Understanding how social worker compassion fatigue and years of experience shape custodial decisions

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ABSTRACT

Background: Compassion fatigue (i.e., a worker’s diminished ability to empathize with clients) is common among “helping workers” and can result in psychological detachment from clients as a coping mechanism.

Objective: In the present research, we explored the relationship between social workers’ compassion fatigue and years of job experience on hypothetical child custody case judgments.

Participants and setting: In two separate studies, individuals with experience working with children in child dependency court (predominantly social workers, Study 1: N = 173, Study 2: N = 119) were recruited on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and read a vignette depicting a mother attempting to regain custody.

Results: Supporting hypotheses, compassion fatigue significantly mediated the relationship between increased years of social worker job experience on recommendations that a neglectful mother receive custody, Indirect Effect = .06, CIs [.026, .127] (Study 1). We also found preliminary support for our hypothesized theoretically derived serial path model, in which (a) social worker compassion fatigue predicts anticipated secondary traumatic stress associated with the child neglect case, B = .54, p = .0001; (b) secondary traumatic stress predicts detachment from the neglected child, B = .27, p = .0003; (c) detachment from the child predicts job efficacy cynicism B = .65, p < .0001; and (d) job efficacy cynicism predicts decisions to allocate custody to the neglectful mother, B = .46, p = .005 (Study 2).

Conclusion: Our research shows that compassion fatigue among social workers may change the lens through which they perceive cases of child abuse.

“I can still hear the kids’ screams.” — Margaret Humphrey

1. Introduction

In 1987, British social worker Margaret Humphrey’s investigation of the British program, Home Children, which involved the secretive and forced relocation of poor British children to other countries, was nationally publicized. These children recounted horrific physical and sexual abuse in vivid detail to Humphrey as she reunited them with their biological families. Subsequently, Humphrey suffered a psychological break and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (Edemariam, 2010).

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Understanding child dependency court workers’ experiences is important because child abuse and neglect remains a significant problem in the U.S. In 2014, 3.2 million children were referred to child protective services as possible victims of abuse and neglect, 702,000 of whom were substantiated as victims (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2014). Given the large number of referrals, and the heinous nature of the cases involved, it is important to consider the impact of these cases on the social workers who handle them directly. In 2014, a total workforce of 37,346 U.S. case workers from 46 states, completed an average of 67 child protective services responses (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2014). These complex cases often involve serious instances of child abuse, and in turn, can be psychologically and emotionally demanding for the social workers assigned to handle them. Over time, highly emotional cases coupled with large caseloads, and few concrete indicators of successful outcomes for children and families create a work environment that fosters compassion fatigue. What impact does social worker years of job experience and compassion fatigue have on the decisions social workers make in cases involving children? Surprisingly, no research has directly explored this important empirical question. Across two separate, but thematically linked studies, we explore how compassion fatigue and years of job experience tentatively predict decisions to allocate custody to a formerly neglectful mother as well as attitudes and beliefs about the mother (e.g., the mother’s character). In Study 1 we utilize a social worker sample to explore these effects. In Study 2, we attempt to both replicate and extend the results of Study 1 by also testing a theoretically derived model exploring the psychological mechanisms that link compassion fatigue with child custody decision. Next, we review research and theory related to the psychological components of compassion fatigue (burnout and secondary traumatic stress), followed by research and theory supporting our theoretically derived hypotheses.

1.1. Burnout

Worker burnout stems from a demanding work environment that, over time, can result in psychological exhaustion (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Research suggests that burnout is a multidimensional concept, involving three components: exhaustion, cynicism, and worker inefficiency (Schaufeli et al., 2009). The negative effects of burnout on workers have been well-established (for a review see Maslach, 2003), predominantly involving diminished ability of an employee’s meaningful work performance and positive mental state (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli et al., 2009).

While burnout is common in many fields, the concept of burnout was first studied in the social services (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Indeed, human service workers are at heightened risk for developing burnout because experiencing the psychological distress of their clients can be particularly emotionally exhausting (Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Burnout among social workers appears to be a consequence of high caseloads, powerlessness in the system, and perceived unfairness (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). In particular, burnout is well-documented among social workers who work specifically with children (McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2015). The high rates of burnout among social workers who work in child dependency court result from the distressing complexity of advocating for both the abused child and abusive parent (Courage & Williams, 1986; Dane, 2000). The high levels of burnout among child dependency court social workers have serious mental health implications including anxiety, depression, and other physical symptoms (Jayaratne, Chess, & Kunkel, 1986). Not surprisingly, as a result, child protective services has unusually high rates of turnover and diminished worker efficiency over time (Daley, 1979). Burnout then predicts the quality of social workers interactions with clients (Wright & Bonett, 1997). For instance, as human service providers’ self-reported emotional exhaustion increased, client depersonalization significantly increased (Gomez & Michaelis, 1995), suggesting that depersonalization may serve as a defense mechanism.

1.2. Secondary traumatic stress

Those who work in social services are not only subject to high rates of burnout, but high rates of secondary traumatic stress as well (e.g., Bride, Jones, & MacMaster, 2007). It has become clear, that the direct witnesses of trauma are not the only ones negatively affected. Secondary traumatic stress is recognized as stress produced by attempts to help a traumatized individual (Boscarino, Figley, & Adams, 2004; Figley, 1995). Many of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) directly overlap with those of secondary traumatic stress. Indeed, their primary difference is that secondary traumatic stress results from the trauma vicariously experienced through exposure to the directly traumatized person.

Because social workers frequently provide post-crisis support to those who have been exposed to traumatic events, employees in this field are also at risk for experiencing secondary traumatic stress (Boscarino et al., 2004). In support, in a study conducted by Bride (2007), 294 masters-level social workers responded to surveys designed to assess levels of secondary traumatic stress. The vast majority of participants worked with trauma victims (98%), indicating that social workers are frequently exposed to vicarious trauma. Of this sample, 70% of participants experienced at least one symptom of secondary traumatic stress. Among the most commonly reported symptoms included an emotional numbing response (i.e., flattened affect), a tendency to distance oneself from others, and a diminished memory for work related to their clients. The high prevalence of secondary traumatic stress among social workers is further supported in research by Boscarino et al. (2004), who measured secondary trauma and job burnout among a sample of 236 practicing social workers living in New York City in 2003 after the World Trade Center terrorist attacks. The majority of social workers in this sample (84%) had some role in counseling those affected by the terrorist attacks. Those workers who were highly involved in counseling the victims had a higher prevalence of secondary trauma symptoms than did those with lower levels of counseling involvement.
1.3. Compassion fatigue

Another correlate of secondary traumatic stress appears to be compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995), which reflects heightened experiences of both burnout and secondary traumatic stress (Adams, Figley, & Boscarino, 2008; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). Compassion fatigue is a diminished ability or motivation to empathize with and experience the suffering of clients (Figley, 1995). Compassion fatigue is theorized to manifest more gradually than secondary traumatic stress, developing after repeated exposure to client suffering (Boscarino et al., 2004; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Newell & MacNeil, 2010).

1.3.1. Compassion fatigue among child social workers

While compassion fatigue is common in numerous fields of social work, it may be particularly prevalent among social workers who work with children. Child custody evaluators often receive such large caseloads that they cannot see cases through to the end and there are seldom concrete positive results to validate their efforts (Daley, 1979; Figley, 1995). The difficulties of working with parents, maintaining a focus on the needs of the children, and following protocols causes those who work in this field to have notably high levels of secondary trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue, which contribute to worker turnover (Figley, 1995). For example, in one study, researchers recruited 363 child protection workers undergoing secondary trauma training seminars and measured their compassion fatigue risk. Almost half of all participants were at a high or extremely high risk of developing compassion fatigue (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006).

1.3.2. The influence of compassion fatigue on social workers’ case evaluations

While the negative effects of burnout and compassion fatigue on workers’ mental health and turnover rates have been well established (e.g., Boscarino et al., 2004), little research has directly explored the effects of compassion fatigue on social workers’ evaluations of their clients, and in turn, client outcomes. However, it is likely that compassion fatigue affects social workers’ case evaluations in ways that directly impact clients’ lives. Indeed, psychologically healthy individuals are better able to provide services then psychologically distressed individuals (Killian, 2008). Compassion fatigue and secondary trauma experienced by workers causes psychological distress, which has the potential to translate into poorer care for clients (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). In support, Dane (2000) conducted focus groups involving child welfare workers. She coded responses to questions assessing welfare workers’ experiences with child abuse cases, coping mechanisms, specific cases which affected them personally and professionally, support systems, and how repeated exposure to child abuse had affected them. All participants indicated utilizing detachment, setting limits at work, and cutting off from their jobs - methods reflecting disengagement from clients. Client disengagement might be a (necessary) byproduct of social work, bolstering social workers’ mental health. Even so, we expect that such disengagement simultaneously has the potential to diminish the quality of care clients receive. The present studies help fill the gap in this field of research by directly exploring the relationship between compassion fatigue and social workers’ hypothetical child abuse case evaluations.

1.3.3. Years of experience and compassion fatigue

While numerous social scientists have suggested that compassion fatigue develops progressively (Newell & MacNeil, 2010), very little research has explored the relationship between years of job experience and compassion fatigue. Of the limited number of studies that have been conducted, the majority have been conducted with nurses. For example, a cross-sectional survey of 153 oncology healthcare providers assessed compassion fatigue, burnout, and years of healthcare experience. The healthcare providers with the most years of experience (11–20) were at the highest risk for compassion fatigue, followed by healthcare providers with fewer years of experience (6–10; Potter et al., 2010). While no research that we are aware of has directly explored the effects of years of experience on compassion fatigue for child social workers, we expect the same trend to emerge.

2. Study 1 overview and hypotheses

In Study 1, we explore how social workers’ hypothetical case evaluations are affected by compassion fatigue as well as their years of social work experience. We present social workers with a vignette depicting a hypothetical neglectful mother who was attempting to regain custody. We expect that as social workers’ compassion fatigue increases, their recommendations that the child be reunited with the mother will also increase. Why? One component of compassion fatigue includes secondary trauma (Figley, 1995), which might facilitate distancing oneself from a client (i.e., client depersonalization), as a way to psychologically cope with the client’s trauma (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Psychologically distancing oneself from a client might help protect a social workers’ mental health while also having consequences for clients. Because psychological distancing from clients results in client depersonalization (Newell & MacNeil, 2010), we expect that psychological distancing from a client will similarly produce diminished concern for the welfare of a child, and in turn, case decisions that might threaten child well-being.

We simultaneously expect that as compassion fatigue increases, so too will cynical beliefs about the child’s future: that the child will have no potential if reunited with the mother, that permanent damage has been done to the child, and there is not much that can be done to help. Why? Another component of compassion fatigue is burnout, or cynicism regarding one’s job efficacy (Dane, 2000; Figley, 1995) which could predict hopelessness and reduced expectations that a child victim could thrive, regardless state actions.

Compassion fatigue might also predict beliefs that the neglectful mother is (relatively) “not that bad.” Indeed, the psychological desensitization to trauma (i.e., secondary trauma), stemming from compassion fatigue might cause social workers to perceive subsequent abuse that they encounter as not very serious. This is supported by the well-documented correlations between exposure to violence and desensitization to violence. For instance, Bartholow, Bushman, and Sestir (2016) explored the relationship between
exposure to violence and violence desensitization, measured via event-related brain potential (ERP). They found that exposure to violent images elicited more ERP among nonviolent video game players when compared to those who play violent video games regularly, suggesting that those who are frequently exposed to violence become psychologically desensitized over time and exposure. A similar psychological framework might explain the development of social worker compassion fatigue. That is, as a social worker’s exposure to abuse increases over time, so too will their desensitization to abuse. The theoretical concept of desensitization to the seriousness of abuse could manifest in a perception that a mother’s abusive and neglectful behavior is not serious. Thus, we expect increased compassion fatigue to be associated with increased beliefs that a neglectful mother is a good parent, of high character, has been rehabilitated from her addictions, and thus, should be allocated full custody of her child.

We further expect that as a social worker’s years of experience increase, their recommendations that the child be returned to the neglectful mother will also increase. In support, research suggests that compassion fatigue increases gradually, as years of job experience also increase (Boscarino et al., 2004). Therefore, we expect that as years of social work experience increase, so too will compassion fatigue, which will drive social workers to be more likely to render a case decision that might harm a child. Likewise, we similarly expect compassion fatigue to mediate the relationship between years of social work experience and attitudes about the mother (i.e., that she is a good parent, sensible, of high character, has been rehabilitated from her addictions), as well as cynical beliefs about the child’s likelihood to thrive (e.g., the child will have no potential if reunited with the mother).

3. Study 1 methods

3.1. Participants

In a first round of data collection (Phase 1), we recruited 400 participants from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) by advertising that we were interested only in participants who had any kind of experience with child dependency issues. MTurk is an online pool of participants who complete surveys in exchange for monetary compensation (Buhmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Although there are some differences between MTurk and non-MTurk samples (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2012), MTurk samples are more representative than the typical college sample and are at least equally reliable (Buhmester et al., 2011). Although our Phase 1 advertisement specified that we were only interested in participants with job experience in dependency court, we anticipated that many participants without relevant job experience would participate nonetheless. Thus, Phase 1 was used as a screening tool to identify and re-recruit only those participants who indicated that they currently or formerly had jobs dealing with child dependency cases. Of the 400 participants from Phase 1, only 235 met this specific criteria and were re-recruited for Phase 2 of data collection. Of those 235 invited to participate in Phase 2, 173 participants participated.

Of the 173 Phase 2 participants, 134 (77.5%) reported being a social worker and 39 (22.5%) were not social workers, but reported having a job that deals specifically with child dependency court issues (e.g., Juvenile Dependency Investigator). Of the 173 participants, 72 participants were White (42%), 12 were African American (7%), 10 were Hispanic (5%), 72 were Asian (42%), 3 indicated “other” for ethnicity (2%), and 4 did not report their ethnicity (2%). The mean age was 31.4 (SD = 8.41); 100 (58%) were men, 66 (38%) were women, and 7 (4%) did not report gender. Most participants were parents (99; 57%).

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. Case vignette

Participants read a vignette depicting a 26-year-old mother attempting to regain custody of her 5-year-old son. The child was removed from the mother’s custody due to substantiated child neglect. Importantly, being removed from the mother is framed as positively influencing the child’s physical and cognitive well-being, which serves to increase case ambiguity by requiring decision makers to weigh parental rights against child well-being. That is, the mother’s addiction to drugs and alcohol caused her to be unable to care for her son, who was suffering from malnutrition, weight loss, and was repeatedly missing school. At school, the child’s grades were declining and his physical health and suffered because the mother was not providing him with necessary medical attention. After being placed in foster care, the child made dramatic improvements in physical health and school performance, gaining back the weight he had lost. While the child was in foster care, the mother attended only some of her mandatory drug and alcohol counseling sessions, often showing up late and missing several without providing prior notice. She also inconsistently attended her weekly meetings with her son, again often showing up late or missing them without providing notice. Although she received a new job, and passed her first and only drug screening, the mother admits that she plans to terminate her addiction counseling when reunited with her child, and a neighbor reported that she had purchased alcohol at the local grocery store. The vignette was reviewed by a practicing social worker for realism, and we intentionally included factors that predict chronic child maltreatment (i.e., maternal addiction; Peterson, Gable, & Saldana, 1996) to make it clear that the child would plausibly be in danger if reunited with the mother.

3.2.2. Demographic information

We asked participants to indicate their race, gender, age, and whether they had children. Additionally, we asked participants to...

1 After reading the vignette, participants were randomly assigned to receive a photo of a mother either with or without a visible tattoo. We report the effects of tattoo presence in a separate, unpublished paper. In the present research, we present all analyses collapsed across the manipulation of the mother’s visible tattoo because the tattoo variable is not the primary theoretical focus within the present research.
indicate whether they were social workers. Following this question, we assessed their involvement with child dependency court issues and to explain their role in dependency court. We also assessed participant’s years of experience in the social work field.

3.2.3. Dependent measures

Unless specified otherwise, all dependent variables were assessed on a 7-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

3.2.4. Fit for full custody

Our primary dependent variable of interest was assessed with the following item: “The mother is fit for full custody.”

3.2.5. Mother rehabilitation scale

Two questions were developed to create the Mother Rehabilitation Scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .78), assessing the extent to which participants believed that the mother had recovered from her addictions. This reliable scale included the following questions: “The mother has recovered from her alcohol addiction” and “The mother has recovered from her drug addictions.”

3.2.6. Good mother scale

A 14-item scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .96) included items designed to assess perceptions of the mother’s quality of parenting. Items included: (a) “The mother will likely provide a safe environment,” (b) “The mother appears to be responsible,” (c) “The mother will likely provide a loving atmosphere,” (d) “The mother is likely to provide the necessities for her child,” (e) “The mother is likely to provide a stable environment,” (f) “The mother is likely to provide a stable and well-structured environment for her child,” (g) “The mother is likely to provide an intellectually stimulating atmosphere for her child,” (h) “The mother is likely to make decisions that are in the best interest of her child,” (i) “The child’s well-being is likely the mothers main priority,” (j) “The mother has exhausted every resource for getting her child back,” (k) “The mother is likely to maintain her employment,” (l) “The mother is likely to foster good manners and habits in her child,” (m) “The mother appears to be very motivated to get her child back,” and (n) “The mother is a good role model for her child.”

3.2.7. Child potential with mother scale

Three items were compiled to create the Child Potential with Mother Scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .84), designed to measured participants perceptions of the child’s potential to succeed if reunited with the mother. Items included: “If the child returns to the mothers custody, he is likely to grow up to develop a drug or alcohol addiction,” “If the child returns to the mothers custody, he is likely to drop out of high school,” and “If the child returns to the mothers custody his physical health will likely suffer.”

3.2.8. Perceived mother character scale

Additionally, participants rated the mother on 5 perceived traits, including (a) character, (b) care, (c) intelligence, (d) trustworthiness, and (e) appearance, on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (low in quality) to 5 (high in quality). These items were compiled to create the Perceived Mother Character Scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .80).

3.2.9. Impulsive mother scale

The following 3 questions were compiled to create The Impulsive Mother Scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .65): “The mother is impulsive,” “The mother is sensation seeking,” and “The mother is probably promiscuous.”

3.2.10. Items assessing attitudes toward child

We further assessed beliefs that the child could be a successful adult with the question: “The child has the potential to grow up to be a responsible and successful adult.” We also asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following two statements “At this point, a great deal of damage has already been done to the son” and “At this point there probably is not much that we can do to help the son grow up to have a successful life.” These three items failed to form a reliable scale and for this reason they were analyzed as 3 unique items.

3.2.11. Compassion fatigue scale

Participants completed the Compassion Fatigue Scale Revised on a rating scale ranging from 1 (Never/Rarely) to 10 (Very Often; Adams et al., 2008). Because compassion fatigue is theorized to include two components (i.e., job burnout and secondary traumatic stress), the 13-item scale includes items designed to measure both burnout (8 items, e.g., “I have felt trapped by my work”) and secondary traumatic stress (5 items, e.g., “I have suddenly and involuntarily recalled a frightening experience while working with a client/patient”). Although the two separate components of the Compassion Fatigue Scale achieve evidence of reliability (i.e., burnout Cronbach’s alpha = .88; secondary trauma Cronbach’s alpha = .80), the overall reliability for the entire 13-item scale was higher than the individual reliability levels of the two separate subcomponents (overall scale Cronbach’s alpha = .91), suggesting evidence for the theorized unidimensionality of this construct, and supporting our decision to conduct analyses below using the Compassion Fatigue Scale (rather than its two separate sub-component scales).
3.3. Procedures

In Phase 1, we assessed basic demographic information, asked participants to indicate what kind of job experience they had pertaining to child dependency cases, and assessed their years of relevant job experience. During Phase 2, participants read the vignette describing the neglectful mother, determined whether the mother was fit for full custody, and answered a series of questions assessing perceptions of the mother and child. Finally, participants completed the Compassion Fatigue Scale. Participants were compensated financially via Mechanical Turk following participation in both Phase 1 and Phase 2.

4. Study 1 results

We first present a series of linear regression analyses assessing the effects of compassion fatigue on all dependent variables, followed by a series of regressions assessing the effects of years of job experience on all dependent variables. We subsequently present a series of analyses exploring compassion fatigue as a potential mediator of the relationship between years of job experience and relevant dependent variables. For all analyses including years of job experience reported below, we co-varied for participant age because this provides a more direct test of our hypotheses. Indeed, years of job experience significantly predicts participant age ($r = .33, p < .001$). Because we are specifically interested in the relationship between years on the job and case judgments, irrespective of participant age, co-varying for participant age allows us to discern the relationship between year of job experience and case judgments, above and beyond participant age.²

4.1. Effects of compassion fatigue on case judgments

Supporting hypotheses, a series of regression analyses (see Table 1 for a summary of regression statistics) indicated that increased compassion fatigue was associated with increased beliefs that (a) the mother was fit for full custody, (b) a great deal of damage had already been done to the child, (c) the child would have no potential if reunited with the mother, (d) the mother had recovered from her addictions, (e) the mother was a good parent, (f) the mother was of high character, and (g) decreased belief that the child could grow up to be a successful adult. Although not statistically significant, increased compassion fatigue was marginally associated with increased beliefs that (a) there was not much that could be done to help the child and (b) the mother was impulsive.

4.2. Effects of years’ experience on case judgments

Also supporting hypotheses, regression analyses revealed that increased years of job experience was related to increased beliefs that (a) the mother had recovered from her addictions, (b) the mother was of high character, (c) the mother was impulsive, (d) the child would have no potential if reunited with the mother, (e) the mother was a good parent, and (f) decreased beliefs that the child could grow up to be a successful adult. There was no significant relationship between years of job experience and beliefs that (a) there is not much we can do to help the child, or that (b) a great deal of damage had already been done to the child. Although not statistically significant, increased years of job experience was marginally associated with increased beliefs that the mother was fit for full custody.

Subsequently, we conducted mediation analyses to understand whether compassion fatigue explained the relationship between years of experience and the belief that the mother was fit for full custody (see Table 2 and Fig. 1). We conducted this mediation analysis even though the effect of years of experience on custodial ruling did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Supporting this data-analytic decision, Preacher and Hayes (2004) argue that it is not necessary for the independent variable to significantly predict the dependent variable in order for significant mediation to exist. In addition, our well-supported theoretical rationale provides sufficient justification to conduct this analysis. Finally, whereas the effect was not statistically significant, it is in the hypothesized direction and it approached significance. We used nonparametric bootstrapping analyses (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) which utilizes 5000 samples to test our hypothesized mediation model. The total effect (TE) of years of experience on the belief that the mother was fit for full custody was not significant ($TE = .06, SE = .05, t = 1.13, p = .26$), nor was the direct effect ($DE = -.003, SE = .05, t = -.06, p = .95$). We then determined whether the indirect effect of years of job experience (IV) on the belief the mother was fit for full custody (DV) through compassion fatigue (mediator) was statistically significant. For this relationship to be statistically significant, zero must not be contained in the 95% confidence interval. When the indirect effect meets this criterion, it is significant at $p < .05$ (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Compassion fatigue CIs [.026, .127] significantly mediated the relationship between years of experience and belief that the mother was fit for full custody, $IE = .06, SE = .02$.

We repeated this same procedure to understand whether compassion fatigue mediated the relationship between years of experience and the Mother Rehabilitation Scale, Good Mother Scale, Child Potential with Mother Scale, Perceived Mother Character Scale, Impulsive Mother Scale, child success variable, child damage variable, and beliefs that the child cannot be helped variable. Supporting hypotheses, compassion fatigue significantly mediated the relationship between years of experience and beliefs that (a)

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² Controlling for age did not affect the relationship between years of experience and any of the dependent variables except for the belief that the mother is fit for full custody and the belief the mother can be rehabilitated, which drop to non-significant without age as a covariate ($p = .54$ and $p = .12$, respectively).
the mother had recovered from her addictions, (b) the mother was a good parent, (c) the child would have no potential if reunited with the mother, (d) the mother was of high character, (e) a great deal of damage had already been done to the child, and (f) that there was not much that could be done to help the child. See Table 2 for a summary of the statistics for all such mediation analyses. Compassion fatigue did not, however, mediate the relationship between years of job experience and beliefs that the mother was impulsive CIs [-.01, .05] or that the child would grow up to be a successful adult CIs [-.077, .018].

Table 1

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<th>Study 1: Compass Fatigue</th>
<th>Study 2: Years of Experience</th>
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Table 2

Statistics reflecting analyses exploring compassion fatigue as a mediator of years of experience on dependent variables for Studies 1 and 2.

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<td>Good Mother Scale</td>
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<td>.04</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE = .05</td>
<td>.04</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE = .05</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Potential with Mother Scale</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>3.01 [0.115, 0.091]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE = .06</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Child Cannot be Helped Variable</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>0.22</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.03</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE = .04</td>
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Note. TE = total effect; DE = direct effect; IE = indirect effect; SE = standard error; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. Several mediation analyses were non-significant. In study 1 these included beliefs that the mother was impulsive and beliefs that the child would grow up to be a successful adult. In study 2 non-significant mediators included beliefs that the mother had recovered from her addictions, the mother was a good parent, a great deal of damage had already been done to the child, the child could grow up to be a successful adult, or that there was not much that could be done to help the child. The following formulas reflect the mediation analyses employed: Indirect effect of X on Y through Mj = a1j b1j; Total indirect effect of X on Y through all M = Σj (a1j b1j); and Direct effect of X on Y = c1 (Hayes, 2012).
Fig. 1. This figure illustrates the bootstrapping mediation analyses for Study 1 wherein compassion fatigue emerged as a significant mediator, statistically explaining the relationship between a social worker’s years of job experience and belief that mother was fit for full custody. Unstandardized coefficients are provided next to their bold respective paths.

5. Study 1 discussion and study 2 overview

Study 1 provided preliminary evidence that compassion fatigue mediates the effects of years of job experience on custody rulings as well as perceptions of a custodial case. Indeed, compassion fatigue was associated with increased tendency to believe the mother was fit for full custody and with numerous negative expectations for the child’s future (e.g., that not much could be done to help the child). Furthermore, increased compassion fatigue was associated with some positive beliefs about the mother (e.g., that she was a good parent). Again, we expected compassion fatigue to predict pessimism about the child’s future success while simultaneously predicting beliefs that the neglectful mother was relatively not that bad. We expected this because emotional distancing and job cynicism are components of compassion fatigue. In the present study, it appears that these theoretical components manifested in social worker pessimism about the child’s future. Simultaneously, the theoretical concepts of psychological desensitization stemming from the secondary trauma component of compassion fatigue may be reflected in the social workers’ perceptions that the neglectful mother was not that bad.

Similarly, although not statistically significant, years of job experience was marginally associated with increased beliefs that the mother was fit for full custody. Likewise, increased years of job experience was associated with many negative expectations about the child’s future if reunited with the mother. Furthermore, like compassion fatigue, increased years of experience was associated with many positive perceptions of the mother. These findings are in line with theory suggesting that compassion fatigue increases over time as years of job experience increases (Boscarino et al., 2004). Our findings suggest that social workers with more years of experience are more likely to perceive the mother as a reasonable parent (resulting from compassion fatigue desensitization), while simultaneously endorsing pessimistic beliefs about the child’s future (resulting from compassion fatigue emotional detachment). We expect that the effects of years of experience on perceptions of the mother and the child result from compassion fatigue that accumulates over years of experience.

Of course, an alternative explanation for the relationship between years of job experience and marginally greater beliefs that the mother is fit for full custody could be that more experienced social workers develop more confidence in the successful outcomes for children who experience reunification. Yet, our analyses do not support this alternative explanation. Instead, consistent with our hypotheses, our mediation analyses establish compassion fatigue as a significant mediator of the relationship between years of experience and beliefs that the mother is fit for full custody (and several other variables related to beliefs about the mother and child).

These analyses suggest that symptoms of compassion fatigue drive social workers’ beliefs that the mother is fit for custody – not their concern for the child’s best interests. Future research should continue to explore this theoretical explanation, particularly because compassion fatigue did not mediate relationships between all dependent variables in the present study, including beliefs that the mother was impulsive and that the child could grow up to be a successful adult.

Moreover, Study 1 left some questions unanswered, which we address in Study 2. One obvious limitation to Study 1 was its cross-sectional methodological design. Specifically, compassion fatigue – our hypothesized mediator – was measured immediately after participants had rendered judgments regarding the hypothetical child custody case, and it is therefore possible that participants’ evaluations of the custody case affected their compassion fatigue scores. Even so, we do not see how this could explain why social workers with more years of job experience had higher levels of compassion fatigue. Still, a cleaner test of mediation would be to measure compassion fatigue prior to participants’ evaluations of the hypothetical child custody case. Thus, our Study 2 replication includes an assessment of compassion fatigue approximately 2 weeks prior to participants’ evaluations of a hypothetical child custody case in a separate phase of the study. Although this still employs a cross-sectional methodological design, it allows for a cleaner test of our hypotheses.

Importantly, we use Study 2 as a means to directly test our newly developed hypothesized model, rooted in psychological theory, that unpacks the relationship between compassion fatigue and child custodial decisions. We explore compassion fatigue as a pre-cursor and predictor of symptoms of compassion fatigue related to the child custodial case – namely, secondary traumatic stress, psychological detachment, and job efficacy cynicism (assessed via measured beliefs about the case). We expect to find support for a serial path model, in which the hypothesized factors (i.e., secondary traumatic stress stemming from the case, psychological detachment from the child in the case, and job efficacy cynicism related to the case) operate serially to explain the relationship between
compassion fatigue and custodial recommendations. First, we expect that increased compassion fatigue will predict social workers’ expectations that they will experience intrusive thoughts and concerns about the child’s well-being that would interfere with their life, as well as anticipated trauma-induced, avoidance-related behaviors (i.e., attempts to avoid situations that remind them of the child neglect case). In support, secondary traumatic stress is one component of the compassion fatigue scale (Figley, 1995; Newell & MacNeil, 2010), which directly measures the extent to which participants generally experience secondary traumatic stress symptoms related to their clients. Naturally, we expect that social workers’ baseline level of general compassion fatigue (which specifically measures propensity to experience secondary traumatic stress) will emerge as a significant predictor of their anticipated secondary traumatic stress related to a hypothetical child neglect case. In support, consistent with the theory of planned behavior (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), specific attitudes toward a particular behavior consistently emerge as predictors of that particular behavior (e.g., Davidson & Jaccard, 1997). In turn, we expect that anticipated secondary traumatic stress symptoms associated with the case will predict anticipated psychological detachment from the child (i.e., anticipated active attempts to avoid thinking about the child). In support, myriad studies examining PTSD symptomology reveal that posttraumatic stress symptoms (e.g., intrusive, disruptive, and unpleasant thoughts) are consistent predictors and natural precursors of attempts to quash such stress symptoms via psychological detachment (i.e., mentally and emotionally “switching off”; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Indeed, this typical outcome of attempts to suppress intrusive thoughts is associated with emotional avoidance within the field of PTSD research (United States Department of Labor, 2017). Subsequently, we expect that anticipated secondary traumatic stress symptoms associated with the case will predict anticipated cynicism related to accomplishing positive outcomes for the child in the case. That is, we expect that psychological detachment (i.e., attempts to withdrawal concern for the child) will predict reduced expectations that the social worker can affect positive outcomes for the child (i.e., job efficacy cynicism). Finally, we expect that social worker job efficacy cynicism will ultimately predict recommendations that the child be returned to the parent. Presumably those who feel they cannot improve the child’s life are unlikely to try to do so. In support, job cynicism has been established as a precursor to job inefficiency (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), which we expect will translate into reduced efforts at protecting a child.

Thus, in Study 2, we expect to (a) replicate Study 1, employing an improved methodological design; (b) uncover new main effects of compassion fatigue and years of job experience on secondary traumatic stress, psychological detachment, and job efficacy cynicism related to the child neglect case; and (c) reveal support for our theorized model depicting the relationship between compassion fatigue and custodial decisions, as serially mediated by secondary traumatic stress, psychological detachment, and job efficacy cynicism.

6. Study 2 method

6.1. Participants

In Study 2, Phase 1 of data collection, we recruited 400 participants from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk by advertising that we were interested only in participants who had experience with child dependency issues, just as we did for Study 1, Phase 1. Once again, of the 400 participants from Phase 1, only 278 met our specific criteria of having a job that deals with child dependency court issues, and were subsequently re-recruited for Phase 2 of data collection. Of those 278 invited to participate in Phase 2, 119 participants participated. Of those who participated in Phase 2, 108 (91%) were social workers and the remaining 11 participants (9%) had jobs directly related to child dependency court issues. Thirty-nine participants were White (33%), 6 were African American (5%), 7 were Hispanic (6%), 64 were Asian (54%), and 3 indicated “other” for ethnicity (2%). The mean age was 29.0 (SD = 6.92); 73 (61%) were men.

6.2. Materials

6.2.1. Case vignette

Participants read a vignette identical to the vignette used in Study 1.

6.2.2. Demographic information

Participants answered demographic questions identical to those in Study 1.

6.2.3. Dependent measures

Following the vignette, participants gave responses to the same questions and scales used in Study 1, on the same seven-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). All scales had acceptable reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .70–.95), except the Impulsive Mother scale, which approached reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .53).

6.2.4. Secondary traumatic stress scale

In addition, we developed a 3-item scale designed to assess the extent to which participants anticipate experiencing secondary traumatic stress related to a hypothetical child neglect case. In support, secondary traumatic stress is one component of the compassion fatigue scale (Figley, 1995; Newell & MacNeil, 2010), which directly measures the extent to which participants generally experience secondary traumatic stress symptoms related to their clients. Naturally, we expect that social workers’ baseline level of general compassion fatigue (which specifically measures propensity to experience secondary traumatic stress) will emerge as a significant predictor of their anticipated secondary traumatic stress related to a hypothetical child neglect case. In support, consistent with the theory of planned behavior (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), specific attitudes toward a particular behavior consistently emerge as predictors of that particular behavior (e.g., Davidson & Jaccard, 1997). In turn, we expect that anticipated secondary traumatic stress symptoms associated with the case will predict anticipated psychological detachment from the child (i.e., anticipated active attempts to avoid thinking about the child). In support, myriad studies examining PTSD symptomology reveal that posttraumatic stress symptoms (e.g., intrusive, disruptive, and unpleasant thoughts) are consistent predictors and natural precursors of attempts to quash such stress symptoms via psychological detachment (i.e., mentally and emotionally “switching off”; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Indeed, this typical outcome of attempts to suppress intrusive thoughts is associated with emotional avoidance within the field of PTSD research (United States Department of Labor, 2017). Subsequently, we expect that anticipated secondary traumatic stress symptoms associated with the case will predict anticipated cynicism related to accomplishing positive outcomes for the child in the case. That is, we expect that psychological detachment (i.e., attempts to withdrawal concern for the child) will predict reduced expectations that the social worker can affect positive outcomes for the child (i.e., job efficacy cynicism). Finally, we expect that social worker job efficacy cynicism will ultimately predict recommendations that the child be returned to the parent. Presumably those who feel they cannot improve the child’s life are unlikely to try to do so. In support, job cynicism has been established as a precursor to job inefficiency (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), which we expect will translate into reduced efforts at protecting a child.

Thus, in Study 2, we expect to (a) replicate Study 1, employing an improved methodological design; (b) uncover new main effects of compassion fatigue and years of job experience on secondary traumatic stress, psychological detachment, and job efficacy cynicism related to the child neglect case; and (c) reveal support for our theorized model depicting the relationship between compassion fatigue and custodial decisions, as serially mediated by secondary traumatic stress, psychological detachment, and job efficacy cynicism.

Footnotes:

3 To ensure that participants in Study 1 did not participate again in Study 2, we identified those who had participated in Study 1 by their Mechanical Turk ID and excluded them from participating in Study 2. As an additional precaution, we asked participants to indicate if they had participated in any kind of similar hypothetical case. All participants who indicated that they had participated in a similar study were also excluded.
traumatic stress related to the case. Although the Cronbach’s alpha was low (.40), Nunnally (1978), reveals that Cronbach’s alpha values depend on the number of items in the scale and when there are few items in a scale, Cronbach’s alphas can be low. As an alternative to assessing reliability for scales with few items, mean inter-item correlation values are recommended for reliability assessment (Briggs and Cheek, 1986). The mean inter-item correlation values for this scale ranged from .20 to .26, and therefore fall within the optimal values for reliable scales (.20–.40), according to Briggs and Cheek (1986). This scale included items measuring anticipated intrusive and distressing thoughts, as well as avoidance-related behaviors – symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). We purposely developed items designed to assess only the constructs of PTSD that specifically pertain to secondary traumatic stress, thereby omitting the measurement of physiological arousal (e.g., exaggerated startle reactions). Specifically, the items included: “My thoughts and concerns about the child’s wellbeing will interfere with my daily activities,” “I’ll probably think about the child often, even when I’m not working on the case,” and “I would try to avoid situations, people, or places that remind me of this case.”

6.2.5. Detachment from the child scale

We developed a 5-item scale designed to measure psychological detachment from the child (Cronbach’s alpha = .69). We drew from research describing detachment as a consequence of compassion fatigue (Figley, 2013). According to Sonnentag and Bayer (2005), psychological detachment is defined as an individual’s attempt to disengage “psychologically from work.” Items included: (a) “I probably won’t worry too much about the child’s wellbeing,” (b) “I would try not to think about this child and this case outside of work,” (c) “The child’s emotional reactions to case outcomes won’t cause me much distress,” (d) “Thinking about this child and this case wouldn’t cause me much distress,” and (e) “I wish I could know how this child would turn out as an adult”.

6.2.6. Job efficacy cynicism scale

We also developed a 3-item scale to measure social worker job efficacy cynicism (Cronbach’s alpha = .85). We referred to Maslach’s (1998) scale measuring job burnout as a model for developing our case-specific job efficacy scale. Scale items included: “Anything I try to do to help this child probably won’t accomplish much, in the end,” “For the most part, I’m helpless when it comes to improving this child’s life,” and “There’s not much I can do as a social worker to help this child.”

6.3. Procedure

During Phase 1, participants provided basic demographic information, indicated if they worked directly with dependency court issues, and completed the Compassion Fatigue Scale. Approximately 2 weeks later, eligible participants from Phase 1 were re-recruited for Phase 2. In Phase 2, participants first read a vignette depicting the neglectful mother and subsequently completed all remaining measures and scales, just as they did in Study 1, Phase 2.

7. Study 2 results

Just as in Study 1, all analyses involving years of job experience included participant age as a covariate, to provide a more direct test of hypotheses. To preview, we first report regression analyses exploring the effects of compassion fatigue and years of job experience on all dependent measures, followed by a series of mediation analyses testing the extent to which compassion fatigue mediates the effects of years of job experience on relevant dependent measures. Lastly, we test our hypothesized serial mediation model to explain the relationship between compassion fatigue and child custodial recommendations.

7.1. Effects of compassion fatigue on case judgments

We first present regression analyses testing the effects of compassion fatigue and years of job experience on dependent variables measured in Study 1, followed by regressions assessing the relationship between compassion fatigue and years of job experience and our newly developed items (see Table 1). Increased compassion fatigue was associated with increased beliefs that (a) the child would have no potential if reunited with the mother, (b) the mother was a good parent, (c) the mother was impulsive, and (d) the mother was of high character. In addition, although not statistically significant, increased compassion fatigue was marginally associated with increased beliefs that (a) the mother was fit for full custody, (b) there was not much that could be done to help the child, and (c) decreased beliefs that the child could grow up to be a successful adult. However, compassion fatigue did not significantly predict the belief that (a) a great deal of damage had already been done to the child, or (b) the mother had recovered from her addictions.

Analyses assessing the effects of compassion fatigue on our newly developed items also revealed consistent support for our hypotheses. Specifically, increased compassion fatigue was significantly associated with increased (a) psychological detachment from the child, (b) job efficacy cynicism toward the case, and (c) anticipated secondary trauma from the case.

7.2. Effects of years’ experience on case judgments

Similarly, we first present regression analyses testing effects of years of job experience on variables measured in Study 1 and the unique items in Study 2.

Similar to Study 1, increased years of job experience was significantly associated with increased beliefs that (a) the mother was fit for full custody, (b) the mother had recovered from her addictions, (c) the mother was of high character, (d) the mother was
impulsive, and (e) the mother was a good parent. However, years of job experience did not significantly predict the belief that (a) the child will have no potential if reunited with the mother, (b) the child had the potential to grow up to be successful, (c) there is not much we can do at this point to help the child, or (d) permanent damage has been done to the child.

Analyses assessing the effects of years of job experience on our newly developed items were largely in line with hypotheses. Specifically, increased years of job experience was significantly associated with increased (a) psychological detachment from the child, (b) job efficacy cynicism toward the case, and (c) anticipated secondary trauma from the case.

7.3. Mediation analyses

Just as in Study 1, we conducted the same mediation analyses to explore whether compassion fatigue explains the relationship between social workers’ years of job experience and beliefs that the mother is fit for full custody (as well as all additional dependent variables). Supporting hypotheses, compassion fatigue significantly mediated the relationship between years of experience and beliefs that (a) the mother was of high character, (b) the child would have no potential if reunited with the mother, and (c) the mother was impulsive. See Table 2 for mediation statistics. Compassion fatigue did not, however, mediate the relationship between years of experience and beliefs that (a) the mother had recovered from her addictions CIs [-.023, .042], (b) the mother was a good parent [-.016, .047], (c) a great deal of damage had already been done to the child CIs [.020, .061], (d) that the child could grow up to be a successful adult [.088, .09], or (e) that there was not much that could be done to help the child CIs [.020, .084].

7.4. Serial path analyses

Next, we employed nonparametric bootstrapping mediation analyses using Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro to explore secondary traumatic stress, detachment from the child, and job efficacy cynicism as possible serial mediators (respectively) of the effect of compassion fatigue on beliefs that the mother is fit for custody. Again, conducting such mediation analyses even when compassion fatigue did not significantly predict custodial ruling is supported by Preacher and Hayes’ (2004) arguments, as well as our strong theoretical foundation, and marginally significant effect. See Table 3 for a correlation matrix illustrating the relationships between variables.

We used model 6, which allows multiple mediators to operate serially, testing all possible combinations of orders of the potential mediators. Thus, model 6 allows us to test our theoretically derived hypothesized serial path model, in which (a) compassion fatigue predicts secondary traumatic stress, (b) secondary traumatic stress predicts detachment from the child, (c) detachment from the child predicts job efficacy cynicism, and (d) job efficacy cynicism predicts beliefs that the mother is fit for full custody. Model 6 tests this serial indirect effect of compassion fatigue on beliefs the mother is fit for full custody using 95% bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (10,000 samples). The indirect effect of compassion fatigue on custody rulings through three serial mediators, secondary traumatic stress scale, detachment from child scale, and work efficacy cynicism scale, (respectively) was significant, \( t = 3.96, p = .0001 \). In turn, as social worker’s secondary traumatic stress increased, detachment from the child also increased, \( t = 3.01, p = .0003 \). Next, as detachment from the child increased, job efficacy cynicism also increased, \( t = 4.59, p < .0001 \). Finally, as job efficacy cynicism increased, beliefs that the mother was fit for full custody also significantly increased, \( t = 2.87, p = .005 \).

8. General discussion

Across two separate studies we consistently found that increased compassion fatigue was associated with increased beliefs that (a) the child would have no potential if reunited with the mother, (b) the mother was a good parent, (c) the mother was impulsive, and (d) the mother was of high character. These findings provide preliminary support for our theoretically derived hypothesis that, as a result of compassion fatigue, social workers’ subjective standards for what it takes to be considered a good parent are lowered (i.e., they perceive the neglectful mother as a relatively decent parent). Ironically, compassion fatigue simultaneously increases social workers’ sense of hopelessness about the child’s future if he is reunited with the mother. Again, consistent across both studies, increased years of job experience was associated with increased beliefs that (a) the mother was fit for full custody (though Study 2’s effect was marginally significant), (b) the mother had recovered from her addictions, (c) the mother was of high character, (d) the

Table 3
Correlation matrix illustrating the relations between variables included in the serial path analysis for Study 2.

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* \( p < .10 \)
* * \( p < .05 \)
** ** \( p < .01 \)
mother was impulsive, and (e) the mother was a good parent. However, in Study 2, there was no significant relationship between years of job experience and beliefs that (a) the child would have no potential if reunited with the mother, (b) there is not much that can be done to help the child, (c) the child could grow up to be a successful adult, or (d) a great deal of damage had already been done to the child. These findings reveal a relatively consistent pattern of relationships between years of experience and perceptions of the mother, but not perceptions of the child. There are several potential explanations for this. First, because social workers rarely see cases to completion due to a variety of factors (attrition, job restructuring, etc.), years of experience is likely unrelated to exposure to the breadth of outcomes children face as their cases progress through the system. In turn, we might expect years of job experience to be less associated with expectations for the child's outcomes. In contrast, as a social worker’s years of experience increase, presumably they are exposed to an increasingly diverse range of custody cases, including some unfortunately heinous cases of parental abuse and neglect. This could lead them to believe the mother presented in the vignette is comparatively not that bad, relative to the years go by, social workers are likely exposed to more and more horri-

![Fig. 2. A serial path analysis illustrating the relationship between compassion fatigue on child custodial rulings as serially mediated by secondary traumatic stress, detachment from the child, and job efficacy cynicism, respectively (controlling for age). Unstandardized coefficients are provided next to their respective paths, with standard errors in parentheses. Bolded lines reflect the significant indirect effect, IE = .043, SE = .026 95% CIs [.01, .12]. * p = .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.](image-url)
of child abuse for the child? One possible implication, as our results suggest, might be for a child to be placed back into the custody of a parent who is not fully capable to care for their child. Indeed, the mother in our scenario bore many markers of a parent who is likely to risk re-abuse. Yet, the social workers with the greatest years of experience were the most likely to support reunification – an effect not mediated by knowledge that the child will be best served by this outcome, but rather by compassion fatigue.

8.1. Future research

Of course, this research represents only a preliminary examination of the impact of compassion fatigue on outcomes for child dependency case outcomes, and thus the results must be interpreted as tentative evidence of the theorized effects. Due to the high number of analyses conducted, it is possible that at least some of the effects uncovered reflect Type 1 errors – a limitation that is at least somewhat mitigated by the Study 2 replication. Even so, future research is necessary to test the parameters of this effect. Indeed, child welfare decision making is a complex process involving numerous decision maker and situational factors. As Decision Maker Ecology details, a decision must be understood within the context it was made, accounting for case factors, organizational factors, decision-maker factors, and external factors (Shlonsky & Benbenishy, 2014). Our model attempts to explore only a subset of specific decision maker factors that influence the outcome of child custody decisions but does not explore the various other complex factors that contribute to social worker decision making. Thus, the present research reflects a necessary but preliminary first step – future research should explore more complex interactive effects of multiple variables in tandem. Will the same results manifest for different instances of child abuse and neglect? Do other social worker characteristics besides years of job experience predict their compassion fatigue, and in turn, case decisions? Indeed, research suggests that a history of childhood abuse, anxiety and mood disorders, a supportive work environment, and caseload size affect social workers’ susceptibility to secondary trauma and compassion fatigue (Boscarino et al., 2004; Bride et al., 2007; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Will a strong social support system outside of work or an ability to compartmentalize one’s self-concept diminish susceptibility to compassion fatigue? What factors predict the prevention of compassion fatigue? For instance, compassion satisfaction, or one’s satisfaction with having helped, predicts reduced compassion fatigue (Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2009). Future researchers should explore the protective effects of compassion satisfaction in guarding against compassion fatigue.

8.2. Limitations

An important potential limitation of our research is one of sample generalizability. Perhaps due to our sampling technique (MTurk), our sample’s mean age is about 10 years younger than the national mean age for social workers (which is 43 years old; Data U.S.A., 2015). Our sample was also more racially diverse and included a higher proportion of men than is reflected in the general social worker population. Thus, the present research might reflect a conservative estimate of the effects of compassion fatigue; because years of experience predicts compassion fatigue, an older social worker sample might exhibit even higher levels of compassion fatigue. Moreover, because age, race, and gender play significant roles in decision making, our sample has limited generalizability and our results may reflect only tentative evidence. Future research should include an older and more generalizable sample.

Importantly, an obvious limitation is that the present research reflects an assessment of social workers’ hypothetical child dependency court case outcomes. Will these results generalize to actual child dependency court case outcomes? Future research is necessary to explore this important question of ecological validity. Of course, examining the relation between compassion fatigue and actual case outcomes includes inevitable methodological limitations, including a lack of methodological control and a restricted ability to assess case specific attitudes, which ostensibly will be limited to retrospective reports. Thus, the present research provides an important first step in understanding the link between compassion fatigue and dependency court outcomes. The sample of participants in the present two studies includes actual social workers, and the hypothetical scenario of child abuse and neglect was detailed and reviewed for ecological validity by a practicing social worker. However, due to the discrepancies between our sample demographics and those of practicing social workers in the U.S., future research should examine the present research questions employing mixed methodologies and a more generalizable sample.

9. Conclusion

It is an unfortunate reality that the cost associated with a lengthy career as a social worker within child dependency court might be compassion fatigue, which research has established to be associated with negative mental health consequences (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). Yet such professions are in high need and are expected to grow in demand over the next 10 years at a rate that exceeds other fields (United States Department of Labor, 2017). What’s more, such professionals fulfill a vital societal role in serving the needs of the most vulnerable members of society – victimized children. It is essential that we support and pursue research and interventions designed to treat compassion fatigue (for a review, see Figley, 2002a, 2002b). We must also consider the responsibility of legal institutions in promoting employee health and preventing compassion fatigue, which requires careful coordination within the large and complex network of child protection services. Special attention to system-wide factors known to contribute to compassion fatigue (i.e., high caseloads), but also to time allocated for team interventions and support provided by supervisors is necessary to mitigate effects of compassion fatigue. Such efforts have the potential to facilitate child dependency court outcomes that best serve the needs of the children who experience such trauma directly.
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References


