensic psychology so inherently interesting?

Many students ask how they can become a forensic psychologist or work in some of the areas already mentioned. The answer to that question is as varied as the different tasks that a forensic psychologist may undertake. The one thing that is clear is that becoming a forensic psychologist involves going to graduate school, and working in these areas typically means obtaining a PhD in psychology (Huss, 2001). Although obtaining a terminal master's degree may allow you to conduct therapy and even conduct psychological evaluations in some states, in order to practice independently in many forensic contexts you need to obtain a doctorate degree in forensic psychology. However, there are numerous ways to become a practicing forensic psychologist. Read more about Clinical Forensic Psychology Education.

### CLINICAL FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

One of the things that make being a forensic psychologist both a joy and a challenge is its sex appeal. That's right, forensic psychology is a sexy topic. Clinical forensic psychology is inherently appealing at some very basic level that gets students and the everyday person interested in the topic. However, with this sex appeal comes the challenge. People think they have a good sense of forensic psychology and the different things a

forensic psychologist does. The problem is that this sense comes from many of the sensational aspects of forensic psychology that are frequently exaggerated or simply inaccurate. In this section, we will try to maintain this sex appeal while we define clinical forensic psychology, examine its difficult relation with the law, describe topics that are characteristic of forensic psychology and the job of a forensic psychologist, and describe the training and education necessary to be a forensic psychologist.

### SENSATIONAL ASPECTS OF FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

An excerpt that appeared in the online encyclopaedia states, "Forensic psychologists are perhaps most commonly recognized for their involvement in the processing of a crime scene." This excerpt is an excellent example of the misguided beliefs that frequently appear regarding forensic psychology and the critical evaluation that should take place when using an online "encyclopaedia" that anyone with Internet access can contribute to in the modern age. The real problem with the above statement is that it is true. The public's notion of forensic psychology does come from television shows and movies in which a psychologist is somehow involved in the "processing of a crime scene." Movies like *Silence of the Lambs* and *Kiss the Girls* frequently depict forensic psychologists as super sleuths who get into the minds of serial killers with their psychological techniques and foil their murderous plans. There was even a television show on for several years, *Profiler*, in which a Dr. Samantha Waters played a "forensic psychologist" who was a psychic detective. The only problem with such a show is there is no empirical support in psychology for the existence of psychic powers, nor have forensic psychologists ever solved crimes by reading tea leaves or interpreting psychic visions.

### SEXUAL OFFENDERS

Sex offenders are increasingly the focus of risk assessment and a variety of other legislative and clinical attempts at reducing sexual violence. A sexual offender is an individual who has committed a sexual act that involves the use of force or a threat against a noncondensing person. Sexual offenses can include a wide range of sexual acts against a wide range of victims. Increasingly, sexual offenders are the focus of a great deal of public attention and legislative reform. It is difficult to turn on

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**Received date:** February 23, 2021; **Accepted date:** March 10, 2021; **Published date:** March 18, 2021

**Citation:** Robin A (2021) Clinical Forensic Psychology. *J Foren Psy.* 6:165.

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the television news or search any national news source on the Web for an extended time without coming across a story about sex offenders. Read more about Sexual Offenders.