Perspectives on Sex Offender Risk Assessment: An interview with Dr Stephen Wong
By Courtney Bailey and Olivia Song

Dr Stephen Wong, Ph.D. is a forensic psychologist and current Honorary Professor at the Institute of Mental Health, University of Nottingham, UK, and Adjunct Professor at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. Dr Wong’s research focuses on the assessment and treatment of violent and sexual offenders. He is the lead author of the Violence Risk Scale (VRS) and the Violence Risk Scale-Sex Offender version (VRS-SO), used to assess individuals risk level, treatment readiness, and stages of change.

On 20 January 2014, Dr Wong presented a seminar on sex offender risk assessment using the VRS-SO at Bond University, as part of a professional development opportunity offered by the Australian Psychological Society (APS) College of Forensic Psychologists (Queensland Section). Following the presentation, two forensic psychology masters students interviewed Dr Wong on his career as a forensic practitioner and researcher.

How did you become involved in the field of forensic psychology?
I started off as a research assistant helping with data collection and research in the criminal justice setting and found the research to be very interesting. From this, I wanted to become more involved in clinical practice within forensic settings working with offenders and then found my interest in this area expanding into forensic clinical research. Over the years, I have worked with many bright, energetic, hardworking students who have kept me energised and inspired and wanting to continue with my involvement in this area of psychology. I have learnt a lot from them and from my clients.

What led you to develop the VRS-SO? What need did you identify for this assessment tool?
Due to being heavily involved in day-to-day clinical practice, I did not get much time to focus on conducting research, although I had ideas for research projects and further exploration. From my clinical work, I saw the need for an assessment tool to identify dynamic risk factors, to predict risk of sexual recidivism by offenders, and, in particular, to guide treatment and intervention. The initial stages of developing the VRS-SO were quite informal. Students often approached me for project ideas because I always enjoy working with students. I suggested developing the VRS-SO as a Ph.D. dissertation for one of my students. That was how it all got started.

What do you find most challenging working with sex offenders?
One of the biggest challenges when working with this population is trying to understand the offender’s thinking, mindset, and point of view. This is challenging because they often come from very different social and cultural backgrounds not familiar to us and one must be cognisant of this and of one’s own value systems and how this could influence the way one views others. Otherwise your thinking may become rigid and inflexible and not able to consider another person’s point of view or to manage your own reactions to the client. When I work with clients, I try to imagine what it’s like to walk in their shoes and to appreciate how they got to where they are in life. Sometimes working within the forensic area day in day out can be quiet depressing because we keep seeing the failures who are the people that return to the system because they reoffended whereas the successful ones stay out and we don’t see them. There is no class reunion to find out how everyone is doing!!

What do you find most rewarding when working with sex offenders?
Although it can be challenging working with sexual and non-sexual offenders, I found this work highly rewarding. I feel privileged to be able to observe, document, treat and conduct research with these individuals and it is very gratifying to see people make positive changes. As I conduct research, I’m in a privileged position because research offers me different perspectives that others may not have. I can look at the research and see that there is an impact even if the day-to-day changes I can see is quite small or even non-existent. I have learnt to take a different perspective on looking at failure and success, as they need to be put into context. For example, many people believe that success is defined by no sexual recidivism. However, success can be defined in other ways such as a reduction in the severity of the offence or a reduced risk of reoffending.

What advice would you give to students who are considering working with sex offenders?
I think you must have confidence in yourself and believe that you can really make a difference in peoples’ lives and try to foster the belief and spread the word that offenders can change for the better based on good research; there are lots of nay-sayers out there. You have to keep your enthusiasm and optimism up because one can become cynical when working with forensic populations. I counterbalance this by being informed by the science and empirical research data. Sharing these beliefs and philosophies with colleagues is also important as they can provide you with support and guidance, otherwise doing it on your own can be exhausting. It is important to develop a curious and inquisitive mind and do not underestimate what you can do. All accomplished researchers and practitioners were once students themselves. Much of my work is based around working and collaborating with students; students can achieve a lot given the chance.