Criminal psychology: a beginner’s guide.

Preface.

Criminal psychology covers a range of fascinating topics. For centuries people have been very interested in crime, and in the last hundred years psychology has grown from a fledgling discipline to one of great importance. In several countries around the world (e.g. the USA, the UK), psychology is now among the top three most popular subjects to be studied at university or college.

It is now recognized that psychology is highly relevant to many aspects of life, especially those to do with offenders, prisons, the police, witnesses, and the courts. This book has been written for members of the general public who wish to have a better understanding of criminal psychology than that which can be provided by the popular media such as newspapers and television. In this book we have explained in a reader-friendly way the research (and theory) which underpins modern criminal psychology. Thus the book will also be of interest to those commencing their studies of criminal psychology (e.g. in college or the final years of school).

We authors of the book have used everyday language to explain the many facets of criminal psychology. We have described the complexity of the issues and explained why, therefore, there are rarely simple answers or rules regarding criminal psychology (e.g. why harsh punishment may not reduce offending, that liars may not look away when deceiving you, that coercion may not produce reliable confessions).

The contents of this book would not have been possible with- out the help of all those people around the world who have participated in the thousands of relevant psychological studies. We would like to thank the police officers, witnesses, victims, offenders, prison officers and others who have given up their time, often in very difficult circumstances, to make a contribution. We would also like to thank Julie Blackwell-Young for her assistance with chapter eight and Aimee Jones for, among other things, collating the chapters.

Ray Bull Leicester January 2006.

Chapter one.

criminal psychologists: within which settings do they work?

Introduction.

If you were asked the question ‘What do criminal psychologists do in their everyday working life?’, what would you answer? If you were to believe the latest television dramas you might think that the main role of criminal psychologists involves helping the police to catch criminals or engaging in the ‘profiling’ of offenders. If, however, you had watched films such as The Silence of the Lambs, then you might believe that all criminal psychologists, like Clarice Starling, attempt to gain a better insight into the minds of serious offenders by talking to convicted offenders about their crimes.

These popular conceptions of the work of criminal psychologists, while they may be true for a small number, do not represent the wide variety of roles that those trained in criminal psychology can, and do, work. From assisting the police in investigations, pro- viding advice on interviewing of suspects or witnesses, working as expert witnesses in court cases, working in the rehabilitation of offenders, conducting criminal psychology research or working in academia, the work of criminal psychologists is varied and wide reaching.

This chapter aims to present a balanced view of the profession of criminal psychology and to introduce the reader to the variety of roles within which criminal psychologists can, and do, work. It will guide you through the criminal justice process and provide a brief overview of how criminal psychologists may contribute their expertise at each stage. Further and more in-depth information can be found in the following chapters.

what is criminal/forensic psychology?

The term ‘criminal psychology’ has been defined in a number of different ways. Even today there is no accepted definition. For example, ten years ago two leading criminal psychologists in the UK defined it as ‘that branch of applied psychology which is concerned with the collection, examination and presentation of evidence for judicial purposes’ (Gudjonsson and Haward 1998, p. 1). It would seem from this explanation that criminal psychology is concerned with investigative (those to do with the police) and court processes. However, with the growth in the last quarter of a century in the involvement of criminal psychologists in the assessment and treatment of offenders following their sentencing, it would not be surprising if there were some disagreement with a definition which would exclude these groups of professionals from being called criminal psychologists.

It would seem therefore that a wider definition of the term is needed. A leading American psychologist has gone some way to provide this. He described criminal psychology as ‘any application of psychological knowledge or methods to a task faced by the legal system’ (Wrightsman 2001, p. 2). This more inclusive definition involves the whole of the legal system. As you will see in the coming pages, criminal psychologists can be involved in all areas of the judicial process (including post sentence) and a broad-based definition is needed to encompass all of this work.

In 1981 Professor Lionel Haward, one of the UK’s founding fathers of criminal psychology, described the four roles that Psychologists may perform when they become professionally involved in criminal proceedings. These are:

Clinical: in this situation the psychologist will usually be involved in the assessment of an individual in order to provide a clinical judgement. The psychologist could use interviews, assessment tools or psychometric tests (i.e. special questionnaires) to aid in his or her assessment. These assessments can inform the police, the courts, or the prison and probation services about the psychological functioning of an individual and can therefore influence how the different sections of the criminal justice system process the individual in question. For example, a psychologist may be asked to assess individuals in order to determine whether they are fit to stand trial or whether they have a mental illness which means that they would not understand the proceedings.

Experimental: this can involve the psychologist performing research in order to inform a case. This can involve carrying out experimental tests in order to illustrate a point or provide further information to the courts (for example, how likely it is that someone can correctly identify an object in the hand of an individual from a distance of 100 meters at twilight). Alternatively, it can involve psychologists providing the court with a summary of current research findings which may be relevant to the case in question.

Actuarial: in this instance the word ‘actuarial’ relates to the use of statistics in order to inform a case. One example of how a psychologist may act in an actuarial role is if they are required to present actuarial information relating to the probability of an event occurring to the court. For example, a court may wish to know how likely an offender is to reoffend before the sentence is decided. In such a case, a psychologist could be called upon in order to inform the pre-sentence report to the court.

Advisory: in this role the psychologist may provide advice to the police about how to proceed with an investigation. For example, an offender’s profile could inform the investigation, or advice could be provided about how best to interview a particular suspect. Alternatively, a prosecution or defence lawyer may ask for advice on how best to cross-examine a vulnerable witness or another expert witness. This role involves the use of the psychologist’s expertise in order to advise the police, courts or prison and probation services.

As you can see, psychologists can be used in a variety of different scenarios within the criminal justice system and for a number of different reasons. The next few sections will examine in more detail how psychologists can and do contribute their expertise to aid the work of the criminal justice system. This list of roles, however, does not claim to be exhaustive – there are many more ways in which psychologists play their part. We have therefore chosen the most well-known roles in order to give an indication of what working in criminal psychology can involve.

Criminal investigations.

The role of a psychologist in criminal investigations can take a variety of forms. Professor Laurence Alison of the University of Liverpool has suggested a number of ways in which the expertise of a psychologist could aid the police and support the work that they do.

It is important to appreciate that the ways in which psychologists can contribute extends well beyond the process of profiling offenders. Indeed the apprehension of the offender would be assisted by enhancing police decision-making and leadership skills, improving methods of interviewing witnesses and victims, developing accurate methods of recording, collating and analysing data on preconvictions of offenders, developing suspect prioritization systems based on empirical research and enhancing intelligence-led policing and the use of informants.

(Alison 2005).

From the list contained within this quote, it can be seen that the role of the psychologist in assisting the police can be wide-ranging. The next sections will focus on some of these roles in more detail.