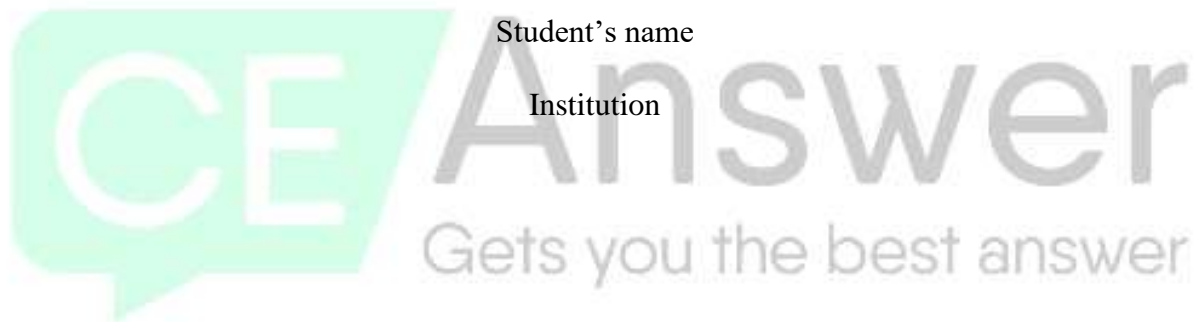


The Role of Forensic Psychology in the Criminal Justice System



Introduction

In some movies, we see forensic psychologists committed to uncovering a clue that results in success in the criminal case. Other movies exhibit forensic psychologists interrogating defendants in a bid to delve into their mind and unravel the motives of the criminals. In reality, forensic psychologists perform roles similar to those played by clinical psychologists though they specifically work within a legal framework. As such, forensic psychology involves the application of psychological principles and practices to the legal system, particularly in court (Towl & Crighton, 2010). Some criminal cases require psychological interventions from forensic psychologists who apply psychological principles to perform psychological analysis that eventually provide essential breakthroughs. Forensic psychology has been indispensable to various criminal cases including the *United States v. Mitchell* in which the court relied on the forensic psychologist's evaluation to determine the competency of the defendant to stand the trial.

United States v. Mitchell

In *United States v. Mitchell*, Brian David Mitchell was charged with kidnapping a 14-year-old girl known as Elizabeth Ann Smart in June 2002 (Cassel, 2003). Mitchell abducted Elizabeth from her parent's residence in the Federal Heights at knifepoint. Consequently, Mitchell took Elizabeth to the outskirts of Salt Lake City and then to San Diego County in California where he held her captive. Mitchell lived with his wife known as Wanda Barzee who also participated in abduction and kidnapping of Elizabeth for nine months. During the abduction, Mitchell raped Elizabeth several times because he intended to forcefully marry her (Berkes, 2010). Mitchell was extremely religious and had imparted his religious beliefs into

Elizabeth. Elizabeth accompanied Barzee and Mitchell in several public occasions but she always wore a face veil and a headscarf to obscure her presence.

Moreover, Mitchell's religious beliefs proscribed women from speaking in public so Elizabeth went unnoticed in public occasions. After the victim, Elizabeth, was retrieved from captivity by law enforcement officers, Mitchell and his wife were arraigned in the District Court in Utah to answer the charges filed against them. However, the determination of Mitchell's competency to stand trial was a challenge that ultimately required the intervention of forensic psychologists. Indeed, the trial began in 2010 so the court took eight years to determine his competency to stand the trial (Berkes, 2010).

Psychological Approach

The psychological approach applied to the crime was rooted in religious delusions. Mitchell could not undergo a trial before undergoing a scrupulous competency evaluation that was to be based on his assertions of being a religious man. Indeed, Mitchell had to interact with forensic psychologists to distinguish between delusion and zealous beliefs. For instance, Dr. Stephen Golding examined Mitchell and found that his religious beliefs were delusional (Berkes, 2010). Golding gave an opinion that Mitchell was incapable to stand the trial due to his delusions. Hence, Mitchell might have kidnapped Elizabeth due to religious delusions because his wife also believed him when he said that God had told him to marry another wife.

Social, Economic and Psychological Impacts of the Crime

Mitchell's criminal case involved abducting and kidnapping his victim, Elizabeth. These crimes have social, economic, and psychological impacts on the victim and the entire community. The first social impact is the involuntary separation of the victim from her family. Another social impact is being held captive in an antisocial environment where Elizabeth could

not express herself during public occasions because Mitchell's beliefs prohibited women from speaking in public (Berkes, 2010). The economic impact of the crime was evident in the use of resources by the family and law enforcement officers in an attempt to trace Elizabeth. The family must have used resources like money to publish the disappearance of Elizabeth on newspapers and other media outlets. Finally, psychological impacts faced by Elizabeth and her family include anxiety, depression, fear, and trauma.

Psychological Treatments

The case moved from the District Court to the Federal Court where Mitchell was sentenced to life imprisonment and his wife, Barzee, was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. However, Barzee was released in September 2018 on parole (CBS News, 2018). According to CBS News (2018), Barzee was released on parole to undergo mental health treatment. Elizabeth did not undergo psychotherapy or professional counselling but received family counselling only. Also, Elizabeth did not receive psychotropic medications that would have helped her to effectively eliminate trauma. Therapists could help Elizabeth to relieve her traumatic experiences or pain and most importantly alleviate anguish and rage she held against her captors. As a result, Elizabeth could not be enraged by the release of Barzee on parole in September 2018.

Victim's Role and Rights

One of Elizabeth's roles was dispensing evidence by confessing what happened during her abduction before the court. In other words, the major role of Elizabeth was to testify for the prosecution (Cassel, 2003). Fundamentally, the role played by Elizabeth during the court process was reinforced by the rights to participation, information, and protection.

The Role of Forensic Psychologists in the United States v. Mitchell

Forensic psychologists had to perform competency evaluation on Mitchell to determine whether or not he was capable to stand the trial based on his religious beliefs. Forensic psychologists had to use psychological principles and practices to differentiate between religious delusion and zealous beliefs. After several competency evaluations, forensic psychologists identified that Mitchell was suffering from religious delusions. The incompetence to stand the trial due to religious delusions delayed the trial for eight years from 2003 when the defendants were arrested to 2010 when the trial began (CBS News, 2018). Before Mitchell regained mental competence, the prosecutor had appealed to the court for permission to forcibly administer medication to the defendants to make them regain mental competence quickly. Utah judge allowed the involuntary medication of Barzee to make her regain competency to stand the trial (Berkes, 2010). The approval of involuntary or forcible medication was unethical because the defendant did not give consent.

Theory of Forensic Psychology

The case demonstrated the criminal behavior theory influenced by psychological factors. The need for Mitchell and his wife to undergo competency evaluation before being subjected to the trial revealed that a psychological state involves biological mechanisms. By requiring the defendants to receive medication to regain mental competency, the court recognized that the individual's mind is connected to the brain (Scott, 2019). Additionally, forensic psychologists identified the defendants as having religious delusions, implying that there is a relationship between false perceptions or false beliefs and the likelihood of criminal behaviors.

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