

BECOMING A FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGIST

DAVID DEMATTEO,
JAYMES FAIRFAX-COLUMBO,
AND ALISHA DESAI



“This isn’t a GPS-plotted route to becoming a forensic psychologist. It’s better, more like a Fodor’s travel guide for the journey. It helps you decide whether and where you want to go, then provides first-class advice on optional routes, preparations for the trip, and how to manage the bumps and detours on the way.”

– Thomas Grisso, University of Massachusetts
Medical School, USA

“To those contemplating a career in forensic psychology, the pathway is often not clear. Understanding and navigating undergraduate preparation, graduate school applications, graduate training, the internship application process and experience, licensure, and various aspects of one’s early career experience is challenging. DeMatteo and his colleagues have provided the perfect roadmap. They answer most, if not all, of the questions many have about these matters, and they provide strategies that maximize one’s chances for success at each step in the process. For each topical area, the authors identify key factors readers should consider as they go about the decision-making process.”

– Randy Otto, University of South Florida, USA

“The field of forensic psychology is both intriguing and captivating but the path to becoming a forensic psychologist can be difficult to navigate. In *Becoming a Forensic Psychologist*, DeMatteo, Fairfax-Columbo, and Desai provide a masterful blueprint for pursuing a career in this field. This important text is a ‘must’ for anyone considering a career in forensic psychology.”

– Patricia A. Zapf, Palo Alto University, USA



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Becoming a Forensic Psychologist

The paths to becoming a forensic psychologist are numerous and varied. *Becoming a Forensic Psychologist* provides insight into the process of pursuing a career in forensic psychology, from an introduction to the field itself to graduate school and beyond.

This comprehensive guide extends beyond mere definitions and overviews to discuss tips, strategies, and questions to ask at every step of the way to becoming a forensic psychologist. Told from the perspectives of individuals at different stages in their career, this book provides up-to-date information about existing forensic psychology programs and resources to assist aspiring forensic psychologists in career decision-making. Additional sidebars define key terms, highlight important court decisions that shaped the field of forensic psychology, and provide interesting facts about the field.

This book will help any individual pursuing a career as a forensic psychologist, including those about to start college who are narrowing their career interests, graduate students, and those already in the field of psychology who are considering a career shift.

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Becoming a Forensic Psychologist

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To Kirk Heilbrun, who taught me to be a forensic psychologist.

David DeMatteo

For my mother, Tina, my father, Russell, and my brother, Bryan,
for providing me love and support over the years.

Jaymes Fairfax-Columbo

For my mother, father, and brother, from whom I continue to
learn the value of dedication and of pursuing what you love. For
John, whose support and companionship make all the
difference.

Alisha Desai

To the next generation of forensic psychologists.

*David DeMatteo, Jaymes Fairfax-Columbo,
and Alisha Desai*



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Preface

The field of forensic psychology has grown considerably over the past several decades, and the application of psychological expertise in legal contexts is in higher demand than ever before. Attorneys and courts are increasingly relying on the expertise of forensic psychologists to address a range of legal questions in criminal and civil law contexts, while lawmakers, policymakers, and administrators are seeking psychological expertise to craft evidence-based policies and laws at historically high levels. Moreover, new training programs in forensic psychology are being developed with some regularity across the United States. Despite the continued growth and development of the field of forensic psychology, we noticed that information about how to become a forensic psychologist was not readily available, which is why we wrote this book.

We had two goals in mind when writing this book. First, by describing the many roles forensic psychologists can fulfill in clinical, research, academic, and consultation capacities, this book provides readers with a clear understanding of the specialized skills that forensic psychologists possess and the job contexts in which forensic psychologists can use those skills. Second, this book provides individuals interested in a career in forensic psychology with a straightforward blueprint for becoming a forensic psychologist. As you will see, there are various paths to becoming a forensic psychologist, and we outline multiple ways to pursue a career in forensic psychology.

This book is divided into three parts that roughly correspond to three major phases in the process of becoming a forensic psychologist. In Part I, we focus on helping you decide whether a career in forensic psychology is right for you. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the field of forensic psychology, the specialized skills forensic psychologists possess, the types of activities in which forensic psychologists engage, and the features that

distinguish forensic psychologists from other types of psychologists. We also discuss the importance of having some understanding of the law given that forensic psychology is firmly at the intersection of psychology and law. In Chapter 2, we take a step back and provide a brief history of the field of forensic psychology, beginning with its origins and tracing its evolution to the present day. Understanding the history of forensic psychology will place the field in its proper context. Next, in Chapter 3, we provide foundational content for applying to graduate school, including the different types of forensic psychology graduate programs that are available, how to obtain research and work experience conducive to gaining admission to graduate school, the various prerequisites for applying to graduate school, and the concept of career specialization.

Part II encompasses the graduate school application process and graduate school itself. To that end, Chapter 4 focuses on preparing for the graduate application process, with a discussion of how to determine the type of degree and training program that would best fit your needs. In Chapter 5, we discuss the graduate school application process, providing insights on how best to maximize chances of acceptance and what to do in the event you are not accepted to graduate school. Chapter 6 focuses on how to survive and thrive in graduate school, and we address topics relating to getting involved in forensic research, choosing clinical practicum experiences, navigating professional conferences, publishing, networking, and self-care. We conclude Part II with Chapter 7, which focuses on navigating the internship process. In Chapter 7, we provide an overview of clinical internships, discuss how to determine which internship is the best fit, provide tips for maximizing your chances of obtaining an internship, and explain how the internship “match” process works.

Part III is focused on life post-graduation, with an emphasis on the range of opportunities in which early-career professional forensic psychologists might be interested. In Chapter 8, we discuss postdoctoral training opportunities, including how to decide if a postdoctoral fellowship is necessary, what type of postdoctoral fellowship to pursue, how to choose the postdoctoral program that offers the best fit, and other paths (including non-traditional paths) towards specialization in forensic psychology. Chapter 9 focuses on practice qualifications, including the process of becoming a licensed psychologist, obtaining board certification in forensic psychology, and the ethical and practice guidelines for forensic psychologists. Finally, Chapter 10 focuses on various types of jobs for forensic psychologists, and it explores other relevant considerations for early-career professionals, such as getting involved in professional organizations and keeping abreast of the latest developments in forensic psychology.

There are various ways to read this book. First, you can read this book in the traditional cover-to-cover way, which would provide the most comprehensive and sequentially logical information for becoming a forensic psychologist. Second, we designed this book so that each chapter can stand alone, which means you can choose to read the specific chapters that are most appropriate for you given your career status and interests. If you have not yet decided whether a career in forensic psychology is right for you, we recommend beginning with Chapter 1 and reading the chapters sequentially. If, however, you are already in graduate school and are looking for tips on maximizing your graduate school experience, or you are already in the field of psychology and looking to re-specialize as a forensic psychologist, some of the earlier chapters may not be as relevant.

Forensic psychology is an exciting and rapidly growing field that provides the opportunity to engage in meaningful work in a wide variety of clinical, research, academic, and legal settings. If you like the idea of working with individuals who are involved in the justice system, conducting research on topics that lie at the intersection of psychology and law, and helping legal decision-makers make better-informed decisions, then forensic psychology may be a great career choice for you. After reading this book, we hope you are as excited about forensic psychology as we are. Happy reading!

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Part I

Career Crossroads



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CHAPTER 1

Forensic Psychologists

What Exactly Do They Do?

WHAT IS FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY?

If you are reading this book, then you probably want to become a forensic psychologist, or you are at least entertaining the idea of becoming a forensic psychologist. Some of you may always have had an interest in forensic psychology and are now seriously considering it as a career, while others may have just recently heard about forensic psychology from a television show, podcast, or movie. Regardless of how or when you became interested in forensic psychology, we can tell you that forensic psychology is an exciting field that is experiencing tremendous growth, and being a forensic psychologist offers the opportunity to engage in meaningful work in a variety of roles and settings.

If you are like most people, you may not be exactly sure what forensic psychologists do. When most people hear the phrase “forensic psychology,” lots of images come to mind, many of which are probably not accurate. Despite being one of the fastest-growing specialty areas in psychology, there are many misconceptions about what forensic psychology is and what forensic psychologists do. Some people think forensic psychology has something to do with autopsies, while others think it involves criminal profiling or collecting evidence at a crime scene. If you want to become a forensic psychologist, or you *think* you might want to become a forensic psychologist, it is important that you understand what forensic psychology is and what forensic psychologists do (and do not do!).

The confusion surrounding forensic psychology most likely stems from how the term “forensic” is used in movies, television shows, books, and the media. Over the past several years, use of the term “forensic” has

become commonplace and there are quite a few portrayals of professionals who are labeled “forensic psychologists” in movies, such as *Silence of the Lambs* and *Manhunter*, and television shows, including *CSI*, *Bones*, *Law and Order*, and *The Profiler*. References to forensic psychologists in books, news articles, and Internet blogs are also becoming much more common. The increasing attention paid to forensic psychology has generated interest in the field, but ultimately resulted in several misconceptions about the nature of forensic psychological work.

A wide variety of activities and professions can be considered forensic, so it is important that we begin our discussion of forensic psychology by first defining the term “forensic.” The word “forensic” comes from the Latin word *forensis*, which is translated as “the forum.” In ancient Rome, the forum was the public center of commercial, religious, economic, and political life. The forum was also where speeches and debates occurred (hence the use of the term “forensic” to describe some high school and college public speaking and debate clubs) and where legal trials took place.

In its current usage, the term “forensic” simply means that an activity or profession is related to the law or a legal process. Perhaps the most common usage of the term “forensic” is among forensic pathologists. Forensic pathologists, who are more commonly referred to as medical examiners, are physicians who specialize in conducting autopsies to determine the cause and manner of someone’s death, typically when an individual has died suddenly, unexpectedly, or violently. This profession is “forensic” because determining the cause of someone’s death is a legal question, and the results of the post-mortem examination are documented on a death certificate, which is a legal document.

Many other professions can also be considered forensic. For example, forensic accountants apply the practice of financial accounting in the context of actual, pending, or anticipated legal disputes. Forensic accountants, who are also called forensic auditors or investigative auditors, may provide evidence in a variety of legal contexts, including tax fraud, money laundering, valuation of a business entity, corporate mergers and acquisitions, the location of money in a contested divorce case, or economic damages in a personal injury case or contract dispute. Another example of a forensic profession is forensic odontology, which is the application of dental science to legal questions. In some contexts, forensic odontologists may assist law enforcement in the identification of criminal offenders by comparing a suspect’s dental records to bite marks left on a victim, or they may identify human remains based on dental records. Incidentally, the serial killer Ted Bundy was ultimately convicted based on the testimony of a forensic odontologist.

Given the meaning of “forensic,” we can state that forensic psychology is simply the application of psychology to the law. As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, there are numerous ways in which the science and practice of psychology can be applied in a variety of legal contexts (see Costanzo & Krauss, 2018). Although the definition of forensic psychology seems straightforward, there is considerable debate and disagreement – even among experienced forensic psychologists – about how broadly forensic psychology should be defined.

At a basic level and using a broad definition, forensic psychology can be conceptualized as the application of the science and practice of psychology to questions and issues relating to the law and the legal system. Using the broad definition of forensic psychology as a starting point, there has been vigorous debate regarding what activities and roles should appropriately be considered as falling within the province of forensic psychology (Brigham, 1999; DeMatteo, Marczyk, Krauss, & Burl, 2009; Neal, 2017; Otto & Heilbrun, 2002). A narrow definition of forensic psychology only includes the provision of clinical psychological expertise to individuals involved in the judicial system. Under this restrictive definition, only those psychologists who conduct evaluations or provide treatment in legal contexts would be considered forensic. This definition would include, for example, conducting evaluations of criminal defendants to see if they were insane at the time of the offense, evaluating someone injured in a car accident to see if they have “psychological damages,” or providing restorative therapy to criminal offenders who have been found incompetent to stand trial. The problem with this narrow definition of forensic psychology is that it excludes psychologists who do not apply clinical skills, but instead conduct research in areas that are relevant to the law. As a result, researchers in areas such as social, experimental, cognitive, and developmental psychology would not be considered forensic psychologists under this narrow definition, even though the results of their research can significantly influence the legal system.

In this book, we endorse a broad definition of forensic psychology that is consistent with the definitions adopted by leading psychology and forensic psychology organizations. For example, the American Board of Forensic Psychology (ABFP), which is the premier advanced credentialing (board certification) organization for forensic psychologists in the United States, defines forensic psychology as the application of scientific, technical, or other specialized knowledge of psychology to inform matters within the judicial system, legislative bodies, and administrative agencies. Similar to the narrow definition of forensic psychology, the ABFP definition encompasses evaluations

in legal contexts, but it also includes treatment and research activities that are conducted in anticipation of future legal, contractual, or administrative proceedings.

Another broad definition of forensic psychology was adopted by the American Psychological Association, the world's largest professional organization for psychology professionals and students. In the *Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychology*, which was adopted as official American Psychological Association policy in 2011, forensic psychology includes “professional practice by any psychologist working within any subdiscipline of psychology (e.g., clinical, developmental, social, cognitive) when applying the scientific, technical, or specialized knowledge of psychology to the law to assist in addressing legal, contractual, and administrative matters” (American Psychological Association, 2013, p. 7). This broad definition of forensic psychology encompasses clinical, research, and consultation activities, and it recognizes the widely varying roles that can be assumed by forensic psychologists in a variety of settings.

Consistent with the definitions of forensic psychology recognized by the ABFP and the American Psychological Association, we endorse a broad definition of forensic psychology that includes evaluations, treatment, research, and consultation activities that address some aspect of the law. This broad definition recognizes the contributions that can be made to various aspects of the United States legal system by psychologists working in clinical, research, and consultation capacities.

WHAT ISN'T FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY?

Before moving forward with our discussion of forensic psychology, we should clarify what forensic psychology does *not* include. The two most common – and highly persistent! – myths surrounding forensic psychology are that forensic psychologists are involved in criminal profiling and the collection of crime scene evidence. In fact, many of the inquiries we receive from prospective forensic psychology students reflect their interest in becoming “an FBI profiler” or working with law enforcement to collect evidence at crime scenes.

Criminal profiling is a law enforcement investigative tool that helps to narrow down the pool of suspects following a crime. Based on their examination of the crime scene and other evidence, profilers provide a description – or profile – of likely suspects. Profiling is based on patterns and correlations observed in large datasets of crimes, criminal offenders, and

crime victims. For example, if the victim of a homicide is Caucasian, statistics suggest that the offender is most likely also Caucasian. Profiling is an actuarial science, which means it is based on the application of statistical models. A non-forensic example of actuarial science is the differing rates that are charged for automobile insurance. Automobile insurance companies typically charge the highest premiums to young, single, male drivers because they are the most likely to have an automobile accident; based on large datasets of accident data, drivers who are young, single, and male have been “profiled” to be the highest-risk drivers.

As you can see, there is not much psychology involved in criminal profiling, although having knowledge of human thinking and behavior can be informative, and most psychologists are not involved in profiling. Although criminal profiling was once the exclusive domain of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI; in the famed Behavioral Sciences Unit), local and state law enforcement agencies are increasingly utilizing criminal profilers. But these positions are filled by individuals who have extensive law enforcement experience, and psychological expertise is typically not a prerequisite for these positions.

The collection and processing of crime scene evidence, such as fingerprints, body tissues and fluids, and DNA specimens, is done by law enforcement professionals and other crime scene specialists. In television shows and movies, these individuals are often portrayed wearing police jackets with the word “forensic” prominently displayed on the back in large letters. Criminal evidence is referred to as forensic because it can potentially be used during a criminal investigation and the subsequent legal proceedings. It is certainly forensic science, but it is not forensic psychology.

WHAT DO FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGISTS DO?

Now that we have defined forensic psychology and discussed some activities that are not performed by forensic psychologists, we can briefly describe the types of activities performed by forensic psychologists. Using the broad conceptualization of forensic psychology, which is the application of the science and practice of psychology to questions and issues relating to the law, forensic psychologists can perform a variety of clinical, research, and consultation activities (Bartol & Bartol, 2018; Huss, 2014; Neal, 2017). In these contexts, forensic psychologists are using their expertise in the areas of human behavior, assessment of mental health functioning, treatments and interventions for mental health disorders, and

the relationship between psychology and law to help inform legal decisions. We provide much more detail on the activities performed by forensic psychologists in Chapter 2.

FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGISTS VS. FORENSIC PSYCHIATRISTS

Now that we have cleared up the confusion regarding what forensic psychology is and what forensic psychologists do, we can address another point of confusion, which relates to the distinction between psychologists and psychiatrists and, by extension, the differences between forensic psychologists and forensic psychiatrists. Although there are many distinctions between these two professions, we focus on the three most prominent differences. First, psychiatrists are medically trained, with either a Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree or a Doctor of Osteopathy (DO) degree. By contrast, psychologists have non-medical doctoral degrees, typically a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or Doctor of Psychology (PsyD), although in some states and settings those with master's degrees can use the title "psychologist." This alphabet soup of advanced degrees is addressed more fully in Chapter 4. Second, the different training models of psychologists and psychiatrists are reflected in their practice. Clinical psychologists receive extensive training in the assessment and treatment of mental health disorders, whereas the training received by psychiatrists is focused largely on the treatment component, with a specific focus on the use of medications to treat mental health disorders. Finally, as medical practitioners, psychiatrists can prescribe medications, while psychologists generally are not trained or authorized to do so. With that said, psychologists have prescription privileges if they work in the United States military, and they have recently become eligible for limited prescription privileges in a few states (e.g., New Mexico, Louisiana), but prescription privileges for psychologists are the exception rather than the rule and obtaining such privileges requires a great deal of extra training.

When it comes to forensic work, psychologists and psychiatrists are generally involved in the same types of activities, with limited exceptions. Both forensic psychologists and forensic psychiatrists conduct mental health assessments of juveniles and adults in a range of criminal and civil law contexts. In some jurisdictions, there is a preference or even a legal requirement for psychiatrists to conduct certain types of forensic evaluations, most notably assessments of criminal offenders for competence to stand trial and insanity. The legal system has historically embraced the medical model of mental health disorders that is reflected in psychiatry,