

Forensic Evaluations: Terminology

Basic Terms

Screening: Brief/quick assessment of a specific construct with emphasis placed on determining if further evaluation is required. Oftentimes seen in delinquency matters where a Certified Forensic Screener provides an assessment of capacity to proceed to trial.

Assessment/Evaluation: Oftentimes, the terms “assessment” and “evaluation” are used interchangeably. Some clinicians may use the term “assessment” to describe a more narrow concept or one aspect of the overall “evaluation.” For example, the assessment of IQ in an evaluation of an individual’s overall functioning.

Forensic Mental Health Assessment (FMHA): The process by which mental health professionals with specialized training conduct evaluations for the courts and/or at the request of attorneys. The phrase covers evaluations conducted by a range of specialists (psychologists, physicians, social workers) and may address issues in civil, criminal, or family law. Other terms: Forensic Assessment

Therapeutic Assessment (Clinical Assessment): An evaluation conducted in order to assist in the diagnosis and treatment of a client(s), rather than for the purpose of assisting the courts/attorneys. Forensic Assessments: more specific purpose, place a high value on directly assessing the examinee’s motivation, usually occurs within a constrained timeframe, and there may be little or no assurances of confidentiality of results. In a therapeutic context, the evaluator is viewed as an advocate, and emphasis is placed on the development of trust, empathy, and the building of the relationship. The nature of the relationship is made explicit at the outset of the evaluation.

Terminology Describing the Approach to the Evaluation

Brief-Focused Assessment (or Solution-focused): Used in family courts, Brief Focused Assessment (BFA) has been used by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts to refer to specific, narrowly-defined issues. These are in contrast to Comprehensive Child Custody Evaluations (CCE). AFCC Guidelines (2009) indicate that there are limitations to the analyses and inferences that may be made. BFAs are useful in cases where there is not a wide range of issues and/or when expenses are of concern. A BFA may highlight the need for a more comprehensive evaluation.

Trauma-Informed Screening or Assessment: An evaluation to determine if an individual has experienced traumatic events. Can be brief (screening) to determine if trauma or exposure to adverse events has occurred or can involve a more in depth evaluation into the nature, severity, and consequences of having been exposed to traumatic events. There is a strong need to routinely and thoroughly assess for exposure to trauma, abuse, victimization. Professionals are encouraged to include the perspectives of the clients and those in his/her environment (e.g, family, teachers) as the conceptualization of trauma, symptoms, needs may not be apparent to the identified client. See www.nctsn.org (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)

Specific Types of Evaluations

Forensic Child Abuse Evaluation: The medical and/or psychological assessment of children/adolescents who are suspected of being a victim of abuse or neglect.

Child Medical Evaluations: In cases of suspected or actual maltreatment, a Child Medical Evaluation is a medical evaluation to assist in determining if abuse has occurred.

Child and Family Evaluations: In cases of maltreatment, a Child and Family Evaluation may be conducted pertaining to the *mental health* functioning in conjunction with the CME.

Parental Competency Evaluations: Evaluations pertaining to the
These evaluations are useful in determining the strengths and weaknesses of a parent, what treatment may be helpful in remediating behavior, and to determine if the parent is not capable of meeting the needs of the child (termination).

Competency Evaluation: The phrase "*competency evaluation*" is broad and could describe a number of different types of evaluations (e.g., to stand trial, to meet needs of child). In addition, the term *competence* is considered a legal, rather than medical or psychological, state. Evaluators may avoid terms *competency/incompetency* to avoid making a legal determinations that should be left to the Trier-of-Fact. Instead, they may refer to an individual's *capacity*, referring to an individual's mental status or decision-making ability.

Sex Offender Specific Evaluation: An evaluation involving interviews, review of documents, and the use of standardized methods and instruments that may be used to assess risk to the community, identify treatment/rehabilitation needs, determine amenability to treatment, and/or to assist in decisions pertaining to supervision and placement recommendations. The evaluation *cannot* be used to determine guilt/innocence. Always clarify the specific issues the evaluator should address, including case-specific concerns.

Actuarial Assessment: Assessment based on statistical analysis of factors correlated with recidivism risk for a specific outcome (sexual recidivism, general delinquency).

Testing Terms

Clinical tests or clinical assessment instruments: Psychological tests or assessment approaches that were developed for purpose of assessment, diagnosis and treatment planning. May be used in a forensic mental health evaluation as part of process but does not directly assess the psycho-legal construct of interest (e.g., ability to meet needs of child, capacity to waive Miranda Rights).

Forensic Assessment Instruments (FAI): Tests/assessment approaches that are specifically designed for use in an evaluation to assess psycho-legal capacities, abilities, or knowledge.

Neuropsychological Assessment: Specialized evaluation involving the assessment of cognitive functioning (attention, memory, language, spatial reasoning, executive functioning). Useful for cases where there is a concern of developmental delay, history of seizures, or brain trauma. The results may also be used to assist in diagnosis and help determine an individual's capacities (e.g., to manage finances, to plan/sequence behavior).