

THE CSI EFFECT

This week, in the second of our series about the research being carried out by leading academics from The Open University, we speak to Graham Pike and Jim Turner about forensic investigation and just how real those TV crime shows are...

On TV, criminals more often than not get their comeuppance thanks to some whizzy science. But these popular crime scene investigations and grisly cop dramas don't reflect the real world, say psychologists. 'Brilliant entertainment, but often utter nonsense,' says Graham Pike, Professor of Forensic Cognition at The Open University.

On-screen forensic investigators solve crimes with tiny traces of evidence, almost supernatural insights and some sophisticated graphics. But is this a problem? Quite possibly, say psychologists at the OU, who are researching something called the CSI effect – dramas such as CSI and Bones give us unrealistic expectations of what forensic science can actually achieve. This could lead to innocent people being wrongly convicted or criminals wrongly acquitted because jurors misunderstand the quality of evidence in court.

This work forms part of an ongoing collaboration with UK police forces and OU psychologists. They're investigating how psychology can contribute to better investigations – how best to question witnesses and suspects, for instance, or the workings of memory. Within the OU's Centre for Policing Research and Learning, 19 police forces are working with the OU to research the best ways of operating and

applying psychological research in practice. The centre's studies provide a rich source of expertise for police officers and staff.

'Jurors may expect every case to be open and shut thanks to forensic analysis, because that's what happens on TV shows,' says Dr Jim Turner, lecturer in forensic psychology at the OU, who together with Professor Pike is researching the impact of bogus TV science. *'If forensic evidence isn't presented in court, jurors might feel obliged to acquit a defendant – and if it is used, they may assume it's completely accurate. But even DNA evidence is not 100 per cent accurate.'*

and uses algorithms to arrive at the most accurate image.

In recent years social media has thrown up a new set of questions for police – does Trial by Twitter, for instance, skew memories of an actual event? If someone posts a picture of a suspect on Facebook or other channels, do we store that as the guilty face? Do photos obliterate other memories of the event?

As long as human beings – and their imperfect memories – are involved, criminal investigations will never be perfect, say Dr Turner and Professor Pike. In the meantime, they advise taking the crime dramas with a large pinch of salt.



'The way you store and recall information may be different to what actually happened'

PROFESSOR GRAHAM PIKE

Our memories can deceive us too. 'Eye witness accounts may contain false memories,' says Dr Turner. Yet individuals honestly can't distinguish between which memories are real and which have been created, perhaps by something as simple as a leading question: What colour coat was the man wearing? (What if he wasn't wearing one at all?). 'People assume our brain works like a computer,' says Professor Pike. 'But the way you store and recall information may be different from what actually happened.'

And with what we now know about eyewitness accounts, how can investigators help people better remember faces? OU psychologists and technology experts at the University of Kent have worked to develop a new facial compositing system which helps witnesses remember whole face rather than individual features

How much do you really know about crime investigations? Try the OU's interactive Finding the Truth quiz at open.edu/openlearn/people-politics-law/the-law/criminology/finding-the-truth to test your knowledge of real criminal proceedings.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Open University's School of Psychology is Europe's largest provider of university level education in psychology. The university offers a range of part-time, distance learning qualifications in psychology that include free online courses, diplomas, certificates, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Psychology can be studied alone or towards a BSc in Forensic Psychology, along with a number of other subjects, including criminology, counselling, philosophy and computing.

Meet the student: Amanda Trotman



'There's so much we don't know about the human mind,' says Open University student Amanda Trotman, 46. *'I like psychology, it's like the last of the unknown worlds.'* Learning for her is always a joy, but her route to higher education hasn't been smooth.

Next year, she'll finish her degree. *'When I say I'm studying for a degree, it feels great and I love that.'* As a child growing up on a boat in Cornwall, Amanda didn't go to school until the age of 11. *'I was taught to read and write by my mother but that was about all. I was bullied at high school but I wanted to be there – I wanted to learn.'* She left at 16 with three GCSEs including an A in English. Her English teacher told her she had ability but her mother discouraged her from college.

Until she married at 26, she'd worked as a waitress and in administration. But she'd also fed her love of learning with a humanities course at a local college. *'One of the tutors said I had a really academic mind.'* But after buying a small business with her husband and starting a family, any further study was put on ice.

When her husband died in 2012, Amanda was faced with raising her four children alone. *'For some reason I decided that it would be a good time to sign up for a degree. My husband had always said I should study. It was one of those moments when you say, "OK, I'm going to do this".'*

She did and used the flexibility of the OU to commit to an open degree. This allows students to build their own unique degree with a combination of chosen subjects. Amanda studied courses in humanities and science, including genetics. She's now studying a module in forensic psychology – including a section on the CSI effect. She was very unsure whether she'd manage, but says that the flexibility of the OU means she can access her studies whenever she wants. *'I can study at my own pace and in my own space. No one judges me in the classroom. No one except my tutor sees my work. And that gives me the confidence to keep aiming high.'*

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