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Developing a Structured Professional Judgment (SPJ) Tool for Child Custody Evaluation
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Key Words: structured professional judgment (SPJ), Child Custody, risk/protective factors, assessment, evaluations

The procedures used by many psychologists conducting family evaluations for court purposes have long been criticized by the broader forensic community for their lack of consistency and empirical foundation. Accordingly, there is widespread variability in how evaluations are conducted, which can lead to questionable credibility from the court's perspective and a negative experience for families. This poster will provide a theoretical and conceptual argument for applying the well-established structured professional judgment (SPJ) framework used in criminal forensic assessment to the child custody evaluation context, as a first step toward developing a more empirically-based family assessment tool.

There are several reasons the researchers have selected applying the SPJ model to the new proposed custody evaluation model. The SPJ model has primarily been utilized in cases involving the assessment of individuals with a history of violence. Although it is a bit of a paradigm shift, many child custody evaluations are essentially a form of risk assessment, in that the court is asking the evaluator to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each parent in relation to his/her children's particular needs in order to provide recommendations to the court regarding the care, custody, and protection of each child. Accordingly, we argue that applying the SPJ model for risk assessment could be a more standardized, structured approach to the forensic evaluation of parents' strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, the spirit of the SPJ model encompasses and encourages the evaluators to categorize individuals (and families, in this case) as being at low, moderate, or high risk (opposed to assigning numeric score cutoffs) depending

on their perceived level of risk and the corresponding degree of intervention required to diminish this risk.

Using the SPJ method of operationally defining risk factors present, and then analyzing the severity and relevance of each factor to the overall family dynamic, can minimize evaluator bias and subjectivity in analyzing risk and providing dispositional and clinical recommendations. In addition, the SPJ model incorporates the identification of protective factors and individual strengths of each family member, which is not often a lens through which many child custody evaluators approach their assessment task. By incorporating a more balanced analysis of strengths (protective factors) and weaknesses (risk factors), this evaluation model can ideally shift the focus of the evaluation to a more collaborative process, in which the focus is on best meeting the needs of the child(ren), rather than simply to decide on the custody arrangement. Furthermore, the final step of an SPJ approach includes communicating recommendations for risk reduction which, in a family evaluation context, has the potential to provide critical clinical recommendations and feedback to parents about how best to work with the child(ren)'s individual needs.

In sum, this poster will provide a more comprehensive explanation of the theoretical basis for applying SPJ to child custody evaluation, as well as a proposed conceptual model for such an assessment framework. It is our hope that the use of a model with established steps and guiding principles for analysis/decision-making will create a more standardized evaluation process for child custody evaluators.