expert witnesses.

Court cases can involve complex issues including the presentation of information that is judged to be beyond the knowledge of the average layperson who may sit on a jury. In such situations, the court permits the calling of an expert witness who, by definition, has an expertise relating to the issue in question. Under these circumstances expert witnesses are permitted to provide their opinion (rather than the facts) on the issue being discussed. The way that expert witnesses are called to the court, however, varies from one jurisdiction to another. For example, in some countries within Europe, an expert witness is called by the court itself in order to provide information as and when it is needed. However, in the UK and USA, the expert is instructed by either the defence or prosecution in order to provide extra strength to their version of events.

The use of the psychologist as an expert witness has, in the past, been constricted by the notion of the expert having to provide information that is beyond the knowledge of the average person. Historically then, the admissibility of a psychologist’s opinion was often limited to providing evidence relating to mental impairment or the psychological functioning of an individual. However, in recent years, the psychologists’ expertise has been increasingly recognized and can now be called upon as evidence in relation to a wide variety of issues. Some examples of these are the impact of interviewing techniques on a suspect or witness, the reliability of eyewitness testimony, the clinical assessment of a suspect or witness, or the use of profiling techniques during an investigation.

Criminal psychologists, especially within Australia, Canada and the UK, are heavily involved in work concerning the assessment, rehabilitation and management of offenders, either in the community or when held in incarceration. This role can involve working with the offenders to reduce their likelihood of reoffending in the future or a more clinical role addressing the psychological needs of offenders. These psychological needs may (or may not) result from the effects of crime they committed (for example, the development of post-traumatic stress disorder or realization of the impact of their offence on their victim) or the environment within which they are held (for example, developing depression due to being away from the family or anxiety brought on by repetitive bullying from other prisoners). This work can be both varied and challenging in nature.

One of the first and ongoing concerns of a criminal psychologist working with offenders post-sentence is the assessment of the offenders. This encompasses an in-depth analysis of their risk of reoffending, their risk of harm (to others as well as themselves) and their needs (such as accommodation, finances and mental health, for example). These assessments can be used in the management of the offenders’ highlighted risk and needs, informing the planning of the activities that the offenders will undertake during their sentence. This could include the provision of basic skills courses, treatment programmes, one to one work on particular issues, and so on. In addition, if an offender is on a community sentence and has been assessed to be a high risk to the public, then it may be the case that the offender becomes subject to monitoring arrangements in order to reduce the risk that he or she poses. Psychologists can provide an input to each of these arrangements on an operational level but can also provide managerial and advisory support to those delivering such interventions.

Over recent years there has been a growth in the use of treatment programmes with offenders (see chapter 10 for more detailed information). Criminal psychologists have been active in this development contributing to the design, delivery and management of programmes which attempt to address the offenders’ thoughts, attitudes and behaviours that contribute to their offending behaviour, and prevent further offending. Psychologists are also involved in the management of these programmes, ensuring that the right offenders are placed on such programmes and that the programmes are delivered in the manner in which the designer intended. Research has shown that badly delivered programmes can at best be ineffective but at worst be damaging.

However, the role of the prison or probation psychologist is not limited to rehabilitation related work. Criminal psychologists within these settings can also be involved in undertaking research, overseeing training of prison or probation staff, preparing reports for the courts detailing the risk level, needs and other information relating to the individual offender, attending court, attending team and area meetings and the inevitable administration!

CASE STUDY.

Claire is a criminal psychologist who is employed to work with offenders within prison environment. She is currently organising an offending behaviour programme for twelve convicted offenders which will address why they committed crimes and what measures can be put in place to prevent further offending on their release from prison. She is responsible for assessing offenders to ensure their suitability for the programme and so carries out a number of interviews and assessments with each potential pro- gramme attendee. For the duration of the programme she will spend four hours a week with her co-facilitator working through the programme exercises and will prepare reports detailing the progress of each offender through the programme.

Claire is also responsible for one-to-one work with offenders who have a tendency to carry out self-harm behaviours and those who are at risk of attempting suicide. She will meet with these on a regular basis in order to monitor their psychological state.

criminal psychologists and academia/research.

With the growth of interest in criminal psychology over recent years, there has been an increased demand for courses which teach the theory and practice of criminal psychology. With the inevitable growth in criminal psychology courses, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of criminal psychologists working within academia.

So what do those people actually do? Well, the obvious answer is that they teach students about criminal psychology: about the psychology of criminal behaviour, of the courtroom, psychology and investigation, the assessment and treatment of offenders and also about how to carry out criminal psychological research. This teaching can be at undergraduate or postgraduate level and can be delivered in a variety of different ways.

However, the role of the academic criminal psychologist is not only limited to teaching. The other main role of academics is to carry out research within their field of interest. Most academics have their own research interests that develop over time and they are usually encouraged by their employers to expand their knowledge of these specialisms by researching them further. The ability to do this can often be dependent on a variety of outside forces, however, such as the availability of funding and access to privileged data or to imprisoned individuals. From a personal point of view, while at times this work can be frustrating, tedious and time- consuming, it is also very interesting and hugely rewarding. Most criminal psychologists who work in universities also are required to be involved in professional practice such as giving advice in some of the many ways outlined in this chapter.

CASE STUDY.

John trained in the field of criminal psychology a number of years ago, completing a postgraduate qualification and working as a criminal psychologist within the secure estate for five years. However, he has always been interested in disseminating knowledge to others and so recently made the decision to move into academia. He is now responsible for delivering academic courses in criminal psychology to individuals who have already studied at undergraduate level and wish to go on to work within this field.

John is also very interested in offenders with severe learning disabilities and their understanding of their crimes. He and a colleague have just secured funding to carry out some research investigating this notion. They plan to hire a researcher to work with them on this project and will publish their findings once the work is complete. He hopes that this research will inform not only those working with learning-disabled offenders but also court decisions in relation to how these individuals are processed and sentenced. It is also possible that at some point in the future he may become an expert witness in a case where a defendant is severely learning disabled. He could be asked to testify as to whether, in his professional opinion, the defendant had the intention to commit an offence.

Conclusions.

We have tried to present a definition of criminal psychology along with information about how various criminal psychologists may work, what roles they may perform and what institutions may employ them for this work.

The work of the psychologist within the criminal justice system can certainly take many routes depending on the special- ism of the particular psychologist. From aiding the police in their investigations, advising in the selection of police officers, providing expert evidence to the court, working with offenders conducting assessments and interventions, carrying out research or imparting their own knowledge to future criminal psychologists, the work is varied and challenging.

Criminal psychology will continue to develop and psychologists are likely to become even more involved in the varied facets of crime and the criminal justice process. There is certainly much more to investigate and learn about how criminal psychologists could contribute to the understanding of crime and how they can aid the workings of justice systems. The remaining chapters of this book will look at current aspects of criminal psychology and provide information about the latest issues and developments within the various fields.