**Describe a personal life experience that has had particular significance for you and highlight the reason(s) it was significant, whether it had an impact on others, and any insights or understandings you gained from it. (800 word maximum)**

The first man I ever defended in court was a schizophrenic war criminal who had decimated a town with a military tank: Mihailo Zoran. Mock trial, of course; the Indonesian legal system is not so far gone that it would let an 8th grader represent a mass murderer in court. I remember turning and asking the opposing counsel, my ever-so-reliable brother, why I had to defend this man in court.

“He’s mentally ill; you can’t go to jail for things you can’t control.”

My response was simple. “That’s bullshit.”

The black and white morality of a 12-year-old child is a cruel thing.

It was a fictional trial, about a fictional case on a fictional man, yet it posed a question on morality more real than any real life incident ever had: how much pardon should we be willing to give a mentally diminished criminal? It’s a question I’ve spent my entire high school life obsessing over.

As contrary as it may seem, the law is my source of passion for psychology — to be able to understand not just what people, criminals, are, but why they are. Why do serial killers murder? Is it for power, out of compulsion, or a reason far beyond what anyone in the field has considered? If not out of necessity, why would one be so brave to soil the soul? For the people that are willing to do such acts, can they be granted pardon when we consider their rationale, every single fragment of their soul, that caused them to end up this way? Even with the insanity defence, the legal system as it stands doesn’t seem to think so.

At 15, I wrote my own case, *The State of New York v. Charlotte Callenreese*, revolving around a young serial killer diagnosed with psychopathy, to pose the same question to the 24 mock trial competitors in my courtroom. If psychopathy has a biological predisposition, a disorder born out of your genetic make-up and childhood experiences you had no hand in controlling, could we truly say that we should prosecute and incarcerate psychopaths and the mentally ill in the same way we do mentally sound people? As humans we are hardwired to empathise, but why is it so difficult to do so when we are made to empathise with the people we view as flawed and imperfect? Do only perfect victims qualify for our perfect empathy?

At 16, my understanding of morality has far progressed from categorizing war crimes as black and legality as white. My senior thesis, a culmination of my obsessive fascination with psychology, the law and morality, was on this very topic: the diagnosis of psychopathy, its limitations, and its implications on the legal system. To my disappointment (and my advisor’s palpable relief), I was barred from conducting primary research on the topic, largely due to the safety concerns intrinsically tied with research on criminal psychology. Yet, even as I spent an entire year evaluating scientific journals on the latest diagnosis methods and rehabilitation trends, it was glaringly obvious that research on it remains incomprehensive, underfunded and unempathetic, even more so for minority groups.

Even as I turn 17, I do not have complete answers to my questions, nor the perfect morality and empathy I’ve been striving so hard to reach. I’ve been told many times that my dream to work in forensic psychology was concerning, violent, something that set me up for a short life span (due to the possibility of death by murder, apparently). But isn’t this perception of criminals and mental disorders (or really, mental disorders that social media fails to romanticize) precisely the reason why we need people researching this field? Mihailo Zoran and Charlotte Callenreese’s cases were the by-products of overactive imaginations, but how many mentally ill criminals face the same unfair, unempathetic treatments under the law?

The first man I ever defended in court was a schizophrenic war criminal. The people I hope to help through my research into criminal psychology are the very same.