

# **Child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office**

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Mini-dissertation accepted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree  
Master of Social Work in Forensic Practice at the  
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## DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE CORRECTNESS

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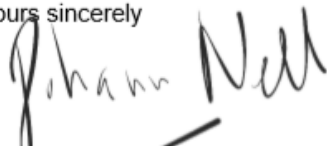
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I, Johann Nell, 6302215073085, hereby declare that I have language edited the mini-dissertation "Child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office" as presented to me by ms M Boshoff. All the suggested changes were left to the discretion of the author.

Yours sincerely

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Dear Prof Robinson

## APPROVAL OF DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED DURING THE PROGRESS OF THE STUDY

**Ethics number: NWU-00139-18-A1**

Kindly use the ethics reference number provided above in all future correspondence or documents submitted to the administrative assistant of the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC).

**Study title: Child-assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office**

**Study leader: Prof TM Robinson**

**Student: M Boshoff-10581863**

**Application type: Single study**

**Risk level: Minimal (monitoring report required annually)**

**Expiry date: 30 April 2020 (monitoring report due at the end of April annually until completion)**

You are kindly informed that the documentation submitted to the NWU-HREC, as per the conditions set in your approval letter, was reviewed by the designated reviewers. The reviewers have indicated that the submitted documents are acceptable and that you as the researcher can proceed with implementing the aforementioned documentation in your approved project.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support at [Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za).

Yours sincerely

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**ABSTRACT****TITLE:** Child assessment practices in the Family Advocate office**KEY WORDS:** Care and contact; child; assessment; best practices; Family Counsellor; Family Advocate Office

It is critical that a child's voice is heard in care and contact disputes before any important decisions are made as to future care and contact arrangements. In South Africa, the Family Advocate Office was established to form the concept of collaborative assessment by professionals (family advocates and social workers) with specialized skills, training and education. Due consideration should be given to the views and wishes of minor children caught up in such disputes as per legal authority (The Children's Act 38 of 2005, as amended) see South Africa (2005). Problems currently experienced regarding the child-assessment relates to the lack of skills and competencies of social workers, lack of the use of multiple data sources, efficient techniques, tools and a framework of criteria for assessment, as well as lack of a protocol or interview structure. The mentioned problems in child assessments are found locally, but also internationally.

The study aims to obtain a comprehensive understanding of current child-assessment practices within the Family Advocate Office.

A quantitative and descriptive survey design in the form of a self-designed survey was used to collect data. The population of this study includes family counsellors duly appointed by the Family Advocate Office in South Africa.

The findings suggest that the current child-assessment practices are not adding to a standardized, quality product which can be widely accepted by Family Courts in South Africa.

## **OPSOMMING**

**TITEL:** **Praktyke vir die assessering van kinders in die Kantoor van die Gesinsadvokaat**

**SLEUTELWOORDE:** Sorg en kontak; kind; assessering/evaluering; beste praktyk; Gesinsraadgewer; Kantoor van die Gesinsadvokaat

Dit is van kardinale belang dat kinders se stem duidelik hoorbaar word in dispute rakende sorg en kontak, alvorens belangrike besluite met betrekking tot toekomstige sorg en kontakreëlins geneem word. Die instelling van die Kantoor van die Gesinsadvokaat het ten doel om die konsep van gesamentlike assessering deur professionele persone (gesinsadvokate en maatskaplike werkers) met gespesialiseerde opleiding en vaardighede daar te stel. In Suid-Afrika, sowel as ander lande, word daar tans 'n probleem ervaar rakende die assessering van kinders ten einde hul stem duidelik hoorbaar te maak. Hierdie probleme wentel hoofsaaklik om die gebrek aan vaardighede en kapasiteit van maatskaplike werkers, die gebrek aan die gebruik van verskillende bronne van data, asook effektiewe gebruik van tegnieke en instrumente. Vervolgens bestaan daar nie 'n unieke raamwerk van kriteria of 'n protokol of struktuur van vraagstelling nie.

Die doel van hierdie studie is om 'n duidelike beeld te kry van die huidige praktyk van assessering van kinders binne die Kantoor van die Gesinsadvokaat.

Die student het gebruik gemaak van 'n self-ontwerpte vraelys wat kwantitatief en beskrywend van aard is in die versameling van data. Die populasie van hierdie studie bestaan uit alle gesinsraadgewers werksaam by die Kantoor van die Gesinsadvokaat in Suid-Afrika.

Die bevindinge dui daarop dat die huidige praktyk van assessering van kinders nie bydra tot 'n gestandaardiseerde produk wat getuig van hoë kwaliteit wat deurgaans deur die Gesinshowe in Suid-Afrika aanvaarbaar is nie.

## PREFACE

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master in Social Work of Forensic Practice. The Social Work Forensic Practice curriculum consists of a total of 180 credits, of these credits, the research dissertation accounts for 60 credits (180 credits).

The dissertation is presented in article format in line with the general academic rules of the North-West University (NWU, 2017) utilizing APA (2010, 6<sup>th</sup> ed.) style and referencing method. The first section of the dissertation provides a literature review, problem statement and outline of the research method. The second section provides a literature study and the third section the manuscript prepared according to the guidelines of the journal that the manuscript will be submitted. The fourth and final section includes the conclusions of the study.

The manuscript will be submitted to *The South African Journal of Psychology* for possible publication. This journal publishes manuscripts covering all fields of psychology. The emphasis is on empirical research, but theoretical and methodological papers, review articles, short communications, book reviews and letters commenting on articles are also published. Priority is given to articles relevant to Africa and that address psychological issues of social change and development. The research topic accords with the journal's aim and scope and is within the South African context of social services and psychology. Internationally psychologists and social workers are employed as custody evaluators. In South Africa psychologists are court ordered to compile custody evaluations.

## INSTRUCTIONS TO THE AUTHORS

### SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

*The South African Journal of Psychology* publishes contributions in English from all fields of psychology. While the emphasis is on empirical research, the Journal also accepts theoretical and methodological papers, review articles, short communications, reviews and letters containing fair commentary. Priority is given to articles which are relevant to Africa and which address psychological issues of social change and development. All articles should include an abstract in English of not more than 250 words and an alphabetical list of at least six keywords should be provided. Tables and figures, with suitable headings/captions and numbered consecutively, should follow the reference list, with their approximate positions in the text indicated. Articles should be no longer than 20 pages (5 500 words) and must include the full title of the manuscript, the name(s) of the author(s) and their affiliations, and the name, postal address, and e-mail address of the corresponding author. The manuscripts should be an MS Word document in 12-point Times Roman font with 1.5 line spacing. The American Psychological Association (APA, ver. 5) style guidelines and referencing format should be adhered to. It is compulsory that manuscripts be accompanied by a declaration that the language has been properly edited, together with the name and address of the person who undertook the language editing. Manuscripts to be considered for publication should be e-mailed to [sajp@up.ac.za](mailto:sajp@up.ac.za). A covering letter with postal address, e-mail address, and telephone number should be included. The covering letter should indicate that the manuscript has not been published elsewhere and it is not under consideration for publication in another journal. An acknowledgement of receipt will be e-mailed to the author and the manuscripts will be sent for review by three independent reviewers. The manuscript number must always be quoted in ALL correspondence to the editor.



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## **SECTION 1: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY**

### **1.1 Literature review**

#### **1.1.1 Background and introduction**

It is imperative that a child's voice is heard in care and contact matters (custody disputes) before any decisions serving the best interest of the child can be made (Africa, Dawes, Swartz, & Brandt, 2003; Barratt, 2003; Bosman-Sadie, Corrie, & Swanepoel, 2013; Burman, Matthias, Sloth-Nielsen & Zaal, 2003; Krauss & Sales, 2000; Nevondwe, Odeku & Raligilia, 2016; Schafer, 2011). This seems to be a matter of international interest (Barrie, 2011; Bilson & White, 2005; Birnbaum & Bala, 2010; Byrnes, 2011; Cashmore, 2011; Cleophas & Assim, 2015; Fotheringham, Dunbar & Hensley, 2013; Glasser, 2003; Hulstein, 2012; Luftman, Veltkamp, Clark, Lannacone & Snooks, 2005; Mabry, 2011; Mahlobogwane, 2008; Morag, Rivkin & Sorek, 2012).

According to Grobler (1990), the role of the social worker appointed as Family Counsellor, is to assist the Family Advocate in determining the best interest of children in custody disputes. The Family Counsellor is guided with instructions by the Family Advocate, as the case manager, and canvasses the child's view through a child-assessment. According to Gould & Martindale (as cited in Patel & Choate, 2014), Family Counsellors must provide the court with valid, objective and unbiased information about how a family functions, as it relates to the best psycho-social interests of the child. The report of the Family Counsellor is perceived as expert evidence (Barratt, 2003). The Family Advocate's Office, as an institution, forms the concept of a collaborative assessment by professionals with specialised skills, training, and education (Glasser, 2003).

### 1.1.2 Legal authorization through policies and guidelines

In South Africa, the Family Advocate Office was established in terms of the Mediation in Certain Divorce Matters Act 24 of 1987 *see* South Africa (1987) with *inter alia* the responsibility to ensure that children's best interest should be upheld in care and contact investigations. Due consideration should be given to the views and wishes of a child, as is legally defined by Sections 31(1)(a) and (b), as well as 61(1)(a) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, as amended *see* South Africa (2005). This concept is explained more practically in Section 7 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 *see* South Africa (2005) as the 'best interest of the child standard'. The Children's Act 38 of 2005 *see* South Africa (2005) gives more than related effect to the concept of a counselling service such as envisaged by the 'Hoexter Commission of Inquiry Into the Structure and Functioning of the Courts' to be attached to a Family Court through allowing for mediation as a supportive function in respect of the court-related enquiry by the Family Advocate and has confirmed the relationship between the legal fraternity and social service disciplines as a joint effort to protect the interests of children affected by divorce (Bosman-Sadie et al., 2013; Grobler, 1990).

### 1.1.3 Current situation

On an international level, in the Nineteenth Judicial Circuit of Lake County, Illinois, an influx of child custody evaluations has drawn the focus in the legal field to make the evaluations more scientific to meet standards for custody evaluations (Vorderstrasse, 2016). A study by Taylor, Fitzgerald, Morag, Bajpai and Graham (2012) has shown that across countries and various legal systems contexts children's participation in custody evaluations need to be strengthened. Similarly, Gould & Martindale (as cited in Patel & Choate, 2014) indicated that an effort should be made to include the participation of children in the process of determination of best interest in custody disputes. Taylor et al. (2012) identified an



apparent gap between what legislative principle says about child participation in custody cases, and how this principle is implemented in practice.

Assessments done by Family Counsellors in South Africa are found to be ineffective and of poor quality (Glasser, 2003). These problems are experienced as found in national and international literature (Africa et al., 2003; Barratt, 2003; Birnbaum, Bala & Boyd, 2016). Several authors (Patel and Jones, 2008; Zaal, 2003) elude to the absence of appropriate child-assessment practices by practitioners involved in custody disputes. Another concern is the lack of specific skill and competencies of these practitioners (Glasser, 2003; Prescott, 2013) which do not contribute to the use of multiple data sources, nor efficient techniques (Africa et al., 2003). Patel and Choate (2014), together with Simon and Stahl (2014), refer to best practices which call attention to child custody evaluators enjoying sophisticated knowledge and expertise in a wide range of topics to attain the best interest of the child standard. Glasser (2003) confirms a need for improved state services by dealing with family-related matters through a specialized family court. Barratt (2003) stated that appropriate tools should be put in place to ensure the significant participation of children for the legal fraternity to develop a more child-centred approach. These problems may be rectified by continuous education, i.e., post-master's coursework, voluntary certification programs, professional workshops and supervised practice (Simon & Stahl, 2014).

The assessment of children in custody disputes is a young development in forensic social work. Since the implementation of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 see South Africa (2005) services by the Office of the Family Advocate are available to all children regardless of their parents' marital status, as well as the scope of the services extended to lower courts as opposed to the previous era where the office only operated within the High Courts (Ndhlovu, 2018). No protocol or interview structure currently exists for Family Counsellors to follow

when assessing a child. According to Saywitz, Lyon and Goodman (2017) a protocol is meant to improve the quality of social work assessments. Protocols exist for professionals in the endeavour of interviewing children about possible sexual abuse (Faller, 2007), but such a protocol does not exist for child assessment in custody disputes. In order to enhance standardization of services, the Family Advocate Office developed Norms and Standards for Family Counsellor Services within the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (1/2015). The working paper (South Africa, 2015) provides standard assessment practice guidelines which reflect clinical assessments and aims to uphold the best interest of the child principle. The inconsistencies in child-assessment practice by Family Counsellors form the concept of the researcher's need to identify and describe current practices for best practices to evolve.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Simon and Stahl (2014) explain child custody evaluations to be complicated and difficult. Several factors need to be considered due to the sophisticated nature of such an evaluation. It is furthermore evident that courts order child custody evaluations as support to judicial fact-finding to improve proper conclusions for children (Africa et al., 2003). This study focussed on literature, both international and national of best practices for the assessment of children in custody disputes. Current practice in child-assessment by Family Counsellors in the Office of the Family Advocate in South Africa was explored to make recommendations on the need for a set standard or protocol for child assessment, which will lead the focus to best practice in this regard.

## **1.3 Research question**

The current child-assessment practices are not adding to a standardised, quality product which can be widely accepted by Family Courts in South Africa. The question to be

answered is: What are the current child-assessment practices followed by Family Counsellors in the Family Advocate Office?

#### **1.4 Aim and objectives**

This study aims to determine through a descriptive cross-sectional survey, the different practices in child assessment within the Office of the Family Advocate. The need for a standardised protocol of child assessment is what the researcher aims to confirm.

#### **1.5 Research method**

##### **1.5.1 Design**

The research design refers to a step in the research process of logical arrangements in its broadest sense (Fouche, Delport, & De Vos, 2011). A quantitative approach was used in this study to produce meticulous and generalisable findings (Rubin & Babbie, 2015). Grinnell & Unrau (2008) refer to “a quantitative approach as relying on quantification in collecting and critically analysing data which makes use of statistical analyses” (p. 16). The researcher approached the research with a critical view which focused on studying and understanding the practices followed by Family Counsellors during child assessment. The focus was correspondingly to critique and to confirm the need for a protocol. It was paramount to add numeric measures to observations and to study behaviour of Family Counsellors as individuals. A descriptive survey design was utilised to collect the data. The measuring tool, a survey in the form of a questionnaire was used to obtain objective and accurate data.

##### **1.5.2 The research setting**

The National Family Advocate Office is situated in Pretoria. A Provincial Family Advocate office is situated in each of the nine provinces of South Africa. There are currently more than twenty-five offices spread over the country, therefore more than just one office per province. The Family Advocate Office is predominantly focussing on mediation of disputes

between parents or parties over contact with, and care of, their child or children. The Family Advocate is a legally qualified person, appointed by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, to nurture and protect the best interests of children in domestic disputes regarding parental responsibilities and rights. The Family Advocate may request a Family Counsellor to support in the investigation into parental responsibilities and rights. There were ninety-three Family Counsellors appointed throughout the country commencing with this research. This specific study was done in the setting of the Family Advocate Office and focused on Family Counsellors who have the task to assess minor children in care and contact disputes, which is the role of all duly appointed Family Counsellors.

#### 1.5.3 Population

The population for this study refers to Family Counsellors duly employed at any of the Offices of the Family Advocate. The population was inclusive of all Family Counsellors which represented various races, gender and age groups. All ninety-three Family Counsellors employed by the Offices of the Family Advocate at that stage formed the population.

#### 1.5.4 Proposed sample size and motivation

Non-probability sampling features availability, judgmental (purposive), quota and snowball sampling (Rubin & Babbie, 2015). All-inclusive sampling was used with a purposeful selection of the whole population consisting of ninety-three Family Counsellors. The sample used should be adequate in size to allow the representation of the population. All the Family Counsellors duly employed by the Office of the Family Advocate at that stage, representative of various race, gender and age, with the responsibility to assess minor children within care and contact disputes, were recruited online to participate in the research by completing an online survey.

### 1.5.5 Process of sample recruitment

Permission was obtained from the Director: Human Resource Development within the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (Addendum B) to facilitate research within the department. The content of this letter stated the aim of the research project and what the requirements of the respondents would be. After obtaining permission from the Director, a goodwill permission letter was directed via email to the Principal Family Advocate, Advocate Petunia Seabi-Mathope (Addendum C). A sample is a small portion or subset of the total set of persons from which a representative selection is made (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). A list (numbers) of possible candidates was obtained from the National Office of the Family Advocate. An address book for officials employed at the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development is available online, indicating their profession - either as a social worker or family counsellor. The address book was used to contact all the Family Counsellors currently employed at the Family Advocate Office.

The Statistical Consultation Service (SCS) at North-West University (NWU) was consulted at the onset of the data collection. In conjunction with Mr.Shawn Liebenberg from SCS it was agreed that the minimum sample size for the data is set at forty (40) participants to complete the online questionnaire. A cross-sectional survey was introduced, via email, to all the Family Counsellors. The permission letter (Addendum B), goodwill permission (Addendum C), and informed consent documentation (Addendum D) used for the introduction of the survey, are attached.

### 1.5.6 Sampling method

This study used a non-probability, purposive sampling technique (Rubin & Babbie, 2015) to select the Family Counsellors currently employed by the Family Advocate Office (Strydom, 2011). As stated above, all Family Counsellors duly employed by the Family

Advocate Office have the responsibility to assess children in care and contact disputes, when addressed by a Family Advocate.

#### 1.5.7 Sample inclusion and exclusion criteria

The universe refers to all probable subjects who hold the features in which the researcher is interested. Population sets restrictions on the study components, as it refers to the individuals in the universe who possess specific features (Strydom, 2011). The inclusion criteria used for this study correlated with the appointment requirements of social workers employed at the Family Advocate Office. The following inclusion criteria were set:

- All family counsellors employed at the Office of the Family Advocate.
- Respondents to be fluent in English.
- Respondents registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions.
- Respondents to be computer-literate and have access to e-mail facilities.

Respondents represented the diverse South African cultural backgrounds, both gender groups, and all ages of Family Counsellors at the Family Advocate Office. No exclusion criteria were included.

#### 1.5.8 Data collection method

Data collection was achieved using Google Forms ("Google Forms," n.d.). Google Forms is an emerging technique. Participants could access the survey by accessing the web link. The researcher selected to use an online survey for the following reasons:

- It is quick and inexpensive, and a large number of prospective respondents any place can be contacted;
- Data are automatically entered for computer processing;

- Respondents skipping items or responding inappropriately can be prompted to correct any omission or mistake during the taking of the survey, before proceeding;
- Respondents who choose not to participate could easily disregard, and there is presumably less pressure on respondents to participate as there is no human contact between the researcher and the respondent, which indicates higher anonymity and privacy regarding sensitive areas.

All Family Counsellors have computers and internet available. Therefore limitations, such as lower response rates, would not hold any threats for the completion of the survey. It could also be expected that all Family Counsellors will have the technical skill to complete an online survey.

The researcher compiled a self-designed questionnaire (Addendum E) which reflects current national and international literature on the topic and emailed it to the respondents. The survey questionnaire comprised of two sections: demographical details and child assessment practices within the Office of the Family Advocate in South Africa. The researcher concentrated the questions on practices underpinned by mostly international authors on child assessment by custody evaluators. The survey was compiled in consultation with Statistical Consultation Services (SCS) at the North-West University (NWU) to ensure the best quality online survey. Closed questions were used, allowing the participants to choose between different options. On some of the questions participants were expected to elaborate or explain. The data was electronically retrieved and emailed to Statistical Consultation Services to analyse the data.

The researcher considered basic principles in the research design, as suggested by Fouche et al. (2011), namely clarity about the type of information that needs to be obtained to decide on the nature of the questionnaire; to keep it short and simple to encourage

participation; to include elements such as a title and an introduction. The latter briefly explained the aim of the research project and the purpose of the questionnaire, as well as clear instructions to stipulate how the questionnaire should be completed.

A survey design provides a numeric description of trends and characteristics, attitudes or behaviour of a population, by studying a sample of that population for purposes of generalisation (Creswell, 2014). Grinnell and Unrau (2008) refer to a cross-sectional survey as a one-group posttest-only design that does not have an intervention of any kind. By using a cross-sectional survey, a cross-section of some particular population is done only once. The results obtained from this survey will only be generalisable to this specific population of Family Counsellors.

Due to the availability of computers and the internet for the targeted population, no expected limitations were foreseen. It was expected that all Family Counsellors would be able to complete an online survey. A survey design provides a numeric description of trends and characteristics, attitudes or behaviour of a population by studying a sample of that population for purposes of generalisation (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008).

#### 1.5.9 Validity and reliability indices of the questionnaire

The researcher decided to make use of a self-developed questionnaire to solicit information appropriate for analysis. This questionnaire, which was not standardised, consisted of questions and statements based on the literature study whereby internationally accepted practice in child assessment by custody evaluators was explored. The questionnaire contained a wide range of items which reflects accepted practice as per literature studied. Validity refers to the extent to which a research study permits causal inferences to be made about relationships between variables (Rubin & Babbie, 2015). Cross-sectional studies normally focus on controlling threats to internal validity which makes it highly desirable to



use when causal inferences are important. The external validity of cross-sectional designs is often limited. Multivariate techniques enhance the internal validity of cross-sectional studies by enabling much greater control over alternative hypotheses, thereby increasing the plausibility of causal inferences drawn from cross-sectional data (Rubin & Babbie, 2015). Descriptive research commonly makes use of cross-sectional designs to establish whether a particular problem exists within a group of participants and what the level of the problem is. The need for feedback from professionals, regarding the development of the questionnaire to enhance the face and content validity of the instrument, is as a result of this, confirmed.

Reliability refers to whether scores to items on an instrument are internally consistent, stable over time, and whether there was consistency in test administration and scoring (Creswell, 2014). The researcher used Google Forms (<https://www.google.com/forms>) to develop a cross-sectional survey and feedback on the questionnaire was received from the Statistical Consultation Service at the North West University. The questionnaire was adapted based on feedback by a professional in the field of quantitative data, Mr. Shawn Liebenberg from the Statistical Consultation Services of the North-West University before it was implemented.

#### 1.5.10 Data analysis methods

Quantitative data analysis can be one of two types: descriptive statistics or inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics describe and summarise one or more variables for a sample or population (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). The aim is to produce a range of the characteristics of such distributions through frequencies, measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion (Fouche & Bartley, 2011). The researcher made use of descriptive statistics, as the aim was to produce a range of the appearances of such allocations through frequencies, measures of central tendency, and measures of dispersion. The statistical chart of

information, received from Google Forms, was provided electronically to the North-West University, Statistical Consultation Services for the data to be analysed and interpreted. This consultation with the Statistical Consultation Services (SCS) assisted the researcher in making sense of the data and presenting the information clearly in the research study. The IBM SPSS statistics were utilised in the process of data analysis. It entailed descriptive analysis on item level. It is vital to present data clearly to create clarity and understanding for the reader. A frequency distribution is an orderly arrangement of data, classified according to the percentage of times the various attributes of a variable are observed in a sample (Fouche & Bartley, 2011). Frequency distributions help to analyse the data, estimate the frequencies of the population based on a sample, and facilitate the computation on various statistical measures (Creswell, 2014). Cross-tabulations were performed to look for association with demographics. The researcher obtained inferential analysis through the use of ANOVA's and T-tests by building in Likert scales in the online survey.

## **1.6 Ethical aspects**

### **1.6.1 The estimated ethical risk level of the proposed study**

The risk level of the study was minimal. The topic under research is part of the daily work of the participants. No sensitive questions were asked. Quantitative data captured during the study were captured in electronic format using a web-based interface and data collection application. This data gathering was done anonymously during capturing, and the researcher was unable to connect specific participants to the data collected. Data was made available on a spread-sheet for analysis purposes. Electronic data will be stored on a disk at the archive for Community Psychosocial Research (Compres) where-after it will be discarded. The e-mail addresses of all known Family Counsellors in the Office of the Family Advocate were obtained from the address list in the National Office of the Family Advocate.

### 1.6.2 Probable experience of the respondents

The participants completed an online questionnaire which took 15-20 minutes. It was a short questionnaire to ensure ease of completion and could, for example, be done during a lunch break. Awareness could be created by answering the questions. It was explained to participants that if they experienced any discomfort by answering questions, they could stop. Participants were able to withdraw from the research project at any time.

### 1.6.3 Dangers/risks and precautions

Participants were recruited from the list of all Family Counsellors duly employed at The Office of the Family Advocate. The researcher informed all Family Counsellors on the list of the planned research using an email advertisement, as the inclusion criteria are similar to the appointment criteria for Family Counsellors in the Family Advocate Office. Participants were informed with a cover letter on the potential impact of the study, expectations of participants, and the time required from participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed as all details of the study were included in the cover letter to the questionnaire. Completion of the questionnaire was anonymous. An online survey was completed and participants were not exposed in public as they did not have any contact with the researcher. Participants could complete the online survey in privacy, in their own time, which ensured anonymous participation. The private on-line survey further ensured privacy and confidentiality in that colleagues were unable to see other colleagues participate in the research study. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any stage.

The researcher herself is employed at the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development within the division of Court Services. The researcher did not meet with any of the Family Counsellors, as they are situated in another division of the same department. Firm

boundaries were set between the researcher and participants not to discuss the research, as they share the same electronic server of the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development.

#### 1.6.4 Benefits and risks for respondents

In the South African context, there is no evidence-based protocol for forensic social workers to assess children in custody disputes. Forensic Social Workers are seen as experts in the field and have to show the court their specialised knowledge and skills in this specific field. The incidental benefit for the participant in the study is that participants contributed to new knowledge in the field, to ensure the court views social workers as experts in this field. This study did not have any direct benefits for the participants. In this study, the benefits outweighed the risks.

This study might have improved participants' awareness of child-assessment practices. This awareness could have an unintended benefit through self-reflection regarding their professional practices. The research study was identified as having minimal risk since the information collected was not personal, but rather opinion based on their knowledge and experience as a Family Counsellor.

Participants were able to self-exit the survey by choice if the questions created discomfort. Participants were advised to seek supervision or social support if the research questions created distress.

#### 1.6.5 Expertise, skills and legal competencies

Permission for the research was obtained from the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC) NWU-00139-18-A1, Addendum F attached hereby. The researcher had in total eight years of previous experience as a Family Counsellor within the setting of the Family Advocate Office. The researcher is still employed by the

Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, and for the past two years as Court Intermediary delivering a Court Service, which operates in a different section of the same department. The researcher was guided by the study leader, Prof. TM Robinson as Associate Professor Extraordinaire who is an experienced researcher herself. Prof. CC Wessels, professor at North-West University, acted as co-supervisor.

Authorisation for this study was obtained through the Research Proposal Committee of the Community Psychosocial Research (Addendum G). Consent for this study was obtained from the Research component of the Department of Justice (Addendum B). Goodwill permission was obtained from the National Principal Family Advocate, Advocate Petunia Seabi-Mathope (Addendum C).

#### 1.6.6 Facilities

The researcher developed the survey using Google Forms (<https://www.google.com/forms>). The survey was adapted based on feedback by Mr. Shawn Liebenberg, a professional from the Statistical Consultation Service from North-West University before it was implemented. Data was collected through a survey instrument designed on Google Forms and was e-mailed to respondents. The online web service for officials at the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development was used to dispense the survey to all Family Counsellors duly employed by the Office of the Family Advocate. North-West University Statistical Consultation Services was responsible for assisting with data analysis.

#### 1.6.7 Incentive and remuneration of respondents

The participants did not incur any costs. The participants did not receive any incentive for completing the survey. It was a voluntary task to complete the survey, and the researcher did not compensate the participants for the time spent to participate in the study.

#### 1.6.8 Dissemination of results

The results of the study will be compiled in an article format for an academic journal, *The South African Journal of Psychology*. The link to an online copy of this article will be made available to the National Family Counsellor Manager to inform all Family Counsellors duly employed by the Office of the Family Advocate as soon as it is completed and approved. Each Family Counsellor will be able to follow the link and read the article, as all Family Counsellors have online access. The researcher will email an online leaflet to ensure that participants have access to the research findings and are informed as to the research outcome.

#### 1.6.9 Privacy / Confidentiality

The questionnaire captured data anonymously. No completed questionnaire could be traceable to a specific individual. Participants were not identified in the analysis of the data or the research report. The researcher took all reasonable steps to ensure confidentiality. The research was conducted under the guidance of a skilled study-leader to provide guidance and oversight of the research process.

#### 1.6.10 Storage and archiving of data

Electronic data will be stored on a disk for five years in a locked cabinet in the secretary's office of Compress. It will be discarded after five years.

#### 1.6.11 The vulnerability of participants:

The study focused on Family Counsellors employed by the Office of the Family Advocate. The participants are professional social workers with more than two years' experience practising as social workers, as the criteria for application for advertised posts in this regard indicates. No personal information was disclosed by the participants. Opinions based on their knowledge and experience as Family Counsellors were captured. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and informed. Electronic consent was given by acknowledging

participation and by clicking on the “next” link after the introduction of the study and thus by submitting the completed questionnaire. The participants were able to exit the survey at any time. Participants were advised to make use of present supervision or social support at work if in need of support after completing the survey.

### **1.7 Structure of the report**

The choice of structure for the report is in line with Rule 4.2.3.3 as per yearbook of the Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus (2017). The researcher utilised the article format and considered *The South African Journal of Psychology* for the publishing of the research article. *The South African Journal of Psychology* publishes empirical, theoretical, and review articles on all aspects of psychology. Articles may focus on South African, African or international issues. An article format was chosen to meet the requirements for the degree MSW in Forensic Practice. To meet the criteria of *The South African Journal of Psychology*, the article must be written in English. The introductory review section does not require a heading-; thereafter the following headings should be used: method; data analysis, results, discussion, conclusion, references. The final article is to meet the following criteria:

- An abstract of not more than 250 words.
- The article must comprise of 5 500 words, or not more than 20 pages.
- The manuscript should be submitted as a Word document only.
- Text should be double-spaced with a minimum of 3cm for left and right hand margins and 5cm at head and foot.
- Text should be standard 12 point.
- The publication guidelines of The American Psychological Association 6<sup>th</sup> edition (APA 6<sup>th</sup>) must be followed.

The findings of the research will be discussed in the article and a conclusion with recommendations will be reached. The article will also have a bibliography and annexures can be included in the article such as the cross-sectional survey used. References are listed in alphabetical order in the bibliography.

The dissertation was edited for language correctness. See Addendum H for the confirmation of the editor. The research report will consist of the following sections:

Section 1: Orientation to the study

Section 2: Literature study

Section 3: The manuscript

Section 4: Summary, conclusions and recommendations

Section 5: References



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## **SECTION 2: LITERATURE STUDY**

### **2.1 Introduction**

According to Vorderstrasse (2016) concerns exist regarding the quality of custody evaluators reports, which is the summary of intensive data collection in a scientific manner to reflect an outcome to the best interest of a child. DiPrizio (2016) confirms this stance due to a lack of standards governing custody evaluations in states such as Illinois, Hawaii, Arizona, Utah and Louisiana, with California taking the head on instituting a model of standards. Turoy-Smith, Powell, & Brubacher (2018) reported that mental health practitioners involved in custody evaluation regard interviewing children in this milieu as complex and unique with limited guidance available. In South Africa a plea for more quality education and training of custody evaluators and for the creation of a specialised family court was made (Glasser, 2003). Despite differences in the grade of problems experienced nationally, as well as internationally, the core of the problem lies with the custody evaluator's ability to perform a sound evaluation of the best interest of children caught up in care and contact disputes. The effect on children of their parents' divorce is well described by Hodges (as cited in Vorderstrasse 2016): "Almost all children, regardless of age, experience the divorce of their parents as a major stressful event" (p. 20) and Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee (as cited in Luftman, Veltkamp, Clark, Lannacone, & Snooks, 2005) referring to divorce as a snowballing incident that escalates and peaks in adulthood.

In South Africa, custody evaluators could be court-ordered registered psychologists, registered private social workers, or most generally, social workers duly employed by the Family Advocate Office as family counsellors (South Africa, 1987). This study focussed specifically on the assessment of children by family counsellors within the Family Advocate

Office to describe the current practices utilised. The objective is to reinforce the need for best practices to evolve to meet an international standard of child assessment.

## **2.2 Definition of main concepts**

### **2.2.1 Care and Contact (Children's Act 38 of 2005 see South Africa (2005))**

According to (Schäfer, 2011) "Care" in relation to a child, includes, where appropriate-

- (a) Within available means, providing the child with –
  - i. A suitable place to live;
  - ii. Living conditions that are conducive to the child's health, well-being and development; and
  - iii. The necessary financial support;
- (b) Safeguarding and promoting the well-being of the child;
- (c) Protecting the child from maltreatment, abuse, neglect, degradation, discrimination, exploitation and any other physical, emotional or moral harm or hazards;
- (d) Respecting, protecting, promoting and securing the fulfilment of, and guarding against any infringement of the child's rights as set out in the Bill of Rights and the principles as set out in Chapter 2 of this Act;
- (e) Guiding, directing and securing the child's education and upbringing, including religious and cultural education and upbringing, in a manner appropriate to the child's age, maturity and stage of development;
- (f) Guiding the behaviour of the child in a humane manner;
- (g) Maintaining a sound relationship with the child;
- (h) Accommodating any special needs that the child may have; and

- (i) Generally, ensuring that the best interests of the child are the paramount concern in all matters affecting the child (p. 221).

Section 28(1) of the Constitution, 1996 see South Africa (1996) needs to be read with the definition of care to broaden the spectrum and meaning of children's right to care.

According to Schäfer (2011) "Contact" in relation to a child, means –

- (a) Maintaining a personal relationship with the child; and
- (b) If the child lives with someone else –
  - i. Communication on a regular basis with the child in person, including –
    - (a) visiting the child, or
    - (b) being visited by the child, or
  - ii. Communication on a regular basis with the child in any other manner, including –
    - (a) through the post; or
    - (b) by telephone or any other form of electronic communication (p. 222).

### 2.2.2 Child

"Child" means a person under the age of 18 years (Schäfer, 2011; South Africa, 2005).

### 2.2.3 Assessment

"Assessment" means a process of investigating the developmental needs of a child, including his or her family environment or any other circumstances that may have a bearing on the child's need for protection and therapeutic services (Bosman-Sadie, Corrie, & Swanepoel, 2013); The role of the multi-professional team is acknowledged in the assessment of a child. Schäfer (2011) refers to assessment where co-holders of parental responsibilities



and rights experience “difficulties” and defines the presence of “a jurisdictional bar to an application for a court order in relation to a child” (p. 258).

#### 2.2.4 Best practices

“Best practices” refer to the most effective and correct use of professional procedures that are accepted or prescribed (Bosman-Sadie et al., 2013).

#### 2.2.5 Family Counsellor

“Family Counsellor” is a social worker appointed under the Mediation in Certain Divorce Matters Act 24 of 1987 *see* South Africa (1987) as a family counsellor at the Office of the Family Advocate. The Office of the Family Advocate interviews the child with the assistance of the Family Counsellor to obtain and convey the child’s views on the matter to court.

#### 2.2.6 Family Advocate Office

The Office of the Family Advocate deals with disputes between parents or family members over the parental responsibility and rights of children. The functions of the Family Advocate have been extended by the Children’s Act 38 of 2005, as amended *see* South Africa (2005). This is in line with the Hague Convention which was adopted in 1980 in a bid to curb international abductions of children.

### 2.3 Purpose of assessment of children in general

Assessment is defined in the New Dictionary of Social Work (as cited in Fouché, 2006) as “the process of analysing the factors that influence or determine the social functioning of the individual, family group or community” (p. 206). Clinical interviews with the aim of treatment differs distinctly with an interview with the purpose to establish the facts of the incident under investigation, which is referred to as a forensic interview (Fouché, 2006; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2008). In a clinical set up an assessment of a child

focuses on the child's developmental needs and has the purpose of providing a suitable, professional treatment and care plan (Faller, 2007; Müller, 2001). The professional social worker conducting an interview as part of a forensic assessment, has the responsibility to obtain a true account from a child in a manner which will best serve the interests of the child, while at the same time being legally acceptable (DiPrizto, 2016; Patel & Choate, 2014).

According to Fouché (2006) the goal of forensic assessment interviews is to “obtain an account from a child in a developmentally sensitive, unbiased, independent and truth-seeking manner so as to support accurate and fair decision making in the criminal justice system...to be utilized in a court process” (p. 206). It is the right of a child to be assessed by a professional who has sound knowledge (obtained through appropriate training and having suitable qualifications), skills (which include critical thinking and experience in communicating with children) and attitude (objective and truth-seeking) to take the views and feelings of a child in consideration (Cohen, 2012; Luftman et al., 2005). The child has the right to participate in any matter concerning that specific child, which is enforced by Section 10 of the Children's Act *see* (South Africa, 2005).

According to Bentovim, Cox, Miller & Pizzey (2009) an assessment of a child to make recommendations towards the best interest of a child should focus on the following developmental needs: health, education, emotional and behavioural development, identity, family and social relationships, social management and independence. Parenting capacity should focus on basic care, ensuring safety, emotional warmth, stimulation, guidance and boundaries as well as stability (Africa, Dawes, Swartz, & Brandt, 2003; Luftman et al., 2005; Sawitz, Camparo, & Romanoff, 2010). Family and environmental factors should include the family history, family and individual functioning, wider family, housing, income and

employment, families' social integration and community resources (Patel & Jones, 2008; Stahl, 2016).

## **2.4 Forensic assessment of children in custody evaluations**

In contrast with generic assessments, where the purpose is understanding the psychological state of the child and his or her parents as the ultimate clients, forensic assessments have the judicial system as the ultimate client, and the professional becomes a fact finder who has the responsibility to obtain uncontaminated data using consultations, interviews, biographical questionnaires and reports (Brubacher, Earhart, Turoy-Smith, & Powell, 2019; DiPrizto, 2016; Patel & Choate, 2014). The professional holds a neutral stance and is aware of the existence of multiple hypotheses (Fouché, 2006). The only techniques utilised in a forensic assessment should be legally defensible (Bosman-Sadie et al., 2013; Sawitz et al., 2010).

The professional conducting forensic assessments expect to be court-ordered to testify as an expert witness, having the judicial system as the ultimate client with the purpose according to DiPrizto (2016) to “assess the fit between a minor child's emerging developmental and socio-emotional needs and the parents' comparative ability to meet those needs” (p. 514). The professional report conducted by the social scientist, such as the social worker or psychologist which serves as end product of the forensic assessment should be reliable, trustworthy and valid, meaning observations and findings should be relevant to the legal context and accurately documented (Africa et al., 2003; Luftman et al., 2005). According to Kuehnle (as cited in Bosman-Sadie et al., 2013) the expert witness acts “as an impartial scientist who provides an objective professional opinion based upon appropriate evaluation methods”(p. 60). It is imperative for the social scientist to stay within the limits of proficiency and to acknowledge limitations experienced in the investigation (Mason, 2015;

Patel & Jones, 2008). When preparing to act as an expert witness, the forensic social worker needs to take in consideration the facts and suppositions on which professional opinion is based, and most importantly the practice employed in arising to an opinion (Bosman-Sadie et al., 2013).

A custody evaluation, as a forensic evaluation, can be requested from one or either of the parties involved in a care and contact dispute, by a Family Advocate requesting a Family Court to make a court order to conduct such an evaluation, or by the presiding officer of court ordering the Family Advocate Office to conduct a custody evaluation (Africa et al., 2003). To follow a guideline it is necessary for sound care and contact evaluation, for example, as was developed by Dr. Lesley Corrie (as cited by Bosman-Sadie et al., 2013). Interview topics vary, but should at least include the developmental needs of the child to be reflected regarding the following areas: physical, educational, health, relationship with siblings, relationship with peers, independence, bond with parents, to suffer the least hostile effects of divorce and any special needs (Goldstein, 2016a; Sawitz et al., 2010). Brown, Lamb, Lewis, Gwynne, Kitto and Stairmand (2019), as well as Brubacher, Earhart, Turoy-Smith and Powell (2019) relay the importance of considering the child's ability to participate in the process of assessment. The professional custody evaluator should make use of court defendable techniques whereby the child is holistically assessed, where after all the information obtained should be reflected in a professional report so that the child's best interest can be adhered to in making recommendations regarding the child's future care and contact position (Africa et al., 2003; Luftman et al., 2005; Patel & Jones, 2008; Turoy-Smith et al., 2018).

## **2.5 Guidelines for child custody evaluations**

Child custody evaluations have many ethical issues that should be taken into consideration (Kuehnle, 1998; Kuehnle & Connell, 2009; Mason, 2015). One of these issues

is the lack of demarcated guidelines for the professional boarding on a custody evaluation (Brubacher et al., 2019; Powell & Lancaster, 2003). DiPrizto (2016) as well as Patel and Choate (2014) confirm the need for a firm set of codes of ethics to guide the professional. Different courts may request varying tasks of the evaluator, depending on the nature of the dispute, as well as the purpose of the said court (Nevondwe, Odeku & Raligilia, 2016). The practice of forensic social work entails intrinsic possibilities for difficulties, disagreements, confusions and misuses, therefore clear guidelines are needed for confidentiality, consent, sincerity and endeavouring for impartiality, credentials, and processes for handling grievances of unethical conduct (Brubacher et al., 2019; Goldstein, 2016a; Sawitz et al., 2010). In this regard the Norms and Standards for Family Counsellor Services in the Office of the Family Advocate 1/2015 (South Africa, 2015) refer to the obligation on social workers appointed as Family Counsellors to register with the South African Council for Social Service Professions, which implies conforming with the regulations, policy and legislative framework of this body.

Simon and Stahl (2014) as well as Patel and Choate (2014) refer to the importance for the child custody evaluator to not only be acquainted with academic literature, but also have experience in investigation of families, child development, parenting and divorce. The use of forensic social work accredited methods for assessment should be applied to the facts of the case (Lamb, 2015; Sheehan, 2016). Child custody evaluators must sustain on-going knowledge with research on child development, the effect of divorce on children, age-appropriate parenting plans, co-parental disagreements, domestic violence, alienation, estrangement, gatekeeping, relocation and international relocation as a specialised field (Prescott, 2013).

In South-Africa, certain guidelines are set by the South African Council for Social Work Professions regarding continuous professional development *see* South Africa (2019). According to these guidelines a social worker has to accumulate twenty-five (25) points per annum relating to continuous professional development, which can be obtained in different settings (South Africa, 2019). The Norms and Standards for Family Counsellor Services in the Family Advocate Office 1/2015 *see* South Africa (2015) refer to the onus on Family Counsellors “to engage in continuous professional development to ensure the development of their skills and knowledge in Forensic Social Work and their understanding of the social issues impacting on the society and their scope of practice”(p. 7). This suggests that social workers duly employed by the Family Advocate Office, have specialised knowledge and expertise, as well as knowledge of new developments in academic literature regarding child custody evaluations, similar to requirements in other countries (Bow & Quinnell, 2004; DiPrizto, 2016; Turoy-Smith et al., 2018).

Accredited guidelines in South Africa are still lacking, but Goldstein (2016a) refers to the American Psychology Association (APA) which has created field parameters for forensic psychologists (2011) and has also created Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations (2010) for use in the United States. The need for neutrality and unprejudiced evaluation practices is emphasised (Goldstein, 2016a). The guidelines also cite the need for the custody evaluator to have the expert capability and to maintain an up-to-date understanding of child and family development, child and family psychopathology, the influence of divorce on children, and knowledge in specialised child custody literature. Furthermore, the guidelines reflect the need to be accustomed to lawful and supervisory statutes and criteria (Goldstein, 2016a). More inclusive guidelines for custody evaluations are reflected from the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) in their updated Model Standards of Practice 2006 (as cited in

Goldstein, 2016b). The AFCC demarcate best practices in the United States related to confidentiality and informed consent, training, the need of various data gathering methods, ex parte consultation, conceivable disagreements of interest, the need to uphold impartiality, the management of information and the report. Reports from other countries confirm data collecting techniques which include observations, interviews, psychological testing, interviews with collateral sources, and appraisal of collateral information (Luftman et al., 2005; Patel & Choate, 2014; Powell & Lancaster, 2003).

Regarding observation of interaction between parents and children, or interactional analysis which forms a structured process to observe specific interaction in a specific setting, it would be functional to observe each parent with the child or children in equal surroundings to ensure balance and neutrality for the custody evaluator (Hynan, 2016; Saini & Polak, 2014; Turoy-Smith et al., 2018). The guidelines recommend that only empirically-based techniques for obtaining information are utilised (Martindale, 2007). Each child who is a topic of the evaluation should be assessed to bring about the desires and anxieties of the child, as well as any special developmental needs of a child (Hynan, 2003). Sibling relationships should be assessed and reflected (Goldstein, 2016b; Patel & Jones, 2008). The assessment of domestic violence, substance abuse, child abuse, sexual orientation issues, parental alienation, and relocation cases is indicated by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts Model Standards (DiPrizto, 2016; Garber, 2016).

According to the AFCC (Bow & Quinnell, 2004) each child having sufficient language abilities should be interviewed. The child should be informed about the non-confidential nature of the interview (Patel & Jones, 2008; Sawitz et al., 2010). Parent-child interaction should be directly observed after the first set of interviews with the parents, unless there are convincing reasons to do otherwise (Saini & Polak, 2014). Evaluators should

concentrate on communication skills, mutual association and responsiveness, means by which parents conserve power, and parental prospects (Goldstein, 2016b). Meyer (2016) indicates that should there be allegations of sexual, emotional, or physical violence that a child has witnessed or been a victim of, a parent-child interactional analysis should not be done. Each parent should be observed with the children on separate occasions (Miles, 2015). A home visit to each parent's home is considered pertinent where parents already live separately (Luftman et al., 2005; Patel & Jones, 2008).

Ackerman (as cited in Goldstein, 2016b), opined that all children three years old or older, should be interviewed. Each child is interviewed at least twice or more, once when brought by the mother and once when brought by the father to obtain balance. Brubacher et al. (2019) reported that the time spent on interviewing children in the family law context is 3.6 hours per case. Should more interviews with a child be necessary, both the parents should accompany the child for the interview to ensure impartiality. Goldstein (2016b), as well as Sawitz et al. (2010) emphasise the importance of first building rapport with the child by asking about the child's world, including their age, school, grade, teacher, favourite and least favourite subjects, activities, and hobbies, as well as friends, TV shows, books and movies. A positive, reassuring atmosphere should be created by dressing casually and have an office which is child-friendly, without distracting material present (Turoy-Smith et al., 2017). It is important to physically lower oneself to the child's level and speak in a soft, reassuring tone and smile (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, 2009).

According to Patel and Choate (2014) procedural considerations and guidelines should be contemplated regarding the language and vocabulary of the child, as well as the type of questions utilised by the custody evaluator. Literature suggests that open-ended questions should be used, but can sometimes be unfathomable to younger children (Gordon,



Lyon & Lee, 2014; Lamb, 2015; Turoy-Smith & Powell, 2017). As younger children, or children with limited intellect, might find multiple choice questions more intelligible, it should be avoided to promote completeness and reliability of children's reports (Sawitz et al., 2010). Literature focuses on the use of wh-questions to elaborate on answers provided by a child (Ahern, Andrews, Stolzenberg, & Lyon, 2015). Faller (2007) proposed a variety of types of questions utilised, alternating from open-ended to focused to multiple-choice, option posing and ultimately to yes-no questions. Leading questions should be avoided (Lamb et al., 2008). Lyon (2011) as well as Sawitz et al. (2010) refer to practical implications for interviewing children such as discussing ground rules, warn children about misleading questions, to assess whether the child can differentiate between the truth and a lie and practicing narrative disclosures.

## **2.6 Structure of the child interview**

Most authors do not prescribe the order in which interviews should take place, but it may be advantageous to determine if any special conditions exist regarding the child before the actual interview (Luftman et al., 2005; Turoy-Smith et al., 2018). Brubacher et al. (2019), Goldstein (2016b) and Sawitz et al. (2010) refer to the importance of commencing with rapport building with the interview with the child. Stahl and Simon (2013) and Vasques (2000) refer to the importance of setting the rules of the interview down with the child. It is further explained to the child that the social worker has to ask questions so that the child's thoughts, wishes and feelings can be understood, while it is the child's responsibility to answer without being pressurised. During this first phase, the social worker stresses the importance of telling the truth and assesses the child's understanding of such (Lyon, Saywitz, Kaplan & Dorado, 2001). Talwar, Lee, Bala and Lindsay (2002) stress that the child needs to understand the consequences of telling lies and make an undertaking only to share the truth.

Powell and Lancaster (2003) confirm the importance of informing the child of the non-confidential nature of the interview. Turoy-Smith et al. (2018) confirm that the next step is to commence with questions about the child's school, extracurricular activities, hobbies, friends and interests to form a holistic understanding of the child. The more substantial questions regarding the child's family, relationships and family matters are posed lastly to ensure the child is at ease to share information (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, 2009; Sawitz et al., 2010).

After this phase, the child's knowledge of the divorce is explored, how the child was informed and by whom (Sawitz et al., 2010). Influence by one of the parents is assessed as it may disclose possible alienation by a parent, reflecting incongruous information with the child or bad-mouthing of a parent by another (Goldstein, 2016b; Luftman et al., 2005; Patel & Choate, 2014). Children should not be asked about their preference as to a parent, however Sawitz et al. (2010) regards children fourteen years and older to be asked about their preferences, whereas children younger than eight years should rarely be asked. The greatest weight should be given to children sixteen years and older. Goldstein (2016b) indicate that children "normally choose to spent equal time with both parents, but exceptions may occur when there is parental alienation, domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, and/or severe mental illness" (p. 46). It is important to assess the possibility of a child being tutored by one of the parents to convey specific information with the social worker.

The current frequency of visitation and forms of contact between the child and the parents are explored next (Goldstein, 2016b). Another important topic according to literature is regarding discipline, including the type of discipline, the follow-through, frequency, length, other parent's response to discipline and the child's conduct that instigates the disciplinary action from parents should follow (Brubacher et al., 2019; Sawitz et al., 2010). Luftman et al.

(2005) as well as Patel and Jones (2008) state that the presence of domestic violence, alcohol or any other abuse and boundaries within the family are all factors to be explored. A typical day in the child's world, during the week and weekends is explored. The child's emotional attachment with each parent is assessed (Mercer, 2009).

Observation or an interactional analysis of the child interacting with each parent is supreme in making a custody evaluation (Hynan, 2016). There is a need to assimilate scientific evidence with sound ethics for a complete custody evaluation. The importance of direct observation of the interaction between a child and each parent should transpire for data to be obtained (American Psychological Association), 2010 and the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, 2006 (as cited in Goldstein, 2016b). A survey by Ackerman and Pritzl (as cited in Goldstein, 2016b) reported that custody evaluators usually conduct parent-child observations, after initial interviews with parents. Literature endorse multiple methods of data collection, which includes the observation of each child with each parent, as well as all the children together with each parent (Brubacher et al., 2019). Parental involvement, emotional connectedness, control, parenting style, resentment, emotional expression, management of disagreements and behaviour regulations is some of the aspects that are assessed through an interactional analysis (Patel & Jones, 2008). Some authors opine that for each parent, two one hour observation sessions that include all the children at one time, allows for an effective representative sample of interaction (Hynan, 2016; Patel & Jones, 2008). An observation can be conducted in an office setting or at home (Saini & Polak, 2014). According to Goldstein (2016a) the age of the children predicts the structure of an interactional analysis. The session commences with a period of free play, followed by the family having to work on a task together which includes an ordinary degree of stress and is terminated with a task to clean up (Hynan, 2003). The observation of parent-child interaction

seems to form part of custody evaluations in the United States, but limited training and information on interactional analysis is available in South Africa.

## **2.7 Summary**

Several authors refer to the need for not only broad recommendations for a process of conducting a child assessment, but rather for formal, internationally recognised standard procedures or protocols, with specific reference to the arena of family law (Brubacher et al., 2019). The researcher is confronted with the nature of child assessment focussing on ethical considerations, methods of information gathering, principles guiding the practical implication of interviewing children, techniques to utilise to promote completeness and reliability of children's reports, types of questions to be used, observation of parent-child interaction, home visits, as well as different topics to be raised. The literature study formed the basis of the questionnaire developed by the researcher to reflect the child assessment practices followed by family counsellors in the Family Advocate Office.

Demographic detail questions needed to be included in the survey to obtain a reflection of the character of the Family Advocate Office, whereby the education level and experience of family counsellors could be measured against literature which suggests the intricate and challenging nature of child assessments whereby expectations of specialisation and a high level of skill are required, as well as experience and additional training (Turoy-Smith et al., 2018).

The inclusion of questions to reflect the child assessment practices was based focussing on current available guidelines as per this literature study. The average time spent by family counsellors on the assessment of each child was aimed to be reflected in the number of children assessed over a period of three months, as well as the number of sessions each child is interviewed. Parent-child observations and home visits form an integral part of

the custody evaluation and provide valuable information on the functioning of the family, as well as the interaction and relationship between each child and parent, therefore inclusion of questions in this regard in the questionnaire were deemed important. The researcher aimed to understand factors normally assessed during a parent-child observation, the structure and the setting to report on the quality of child assessments within the Family Advocate Office.

The importance of creating a suitable atmosphere with minimal distractions for the child to be assessed in needed to be reflected in practice. The researcher concentrated on including questions which would reflect the factors normally assessed and the rate of importance of covering all the factors as indicated by literature. Furthermore, the researcher focussed on questioning the interview techniques used by family counsellors to reflect accredited and scientific use of such in light of the reliability and completeness of information provided by children during the interview. A sound reflection of the types of questions normally used by family counsellors needed inclusion to eliminate possible cross-contamination of information obtained. The use of questions or techniques to obtain information about the attachment patterns between children and their parents needed to be reflected in the questionnaire.

The lack of a standard of procedure or protocol for the child assessment in family law as reflected in literature was necessary to be included in the questionnaire to elicit information about the family counsellors' knowledge, skill and experience in forensic social work, as well as to provide structure for a sound custody evaluation to be accepted in the family court. All questions included in the questionnaire had the purpose to elicit perceptions and information about the practice of assessment of children in the arena of family law in South Africa.

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### **SECTION 3: THE MANUSCRIPT**

#### **CHILD-ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN THE FAMILY ADVOCATE OFFICE**

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### **3.1 ABSTRACT**

The research question which directed this quantitative and descriptive study was: What are the current child-assessment practices followed by Family Counsellors in the Family Advocate Office?

A quantitative research design, in the form of a self-designed survey, was followed to collect data from the population: all Family Counsellors duly appointed by the Family Advocate Office with the responsibility to assess children. This study aimed to obtain a sound reflection of current child-assessment practices to lead to best practice.

The findings suggest that the current child-assessment practices are not adding to a standardised, quality product which can be widely accepted by Family Courts in South Africa.

**KEY WORDS:** Assessment, best practices, care and contact; child; Family Advocate Office; Family Counsellor

### 3.2 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Family Advocate Office was established in October 1990 in terms of the Mediation in Certain Divorce Matters Act 24 of 1987 *see* South Africa (1987) to deal with disputes regarding parental responsibilities and rights of children. The functions of the Family Advocate have been extended by the Children's Act 38 of 2005 *see* South Africa (2005). This entails that due consideration should be given to the views and wishes of a child in any matter whereby participation will depend on the age, maturity and stage of development, as is legally defined by Sections 10, 31(1)(a) and (b), as well as 61(1)(a) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 *see* South Africa (2005). This concept is explained more practically in Section 7 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended *see* South Africa (2005) as the 'best interest of the child standard'. Many authors, locally and internationally, have the view that a child's voice must be heard as stipulated in terms of Section 10 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 *see* South Africa (2005) in custody disputes before any decisions serving the best interest of the child can be made (Africa, Dawes, Swartz & Brandt, 2003; Barratt, 2003; Barrie, 2011; Bilson & White, 2005; Birnbaum & Bala, 2010; Bosman-Sadie, Corrie, & Swanepoel, 2013; Burman, Matthias, Sloth-Nielsen & Zaal, 2003; Byrnes, 2011; Cashmore, 2011; Cleophas & Assim, 2015; Fotheringham, Dunbar, & Hensley, 2013; Glasser, 2003; Hulstein, 2012; Krauss & Sales, 2000; Luftman, Veltkamp, Clark, Lannacone, & Snooks, 2005; Mabry, 2011; Mahlobogwane, 2008; Morag, Rivkin & Sorek, 2012).

In South Africa, the protection of children affected by divorce should be a joint effort (Grobler, 1990; Bosman-Sadie et al., 2013; Burman et al., 2003). With the assistance of the Family Counsellor, the child's views are obtained through a child-assessment (Bosman-Sadie et al., 2013). Family Counsellors have the responsibility to provide the court with the valid, objective and unbiased information about how a family functions as it relates to the best psycho-social interests of the child as stated by Gould & Martindale (as cited in Patel & Choate, 2014). The Family Advocate compiles a report based on the Family Counsellor's report, which is perceived as expert evidence (Barratt, 2003). The Family Advocate Office forms the concept of a collaborative assessment by professionals with specialised skills, training, and education (Glasser, 2003). The aim is to protect the child from testifying in a potentially harsh court environment (Grobler, 1990).

The international picture reflects the same picture. Evaluation should be more scientific (Vorderstrasse, 2016); children's participation in the process of determination of best interest should be strengthened (Bilson & White, 2005; Taylor, Fitzgerald, Morag, Bajpai, & Graham, 2012); children should be included in the process of custody evaluation as defined by Gould & Martindale (as cited in Patel & Choate, 2014). Taylor et al. (2012) identified an apparent gap between what legislative principle says about child participation in custody cases, and how this principle is implemented in practice.

It was already reported by Glasser (2003) that assessments done by Family Counsellors in South Africa were found to be of poor quality. Similar issues are experienced as per international literature (Birnbaum, Bala & Boyd, 2016; Bradley, 2004; Fanetti & Boles, 2004; Patel & Jones, 2008; Prescott, 2013; Simon & Stahl, 2014) eluding to the absence of appropriate child-assessment practices, the lack of specific skills and competencies of these practitioners which do not contribute to the use of multiple data sources, nor efficient techniques (Africa et al., 2003), no customary framework of criteria, and aspects to be assessed; lack of appropriate tools to ensure significant participation of children for the legal fraternity to develop a more child-centred approach (Barratt, 2003). Patel and Choate (2014), together with Simon and Stahl (2014), refer to best practices which call attention to child custody evaluators enjoying sophisticated knowledge and expertise to attain the best interest of the child standard. These issues may be rectified by continuous education, i.e., post-master's coursework, voluntary certification programs, professional workshops and supervised practice (Simon & Stahl, 2014).

Forensic social work is a young development in the social work domain in South Africa. The assessment of children in custody disputes belongs to forensic social work. Since the implementation of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 see South Africa (2005) services by the Family Advocate Office are available to all children regardless their parents' marital status, as well as the scope of the services extended to lower courts as opposed to the previous era where the office only operated within the High Courts (Ndhlovu, 2018). Currently only a document consisting of norms and standards for services by family counsellors exist to use as a guideline when assessing children. According to Saywitz, Lyon & Goodman (2017) a protocol is meant to improve the quality of social work assessments. Protocols exist for professionals in the endeavour of interviewing children about possible sexual abuse (Faller, 2007; Lamb, Hershkowitz, Orbach & Esplin, 2008). Although these protocols are suited for

interviewing witnesses and victims of crime, many of the findings have applications and importance for interviews in cases of contested divorce and dissolution (Sawitz, Camparo & Romanoff, 2010). To enhance the standardisation of services, the Family Advocate Office developed Norms and Standards for Family Counsellor Services (1/2015) see South Africa (2015). The Norms and Standards provide standard assessment practice guidelines which reflect clinical assessments and aims to uphold the best interest of the child principle. The researcher aims to identify and describe current practices of Family Counsellors that may assist in developing best practices within the Family Advocate Office (Africa et al., 2003).

### **3.3 METHOD**

The researcher followed a quantitative research design to obtain a reflection of the current child-assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office. A questionnaire was designed and circulated via email to all Family Counsellors with the responsibility to assess children in the Family Advocate Office. Participation in the study was voluntary. Of the population of ninety-three respondents a total of forty-one respondents (44.08 %) participated in the study and their questionnaires were suitable for processing. The sample size ensured a reasonable likelihood to analyse item level.

### **3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

All ethical principles were adhered to, referring specifically to informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality. Care was taken that no data could be linked to a respondent, Family Advocate Office or Province. The research was approved with the institutional ethics committee, North West University Health Research Ethical Committee (NWU-00139-18-A1), and the level of risk was indicated as low.

### **3.5 DEMOGRAPHICAL DETAILS**

Respondents were asked to indicate their age and gender, as well as their race and current qualifications as a Family Counsellor. Of the forty-one respondents, the highest range of age was found to be between 41 and 50 years (56.1 %). The percentage of respondents in the age group between 20 to 40 years (34.2 %) was higher than the percentage of respondents older than 50 years (9.7 %). The profile of the respondents shows that the Family Advocate Office has predominantly more experienced, female Family Counsellors (90.2 %) as employees. The male respondents who participated in this study were limited to 9.8 %. The profile of the respondents regarding race correlates with the profile of the South African

population, where 51.2 % of the respondents are Black, 31.7 % are White, 12.2 % are Coloured and 4.9 % are Indian.

In terms of the respondent's highest current qualification, the highest percentage of Family Counsellors has a social work degree (90.2 %). In South Africa Social Work is a four year professional degree which can give access to a Masters if minimum requirements are met. Only 4.9 % of the respondents answered that they obtained a Master's degree in social work forensic practice and another 4.9 % indicated that they have other Master's degrees. At this stage the requirements for a Family Counsellor is an honours degree in social work, with two years' experience as social worker.

Forensic Social Work is a specialised field requiring specialised skills, knowledge and understanding of the role of law (Sheehan, 2016). From data analysis, most Family Counsellors had no professional training in Forensic Social Work as part of under graduate studies. The question focussed on supplementary training received, including in-house training, Council (South African Council for Social Service and related Professions) accredited training and any special training in interviewing of children. From the population of forty-one respondents, twenty-nine indicated that they received in-housing training, which referred to arranged training during group supervision presented by colleagues. Council accredited training was indicated by twenty-eight respondents. Three respondents indicated that they have not received any council accredited training. One respondent indicated that she last received council accredited training during 2014. One respondent indicated training received in "evidence collection and data" (4 Continuous Professional Development points) and "data analysis in Forensic Social Work" (3 CPD points). Another respondent informed of training received during 2013 in the "Assessment of Attachment in Parent/Child relationships" (20 CPD points); during 2014 "Forensic Report writing and Expert Witness" (15 CPD points) and during 2016 "SAAM mediation training" (25 CPD points). From the data analysis, the training attended with the highest percentage within the past six years was presented by Family Zone, Dr. R. Duchan & I Schutte (Ndhlovu, 2018) on "Voice of the Child Toolkit" (4 CPD points).

The policy regarding requirements for continuous professional development set by the South African Council for Social Service Professions **see** South Africa (2019) aim at maintaining registration through enhanced knowledge, skills and experience related to professional activities, following the completion of formal training in social work. All



registered social workers are required to obtain a minimum of twenty five (25) CPD points annually. Some provinces obtain CPD points during academic planned group supervision. Concern does exist about Family Counsellors who expressed a need for continuous professional development: “*Last attended in 2014 - Code of Conduct and Ethics - 5 CPD points*”.

The current work experience in years of Family Counsellors within the Family Advocate Office is reflected in Figure below:

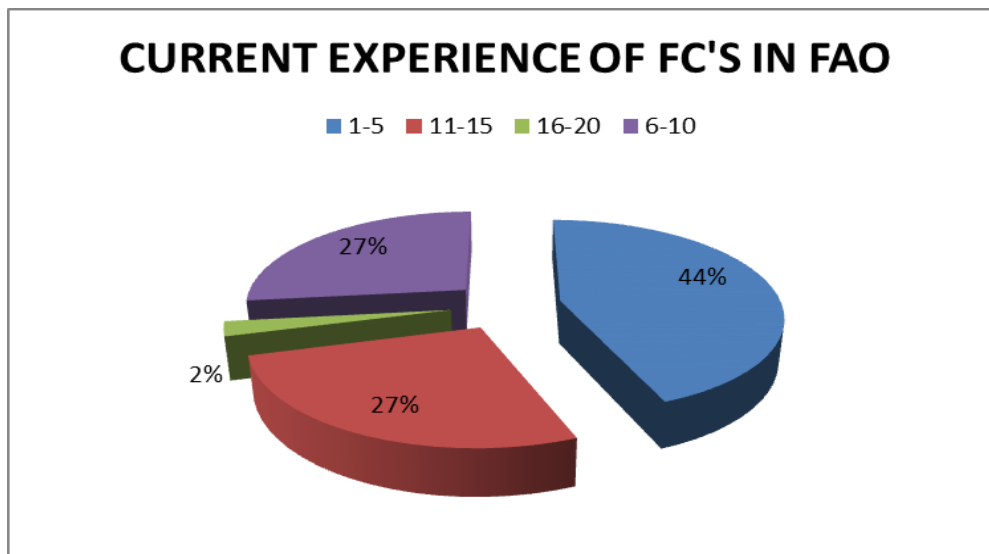


Figure 1

*Experience of Family Counsellors in years and percentage*

The majority of respondents (44 %) indicated that they have between one to five years' work experience in the Family Advocate Office. Equal percentages were indicated for respondents having six to ten and eleven to fifteen years of work experience. Only two percent of respondents have between sixteen and twenty years of work experience.

### 3.6 CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

To answer the research question, the researcher utilised a self-designed survey to reflect normal practices regarding child assessment. The central tendencies analysed from data is hereby discussed.

The *American Psychology Association* have a set of guidelines for custody evaluators regarding the need of knowledge to reflect sound assessment (Stahl, 1994; Thompson, 2012). The respondents were requested to indicate importance of knowledge as per APA for Family

Counsellors in the Family Advocate Office. Table 1 reflects the tendency found from data analysis.

Table 1

*The American Psychology Association guidelines regarding knowledge of custody evaluators completed by FC's as to what is regarded important (6) for sound child assessment and what is regarded as less important (1)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Specialized competence	6	4	1	3	7	20	41
Maintain up-to-date understanding of child and family development	2	2	4	5	12	16	41
Child and family psychopathology	5	2	6	8	12	8	41
Effect of divorce on children	1	2		3	15	20	41
Specialized child custody literature	2			4	14	21	41
Familiarity with legal and regulatory statutes and standards	4	1	1	6	9	20	41

As set out in **Table 1**, most respondents regard specialised child custody literature as most important. It appears that respondents regard specialised competence, the effect of divorce on children and familiarity with legal and regulatory statutes and standards as similarly important. To maintain up-to-date understanding of child and family development and child and family psychopathology are perceived as less important. To stay abreast and understand child and family development is imperative for the Family Counsellor as an expert in the field of *inter alia* child assessment (Sheehan, 2016).

It makes sense that respondents regard skills in child and family psychopathology as less important, as Family Counsellors are social workers are not licenced to compile psychological tests. Bow and Quinnell (2004) found in a study that judges regard psychological testing as similarly unimportant. From analysis of the data it became evident that only registered psychologists perform psychological testing. Referrals for psychological testing is done by Family Counsellors only when allegations are made concerning one of the parents' mental health (85.4 %) or one of the children's mental stability (58.5 %). An example was provided by one of the respondents: *"When either of the parents indicate that the child displays behavioural tantrums towards the other parent and/or contest contact with the other parent accompanied by threats of suicide/verbalizes threats or fear of visiting the other parent due to exposure to domestic violence prior to the parents' separation"*. Some respondents (24.4 %) indicated that a psychological assessment forms part of the child

assessment as per request, while 75.6 % respondents informed that psychological testing does not form part of a child assessment. A respondent provided the following information regarding psychological testing: *“Only when there are concerns which could not be clarified through collateral follow-up or depending on the nature of pathology and it has an impact on the care and contact arrangement. Psychological testing is the exception, rather than the rule.”*

According to literature the assessment of a child is the responsibility of the custody evaluator (Birnbaum et al., 2016; Muto, 2016; Patel & Choate, 2014). Most respondents indicated that it is the sole responsibility of the Family Counsellor to assess children (90.2 %). Only 7.3 % of the respondents indicated that it is a dual responsibility of Family Counsellors and Family Advocates. The average number of children assessed over the past three months is reflected in Figure 22 below:

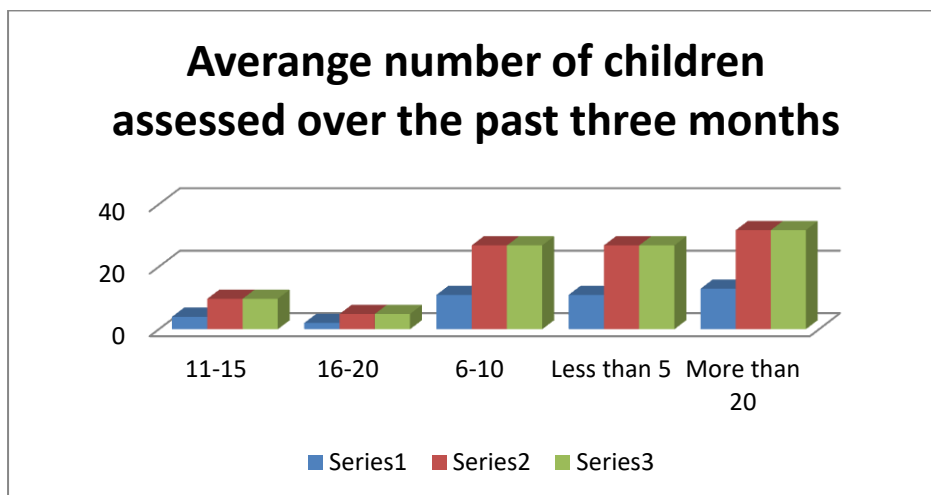


Figure 2

*Average number of children assessed over the past three months*

The majority of respondents (13) indicated that they assessed more than twenty children on average during the past three months. Eleven respondents informed that they assessed less than five children on average. Eleven respondents indicated that they assessed between six and ten children. Four respondents indicated that they assessed an average of eleven to fifteen children, while the lowest indicator was that between sixteen and twenty children were assessed. The researcher opines that a high volume of children assessed on average each month by Family Counsellors indicate a high quantity of work as other responsibilities include mediation consultation and report writing (South Africa, 2015).

Children are normally assessed more than once (Luftman et al., 2005; Mason, 2015; Patel & Choate, 2014; Stahl, 1994). The majority of respondents (80.5 %) answered that each child is assessed only once. Five respondents informed that each child is assessed twice, and two respondents informed that a child is assessed more than twice. One respondent indicated that a child is sometimes not assessed at all due to a young age (3 years and younger), unintelligible language and vocabulary (14); while six (6) respondents indicated successful mediation; and five (5) respondents reported developmental delays as reason. The researcher holds the view that having only one interview with each child, or not any interview, reflects quantitative practice, but probably lacks a qualitative child assessment.

A home visit allows for a natural setting to observe interaction between parents and children, though it might be difficult to arrange (Hynan, 2003). Luftman et al. (2005) opines the need for a home visit if a family member disputes the physical environment of either home. A home visit provides information on physical space, security, sites and nurturance. Thirty-eight of the respondents indicated that a home visit only occurs when allegations are made towards the housing circumstances of one parent. It is the opinion of twenty-seven respondents that a home visit is done when the homes are in different provinces, while only three respondents indicated that a home visit is conducted in every matter.

Parent-child observations form part of the child custody evaluation (Hynan, 2016; Patel & Jones, 2008). Most authors recommend direct parent-child observations (Bow & Quinnell, 2004; Mason, 2015; Saini & Polak, 2014). Most respondents (23) replied that parents and children are observed together in the waiting room, while fifteen respondents indicated that an Interactional Analysis (parent-child observation) is done when deemed necessary, where high conflict, allegations of abuse, parental alienation and relocation prevails. Only three respondents replied that an Interactional Analysis is done in every matter. One respondent indicated that an Interactional Analysis (parent-child observation) does not form part of the child assessment due to not being trained to conduct such. Another respondent stated: *"I do not call it an Interactional Analysis, because I have not received the necessary training"*. Two respondents informed that an Interactional Analysis could not be performed due to lack of proper facilities. It is evident that differences exists between mere observation of interaction and a structured, organised Interactional Analysis which entails a formal setting and appropriate toys, material and opportunity for video recording (Patel & Jones, 2008). A respondent replied as follows: *"Interactional Analysis is different from mere*

*observation and it is a detailed activity which requires a specific environment with specific activities and the observation of the parent-child's interaction while observation either upon arrival and/or at the reception is "secret observation" in the sense that, the parents are unaware that they are being observed; and there are no specific task (activities) given to them to do with the child in order to observe parents' capability to engage with the child, so as to determine whether the parent understand the child's cues or not and to what extent does the parent understand the child inclusive of the child's developmental milestone".* Training in Interactional Analysis lacks, as well as proper facilities, which both hinders the performance of this important element of child assessment.

Saini and Polak (2014) opine that child-parent observations provide valuable information on family connections and dynamics, parents' response to children's needs, children's response to each parent, as well as identifying potential concerns and risks in the parent-child relationship. The structure of an Interactional Analysis normally consists of free play, to work on a task together involving moderate stress, working on several tasks together to determine discipline, interaction and sensitivity, and clean up (Hynan, 2016). Most respondents (85.4 %) indicated that free play forms part of the Interactional Analysis, while twenty-seven replied that working together on tasks involving moderate stress, as well as to determine discipline, interaction and sensitivity forms part. Only twenty-one respondents utilise a clean-up activity and seven respondents make use of other activities as part of the structure of an Interactional Analysis. The other activities were indicated as nurturing activities, especially where very young children or babies are concerned, as well as separation anxiety for children younger than two years.

The Association for Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) set factors to be assessed during a parent-child observation (as cited in Goldstein, 2016a). The respondents were requested to indicate the importance of the listed factors (AFCC) during parent-child observations and the following percentages were retrieved from the data analysis:

- Communication skills (90.2 %)
- Methods by which parents maintain control (90.2 %)
- Attachment (90.2 %)
- Parental expectations (75.6 %)

Other factors normally focussed on are discomfort and disconnectedness in cases whereby long periods passed without any contact, parent's understanding of the child's

developmental milestone, as well as the attributes and behaviour associated with the parents' response to the child's needs or cues thereof (Meyer, 2016). One respondent indicated that the possible alienation by one parent can be tracked through the parent-child observation.

The child-interview can be compiled in different settings, however a child-friendly environment without distractions for the child is most suitable (Goldstein, 2016a).

Respondents were requested to indicate which setting is mostly used:

Table 2

*Setting for child assessments*

Office setting	20
School	0
Home setting	1
Office or home setting	12
Office, school or home setting	6
Office setting or school	2
Total of respondents	41

The majority of respondents (48.7 %) indicated that children are assessed in an office setting, while twelve (29.3 %) respondents opted for an office or home setting. Only six (14.6 %) respondents replied that an office, school or home setting is used for assessment. One (2.4 %) respondent indicated that a home setting is a norm for assessment.

Luftman et al. (2005), as well as Patel and Jones (2008) recommend that children should be interviewed first, separately and more than once. Thereafter, the children can be interviewed as siblings together, and then each child and each parent. Respondents assess children separately (97.6 %). Siblings are sometimes assessed together (31.7 %), to assess the relationship between them. One respondent opined that by assessing siblings together, caution should be taken: *“The voice of younger or more introvert children should not be lost when siblings are assessed together. Each child must still be afforded the opportunity to express their individual views and wishes and not be over-shadowed by a sibling”*. Data indicated that a family assessment is only conducted when deemed necessary. One respondent replied that a family assessment could be useful: *“When I want to obtain information regarding the functioning as a family together and want to observe the role of each member, I do family assessments. Provide valuable information regarding the parents’ roles and the children's expectations of each parent”*.

The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts Model Standards (AFCC) provide for the following factors to be assessed during the child assessment (Luftman et al., 2005; Stahl & Simon, 2013). Respondents were requested to indicate which of the following factors are normally assessed during the interview with the child:

Table 3

*Factors assessed*

Developmental phase of child	37
Developmental needs of the child	41
Wishes and concerns of the child	39
Knowledge of the child about divorce	27
Sibling relationships	41
Presence of domestic violence	41
Presence of substance abuse	41
Presence of sexual orientation issues	17
Presence of parental alienation	41
Relationship of child with father	41
Relationship of child with mother	41
Child's relationship with other significant people / family	41
Discipline of child and who is responsible	41
Parenting styles	39
Typical routine of the child during the week and weekends	41
Communication between child and each parent	41
Negative comments one parent to another in child's presence	39
Adult information shared with child	41
Child's functioning at school	39
Child's social functioning at school and at home	39
Child's functioning within the family	41
Child's attachment patterns	41

Respondents regard all the factors as important. The factors deemed to be less important are the presence of sexual orientation issues (only 17 respondents regard it as important), and a child's knowledge about divorce (27 out of 41 respondents regard it as important).

Age appropriate interviewing techniques should be used to alleviate information from children (Vasques, 2000; Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, 2009). The technique mostly used by respondents during child assessment, is the "Child Voice toolkit" (75.6 %), an interview aid developed by Dr. R. Duchon, psychologist, and

Mrs. I. Schutte, social worker in private practice. The majority of respondents received training in the use of the toolkit, with a weight of four (4) Continuous Professional Development points. Respondents replied that they make use of incomplete sentences (70.7 %), structured interviews (56.1 %) and the “worst and best of residing with each parent” (56.1 %) as techniques of assessment. Other techniques that are not used as often by respondents are “draw a person” (41.4 %), “kinetic family drawing” (48.7 %), stories of fantasise like three wishes, island game, mommy’s house, daddy’s house, calling mom, calling dad and animal representations (36.6 %), family projection cards (31.7 %) and self-projection cards (22 %).

The most appropriate type of question posed by professional evaluators is open-ended, indirect questions to prompt elaboration of initial narrative (Lamb, 2015; Saywitz et al., 2017; Vasques, 2000). The respondents were requested to indicate the types of questions normally used to elicit information during the child interview. The responses from respondents are indicated in Table 4 below.

Table 4

*Type of questions used*

<b>Type of questions</b>	<b>Alway</b>	<b>Mostl</b>	<b>Sometime</b>	<b>Rarel</b>	<b>Neve</b>	<b>Total</b>
Open ended questions	26	14	0	1	0	41
Multiple answer questions	2	10	9	10	10	41
Leading questions	1	0	8	10	22	41
Closed end questions (yes / no)	3	8	12	11	7	41
Other	2	5	14	3	17	41

The majority of respondents opined that they always use open-ended questions when assessing children. Multiple answer questions are used sometimes, while closed-end questions are rarely used. Only one (2.4 %) respondent indicated that leading questions are always used during child assessment, while eight (19.5 %) respondents replied that they sometimes use leading questions. Ten (24.3 %) respondents indicated that they rarely use leading questions and twenty-two (53.7 %) respondents replied that they never use leading questions.

The emotional relatedness between a child and each parent needs to be assessed (Mercer, 2009). While very young children are normally assessed by the Strange Situation Paradigm, story stem interview techniques are used for school-age children (Mercer, 2009).



Respondents had to determine the questions normally posed to children in order to reflect attachment patterns:

- When you have a problem, to whom do you go? (95.1 %)
- When you are sick, who do you ask for help? (95.1 %)
- When you wake up at night with a nightmare, who do you ask for help? Why? (95.1 %)

A direct question such as: “With which of your parents would you like to reside?” is never asked (48.8 %), or rarely asked (29.3 %). Two (4.9 %) respondents replied that they always use the question mentioned; two (4.9 %) respondents indicated that they mostly use this question and five (12.2 %) respondents indicated that they sometimes use this question. Dolan and Hynan (2014) perceives the parent-child relationship as imperative to a child’s well-being after divorce, because attachment is thought to affect the child’s sense of identity and later ability to trust and form meaningful relationships.

Powell and Lancaster (2003) stressed the building of rapport with a child by asking open-ended questions, setting the ground rules and purpose of the interview before eliciting the child’s wishes and concerns. Lamb (2015) describes three phases of the child interview which includes a planning phase, preliminary phase, questioning the child by raising a topic, asking general open-ended questions and prompting elaboration of the initial narrative. The following steps or protocol (Goldstein, 2016b) used during child assessment were provided to the respondents and on a continuum between “always” and “never” utilisation was reflected.

Table 5

*Steps utilised*

Meeting with the child in the waiting room	41
Meeting with the child on the child’s level	41
Allowing a parent to accompany the child for the first few minutes if child has separation issues	29
Ensure my dress code is informal, not formal	11
Inquire about child’s understanding of divorce; if child has been informed, by whom and when	33
Introduce myself and my purpose to the child in a neutral way	39
Build rapport with the child by asking about his world	39
Explain the rules of the interview to the child	27
Competency test (understanding of the truth/lie and importance of telling the truth; language and vocabulary consideration	13
Explain the limits of confidentiality to the child	29
Explore about the child’s world: school; aftercare; activities; socialization; siblings; significant others	41

Explore the child's family (mother, father, family members)	41
Inquire about the child's normal routine during weekdays and weekends	41
Use of techniques to test for consistency of information	23
Explore the child's wishes and concerns	41
Test for attachment patterns	40
Explore domestic violence, substance abuse, boundaries in family, relocation issues, parental alienation	41
Inquire about negative comments by parents towards each other	35
Inquire about parents sharing adult information	37
Inquire about discipline of child	41
Inquire about parenting styles; authoritarian, authoritative, permissive	37
Get permission from the child to share any relevant information with parents, if necessary	31
Ending of assessment; talk about a neutral topic with the child	31

From the table, the steps regarded as less important to follow, is an informal dress code, competency testing and the use of techniques to test for consistency of information provided. Competency testing involves a developmental assessment of the child's language, reasoning and knowledge, as well as the understanding of the moral implications of the truth and lies (Lamb, 2015; Talwar, Lee, Bala & Lindsay, 2002; Vasques, 2000). Mason (2015) refers to the implementation of multiple data collections methods to substantiate the reliability and validity of opinions, findings and conclusions. The researcher opines that the limited use of some of the procedures regarded as important in forensic social work reflects the respondents' missing link regarding operational forensic social work.

### 3.7 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings regarding the demographic details of respondents suggest that the majority are female, having obtained a baccalaureus atriun degree in social work. Some respondents were exposed to in-house training, as well as council (South African Council for Social Service Professions) accredited courses with a continuous professional development (CPD) weight, but some respondents last received training five to seven years ago. The requirement for continuous professional development per South African Council for Social Service Professions policy *see* South Africa (2019) is twenty-five (25) points annually. Non-compliance will be dealt with in accordance to sections 21 and 22 of the Social Service Professions Act, Act 110 of 1978 *see* South Africa (1978). The lack of knowledge and enhanced training of Family Counsellors is reflected for example, in the inability to conduct a child-parent observation due to never received training. Further evidence that indicates the lack of knowledge and experience in Forensic Social Work is reflected in data regarding the

steps used during child assessment, such as conducting a competency test and using techniques to test for consistency of information provided by the child. Patel and Choate (2014) confirm the importance of continuing education, supervised practice, to keep abreast with new development, as well as an awareness and knowledge of law. In Israel Family Court Service practitioners are social workers with a master's degree in social work and prior training in family systems therapy (Cohen, 2012). Patel and Jones (2008) indicate that evaluators should hold a master's or doctoral degree and be competent in a wide range of topics related to child custody, such as child development, interviewing techniques, family systems and psychopathology.

The basis of this research focussed on the child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office, which is predominantly the responsibility of Family Counsellors (90.2 %). In South Africa, research done during 2003 already focussed on difficulties experienced regarding the assessment of children in the Family Advocate Office (Africa, Dawes, Swartz, & Brandt, 2003; Barratt, 2003; Zaal, 2003). The findings confirmed that practice standards are adhered to in some instances, but unfortunately the standards of practice do not correlate with international literature.

An interesting finding was that respondents' perceive understanding and knowledge of child and family development as less important as a guideline for custody evaluators' knowledge and skills. The American Psychology Association (APA) has created speciality guidelines for forensic psychologists (2011) and has created Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations (2010) (Godbout, Parent & Saint-Jacques, 2015) and the need for impartiality and non-discriminatory evaluation practices is recognised (Goldstein, 2016b). However, keeping abreast of child and family development should be regarded as highly important to Family Counsellors to synchronise with continuous professional development (Turoy-Smith, Powell & Brubacher, 2018). In South Africa, social workers as Family Counsellors, are not licenced to perform psychological assessment and referrals are done to registered psychologists (Thompson, 2012). This explains respondents' lack of interest in knowledge of psychopathology as guideline.

The results indicate that the majority of children are assessed in an office setting. The school, or home, where children may feel more confident to share information, is seldom used for assessment. Most authors stressed the need for a neutral environment, which correlates with the current child assessment practice in the Family Advocate Office (Bow &

Quinnell, 2004; Patel & Choate, 2014). Literature suggests that both parents attend the first session, or even the family as a unit. Family Counsellors are expected to evaluate each child who is a subject of investigation (South Africa, 2015). During this assessment, the wishes and concerns of each child should be considered, as well as any special developmental needs of a child (Goldstein, 2016b). The child should be informed of the non-confidential nature of the interview, and the evaluator should have appropriate training and experience in conducting interviews with children (Patel & Jones, 2008). Furthermore, the evaluator should have an awareness of factors which could affect the child's capacity as a witness (Goodman & Melinder, 2007; Lyon, 2011). Respondents indicated that a child is predominantly interviewed only once (80.5 %). Literature however, suggests two/three sessions or more with each child (Luftman et al., 2005; Mason, 2015). The researcher holds the view that limiting child-assessment to only one session may result in obtaining inadequate information and lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions, with wrong conclusions and recommendations for children. An office interview with a child should at least be followed up with an interview at the child's home, where security and comfort is provided to result in eliciting information more easily.

It is important to employ diverse methods in collecting data which may include interviews, observations, psychological testing, interviews with collateral sources, and review of collateral information to enhance validity and reliability of information obtained (Goldstein, 2016b; Patel & Jones, 2008). Findings in this study indicate that a home-visit is conducted only when circumstances prevail, therefore it is not the norm. During a home visit, important factors like the safety of children, sensitivity of parents and interaction between parents and children can be assessed (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, 2009). Findings also demonstrate that an Interactional Analysis or child-parent observation is only conducted when deemed necessary. A lack of Interactional Analysis training, as well as proper facilities (video-recording; rooms with one-way mirrors) contribute to the under-performance of sound observation of parent-child observation. Informal observation of the interaction between parents and children seems to form the norm for child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office. Literature however, confirms that each child and each parent should be observed for 45 to 60 minutes (Saini & Polak, 2014).

Findings about the factors normally assessed during a child assessment correlate largely with literature suggestions (Luftman et al., 2005; Vasques, 2000). Interesting is that

Family Counsellors do not regularly focus on the child's knowledge about divorce or the presence of sexual orientation issues, which both seems to be important factors. The majority of Family Counsellors uses the "voice of the child" toolkit as an assessment technique. Other techniques that are normally used in the child assessment are a structured interview, incomplete sentences, a kinetic family drawing and "worst and best" of residing with each parent. The type of questions used to illicit information is open-ended questions. Leading questions are not commonly used. Several types of questions are used to determine a child's attachment patterns which synchronise well with literature in this regard. It is important to avoid the use of pronouns with children, to be as concrete as possible and to keep sentences short. Leading questions should be avoided. Vocabulary should be appropriate and clear to the child (Stolzenberg, Lyon & California, 2015).

The majority of respondents make use of steps to assess a child, which correlates well with what literature provides. It was interesting to note that respondents do not regard their dress code in child assessment. Literature suggests a positive, supportive atmosphere and a child-friendly office. The dress code of the custody evaluator adds to this atmosphere (Goldstein, 2016b; Vasques, 2000). A competency test whereby the child's understanding of the truth and a lie, consequences of telling lies, and the consideration of the child's language and vocabulary, is not regarded as an important step in child assessment, as is techniques to test the consistency of the information provided by a child. Explanation of the rules of the assessment, as well as the limits of confidentiality, lacks importance for respondents. Turoy-Smith et al. (2018) included the competency test, as well as narrative training on events as part of the process followed by health professionals when assessing a child. The lack of knowledge, experience and skills in Forensic Social work by Family Counsellors is reflected in these findings.

### **3.8 CONCLUSION**

There is a need for Family Counsellors to receive continuous professional development to improve and enhance their knowledge, skills and expertise of child assessment practices. Family Counsellors need to stay abreast of new development in the area of child and family development and child assessment. Family Counsellors need to meet the requirements per the policy on continuous professional development by embarking on different academic environments to accumulate twenty-five points annually, as non-

compliance with the requirements set by the SACSSP will be dealt with in terms of sections 21 and 22 of the Social Service Professions Act, Act 110 of 1978 *see* (South Africa, 1978).

Best practice in the assessment of children should be encouraged through obtaining sophisticated knowledge and expertise to serve children's best interest by giving children a platform to voice their wishes and concerns in a custody evaluation. Supervised practice forms an important part of best practice, especially in light of the requirements for the appointment of social workers as Family Counsellors in the Family Advocate Office, where only two years of experience as social worker, holding a social work degree is regarded as qualification. In relation to international accreditation for child custody evaluators, where a Master's or PhD in social science or psychology forms the norm, nothing less than post-graduate qualification for social workers, preferable in Forensic Social Work, should be the requirement to be appointed as Family Counsellor.

A quality outcome for each child assessed by the Family Advocate Office should be prioritised above a quantity outcome. Bainham, Lindley, Richards and Trinder (2003) indicate that divorce is associated with reduced wellbeing (in both the short and long term), but there is striking variability in outcome. There is also a growing recognition that divorce is not a single circumscribed event, but a multistage process of radically changing family relationships as described by Wallerstein (as cited in Goldstein, 2016b). Family Counsellors are expected to meet statistical parameters set by the Family Advocate Office which is fundamental to a standard of services. These statistical parameters do not provide that a child is assessed more than once, or that an Interactional Analysis or home visit is performed in every matter. Turoy-Smith et al. (2018) support that a sound foundation exists for a set of guidelines for a child assessment is provided for in literature. A quality end product is however subject to a child assessment reflecting the use of a semi-structured interview with each child separately, the use of accredited and approved techniques and a protocol to be followed which will be acknowledged by Family Courts in South Africa.

Specific professional training in forensic practice is non-negotiable for Family Counsellors. Since there has been a significant increase of allegations of sexual and physical abuse in custody cases, Family Counsellors must follow guidelines (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 2012; National Children's Advocacy Centre, 2007) in conducting assessments of this sensitive area (Goldstein, 2016a). The assessment of children in the Family Advocate Office enjoys specific attention from Family Counsellors as the

responsibility lies with this profession. Current practices of Family Counsellors meet literature suggestions to a certain extent, but lack some of the most important factors indicated as part of a protocol in forensic assessment. Currently, only the North-West University in Potchefstroom presents a master's degree in social work forensic practice in South Africa. Consultation between this University and the Office of the Family Advocate should commence meeting an outcome whereby Family Counsellors' academic knowledge can embark on a new development of training in the form of a post-graduate diploma or certificate.

### **3.9 RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is a need for a standardised protocol or steps to follow where child assessment practices are concerned within the Family Advocate Office. Further investigation in to what such a protocol should entail is needed. A protocol should also meet the standards of internationally followed protocols as well as local needs and practicability's.

A firm set of guidelines to form a standard of practice should be developed. Such a standard of practice guideline should also meet international guidelines to be accredited. The guideline should entail the use of various techniques whereby a child assessment is done, to enhance the validity and reliability of hypotheses testing, which will ensure that the best interest of children shall be adhered to when recommendations are made in the Family Advocate Office. This standard of practice guidelines will serve to ensure that the Family Advocate Office strives to render a quality driven service rather than a quantity driven outcome, as is currently the situation.

Further investigation is needed to practically implement opportunities within the Family Advocate Office whereby the requirements for continuous professional development can be met as per the policy for continuous professional development by the South African Social Service Professions Council.

The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, in coordination with the Justice College and Universities could consider amalgamating in the process of training Family Counsellors in a post-graduate diploma or certificate in forensic social work practice or a MSW in Forensic Practice.

The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development should set a requirement for candidates as Family Counsellors to have a post-graduate qualification in Forensic social

work practice. Forensic social workers should be appointed in the field. It is important to note that forensic social work is a specialised field and specialised training is necessary to be an expert in this field. Generic social workers are not trained in protocols to conduct forensic assessments.

The South African Council for Social Service Professions should have Regulations in place where Forensic Social Workers can register as Forensic Social Workers. This will not only benefit the profession but will also serve in the best interest of children.



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## **SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The most important findings and conclusions of this research are summarised in this section. The method of the investigation consisted of two coordinated processes, namely a literature study and an empirical study, through which the researcher aimed to gain an understanding of existing literature and research relevant to the research question. This was done using an empirical study where data was analysed quantitatively.

### **4.1 Literature study**

The purpose of the literature study was to gain an understanding and to set a framework for the research project. The literature study assisted the researcher in critically evaluating the existing knowledge base and the disciplinary content of the literature (Rubin & Babbie, 2015). Aspects covered as a part of the literature study included the assessment practices normally utilised by custody evaluators when children are assessed. Also, a discussion followed regarding the current assessment practices utilised by Family Counsellors duly employed by the Family Advocate Office when assessing minor children in disputes regarding parental responsibilities and rights. The Ferdinand Postma Library at the North-West University (Potchefstroom) was used as the main source for gaining information and literature. Research publications, articles and textbooks were utilised. The standard of operation for Family Counsellors duly employed by the Family Advocate Office was studied.

The literature study pointed out that almost all children, regardless of age, are severely affected by disputes regarding parental responsibilities and rights of their parents which results from separation or divorce. The Family Counsellor as assessor of each child's wishes and concerns finds that interventions are difficult and complex. Skills and knowledge are required, formal training and supervised experience are recommended (Stahl, 2016). Family Counsellors are not trained in forensic practice during under-graduate studies and

therefore need further training, skills and refined knowledge about child assessment practices in custody evaluation (Turoy-Smith, Powell & Brubacher, 2018). The researcher was interested in the current child assessment practices of Family Counsellors in the Family Advocate Office, which was the focus of this study. From studying both South African and international literature, it became evident that problems are experienced regarding the child-assessment. The problems relate to lack of skills and competencies, lack of use of multiple data sources and efficient use of techniques, tools and a framework of criteria, as well as the lack of a protocol or interview structure (Africa et al. 2003; Barratt, 2003; Birnbaum, Bala & Boyd, 2016; Patel & Jones, 2008; Zaal, 2003).

## **4.2 Empirical study**

The empirical study consisted of the collection and analysis of data based on the purpose of the study, namely to identify the current child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office.

### **4.2.1 Method**

The study followed a quantitative approach and was appropriate concerning the purpose of the study. The approach, however, can be more insightful if a larger representative sample is involved to generalise the findings. The study focused on all Family Counsellors presently employed by the Family Advocate Office of which a list of ninety-three was received. A sample was set at forty participants, but a future study can be undertaken with larger sample size. A qualitative approach, or mixed-method approach, could have provided more insight into certain aspects in the Family Counsellors' experience, beliefs and knowledge regarding the assessment of children.



#### 4.2.2 Respondents

An all-inclusive sample of Family Counsellors currently employed in the Family Advocate Office was included in the study. The rationale for the inclusion was based on the fact that Family Counsellors have the responsibility to assess minor children in disputes regarding parental responsibilities and rights. The researcher was interested in the demographic details, and child assessment practices.

#### 4.2.3 Measuring tool

The formulation and construction of questions were based on the aim of the study and what the researcher wanted to achieve regarding respondents' knowledge about the child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office. For this study, a self-designed questionnaire was effective because the researcher could gather specific information on respondents' knowledge based on the establishing of current child assessment practices. Although the content of the questionnaire consisted of questions related to the focus of the study, certain questions had too many options, which created a wide ratio and resulted in limiting meaningful answers. The questions made way for follow-up questions through the specification of answers which provided valuable qualitative information to the study. The questions were based on the literature study. The use of certain questions in the questionnaire already provided information to the respondents which might have influenced their knowledge and practice of child assessment. The implication could have been that they did not answer questions openly and honestly.

#### 4.2.4 Ethical aspects

Ethical aspects were maintained and considered in the process of data collection. Obtaining permission from the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, as well as goodwill-permission of the National Principal Family Advocate, was time-

consuming. The open network-access, utilised to distribute the survey to Family Counsellors, caused difficulties for the study as the researcher had to request on more than one occasion that the built-in firewall should be removed to allow respondents access to the survey. This resulted in a delay of approximately two months in obtaining data.

#### 4.2.5 Data analysis

Data analysis enabled the researcher to process and give meaning to the data. Data were analysed using frequencies. Consultation with a statistician from Statistical Consultation Services from North-West University contributed to the validity of the data analysis.

#### 4.2.6 Procedure

Obtaining consent from the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development as well as goodwill permission from the National Principal Family Advocate was time-consuming. The attitudes of the majority of Family Counsellors were positive towards the research project. It was however, necessary motivate for participation in the survey continuously. The Family Counsellors are under pressure to perform according to a performance agreement which focuses on the quantity which indicates they may have experienced work pressure that influenced their attitude.

### 4.3 Findings

The overall finding is that Family Counsellors' child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office reflects a need for training in forensic social work practice, as well as continuous professional development to stay abreast of new development in a young specialised field of social work. The majority of Family Counsellors lack training in certain techniques, specific skills or competencies to provide Family Courts in South Africa with a product reflecting sophistication and expert knowledge. The need for an interview structure,

as a standard protocol of assessment of children in disputes relating to parental responsibilities and rights, was identified and further investigation is needed.

The statistically non-significant findings are:

- Awareness of policy requirements for continuous professional development.
- The aim of the research, namely to obtain a reflection of current child assessment practises in the Family Advocate Office, was achieved through establishing the importance of training of Family Counsellors in forensic social work practice and for continuous professional development in forensic social work practice.

#### **4.4 Limitation of the study**

The study focused on a sample (forty-one respondents) of the total population of ninety-three respondents. A larger sample of the population would allow for results to be generalisable. Certain questions in the questionnaire could have a negative impact on the data as the questions were derived from current literature regarding child assessment in custody disputes.

#### **4.5 Personal reflections**

Family Counsellors need specific, sophisticated training in forensic social work practice to enhance best practice in child assessment. Current child assessment practices do not reflect sound forensic practice. The optimal solution would be to set a requirement for Family Counsellors to have a Master's degree in social work forensic practice. Forensic practice training for Family Counsellors as a post-graduate diploma or certificate will improve best practice in the assessment of children in the Family Advocate Office, but it does not presently exist and needs to be developed in consultation with significant parties. The study highlighted the importance of continuous professional development. Continuous professional development is required for all registered, practising social workers as per

SACSSP policy and adherence to it will provide Family Counsellors with specific skill, competencies and sophisticated knowledge and expertise to improve and keep abreast with new developments in child assessment.

Family Counsellors compromise the quality of child assessment for quantity to meet expectations as per performance agreements between Family Counsellors and the Family Advocate Office. Best practice in child assessment is also compromised in the process, which results in a product provided to Family Courts in South Africa that is not reflecting sound practice or expert evidence. The investigation of the best interest of children in parental responsibility and right disputes is a specialised field. The need for forensic social workers in the Family Advocate Office is of the utmost importance to act in the best interests of the child.

#### **4.6 Recommendations**

Further investigation is needed:

- An investigation is needed for the development of post-graduate training in forensic social work practice for Family Counsellors. Significant role players in developing an academic diploma or certificate in forensic social work will be the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (Justice College), the North-West University as presently being the only provider of academic course work in Forensic Social Work and the South African Council for Social Service Professions being involved in setting requirements for social workers to enable them to register as Forensic Social Workers in future.
- An investigation is needed to develop a protocol that can serve as a standardised semi-structured interview for the assessment of children in the Family Advocate Office to enhance best practice.

The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development could consider:

- Amending the current performance agreements of Family Counsellors with the Family Advocate Office to focus on quality, rather than quantity of child assessments.
- Ensure that Family Counsellors meet the requirements of the South African Council of Social Service Professions policy regarding continuous professional development in different academic environments.
- Appoint social workers with a Master's degree in social work Forensic Practice as Family Counsellors.

Family Counsellors:

- Family Counsellors should recognise the importance of obtaining the best possible education to ensure sophisticated knowledge and expertise in the field of child assessment in forensic social practice.
- Guidelines and procedures regarding continuous professional development should be adhered to annually. Despite policy about the continuous professional development of social workers, Family Counsellors are not meeting the annual requirements.

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## **SECTION 5: THE ADDENDUMS**

### **ADDENDUM A**


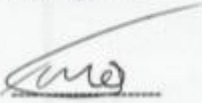
#### **INSTRUCTIONS TO THE AUTHORS**

##### **SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY**

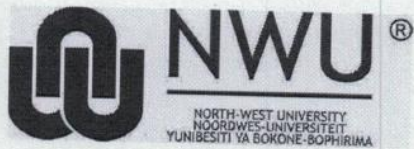
*The South African Journal of Psychology* publishes contributions in English from all fields of psychology. While the emphasis is on empirical research, the Journal also accepts theoretical and methodological papers, review articles, short communications, reviews and letters containing fair commentary. Priority is given to articles which are relevant to Africa and which address psychological issues of social change and development. All articles should include an abstract in English of not more than 300 words and an alphabetical list of at least six keywords should be provided. Tables and figures, with suitable headings/captions and numbered consecutively, should follow the reference list, with their approximate positions in the text indicated. Articles should be no longer than 20 pages (5 000 words) and must include the full title of the manuscript, the name(s) of the author(s) and their affiliations, and the name, postal address, and e-mail address of the corresponding author. The manuscripts should be an MS Word document in 12-point Times Roman font with 1.5 line spacing. The American Psychological Association (APA, ver. 5) style guidelines and referencing format should be adhered to. It is compulsory that manuscripts be accompanied by a declaration that the language has been properly edited, together with the name and address of the person who undertook the language editing. Manuscripts to be considered for publication should be e-mailed to [sajp@up.ac.za](mailto:sajp@up.ac.za). A covering letter with postal address, e-mail address, and telephone number should be included. The covering letter should indicate that the manuscript has not been published elsewhere and it is not under consideration for publication in another journal. An acknowledgement of receipt will be e-mailed to the author and the manuscripts will be sent for review by three independent reviewers. The manuscript number must always be quoted in ALL correspondence to the editor.



## ADDENDUM B

 <b>Department: Justice and Constitutional Development REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA</b>	
<b>NATIONAL OFFICE</b> PRIVATE BAG X81, PRETORIA, 0001. Momentum Centre, 329 Pretorius Street PRETORIA      Tel (012) 315 4840,	
Ref: HRD/01/19 Enq: (012) 315 4839 E-mail: MLebaka@justice.gov.za	
<b>TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN</b>	
This serve to confirm that the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development has granted Ms Magdalena Boshoff permission to conduct Academic Research in the Department.	
Ms M Boshoff's research topic is: "What are the current child-assessment practices followed by family counsellors in the Family Advocate Office?"	
Ms M Boshoff's approval is on condition that:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) She only collects information that is relevant to her academic research.</li> <li>(b) She share the information obtained from the Department for academic purpose only.</li> <li>(c) She maintains, uphold and stick to strict confidentiality on all information obtained from the Department.</li> <li>(d) She should not publicly publish the findings and recommendations of the research without prior approval of the Department. The publishing should only be limited to the Academic Institution's requirements.</li> <li>(e) She must share her findings and recommendations of her research with the Department.</li> </ul>	
Best regards,	
	<u>21/01/2019</u>
Dr M Lebaka Director: Human Resource Development	Date

## ADDENDUM C



To whom it may concern

**Ethics number:**

**NWU-00139-18-S1**

**Study title:** Child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office

**Study leader/supervisor:** Prof TA Robinson

**Student:** M Boshoff - 10581863

**Application type:** Single study

**Risk level:** Low

The research project is taken note of and goodwill permission is granted to take part in the research project.

Office of the Family Advocate:

Name and surname of Chief Family Advocate:

P.I. Seabi-Mathope

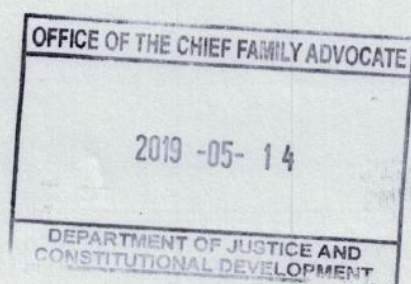
*P.I. Seabi*

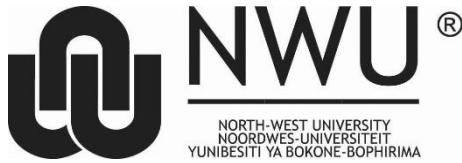
Signature

2019 -05- 14

Date

1



**ADDENDUM D**

Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom  
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Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

**HREC Stamp**

**INFORMED CONSENT  
DOCUMENTATION FOR A RESEARCH  
STUDY WHEREBY THE CURRENT  
CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES BY  
FAMILY COUNSELLORS IN THE  
FAMILY ADVOCATE OFFICE WILL BE  
EXPLORED.**

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: Child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office

**ETHICS REFERENCE NUMBERS: NWU-00139-18-S1**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:**

Prof. T. M. Robinson

*Associate Professor Extraordinaire*

North West University

**POST GRADUATE STUDENT:**

Magdalena Boshoff

**ADDRESS:**

1842 Cnr. Valon Place & Tarascon Drive

Dainfern Valley

Sandton, Johannesburg

South Africa

**CONTACT NUMBER:**

011 469 3866 / 082 682 6686

You are being invited to take part in a **research study** that forms part of a Masters in Forensic Practice study requirements. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this study. Please ask the researcher or person explaining the research to you any questions about any part of this study that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you might be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary** and you are free to say no to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part now.

This study has been approved by the **Health Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the North-West University (NWU-00138-18-S1)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Processes and Structures (DoH, 2015) and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee members or other relevant people to inspect the research records.

### **What is this research study all about?**

- *We plan to determine through an online survey to explore the current child assessment practices utilized within the Office of the Family Advocate by Family Counsellors. The finding of this study will help to focus on the need for a set standard protocol for child assessment which will lead the focus to best practice in this regard.*
- *This study will be conducted within the ICTservice of the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. All Family Counsellors appointed by the Office of the Family Advocate who has the duty to assess minor children in care and contact disputes will be recruited to complete the survey online. The study will be done by experienced health researchers trained in online surveys.*

### **Why have you been invited to participate?**

- *You have been invited to be part of this research because you are an experienced Family Counsellor.*
- *You also fit the research because you have a valid social work degree, that is recognised by the SACSSP.*
- *You have at least two years' experience as social worker before you were employed by the Office of the Family Advocate.*
- *You are currently employed by Office of the Family Advocate and it is part of your responsibilities to assess minor children caught up in care and contact disputes.*
- *You will not be able to take part in this research if you are not currently working as a Family Counsellor.*

### **What will be expected of you?**

- *It will be expected of you to participate in a cross-sectional survey online which will be emailed to you on your official work address.*
- *You will be ensured anonymity for you as participant by not having to complete your name on the survey.*

- *The survey will focus on identifying the current child assessment practices and contextual factors that may be encountered by you within the multi professional context of employment.*
- *A questionnaire will be completed by you which will take the format of a multiple possible answer questionnaire. The questions will be non-judgmental and unbiased, focusing on the forensic assessment of children in care and contact disputes.*
- *You will be expected to complete an online survey, which will have a duration of between 20 and 40 minutes.*

### **Will you gain anything from taking part in this research?**

- *There will be no personal gain for you as a participant in this study.*
- *The results of the study may assist in gaining a better understanding of your practice in assessing children caught up in care and contact disputes.*
- *You will contribute to the literature available in South Africa regarding the current practices within the Family Advocate Office regarding assessment of children in care and contact disputes.*

### **Are there risks involved in you taking part in this research and what will be done to prevent them?**

- *You will not be expected to complete the survey during working hours. A lunchtime can be utilized to complete the survey.*
- *Your participation will be on a voluntary basis. You will have the right to withdraw from participating in the study at any time by just leaving the online site.*
- *The risks to you in this study are the loss of confidentiality due to a leak of data collected, this will be prevented by ensuring that personal information is stored in a locked cabinet and by making use of a coding system to identify all participants.*

### **How will we protect your confidentiality and who will see your findings?**

- *Anonymity of your findings will be protected by storing all information in a locked cabinet, 5 years after the completion of the study all data will be destroyed in an ethically approved manner.*
- *Your privacy will be respected by the researcher using a coding system to identify all participants, therefore no identifying details will be used.*
- *Your results will be kept confidential by referring to you as participants in the mini-dissertation, no identifying details will be used in any part of the study.*
- *Only the researchers and research assistance will be able to look at your findings.*
- *Findings will be kept safe by locking hard copies in locked cupboards in the researcher's office and for electronic data it will be stored on a password protected computer. Data will be stored for 5 years.*

**What will happen with the findings or samples?**

- *The findings of this study will only be used for this study and the data will be destroyed after 5 years. The researcher will apply to have the findings published in the Social Work Journal.*

**How will you know about the results of this research?**

- *We will give you the results of this research once the research has been completed, should you wish to receive the results. The results of the research will be forwarded via email by Daleen Boshoff.*

**Will you be paid to take part in this study and are there any costs for you?**

- *You will not be paid to take part in the study because the study is a small scale study which is done to fulfil the requirements of a MSW in Forensic Practice and you are requested to voluntarily take part in the study without receiving any reimbursement.*
- *We are of the opinion that the research will not intrude on your personal time and we will go out of our way to ensure that participants experience minimal to no inconvenience during the process.*
- *There will be no costs involved for you, if you do take part in this study.*

**Is there anything else that you should know or do?**

- *If you have any questions or concerns, you can call **Magdalena Boshoff** at **083 451 7080** or contact her on her email address: [MBoshoff@justice.gov.za](mailto:MBoshoff@justice.gov.za).*
- *You can also contact the Health Research Ethics Committee via Mrs Carolien van Zyl at 018 299 1206 or [carolien.vanzyl@nwu.ac.za](mailto:carolien.vanzyl@nwu.ac.za) if you have any concerns that were not answered about the research or if you have complaints about the research.*
- *You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own purposes.*



### Declaration by participant

By signing below, I ..... agree to take part in the research study titled: *CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN THE FAMILY ADVOCATE OFFICE*.

I declare that:

- I have read this information/it was explained to me by a trusted person in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- The research was clearly explained to me.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person getting the consent from me, as well as the researcher and all my questions have been answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be handled in a negative way if I do so.
- I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in the best interest, or if I do not follow the study plan, as agreed to.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....

**Signature of participant**

.....

**Signature of witness**



### Declaration by person obtaining consent

I (*name*) ..... declare that:

- I clearly and in detail explained the information in this document to  
.....
- I did/did not use an interpreter.
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above
- I gave him/her time to discuss it with others if he/she wished to do so.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....

**Signature of person obtaining consent**

## Declaration by researcher

I (*name*) ..... declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to ..... **or**  
I had it explained by ..... who I trained for this purpose.
- I did/did not use an interpreter
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them  
or I was available should he/she want to ask any further questions.
- The informed consent was obtained by an independent person.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as described above.
- I am satisfied that he/she had time to discuss it with others if he/she wished to do so.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....

**Signature of researcher**

## ADDENDUM E

9/6/2019

### CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Good day!

You are invited to participate in the following survey, which will be used to obtain information regarding the child assessment practices followed by the family counsellors within the Family Advocate offices. The survey will ask questions regarding above mentioned practices, as well as some questions about the Office of the Family Advocate, and some questions regarding information about yourself and your position in the office. This survey is to be completed by all family counsellors appointed by the Office of the Family Advocate (The selection process is all-inclusive).

It is important for me to learn your opinions and practices, as the outcome of this study will benefit all family counsellors; not only by self-reflection through completion of the study, but also by the reading of the final article, which will be published, as the research has the aim of setting the best practices for child assessment.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you have the right to self-exit the survey at any time. There are also no foreseeable risks associated with this study. All of the given information will be kept anonymous and confidential and any data obtained will only be reported in the aggregate. There are no incentives involved in the completion of the questionnaire. It will take approximately 15 -20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The deadline for completing the questionnaire is in two weeks from today.

If you have questions at any time about the survey or the procedures, you may contact Daleen Boshoff at 0834517080 (cellphone) and/or 0515061305 (work), or by email at the following email addresses: [MBoshoff@justice.gov.za](mailto:MBoshoff@justice.gov.za) and/or [daleenvdw123@gmail.com](mailto:daleenvdw123@gmail.com). I, Daleen Boshoff, living at 1 Garden View, 7 Eighth Street, Arboretum, Bloemfontein, 9300, is solely responsible for the budget of this research study.

Thank you very much for your time and support. By continuing with this survey you provide the researcher with your informed consent to make use of this data as needed. Please start with the survey now by clicking on the Next button below.

\* Required

1. Mark only one oval.

☐ Option 1

## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

2. What is your age? (Please tick appropriate block) \*

Mark only one oval.

☐ 20-30

☐ 31-40

☐ 41-50

☐ 51-60

☐ 60+

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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

**3. What is your gender? \****Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other

**4. What is your race? \****Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black
- ☐ Colored
- ☐ Indian
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Current qualifications as a Social Worker / Family Counsellor (Tick appropriate block/s) \****Check all that apply.*

- ☐ BA degree (Social work)
- ☐ Master's degree: Forensic Practice
- ☐ Other Master's degree
- ☐ PhD in social work

**6. Any other training received (Tick appropriate block/s and specify)***Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Any in house training received (Please specify year of training, presenter and CPD points)

7. \_\_\_\_\_

**8. Check all that apply.**

- ☐ Any Council accredited Short courses (SACSSP) attended (Please specify CPD points)

9. \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Check all that apply.**

- ☐ Any special training in interviewing of children / play therapy received (Please specify CPD points)

11. \_\_\_\_\_

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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

**12. Current experience as Family Counsellor within the Office of the Family Advocate (Tick appropriate block) \****Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ 1-5
- ☐ 6-10
- ☐ 11-15
- ☐ 16-20

**13. Province in which you are appointed (Tick appropriate block) \****Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Western Cape
- ☐ Northern Cape
- ☐ Free State
- ☐ Gauteng
- ☐ North-West
- ☐ Mpumalanga
- ☐ KwaZulu-Natal
- ☐ Eastern Cape
- ☐ Limpopo

**14. Amount of vacant Family Counsellor posts in your area of operation (Please tick appropriate block and specify office)***Check all that apply.*☐ 1

15. \_\_\_\_\_

**16. Check all that apply.**☐ 2

17. \_\_\_\_\_

**18. Check all that apply.**☐ 3

19. \_\_\_\_\_

**20. Check all that apply.**☐ More than 3

21. \_\_\_\_\_

**CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES**

Assessment Practice Factors

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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

22. The APA (American Psychology Association) has guidelines for custody evaluators regarding their knowledge and skills. Which of the following do you regard as most important / imperative for sound child assessment (6) and which do you regard as less important (1) (Please tick appropriate block/s for each) \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Specialized competence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintain up-to-date understanding of child and family development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child and family psychopathology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Effect of divorce on children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Specialized child custody literature	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Familiarity with legal and regulatory statutes and standards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

23. Who is responsible for the child assessment (Tick appropriate block) \*

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Family Counsellor only  
☐ Family Advocate only  
☐ Both Family Counsellor and Advocate

24. Does psychological testing form part of the child assessment (Please tick appropriate block) \*

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

25. Who performs psychological assessments if it is deemed necessary (Please tick appropriate block) \*

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Family Counsellor and Family Advocate  
☐ Family Counsellor  
☐ Registered psychologist

26. Which circumstances prevails that psychological testing is undertaken (Please tick appropriate block/s and specify)

Check all that apply.

- ☐ When allegations is made towards one of the parents' mental health / capacity

27. \_\_\_\_\_

28. Check all that apply.

- ☐ When allegations is made towards one of the children's mental health

29. \_\_\_\_\_

30. Check all that apply.

- ☐ In every matter where a custody dispute arises

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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

31.

32. During the past 3 months, how many children have you assessed on average? (Please tick appropriate blocks) \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	Less than 5	6-10	11-15	16-20	More than 20
Past 3 months	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

33. How many times were each child, who is a subject in a custody dispute, assessed (Please tick appropriate block) \*

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ 1 time
- ☐ 2 times
- ☐ More than 2 times

34. When does child assessment normally proceed? (Please tick appropriate block) \*

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Before consultation with parents
- ☐ After consultation with parents

35. Which circumstances normally determines a child not being assessed (Please tick appropriate block/s) \*

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Child under 3 years of age/unintelligible language / vocabulary
- ☐ Child with developmental delays / other delays
- ☐ Where parents agree on children's needs and how it is going to be met (mediation)

36. Under which circumstances does a home visit form part of the child custody assessment (Please tick appropriate block/s and specify)

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Only when allegations are made towards housing circumstances of one parent

37.

38. Check all that apply.

- ☐ Only when a Regulation 6 request is determining a home visit

39.

40. Check all that apply.

- ☐ In every matter both parents' housing circumstances are observed

41.

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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

**42. What is normally determined during a home visit (Please tick appropriate block/s) \****Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Safety of the children
- ☐ Sensitivity of parents towards children's needs
- ☐ Interaction between each parent and each child
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**43. Under which circumstances does a parent-child observation forms part of the child custody assessment (Please tick appropriate block/s) \****Check all that apply.*

- ☐ In every matter an Interactional Analysis is done between every parent and every child
- ☐ In every matter each parent and child is observed together in the waiting room/play room
- ☐ An Interactional Analysis is only applied in matters where it is deemed necessary (high conflict; allegations of abuse; parental alienation; relocation case)

**44. Please specify**

\_\_\_\_\_

**45. How is the Interactional Analysis normally done (Please tick appropriate block/s)***Check all that apply.*

	Office setting		Home based setting	
Structured	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Informal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**46. Please specify reason**

\_\_\_\_\_

**47. When a structured Interactional Analysis forms part of the child assessment, how is it structured (Please answer on a continuum starting with 1 – always; 3 – sometimes; 5 - never) \****Mark only one oval per row.*

	1 - Always	2 - Mostly	3 - Sometimes	4 - Rarely	5 - Never
Free play	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work on a task together involving moderate stress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work on several tasks together to determine discipline; interaction and sensitivity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Clean up	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Any other activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**48. Please specify if any other activities are used**

\_\_\_\_\_



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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

49. What are the assessment factors being focused on during the Interactional Analysis (Please answer on a continuum starting with 1 – always; 3 – sometimes; 5 - never) \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 - Always	2 - Mostly	3 - Sometimes	4 - Rarely	5 - Never
Communication skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parental expectations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Methods by which parents maintain control	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attachment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Any other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

50. Please specify other

---

51. In which setting are children normally assessed (Please tick appropriate block/s) \*

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Office setting
- ☐ School
- ☐ Home setting (where the child will most possibly reside in future)

52. How is each child assessed (Please tick appropriate block/s and specify)

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Each child separately

53.

---

54. Check all that apply.

- ☐ Siblings together

55.

---

56. Check all that apply.

- ☐ Family assessment (including parents and children)

57.

---

58. Check all that apply.

- ☐ Any other

59.

---

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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

60. Which factors are normally assessed during the child assessment (Please answer on a continuum starting with 1 – always; 3 – sometimes; 5 - never) \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 - Always	2 - Mostly	3 - Sometimes	4 - Rarely	5 - Never
Developmental phase of child	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Developmental needs of the child	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wishes and concerns of the child	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knowledge of the child about divorce	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sibling relationships	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presence of domestic violence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presence of substance abuse	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presence of sexual orientation issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Presence of parental alienation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship of child with father	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Relationship of child with mother	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child's relationship with other significant people / family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discipline of child and who is responsible	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parenting styles	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Typical routine of the child during the week and weekends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Communication between child and each parent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Negative comments one parent to another in child's presence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adult information shared with child	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child's functioning at school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child's social functioning at school and at home	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child's functioning within the family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child's attachment patterns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

61. Which techniques are utilized during the child assessment (Answer on a continuum starting with 1 – always; 3 – sometimes; 5 - never) \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 - Always	2 - Mostly	3 - Sometimes	4 - Rarely	5 - Never
Structured interview	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Draw a person	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kinetic Family Drawing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Stories of fantasize (three wishes; island game; Mommy's house; Daddy's house; Calling Mom, Calling Dad, Animal representation)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Incomplete sentences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Toolbox (Irma Schutte)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family projection cards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Self-projection cards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Worst and best of residing with each parent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

62. What type of questions are utilized during the child assessment (Answer on a continuum starting with 1 – always; 3 – sometimes 5- never) \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 - Always	2 - Mostly	3 - Sometimes	4 - Rarely	5 - Never
Open ended questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Multiple answer questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leading questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Closed end questions (yes/no)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

63. Which type of questions do you utilize in order to determine the child's attachment patterns (On a continuum of 1 – 5. 1 – Always; 3 – sometimes and 5 – never) \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 - Always	2 - Mostly	3 - Sometimes	4 - Rarely	5 - Never
When you have a problem, to whom do you go?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When you are sick, who do you ask for help?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When you wake up at night with a nightmare, who do you ask for help? Why?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Which parent do you play games with? Which games?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
With which of your parents would you like to reside?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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## CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

64. Which of the following steps / protocol do you utilize when you assess a child (On a continuum of 1 – 5; 1 – always; 3 – sometimes and 5 – never) \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 - Always	2 - Mostly	3 - Sometimes	4 - Rarely	5 - Never
Meeting with the child in the waiting room	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Meeting with the child on the child's level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Allowing a parent to accompany the child for the first few minutes if child has separation issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ensure my dress code is informal, not formal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inquire about child's understanding of divorce; if child has been informed, by whom and when	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Introduce myself and my purpose to the child in a neutral way	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Build rapport with the child by asking about his world	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Explain the rules for the interview to the child	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competency test (understanding of the truth/lie and importance of telling the truth; language and vocabulary consideration)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Explain the limits of confidentiality to the child	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Explore about the child's world: school; aftercare, activities, socialization, siblings, significant others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Explore the child's family (mother, father, family members)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inquire about the child's normal routine during weekdays and weekends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use of techniques to test for consistency of information provided	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Explore the child's wishes and concerns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Test for attachment patterns	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Explore domestic violence, substance abuse, boundaries in family, relocation issues, parental alienation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inquire about negative comments by parents towards each other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inquire about parents sharing adult information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inquire about discipline of child	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inquire about parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Get permission from child to share any relevant information with parents, if necessary	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ending of assessment: talk about a neutral topic with the child	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>


9/6/2019

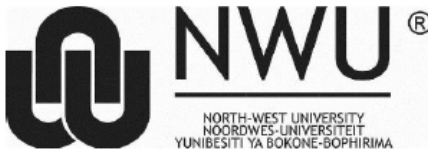
CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

**CHILD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES**

Thank you for completing this survey! It is greatly appreciated.

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Powered by  
 Google Forms

**ADDENDUM F**

Prof TM Robinson  
Social Work  
COMPRES

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom  
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222  
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

**Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research,  
Training and Support**

**North-West University Health Research Ethics  
Committee (NWU-HREC)**

Tel: 018-285 2291  
Email: [wayne.towers@nwu.ac.za](mailto:wayne.towers@nwu.ac.za)

21 May 2019

Dear Prof Robinson

## **APPROVAL OF DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED DURING THE PROGRESS OF THE STUDY**

**Ethics number: NWU-00139-18-A1**

Kindly use the ethics reference number provided above in all future correspondence or documents submitted to the administrative assistant of the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC).

**Study title: Child-assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office**

**Study leader: Prof TM Robinson**

**Student: M Boshoff-10581863**

**Application type: Single study**


**Risk level: Minimal (monitoring report required annually)**

**Expiry date: 30 April 2020 (monitoring report due at the end of April annually until completion)**


You are kindly informed that the documentation submitted to the NWU-HREC, as per the conditions set in your approval letter, was reviewed by the designated reviewers. The reviewers have indicated that the submitted documents are acceptable and that you as the researcher can proceed with implementing the aforementioned documentation in your approved project.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support at [Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za).

Yours sincerely

 Digitally signed by Wayne  
Towers  
Date: 2019.05.21  
23:37:17 +02'00'

Prof Wayne Towers  
Chairperson: NWU-HREC

 Digitally signed  
by Prof Minrie  
Greeff  
Date: 2019.05.23  
21:27:14 +02'00'

Prof Minrie Greeff  
Head of Health Sciences Ethics  
Office for Research, Training and  
Support

## ADDENDUM G



**Recommendation of the Research Proposal Committee to the Research Ethics Committee**  
**Research Using Human Participants**

<b>Scientific Committee</b>	<b>Name</b>	Magdalena Boshoff	<b>Discipline</b>	MSW Forensic
	<b>Research Entity</b>	COMPRES	<b>Contact Person</b>	Ellen Seokolo
	<b>Faculty</b>	Health Science	<b>E-mail</b>	<a href="mailto:23352000@nwu.ac.za">23352000@nwu.ac.za</a>
<b>Title of the study:</b>	Click here to enter text. Child-assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office			
<b>Researchers involved in the study:</b>	Tanya Robinson and Cornelia Wessels			
<b>Executive summary of the research:</b>	Click here to enter text (150 words max).			
<b>Potential risk level for human participants:</b>	No risk	<input type="checkbox"/>	Motivate: Click here to enter text.	
	Minimal risk	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
	Medium risk	<input type="checkbox"/>		
	High risk	<input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>Potential risk level for children and incapacitated adults:</b>	No risk	<input type="checkbox"/>	Motivate: Click here to enter text.	
	No more than minimal risk of harm	<input type="checkbox"/>		
	Greater than minimal risk with the prospect of direct benefit	<input type="checkbox"/>		
	Greater than minimal risk with no direct benefit	<input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>Recommendation for the ethics committee</b>	Expedited review	<input type="checkbox"/>	Motivate: Click here to enter text.	
	Full review	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
	Exempted from review	<input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>Any additional comments</b>	Motivate: Click here to enter text.			
<b>Committee members present during the review</b>	<b>Members present</b>			
	Karel Botha			
	Heleen Coetze			
	Mariette van der Merwe			
	Esme van Rensburg			
	Elma Ryke			
	Wim Roestenburg			
<b>Date of review</b>	2018/07/12			




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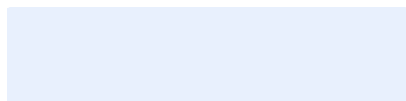
**Signature of Chairperson**
**Date: 2018/10/23**



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**Signature of Research Director**
**Date: 2018/10/23**
**Decision of the Ethics Committee:**

<b>Expedited review</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Full review</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Exempted from review</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Motivate:** [Click here to enter text.](#)



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**Signature of Chairperson of the Research Ethics Committee**
**Date:** [Click here to enter a date.](#)



**ADDENDUM H**

PO Box 58

Cape Gate

Brackenfell

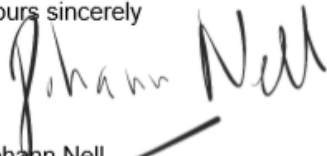
7562

Cape Town

17 November 2019

I, Johann Nell, 6302215073085, hereby declare that I have language edited the mini-dissertation "Child assessment practices in the Family Advocate Office" as presented to me by ms M Boshoff. All the suggested changes were left to the discretion of the author.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johann Nell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Johann Nell

0824499668

[johannorrel@gmail.com](mailto:johannorrel@gmail.com)

BA (US) 1983

HED (post-graduate) (UFS) 1984

BAHons (UFS) 1986