

The Influence of Decision-Maker Gender on Child Custody Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Custodial rulings are high in prevalence, yet low in standardized criteria necessary in preventing biased decisions. Because various legal decision-makers inform custodial decisions, it is crucial to examine individual difference predictors of such decisions. Indeed, research has revealed that factors related to parents involved in custodial disputes (gender, social adjustment, and social skills) influence outcomes in custody cases (Kunin, Ebbesen, & Konečni, 1992). In my own previous research, I have explored various factors that have the potential to impact a custodial decision (e.g., a mother's tattoo, a mother's race, a mother's history of mental illness). In the present study I explore the impact of participant gender on decisions regarding whether an abusive parent who had lost child custody be awarded custody of her child in the future. I conducted a novel study in which participants read a vignette depicting a neglectful mother who had lost custody of her child, but who was making strides toward regaining custody. Supporting my hypotheses, women were less likely to grant the mother full custody of the child, as compared to men. Furthermore, this effect was mediated by women's belief that the mother was a less capable parent.

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Numerous custody cases reach dependency court each year. Few of these cases are straightforward, and many accompany allegations of abuse and neglect. Because custody rulings are often emotional, and certainly involve serious life-long consequences that affect both the parent and child, it is imperative and a legal requirement that these rulings be unbiased and uninfluenced by prejudicial emotion. Yet, social science research repeatedly reveals the existence of personal prejudice and its effects on behavior and decisions. It is, therefore of great value to explore factors that predict outcomes in custodial cases, which often include emotionally laden legal decisions. Indeed, numerous benign characteristics of parents have the potential to influence custodial rulings, including, for instance, physical appearance, visible tattoos, and a father's post-divorce living arrangement (Kunin, Ebbesen, & Konečni, 1992; Denne, Wornica, Meyer, & Stevenson, 2013). Moreover, characteristics of legal decision-makers (e.g., judges and social workers) have the potential to affect child custodial decisions as well. In the current study, I explore how decision-maker gender shapes rulings in child custodial cases.

Factors Shaping Child Custodial Decisions

Although limited, emerging research has documented various factors that have the potential to shape child custodial decisions. For instance, legislation and policy directly limit the parental rights of parents with mental illness when they are involved in a child custodial case. Specifically, more than 40% of all 50 states limit the child custody rights of parents who have a mental illness (see Hemmens, Miller, Burton, & Milner, 2002 for a review). A more recent study revealed that eight states and the District of Columbia take the parent's mental and physical health into consideration in regards to custody decisions (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Although considering parental mental and physical health in a child custodial

case might be in the best interest of the child, recent research suggests that negative stereotypes and myths associated with mental illness drive discriminatory child custodial decisions targeting parents with a history of mental illness (Wornica, Denne, & Stevenson, 2016).

A few studies have explored the potential for extra-legal characteristics related to the parent to shape child custodial decisions. For instance, Kunin and colleagues (1992) examined 282 custody investigations from 1982 from the San Diego County Superior Court to explore the actual effects of these variables in real-life custodial decisions. The researchers assessed and coded information about parents involved in dependency court cases, including demographic information, counselor notes, and psychiatric evaluations. When a mother was rated “high” in physical appearance, social skills, and social adjustment by a court appointed counselor, she was more likely to receive full custody than if she was rated as “low” in those characteristics (Kunin et al., 1992).

Only one study has included an experimental manipulation of characteristics associated with a mother involved in a child custodial dispute. Specifically, Denne, Wornica, and Stevenson (2014) experimentally manipulated the presence of a mother’s visible tattoo to explore the impact of tattoo presence on participants’ likelihood to grant her full custody. Participants read a vignette depicting a mother involved in a custodial dispute over her child. The mother was described as generally responsible, but that she had engaged in isolated behaviors indicating poor parenting. In line with hypotheses, participants were marginally less likely to allocate full custody to the tattooed mother as compared to the non-tattooed mother, and perceived the tattooed mother as a significantly less capable parent than the non-tattooed mother – a belief that significantly mediated participants’ tendency to deny her full custody. These findings are consistent with research indicating that women with tattoos are perceived to be less attractive,

less religious, psychologically unstable, and financially insecure, (Swami & Furnham, 2007; Martin & Dula, 2010; Braverman, 2012) -- all factors that have been shown to greatly reduce a mother's chance of receiving custody (Chesler, 1991; Efran, 1974).

Gender Differences in Reactions to Child Abuse

Although there is a small body of research exploring parent characteristics that predict outcomes in child custody cases, currently no research has explored participant characteristics -- namely participant gender -- as predictors of decisions in child custody cases (i.e. Chesler, 1991; Warshak, 1996). I expect that participant gender will emerge as a predictor of child custodial decisions, particularly when child abuse is involved. Specifically, I expect that women will be less likely than men to award child custody to a previously abusive parent. Next, I turn to research and theory highlighting participant gender differences in reactions to cases involving child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, and child neglect.

Gender Differences in Perceptions of Child Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse and Neglect

In cases involving child sexual or physical abuse, women tend to make more pro-child victim rulings than men and tend to make more case judgments that lead to defendant convictions (Bottoms et al., 2011; Dukes & Kean, 1989; Bottoms, Golding, Stevenson, & Yozwiak, 2007; Bottoms, 1993; Bottoms et al., 2014). Such gender differences are most strongly and frequently demonstrated in cases involving child sexual abuse (for a review, see Bottoms et al., 2007), yet they extend to cases involving child physical abuse and child neglect as well (Dukes & Kean, 1989). For instance, Dukes and Kean (1989) presented participants with incidences of child psychological abuse, neglect, and physical abuse. Participants then answered a series of questions assessing the extent to which they believed the incidents were abusive. Women viewed all the scenarios as more abusive than did male participants. In a similar study conducted by Bornstein, Kaplan, and Perry (2007), participants read vignettes depicting severe

sexual abuse, mild sexual abuse, or physical abuse. Participants then answered a questionnaire assessing the severity and likelihood of reoccurrence of abuse. Results revealed that women tended to view both sexual and physical abuse as more severe, and more likely to reoccur, as compared to male participants (see also Howe, Herzberger, & Tennen, 1988). In a more recent mock trial study conducted by Bottoms and colleagues (2011), participants read a detailed scenario depicting a father accused of smothering his three month old baby to death with a towel out of frustration over the baby's incessant crying. Women, as compared to men, were more likely to rule in favor of the prosecution, support a harsher punishment for the defendant, and value the infant as a unique being. These effects of gender were mediated by men's greater empathy, sympathy, and similarity felt toward the male perpetrator (the father). These findings suggest that the gender differences evidenced in child sexual abuse cases also persist in child neglect and physical abuse cases. While no studies to date have explored whether gender differences emerge in participants' judgments in child custodial cases, it is reasonable to expect that similar gender differences will emerge, particularly when participants are asked to render decisions regarding withholding custody of a child from a neglectful parent.

Understanding Participant Gender Differences in Reactions to Child Abuse Cases

Although well-established gender differences in reactions toward child abuse consistently emerge, it is important to understand the psychological underpinnings of such effects. It is unlikely that these gender differences are due to fundamental differences in male and female anatomy. Instead, empirical evidence suggests that these gender differences are driven by underlying psychological phenomenon -- namely gender differences in empathy toward children (Bottoms et al., 2007; Bottoms et al., 2014).

Empathy is defined by Davis (1983) as the cognitive and emotional reaction of a person to the experiences of another. This includes the ability to take another person's perspective and

sensitivity to others. Specifically in rape cases, men have been shown to be less empathic towards the female rape victim than women and, as a result, make less pro-victim judgments (Barnett et al., 1992; Deitz & Littman, 1984; Deitz & Byrnes, 1981). Further studies have demonstrated that these findings generalize to children specifically in sexual abuse cases (Barnett et al., 1992; Davis, 1983; Bottoms, 1993; Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Bottoms et al., 2011). That is, women (compared to men) tend to experience more empathy for children and have stronger negative reactions to child sexual abuse – emotions and attitudes that drive their increased likelihood to convict the defendant (Bottoms, Peter-Hagene, Stevenson, Wiley, Mitchell, & Goodman, 2014).

There are several possible explanations for the effect of participant gender on levels of child-victim empathy in sexual abuse contexts. One such explanation is that women are able to relate to children better than men. Empathy is highest when the subject considers it possible that they would be in the same situation as the victim, or they perceive the victim as similar to themselves (Aderman, Brehm, & Katz, 1974). Women are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse than men, and therefore sexual abuse is a more salient issue for women (Bottoms, 1993; Bottoms et al., 2014). Because women are better able to identify with children who have been victims of sexual abuse (Back & Lips, 1988), they feel more empathy for them (Beling, Hudson, & Ward, 2001; Bottoms et al., 2014).

Alternatively, gender roles and socialization can explain, in part, gender differences in empathy and attitudes towards children (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Nicholas & Bieber, 1994; Hoffman, 1977; Bottoms et al., 2014). The attitudes that men and women have are a reflection of their socialization (Beling, Hudson, & Ward, 2001). Women are socialized to be caring, concerning and child-oriented, gearing them towards child care behavior and parenting;

alternatively, men are socialized to be aggressive and independent (Bradshaw & Hinds, 1997; Kean & Dukes, 1991; Hoffman, 1977; Barnett & Sinisi, 1990). Additionally, women's societal roles allocate them increased experience with children (Bottoms, 1993). It is possible then that women's care-focused orientation and experience with children translates into women valuing children more, and in turn, empathizing with children more than men.

Differences in empathy translate into pro-victim rulings in numerous ways. Empathy influences one's ability to take other's perspectives, which in turn affects perceived responsibility for behavior. In a child sexual abuse context, men tend to perceive children as more responsible for their abuse than do women (Back & Lips, 1998). Alternatively, empathy for the child, which is more commonly experienced among women, helps prevent victim-blaming. Even if originally the evaluator was disposed to make negative child attributions, these attributions may be superseded by feelings of compassion and identification with the child victim (Bottoms, 1993). In turn, those with higher levels of empathy are more likely to make pro-victim rulings, at least in child sexual abuse cases (Bottoms, 1993; Bottoms, 2014). Indeed, women tend to render more pro-prosecution judgments in child sexual abuse cases precisely because women, on average, have higher levels of empathy toward victims of child sexual abuse. Illustrating that empathy ultimately explains gender differences in child victim judgments, Bottoms et al. (2014) found that men who were more empathic toward children tended to make more pro-child victim judgments (much like women, generally). Likewise, women who were less empathic toward children made fewer pro-victim judgments (much like men, generally).

Although research has been limited to the psychological underpinnings of gender differences in reactions to child sexual abuse, it is likely that these theoretical explanations generalize to other forms of abuse (physical abuse or neglect). In support, women are at greater

risk of experiencing domestic physical victimization, as well (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). This is supported by Kean and Dukes (1991) who found that women are slightly more likely than men to intervene on behalf on a physically abused child and slightly more likely than men to take action against an abusive parent (Kean & Dukes, 1991).

Decision-Maker Gender Differences in Custody Rulings

No research to date has explored possible decision-maker gender differences in reactions to child custodial cases involving child abuse. Social workers and judges make evaluations and decisions regarding family reunification versus termination of parental rights when cases involve previously substantiated child abuse. It is possible that the decision-maker's gender might shape such decisions – a possibility that I explore in the present research. In the present study, I presented men and women participants with a vignette depicting a neglectful mother who had lost custody of her child, but who was making strides toward regaining custody. I expect that men will grant the mother custody of her child more frequently than women. Furthermore, I predict that these gender differences in custody rulings will be mediated by beliefs about the capability of the mother, such that men will believe the previously neglectful mother to be a more capable parent as compared to women. These hypotheses are in line with previously reviewed research illustrating that women (versus men) tend to hold more pro-child attitudes (Barnett & Sinisi, 1990; Hoffman, 1977) and perceive child abuse to be more severe (Hansen et al, 1997; Bornstein, Kaplan, & Perry; 2007; Bottoms et al., 2014).

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 254 community members (47% women; M age = 34.32, SD = 9.71; 71.9% White) recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Amazon's Mechanical Turk

(36% non-White; 31% non-American) is an online workforce of potential participants who complete certain tasks in exchange for compensation (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). With over 100,000 people participating, this workforce is commonly used by social scientists who post experiments and surveys on Mechanical Turk and pay participants for their participation (Pontin, 2007). Amazon.com hosts Mechanical Turk and allows social scientists to recruit a sample of participants that are more generalizable than an undergraduate sample from one university. Research has shown that the samples provided by Mechanical Turk are more representative than the typical college sample and are at least equally reliable (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

Materials

Case vignette. Participants were given a vignette depicting a child custodial case (see Appendix B) and were instructed to imagine they were a social worker evaluating a 26-year-old mother who was attempting to regain custody of her 5-year-old son.¹ Participants were told the child had been removed from the mother's custody after allegations of neglect. The mother was additionally described as an alcoholic with a Vicodin addiction. The child was depicted as having made gains in physical health and academic performance after being removed from the mother's care and placed in temporary foster care. Since losing her child, the mother attended weekly visitations with her son with moderate consistency as well as the majority of her counseling sessions. The mother passed her first drug screening and had not broken any laws since the removal of her child. However, the mother indicated that she planned to terminate her counseling sessions if reunited with her child. Participants were then charged with determining if reunification with the mother was in the best interest of the child. The vignette was reviewed for

realism by a practicing social worker. Following the vignette, participants were provided with a photograph of the mother.

Dependent measures. Participants completed a series of scales designed to assess perceptions of the mother's character and capability. Questions were categorized and compiled to create four separate scales.

Perceived mother capability scale. This 13-item scale (Crobach's alpha = .97) included items assessing perceptions of the mother's parenting ability, including: "The mother will likely provide a loving atmosphere for her child," "The mother has recovered from her drug addiction," "The mother is likely to maintain her employment," "The mother is likely to make decisions that are in the best interest of her child," "The mother is likely to provide a stable and well-structured environment for her child," "The mother has recovered from her alcohol addiction," "The mother is likely to foster good manners and habits in her child," "The mother will likely provide a safe environment for her child," "The child's well-being is likely the mother's main priority," "The mother is likely to provide the basic necessities for her child," "The mother is likely to provide an intellectually stimulating atmosphere for her child," "The mother is a good role model for her child." Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with the prior statements using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

Mother motivation scale. Two questions were compiled to create the Mother Motivation Scale (Crobach's alpha = .79), which employed the same seven-point Likert Scale. This scale included the following questions: "The mother has exhausted every resource for getting her child back" and "The mother appears to be very motivated to get her child back".

Perceived child potential scale. Thirdly, items designed to measure perceptions of the child's ability to have a successful future if reunited with the mother were compiled to create the

Perceived Child Potential Scale (Crobach's alpha = .89). The scale included the following 3 items: "If the child returns to his mother's custody, he is likely to grow up to develop a drug or alcohol addiction," "If the child returns to his mother's custody, he is likely to drop out of high school," and "If the child returns to his mother's custody, his physical health will likely suffer."

Perceived mother characteristic scale. Additionally, participants evaluated the mother on 5 perceived characteristics (intelligence, caring, responsibility, trustworthiness, and appearance) using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Low in Quality*) to 5 (*High in Quality*). These assessed characteristics were compiled to create the Perceived Mother Characteristic Scale (Crobach's alpha = .83).

Fit for full custody. Following these measures, participants indicated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) the extent to which they believe the mother to be fit for full custody.

Demographics. Participants answered some basic demographic questions assessing their age, gender, religiosity, ethnicity, and marital status. They then further indicated their stance on foreign policy issues, social issues, and economic issues using a 7 point Likert Scale ranging from 0 (*very liberal*) to 6 (*very conservative*). Participants then answered "yes" or "no" to the following questions, "Have you ever been personally involved in a custody battle?" and "If you have children, have any of your children ever been removed from your custody by the state?"

Procedure

Participants were first informed that the study contained minimal risks and no identifying information would be linked to their responses (see Appendix A). Additionally they were informed of their freedom to withdraw. After providing informed consent, participants read a vignette depicting a mother who lost custody of her 5 year old child due to allegations of drug

addiction and child neglect. Participants then answered a separate questionnaire assessing their perceptions of the mother's capability, characteristics, motivation to regain custody of her child, the child's potential if reunified with the mother, and their belief that the mother is fit for full custody. Participants were then provided with a debriefing statement which explained the purpose of the research, directed participants towards related research, and provided participants with the researcher's contact information

Results

Between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted on the respondents' assessment of whether the mother was fit for full custody, and ratings on the 4 scales assessing beliefs about the mother. Consistent with hypotheses, men ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.70$) were significantly more likely than women ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.26$) to report the mother as fit for full custody, $F(1, 253) = 12.77$, $p < .0005$. Men ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.34$), as compared to women, ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.07$) were also significantly more likely to view the mother as a capable mother, $F(1, 253) = 9.94$, $p = .002$. Furthermore, men ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.45$) rated the mother as significantly more motivated to get her child back, as compared to women ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.23$), $F(1, 253) = 14.23$, $p < .0005$. Finally, men ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.32$), as compared to women, ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .97$), $F(1, 253) = 18.15$, $p < .0005$, were significantly more likely to view the child as having more potential if placed back with his previously neglectful mother. There were no significant participant gender differences on the Mother Characteristic Scale, $F(1, 253) = 1.77$, ns .

Mediation Analyses

Subsequently, I conducted mediation analyses (see Figure 1) to understand what factors drove the relationship between participant gender and custodial decisions. I included the Perceived Mother Capability Scale, the Perceived Mother Motivation Scale, and the Perceived Child Potential Scale as three potential mediators in a multiple mediation model. As recommended for research involving multiple mediators, I employed nonparametric bootstrapping analyses (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) to test my mediational model. According to Preacher and Hayes (2004), for mediation to be significant, the 95% Bias Corrected and accelerated confidence intervals for the indirect effects (IE) must not include 0. Supporting evidence of mediation, results based on 5000 bootstrapped samples revealed that the total effect (TE) of gender on belief the mother is fit for custody was significant (TE = -.68, SE = .19, $t = -3.57$, $p = .0004$) and the direct effect (DE) was not significant (DE = -.16, SE = .12, $t = -1.38$, ns).

Next, I determined whether the indirect effects of the independent variable on the dependent variable through the proposed three mediators were statistically significant by applying the following criteria: When zero is not in the 95% confidence interval, the indirect effect is significantly different from zero at $p < .05$ (two-tailed). The Perceived Mother Capability Scale (IE 95% CI: -.753, -.184) significantly mediated the relationship between gender and belief that the mother was fit for full custody. In contrast, neither the Perceived Mother Motivation Scale (IE 95% CI: -.109, .064), nor the Perceived Child Potential Scale (IE 95% CI: -.155, .051) significantly mediated this relationship. Thus, my analysis indicates that women believed the mother was less fit for full custody than men because women believed her to be a less capable mother. Finally, a comparison of the relative strength of the individual indirect

effects against each other revealed no significant differences (i.e., the confidence interval did contain zero) (IE 95% CI: -.149; .098).

Discussion

Supporting the hypotheses, men allocated child custody to the neglectful mother more frequently than did women. Thus, just as various extralegal factors appear to influence rulings in family court (Kunin, Ebbesen, & Konečni, 1992; Denne, Wornica, Meyer, & Stevenson, 2013), so too do characteristics of decision-makers – namely, decision-maker gender. Furthermore, the effect of participant gender on custodial ruling was mediated by women's heightened beliefs that the mother was a less capable parent. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that women (versus men) tend to hold more pro-child attitudes (Barnett & Sinisi, 1990; Hoffman, 1977) and perceive child abuse to be more severe (Hansen et al, 1997; Bornstein, Kaplan, & Perry; 2007; Bottoms et al., 2014). It is not surprising then that women were less likely to give the previously neglectful mother full custody of her child because they believed the mother to be a less capable parent. Furthermore, men rated the mother as more motivated to get her child back and were more likely to view the child as having more potential if placed back with the mother when compared to women. Again these findings are supported by previous research which has demonstrated that women tend to view child abuse as more severe, and more likely to reoccur, as compared to men (Bornstein, Kaplan, & Perry, 2007; Howe, Herzberger, & Tennen, 1988). However, the present research has extended the findings of previous research by demonstrating that the documented gender differences in reactions to child abuse, physical abuse, and neglect may affect the outcomes of custodial rulings. Although legal decisions should be uninfluenced by prejudicial emotion or bias, this preliminary research reveals that different life experiences stemming from one's gender may shape how child custody cases are perceived and determined.

This research highlights the consequences of biases stemming from decision-maker characteristics as basic as gender and their measurable effects on the outcomes of custodial cases. Uncovering factors that shape decisions in child custodial contexts is necessary to help facilitate decisions that are simultaneously fair to parents and in the best interest of their children.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to inevitable limitations that accompany any research, these results have limited generalizability. This case vignette depicted a neglectful mother fighting for custody of her child. Therefore these results generalize primarily to custody cases involving allegations of neglect – a behavior which certainly varies widely in form and severity. It is possible then that gender differences will manifest differently in custody cases involving more severe forms of neglect, sexual abuse, or emotional abuse. However, there is reason to believe that similar patterns of gender differences would emerge. This is supported by previous research suggesting that comparable gender differences exist in perceptions of children who are victims of sexual abuse (see Bottoms et al., 2007 for a review). Even so, future research should explore gender differences in child custodial decisions that vary in abuse type. Additionally, the present study is limited with regards to ecological validity. Although participants recruited through Mechanical Turk tend to be representative of the general population, court judges and social workers determine custody rulings, not lay people. It is possible that gender differences in custody rulings for such a specialized and highly-trained sample are not as pervasive. Future research should assess the attitudes of child custodial court officials directly. In addition, contested custody cases are often far more complex and consider numerous other evaluator, child, and parent factors than can be reflected in a simple vignette. Future research should explore gender differences in child custodial determinations using more detailed case materials. Yet, our case vignette was

reviewed for realism by a practicing social worker, and so, the present research represents a good first step.

Future research should also continue to explore the potential for other relevant factors to shape decisions in child custodial contexts, including both decision-maker characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity, profession, education level, prior abuse exposure), and child and parent characteristics (e.g., mental or physical illness, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education level). These variables may include race or age of the child, and the mental health history of all involved, as these factors frequently shape our perceptions in other contexts. The paucity of research addressing these empirical questions highlights the necessity for future research in this area.

Conclusion

Research repeatedly shows that biases, prejudice, and stereotypes affect our behavior and decisions. While stereotypes appear to be a natural and unavoidable byproduct of life experiences and a need for categorization (Hilton & Hippel, 1996); it is imperative that these biases not preclude fair and carefully considered decisions. Fairness is particularly important in a legal context when decisions have life-long and life-changing consequences. Indeed, no child should be placed back into a neglectful home nor should they be denied reunification with their parents without adequate cause. Yet, the present research suggests that arbitrary factors, unrelated to the case at hand – the gender of a child court official – stand to influence child custodial outcomes. It is imperative, then, that custodial decisions be made with carefulness and neutrality. Research exploring factors that shape child custodial rulings is the first step toward achieving fairness in cases that involve the safety and well-being of society's most vulnerable individuals – children.

Note

1. In the present study we manipulated the child and mother race (black mother/child and white mother/child) as well as mother tattoo (no tattoo or large floral arm tattoo) but the results revealed no effect of race on our fit for full custody variable because too many participants indicated that they were suspicious of our manipulation. Yet, the primary research question for the present research was an exploration of the effects of participant gender on custodial decisions and attitudes. Because we were not interested in the effects of race, we collapsed across both child and mother race as well as tattoo condition in all analyses.

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Figure

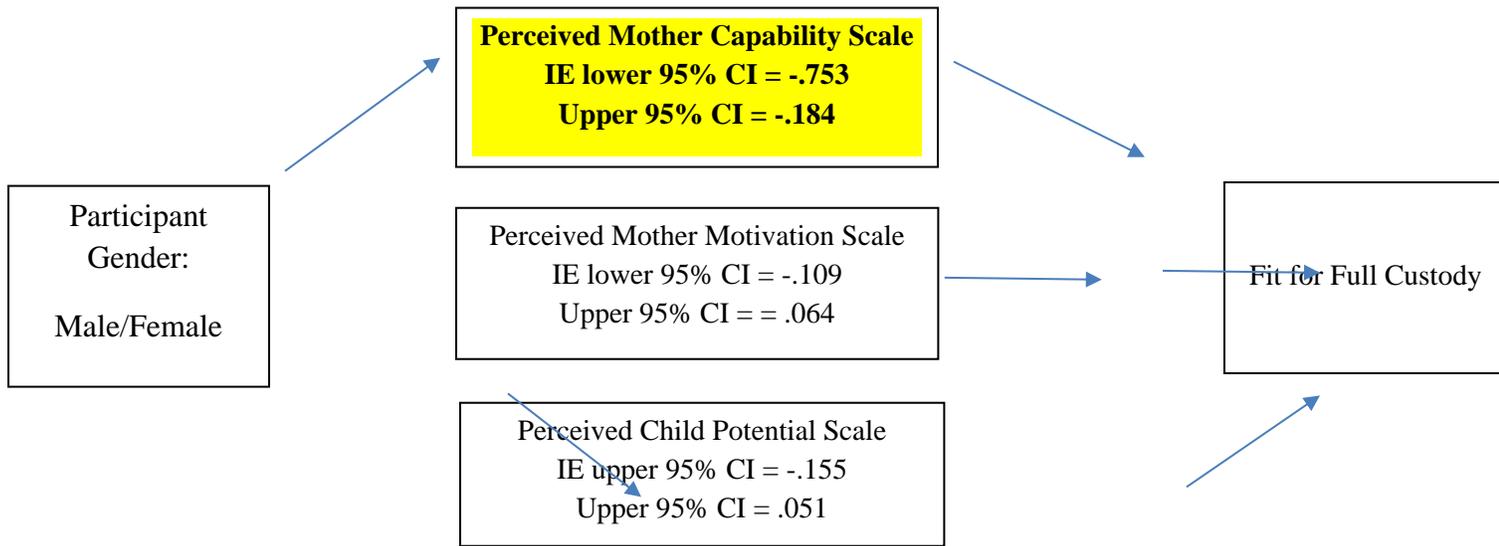


figure 1. This figure illustrates our bootstrapping mediation analyses. The Perceived Mother Capability Scale emerged as the only significant mediator explaining the relationship between participant gender and our fit for full custody variable.

Appendix A

University of Evansville
Anonymous Consent for Participation in Research
“Perceived Parenting Ability”

You have been asked to participate in the research because we are interested in perceptions of parenting ability. Please read this form before agreeing to be in the research.

- a. This study is being conducted by Emily Denne, Allison Meyer, Taylor Wornica and Dr. Margaret Stevenson at the University of Evansville.
- b. The purpose of this research is to investigate perceptions of parenting abilities.
- c. You will be asked to read a vignette depicting a mother seeking full custody of her child. Then you will be asked to complete a questionnaire assessing your perceptions of the mother. You will also be asked to determine if, based on the given information, you find her fit to receive full custody of her child. Finally you will be asked to answer questions regarding your demographics. Your participation will take no more than 20 minutes.
- d. You are eligible to participate only if you are 18 years or older.
- e. The information being collected will not be used for any purposes other than the proposed research.
- f. All information collected as a part of this study will remain anonymous and no identifying information will be collected. Therefore, the researchers will have NO WAY of connecting your identity with any information obtained in connection with this study, so your answers will remain completely confidential.
- g. Participation in this study has minimal risk. The information gained from this study should help advance our knowledge of the role perceptions play in determining parenting ability. The benefits of this research include that you might find the topic interesting, that you will help advance social science generally, and you will receive monetary compensation for your time.
- h. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.
- i. If you have questions you may contact the researchers at ed96@evansville.edu, tw151@evansville.edu, am473@evansville.edu, and ms446@evansville.edu.

Appendix B

Imagine that you are a social worker evaluating a 26-year-old, single mother who is attempting to regain full custody of her biological child, a 5 year old boy. One year ago, the child was removed from the mother by the state due to allegations of neglect, which were later documented and found to be truthful. At the time, the mother was struggling with an alcohol addiction and illegal prescription drug addiction to drug addiction to Vicodin (a pain reliever). During this time period, the child lost 10 pounds due to mal-nourishment, repeatedly missed school, and he fell behind in basic cognitive and social skills. The child's physical health and dental hygiene suffered because the mother did not take him in for regular check-ups, or when he needed medical attention. The child was then placed with a temporary foster family, which provided the child with a safe and comfortable living environment. The child gained back the weight he lost and his physical and dental health improved. His teachers reported that his performance in school had improved as well. The child enjoyed the mother's allotted weekly one-hour visits at the child's temporary home. Although the mother attended many of her weekly meetings with her child, she did miss some of the meetings, without providing prior notice. Since this time, the mother has attended most of her regulatory, mandated counseling sessions for her drug and alcohol addiction, although she has been known to show up late and she missed a few sessions without prior approval. If granted custody, she plans to terminate the counseling sessions because she believes she has recovered enough to handle her addiction on her own. She also got a new job and plans to continue working if granted full custody. This job requires monthly mandatory drug screening, and she passed the first and only drug test she has taken so far. Since the removal of her child, the mother has not broken any laws. Although a neighbor reported suspicion that she had purchased alcohol at a local grocery store, this suspicion was not confirmed with hard evidence. You are required to determine if being placed in the mother's home is in the best interest of the child. Your report will be reviewed by the judge presiding over the case. Please use the information provided above to help inform your decision.