Forensic psychology

Forensic psychologists advise their clients in several ways, including diagnostic appraisals, which may be used to determine the competency of the client to stand trial, and contributing to defense strategy. They are also called upon to render clinically based opinions on a wide variety of issues arising from their diagnoses, such as the best interests of a child in a custody case, or the readiness of a prisoner for parole. Finally, forensic psychologists advise on the prognosis and treatment of the individuals under evaluation. In most cases, they obtain a “forensic history,” which includes hospital records, police reports, witness statements, and provide relevant research. Besides submitting reports on their findings, they are sometimes required to testify in court.

In a typical criminal case, the forensic psychologist may be hired by a defense attorney to evaluate the defendant. (A case will commonly entail the services of a psychologist, for example, if an insanity defense is being considered.) The psychologist is briefed on the circumstances of the crime and examines records detailing the defendant’s previous criminal record and any history of mental or emotional problems and treatment. In pretrial preparations, the psychologist may administer personality and intelligence tests to the defendant. Afterwards, the psychologist reports the evaluation findings to the attorney and may be asked to testify at pretrial hearings, the trial itself, or the sentencing.

The most common type of civil case in which a psychologist may be consulted are lawsuits to recover damages for injuries resulting from car accidents. The first task is to become familiarized with the case, which includes an examination of the client’s medical records relating to the accident, as well as his or her previous medical history and any records that indicate the client’s level of functioning at work or in other settings prior to the accident. The psychologist must then evaluate the plaintiff’s emotional or cognitive problems, being careful to distinguish those problems caused by the accident from any preexisting ones.

Forensic psychologists are regularly consulted in child custody cases. In many situations it is the court itself that hires a psychologist to evaluate both parents, children, and other relevant family members. These evaluations may involve visits to the home of each parent, which provide additional information on the relationship between parent and child and on a child’s possible future environment. Such interviews, by their relatively informal nature, serve to facilitate communication with the child.

In addition to providing expert consultation on a contractual basis, forensic psychologists are also employed by community mental health centers, police departments, and prisons. They may train police officers to handle diverse situations like domestic abuse, suicide threats, and hostage crises, and how to control crowds. Those who work in prisons provide clinical services to inmates. In addition to the applied work performed by forensic psychologists in these and other settings, some members of the field specialize solely in research, investigating areas such as eyewitness and expert testimony, jury selection, and the jury decision process.

Regardless of specialty, forensic psychologists must be familiar with relevant case law, respect issues of confidentiality, and continually keep apprised of new research in the field. Joint Ph.D.-J.D. programs have been in existence since the early 1970s. It is also possible to earn a Ph.D. in psychology with a specialization in forensic or correctional psychology, and the curricula of graduate programs in psychology include a growing number of law-related courses.

Organizations for forensic psychologists include the American Association for Correctional Psychology and the American Psychology-Law Society. Forensic Psychology has had its own division in the American Psychological Association since 1980 (Division 4). The American Board of Forensic Psychology has provided referrals to qualified professionals in the field since its establishment in 1978 as well as promoting the discipline of forensic psychology to the general public. The Board certifies practitioners who have amassed at least 1,000 hours of experience within a five-year period. Applicants must also submit a work sample and undergo a three-hour examination administered by their peers.

Further Reading
Criminal Justice and Behavior. Volume 1-, March 1974-.
Law and Human Behavior. Volume 1-, 1977-.

Further Information
American Association for Correctional Psychology (Formerly: American Association of Correctional Psychologists). West Virginia University, College of Graduate Studies Institute. Morgantown, West Virginia 25112, (304) 766-1929.
Forgetting curve

The general, predictable pattern of the process of forgetting learned information.

Psychologists have been interested in the processes of learning and forgetting since the early days of the discipline. The researcher who pioneered this field, Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909), invented the nonsense syllable in order to be able to assess “pure” learning, that is, learning free of meaning, and the rate at which we forget. He served as his own subject and learned an incredible number of lists of nonsense syllables. He used material with little or no meaning because he was aware that learning new information is influenced by what we already know. He decided to create learning situations that were free of prior knowledge.

The way that we forget is highly predictable, following what psychologists call the forgetting curve. When we acquire knowledge, much of our forgetting occurs right away. Ebbinghaus discovered that a significant amount of information was forgotten within twenty minutes of learning; over half of the nonsense material he learned was forgotten within an hour. Although he forgot within a day almost two thirds of the material he learned, retention of the material did not decline much beyond that period. In other words, if information is retained for a day, the knowledge was there to stay.

Ebbinghaus’s forgetting curve is actually much more dramatic than a forgetting curve would be for meaningful material. When the learner is able to connect new information with old information, he still might forget what was learned, but the amount and speed of forgetting is likely to be less than what Ebbinghaus experienced.

See also Ebbinghaus, Hermann

Viktor E. Frankl

1905-1997

Jewish psychiatrist and author who developed the discipline of logotherapy.

Born March 26, 1905, in Vienna, Austria-Hungary (present-day Austria); died September 2, 1997, in Vienna, Austria, of heart failure. Viktor E. Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist and author, drew on his experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust (Nazi Germany’s campaign to exterminate the Jewish population of Europe during World War II) to develop the discipline of logotherapy, a form of psychotherapy that, by stressing the need to find meaning even in the most tragic circumstances, offered solace to millions of readers of his classic work, Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy.

Frankl grew up in Vienna, the birthplace of modern psychiatry and home of the renowned psychiatrists Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler. A brilliant student, Frankl became interested in psychiatry in his teens. At age 16 he began writing to Freud, and on one occasion sent him a short paper, which Freud regarded so highly that he passed it on to the International Journal of Psychoanalysis, where it was published three years later. Frankl earned a medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1930 and was put in charge of a Vienna hospital ward for the treatment of females who had attempted suicide. When Germany seized control of Austria eight years later, the Nazis made Frankl head of the Rothschild Hospital, the only Jewish hospital that was allowed to remain open in Vienna.