

## Evaluation of Forensic Psychology Reports: The Opinion of Partners and Stakeholders on the Quality of Forensic Psychology Reports

**Mohammed Aldhawyani\***

*Department of Criminology, Dubai Police, UAE*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Mohammed Aldhawyani, Department of Criminology, Dubai Police, UAE.

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### Abstract

The present study aims to solicit feedback from partners on the quality of forensic psychology reports, Evaluate the quality of the forensic psychology reports through a 9-item questionnaire which was designed based on previous research, test if there is an agreement in evaluating the forensic psychology reports between the groups/classifications of partners and analyzing the feedback from partners and stakeholders on those reports for the purpose of continuous development and improvement of the service provided. To achieve these goals, a questionnaire containing 9 items was devised and validated, questions from 1-8, are concerned with avoiding the most common mistakes in forensic psychology report writing. Item 9 is singled out for comments and suggestions from the partners involved in the research.

(41) research participants, categorized into 3 subgroups (judicial organizations. - Police agencies - Specialized bodies). A statistical program (SPSS) was used for data analysis and the application of some statistical analyses such as (Mann-Whitney U test and Spearman correlation). The results of the current study show that there was an overall positive evaluation from participants. In addition to that, the results show that there was an agreement between participants within the subgroups on the fact that forensic psychology reports are free from the most common mistakes. The findings also highlighted that there is correlation between the clarity of the expert's opinion and answering the referral question on one hand and the increased demand for such reports in the future on the other hand.

**Keywords:** *Forensic Psychology Reports; Partners; Stakeholders*

### Introduction

Judicial bodies in most countries of the world rely on forensic reports that are prepared by forensic experts in their various scientific disciplines when making a legal decision or sentencing the "accused" to be convicted. With the passage of time and the development and complexity of the crime, some judicial bodies used the forensic psychology reports to identify and address cases in which some of the perpetrators are acquitted on the grounds of insanity or some psychiatric illness. Although forensic psychology reports are based on intangible evidence similar to other forensic reports of a physical nature, forensic psychology reports are based on the very scientific basis on which other forensic reports are built.

### Criminology department in Dubai police

The General Head Quarters of Dubai Police was the first in the region to issue forensic psychology reports due to the proactive leadership and the establishment of the Department of Criminology has a forensic psychology section, which is currently responsible for the issuance of forensic psychology reports to judicial and police authorities.

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### The current study

The present study aims to:

1. Evaluate the quality of the forensic psychology reports through a questionnaire, which was designed (and validated), based on the previous research concerning the most common mistakes in writing forensic psychology reports.
2. Test if there is an agreement in the evaluation of forensic psychology reports between participants' subgroups.
3. Analyze partners and stakeholders feedback for the purpose of continuous development and improvement of the service provided.

### Specific Research Questions:

1. Is there an agreement between partners in the evaluation of forensic psychology reports?
2. Is there a correlation between the clarity of expert opinion and the increased number of requests for the reports in the future?
3. Is there is a correlation between answering the referral question and the increased number of requests for the reports in the future?

### Literature Review

#### The purpose of writing forensic psychology reports

Karson and Nadkarni [1] views the purpose of writing forensic psychology reports as a mean of answering referral questions set by judicial organizations. In Dubai not only judicial organizations request forensic psychology reports but also other entities (governmental) also do ask for the preparation of such reports and for this reason referral questions differ. Otto [2] suggests that the purpose of writing these reports could be summarized in the following points:

1. Acknowledge the proficiencies of the report writer and its expertise.
2. Exploring different and diverse referral questions.
3. A communication mean with judicial organizations.

#### The most common mistakes when writing forensic psychology reports

Witt [3] has decided to shorten the instructions of Grisso [4] review on the most common mistakes when writing forensic psychology reports. Witt [3] included a checklist of 10 guidelines based on common repeated errors in forensic psychology report writing. The following are the most frequent errors followed by their frequency from [4] point of view:

1. Conclusion without explanation (56%), where the expert reaches the final opinion without explanation or analysis of the results and data.
2. Lack of clarity (53%), i.e. not answering or addressing referral question in the report.
3. Lack of organization (36%), where the information is non-structured and logically sequenced.
4. Data and opinions not related to the required (31%), these data do not add meaning or answer to the query of the requesting parties.
5. Alternative hypotheses are not considered (30%), where the report does not include reasons for excluding any of the hypotheses.
6. Data and information are incomplete (28%), ignore or not include information relevant to the case.
7. Integration of test results with findings and analysis in a single paragraph (26%).
8. Relying on a source for evaluation (22%), an example is relying on the method of forensic interviewing only to reach a conclusion without resorting to alternative sources of information such as psychological assessments.
9. A method of writing that is characterized by bias, contempt and neglect (19%).
10. Improper use of psychological tests and assessments (15%), example of some test application for adults in children's age group.

#### Psychological tests and assessments in forensic reports

Psychological assessments aim to strengthen the opinion of the psychologist, where most scientific studies confirm that the psychologist must rely on more than one source (method of examination) to reach a final opinion. Stating, Last [5] forensic psychologists should mention the function of each psychological test applied in addition to writing all the test results whether they were with the experts final opinion or against it. Add to that the commentary of Elwork [6] on the inclusion of test results in the report, where he felt that the psychologist should formulate the test results in the form of conclusions rather than facts.

**The difference between forensic reports and clinical reports**

It is important to draw a comparison line separating forensic from clinical reports. The Criminology department at Dubai police is concerned with the preparation of forensic psychology reports only and does not provide by any means clinical reports, as there are several entities, which are responsible for such reports. Karson and Nadkarni [1] states that forensic psychology reports answer a specific referral question and does not address to many hypotheses and speculation as the true purpose for these reports is answering a referral question unlike clinical reports which aim at diagnosis. Otto., *et al.* [7] attempted to differentiate between the two in different criteria mentioned below.

Criteria	Forensic reports	Clinical reports
Reader	Judiciary organization	Medical specialists
Language	Rare use of scientific terms	Common use of scientific terms
Diagnosis	rare	Diagnosis is a must

*Table 1: A comparison between forensic reports and clinical reports.*

**Guidelines in writing forensic psychology reports**

1. Avoiding confirmation Bias [8].
2. Using the third person when expressing opinion to add objectivity [9].
3. Differentiating between facts and (inferences - interpretations) [1].
4. Use of various degrees of opinion/level of certainty [10].
5. Stating the source of each information [11,12].
6. Gradually building towards the conclusion/final opinion [13].

**Evaluating forensic psychology reports:**

Ireland (2012) stats that no studies were conducted on evaluating forensic psychology specifically in England and Wales. For that reason Ireland (2012) conducted a study where he allocated 4 evaluators to evaluate (126) custody related reports. Results from his study show that there was a diversity on the quality of the reports, 5 experts where unqualified, 75% of those reports where evaluated as “weak” or “strongly weak” whereas 25% where evaluated as “good” and excellent”. The current study will attempt compare its results with that of Ireland’s (2012) study.

**Methodology**

**Research participants**

The research sample in this study is the beneficiaries of the forensic psychology reports (partners/stakeholders). There are multiple stakeholders for these reports in Dubai. Table 2 shows how participants were sub-grouped into 3 main categories.

Judicial bodies	Courts
	Public Prosecutions
Security and police authorities	Police stations
	Criminal Investigation departments
	National Security Agencies
Specialized individuals	Experts in clinical/forensic Psychology - Al Amal Hospital

*Table 2: Classification of participants’ subgroups.*

### Study design

To serve the purpose of this study a special questionnaire has been designed and validated containing (9) items. The questionnaire items are based on avoiding the most common mistakes in writing forensic psychology reports. Participants were asked to respond to these items and evaluate their experiences with the forensic psychology reports. For items (1-8), a (5 points) Likert scale was used ranging from 1=Strongly agree to 5 = Strongly disagree. Responses to Item (9) were in a format of comments (free recall of experience).

(Note 1: The questionnaire was validated by establishing the face validity, then conducting a pilot test on each item. Principle Component Analysis and Cronbach's Alpha were conducted and calculated respectively on all items).

(Note 2: The questionnaire sample is in the appendix).

### Materials

Participants responses to the questionnaire items were coded into (SPSS) for statistical analysis as follows:

1. Use of the parameters of the central tendency and percentages to display the results of the questionnaire items in general. (Example: Percentage of participants who reported the forensic psychology reports as being "excellent").
2. The (Mann-Whitney U Test) proposed by Bertram [14] will be used to analyze the results and measure the possibility of having an agreement between participants' subgroups. The (Mann-Whitney U Test) was selected because this statistical method is able to compare the views of different groups in a particular subject in a question.
3. The Spearman correlation coefficient will also be used to measure the correlation between items (5) "The final opinion of the forensic psychologist is clear" and (7) "I will request the preparation of such reports in the future" and between item (6) "The referral question was answered in the report" and item (7) "I will request the preparation of such reports in the future".

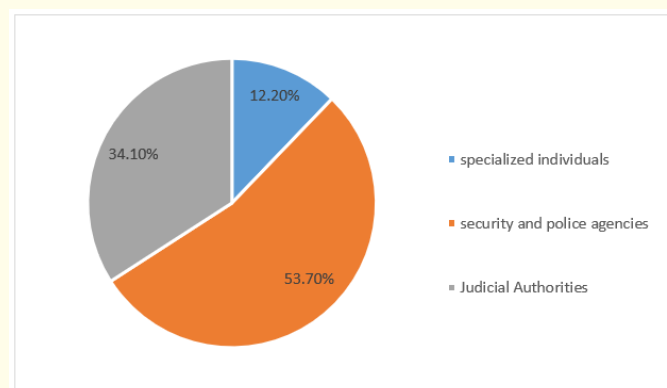
### Procedures

1. Define the objectives of the study, the research sample and the expected results.
2. Design and validating the questionnaire items by relying on previous research concerning forensic psychology report writing.
3. Gathering information from participants (Data collection).
4. Coding the results of the questionnaires into (SPSS).
5. Analyzing results using measures of the central tendency and statistical analysis methods (the Mann-Whitney U Test and Spearman correlation).
6. Discussing the results in the light of the objectives of the current study.
7. Writing the final report of the study and making recommendations.

## Results

### Main Findings

#### Participation percentage (Graph 1)



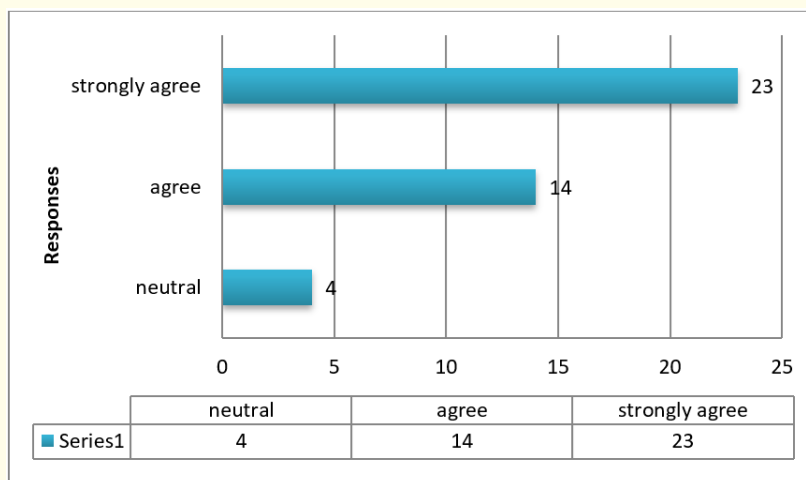
Graph 1: Percentage of participants by category.

(41) Participants have completed the questionnaire items and there were sub-grouped as follows; (14) participants from the judicial authorities, (22) Participants from the security and police agencies and (5) specialized participants.

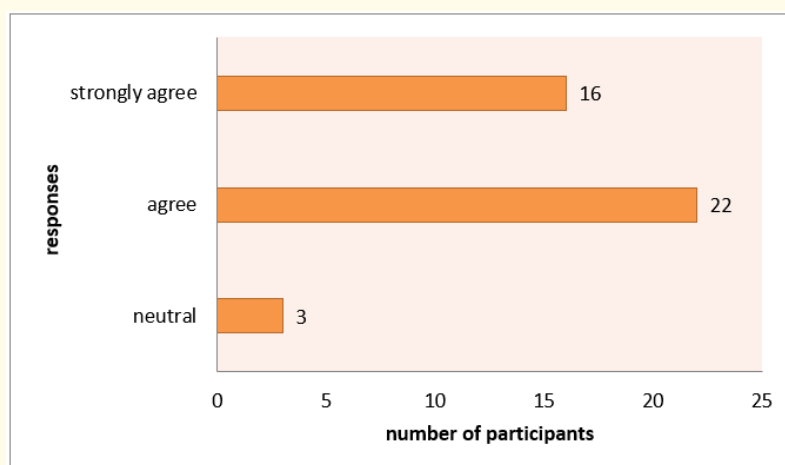
Note 3: Those 41 participants benefited from 152 forensic psychology reports prior to this study.

**Participants' responses to questionnaire items**

Results show that participants responses to (item 1 «The language used in writing the report is clear and easy to understand for the reader» and item 2 «The purpose of preparing the report is clear and well stated») were mostly between “strongly agree” and “agree”. In item 1»the language and method used in writing the report is clear and easy to understand» (63.4%) of participants chose strongly agree and (36.6%) chose “agree”, While nearly half of the participants responded “strongly agree” and the other half responded “agree” To item (2), which is concerned with «the purpose of the report is clear and well stated». Responses to item 3 «The purpose of using psychological assessment tools is explained in the report and the results were explained and interpreted accordingly» and item 4 «The use of various degrees of opinion is in line with scientific evidence and results» were positive as well, as participants’ responses ranged from “strongly agree” and “agree” with the statements. Graph 2 illustrates participants’ responses to item (5) which was about the clarity of expert final opinion, whereas graph 3 shows how participants responded to item (6) which states whether the report answered the referral question.

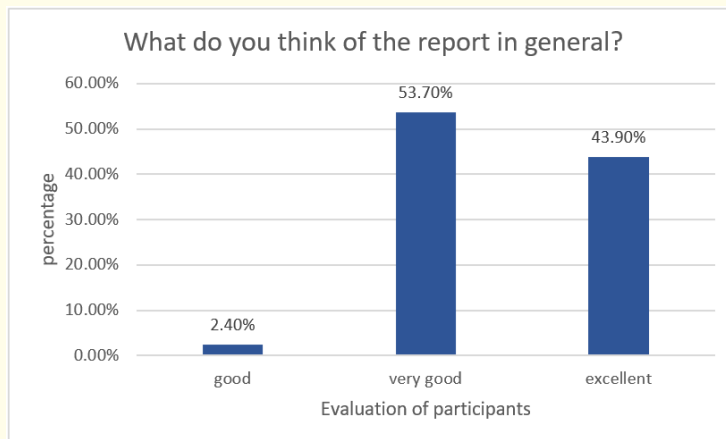


**Graph 2:** The clarity of expert final opinion.



**Graph 3:** Answering the referral question.

Item (7) asked the participants about the probability of requesting forensic psychology reports in the future and the results show that 25 participants out of 41 “strongly agree” with that statement whereas 16 participants “agreed” to the same statement. When participants were asked to evaluate forensic psychology reports in general (item 8), almost half of the participants (18) rated these reports as being “excellent” while the other half rated them as being “very good” and only one participants rated these reports as being “good” as graph 4 shows.



Graph 4: Evaluation of forensic psychology reports.

**Is there an agreement between the participants’ categories (judicial bodies - police agencies - specialized individuals) in terms of responding to questionnaire items?**

**Firstly:** Is there an agreement between the judicial authorities and the police authorities on the questionnaire items?

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to test if there is an agreement between Judicial authorities and police authorities, as indicated we find out that there was no «significant» difference between the judicial authorities and the police authorities in the evaluation of the forensic psychology reports based on the questionnaire items except in two items (2, 4) where it was found that there was a difference between the two groups ( $p = .049$ ) in item 2 and ( $p = .017$ ) in item 4 with both values lower than the  $p$  value of 0.05.

**Second:** Is there an agreement between the judicial authorities and specialized individuals on the questionnaire items?

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the hypothesis of disagreement/agreement between judicial and specialized individuals, as indicated we find out that there was no “significant” difference between the judicial authorities and specialized individuals apart from (item 8 “what do you think of the report in general?”) where it was clear that there was a significant difference between the two sides as the ( $p = .034$ ) in item (8) which is lower than ( $p = 0.05$ ).

**Third:** Is there an agreement between the police agencies and specialized individuals on the questionnaire items?

Results from the statistical analysis tool shows that there was no “significant” difference between both groups on all questionnaire items.

**Is there a correlation between the clarity of the final opinion (item 5) and the likelihood of increased demand for forensic psychology reports in future (item 7)**

The Spearman Coefficient was used to measure the correlation between the clarity of the expert opinion and the increasing demand for the reports. Results from the statistical analysis tool suggest that there is a medium positive correlation between item (5) “The final opinion of the forensic psychologist is clear” and item (7) “I will request the preparation of such reports in the future”, since the value of Spearman correlation coefficient= 0.63 At a  $p$  level of=0.01

**Is there a correlation between answering the referral question (item 6) and the likelihood of increased demand for forensic psychology reports in future (item 7)?**

Results show that there is a medium positive correlation between item (6) «The referral question was answered in the report» and item (7) «I will request the preparation of such reports in the future», since the value of the Spearman correlation = 0.52 at a p value of=0.01, this suggests that answering referral questions directly increases the likelihood of requesting of forensic psychology reports in future.

**Discussion**

**Forensic psychology reports - partners and stakeholders’ perspective**

By analyzing participants’ responses to questionnaire items, it was revealed that most ratings were positive as responses were exclusively between “strongly agree” and “agree” with questionnaire statements (items 1 - 6). This suggest that the previous (152) reports got partners and stakeholders approval (item 8) which in return will increase the demand for such reports in the future (item 7). To be more precise with evaluation, (53.7%) of participants evaluated forensic psychology reports as being “very good” and (43.95) of participants reported them as being “excellent”. Furthermore, based on these results and taking into account that the questionnaire items were designed on the concept of avoiding the most common mistakes in writing forensic psychology reports, it is acceptable to conclude that these forensic psychology reports prepared by Criminology Department at Dubai Police are indeed a good quality reports that tries to avoid the most common mistakes in the field of forensic psychology report writing.

**Agreement on forensic psychology reports among different groups**

As discussed in the main findings section, the results analyzed by the Mann-Whitney U Test reveal that there was an agreement between all participants subgroups on most of the questionnaire items. For this reason, this statistical analysis tool also suggests that there was an agreement between participants on their ratings of the forensic psychology reports regardless of their subgroups.

**Expert opinion and the demand for forensic psychology reports**

Spearman Correlation Coefficient was used to test the correlation between the items mention above. Results from the statistical analysis tool show that there was a medium positive correlation between the two items as the value was = 0.63 at p = 0.01 which means that correlation is statically significant. These results have important implication for those who prepare such reports as the correlation suggest that the clearer the expert opinion the more approval it gets for those who acquire such reports.

**Answering referral questions and the demand for forensic psychology reports**

The Spearman test also shows that there was a medium positive correlation (which is significant) between answering the referral questions and the increased demand for forensic psychology reports in the future as the value of the correlation was = 0.52 at p = 0.01. This confirms the importance of answering referral questions as a main purpose of writing such reports in the first place [2,15-22].

**A comparing with Ireland (2012) study**

Criteria	Current study	Ireland’s, 2012 study
Main purpose	Evaluating forensic psychology reports	Evaluating forensic psychology reports
Evaluators	Judicial Organizations - police and security entities - specialists	Specialists
Sample - participants	152 reports - 41 evaluators	126 reports - 4 evaluators
Main results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive evaluation</li> <li>• Agreement between evaluator</li> <li>• Correlation between some items</li> <li>• 43.9% of reports were evaluated as being “excellent”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity on reports quality</li> <li>• 1\4 of reports were evaluated as being “excellent”</li> <li>• 70% of reports were “weak”</li> </ul>
Reliability and Validity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validated questionnaire</li> <li>• Different evaluators from different subgroups</li> </ul>	4 evaluators suggest “inter-rater reliability

*Table 3: A comparison between the current study and Ireland’s (2012) study.*

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study achieved its objectives as the results show and present. To clarify, the results revealed the opinion of partners and stakeholders on forensic psychology reports. It also revealed that the general rating of forensic psychology reports was mostly positive. What is more, as stated in the methods section the questionnaire was designed by including statement about avoiding the most common mistakes in writing forensic psychology reports and participants responses suggest that the forensic reports prepared by Criminology Department at Dubai Police do indeed attempt to avoid these common mistakes.

In addition to that, results from statistical analysis tools (the Mann Whitney U test and Spearman Correlation Coefficient) used in the current study suggest that there is an agreement between participants' subgroups on rating questionnaire items positively. They also suggest that there is a correlation between some of the questionnaire items such as (the clarity of expert opinion and the increased number of requests in the future) on one hand, and between (answering the referral question and the increased number of requests in the future) on the other hand. These correlations shed light upon the importance of the clarity of expert opinion and answering referral questions.

### Strengths

- The diversity of the participants according to the following classifications (judicial authorities - police agencies - specialized individuals).
- Use of the Mann-Whitney U test to measure level of agreement/disagreement between the subgroups of participants.
- Use of the Spearman correlation coefficient to measure the relationship between some of the questionnaire items.
- Designing and validating the questionnaire based on scientific research concerning forensic psychology report writing and the most common mistakes.

### Recommendations

- Larger sample size is needed so that it will be more statistically representative of the research community in question and for the results it will be more statistically significant.
- Adopt more than one method for data collection to obtain more precise details of the research problem.
- A clearer explanation of questionnaire items and use of semi-structured interviews.

### Appendix: Sample Questionnaire

Some questions related to your experience (as a partner/beneficiary) who read (use) the forensic psychology reports issued by the General Directorate of Forensic sciences and Criminology. There are (9) items for evaluation and each item/ statement should be evaluated as follows:

1. I strongly agree	2. I agree	3. Neutral	4. I disagree	5. I strongly disagree
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1. The language used in writing the report is clear and easy to understand for the reader.

1. I strongly agree	2. I agree	3. Neutral	4. I disagree	5. I strongly disagree
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2. The purpose of preparing the report is clear and well stated.

1. I strongly agree	2. I agree	3. Neutral	4. I disagree	5. I strongly disagree
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3. The purpose of using psychological assessment tools is explained in the report and the results were explained and interpreted accordingly.

1. I strongly agree	2. I agree	3. Neutral	4. I disagree	5. I strongly disagree
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4. The use of varies degrees of opinion (see, is likely, unlikely, excluded, possible) is in line with scientific evidence and results.

1. I strongly agree	2. I agree	3. Neutral	4. I disagree	5. I strongly disagree
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5. The final opinion of the forensic psychologist is clear.

1. I strongly agree	2. I agree	3. Neutral	4. I disagree	5. I strongly disagree
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6. The referral question (Partner/beneficiary question) was answered in the report.

1. I strongly agree	2. I agree	3. Neutral	4. I disagree	5. I strongly disagree
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7. I will request the preparation of such reports in the future.

1. I strongly agree	2. I agree	3. Neutral	4. I disagree	5. I strongly disagree
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8. What do you think of the report in general?

1. Excellent	2. Very Good	3. Good	4. Acceptable	5. Weak
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9. Do you have any feedback or suggestions about the report?

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