

The Psychology of Lawyering*
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I don't know much about being a lawyer. I've only been licensed to practice for approximately four months. Very little that I experienced in law school actually prepared me for "practicing law." However, I am a very experienced and well-seasoned law student. I can prepare for class discussion and write an essay exam with the best of them and I truly believe that I have Belmont's Psychology program to thank for that. I know for a fact that my undergraduate training in psychology helped me be a successful law student, and I am fairly certain that it will help me be an even more successful lawyer.

Most people think being a lawyer is all about what they see on television and in movies. They think that every day is spent in court, questioning witnesses, and revealing shocking "who done it's". Keep in mind that the outcome of all of your hard work hinges on the decision of twelve angry (or hopefully not so angry when you're a defense attorney) jurors. While this is the case on some days, most of my days are spent talking on the telephone, interviewing witnesses and determining how they will present to the jury, and negotiating settlements. Understanding how people "work" and reading their poker faces is a key to success in this business (or at least that is what I've been told).

On a more practical note, the research and writing skills I began to develop as an undergraduate psychology student were the key to my survival and ultimate success in law school. The ability to communicate is important in any career, but being able to present an effective argument, support that argument with logic and reason, and convince a judge (who is probably much smarter or at least more experienced than you) that you are right is what I spent three years in law school learning to do. My undergraduate training in psychology definitely put me a step ahead of everybody else. I already knew how to conduct effective research, how to integrate that research to make sense to my specific set of facts, and how to draw logical conclusions based on past research and current facts. Further, and even more important, I knew how to communicate those conclusions to others. And don't even discount the character building experience of taking essay exams. That is all there is in law school. If you are not an effective writer, and do not have the test-taking skills to endure a three to four hour essay exam, you will not graduate from law school. And then there is the Bar Exam, which has an entire day (six hours) spent essay writing.

Although the very large majority of legal proceedings are conducted "on paper" through briefs and motions, some clients still get their day in court, and this is another area of my legal education and legal practice for which my degree in psychology prepared me. Every psychology student dreads the day when BURS/PURS rolls around each semester and they are required to stand before their peers and professors and present the results of the even more dreaded semester of Research Methods II. I was a nervous wreck in any public speaking context, but muddled my way through with dignity in order to obtain my degree. In law school, not only were you required to take classes such as Trial Advocacy and Moot Court where the students "played" court, but also any given day in class could easily turn into a public speaking engagement. Law professors swear by the Socratic method, and my first year of law school was like having to present at BURS/PURS everyday.

For those of you interested in the actual subject area of psychology in the legal world, there are many areas where the two topics converge. For example, there are people who make careers (and a nice income) by studying potential jurors and helping attorneys make selections who will be sympathetic to their case. There are people who study the dependability and accuracy of eyewitness testimony. And, everyone is familiar with the expert witness who typically makes an appearance in criminal cases when the defendant has pleaded insanity as a defense.

In conclusion, I guess the point of this article is not to convince you to abandon your dreams of a career in psychology and run to apply to law school. Although I am a little prejudiced since I think being a lawyer is a great career, I think more importantly that you should realize what a strong background your chosen major is giving you and how it can prepare you to be successful in *any* career you choose to pursue. Being able to take someone else's work and apply that to your own ideas, and on top of that being able to effectively communicate your ideas to others in a persuasive manner is the key to be successful in any career. I just happen to know from experience that it prepared me for mine and I would not trade it for anything else in the world.

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