

# FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

## **Definition**

Forensic psychology involves the application of psychological knowledge to all aspects of the criminal and civil justice system, and therefore encompasses a broad array of topics and methodologies. A common view of forensic psychology is that it is concerned with the 'criminally insane'. However, although psychopathy and dangerous and severe personality disorder are prominent themes in both research and practice, forensic psychology is equally concerned with the broader spectrum of criminal behaviour, investigation and rehabilitation. Key areas within forensic psychology include: theories of offending that attempt to seek a psychological explanation as to why certain people commit criminal acts, whether these be serious sexual offences or minor theft; offender profiling, which is an investigative technique that makes use of statistical modelling of the behavioural patterns of known criminals to provide details concerning the type of person that may have committed a crime; studies of the techniques and procedures used by police agencies to obtain evidence from witnesses, especially through interviewing and identification procedures; the reliability of witness testimony, the validity of expert testimony and the behaviour of juries in the courtroom; and the rehabilitation of offenders, which is largely based on clinical psychological treatment.

## **Distinctive Features**

A key feature of forensic psychology is its applied nature, with research and theory tending to be directed toward specific criminal justice system policy and practice. It is also a discipline that has both prominent academic and practitioner branches. Forensic clinical practitioners often work within secure psychiatric units concentrating on the assessment and rehabilitation of offenders, although their expert knowledge is also of use to the police, courts and

probationary services. To practise in a clinical setting requires extensive clinical training and accreditation, making one distinctive feature of forensic psychology the prominence of national accrediting bodies, such as the Health & Care Professions Council, the British Psychological Society, and the American Board of Professional Psychology.

It is a discipline that draws on knowledge from many other areas of psychology. As well as the treatment of offenders making use of clinical psychological theory and practice, other areas involve knowledge from cognitive, personality, developmental and social psychology. For example, in studying the role of a witness in the criminal justice system it is necessary to understand their cognitive processes, such as those of perception and memory, that will determine the extent and accuracy of the information the witness can provide, whilst an understanding of the social processes that occur in small groups is crucial when examining jury decision making.

As might be expected from such a broad array of topics, forensic psychology is studied using multiple methodologies and perspectives. These include clinical intervention and case studies, laboratory and field experimentation, psychometric testing, the statistical analysis of offender patterns, interviewing, and qualitative analysis techniques. Although the discipline as a whole can be said to involve a broad array of topics and methodologies, it is often the case that a particular approach will dominate within certain sub-areas: as well as clinical methodologies being prevalent in the treatment of offenders, the scientific, experimental approach tends to be used when studying witnesses, and psychometrics are widely used in developing theories of offending.

Overall, breadth is a key factor that makes forensic psychology a distinct discipline from that of 'forensic psychiatry', although there is undoubtedly a degree of overlap between the two. One key distinction is that forensic psychology seeks to study more of the criminal

justice system, notably that pertaining to criminal investigation. However, even within a clinical setting it is possible to distinguish a forensic psychologist from a forensic psychiatrist on the grounds of the therapeutic approach taken.

Although there are many courses available that offer interdisciplinary awards in forensic psychology and criminology, the roots of the two disciplines in psychology and sociology can lead to differences in how similar topics are approached. These differences are perhaps most prominent in theories of offending, with forensic psychologists tending to look more to genetic, cognitive and personality characteristics, whilst criminologists concentrate on broader societal and structural factors. Other distinctions result from differences in methodology, with clinical and experimental approaches featuring far more prominently in forensic psychology.

## **Evaluation**

As forensic psychology is an applied discipline, one way of evaluating its success is to examine its impact on relevant policy, procedures and practice. Such an evaluation reveals considerable international differences. In the USA, psychologists are frequently called as expert witnesses to give evidence on many topics, including the reliability of witnesses, whilst in the UK this is less usual, with expert forensic psychology testimony often being limited to assessments of the mental state of the accused. Arguably, however, forensic psychology has had more of an impact on legislation in the UK, with policy such as the Codes of Practice to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act taking on board the findings of psychological research. The implementation of knowledge gained from forensic psychology can also be seen in many countries around the world within rehabilitation programmes and the procedures used by the police for interviewing witnesses, particularly vulnerable witnesses such as children.

It is also possible to take a more critical stance and evaluate forensic psychology from a criminological perspective. As is generally the case in psychology, forensic psychology does not tend to give a prominent role to broader social issues, and it can be argued that the resulting theories of criminality therefore miss many contributing factors. In addition, definitions of crime and criminality are often not questioned and there is a focus on the crimes of the individual. A possible result of this is that the challenge offered by forensic psychology to the criminal justice system involves the implementation of reasonably minor procedural changes rather than more radical and far-reaching criticisms of the general approach taken.

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**Associated Concepts:** cognitive behaviourism, forensic anthropology, psychopathy

### **Key Readings**

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