*Corresponding Author's Email: psiholog_m@yahoo.com
Proceedings of the International Conference on Future of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vol 3., Issue. 1, 2025, pp. 10 - 20
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33422/fshconf.v2i1.1251
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ISSN: 3030-0193 online

Diamond Scientific Publishing

The Psychological Assessment of Perpetrators of International Crimes: Judicial Implications and Ethical Challenges in the Context of International Criminal Justice

Rus Mihaela
Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences, Ovidius University, Constanta, Romania,
Institute of Philosophy and Psychology of the Romanian Academy

Abstract

The psychological assessment of individuals accused of committing international crimes—such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes—has become a crucial but complex component of international criminal justice. This paper examines the role, scope, and limitations of psychological evaluations in proceedings before international tribunals and courts, including the International Criminal Court (ICC) and ad hoc tribunals. Psychological assessments are often used to determine the mental capacity of the accused, their ability to stand trial, or the presence of personality disorders that may have influenced their actions. However, the integration of psychological expertise in international legal settings raises significant judicial and ethical questions. Challenges include the lack of standardized protocols for assessment across jurisdictions, cultural and linguistic biases, and the risk of pathologizing political or ideological motivations. Furthermore, ethical tensions arise when expert evaluations may impact sentencing, criminal responsibility, or perceptions of remorse and rehabilitation. The paper analyzes key cases where psychological assessments have influenced court decisions and discusses the difficulties of maintaining objectivity in highly politicized trials. It also explores the intersection between justice and mental health in contexts where collective violence and command responsibility complicate individual accountability. Ultimately, the study argues for the development of clearer ethical frameworks and interdisciplinary standards to guide psychological expertise in international criminal proceedings. The aim is to enhance the fairness, consistency, and human rights compliance of judicial processes in which mental health plays a determinative role.

Keywords: accountability, ethical challenges, international criminal justice, psychological assessment, war crimes

1. Introduction

In the realm of international criminal justice (Bassiouni, 2013), psychological evaluations serve as indispensable tools for understanding the mental state, culpability, and behavioral patterns of individuals accused of committing grave violations of international humanitarian law. Such assessments play a crucial role in determining whether an accused possesses the mental capacity to stand trial, comprehend the proceedings, and participate effectively in their own defense—a fundamental requirement under both international legal norms and human rights principles. Beyond questions of competence, psychological evaluations can also inform judicial deliberations regarding mitigating or aggravating circumstances, thereby influencing sentencing outcomes. They may reveal histories of trauma, coercion, or psychological disorders that shape not only the accused's conduct but also broader narratives about responsibility and victimhood in conflict settings.

However, the integration of psychological expertise into international criminal proceedings unfolds within a landscape marked by profound complexity. Legal institutions tasked with adjudicating atrocities such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes must balance rigorous procedural standards with considerations of fairness, impartiality, and respect for the dignity of all parties involved. In this context, psychological evaluations often straddle delicate boundaries between objective scientific inquiry and subjective interpretation. While intended to aid the pursuit of truth and justice, such evaluations may become entangled with political narratives, cultural biases, or strategic legal maneuvering, especially in trials that attract global attention and carry significant geopolitical implications.

Moreover, ethical challenges abound. Mental health professionals involved in international criminal cases operate under overlapping and sometimes conflicting ethical codes, including commitments to confidentiality, the well-being of the examinee, and obligations to the court. The stakes are exceptionally high: assessments may profoundly impact an individual's liberty, reputation, and even safety, particularly in environments marked by ongoing conflict or political repression. There is also the risk that psychological findings might be misinterpreted, sensationalized, or misused to stigmatize entire communities or populations associated with the accused, thereby perpetuating stereotypes or political agendas.

This paper aims to explore these judicial and ethical complexities in depth, examining how psychological assessments are conducted, presented, and interpreted within the framework of international criminal justice. It seeks to analyze the tension between legal imperatives for accountability and the ethical mandates of mental health practice, addressing questions such as: How can psychologists ensure the accuracy and impartiality of their assessments in highly politicized trials? What safeguards exist to protect the rights and dignity of defendants while still serving the interests of justice? And how do these evaluations intersect with broader debates about the role of mental health expertise in shaping legal outcomes on the international stage?

Through an interdisciplinary lens, the paper will draw upon legal scholarship, psychological science, and case studies from international tribunals—including the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), and the International Criminal Court (ICC)—to illuminate the nuanced interplay between psychology, law, and geopolitics. By doing so, it aspires to contribute to ongoing discussions about how best to uphold both the integrity of international justice and the ethical standards of psychological practice in contexts marked by extraordinary human suffering and legal complexity.

2. Questions Research

QR1 To what extent do psychological assessments influence international court decisions regarding criminal responsibility and sentencing in cases of international crimes?

Psychological assessments significantly influence international court decisions in determining both criminal responsibility and the individualization of sentencing, although their weight varies depending on the legal framework, the type of crime, and the perceived reliability of the assessment.

In proceedings before tribunals such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the ad hoc tribunals (e.g., ICTY, ICTR), psychological evaluations are primarily used to assess:

- The mental capacity of the accused at the time of the alleged crime (e.g., insanity or diminished responsibility);
- The fitness to stand trial, ensuring the defendant understands the proceedings and can participate in their defense;
- The presence of personality disorders or trauma-related symptoms (e.g., PTSD), especially in cases involving former child soldiers, such as *Dominic Ongwen*;
- Indicators of remorse, rehabilitation potential, or dangerousness, which may impact sentencing.

For instance, in the *Ongwen* case before the ICC, psychological evidence played a dual role: the defense used it to argue that Ongwen's traumatic background and mental health issues should mitigate responsibility, while the prosecution maintained that he retained sufficient autonomy and understanding to be held fully accountable. The Chamber ultimately recognized Ongwen's trauma but ruled that it did not exonerate him, showing that psychological evidence can contextualize, but not always determine, legal findings.(Bracken et al. 1997)

Moreover, sentencing decisions may be shaped by psychological evaluations that portray the accused as suffering from psychopathology (e.g., narcissistic, antisocial, or paranoid personality traits) or, conversely, as capable of reintegration into society. However, courts tend to be cautious, often prioritizing legal standards over clinical interpretations, particularly in politically sensitive cases where mental disorders could be misused to evade justice or to pathologize ideological motives.

Nevertheless, psychological assessments have limited normative impact unless supported by clear legal standards and corroborated by additional evidence. Their influence is strongest when they are used to determine procedural competence (e.g., fitness to stand trial) or when mental illness is profound and undisputed.

In conclusion, psychological assessments in international criminal law serve as auxiliary tools that can shape the court's understanding of the defendant's mental state, motivation, and culpability. While they rarely absolve individuals of responsibility entirely, they play a crucial role in modulating sentencing, informing reparative justice, and enhancing the perceived legitimacy and fairness of judicial processes. Their influence is thus significant, yet always mediated by the legal, ethical, and political context of each case.(Milgram, 1974).

QR2 What are the main ethical dilemmas and risks associated with the use of psychological expertise in international criminal proceedings, particularly in ideologically or politically charged cases?

The use of psychological expertise in international criminal proceedings raises several ethical dilemmas and risks, especially in cases where defendants are implicated in ideologically

motivated or politically sensitive crimes such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. These dilemmas can be grouped into five main areas:

The Risk of Pathologizing Ideology or Political Belief

One of the most pressing concerns is the pathologization of political or ideological motivations. When psychological assessments are used to interpret extremist views, nationalist rhetoric, or collective violence through the lens of mental disorder, there is a risk of:

- Undermining genuine political agency, reducing moral and ideological convictions to psychiatric symptoms;
- Exonerating systemic crimes by individualizing what may be part of broader sociopolitical structures;
- Instrumentalizing diagnosis (e.g., personality disorders, delusional beliefs) to explain complex sociopolitical behavior.

This is particularly problematic in trials involving charismatic leaders or ideologues, where the line between genuine mental disorder and calculated manipulation is thin.

Dual Loyalty and Role Conflict

Psychologists may face a conflict between their duty to the court and their ethical obligation to the individual being assessed. In international criminal law, psychological evaluations are often requested by the prosecution, defense, or judges, but the individual undergoing assessment may not have given fully informed or voluntary consent, especially in detention settings.

This dual role generates tensions such as:

- Breaching confidentiality;
- Risking coercion or lack of autonomy in participation;
- Compromising therapeutic neutrality, as assessments are used for legal purposes, not clinical care.

Cultural and Linguistic Biases

International criminal tribunals deal with diverse populations, but psychological instruments and diagnostic frameworks are often derived from Western contexts. This leads to ethical concerns about:

- Cultural misinterpretation of symptoms or behaviors (e.g., culturally normative expressions of grief or trauma misread as psychopathology);
- Language barriers, reliance on interpreters, and translation errors that distort meaning;
- Ethnocentrism in diagnosis, which can delegitimize local narratives or resilience strategies.

Influence on Sentencing and Perceptions of Remorse

Psychological assessments often contribute to the court's perception of whether the accused:

- Feels remorse;
- Is rehabilitable;
- Poses ongoing risk.

These factors may significantly influence sentencing outcomes, yet they rest on subjective clinical interpretations that are difficult to verify and highly vulnerable to bias—especially in politically polarized trials. An evaluator's implicit bias or assumptions can impact assessments of remorse or dangerousness.

Lack of Standardized Ethical Guidelines for International Contexts

There is no universal code of ethics specifically designed for psychologists operating within international criminal tribunals. As a result:

- Ethical standards vary by the expert's country of origin and training;
- There is little oversight or enforcement of ethical misconduct;
- Cross-jurisdictional inconsistencies lead to uneven application of psychological expertise, undermining fairness.

This regulatory vacuum can be exploited to promote political narratives or to discredit defendants under the guise of scientific neutrality.

Q3. How can interdisciplinary standards and ethical guidelines be developed to ensure fairness and human rights compliance in the psychological assessment of individuals accused of international crimes?

Developing interdisciplinary standards and ethical guidelines for psychological assessments in international criminal justice requires a coordinated, context-sensitive, and rights-based approach. Given the complexity of international crimes and the diversity of cultural, legal, and psychological systems involved, such standards must draw on law, psychology, human rights, ethics, and cross-cultural studies. The following key elements can guide the creation of robust, fair, and human rights-compliant frameworks:

Establishment of a Multidisciplinary Working Group

A critical first step is to convene an interdisciplinary task force comprising:

- Legal experts from international criminal law (ICC, ICTY, ICTR);
- Clinical and forensic psychologists with cross-cultural competence;
- Human rights specialists;
- Representatives from civil society and vulnerable groups;
- Experts in ethics and medical law.

This group would be responsible for drafting core principles, harmonizing existing national standards, and ensuring compatibility with international legal instruments such as the Rome Statute, the UN Principles of Medical Ethics, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.(American Psychological Association. 2017).

Definition of Minimum Ethical and Procedural Standards

Such standards should include, at minimum:

- Voluntary informed consent before any assessment;
- Confidentiality protections, even when acting as court-appointed experts;
- Neutrality and independence from political and prosecutorial influence;
- Clear limits of interpretation: psychological findings must not be stretched to serve legal, ideological, or punitive goals.

These should be codified in a document similar to the Istanbul Protocol, adapted specifically for forensic psychological assessment in the context of international justice.(Carabellese et al., 2021).

Development of Standardized Methodologies and Tools

To ensure reliability and fairness, assessments must be grounded in:

- Culturally adapted instruments that are validated for use across diverse populations;
- Standard operating procedures (SOPs) for conducting interviews, collecting data, and writing reports;
- Triangulation of data (clinical observation, collateral information, self-report) to reduce bias and error.

Where possible, psychological tools should undergo peer review and international validation before being accepted as evidence.

Training and Accreditation of Forensic Experts

Experts involved in international trials must undergo:

- Specialized training on international criminal procedures and evidentiary standards;
- Modules on cultural psychology, trauma assessment, and intercultural communication;
- Continuous professional development on ethics in adversarial legal settings.

An international certification or accreditation mechanism could be created under the auspices of the International Association for Forensic Mental Health Services or in collaboration with the United Nations.(Cynkier, 2022)

Creation of Oversight and Review Mechanisms

To prevent misuse and ensure accountability:

- An independent review board should be empowered to monitor the use of psychological evidence in international cases;
- A grievance mechanism should be available for defendants or legal teams to challenge flawed or biased assessments;
- A repository of anonymized case studies could serve as a reference point for best practices and continual improvement.

Oversight mechanisms must also monitor conflicts of interest and ensure that experts do not act simultaneously in advocacy, assessment, and judgment roles.

Alignment with Human Rights Principles

All standards must be grounded in a firm commitment to:

- Non-discrimination;
- Respect for dignity and autonomy of the accused;
- The presumption of innocence;
- Protection against degrading or inhumane treatment, including coercive psychiatric practices.

These principles are non-negotiable in maintaining the integrity of international criminal justice and avoiding the ethical failures that have historically plagued forensic psychiatry in political trials.

3. The Role of Psychological Assessments in International Trials

Sychological assessments hold a crucial place within the framework of international trials, serving several vital and interrelated purposes. Far beyond merely diagnosing mental disorders, these evaluations are instrumental in ensuring the fairness and integrity of

proceedings, as they help courts navigate complex questions about defendants' mental states and capacities.

One primary function of psychological assessments is to determine competency to stand trial, examining whether the accused possesses the cognitive abilities and volitional control necessary to understand the charges against them and to participate meaningfully in their own defense. This evaluation safeguards the fundamental legal principle that a person cannot be tried if they are incapable of comprehending the nature of the proceedings or communicating with their legal counsel effectively.(Schabas, 2020).

Another significant role involves assessments related to mental health defenses, such as insanity or diminished responsibility. In these cases, psychological experts evaluate whether the defendant was suffering from a mental disorder at the time of the alleged crimes, potentially affecting their capacity to discern right from wrong or to control their behavior. Such findings can influence the degree of criminal responsibility and, consequently, the sentencing outcomes.

Furthermore, psychological assessments contribute to the evaluation of dangerousness, remorse, and rehabilitation potential. Courts often rely on expert opinions to gauge whether a convicted individual poses a continued threat to society or whether they demonstrate genuine remorse and the potential for reintegration. These considerations play a vital part in decisions about sentencing, parole, or other forms of judicial discretion.(Ștefănoaia ,2015),

In addition, psychological assessments help shed light on ideological, authoritarian, or group dynamic factors that may have driven individuals to commit atrocities, particularly in the context of war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide. Understanding the psychological and social influences behind such acts is essential for both the legal process and broader historical and societal reflection.

Notable examples illustrating the application of psychological evaluations in international justice include the psychiatric assessments ordered in the trials of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). In these high-profile cases, expert assessments were crucial in determining whether the defendants were mentally competent to stand trial and capable of understanding the gravity of the charges brought against them.(International Criminal Court. 2011).

Ultimately, psychological assessments in international trials are indispensable tools that help courts uphold legal standards of justice, protect the rights of defendants, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of human behavior in the context of grave international crimes.

4. Methodological Challenges

Despite the critical role that psychological assessments play in international trials, their application in these contexts is fraught with significant methodological challenges that can undermine both their reliability and their utility in legal proceedings.

A central difficulty lies in the lack of standardization across international legal systems. Different courts may operate under varying procedural rules, definitions, and evidentiary standards, which means that psychological evaluations are neither uniformly conducted nor uniformly interpreted. This variability complicates efforts to ensure consistency and comparability of assessments across cases and jurisdictions.

Moreover, psychological assessments in international settings are highly susceptible to cultural and linguistic biases, which can seriously compromise their validity. Many assessment tools have been developed and normed within specific cultural contexts, often Western, and may not accurately reflect psychological functioning in individuals from different cultural

backgrounds. Misinterpretations can arise when evaluators apply culturally specific norms to defendants whose experiences, expressions of distress, and understanding of mental health may differ substantially. Linguistic translation adds further layers of complexity, introducing potential for distortion or loss of nuance in both clinical interviews and standardized testing. (Qureshi et al. 2009)

Another significant constraint is the limited access to clinical environments. In many international legal settings, evaluators are unable to conduct prolonged or in-depth assessments under optimal clinical conditions. Instead, they are often restricted to brief, forensic-focused interviews conducted in secure facilities, under time pressures, and sometimes under conditions that do not foster trust or open disclosure. Such limitations reduce the richness of the data available to assessors and can affect the depth and accuracy of their conclusions.

Additionally, there are tensions between legal and clinical definitions of psychological constructs. For example, legal concepts such as "insanity" or "diminished responsibility" often do not align neatly with clinical diagnoses like psychosis or personality disorders. The legal system may demand categorical determinations of criminal responsibility, whereas clinical practice recognizes the complexity and spectrum of mental health conditions. This divergence can place assessors in a difficult position, requiring them to translate nuanced clinical findings into legal frameworks that may lack the flexibility to accommodate such complexity.

Compounding these challenges, evaluators frequently have to work with incomplete life histories and contradictory testimonies. Information about defendants' backgrounds may be fragmentary, disputed, or biased by the highly adversarial nature of legal proceedings. This adversarial context can exert subtle pressures on assessors, potentially threatening the objectivity and clinical neutrality that are essential for credible evaluations.

Altogether, these methodological challenges highlight the delicate balance that psychological experts must maintain between clinical rigor and the practical demands of the legal process. Addressing these issues requires ongoing efforts to develop culturally sensitive tools, improve cross-disciplinary communication between legal and mental health professionals, and establish clearer standards for psychological assessments in international justice contexts.

5. Ethical Dilemmas and Risks

Psychological assessments in international trials not only face methodological hurdles but also raise profound ethical dilemmas that challenge the very foundation of professional practice in forensic contexts. At the heart of these challenges lies the dual role of psychologists, who must simultaneously act as impartial, scientifically grounded experts and as participants in a legal process where their findings may profoundly influence outcomes such as determinations of guilt, sentencing decisions, or considerations of release. This dual responsibility places considerable ethical strain on professionals navigating complex, high-stakes cases.

A prominent ethical concern is the risk of instrumentalization, whereby psychological evidence may be selectively employed to serve particular legal or political agendas. In adversarial proceedings, parties may attempt to use psychological assessments either to discredit the accused—by portraying them as dangerous or pathologically deviant—or to humanize them, casting them as victims of mental illness whose actions were beyond their control. Such selective use of expert testimony can distort the nuanced realities captured by psychological evaluations, leading to outcomes driven more by legal strategy than by clinical truth.

Another critical issue arises from the potential for pathologizing ideology. In cases involving political violence, terrorism, or nationalist movements, there is a temptation to frame extremist beliefs and actions as manifestations of mental disorder. While it is legitimate to explore the

psychological factors contributing to violent behavior, there is an inherent ethical danger in interpreting ideological commitment as pathology. Such framing risks oversimplifying the complex socio-political roots of violence, undermining genuine accountability, and potentially obscuring patterns of systemic violence and oppression. In this way, psychological assessments can inadvertently become tools that depoliticize or medicalize conduct that should also be understood in its historical and social context.

Furthermore, issues of confidentiality and informed consent become highly fraught in the unique context of international trials. Defendants often find themselves in environments that are coercive by nature, where the boundaries between voluntary participation and subtle compulsion are blurred. Ensuring that individuals genuinely understand the purpose, potential consequences, and limits of confidentiality in psychological evaluations is exceptionally challenging under such conditions. Defendants may feel pressured to cooperate, fearing negative legal repercussions if they refuse, thus calling into question the validity of consent obtained in these circumstances. (Stefănoaia,2015)

These ethical dilemmas underscore the delicate balance required of psychological professionals working in international legal settings. Upholding the principles of neutrality, respect for autonomy, and scientific integrity demands constant vigilance and a critical awareness of the broader legal and political contexts in which assessments are conducted. It is imperative for psychologists to engage in ongoing ethical reflection and to advocate for practices that protect both the rights of individuals and the pursuit of justice. (Stefănoaia,2015)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The present analysis has explored the complex and multifaceted role of psychological assessment in the context of international criminal justice, with a specific focus on its legal relevance, methodological limitations, and ethical vulnerabilities. Across various international legal forums—including the ICC, ICTY, and ICTR—psychological evaluations have emerged as critical tools for assessing defendants' mental fitness, responsibility, and rehabilitation potential. However, the findings also reveal that the integration of psychological expertise in trials involving international crimes is not only procedurally delicate but also ethically charged.

One key insight is the ambivalence surrounding the interpretation of psychological findings in highly politicized or ideologically motivated cases. While mental health assessments can illuminate trauma histories or cognitive impairments, there is a tangible risk of pathologizing political beliefs or minimizing systemic dimensions of violence. This raises broader questions about the boundaries between individual psychopathology and collective criminal agency.

Furthermore, the discussion has identified gaps in standardization across jurisdictions, cultural misalignments in diagnostic tools, and concerns over the voluntary nature of participation in forensic assessments. These concerns are amplified in international contexts where language barriers, detention environments, and geopolitical dynamics can compromise objectivity and fairness. Without established, interdisciplinary ethical standards, psychological reports risk being either undervalued or misused in legal deliberations.

Equally important is the recognition that psychological assessments can significantly affect sentencing, especially when they shape judicial perceptions of remorse, rehabilitation, and dangerousness. Yet these constructs remain inherently interpretive and context-dependent, underlining the need for structured ethical frameworks and qualified expert practice.

Psychological assessments occupy a vital but ethically sensitive position in the prosecution of international crimes. They can offer nuanced insights into the mental state, culpability, and future risk of individuals accused of heinous acts, contributing to more informed and humane

judicial decisions. However, without robust ethical safeguards and standardized interdisciplinary protocols, such assessments can be compromised by cultural bias, political pressures, and forensic misuse. (United Nations, 1948).

This paper has argued that the legitimacy and fairness of international criminal proceedings depend, in part, on how psychological expertise is integrated and regulated. To ensure that psychological assessments uphold rather than undermine justice, there is a pressing need for:

- Interdisciplinary codes of ethics tailored to international legal contexts;
- Standardized assessment procedures adapted to cross-cultural realities;
- Independent oversight mechanisms to protect the rights of accused individuals.

Ultimately, the effective use of psychological assessment in international justice systems must strike a balance between clinical insight and legal integrity. Only through transparency, ethical consistency, and interdisciplinary cooperation can this balance be achieved—ensuring that mental health expertise contributes constructively to justice, accountability, and human dignity.

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