A Resource For Forensic Psychology Job Seekers:

Insight from Early Career Professionals

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Abstract

While there are a number of career options available for those who receive training in law and psychology, the avenues through which students and early career professionals learn about those positions are limited. Mentors may only have narrow awareness of opportunities within the field, depending on their specialty areas, and students may only find out about other opportunities through informal means. The purpose of this paper is to introduce students and mentors to the range of career opportunities available within psychology and law. It also describes how individuals can become competitive candidates, as well as provides concrete ways to find these different positions. This paper highlights three different areas with psychology and law: clinical, policy/research, and academic.
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Recent statistics suggest a rapid growth rate for jobs in psychology (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Forensic psychology, which has generally been thought to encompass the application of psychological science to the law (American Board of Professional Psychology, N.D.), in particular has demonstrated a rapid growth (Clay, N.D.). Despite the abundance of forensic opportunities, many young professionals narrow their job searches to traditional forensic psychology positions (e.g., academia or forensic assessment positions). This may be due to their, as well as their mentors, limited knowledge of the diversity of forensic positions outside of academia or traditional forensic clinical work (e.g., correctional facilities) (American Psychological Association, 2014; Central Michigan University, 2004).

Although there have been peer-reviewed publications regarding graduate training in forensic psychology (Clements & Wakeman 2007; DeMatteo, Marczyk, Krauss, & Burl, 2009; Zaitchik, Berman, Whitworth, & Platania, 2007) and internet sources on careers in forensic psychology (Franklin, 2014; Ward 2013), to our knowledge, no peer-reviewed journal publications have been designed as a resource for this topic. Thus, the primary purpose of this paper is to review career options open to forensic psychology job seekers across three primary domains: clinical, research/policy, and academic, and provide concrete methods for finding these jobs as well as become competitive applicants. Early career experts in each of the domains provided the information included within this paper.

**Clinical**

Clinical positions allow forensic psychologists opportunities for practical application of their forensic and clinical skills. Many graduating clinical psychologists may consider a formal
or informal forensic clinical psychology postdoctoral fellowship as a means of broadening their clinical skill set and learning more advanced skills in forensic work. However, postdoctoral positions are not the only types of clinical positions students can consider when seeking a full-time (or part-time) forensic clinical position.

**Where to Look**

Settings to work include court clinics, hospitals (public or private), correctional facilities, and private practices (American Psychology-Law Society, N. D.c). Court clinics exist in many, though not all, states. Psychologists who work at court clinics are located at courthouses and called upon when mental health consultation is needed during the course of legal proceedings. Consultations may take the form of brief and informal conversations with judges or attorneys, assistance in locating available mental health resources for individuals in need, or evaluations of an individual subject to legal proceedings (which may be civil or criminal). Forensic evaluations in such locations are often conducted in the courthouse lock-up, are speedy, and frequently require immediate testimony. Court clinic positions are ideal for clinicians who are interested in forensic assessment, enjoy testifying, are knowledgeable of the clinical and legal issues arising in a somewhat fast-paced environment, and want to work closely with legal professionals (e.g., judges, attorneys) as well as members of the public.

Hospitals also offer job opportunities for forensic psychologists, and many hospitals have designated forensic units. Forensic units vary in their clientele and purpose: Some consist of pre-trial detainees who are in need of forensic evaluations (e.g., competency to stand trial); others consist of forensic patients who have been committed, often due to civil commitment or criminal findings (e.g., being found not guilty by reason of insanity), and are in need of ongoing mental health treatment. As a result, both full time forensic evaluator and forensic clinician positions are
available. Evaluations conducted in this setting may be time-sensitive (but not as immediate as court clinic evaluations), frequently involve complex or serious mental illnesses, and involve close work with other clinical disciplines (e.g., psychiatry, social work). Clinicians best suited for these positions should enjoy working more directly with psychiatric patients and working in conjunction with other clinical professionals.

Correctional facilities require forensic psychologists as evaluators and treatment providers; however, the numerous settings and opportunities that exist in correctional facilities for psychologists might surprise some. Most prisons have general mental health needs that require psychologists to act in an outpatient capacity; inmates set up appointments and arrive at psychology offices within the correctional facility, just as they would in an outpatient practice. Other prisons have specialized units in which psychologists are embedded. For example, prisons with units that house inmates with severe mental illness, sex offenders, or intensive/residential drug addiction programs, require on-site psychologists to work full-time in those programs.

Additionally, correctional facilities may seek out neuropsychologists to aid in forensic evaluations, or health psychologists to help on medical units or with inmates approaching end of life.

In addition to the diverse positions available within correctional facilities, there are also varied types of correctional facilities, all of which seek out forensic psychologists. These include jails, prisons, and halfway houses with varying levels of security (e.g., maximum, medium, low) and they need psychologists to assist not only with the patients, but training for front-line staff in appropriately working with patients. Factors such as whether the facility is run by the state or federal government, is privatized, nonprofit or for-profit, can all have significant ramifications on how the facility is run and experienced by inmates and staff.
Still many forensic psychologists choose to work in private practices. Joining an existing private practice is an option many consider, while others immediately open their own private practices. Private practices vary in specialties, with many practices choosing one or a just a few unique types of forensic evaluations to conduct, such as criminal evaluations or parental termination evaluations.

Finally, some psychologists choose to combine their clinical interests. They may work a few hours a week at a private practice, either on their own or with colleagues, and work the other part of their week in a hospital. This way, they can engage in varied types clinical work in a range of settings.

**How to Be Competitive**

Clinical experience, both quantity and quality, is necessary to being successful in obtaining clinical positions. However, it is not just the experience that makes burgeoning forensic psychologists competitive, it is also having foundational knowledge and generalizable clinical skills (e.g., ability to build rapport, conduct a basic intake) that will make any candidate appealing to clinical directors. Generally, having good clinical skills, analytical ability, and strong verbal/written communication skills all make for an attractive candidate for any forensic psychology position.

In addition to broadband clinical skills, forensic specialty sites desire targeted training in forensic psychology (e.g., coursework), experience in clinical settings, and psycholegal knowledge (including relevant statutes and case law). Experiences working with criminal populations, conducting assessments, and, if possible, testifying in or observing courtroom proceedings, all make for a more competitive candidate. The more a clinician’s past experience aligns with a specific position, the better.
As many forensic psychology positions require psychologists to work closely with patients with severe mental illnesses, histories of traumatic experiences, and/or substance use disorders, any experience with these clinical issues is helpful. Inpatient and outpatient settings may provide opportunities to work with these individuals, and employers will want their psychologists to have familiarity with both environments. Ways individuals can increase familiarity with each of these environments include talking with colleagues or mentors who have worked in these environments, touring facilities, and seeking these particular experiences during practicum and pre-doctoral internship training.

While getting licensed prior to starting these positions is not always essential, as some hospitals and private practices provide opportunities for supervision, an individual’s desirability significantly increases with licensure, as does pay and autonomy. Further, employers will want to see evidence of a job applicant’s progress toward licensure. Taking (and passing!) the Examination for Professional Practice of Psychology (EPPP) early can help make any candidate more competitive and desirable for a position.

Social workers, medical professionals, and licensed professional counselors, as well as clinical psychologists, may all engage in clinical work, albeit variant clinical work, within forensic settings. Generally, the type of degree may dictate the specific clinical responsibilities.

**Positives of the Career**

There are a number of positives to working in primarily clinical settings. The ability to work with a variety of disorders can be intellectually stimulating, and the complex or atypical symptom presentations provide opportunities to increase an individual’s clinical knowledge. As a result, clinicians are always learning and constantly obtaining new experiences that are challenging and stimulating.
Clinical work also allows for opportunities to educate non-clinicians. Clinicians who work in courts must explain in nontechnical language to non-clinicians how disorders manifest and impact different individuals. They also have to work as part of interdisciplinary teams and as a result, are not only educating others, but learning from other professionals as well. There is also flexibility in work life, and limited dependence on grant funding, which takes away significant stress that a forensic psychologist might experience in other settings.

**Challenges of the Career**

Despite the many positives, there are also challenges in working in clinical settings. Time pressure is a constant, especially when conducting forensic evaluations for the court. It also can be difficult to maintain smooth communication between the different disciplines; it is not uncommon to have misunderstandings based on discipline differences in terminology use. There is also a great deal of clinical and legal paperwork, which may at times require working extended hours to meet deadlines. In the case of private practice work, the clinician may also have to contend with fluctuating income depending upon caseload, as well as maintaining the difficult ethical balance between conducting unbiased forensic work for an attorney and knowing that his or her income may be significantly dependent on said attorney.

**Research/Policy Careers**

Research is often a component of careers in forensic psychology, whether a psychologist works in an academic or clinical setting. However, there are also career options that allow individuals to work in primarily research-oriented settings. Often, these research-focused careers have a focus on public policy.
Where to Look

Research/policy focused opportunities can include positions in advocacy organizations, research institutes - including independent research institutes and those affiliated with academic institutions, and government contracting and/or consulting firms. Positions may also be embedded within governmental agencies. Although these positions may be available across a variety of settings, individuals in research/policy focused positions often work in multidisciplinary settings, and communicate the results of their work to a wide variety of audiences, including academics, policymakers, and laypeople (American Psychology-Law Society, 2004).

Although there are a variety of research/policy jobs, there are several common locations to consider. Universities typically have research or policy collaborations, which results in institutes or policy centers, which may focus on research, advocacy, or policy. Identifying research institutes, think tanks, and research collaboratives is a good place to find this type of job (see Table 1).

Working within a university setting is a traditional route for doing research. For example, there are some academic positions at universities whose job description includes becoming a research director at an institute. Such employment most commonly involves conducting research on behalf of the institute as part of or as a majority of that individual’s employment. These research institutes require researchers and policy experts to work under the directors.

Outside of universities, there are many independent institutes, research organizations, and other nonprofit groups who are interested in individuals that are able to conduct research/policy work. Many of these locations’ research initiatives focus on specific policy issues and seek to gain funding from private or government organizations to study socially impactful policy issues.
The specific policy context may vary by project or institution, but can include policies at the organizational, local, state, or federal level. Many forensic psychologists will find that their research interests have policy relevance, as forensic psychology related issues (such as at risk youth, civil legal concerns, or corrections reform) are, by definition, shaped by and inform the legal system.

Often, independent research institutes and institutes associated with universities will be objective in their mission. However, certain research institutes and advocacy groups may seek researchers to conduct and apply empirical evidence in an effort to advance social justice causes. The field of forensic psychology inherently concerns a number of social justice causes, from domestic violence policy and corrections reform to juvenile justice issues, making individuals with research and statistical training particularly competitive for these positions.

**How to Be Competitive**

Research/policy careers can blend clinical knowledge, research, and teaching. Having a solid background in research, especially the ability to initiate, conduct, and publish research, makes an individual a competitive research candidate. Interested researchers should consider not just where their expertise lies, but other related topic areas; although a researcher’s expertise may not perfectly align with an employer, sites will consider strong researchers with tangential expertise, especially if those candidates have demonstrated success in publishing and obtaining funding. In addition, many research/policy organizations conduct research in a number of disciplines, not just the legal system; therefore, having a broad range of experience or interests can make an applicant more competitive to these organizations.

In addition to having strong research skills, it is favorable to have experiences in applying for, or managing, outside funding, such as government or private grant funding. Although many
of these positions do not require an individual to entirely fund his or her paycheck using grant money, many employers rely on grant funding to operate. Having an individual who is familiar with the application process, the ins and outs of grant management, and who has gained grant funding is an important asset that would assist his or her ability to obtain a research/policy position. It can be extremely difficult to obtain large grants from government or private institutions; however, smaller student and early career grants can help demonstrate an ability to write grant proposals. There are various student and early career psychologist grants, especially from the American Psychological Association (http://www.apa.org/about/awards/). Even if the individual does not ultimately obtain grant funding, familiarization with the grant application process is a skill that can be discussed during an interview process, particularly when he or she can identify lessons learned and strategies for future success.

Another important skill to demonstrate for the purposes of obtaining research or policy positions is the ability to communicate with the public or non-academic audiences. Many institutions have a goal of translating research knowledge for lay consumption. These skills are particularly important when dealing with policy work, as much of the interaction within the career can be with politicians and government officials, many of which do not have the background in psychology. Being able to write and present for the appropriate audience is vital in succeeding for such a career.

Flexibility is a must for a research/policy position, as a researcher’s day-to-day is never the same and can vary depending on other people’s schedules. One week may be spent in the office analyzing data and writing a report, the next week may be spent out of the office at meetings with government officials discussing research results or new projects.
Clinical, experimental, and social psychologists as well as statisticians who specialize in forensic psychology may find jobs in research and policy. Research/policy positions may be open to individuals with master's or doctoral degrees, and the job advertisements will specify the minimum educational requirements. The key for any research or policy position is not necessarily the degree, but the match between the specific policy/research topic and that individual’s previous research line, as well as the match between the needs of the project and his or her skillsets.

**Positives of the Career**

There are many positives to this type of work. There is a variety of day-to-day work, as each day could involve everything from taking time to plan a research agenda to meeting with key stakeholders regarding changes to legislation based on empirical evidence. Additionally, there is an opportunity to conduct research in novel areas, as much of the research that is conducted in such jobs is driven by the needs of policy and real life issues. Other advantages include working in multidisciplinary teams and learning and cultivating relationships outside of the traditional psychology field. Further, as the focus of these positions is almost exclusively on research, this type of work may be particularly suited for individuals with minimal teaching or clinical interests. Finally, for an individual to see the impact of his or her research is profound, as research conducted can be translated to policy and have immediate impact in the real world.

**Challenges of the Career**

As with all careers, there are challenges to choosing this path as a career. Although noted as a positive, the variety of day-to-day work can also become a challenge, as there is little consistency in the work during the week and routines are harder to develop. Additionally, scheduling time outside of work and planning ahead can be more difficult, as deadlines may
suddenly move or directions may suddenly change, affecting both professional and personal schedules. Although the opportunity to conduct research in novel areas is a positive, conducting research in novel areas is always difficult. New research directions and methodologies are often met with skepticism and doubt, new areas of study may also be met with questions about its usefulness or uniqueness. Such stressors can have an effect on a research agenda as well as have on the researcher’s confidence. Finally, funding can be an issue. Many of the jobs that are within this career path require the individual to obtain grant funding from government or private sources. Gaining grant funding is difficult, especially as an early career psychologist, and having income tied to the process can add significant stress. Finally, funding for such work, especially for novel ideas, is much more difficult, as funding agencies typically see novel ideas as high risk.

**Academia**

Within academia, positions can be delineated into teaching, research, and clinical. Interested academics may want to look at large and small universities as well as colleges and community colleges.

**Where to Look**

In considering positions, applicants may consider positions in undergraduate departments, masters programs, and doctoral level programs (either a Ph.D. or Psy.D.) (American Psychology-Law Society, 2004). One of the important considerations is the research classification of the university, which will dictate the amount of research required by the faculty member. Universities are ranked using a classification system for doctoral granting universities by how high their research activity is, with “R1” denoting the most research productivity, “R2” representing a high amount of research productivity, and “R3” representing a moderate level of research activity (http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/index.php).
There are tenure and non-tenure track positions within academia, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both (American Psychology-Law Society, 2004). With a tenure-track position, typically, the “tenure clock” runs for six years, with the academic applying for tenure at the beginning of the sixth year. While gaining tenure is the goal and can reduce significant stress, as job security becomes a guarantee, the years leading up to tenure can be stressful and filled with high expectations regarding research, teaching, and service responsibilities. Depending on the type of institution, the requirements within and among these three areas may significantly vary. For example, an academic at a four-year teaching college may be expected to teach four classes each semester and publish one scholarly article each year. In contrast, expectations at an R1 institution may include only two courses each semester, but also include three peer-reviewed articles and one external grant application. The tenure requirements are typically a reflection of the values of the institution and it is in the academic’s best interest to be aware of these requirements prior to entering into the employment contract.

Non-tenure track positions are typically time-limited (e.g., 9 month contract, 12 month contract) and may be renewable, depending on the needs of the institution and the department. Although there are institutions that give multi-year contracts, the major disadvantage of this type of position is the lack of job security. On the other hand, this position may be ideal for the individual who is unsure as to whether academia is the best career fit, as it provides the opportunity to become immersed in the academic world, with little commitment or would like a more clinical teaching position. Further, individuals interested in non-tenure track positions will often find fewer expectations around research and grant procurement.

Whether seeking a tenure or non-tenured position, there are opportunities for academics in primarily teaching colleges (e.g., undergraduate intuitions with small or no graduate
programs), more research oriented settings (e.g., R1), and more clinically geared programs (e.g., Psy.D. programs). For those forensic psychologists interested in teaching and mentoring undergraduates as opposed to conducting research, he or she should consider openings not just in undergraduate psychology departments, but also criminology/criminal justice departments. In addition, there are a number of masters programs in forensic psychology where academics can reach a large number of students through typical lecture courses and also work closely with students as they progress through their clinical and research training. An important consideration of the teaching focused setting is the quality of the teacher. Specifically, in these settings a strong emphasis is placed on teaching skills during the annual evaluation process each contract year. The pressure to demonstrate teaching effectiveness, typically through student course evaluations, can be high.

Research driven universities seek both research professors and tenure track faculty. While the former is eventually completely reliant on soft money (e.g., grant funding), there is often a great amount of flexibility with regards to non-research responsibility; research professors have limited obligations in the areas of teaching and service (e.g., school and departmental committees) requirements. Tenure-track professors in a research environment are generally required to obtain large grants and publish frequently in prestigious journals and they have service as well as teaching requirements. They may sometimes, though, be “bought” out of some of these additional requirements with grant money. As described above, an incredible advantage of the tenured position allows for permanent job security.

Clinically driven programs want their faculty to have expertise in the field, and that means working concurrently as a clinician. While clearly the full time position would be as a faculty member, there is an expectation that the faculty member’s conduct forensic evaluations
and supervise students. This clinical work is also accompanied with teaching, research, and service requirements. However, expectations regarding research will likely be lower than the traditional R1 institution.

**How to Be Competitive**

For research oriented academic careers (most often found at R1 and R2 universities), past research, which can be demonstrated through a strong publication record along with presentations at national conferences, is extremely important. Demonstrating an ability to publish in prestigious and high impact journals, particularly as the first author on collaborative manuscripts, makes candidates competitive. Being awarded grants, however small, demonstrates an ability to start an academic career within a research context.

Within a clinically focused academic position, it is important to demonstrate previous, as well as current, clinical work. While many of these positions may not require the same publication record as a research academic career, these positions do require some research interest and a publication record. Importantly, these positions will require an individual to demonstrate his or her ability to impart clinical knowledge to students. As such, previous teaching experience or experience in conducting clinical trainings is important. Additionally, a specific area of focus in clinical work will help, as many jobs are specific in which type of population and setting in which they wish to have an academic work.

Finally, within a teaching academic career, it is important to be able to demonstrate previous teaching experience or oral presentation skills. Even in primarily teaching positions, research ability remains a requirement, therefore demonstration of publication or presentation within the field is important. Four-year undergraduate institutions typically value the inclusion of undergraduates in the research process. As such, a candidate who can demonstrate a research
agenda in which it is feasible to include undergraduate research assistants or an ability to mentor undergraduate research will likely be more competitive. Finally, similar to the clinical position, an area of focus or specialization is important, as many of these positions desire an individual with a specific concentration within forensic psychology (e.g., juvenile justice).

Academic positions primarily require doctoral degrees. Depending on the type of institution, and the priorities of that institution, a candidate’s desirability may be weighed differently. Chiefly, a teaching college will most closely examine prior teaching experience, whereas a research university will prioritize a strong publication record.

**Positives of the Career**

There are several obvious positives to a career within academia. Many academics note the satisfaction of imparting knowledge, advising career directions, and witnessing students develop into colleagues. Academics have the opportunity, depending on the position, to shape the lives of undergraduate and graduate students within the field, and the students they advise will shape the future of the field. Such actions of ‘paying it forward’ are intrinsically rewarding and provide an academic the opportunity to influence the direction of the forensic psychology field. Another advantage to an academic career is the inherent flexibility within the position. Many academics are able to schedule the work hours that are suitable for their own lives, perhaps allowing the interested individual the opportunity to add clinical or consulting work “on the side.” There is not only time flexibility, but also some flexibility with regards to the teaching and research. Many academics have the flexibility to pursue their own research goals and can, in certain jobs, choose the classes that they teach.
**Challenges of the Career**

A complaint often heard (no matter the specifics of the academic job) often concerns department and institution politics. As a new faculty member, it is often helpful to secure a mentor inside and outside of the department so that he or she may share the political particulars of the university. Additionally, new faculty members are often given some of the more time consuming and least appreciative committee roles. If not careful, these roles can consume much time that could be devoted to research, publishing, mentoring students, or teaching. Further, while students are one of the best parts of being a faculty member, they also come with a specific set of challenges. Students’ abilities and knowledge often vary, perhaps making their ability to assist in research limited or extra time to teach an important concept. Some students may enter a program with a certain set of expectations regarding what they expect a mentor to look like, and can be disappointed and even angry if their expectations are not met. Finally, if in a tenure-track position, for approximately six years, tenure is always looming. For some, the stress can be consuming and the fears of not publishing enough, getting along with important members of the department, not getting strong enough of teaching evaluations can feel more meaningful as these factors will all affect that end all decision.

**Final Thoughts**

Forensic psychology as a field offers abundant opportunities. While these opportunities can be varied and some may be nontraditional, all can be gratifying, especially when fit is considered. Flexibility when seeking jobs is also important, as sometimes a job that seems imperfect on paper can turn into an ideal position in practice. Job seekers should not be intimidated nor avoid applying for certain positions simply due the job titles; sometimes jobs titles do not accurately describe a position. Similarly, employers may be seeking early career
professionals for prestigious sounding positions. Finally, there are ways to integrate clinical, research, and academic interests. Some psychologists enjoy adjunct teaching, working within a private practice a few days a week, and remaining engaged in research/public policy through writing and attending conferences. In sum, it is important for an individual to know his or her interests and skillsets, to keep in mind that there are numerous forensic psychology opportunities available, and to recognize that there are varying ways to combine them all.
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