

Careers in Psychology: Psychology and Law

So You Want To Be a Profiler?

After the television show “The Profiler” aired, many students across the country thought that criminal profiling looked like an interesting job. After all, profilers can read the minds of criminals and use psychological skills and knowledge to track serial killers, right?

No, not really. In fact, the FBI does not even have a job category called “profiler.” Instead, the tasks associated with profiling are performed by Supervisory Special Agents assigned to the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) at Quantico, Virginia. One of the basic requirements is that you must have served as an FBI special agent for 3 to 5 years with experience in violent crimes, homicides, child abduction, and other task forces. An advanced degree in behavioral or forensic science is preferred, but applicants should pursue a degree in a discipline that interests them most. *Becoming a special agent does not guarantee eventual assignment as a profiler.* For information about joining the FBI, consult their website at www.fbi.gov. A list of frequently-asked questions appears at www.fbi.gov/employment/faq.htm. Even outside of the FBI, very few full-time positions are available for individuals who are interested in profiling. Instead, most psychologists who work as profilers also work as police or correctional psychologists. (See the end of this flier for an interesting essay on profiling.)

What is Forensic Psychology?

“Forensic” simply means the interface between psychology and the legal system. Forensic psychology is concerned with applying psychological knowledge to understand crime and other legal concerns. For an overview of the field, consult the following resources:

Brigham, J. C. (1999). What is forensic psychology, anyway? *Law & Human Behavior*, 23, 273-298. (Library catalog number K12.A822x)

The web site for the American Psychology-Law Society (AP-LS), the national organization for psychological scholars who work with the legal system. This organization is geared toward applied research in psychology-law and legal work by nonclinical psychologists (although clinical psychologists also belong). Click into “graduate programs” to link into an on-line pamphlet on careers in psychology and law. www.unl.edu/ap-ls/ (The site is maintained by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which hosts one of the top psych-law programs. They also award a MLS—Masters of Legal Studies—degree.)

An individual who obtains a graduate degree in clinical psychology with relevant training and experience can be a clinical forensic psychologist. Clinical forensic psychologists are paid by attorneys or the court system to do such tasks as child custody evaluations, parental fitness evaluations, and psychotherapy with families referred by the Department of Social

Services or Friend of the Court. These forensic psychologists perform evaluations to help decide whether an individual was insane during the commission of a crime, whether an individual is competent to stand trial, and to ascertain risk of reoffending. Additionally, forensic psychologists do psychotherapy with individuals who are involved in the legal system including prisoners, probationers, and those who are court-ordered to receive therapy.

Many individuals with Ph.D. degrees in other areas of psychology also do forensic work. These psychologists sometimes inform the court about matters that become an issue at trial, such as the accuracy of eyewitness memory. They also consult with and train attorneys.

Educational Requirements

Several programs offer degrees in forensic psychology (for specific programs see <http://www.psywww.com/careers/forensic.htm>). Other programs offer joint Ph.D. /J.D. (law) programs (consult the AP-LS website at the address listed above). These joint programs typically take eight years to complete. However, the majority of forensic psychologists doing clinical work typically go to graduate school for a degree in clinical psychology. Non-clinical psychologists often have doctoral degrees in social psychology, developmental psychology, or experimental psychology.

For more information about graduate programs in psychology, see *Graduate Study in Psychology* (updated frequently). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. This book describes graduate programs in all fields of psychology, with information about admission requirements. Ask for it at the reference desk in the library.

For general information about careers in psychology, see www.apa.org (the website for the American Psychological Association. Click into "Students" and "Considering a Career in Psychology?")

The following was reprinted from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 7, 2001. Reprint permission was given by the author and the *Chronicle*.

OBSERVER

So You Want to Be a Serial-Murderer Profiler...

By JOHN RANDOLPH FULLER

As professors, we often get caught up in the flurry of teaching and publishing and forget that we sometimes play a pivotal role in helping students decide what careers to pursue. I remember Patrick McNamara of the University of New Mexico casually telling me, "John, you ought to go to graduate school."

Me? Graduate school? You mean I might actually finish college? Although no other professor, none of my friends, nobody in my family, and certainly not my girlfriend had ever suggested that I was graduate-school material, that one passing remark by a professor I respected changed the direction of my life.

I also often suggest to students that they should go to graduate school. Those suggestions come easily because the students in question demonstrate a keen intellect and a thirst for knowledge. It is the students who request practical career guidance whom I find more problematic.

Students in my criminology classes occasionally show up in my office and ask me, much like Virgil in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to guide them through hell as they struggle with the cosmic decision of what they are going to do with their lives. I give them the best counsel I can, but I'm never comfortable doing it. They look at me as if I have all the answers. I don't. I'm not the insightful wizard that Pat McNamara was.

Here is what usually happens.

I'm sitting at my desk, typing away on my computer, a Mozart CD playing on my little boombox, when I hear a knock on my door. I turn to see a young woman with an expectant look on her face.

"Dr. Fuller, are you busy?"

"Of course not. Please come in. I always have time for my students," I say. Actually I'm thinking, "Of course I'm busy. Can't you hear the rhythmic clack of the keyboard as I pound away at speeds approaching 20 words a minute? Can't you see that I'm deep in the creative process, composing a missive that could only be described as poetry?"

I motion the student to a chair.

"I want to talk about my future," she says. "I'm going to be a serial-murderer profiler. Can you help me?"

At that point, my heart sinks. I have had similar requests for help with a glamorous but unrealistic career track from at least a hundred students over the past 20 years. It is a conversation that never fails to challenge my concept of the role of adviser.

"Did you see *The Silence of the Lambs* last night?" I ask.

"That's a great movie," the young woman says. "Also, I watch the TV program *Profiler*, and I've decided that's what I want to do. I want to get inside the brains of serial murderers and help the police catch them. When I graduate next year, I plan to work with the FBI -- traveling around the country to help police departments with cases."

This is where the challenge of advising comes in. Fortunately, serial murderers are rare creatures. Rare enough that there is no career track for people who want to profile them. Do I tell my student that probably only two dozen people in the country make a living out of profiling serial murderers? Do I tell her that she is not going to work for the FBI after only four years of college, with a 2.3 grade-point average and no street experience? Do I tell her that she should study accounting or go to law school if she wants to be an FBI agent? Do I attempt to convince her that her career goals are a figment of some Hollywood mogul's imagination?

Kind of. I fold my hands and smile. "Let's talk about this," I say.

What I don't tell her is that I have come to doubt myself as a source of wisdom for guiding the lives of other people. While I want my students to achieve their goals, I know that most of them will end up working in local criminal-justice agencies and not as serial-murderer profilers or even FBI agents.

Even the ones who do get the jobs they want may find themselves disappointed by the real world of criminal justice, as opposed to the made-for-television version. Recently, I spoke with a former student who was considering quitting the Secret Service. His job, of late, was guarding empty stairwells all night because the president might walk down them. My former student had realized his dream: He was protecting the president. But he found out the hard way that protecting the president involves less fighting off attackers and escorting VIP's into waiting limousines and more concentrating on blank expanses of floor and lonely flights of stairs.

So when students design glamorous careers for themselves in criminal justice, I'm often tempted to point out their unrealistic expectations. However, I always hesitate, because I have been wrong before. In fact, I missed the boat on serial murderers.

Twenty years ago, as a fresh, young assistant professor at the State University of West Georgia, I shared an office with another neophyte, Eric Hickey, who is now at California State University at Fresno. The local paper interviewed us about the murders of 29 African-American children in Atlanta, and we pontificated on the new buzzword "serial killers." While we didn't say anything profound, the interview piqued our interest. As new professors out to make our mark in the discipline, we talked about writing a book on the subject.

For several weeks, we tossed the idea back and forth. Finally, I told Eric, "This is fascinating, but we could never get this book published. By the time we're done with it, serial murderers will no longer be in vogue, and we'll be laughingstocks for jumping into pop criminology instead of concentrating on serious issues. Count me out."

Eric did. Now, two decades later, his book *Serial Murderers and Their Victims* is in its third edition. Eric is an internationally recognized expert on the subject and trots around the globe lecturing and consulting on serial murders. He has been interviewed on National Public Radio and numerous television programs. He served as a consultant in the federal search for the Unabomber and is constantly called on by law-enforcement agencies to lead workshops on profiling serial murderers. Additionally, he serves as an expert witness in both criminal and civil cases. I use his book in my graduate class on violence. It hurts.

All that could have been half mine had I had the vision. But no. I said that the book would never be published and that serial murder as a criminological topic was but a passing fad. So who am I to give career advice to my students? More than most professors I have come to appreciate the limitations of the adviser's role.

How do I tell my students that being a serial-murderer profiler isn't realistic? It turned out to be plenty realistic for Eric, and I envy him for his wisdom in ignoring my counsel.

I do my best to help guide my students. I sketch out the various career options in criminal justice. I attempt to demystify the students' overly romantic notions. I offer them pragmatic advice on the probabilities of achieving high-profile, high-paying, and ultimately satisfying careers in the field. I try to steer them toward a realistic path, armed with some common sense as they begin their working lives. While I strive to be intellectually honest with them, I also hope, to some degree, that they will ignore me as Eric did. After all, the journey is theirs, not mine.

John Randolph Fuller is a professor of criminology at the State University of West Georgia. His latest book, written with Michael Braswell and Bo Lozoff, is Corrections, Peacemaking, and Restorative Justice: Transforming Individuals and Institutions (Anderson Publishing, 2001).

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: The Chronicle Review

Page: B5