

SPS Feature Newsletter

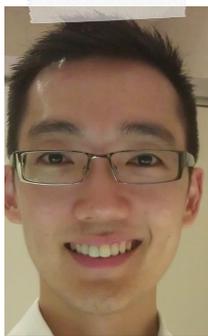
Periodically, this e-newsletter will introduce psychologists of different specialisations who work in various settings (e.g. hospital, private setting, ministry) in hope to create awareness and to educate the public (including students, aspiring psychologists-to-be, as well as practicing psychologists from different specializations) about their roles through personalised interviews and sharing.



Introduction

*Our featured
psychologists!*

In this e-newsletter, we interviewed 3 Forensic Psychologists i.e. Dr. Kenji Gwee from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), Dr. Julia Lam from Forensic Psych Services (Private), and Ms. Silma from Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) to illustrate how it is like to be working as a Forensic Psychologist.



Dr Kenji Gwee
Institute of Mental Health



Dr Julia Lam
Forensic Psych Services (Private)



Ms Silma
Ministry of Social and Family Development

What is a forensic psychologist?

Thanks to drama series like *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, or *Mind Game* (MediaCorp Drama in 2015), one of the most common myths regarding forensic psychologists is that they profile criminals or solve crimes. Yes, forensic psychologists may work on criminal cases, but their work focuses on the psychological nature of criminal cases (which may indirectly solve crimes, too). However, investigating crimes and gathering evidence is the sole responsibility of police.

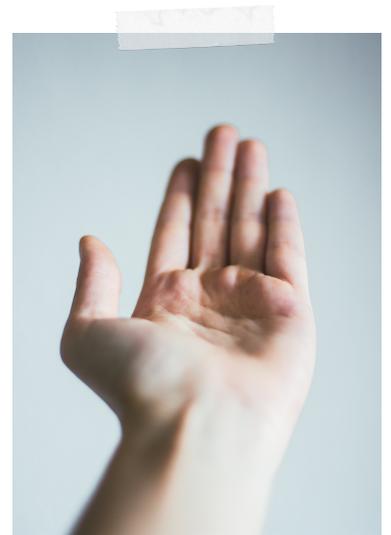


"Forensic Psychology?
Another *CSI* or *Criminal
Minds??*"

In real life, forensic psychology is a diverse field (to be described later) but it could be generally understood as the application of psychology in the domain of law and legal system (Imagine a dance between psychology and law). Forensic Psychologists are scientist-practitioners who apply psychological knowledge, theory and skills to the understanding and functioning of legal and criminal justice systems.

What do forensic psychologists do?

The 3 Forensics Psychologists shared that their main duties are to provide: 1) forensic interviewing, 2) psychological assessment regarding the mental health condition of offenders, 3) re-offending risk of offenders, or 4) to develop intervention programs (e.g. rehabilitation) to reduce offence behaviour. Some of them also conduct research or lecture in relevant areas. It is their responsibility to understand the psychological aspects of legal cases and give professional advice to litigants, perpetrators, victims, and personnel of government and community organisations. They also play invaluable roles in courtrooms such that they advise lawyers before trial, provide psychological support to police officers, or report psychological evidence in legal and quasi-legal proceedings. Due to potential conflicts of a dual-role, usually the forensic assessor will not provide



intervention to the same client and will refer on; and vice versa.

As in intervention programs abovementioned, Forensic Psychologists work with both offenders, victims, and possibly their families to reduce re-offence and to address psychological impact on the victims. For example, Ms Silma who is working in MSF mainly work with youth offenders, who are either sentenced to probation or ordered to reside in a residential home and with offenders' families to help solve the problems from within the family nucleus. While her job is challenging and exciting, Ms. Silma reported that it can be very stressful because of the regular contact with human misery and suffering.

"While I enjoy most aspects of forensic psychology, I also come in contact with a great deal of human misery. Coming in contact with this much pain can take a toll. Hence, it's important to engage in self-care to take care of both my physical and emotional health."

— Ms Silma

Who do forensic psychologists work with?

Notably, Forensic Psychologists often are not lone rangers, they work closely with internal and external partners, depending on their work setting. For instance, Dr. Kenji shared that Forensic Psychologists working in prisons will work closely with uniformed officers, counsellors and wardens, while those from the Courts will have lawyers, judges, and counsellors as colleagues.

In the psychiatric hospital, forensic psychologists work closely with psychiatrists, neuropsychologist, child/clinical psychologists, medical social worker, and case managers, while those in MSF like Ms. Silma, she is expected to correspond with child protection officers, policy makers, counsellor, and staff from rehabilitative services like homes.

While in private setting, Dr. Julia shared that her work covers family issues such as parental fitness, custody / care and control issues of children in divorce cases, Personal Protection Orders in domestic violence cases, and dissolution of marriage due to mental issues / addiction / domestic violence. In short, forensic psychologists are expected to work with the mental health professionals, legal system, and the relevant authorities.

Team work is essential in the work of a Forensic Psychologist

Where do forensic psychologists work?

Forensic Psychologists often work in criminal, civil and family legal contexts. From the example of things that they do, it comes as no surprise that forensic psychologists are mostly employed in our government agencies like Ministry of Home Affairs and Singapore Prison Service, State Courts, Institute of Mental Health (IMH), Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), and Singapore Police Force (SPF) or in private practice.

"I sat-in a module— Introduction to Forensic Psychology taught by the late Prof Robert Andry. Dr Andry shared with the students his rich experience and we had some brainstorming and discussion about the case where two 10-year-old British boys abducted and brutally killed a 2-year-old toddler back in 1993. I became fascinated by Forensic Psychology."

— Dr Julia Lam

How to be a forensic psychologist?

The training as a forensic psychologist would involve the formal education of at least 5 years, including undergraduate Honours in psychology and 2 years of Masters in Forensic/Clinical Psychology, as well as relevant working experience in a forensic setting (e.g., prisons, probation office). One can also study Masters in Clinical Psychology and specialise in Forensic Psychology later.

While Dr. Kenji shared that UK and Australia are best for practice-oriented training based on his observation, Dr. Julia suggested Australia, UK or US and she urged that students must bear in mind to choose credible programmes with a scientist-practitioner model, which will make students eligible to join professional bodies like the College of Forensic Psychologists of Australian Psychological Society (APS) or British Psychological Society (BPS), as well as get specialist registration or licensing in respective countries with an endorsement to do forensic psychological work.

What are the challenges faced in the journey of becoming a forensic psychologist?

Dr. Julia highlighted that the scarcity of training programmes with good standards and quality is a big challenge. Currently, there is a lack of an accredited forensic psychology postgraduate program provided in Singapore. Therefore, the financial cost involved studying overseas is a drawback, according to Ms. Silma. For example, Dr. Julia shared that she did her Master's degree in Applied Forensic Psychology by distance learning offered by Leicester University and later completed a doctorate in Forensic Psychology with the University of Melbourne.

On the other hand, Dr. Kenji thought that becoming a skilled clinician while overlaying the forensic aspect on top of clinical expertise is challenging for those who are entering this arena. He added that operating with and within the various systems of practice (law, psychology, your organizational demands, personal values) would be another challenge, as with figuring out how to meld your work with that of other professionals. Dr. Julia added that unlike in Australia, forensic psychological work is not so much recognised and appreciated by the criminal justice system in Singapore, as judges and prosecutors tend to believe this kind of work should only be done by psychiatrists.

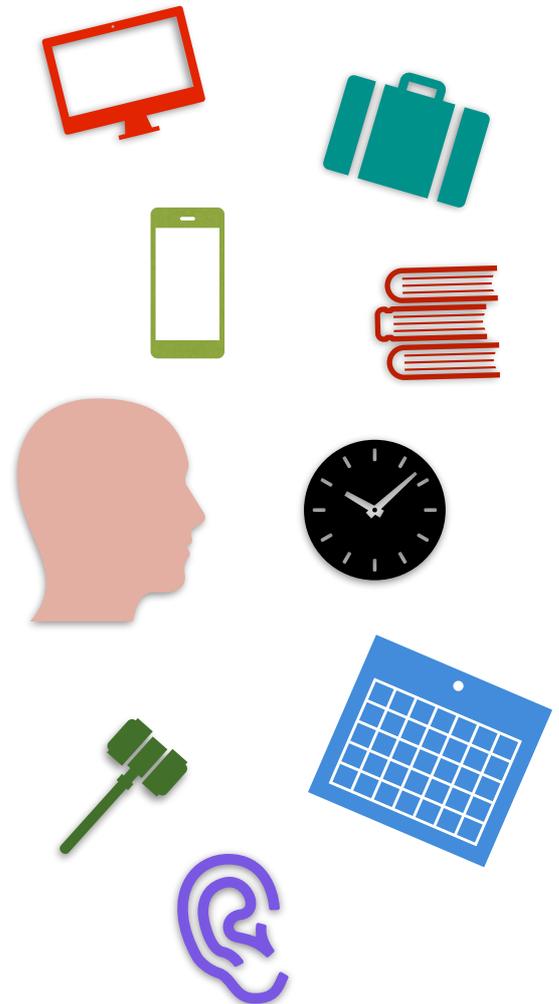


*"Psychologist?
Psychiatrist? Where
would I stand in this
field? What would my
barriers be?"*

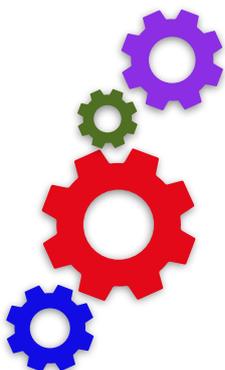
What is a typical workday like for you?

As a Principal Clinical Psychologist working in a hospital setting, Dr. Kenji shared that there is no regularity to his schedule. Other than providing clinical services like therapy and psychological assessments, he will be discussing cases with psychiatrists, lawyers, and his fellow clinical psychologist colleagues. He also supervises the latter to assist their clinical development and assign cases from psychiatrists to them for therapy or assessment. Dr. Kenji added that he still does his readings while travelling and work on some research, sometimes during his personal time.

Working in a private setting, Dr. Julia focuses more on forensic psychology services. If there is a new case, she would interview and conduct assessment for 4-6 hours on average on a single day to collect information and administer psychometric testing. Sometimes she may need to interview family informants and/or significant others. After that, she will spend another day (8-12 hours) to write up a medico-legal report as well as spend time perusing documents relevant to the case (medical reports, online news, judgement of previous cases of a similar nature) and looking up medical and psychological literature to support opinions drawn. Dr. Julia also discusses and consults cases with lawyers and peer psychologists.



What do you find most challenging in this job?



Forensic psychology is a specialization in clinical psychology and is a relatively new field, even newer in Singapore compared to overseas, said Dr. Kenji. As such, the overall support in terms of services and the expectations of stakeholders prove to be the most challenging to him. Dr. Julia agreed that working with stakeholders, such as public prosecutors, judges, psychiatrists, who hold different perspectives can be very difficult. Dr. Julia also added that suicidality in clients can be very devastating to clinicians. Therefore, having good peer supervision and self-care are very important.

"Overcoming these challenges (support in service and expectations of stakeholders) is a systemic effort, but I do what I can by psychoeducating stakeholders, teaching and training the new generations of clinical and forensic psychologists, and dabble in a bit of research to make my humble contribution in moving the field along somewhat."

— Dr. Kenji Gwee

What makes a good forensic psychologist?

Ms. Silma shared that being persistent and resilient are essential in surviving the forensic psychology field. Dr. Kenji thinks that a good forensic psychologist is one who is **objective, clear-headed** and has good control over one's emotions. He or she should have a mettle for challenging and complex work, and be **resilient** to face up to having one's work scrutinised.

In addition, Dr. Julia highlighted that being **non-judgemental, compassionate**, and having an **open mind** to consider things from different perspectives are very important. She added that unless it is psychopathy, she believes that nobody would choose to commit a crime and have their freedom and dignity taken away. Hence, there is always something to look out for in terms of trying to understand why they did what they did. In short, the psychologists summarised that being **compassionate, resilient**, and **objective** are the key qualities to be a forensic psychologist.

- ★ Persistence
- ★ Resilient
- ★ Objective
- ★ Clear Headed
- ★ Compassionate

Any advice for "forensic psychologist-wannabes"?

Be Compassionate

Be Brave

Be Aware

Be open

Dr. Julia advised "Be compassionate, dare to go into areas others are not brave enough to. Beware of own values and beliefs, whether you prefer to work with offenders or victims, you prefer to conduct assessment and interviews, or to provide treatment for the forensic groups (perpetrators or victims) or just become an academic teaching modules in forensic psychology."

Dr. Kenji advised "If you are open to this field and are in the exploration stage, try your best to take a closer look though I know such opportunities are hard to come by. If you have already decided on this, keep at it- practicing clinical psychology is an already long road, and forensic psychology, which is a specialization in clinical psychology, is an even longer one. But you know it's gonna be fun!"

How do people usually get an appointment to see a forensic psychologist?

Dr. Kenji shared that the public usually do not, unless they require psychological assessment for criminal proceedings, or reports for civil litigation, or when they seek treatment for offence-related behaviours, such as paraphilia in the context of an outrage of modesty offence. When done voluntarily, they usually seek private practitioners, those in step-down care services, or less frequently, hospitals. When mandated, appointments with government forensic psychologists will usually be made for the clients. Dr. Julia's cases are usually referred by lawyers, in private practice, or through CLAS (Criminal Legal Aid Scheme) and LASCO (Legal Aid Scheme for Capital Offences), and Forensic Psychiatrists who required collaboration / specialised forensic psychological assessment / testing in their work. Some of her cases are also through word-of-mouth by her ex-clients, she said.



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Singapore
Psychological
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