

Commentary: MMPI-2 Readability

James N. Bow
James (Jay) Flens
Jonathan W. Gould

ABSTRACT. This commentary is meant as a clarification of a discussion in the *Journal of Child Custody, Volume 2, Issue 4* on MMPI-2 readability found in an article by Bow, Flens, and Gould, "An Analysis of Administration, Scoring, and Interpretation of the MMPI-2 and MCMI-II/III in Child Custody Evaluations." This commentary explores whether an MMPI-2 test taker needs an eighth grade reading level or a sixth grade reading level to take the test. Arguments are presented on both sides of this issue. These authors conclude that at least an eighth

James N. Bow, PhD, is Director of Psychology at Hawthorn Center and Adjunct Assistant Professor at Wayne State University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences. He is involved in forensic practice and research (Website: www.drjamesbow.com).

James (Jay) Flens, PsyD, is a clinical and forensic psychologist in private practice in Brandon, Florida, and a principal with Child Custody Consultants, a national consulting consortium. His practice is devoted to child custody related issues, including evaluations, expert testimony and consultation with attorneys. Dr. Flens is also involved with many research projects involving psychological testing in the child custody context, and serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Child Custody*.

Jonathan W. Gould, PhD, is a practicing forensic psychologist specializing in child custody matters in Charlotte, NC. He is author of *Conducting Scientifically Crafted Child Custody Evaluations* (Sage, 1998) and more than 30 articles in the family law area. He is a principal in the national consulting consortium, Child Custody Consultants (Website: Child-Custody-Consultants.Com).

Address correspondence to: James N. Bow, PhD, Hawthorn Center, 18471 Haggerty Road, Northville, MI 48168 (E-mail: bow@michigan.gov).

Journal of Child Custody, Vol. 3(1) 2006
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JCC>
© 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1300/J190v03n01_05

grade reading level is mandatory. The authors encourage psychologists who administer this test to give the test taker a reading test if they suspect that the litigant might not read at an eighth grade level; and they suggest that the difficult reading items be analyzed through an examination of unanswered and critical items. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. MMPI-2, reading level, Lexile values

In the latest issue of the *Journal of Child Custody*, we authored an article titled “An Analysis of Administration, Scoring, and Interpretation of the MMPI-2 and MCMI-II/III in Child Custody Evaluations” (Bow, Flens, & Gould, 2005). We would like to clarify an aspect of our discussion of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2)’s readability and our rationale for advocating for an eighth grade reading level. In the original MMPI-2 Manual for Administration and Scoring, Hathway and McKinley (1989) indicated that one needed an eighth grade reading level to understand all of the MMPI-2 items. They wrote: “Based on contemporary reading-proficiency levels, it would now require an eighth-grade reading level to comprehend the content of all the MMPI-2 items and respond to them appropriately” (p. 14). A reference is made to the Lexile values of the test, noting they range from 300 (roughly equivalent to a second grade level) to 1,300 (equivalent to a post high school level).¹ The Lexile value is an index of reading difficulty and a range of reading comprehension.² It is important to note that each Lexile value represents a 75% comprehension rate.³

In the revised edition of the MMPI-2 Manual for Administration, Scoring, and Interpretation (Butcher, Graham, Ben-Porath, Tellegen, & Dahlstrom, 2001), exactly the same Lexile values and the same wording regarding the comprehension of all MMPI-2 items are reported as are found in the original manual. Butcher et al. (2001) concluded, however, that a sixth grade reading level rather than an eighth grade reading level is now required (p. 9).

Paolo, Ryan, and Smith (1991) analyzed the reading level of the MMPI-2. They assessed the Lexile rating for each MMPI-2 item and for 61 sub/special scales. They found that the mean Lexile rating for all items was 600 (equivalent to a fifth grade level). They also found that 10% of the items were at or above a ninth grade level and that nine subscales had 25% or more of the items above an eighth grade reading

level. Paolo et al.'s concluded that the recommended minimum reading level was an eighth grade.

Our own calculation of Lexile values for the different MMPI-2 items revealed varying results from those cited in the manual, but support Paolo et al. (1991) findings. Butcher et al.'s (2001) conclusion about recommending a sixth rather than an eighth grade reading level raises several concerns. First, how are the same Lexile data in the 1989 manual being interpreted differently at a later point in time? Second, authors of the MMPI-2, manuals state that a certain reading level is necessary for comprehension of the content of *all* MMPI-2 yet no mention is made of the variability in reading level among some items. Further, no mention is made that the reported reading level is an average for all items. The key word is "all." When research has indicated that 10% of the MMPI-2 items are at or above a ninth grade level, we believe it is important to inform the test administrator about this variability so as not to mislead one into believing that someone with a sixth grade reading level can comprehend all items on the test. The Appendix lists the ten items that have a Lexile value of 1,200 or higher, which is roughly equivalent to an eleventh grade level, and are considered the most difficult.

Third, in a forensic setting, much greater scrutiny is applied to the administration, scoring, and interpretation of tests. Often, the results and interpretation of those results have a greater impact on decision making. Consequently, in a forensic setting, we think it is imperative for an examinee to have at least an eighth grade reading level to comprehend the MMPI-2.

When an examinee is suspected of functioning below an eighth grade reading level, it is strongly recommended that a reading test be given to assess reading ability. In addition, analyzing the most difficult reading items on the MMPI-2 might be useful through an examination of unanswered and critical items.

NOTES

1. According to the Website (www.Lexile.com) for Lexile Framework® for Reading, (What is The Lexile Framework for Reading?) The Lexile Framework® for Reading is a scientific approach to reading and text measurement. It includes the Lexile® measure and the Lexile scale. The Lexile measure is a reading ability or text difficulty score followed by an "L" (e.g., "850L"). The Lexile scale is a developmental scale for reading ranging from below 200L for beginning-reader

material to above 1700L for advanced text. All Lexile Framework products, tools and services rely on the Lexile measure and scale to match reader and text.

2. According to the website (www.Lexile.com) for Lexile Framework® for Reading,

(Why is the “75-percent comprehension” number so significant?) Lexile measures allow you to manage comprehension. Matching a reader’s Lexile measure to a text with the same Lexile measure leads to an expected 75-percent comprehension rate—not too difficult to be frustrating, but difficult enough to be challenging and to encourage reading progress. You can further adjust anticipated comprehension simply by choosing more or less difficult texts within a student’s Lexile range, which spans 50L above and 100L below their Lexile measure.

3. According to the website (www.Lexile.com) for Lexile Framework® for Reading,

(What does a Lexile measure tell me about what a student can read?) Lexile measures allow you to manage student reading comprehension. When reader and text measures match, the reader is “targeted.” This is the basis for selecting text that is targeted to a student’s reading ability, and the result is an expected 75-percent comprehension rate—not too difficult to be frustrating, but difficult enough to encourage reading progress. The student’s interests, parental views on what constitutes age-appropriate material and teacher’s instructional aims are also vital issues in managing a reader’s growth.

REFERENCES

- Bow, J. N., Flens, J. R., Gould, J. W., & Greenhut, D. (2005). An analysis of administration, scoring, and interpretation of the MMPI-2 and MCMI-II/III in child custody evaluations. *Journal of Child Custody, 2* (4), 1-22.
- Butcher, J. N., Dahlstrom, W. G., Graham, J. R., Tellegen, A., & Kaemmer, B. (1989). *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2: Manual for Administration and Scoring*. University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota.
- Butcher, J. N., Graham, J. R., Ben-Porath, Y. S., Tellegen, A., Dahlstrom, W. G., & Kaemmer, B. (2001). *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2: Manual for administration, scoring, and interpretation* (rev. ed.). University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota.
- Paolo, A. M., Ryan, J. J., & Smith, A. J. (1991). Reading difficulty of MMPI-2 subscales. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 47*, 529-532.

SUBMITTED: April 14, 2006

REVISED: April 15, 2006

ACCEPTED: April 20, 2006