

25 RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS USE OF THE MMPI/MMPI-2 IN FAMILY CUSTODY CASES¹

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What is there about the MMPI scales that make them the most frequently used measures in assessing parents in child custody evaluations? The extensive research detailing the instruments' validity and effectiveness is highlighted to illustrate the empirical basis of the test in this application. Early research with the MMPI on parental behavior and problems established the test's utility in understanding couples problems. Hundreds of studies on parents and their children have been published over the past 75 years. The following highlights describe a small sample of the special contributions that support using the MMPI/MMPI-2 for assessing couples in custody cases:

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- 1952 Sopchak conducted research to determine if there is a relationship between parent personality measured by the MMPI and children's behavior. The data showed that, for both men and women, the hypothesis that identification with parents is associated with normality and good adjustment rather than with abnormal trends. Knowing the relationship between young people and their parents is valuable information for determining their adjustment.
- 1959 Liverant found that the MMPI scales strongly supported the clinical impression that both fathers and mothers of disturbed children are significantly more maladjusted than the fathers and mothers of non-disturbed children.
- 1965 Patterson studied the impact of parent behavior on the adjustment of children. In general, these data support the hypothesized relationship between responsiveness to disapproval and poor adjustment. Parents dispensing disapproval were highly effective in changing the child's choice behavior.

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- 1966 Loeb and Price studied parental personality and the difficulties of children from broken homes. MMPI records of divorced and separated (DS) mothers indicated more personality disturbance ($p < .05$) than did records of continuously married (M) mothers. DS mothers were much higher ($p < .001$) on Pd and higher ($p < .05$) on Sc and Ma, suggesting impulsiveness, anger, and nonconformity usually associated with conduct disorders. Inflated mean Pd scores were also obtained by remarried mothers and by fathers with histories of marital disruption. Children of divorced and separated parents more frequently have problems including aggressive or acting out behavior. A particularly striking difference occurred in the girls; 10 out of 15 daughters of divorced and separated women were rated aggressive, whereas only 1 out of 15 daughters of continuously married women was rated aggressive.
- 1968 Murstein and Glaudin conducted a study to evaluate the use of the MMPI in the determination of marital Adjustment. Couples receiving marital counseling were compared with control couples. Couples in both groups received the MMPI scored for the usual variables plus Deviancy from the norm mean, Hostility, Dominance, Anxiety, Regression, and Ego Strength. The marker variable marital maladjusted S or control S was also included. Separate factor analyses were performed for men and women to determine the personality dimensions associated with marital adjustment. For both men and women, 2 factors relating to marital adjustment were obtained. 1 related to the presence of gross psychiatric disturbance, while a subtler factor related to a rigid defense in always doing the right thing and to strongly masculine interests by both sexes.
- 1969 Hafner, Butcher, Hall and Quast provided a review and summary detailing the appropriateness and value of the MMPI in assessing parents in family contexts. They summarized the early research and provided a number of points for MMPI users and researchers to consider in future applications.
- 1974 Paulson, Afifi, Thomason, and Chaleff conducted an evaluation to determine if the MMPI, as a descriptive measure of psychopathology, can aid in the identification of potentially abusive parents. They found characteristic MMPI profiles that differentiate between abusive and nonabusive parents. Their research provided information as to the early identification and better understanding of abusing parents.
- 1974 Bradley studied families (mother, father, and 1 child who were in the process of obtaining psychiatric consultation services for problems related to the psychological adjustment of the child) in an effort to find consistent relationships between the personalities of parents as measured by the MMPI and 6 behaviors: excessive or prolonged rocking, head banging, or pulling at blanket fuzz or at one's own hair, rigidity or holding oneself stiff; pica; and breath-holding. He found significant relationships between mothers' MMPI scales and the pathological behaviors of their children and between fathers' MMPI scales and the behaviors. The Sc, D, and F scales of both parents were associated with the pathological behaviors. Results are interpreted as support for the existence of a

- relationship between pathological behaviors of children and a personality dimension of their parents.
- 1976 Wright administered a battery of psychological measures (e.g., the Rorschach and the MMPI) to convicted child batterers. Controls were matched non-batterers. Significant differences were obtained on 5 of 21 study variables. Batterers appeared healthier on those instruments based largely on content validity, where the social desirability of the items was more obvious. They appeared more disturbed (i.e., psychopathic) on items based on concurrent or statistical validity. It is concluded that battering parents were psychopathically disturbed, but whenever possible presented a distorted picture of themselves as healthy and unlikely to abuse their children, thus the label "sick but slick syndrome.
- 1984 Ollendick and Otto conducted an evaluation of couples who received joint custody verses those undergoing a contested decision that are completed through the court decisions. As a result, mental health professionals remain active in assisting courts in this process through custody studies. However, there has been a lack of descriptive data on the personality characteristics of these parents. They evaluated 38 pairs of 20–50 yr old divorcing parents who were referred to a community mental health center for a 2nd-opinion custody study indicated that custodial parents tended to represent themselves in a healthier fashion than those in contested cases they tended to cope with feelings of anger and impulsivity more effectively, were more trusting and open toward others, and received lower alcohol use scores than noncustodial parents.
- 1984 Ollendick investigated the scores of 3 MMPI-based alcohol scales of 38 couples who had been consecutively court-ordered to a community mental health center for psychological evaluations to be used in the determination of child custody. Significant mean differences were noted on 2 of the 3 scales between parents receiving custody and those not receiving custody. It was concluded that the MMPI-based alcohol scales are useful in supplying supportive, objective test data in cases involving the determination of child custody.
- 1986 Land assessed the relationship between treatment intensity and rehabilitation at discharge of child abusers whose MMPI profiles revealed high levels of psychological distress and who had been resistant to previous attempts at treatment. Ss were suspected child abusers (aged 15+ yrs) who were court-ordered to participate in a treatment program that varied in duration and intensity. Results indicate that, with regard to their degree of psychological distress, 69.7% of Ss had an MMPI elevation within the abnormal range; the most frequent profile elevations were in scales measuring primarily psychopathic deviation and hypomania and secondarily, paranoia and schizophrenia. Clients who received intense weekly treatment for longer durations were assessed as having a higher degree of rehabilitation both in themselves and in their relationship to their child. Results support the need for differential diagnosis and subsequent differential treatment of child abusers.

- 1995 Otto and Butcher evaluated the use of computers in evaluation of parents in child custody assessments that have played an increasing role in mental health practice in recent years, including in the administration, scoring and interpretation of a number of tests. They pointed out that computer-assisted testing has the potential to improve the validity of child custody and other types of forensic and nonforensic "therapeutic" evaluations, but computer applications also require verification. Attorneys and judges who are consumers of child custody evaluations should not assume that tests administered as part of the evaluation process are valid or appropriate, even when administered, scored, or interpreted by computer. Consequently, they must explore the examiner's knowledge and qualifications and then discern which tests and computer programs are most appropriate to ensure that decisions regarding the placement of children are made with the best possible information.
- 1997 Bathurst, Gottfried and Gottfried (MMPI-2) developed specialized "norms" for parent MMPIs based on 508 child custody litigants. Defensive underreporting and self-favorability were often exhibited along with an elevation on the Over-Controlled Hostility (O-H) scale. Highest mean clinical scale scores were Hysteria, Paranoia, and Psychopathic Deviate. Differences were not found among mothers, fathers, and stepparents, indicating that a single set of norms is suitable. Findings highlight the importance of context specificity in personality assessment. Proper interpretation of personality inventories in child custody disputes needs to consider both the norms of the standardization sample and the litigants' reference norms.
- 1998 Postume and Harper concluded that their investigation lends strong support to using both the standard and supplemental validity scales and indexes to assess response bias in a litigant's approach to the MMPI-2. Using the supplemental scales and indexes (in addition to the well-researched *L*, *F*, and *K* scales) improves the forensic psychologist's balance. In some cases the supplemental scales provide a more accurate picture than the standard scales of negative or positive response distortion. The emerging scientific database for the MMPI-2 supports its ability to provide incremental validity in a forensic context by detecting response distortion in the form of malingering or denial of problems. In fact, in most cases where reading ability, comprehension, or cultural variables are not an issue, the omission of the MMPI or MMPI-2 from a forensic evaluation might be called into question.
- 1998 Siegel and Langford conducted a study on MMPI-2 validity scales of two groups of parents going through child custody evaluations, parents who engage in parental alienation syndrome (PAS) behaviors and parents who do not, were compared. It was hypothesized that PAS parents would have significantly higher *L* and *K* scales and a significantly lower *F* scale than parents who do not engage in these behaviors. Using female Ss (aged 27–45 yrs), since few males were available, the hypothesis was confirmed for *K* and *F* scales, indicating that PAS parents are more likely to complete MMPI-2 questions in a defensive manner, striving to appear as flawless as possible. It was concluded that parents who

- engage in alienating behaviors are more likely than other parents to use the psychological defenses of denial and projection, which are associated with this validity scale pattern. Implications of this finding regarding possible personality disorders in PAS parents are discussed.
- 2000 Bosquet and Egelund examined the relation between scores on the Antisocial Practices (ASP) content scale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) and parenting behaviors in a sample of low-income women. During pregnancy, 141 women were administered the MMPI-2 and then placed into 1 of 3 groups: an antisocial, nonclinical, or clinical control group. When their children were 13 and 24 mo old, antisocial mothers were observed to be less understanding and more hostile and harsh in their parenting styles than mothers in the other groups. The nonclinical and clinical control groups did not differ on any measures. Other MMPI-2 measures of antisocial behavior were not predictive of harsh parenting styles. These findings support the predictive and construct validity of the ASP content scale of the MMPI-2.
- 2000 Schmidtgal, King, Zarski and Cooper evaluated the relationship between the level of family conflict and the level of depression for female adult children (aged 19–32 yrs) of divorced parents. This study utilized an ex-post facto design using archival data. The predictor variables consisted of age at time of parental divorce and level of conflict as measured by the *Family Environment Scale*. The criterion variable consisted of level of depression as measured by the MMPI-2 scale 2 scores. Results indicated that for adult female children of divorced parents, there was a statistically significant relationship between parental conflict in the family of origin and adult depressive symptomology. Depressive symptomology increased as the level of reported family conflict increased. No relationship was found between age at the time of parental divorce and symptoms of depression.
- 2001 Quinnell and Bow explored the current status of psychological testing in custody evaluations using a national survey of 198 psychologists. They found that participants viewed testing as one source among many for data collection, neither under- nor over-valuing its importance. Results also indicated that participants were more discriminating in their test selection, with a greater focus on objective assessment, particularly in the use of parent inventories and rating scales. Among the adult objective personality tests, the MMPI/MMPI-2 was by far the most frequently used reaffirmed prior by Ackerman and Ackerman in 1997 and Keilin & Bloom, in 1986 and LaFortune & Carpenter in 1998. The MMPI-2 was given in the overwhelming majority of custody cases 94%, with a small number 7%) using the original version.
- 2005 Erickson provided a comprehensive review of studies of battered women's MMPI/MMPI-2 scores to determine whether elevated MMPI/MMPI-2 scores of battered women represent characterological "traits" or reactive "states." The answer to this question is crucial for battered women litigants in custody cases. Research to date

- seems to lend more support to the reactive state theory. When tested while domestic violence is ongoing or has just ended, battered women typically exhibit MMPI/ MMPI-2 elevations on several clinical scales. This article surveys available research on battered women's MMPI/ MMPI-2 profiles and supports the hypothesis battered woman's MMPI-2 profile often is a result of the abuse she has suffered, a reactive state, rather than that she has personality traits indicating that she would not be a fit parent.
- 2007 Ezzo, Pinsonneault and Evans evaluated MMPI-2 profiles for three types of child custody samples: child maltreatment, unmarried, and married. The results successfully differentiated the child maltreatment group from the two non-maltreatment groups (collapsed into one group) with T-scores significantly higher on scales F, Pd, Pa, Sc, Ma, and Si, and lower on scale K. Discriminant analysis provided a formula which successfully identified .79 of the profiles as maltreatment or non-maltreatment. Implications of these findings were discussed in relationship to psychosocial and demographic variables in child maltreatment cases.
- 2010 Cooke conducted an evaluation of a sample of parents in child custody disputes to determine the utility of the test given the proclivity of some parents to produce defensive invalid records. He particularly I evaluated the extent to which parents from higher SES and educational levels scored on the validity measures. He assessed the effects of these variables on L, K and S scale elevations. He provided suggestions for interpreting the context in which these scales are elevated.
- 2012 Carstairs, Richards, Fletcher, Droscher & Ecob compared the results with the MMPI-2 profiles of a sample of UK parents who had also undergone court ordered parental competency evaluations with a sample from the United States (Stredny, Archer, and Mason, 2006). The MMPI-2 results for the UK sample were found to be largely consistent with the US sample, with a near significant elevation on the Lie scale (L) and peaks on clinical scales 4 (Psychopathic Deviate) and 6 (Paranoia). The elevations on the clinical scales of 4 and 6 in the British sample and the US sample are noteworthy. And highly similar to the results reported by Bathurst et al. (1997) also obtained elevations on 4 and 6 (along with scale 3) in their child custody sample. It is possible that the elevations on the clinical scales represent personality traits that impact on parenting rather than situational states arising from the context of the evaluation.
- 2014 Roma, Ricci, and colleagues in Italy found that a significantly higher percentage of “faking-good” profiles on the MMPI-2 among Italian women compared to men and as compared to the normative Italian female population. They found that cultural and social factors could account for these differences.
- 2018 King (2018) provided a comprehensive review and analysis of the research and theoretical perspectives on child custody evaluation from the perspective of a research-practitioner. She discussed several psychological tests that are used in this forensic application and concluded that the MMPI-2 is the most effective and

acceptable instrument for assessing clients in custody evaluations.

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