

## Psychological Evaluations: What Questions Can the Data Answer?

By: Erik Sorensen, Ph.D.  
Presented: 10/30/2017

Details regarding the process used to gather information about clients, consider inconsistencies in that data (especially between collateral sources and the client), and offer specific recommendations for use by attorneys, child welfare, and the courts will be discussed in detail. Specific case examples offered. Questions welcome.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Psychological Evaluations: Integration of Varied Data

- Multiple sources of information and they never agree completely.
- Psychological assessment measures, each with their limitations.
- Resistance, anxiety, and distress can affect what is said
- Recent drug use can affect presentation greatly.
- Defensiveness can affect what is learned.
- Observed findings can result from individual causes or from multiple factors.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Evaluation of What? The Referral Question

- Impact of family problems/events on functioning.
- Cognitive functioning, considering intellectual disability, autism, or other developmental limitation.
- Educational programming: application for special education services, specific areas of weakness, special learning strategies.
- Treatment needs including what level of care (residential vs outpatient) is needed.
- Parental Competency: do mental health, substance use, domestic violence, or other factors impair a parent's ability to safely care for a child?
- What effect visitation with parents (or cessation of visits) is likely to have?
- What would the benefit and risks be to separating siblings?
- Current capacity of a child to accept adoption.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Forensic Use Requires a Specialty Provider

- All practicing psychologists and many other disciplines are trained in counseling services.
- Psychologists are often (but not always) trained to conduct psychological evaluations.
- Fewer have specialty training in working with children, even fewer with small children.
- Training for assessment of infants is an even more specialized area and often conducted by developmental specialists rather than psychologists.
- Forensic evaluation is another subset, when the assessment is to be conducted for use by some agency (Child Welfare, Courts, Department of Youth Services).

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Role of the Forensic Evaluator

Psychological evaluations are a unique and unparalleled opportunity to gather in depth history and detail about behavior patterns and experiences.

- Supported by Objective Test Data
- Integrated with data about other family members
- Gathered without the overlay of maintaining a therapeutic relationship with the subject
- Objective: With consideration of potential bias

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Focus on: A review of reasoning, Judgment, and Present Functioning

- Honesty of the client and accuracy of child welfare records are of less an issue for assessments
- How they process information, evaluate risks, and plan to address problems is more relevant than accuracy of the details provided

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Informed Consent: Explaining the Evaluator's Role

- Builds an honest relationship: informs on the purpose of the assessment and access to their data.
- Alerts the subject to these what is expected of them.
- Avoid self-incrimination in criminal proceedings.
- Specifies what is of most importance to the evaluator and helps reduce confusion about the questions asked.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## What can the psychological evaluation tell consumers?

- Degree of emotional distress and diagnosis to focus treatment
- Source of distress (sometimes)
- Amenability to treatment
- Benefit of recent intervention efforts
- Cognitive abilities, relative and normative weaknesses and strengths, and whether these constitute a developmental difficulty
- Based on reports of their prior history (i.e. abuse suffered, characteristics of home environment), the impact of this history on current processes and functioning
- For Children Specifically
  - Potential benefit of current caregivers as treatment agents (based on their recent efforts)
  - Attachment to current caregivers and sometimes to prior caregivers

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Treatment Recommendations (hopefully in great detail)

- What type is best for this person and why.
  - Group versus individual meetings with providers
  - Specific treatment approaches, CBT vs ACT vs DBT, etc.
- How capable is the person to participate in treatment decisions and planning?
- What obstacles are likely to be present during the delivery of treatment?
  - Resistance
  - (For Children) Attitude and parenting approach of the caregivers
  - Development, and cognitive abilities
- What local agencies or supports are best suited to provide specific interventions?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Predictions of Risk, Danger, and Future Adjustment

- Risk and danger posed by parents' behavior.
- Impact of placement and the "fit" between a parent's and a child's characteristics/behavior/functioning.
  - Risks to child development, emotional functioning, social abilities, and attachment are central to custody placement and whether to force services and oversight by child welfare.
- Comments about these future impacts requires comparison to a larger knowledge base.
  - What happens to children under similar circumstances (since we cannot know what will happen, we must look to what happened in similar cases).

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Stages of Case Involvement

- Early: Is the degree of problems worthy of forced intervention and what are the primary issues to target?
- Middle: Is the treatment that is under way sufficient and appropriately targeted or why is more progress not being made?
- End: Is any more intervention or concern warranted (reunification time) or will further treatment offer any benefit (time to seek the alternate plan)?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Summary Recommendations

- Select the evaluator carefully, ensuring they have:
  - the requisite expertise and reputation
  - Provide details of interest regarding risk assessment, treatment recommendations, and case planning ideas
  - Consider the accuracy of available data
- Specify the referral questions and who will be using the results.
- Prepare to be helpful, assisting in providing background data from other sources, details about concerns, etc.
- Request detailed answers to questions relevant for pending decisions.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---