

NEWS BRIEFS

EVENTS

NOTABLES

SEARCH

PRINT THIS ISSUE

PRINT PAST ISSUES

FEEDBACK

SUBSCRIBE  
(ENTER E-MAIL)

UVM HOMEPAGE

## Beyond the Clinical Interview

By Jon Reidel

Article published April 9, 2008

 PRINT | EMAIL THIS PAGE

Stephanie McConaughy, research professor of psychiatry and psychology, has spent nearly three decades producing research to help evaluators accurately diagnose children. (Photo: Sally McCay)

It seems paradoxical that Stephanie McConaughy, research professor of psychiatry and psychology, whose book *Clinical Interview for Children and Adolescents: Assessment to Intervention* (Guilford, 2005) is an international model for the adolescent clinical interview, would also be a proponent and architect of assessment tests that produce numerical scores. After hearing her University Scholar Lecture on Feb. 21, however, it's hard to imagine a psychiatrist not using both forms of analysis to make a diagnosis.

A large part of McConaughy's lecture, "Interviewing and Observing Children for Psychological Assessment," focused on the importance of including input from multiple stakeholders. Historically, the clinical interview has always been given the most weight, and although McConaughy doesn't dispute its importance and is considered a master at conducting them, she says researchers shouldn't rely solely on their own observations. Instead, they should use

in part because children act differently at home, school and in the school psychologist's office.

It probably wasn't intentional (although she is a licensed clinical psychologist), but McConaughy's more holistic approach to analysis was given some credence during her U-Scholar Lecture when she asked audience members — a mixture of psychiatrists, psychologists and lay people — to make a diagnosis after watching a video of a young boy she'd interviewed. The answers varied, showing why McConaughy's belief that empirically based methods of evaluating children are key components of the evaluation puzzle.

“The clinical interview has always been the gold standard,” says McConaughy, who has been a school psychologist for 20-plus years. “It's been given a lofty standard above all others, but why not consider as many perspectives as possible. Everyone has their own ideas about what might be wrong — the school psychologist, teachers and the parents — but not one of them necessarily has the ‘right’ answer. Kids act differently depending on the circumstances. There weren't established norms (for interviews), so one of our goals was to create an empirically based rating scale to create some standards.”

### **Creating tools to help evaluators and children**

McConaughy's love for child development started early in life and flourished while specializing in psychoeducational assessments of children's learning and behavioral problems as a doctoral student at UVM in 1980. She was appointed assistant research professor one year later and immediately started working with Thomas Achenbach, professor of psychology and creator of the world-renowned Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA), who had arrived one year earlier.

Since then, the tandem has produced dozens of assessment tools, papers, presentations and books on their own and under the umbrella of the Research Center for Children, Youth, and Families, Inc., which they established as a non-profit at UVM in 1981. Many of these tests and interview methods developed by McConaughy have been used worldwide to help accurately assess child behavior. The Semistructured Clinical Interview for Children and Adolescents (SCICA) is an industry standard. The Test Observation Form (TOF), a standardized form for rating observations of behavior, affect, and test-taking style, and the Direct Observation Form (DOF), designed to score observations over 10-minute periods in classrooms and group activities, have greatly enhanced the ability of interviewers to properly assess students.

The results of the tests are fed into a computer, and a score is produced that can show a mild deviance, something more severe (90th percentile or above) or even a syndrome that may be considered clinically severe (97th percentile). Prior to the development of many of these assessment tests, the determination of whether a child had ADHD, for example, was based almost solely on the observations of a clinician.

“She’s worked with me longer than anyone and has been a great collaborator,” says Achenbach. “Her book on clinical interviews is very unique and really filled a niche. There’s not another one out there like it; she’s done it very successfully. She’s also worked with a lot of students over the years.”

### **Keeping it fresh**

The sheer volume of work produced by McConaughy, who serves on editorial boards of four journals and is frequently published in top journals, is hard to grasp. She produced a book in 2007 titled, *Collaborating with Parents for Early School, Success* and is working on another book for 2008. She has also served as an advisor to numerous graduate students including Jessica Cota, who recently defended her dissertation titled “Academic Challenges for Children With ADHD: Policy Implications for School-based Practice.”

"I truly respect her character and professionalism," says Cota. "She is committed to supporting students, and her style of advising is direct and goal-oriented. I was impressed with the time and resources she was willing to share with me. I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked with, and learned from, the best."

McConaughy, along with Cota and others, are conducting a massive, multi-site, National Institutes of Health-funded study to advance assessment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) using two TOF, DOF and other ASEBA forms she helped create. This research is being conducted in conjunction with the College of Education and Social Services. “Her collaborations with researchers (in CESS) have produced grant funding, multiple publications in peer-reviewed journals, chapters in books, and a book,” says one of her U-Scholar nominators.

If successful, the NIH grant study, which uses independent evaluators or "blind" observers in conjunction with educators and parents to make a diagnosis, could shed light on why some students don't perform well in the classroom and may help determine what should be done to help them improve. “I don't expect a perfect argument to come from this, but if we could add an independent source that agrees with parents and teachers, that would be powerful. ADHD

research hasn't focused on academic performance. The next step will be to figure out what to do about it.”

theview

University Communications  
86 South Williams Street  
Burlington, Vermont  
05401-3404

pho 802.656.2005  
fax 802.656.3203

[theview@uvm.edu](mailto:theview@uvm.edu)

[The View Homepage](#) | [UVM Homepage](#)  
[News Briefs](#) | [Events](#) | [Notables](#) | [About Us](#) | [RSS](#) | [Feedback](#)