Forensic Psychology: A Guide to Practice

by G. H. Gudjonsson and L. R. C. Haward

London: Routledge (1998) ISBN 0 415 1329 16 (241 pages, £16.99)

Reviewed by C. Gabrielle Salfati

Until recently, psychologists have not been involved to any great extent with the judiciary system. However, increasingly, psychologists are called upon to prepare evidential material and give expert testimonies and evidence in court.

Forensic Psychology aims to give a comprehensive guide to the practice of forensic psychology within the courts. It outlines where psychology can contribute to the judiciary system, and highlights some of the professional and ethical issues involved in court work and in what capacity this increasingly affects the psychologist. It is intended as a practical and easily accessible handbook for forensic practitioners, in order to assist them with their preparation of court reports and presentation of evidence in court. It is however not an exhaustive in-depth discussion of very detailed issues, but rather an overview of the area at the present time. The book is aimed primarily at psychologists, although other professionals who engage in court work may also find it useful. The emphasis is on UK court practice, although reference is made throughout to important forensic developments from both Europe and the US.

The authors' emphasis throughout is on providing relevant background material on psychology and the law, legal judgments, psychological principles, assessment techniques, professional and ethical behaviour, and guidance about the preparation of court reports and the presentation of oral testimony.

The book starts with a brief background of the legal histories of various countries, with special attention to key developments that have shaped the application of psychology to legal problems. In particular the authors highlight early difficulties in the resolving of issues pertinent to the forensic psychologist, such as dealing with ethical dilemmas and the validity and reliability of psychological evidence.

The differences between the roles of psychology and psychiatry are laid out, as are the differences between the different areas in which psychology can be involved within the courts. These include forensic psychology, clinical psychology, experimental psychology, and psychology as actuarial, and advisory evidence. It also specifically lays out the different needs of psychological evidence for civil and criminal cases.

The handbook goes on to give a review of surveys which have been conducted into psychological evidence in court, and a range of methods and techniques available to psychologists are reviewed. In particular, issues regarding psychological testing are expounded. Although it does not go into great detail on these various tests, it does highlight what types of tests are available for different situations, and it also makes some reference to where the reader may want to follow up on the various issues raised.

Finally, the authors conclude by laying out a practical framework and specific guidelines for preparing court reports and presentation of oral evidence in court, with the specific intention for forensic psychologists to use these guidelines as a reference tool.

The authors end their discussion with recommendations about which areas within forensic psychology are still lacking in expertise, and recommend possible areas of training for the future which will help to structure the profession of forensic psychology within the judicial system.

In summary, Gudjonsson and Haward provide an introduction into a new but an important and rapidly expanding field. They give a comprehensive overview of the issues involved and put forward a structured professional framework for approaching these issues. This is an important reference for anyone who is called upon to deliver psychological evidence in court, and would definitely be useful to anyone who wants a broad insight into the issues involved. The book is not a detailed exploration of these issues, but rather it highlights areas of concern, and offers possible avenues for further exploration.

C. Gabrielle Salfati, BA MSc PhD Cpsychol
University of Liverpool