

# Helping the police with their inquiries



**Jennifer Brown**  
*argues for a distinctive policing psychology.*

**W**HILE television's *Cracker* may have done wonders for recruitment to forensic psychology courses, the psychological offender profiler is a highly specialised type of psychologist who works with or for the police.

The purpose of the present article is to describe the origins and variety of the endeavours of psychologists who are associated with the police, and to discuss their role within forensic psychology. This raises issues of definition, accreditation, and achievement of supervised practice en route to Chartered Psychologist status. These may well resonate with debates within health and counselling psychology (Salmon, 1994).

One reason why it is important to clarify the status and standing of psychologists who work within the police derives from public interest, not least from portrayal of offender profilers in dramas and the levels of media coverage of psychological aspects of offending (Grover & Soothill, 1996). The blurring of boundaries between celebrity profilers and their fictional *doppelgängers* confuses expectations about standards and demarcations of practice.

Not all agencies who are likely to use the services of a forensic psychologist may be aware of the technicalities involved in professional affiliation, accreditation, or codes of practice governing the credentials and competencies of practitioners. Williamson (1996) argues that, in some police investigations, quality control is actually being exerted by judges when cases come to trial, rather than by the advising psychologist.

Another purpose of clarification is to identify the psychological knowledge employed by, and specific skills of, psychologists who work with the police to

establish whether they meet the Division of Criminological and Legal Psychology's (DCLP) requirements for Chartering.

## The meaning of 'forensic'

Coolican *et al.* (1996), writing about fields of applied psychology, use the terms 'criminological psychology' and 'forensic psychology' interchangeably. They give a broad definition: the application of psychological principles to the criminal justice system.

On the other hand, Blackburn (1996) points out that 'forensic' literally means pertaining to or used in courts of law. He argues for a narrow definition, because

to extend the notion of forensic psychology to any setting within the criminal justice system generates confusion about precisely what expertise is on offer. It also creates potential ethical dilemmas for practitioners, in terms of conflicts of interest between due legal process and responsibilities to individual clients.

In trying to resolve the inclusivity vs. exclusivity debate, it is perhaps useful to look at practice elsewhere. In a survey of European forensic psychology, James McGuire examined various terms and found that some, such as the German *Rechtspsychologie* and

Portuguese *psicologia legal*, conform to Blackburn's narrow definition (McGuire, 1996).

However, the Spanish *psicologia juridica* is a general term and has a number of subdivisions. These refer to work with the police, juveniles, families, prisons and victims, court testimony and work related to juries. This seems a workable compromise: to have an umbrella term but with identifiable specialisms associated with particular



practice settings. This is also in keeping with the present definition of forensic psychology offered by the DCLP in its rules laying out conditions for membership.

## Early involvement

The earliest contribution by psychologists to the (American) police appears to have been at the turn of the century. This involved using the Stanford Binet Intelligence Scale to test candidate police officers (Reese, 1995). Reese notes that an IQ of 80 was set as the appropriate minimum standard.

In more recent times, James Brussel, a precursor of the protagonist in *Cracker* and self-designated crime psychiatrist, developed principles of offender profiling. During the 1950s, the New York Police Department was engaged in a massive operation to find the perpetrator of a series of bombings. Conventional investigative techniques failed to reveal the identity of the individual who became known as the 'mad bomber'.

Brussel was approached to profile the type of person who would be capable of committing the bombings. He came up with a remarkably accurate profile, predicting that the bomber would be a neat, obsessive, middle-aged Slav living with older female relatives. George Metesky, who was eventually arrested and charged with the bombings as a result of investigative leads provided by the profile, was Polish by birth, fiftysomething, and living in Connecticut with two unmarried sisters.

When apprehended, Metesky was even wearing the button-up double-breasted suit as predicted by the profile. The source of the latter element? Given the persistence of the apparent grudge motivating the bombings, Brussel had surmised that the bomber was suffering from paranoia. Such a person was likely to be neat, ordered and precise, a man who would avoid newer styles of clothing until fashion dictated them to be conservative. During the 1950s a double-breasted suit was the appropriately conservative garb and the jacket would, obsessively, be buttoned (Brussel, 1968).

Profiling gradually became systematised with the advent of the FBI's involvement. Experienced investigators, who also had behavioural science qualifications, interviewed convicted murderers and rapists to study different types of criminal personalities (see Ainsworth, 1995, for an overview).

## Emerging roles

Reese (1995) notes that psychologists became involved with US law enforcement with the occurrence of several critical incidents that revealed a need for counselling and social skills training.

These incidents included: intervention in the aftermath of stress experienced by officers following the kidnap and murder of a Los Angeles Police Department patrolman; the shooting by police of a gunman in Texas; and the escalation of public disorder following the arrest of a black suspect by a California Highway Patrol officer. Similarly, critical events can be traced in Britain that heralded the advent of different subdisciplines' involvement with the police — for example, academic, clinical and occupational psychology.

In 1983, a Home Office circular challenged chief constables to replace police officers carrying out certain support functions with civilian staff. The purpose was to return the officers to front line operational duties (Home Office, 1983). Many police forces have research departments which became targets for this 'civilianisation' process. Gradually, forces employed professionally qualified research staff.

Research topics expanded in scope and sophistication, with civilian staff working inside police forces collaborating with academic psychologists and contributing to the research literature. Topics included, for example, the fear of crime and its relationship to newspaper readership (Williams & Dickinson, 1993), the psychological impacts of sexual harassment experienced by women officers (Brown *et al.*, 1995) and an evaluation of cognitive interview techniques (Clifford & George, 1996).

## Stress counselling

In 1985, the Bradford City football stadium caught fire. Over 50 people died and nearly 300 were treated for their injuries in hospital, including 40 police officers. West Yorkshire Police co-ordinated the casualty bureau giving information about the disaster to enquirers, and staffed a reception team to interview next of kin for body identification purposes. Police officers involved showed persistent 'out of character' behaviour some days after the event.

Duckworth and Charlesworth (1988), discussing the aftermath of the disaster, noted the general lack of police expertise and training in recognising and managing traumatic incident exposure. However, they pointed out that the Chief Constable of West Yorkshire took 'the unprecedented step of making available professional counselling to those officers who appeared to be suffering the psychological consequences of their involvement' (Duckworth & Charlesworth, 1988, p.201).

The recognition of traumatic stress deriving from operational exposure developed into supportive and preventative counselling services nationwide, provided by a variety of in-house and external consultants. This recognition

also stimulated a flurry of research activity that initially examined aspects of post-traumatic stress disorder (Duckworth, 1991), but then extended to the sources of routine, organisational and operational stressors (Brown & Campbell, 1994; Crowe & Stradling, 1993).

## Assessment of police officers

The involvement of occupational psychologists within the ambit of policing was stimulated as one consequence of the shooting in error of Stephen Waldorf by London police officers in 1983 (McKenzie, 1996). This shooting contributed to the use of psychological assessment and psychometric testing in the selection of firearms officers (Mirrlees-Black, 1992).

Such a specific policy on assessment was unprecedented. Despite the attempts at civilianisation, many police personnel departments were headed by senior police officers with no specialist qualifications in human resource management. Methods of recruitment and selection for specialist postings, training courses and promotion were, by and large, unsystematic and procedures were undocumented.

However, the issues of equal opportunities and fairness in career advancement resulted in the professionalisation of personnel departments and the employment of occupational psychologists. These were both in-house and external consultants, who helped to develop and run assessment centres and introduce systematic methods such as critical job analyses (Wigfield, 1996).

## Assessment of the police service

The previous Conservative government and the Audit Commission, in developing greater accountability for the public sector, introduced new management concepts into the police service, including performance measurement. These external triggers, as well as a more internally driven 'quality of service' ethos, led the police service to measure its own informal culture by, for example, internal staff attitude surveys.

The police were also being required by government to measure public opinion and to target previously neglected groups, such as gay and lesbian communities, to further the interests of victims (Burke, 1995). Equal opportunities policies and greater consciousness about the quality of service delivered to the public were manifest in developments in police training and promotion procedures. Psychologists were at the forefront of developing and evaluating new methods

of training based on social skills (Bull & Horncastle, 1988), and were instrumental in designing promotion assessment procedures based on role play (McGurk *et al.*, 1992).

## Investigating crime

British psychologists have also turned their skills to police investigative processes. Following a number of abortive trials and miscarriages of justice, and concerns about gaps in the interviewing skills of detectives, psychologists have been used to help develop operational interviewing procedures (Stockdale, 1993). They have focused especially on vulnerable witnesses or victims, for instance children or particularly susceptible adults (Cherryman & Bull, 1996). Models of memory and recall have been applied to eyewitness testimony, deriving from original theoretical research by Loftus (1979).

Early examples of psychologists helping in police inquiries are given by Bartlett (1940) and Haward (1981). More recently, instances include the contribution by David Canter in the case of the 'railway murders' for which John Duffy was apprehended (Canter, 1989) and the work of Paul Britton, recently described in a style reminiscent of the Brussel casebook (Britton, 1997).

## A recognisable specialism?

Bartol (1996) describes four distinctive trends in psychologists' involvement with the police: cognitive assessment; personality assessment; stress and its prevention; and organisational issues. These areas of work clearly draw upon psychological expertise from occupational, clinical, social, environmental and cognitive orientations. Because their activities take place within a police force, does this imply a distinctive application of psychological theories and methods such that policing psychology is recognisable as an emergent specialism?

I have demonstrated above the employment of methods and theories from mainstream psychology. But is there a case for distinctive knowledge, an issue highlighted by Salmon (1994) when discussing the degrees of separation between clinical and health psychology? I would argue that there is.

Application of occupational psychological principles in a forensic setting, such as the police, might well have to tap into and adapt to the special nature of the police occupational culture. In Poland, for example, occupational psychology is included in the work of forensic psychologists who work for the police (Trzcinska, 1997).

Specialised clinical support for police officers as trauma victims has had to be developed (Duckworth & Charlesworth, 1988). The police occupational culture presents particular problems when designing therapeutic interventions, because of the ethos of containment and control of emotions (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991).

The work of Marc Burke (1995), who proposed a theoretical synthesis of occupational socialisation and sexual orientation in the identity construction of gay and lesbian police officers, suggests the emergence of a specialist policing theoretical literature.

However, compared with these developments, the contribution of psychologists to the investigative process might be represented as having the greatest claim for a distinctive policing psychology. The work in eyewitness testimony, cognitive interviewing and offender profiling seeks to develop particular methods and to derive bespoke theoretical formulations within the context of policing (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Canter, 1994).

## Professional status

Critical to being accredited as a Chartered Forensic Psychologist by the Society are the elements of appropriate theoretical knowledge, supervised practice and a criminal justice setting. Using psychological methods and theories within a police setting provides the necessary, but in themselves insufficient, eligibility criteria for Chartered Forensic status. The title Chartered Forensic Psychologist confers a differential and distinctive status as practitioners incorporating the element of special knowledge (as opposed to more generic psychological knowledge).

Psychologists who work in or for the police service may hold an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in psychology or may gain a masters degree through the emerging forensic or criminal psychology courses. This may fulfil the academic element, but obtaining the necessary supervision of practice may be more difficult to achieve. Without this, they are not eligible for Chartered status. The DCLP is now developing procedures to systematise supervised practice, and to encourage remote supervision when a suitably qualified forensic psychologist is not available in-house.

More contentious may be the academic psychologists who research police or policing or those who hail from private consultancies providing psychological services to criminal justice agencies. They may work in an appropriate forensic setting, but their expertise may be confined to a particular specialism rather than demonstrating the wider range of expected knowledge. In which case, they

may experience difficulties in achieving full Division membership.

Countering the criticisms about lack of consistency (Copson, 1995) and quality control of the work of psychologists within the police arena (Williamson, 1996), being a Chartered Forensic Psychologist provides accreditation and adherence to a code of conduct. Chartering should reduce rather than increase confusion as to policing psychologists' levels of functioning and standards of conduct, be they researchers or practitioners.

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