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The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Forensic Neuroscience

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Edited by Anthony R. Beech, Adam J. Carter, Ruth E. Mann, and Pia Rothstein
979 Pages in two volumes
Wiley-Blackwell
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It wasn't all that long ago that neuroscience appeared to outsiders as a dark, arcane knowledge, comprehensible only to a select few. Keynote presentations at conferences were noteworthy first for the complexity and rich colors in the PowerPoint slides and then for the apparent lack of hope. It seemed that what we learned was that trauma made catastrophic changes to the brain. Audience members often came away with the impression that they were neurologically doomed by their early life experiences, and likely their children were as well. Worst of all, there seemed to be few ideas about how to improve matters for ourselves and our clients, outside of the idea that some changes were possible in adolescence (too late for the participants). This assessment is embellished for dramatic effect, but in some cases is close to accurate. Over the years, considerable research has entered the mix, including Adrian Raine's work on the biological roots of crime.

Fast forward 15 or 20 years, and the situation has improved dramatically. In a workshop in Wisconsin in 2005, the lead editor of this project, Tony Beech, explained his approach to life and its challenges: all you need is a wiring diagram. Tony had spent much of his life around various electronic projects and had found that using diagrams to illustrate the difference between current and future desired states, whether it be in a pedal for his guitar or an understanding of the brain, appeared to make the difference between a fun project and a tiresome one. With this volume, Tony and his editors have taken this logic to Olympic levels.

The list of contributors to this volume will be familiar to many readers. Indeed, it is an all-star cast that includes (and is not limited to) Daniel Amen, Kevin Creeden, Bruce Perry, Corine de Ruiter, Paul Gilbert, Dawn Fisher, Don Grubin, Sheilagh Hodgins, Claire Nee, Christopher Patrick, Adrian Raine, Tony Ward, Fiona Williams, and many others. The material itself is too extensive to review in detail here, but volume one, alone, includes an introductory section of two chapters; a section of six chapters

on general neuropsychology; nine chapters on the neurobiology of offending; four chapters on the neurological bases to risk factors of offending (a topic that alone could make up an entire conference). For those who, like me, have wanted clear guidance on what professionals at the front lines can do to build better lives for our clients, the section on rehabilitation spans nine chapters across 140 pages. The final section appropriately considers ethical, legal, and political implications, and there are two concluding chapters.

Although in itself this project would be a triumph, the benefits go further: The volumes include bulleted summaries and key points of each chapter. While this ensures a high level of accessibility compared to earlier projects, the editors go further and provide definitions of terms for each chapter as well.

Although it may seem a small point, these tools for the reader are included in each chapter, providing not just accessibility, but true ease for the front-line professional seeking resources. This is something the editors obviously cared passionately about. Many of us have gone to conference workshops or read studies and chapters in which we had the experience of getting caught up in the technical gears. For example, key terms get shortened to initials that then require the reader to expend extra effort to understand. Likewise, conference presenters may offer one or two new ideas in the time it takes for the listener to process the words “monoamine oxidases”. As if all this weren’t enough, the book includes color illustrations that significantly ease the process of reader learning. Somehow, the two volumes are surprisingly slim yet well-constructed, thereby making for a physically comfortable experience. Taken together, this is not the multi-volume set that discourages reading through its sheer size. In fact, it draws the reader in and is hard to put down.

In all, the editors clearly kept the brain in mind (to borrow a pun) when constructing this set. Having clearly learned the lessons of their own subject material, it is by far the most comprehensive yet user-friendly resource in this area to date.

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