

Qualitative Analysis of Current Child Custody Evaluation Practices

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Abstract : The role of the custody evaluator is perhaps one of the most controversial and risky endeavors in clinical practice. Complaints filed with licensing boards regarding a child-custody evaluation constitute the second most common reason for such an event. Although the evaluator is expected to answer for the family-law court what is in the “best interest of the child,” there is a lack of clarity on how to establish this in any empirically validated manner. Hence, practitioners must contend with a nebulous framework in formulating their methodological procedures that inherently places them at risk in an already litigious context. This study sought to qualitatively investigate patterns of practice among doctoral practitioners conducting child custody evaluations in the area of Southern California. Ten psychologists were interviewed who devoted between 25 and 100% of their California private practice to custody work. All held Ph.D. degrees with a range of eight to 36 years of experience in custody work. Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate assessment practices, ensure adherence to guidelines, risk management, and qualities of evaluators. Forty-three Specific Themes were identified using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Seven Higher Order Themes clustered on salient factors such as use of Ethics, Law, Guidelines; Parent Variables; Child Variables; Psychologist Variables; Testing; Literature; and Trends. Evaluators were aware of the ever-present reality of a licensure complaint and thus presented idiosyncratic descriptions of risk management considerations. Ambiguity about quantifying and validly tapping parenting abilities was also reviewed. Findings from this study suggested a high reliance on unstructured and observational methods in child custody practices.

Keywords : forensic psychology, psychological testing, assessment methodology, child custody

Conference Title : ICPP 2016 : International Conference on Psychology and Psychiatry

Conference Location : London, United Kingdom

Conference Dates : June 23-24, 2016