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BRIEF REPORT

Development and Validation of the Family Law DOORS

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When former spouses experience distress and dispute following separation, risks to well-being and to safety are heightened for all family members. Reliable family-wide risk screening is essential. The Family Law DOORS (Detection of Overall Risk Screen) is a 3-part screening framework to assist identification, evaluation, and response to safety and well-being risks in separated families. Uniquely, the Family Law DOORS screens for victimization and perpetration risks and appraises infant and child developmental risk. The Family Law DOORS self-report screening tool is the subject of this report. Internal scale reliability and concurrent and external criterion validity for the Family Law DOORS were estimated with a community sample of 660 separated parents, including 181 mother–father pairs. Overall psychometric properties are strong and demonstrate good potential for the Family Law DOORS to support early risk detection for separating families.

Keywords: assessment, divorce, domestic violence, family law, validation

Serious allegations of violence and abuse are present in an estimated 50% to 60% of applications to the family law court in Western countries, and between 40% and 80% of mediation cases report some form of intimate partner violence (Ballard, Holtzworth-Munroe, Applegate, & Beck, 2011; Beck & Raghavan, 2010), substantially higher than U.S. general population rates of 12% to 30% (Field & Caetano, 2005). Although self-assessments of risk are more likely to be right than wrong, subject to neither a pessimistic nor optimistic bias (Bell, Cattaneo, Goodman, & Dutton, 2008; Cattaneo, Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007), the spontaneous reporting of risk by clients occurs in only a minority of cases. The practice of standardized universal screening is relatively

rare in family law services; approximately 50% of family violence goes undetected in mediation services (Ballard et al., 2011).

Postseparation partner violence may represent either a continuation or escalation of violence that began during an intimate relationship or a reaction to the act of separation (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Triggers for translating individual stress into assaults on safety and well-being include affective disorders and substance abuse (Gibb, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2011) and partner-initiated separation, long-standing marital discord, adverse personal and cultural meanings of the separation, accumulating life stress, absence of effective supports, and financial hardship (McIntosh & Ralfs, 2012; Kessing, Agerbo, & Mortensen, 2003). The temporal link between suicide intent or ideation and separation is also well established (Batterham et al., 2014; Ide, Wyder, Kölves, & De Leo, 2010).

Children are commonly present at and witnesses to violent incidents between their parents. Meta-analytic and observational methodologies (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Medina, Margolin, & Wilcox, 2000) have concluded that child witnesses of domestic violence have significantly worse psychosocial and neuro-cognitive outcomes than do nonwitnesses and similar outcomes to those of physically abused children. Greater developmental impact is evident when conflict and family violence co-occur with chronically diminished parenting capacity, parents' poor mental health, parental substance abuse, unemployment, and low levels of education (Gustafsson et al., 2014; McIntosh, 2003). An estimated 40% to 55% of cases of family law–related matters involve allegations of both child abuse and intimate partner violence (Fantuzzo, Boruch, Beriama, Atkins, & Marcus, 1997; Moloney et al., 2007). Heightened safety concerns include abduction

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Jennifer E. McIntosh is the author of the Family Law DOORS Level 1 tool, first commissioned by Relationships Australia, South Australia, a not-for-profit organization. Further refinement of the framework was commissioned by the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department. The tool is copyrighted and trademarked and is freely available at www.familylawdoors.com.au. Development of an online course in the use of the DOORS was funded by Relationships Australia, South Australia, and is also offered on this site.

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(Johnston, Sagatun-Edwards, Blomquist, & Girdner, 2001) and lethality (Mouzos & Rushforth, 2003; Nielssen, Large, Westmore, & Lackersteen, 2009). Given all this, it is surprising that to date no validated whole-of-family risk screens have been developed for the family law sector.

Existing Screening Tools and Their Limitations for the Family Law Population

Multiple domestic violence screens were reviewed in the development of the Family Law DOORS; for example, the Domestic Violence Evaluation (DOVE; Ellis & Stuckless, 2006), the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), and the Mediator's Assessment of Safety Issues and Concerns (MASIC; Holtzworth-Munroe, Beck, & Applegate, 2010). All have one, several, or all of the following limitations: They address a narrow definition of *risk*, are not specific to separating couples, appraise subjective experience rather than behaviorally specific indices of abuse, do not address surrounding comorbidities (e.g., mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse) or surrounding precipitants (e.g., religious significance of separation, lack of social support), are not designed for universal use, and screen either victims/potential victims or perpetrators rather than both. None address developmental risk for infants or children, and none are designed for use by both legal and social science professionals in the family law system. The Family Law DOORS was developed in this context.

Development of the Family Law DOORS

The Family Law DOORS is a three-part framework (McIntosh & Ralfs, 2012a) designed to aid cross-disciplinary detection of and response to well-being and safety risks in client families of the family law system. The Family Law DOORS (hereafter DOORS) was first developed for use in a community relationships service and was later commissioned by the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department for refinement and national implementation (McIntosh & Ralfs, 2012b).

The DOORS framework defines *risk* as the potential for physical and psychological harm to self and other family members and includes developmental harm to infants and children. The tool screens for risks of both victimization and perpetration. Screening begins with Level 1 DOORS (McIntosh, 2011), a self-report comprising 10 domains. Practitioners select the domains relevant to their client. The full screen takes 15–20 min to complete using either software or pen and paper or longer if by interview administration. A Level 2 follow-up report is generated for the professional (hard copy or software-generated), highlighting risk indices and giving prompts for follow-up enquiry and response planning. Level 3 resources provide specialist assessment tools and literature on risk etiology.

The 10 domains of the DOORS and their content were derived through extensive literature review, examination of related measures, peer consultation, and a 2-year piloting process. The parent version is the subject of this study (a nonparent version is also available). Unless otherwise indicated, all items are dichotomous, coded "Yes" or "No." The domains are as follows: (1) Your cultural and religious background (1 item); (2) About the separation (7 items); (3) Managing conflict with your child/ren's other

parent (3 items); (4) How you are coping (10 items); (5) How your child/ren's other parent seems to be coping (7 items); (6a) About your baby/young child 0–4 years (6 items) and (6b) About your school-age children 5–17 years (10 items); (7) Managing as a parent (5 items); (8) Your child/ren's safety (7 items); (9a) Your safety (13 items); (9b) Behaving safely (12 items); (10) Other stresses (11 items). (The Level 1 DOORS is available freely from <http://www.familylawdoors.com.au>).

Method

Sample

The sample comprises the whole first cohort to complete the DOORS as part of the partner organization's rollout of universal screening in postseparation mediation and counseling services ($n = 660$). Parents were voluntary or mandated clients. Sample demographics were as follows: 52.0% female, 2.3% indigenous Australian, 44.1% separated less than 24 months, 38.8% college education levels, 53% in paid employment, 67.2% annual income less than \$50,000, and 47.5% receiving welfare payments. Mean ages were as follows: men, 37.6 years (SD 8.2); women, 35.4 years (SD 7.4); and children, 8.7 years (SD 4.3). Over half (60.3%) reported on a preschool child and 60.5% on a school-aged child. Two thirds (63.8%) were referred for mediation. Of these, 65.9% were the party first requesting dispute resolution ("Party A"). Remaining parents were referred to a contact center or to post-separation counseling. Screening data were available for 181 mother–father pairs (51.3% of sample), 134 individual fathers (19.0%), and 164 individual mothers (23.3%).

Procedure

Although the screen can be completed alone, all DOORS and concurrent validity data reported were collected during risk screening interviews by the partner organization, where screening is universally undertaken. The privacy policy and client consent protocol of this organization allow deidentified information to be used for directly related research purposes. Such policies enabled the inclusion of every client screened in this first pilot cohort, not just consenting participants recruited into a research project, potentially strengthening the generalizability of findings. Deidentified data were securely exported to the external researchers for analyses.

Creating external criterion validity subsamples. To explore whether self-report on the DOORS could be said to reflect objective markers of safety, we determined five external criteria: the presence or absence of an intervention order or child protection report prior to the service whether mediation occurred, whether a safety plan was made and whether a child protection referral was made at the service. Data extraction occurred by individual file review. Funding permitted a random subsample of 303 cases (62% of families in the study). Two coders from the partner organization, both blind to the Level 1 DOORS scale scores, reviewed and double-coded 10% of the case files. Agreement on all external criteria was moderate-to-high (lowest: Cohen's $\kappa = 0.65$ for whether there was a child protection order [premediation and postintake]; highest: $\kappa = 1.00$ for documented mediation outcomes).

Creating concurrent validity subsamples. Concurrent validity was assessed via correlation with gold standard measures available from two nested studies conducted within the cohort: (1) the K-10 (Kessler et al., 2002) mental health screen for 50 parents and (2) the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire—Parent Report (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) or the Brief Infant Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (BITSEA; Briggs-Gowan, Carter, Irwin, Wachtel, & Cicchetti, 2004) for children and preschoolers, from 122 parents.

Results

Scale Derivation and Analysis

Given that most of the items in the Level 1 DOORS are dichotomous, with some three-category ordinal items, categorical principal components analysis (CATPCA) was used as a confirmatory technique on 11 domains of the Level 1 DOORS. In all cases except for items on difficulty coping, a one-factor solution was found to be optimal, with only one eigenvalue greater than

unity. Signs of having difficulty resulted in two factors with eigenvalues greater than unity: one for feelings of not coping and one for drug and alcohol use. CATPCA also provided estimates of internal reliability for each measure. Potentially redundant items were deleted if to do so was consistent with theoretical expectations. In the case of the stress index, the analysis resulted in reduction of the number of items from 11 to 10. In total, 11 scales were derived (see Table 1) using factor loadings. Table 2 presents interscale correlations.

Comparisons Between Mothers' and Fathers' Ratings

A large table including all measures (separately for mothers and fathers) was constructed, and internal reliability of scales was calculated using categorical principal components analysis. All measures of internal reliability were either satisfactory (.70 or above) or retained given the important content domain being assessed. These latter were parents' ratings of child safety (coefficient $\alpha = .68$) and mothers' ratings of perpetrating unsafe behaviors (coefficient $\alpha = .58$). The latter alpha likely reflects low

Table 1

Results of Categorical Principal Components Analysis for the Family Law DOORS Scales

Scale and items	No. items	α	% variance	Interitem correlation coefficients (range)	Component loadings (range)
1. Negative emotions about separation <i>Discontented; Sad/down; Distressed/upset; Frustrated/annoyed; Worried/anxious; Hopeless/powerless; Scared/afraid; Embarrassed/humiliated; Jealous/resentful; Angry/furious; Shocked/devastated</i>	11	.85	39.2	.13–.56	.43–.74
2. Adult not coping <i>Very anxious/fearful; Very angry/irritated; Very sad/empty/depressed; Unusual behavior/feelings</i>	4	.73	48.3	.29–.37	.67–.72
3. Parent's substance use <i>Alcohol/drugs more than meant to; Want/need to cut down; Someone else worried</i>	3	.80	71.1	.45–.70	.74–.91
4. Partner not coping ^a <i>Major worries; Very anxious/fearful; Very angry/irritated; Very sad /depressed; Out of character behavior; Problem A/D use; Seen mental health professional</i>	7	.77	42.5	.14–.45	.49–.79
5. Infant distress ^b <i>More distressed; More fussy; More angry</i>	3	.72	54.3	.19–.54	.62–.81
6. Child distress ^c <i>More anxious; Aggressive; Sad/withdrawn; Defiant; Concerning behavior</i>	5	.79	48.4	.22–.58	.55–.76
7. Parenting responsiveness index ^d <i>Know how child is feeling; Comfort child; Set limits; Support child's activities/interests; Harsh (reverse-scored)</i>	5	.73	48.3	.13–.41	.44–.85
8. Concerns about child's safety <i>Concerns with other parent; Concerns with anyone else; Someone else is worried; Child protection report</i>	4	.72	54.0	.22–.50	.64–.83
9. Concerns for own safety <i>Worried about safety now; Worried about safety past; Others are concerned; Police have been called; Ex threatened me; Ex used force</i>	6	.80	50.6	.30–.57	.67–.80
10. Own unsafe behaviors (men only) <i>Others worried by me; Followed ex; Controlled ex; Threatened ex; Used force with ex; Ex/children afraid of me</i>	6	.73	42.9	.19–.49	.45–.81
11. Stress index <i>Unemployment; Financial hardship; Property settlement; Child support; Legal; Housing; Feeling isolated; Harassment; Illness/disability; Transport</i>	10	.75	30.3	.04–.36	.40–.74

Note. DOORS = Detection of Overall Risk Screen.

^a Cases omitted if respondent had no contact with other parent in previous 6 months (remaining $n = 469$). ^b Cases omitted if respondent did not have a young child or had no contact with the young child in the previous 6 months (remaining $n = 305$). ^c Cases omitted if respondent did not have a school-age child or had no contact with the child in the previous 6 months (remaining $n = 380$). ^d Cases omitted if respondent had no contact with the child in the previous 6 months (remaining $n = 516$).

Table 2
Scale Intercorrelations for the Family Law DOORS (Level 1)

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Negative emotions	—									
2. Adult not coping	.42***	—								
3. Parent's substance use	.14***	.29***	—							
4. Partner not coping ^a	.33***	.42***	-.06	—						
5. Infant distress	.15*	.26***	.11	.34***	—					
6. Child distress	.28***	.36***	.08	.41***	.58***	—				
7. Parenting responsiveness	-.09*	-.24***	-.07	-.18**	-.14*	-.40***	—			
8. Concerns for child's safety	-.00	.16***	-.00	.42***	.32***	.36***	-.13**	—		
9. Concerns for own safety	.12**	.33***	.05	.50***	.21**	.25***	-.11*	.54***	—	
10. Behaving unsafely (men)	.09*	.19***	.21***	.30***	.09	.19***	-.09*	.33***	.29***	—
11. Stress index (total)	.39***	.50***	.31***	.32***	.25***	.29***	-.20***	.23***	.34***	.25***

Note. DOORS = Detection of Overall Risk Screen.

^a Report of another person's well-being was included only if that person (adult or child) had been seen within 6 months.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

item endorsement and has been retained in the DOORS for future analyses with larger samples. The resulting matrix of scale correlations was used in a preliminary multitrait multimethod analysis (see the Preliminary Multitrait Multimethod Analysis section).

External Criterion Validity for Safety Scales

Table 3 gives results of logistic regression analyses regressing internal scales (some of which would be expected to predict outcomes strongly but others not) onto external criteria. Two scales—parent report of child safety concerns and men's reports of their potential to behave unsafely—significantly differentiated families on all five external criteria. High concerns for self-safety also predicted four of the external criteria (i.e., all except having a preservice child protection report). The three remaining scales—stress index, having difficulty coping, and reports of the other parent having difficulty coping—were weaker predictors of, or unrelated to, external criteria. Reports of poor personal coping predicted the deployment of a safety plan, and high levels of reported stress predicted three external criteria.

Concurrent Validity for Infant, Child, and Adult Well-Being Scales

We compared three gold standard well-being risk screens' scores to the infant and child distress scales and the adult coping scales of the Level 1 DOORS, using Pearson's r . BITSEA problem scales correlated significantly with the DOORS infant distress scale ($n = 22$, mean age 24 months; $r = .45$, $p = .038$). SDQ reports correlated significantly with the DOORS child distress scale ($n = 97$ families, mean child age 9 years; $r = .66$, $p = .000$). K-10 scores were moderately associated with the DOORS adult not coping scale ($n = 51$; $r = .49$, $p = .000$).

Interparty Corroboration of Safety Reports Between Parents

Intraclass correlation coefficients with matched pairs (see Table 4) showed former couple reports correlated significantly on negative emotion about the separation, personal well-being, perceptions of other's well-being, parenting stress, general stress, school-age children's well-being, and concern for their own and for their

Table 3
Logistic Regression With Odds Ratios for External Safety Criteria Regressed Onto the DOORS Scales

Variable	Preservice		At service		
	Intervention order	Child protection report	Mediation occurred	Safety plan	Child protection referral
n (sample size)	298	292	265	291	292
% with indicator	10.4	16.5	42.3	43.6	11.6
Child safety concerns	1.85**	2.63***	0.63**	1.81***	2.06***
Self safety concerns	1.44**	1.23	0.80*	1.68***	1.35*
Behaving unsafely (men)	2.09**	1.54*	0.62*	2.77***	1.76*
Stress index	1.32*	1.10	0.78*	1.27*	1.31
Not coping	1.15	0.92	0.96	1.33*	1.08
Other parent not coping	1.07	1.19	1.04	1.39**	1.45*

Note. DOORS = Detection of Overall Risk Screen.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Paired Sample Correlations Concerning Parent Safety Reports

Variable	Pairs (<i>n</i>)	Intraclass correlation ρ	Pearson correlation <i>r</i>
Ratings of the same phenomenon			
Mother's concerns for her safety with father's report of his unsafe behaviors	165	.55***	
Mother and father report of father's not coping ^a	87	.52***	
Mother and father report of mother's not coping ^a	93	.42***	
Concerns for child's safety	137	.32***	
Child well-being	64	.30**	
Infant well-being	47	.19	
Ratings of different phenomena			
Own physical safety	164		.52***
Parenting responsiveness index	97		.50***
Other parent's coping	82		.39***
Negative emotions about separation	181		.30***
Stress index	168		.30***
Own coping	155		.16*
Own drug and alcohol problems	155		.02

^a Report of other parent's well-being was included only if the reporting parent had seen the other parent within 6 months. Intraclass correlation coefficient (1, *k*) *F* test, single-measure absolute agreement.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

children's safety. Mothers' concerns for their own safety correlated highly with fathers' reports of their own potentially unsafe behaviors, including fathers' agreement that mothers would report feeling unsafe. Paired reports on infant well-being and parents' drug and alcohol problems did not correlate significantly.

Preliminary Multitrait Multimethod Analysis

A full multitrait multimethod (MTMM) approach to construct validity (Ferketich, Figueredo, & Knapp, 1991) could not be undertaken, due to a relatively small sample size for paired ratings on some items. Preliminary analyses were possible with two internal sets of ratings (mothers' and fathers') and two external measures (K-10 and SDQ). Correlations between monomethod and heteromethod blocks were compared. Preliminary analysis (using Pearson correlation coefficients) showed general agreement with the expected results. Correlations between ratings of different traits and different methods were all zero to weak, with the highest correlation between mothers' parenting responsiveness and fathers' not coping ($r = .30$). Correlations between ratings of different traits by the same method were zero to moderate, with the highest correlation between mothers' stress and mothers' feeling of not coping ($r = .50$). Correlations between measures of the same trait by different methods were low to moderate, with moderate agreement between mothers' coping and fathers' assessment of mothers' coping ($r = .42$), between fathers' coping and mothers' assessment of fathers' coping ($r = .52$), and between mothers' assessments of safety and fathers' acknowledgment of unsafe behaviors ($r = .55$).

Discussion

The Family Law DOORS was developed as a three-part framework to support professionals in screening, evaluating, and responding to safety and well-being risks for all family members, including infants and children, after separation. Internal reliability

of test scores and validity of interpretation were explored in four substudies, using data from 660 postseparation clients at a community-based counseling and mediation service. The first psychometric indications are sound on several fronts. First, 11 distinct scales were identified (see Table 1), with internal reliabilities ranging from 0.66 to 0.82. When the sample was split by gender, internal consistencies remained at least adequate for all measures except mothers' ratings of their own unsafe behaviors. When the 11 scales were correlated with each other (see Table 2), eight of the 55 possible correlations were not statistically significant. This suggests that even though many risk domains are linked, postseparation risk is not adequately captured by a single dimension, particularly when adopting a whole-family definition of the client in family law matters.

Five of six parent ratings of the *same* phenomenon correlated significantly with the matched rating of the other parent (see Table 4). Six of seven matched reports of *different* phenomena were significantly correlated in the matched pairs. This suggests more synchrony than dys-synchrony in experiences of conflict and stress and considerable accuracy in reporting the other parent's well-being after separation. Women's concerns for their own safety with their ex-partner correlated with men's independent ratings of their own unsafe behaviors, suggesting interpretive validity of the tool in detecting gendered violence risks. Although some evidence has suggested that former partners misperceive the emotional reality of the other parent (maximizing self and minimizing other), our results support greater correlation. Such findings are important, given that some practitioners see only one parent presenting for a service and may need to consider risk to the other parent and/or the children, in the absence of "corroborating" material.

Strong correlation between the infant and child well-being scales and the BITSEA and SDQ, respectively, suggests the Level 1 DOORS may provide a valid shortcut to initial screening of parents' concerns about their children. Parents' ratings of infant distress were not significantly correlated, but they were for school-

age children. This difference is worth further investigation. Future work should aim to establish correlations of matched parent Level 1 DOORS reports with independent reports of professionals. Finally, strong positive findings of external criterion validity were obtained by linking the DOORS data to five external criteria, indicating that a client's self-report of safety concerns on the DOORS predicted at least one professional's decisions about risks in the case (such as a police officer drafting an intervention order or a practitioner making a child protection notification).

Limitations

Although these data from 660 clients are representative of "business as usual" at the partner agency, other sites and other locations may find a different pattern of responses where clients are solely court-ordered to attend services or present to mediate only property matters. The concurrent validity subsamples were opportunistic and are smaller than the main sample. Current work on this screen has yet to consider potential response distortions in reporting, as well as validity of interpretation and reliability, for the nonparent version of the Family Law DOORS. The universal nature of the sampling is a key study strength. Analyses with the next sample of 4,000 screens are planned and will allow completion of MTMM analysis, determining threshold scores and facilitating better predictive capacity about the safety of family law clients.

Conclusion

The prevention of risk to the safety and lives of family law clients remains one of the field's highest priorities. Current policy and practice directions (Johnston & Ver Steegh, 2013) reinforce the place for standardized risk screening of separated parents in dispute. The DOORS marks an evolution in both definition and methodology of risk screening, with the aim of enabling better and earlier whole-of-family screening. The first validation and reliability data reported here lend support to the utility of the Family Law DOORS in these endeavors.

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