



# So you want to study forensic psychology?

**F**IRST off, before you share your ambition of becoming a forensic psychologist with anyone, bear in mind that many people get confused about what 'forensic' means. You would do well to have a stock set of responses for interested folk who assume that you will either be the next 'Cracker', or will spend most of your time examining exit wounds.

So what is forensic psychology? The dictionary definition of *forensic* is 'anything pertaining to law and the courts'; *psychology* is 'the science of mental processes and behaviour'. Forensic psychology is thus the application of psychological science to guide those involved in the operation of the law. Study of forensic psychology could take you into a range of areas, including:

- assessment of clients for court appearances (fitness to plead, competency to stand trial);

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- risk assessment and management of dangerous clients;
- design, delivery and evaluation of groupwork programmes targeting offending behaviour;
- expert testimony in criminal and civil cases;
- one-to-one work with offenders; and
- research exploring the aetiology and maintenance of offending behaviour.

Psychologists working for HM Prison Service, who continue to be the largest employer of postgraduate forensic psychology students, undertake much of the treatment and assessment work for individuals in custody. A position with the prison service can be a useful route to gaining Chartered status, but there are many other options available if a career in the prison environment does not appeal. In my case, having an undergraduate degree in law rather than psychology meant that I was ineligible for many

prison service posts that require graduate membership of the BPS. However, my professional interest in substance misuse and offending led to several interviews with organisations in the fast-growing drug-treatment sector, with many organisations recruiting people to work with offenders in prison or in the community on a one-to-one basis. Another dynamic area is youth offending, with youth offending teams and young offender mediation projects springing up throughout the country.

Forensic psychology is definitely a growth area. If you are interested in a career in this area, it is a good idea to get some voluntary experience, as this will come in handy both for applying for courses and gaining employment when you graduate. Organisations such as Victim Support and SACRO (NACRO in England) are good places to start. Practical experience may also be invaluable in deciding whether you are cut out for working with offenders – the role of the forensic psychologist requires you to empathise with the perpetrators of (sometimes brutal) crimes as well as with their victims.

As for becoming the next Cracker, there are only a handful of offender profilers working in the UK at the moment; and as far as I am aware they are not taking on any graduate trainees! The status of offender profiling as a proper area of forensic psychology is in some debate (for a review, see Ainsworth, 2001), and the best-validated approach to this controversial field involves a strong grasp of multivariate statistics. If you are interested in this, and have

## WHERE TO GET AN MSc IN FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

University of Birmingham  
Coventry University  
Glasgow Caledonian University  
University of Leicester  
University of Kent at Canterbury  
University of Liverpool  
Birkbeck College, London  
Manchester Metropolitan University  
Middlesex University  
University of Portsmouth  
University of Surrey  
University of Teesside

the necessary statistical competence, you would be well advised to seek training on the Investigative Psychology MSc at Liverpool University.

If you are interested in pursuing a career in forensic psychology there are a number of BPS-accredited courses available in the UK that allow you to progress to full Chartered status (see box above). But please note it is as difficult to get on a forensic psychology MSc as it is to get on to clinical training, and a high-quality honours degree and relevant experience are mandatory. If you turn up with a 2:2 and no relevant experience bar having read a book by Paul Britton and seen *The Silence of the Lambs*, you are unlikely to be interviewed!

### Reference

Ainsworth, P.B. (2001). *Offender profiling and crime analysis*. Uffculme Cullompton, Devon: Willan.

■ *Emma Christie has an MSc in forensic psychology from Glasgow Caledonian University and is now employed as an arrest referral worker in Ealing and Hounslow, London.*

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## PSYPAG WINTER WORKSHOP 2003

### The psychophysiology of stress and its measurement

Friday 31 January 2003, 10am–4.30pm, University of Westminster, London  
Registration fee: £10

This one-day workshop explores the latest issues surrounding physiological markers of psychosocial stress, and provides hands-on experience of stress reactivity measurement.

*Morning sessions:* Professor Angela Clow: 'Use of salivary cortisol as a measure of stress in humans'; Professor Frank Hucklebridge: 'Neuroendocrine – Neuroimmune interactions'

*Afternoon practical:* Measurement of stress reactivity using Powerlab: Electrodermal activity, respiration-rate and heart-rate monitoring. Coffee, biscuits, tea and sandwich lunch included.

Contact Professor Angela Clow. E-mail: [clowa@wmin.ac.uk](mailto:clowa@wmin.ac.uk); tel: 020 7911 5000 ext 2174.