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Factors Associated With Child Custody Evaluators' Recommendations in Cases of Intimate Partner Violence

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Although child custody evaluations can lead to unsafe outcomes in cases of intimate partner violence (IPV), little is known about factors associated with evaluators' recommendations. In this study of 465 child custody evaluators, we investigated the association between evaluators' beliefs, background, and knowledge and their custody and visitation recommendations in cases involving IPV. We hypothesized that evaluators' belief in false allegations by the mother and their recommendations that perpetrators have custody or unsupervised visits would be positively associated with (a) being a male evaluator, (b) patriarchal norms, (c) not knowing a survivor of IPV, and (d) less knowledge of IPV. In addition, we hypothesized that evaluators' belief in false allegations by mothers would be related to their recommendation that perpetrators have custody or unsupervised visits. Results supported most of the hypothesized relationships. Multivariate analysis revealed that belief variables explained more of the variance in custody-visitation outcomes than demographic and knowledge variables. Implications of the findings for IPV training, evaluator selection, and evaluation guidelines are provided.

Keywords: domestic violence, intimate partner violence, child custody evaluations

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Victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) and their children may experience serious harm as a result of custody decisions that ignore or do not adequately consider IPV.[1] For example, sole or joint custody of children may be awarded to a violent parent (American Psychological Association, 1996), or a violent parent may continue to abuse an ex-partner and the children during unsupervised or poorly supervised visitation (Hayes, 2012; Neustein & Lesher, 2005; Radford & Hester, 2006). An abuser's continued contact with an ex-partner is often associated with children's exposure to IPV, poor role modeling, and risk of physical and psychological maltreatment of the children (Hardesty & Chung, 2006; Jaffe & Crooks, 2007; Saunders, 2007). In contested cases, court decisions are usually based on child custody evaluations (e.g., Davis, O'Sullivan, Susser & Fields, 2011). However, few studies have focused on child custody evaluators' beliefs, background, and knowledge about IPV in relation to their recommendations regarding custody and parent–child visitation.[2] The purpose of this study was to further our understanding of the predictors of evaluators' recommendations in IPV cases to help inform training, policy development, and evaluator selection.

Concerns about custody outcomes have been raised because representative state and local studies reveal that a small to substantial minority (10%–39%) of abusers receive primary physical custody or joint custody (Davis et al., 2010; Morrill, Dai, Dunn, Sung, & Smith, 2005). In one study, most abusers (65%) received primary or joint custody (Johnson, Saccuzzo, & Koen, 2005). Custody evaluators in a small, nonrandom survey (primarily psychologists in independent practice) indicated that in half of cases with a single IPV perpetrator, evaluators recommended the victim receive sole legal and physical custody; however, in 39% of cases they recommended joint legal custody, with primary physical custody recommended for the victim (Bow & Boxer, 2003).[3]

Raising further concerns, several representative studies involving record reviews or survivor interviews showed little or no difference in custody and visitation outcomes for cases with and without IPV (Kernic, Monary-Ernsdorff, Koepsell, & Holt, 2005; Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Horvath, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2000; O'Sullivan, King, Levin-Russell, & Horowitz, 2006). Some re-

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[1] The term *survivor* is used interchangeably with the term *victim* to refer to those victimized by intimate partner violence.

[2] The term *recommendation* includes recommendations that professionals actually made or *would* have made if in a position to make recommendations in custody or visitation cases. According to some professional standards and the rules of some jurisdictions, evaluators may not be allowed to make recommendations about "ultimate issues."

[3] The original booklet of the American Judges Association (n.d.) stated that, "studies show that batterers have been able to convince authorities that the victim is unfit or undeserving of sole custody in approximately 70% of challenged cases" (American Judges Association, n.d., p. 5). However, the Association did not conduct original research or provide a reference.

searchers have focused on the weight evaluators give to family violence. In a 2001 survey of psychologist evaluators, the three most important criteria for custody recommendations were IPV, parent–child emotional ties, and willingness and ability of parents to encourage a close relationship with the other parent (Bow & Quinnell, 2001; 8.1–8.4 on a 9-point scale, with 9 = "*extremely important*"). Evaluators appear to give more weight to abuse and violence recently. In 2008, Ackerman and Pritzl (2011) found that 64% of custody evaluators listed physical or sexual abuse as a major reason for sole custody, compared with only 38% in an earlier study (Ackerman & Ackerman, 1997).

Regarding evaluation training and practices, Bow and Boxer's (2003) nonrandom survey of 115 evaluators, mostly psychologists, revealed that almost all had some IPV training and appeared to follow established standards for custody evaluations when evaluating IPV cases. Evaluators tended to use multiple information sources, but most (60%) did not use specialized IPV questionnaires or instruments. When IPV was detected, evaluators indicated that it greatly impacted their recommendations. Power/control issues and jealousy/possessiveness were weighted more heavily than physical abuse. Evaluators have recently begun to apply research findings on different types of IPV, leading to more individualized recommendations (e.g., Jaffe & Crooks, 2007) and helping to quell debates between victim advocates and family court professionals over whether all IPV is the same and over the extent of "mutual combat" (Salem & Dunford-Jackson, 2008).[4] While there is evidence that evaluators increasingly consider abuse in their decisions and receive training on differential assessments, some evaluators may continue to have serious misconceptions about custody cases and IPV. For example, they may misinterpret some victims' trauma responses, such as anxiety, paranoia, or flat affect, as signs of chronic psychopathology (American Psychological Association, 1996; Erickson, 2006).

Gender bias might lead evaluators to interpret the same psychological symptoms very differently for fathers and mothers (Lesher, 2010). This bias is frequently uncovered in custody disputes (Dragiewicz, 2010; Rosen & Etlin, 1996) and is often tied to mistrust of women, in particular to the belief that they frequently make false allegations of child abuse and IPV. In a 1997 study, evaluators considered nearly half of the abuse allegations (physical, sexual, emotional abuse of any family member) false or inflated (LaFortune & Carpenter, 1998). More male than female evaluators believed allegations were false (57% and 34%, respectively). Studies of rates of false allegations of IPV are lacking; however, for allegations of child abuse in divorce cases, rates of false allegations are quite low (e.g., Faller, 2005; Trocmé & Bala, 2005) and are made more often by fathers than mothers (Trocmé & Bala, 2005).

Evaluators are also likely to conform to the "friendly parent" standard that exists in most state laws for determining the child's best interest (Zorza, 2007); that is, parents are expected to facilitate a good relationship between the child and the other parent, despite a reasonable reluctance to coparent because of fear of harm (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006). Similar to the emphasis on cooperative parenting, use of "parent-alienation syndrome" (PAS; Gardner, 1998) or "parental-alienation disorder" (Bernet, 2008) can also place battered women in a no-win situation when they make child abuse allegations or have concerns about contacts they or their children may have with their ex-partner. Despite their lack of scientific support (American Psychological Association, 1996), practitioners may continue to apply parent alienation formulations when parents report abuse. These practitioners may label a parent as an "alienator" without a thorough investigation of the abuse allegations (Brown, Frederico, Hewitt, & Sheehan, 2001; Meier, 2009).

Evaluators' theoretical orientation also appears to influence their evaluations. One record review showed that evaluators who viewed "power-and-control" as the basis for IPV, as opposed to the family system, were more likely to recommend parenting plans with elements indicating higher levels of safety (Davis et al., 2010). Women were more likely than men to have the "power-and-control" orientation. Similarly, in a qualitative study of 23 evaluators, several differences were found between those with "family violence" and feminist perspectives (Haselschwerdt, Hardesty, & Hans, 2011). "Feminist" evaluators had much more IPV training, used a power-and-control orientation, and differentiated among types of IPV. They were much more likely to believe spouse abuse was highly relevant in custody evaluations, false allegations relatively rare, and that recommendations should emphasize safety over coparenting.

Some traits and background factors may also be related to evaluators' beliefs and practices, similar to results with other professionals. For example, those who were abused as a child or adult may be more likely to show positive attitudes and behavior toward victims (Yoshihama & Mills, 2003), and first-hand acquaintance with survivors can be related to increased likelihood of detecting IPV (Saunders & Kindy, 1993). Women professionals are consistently less likely than men to blame IPV victims (e.g., Saunders, Lynch, Grayson, & Linz, 1987). In one study, female family court judges showed more IPV knowledge and greater support for victim protections (Morrill et al., 2005). Evidence shows connections between blaming battered women for their abuse and sexist beliefs (patriarchal norms; Saunders et al., 1987). Associated with patriarchal norms and victim blaming are the value-laden beliefs that the world is basically just (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) and social hierarchies are good for society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Based on the above literature review, we developed a conceptual model with several sets of variables: (1) traits (e.g., gender and age); (2) general, value-laden beliefs (patriarchal norms, belief in just world, support for social hierarchies); (3) background (knowing victims of IPV, knowledge of IPV); (4) beliefs about custody and IPV; and (5) recommendations for custody-visitation. We hypothesized that two main dependent variables, specifically a belief in false allegations by the mother and the recommendation that perpetrators have custody or unsupervised visits, would be positively associated with: (a) male evaluators, (b) patriarchal norms, (c) not knowing a survivor of IPV, and (d) less knowledge

[4] For some, evidence that different patterns of abuse (mutual combat vs. male-to-female violence) exist in different types of samples (Johnson, 2008) has resolved this fundamental question. Others insist that when evaluators are taught that women are the primary victims, they may produce biased evaluations (Dutton, 2006). Those who focus on men's violence point to gender-bias commission reports that almost always find greater bias against women (Dragiewicz, 2010; Meier, 2003), and to evidence of women's more frequent use of self-defense violence (e.g., Kimmel, 2002).

of IPV. In addition, we hypothesized that a belief in false allegations would be related as an independent variable to the outcome of evaluators' recommendations that perpetrators have custody or unsupervised visits. It was further expected that the following beliefs about custody and IPV would be intercorrelated: a high rate of false allegations of IPV, a high rate of false allegations of child abuse, IPV is not relevant in custody/supervision decisions, parents alienate children from the other parents, survivor symptoms are a sign of chronic psychopathology, and controlling behavior is not relevant in evaluations. Multivariate analysis was used to explore the relative weight of sets of variables in predicting custody-visitation and to assess whether bivariate results remained after controlling for demographic, background, and core belief variables.

Method[5]

Recruitment Procedures

Recruitment procedures began after an institutional review board approved the human subjects protocol. We generated invitation lists from several sources: (a) members of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) who were psychologists, because they are likely to conduct custody evaluations; (b) Web searches for evaluators; (c) a list from another researcher based primarily on Web searches; and (d) e-mail and telephone contact with the directors of court-based custody evaluation units. Our final sample included 54% who worked in private settings, 29% in court settings, and 14% in both. A small percentage (3%) worked in other settings.[6]

We sent 4,017 e-mail invitations in 35 separate e-mails from May 31, 2009, through March 29, 2010, and two reminder e-mails. There were 302 e-mails with "undeliverable" notices sent back to us, 196 who reported they were not custody evaluators, and 24 who said they did not want to participate (0.7%). It is likely there were many more nonevaluators on the invitation list who did not contact us to say they were not evaluators and many who did not open the e-mail invitations. In a similar study of judges in which we could track e-mail activity, 24% opened the e-mail and only 8% opened the survey. We sent 1,665 invitation letters to people with no e-mail addresses on our list.[7] We modified Dillman's (2005) procedure, sending an initial letter with a link to the Web survey, followed by a copy of the survey in the mail 7–10 days later, and then a postcard reminder 10 days after that. There were 196 undeliverable mailings with no forwarding address. We forwarded any mail that had a forwarding address. We offered two incentives for completion: a $5 donation on their behalf to one of four child abuse/child trauma organizations and a chance to win a $100 Amazon gift card. Similar to other surveys of evaluators (e.g., Bow & Boxer, 2003), we could not calculate a response rate because we sent invitations to both nonevaluators and evaluators. We obtained some information on likely nonrespondents by comparing characteristics of those who completed a small portion of the survey with those who completed all or almost all of the survey. Noncompleters reported a significantly lower percentage of IPV cases in their caseload, possibly indicating that noncompleters viewed the survey as less relevant. Experience conducting evaluations was not related to completion.

Sample

We received surveys from 520 evaluators. Fifty-five (11% of the sample) had between 73% and 98% of the variables missing and were excluded from analysis because key variables were missing, resulting in a final sample of 465. Most (60%) were women and 75% were over 50 years old. Almost all had advanced degrees (94%): 42% had masters and 46% had doctoral degrees. Approximately half (52%) were psychologists, 24% were social workers, 7% counselors, 6% marriage and family therapists, 3% lawyers, 2% psychiatrists, and 6% were "other or multiple." Most (57%) had conducted over 100 evaluations, and 20% had conducted over 500.

Measures

We describe the independent variables first followed by the two main dependent variables (The measures can be found online. See supplemental materials link.).

Beliefs about family violence, custody, and visitation. Some of the items in this category were taken or modified from other studies (Morrill et al., 2005; our unpublished pilot studies of responses of staff from supervised visitation programs).[8] Five subscales, using a 7-point Likert scale from "*strongly disagree*" to "*strongly agree*," were formed based on the results of principal component factor analysis (varimax rotation, with eigenvalues greater than 1).

(a) IPV survivors make false IPV allegations. This 3-item scale had an alpha internal reliability coefficient of .80. We used a factor score to standardize the items because they had different response options.

(b) IPV survivors alienate child. This 4-item scale had an alpha internal reliability coefficient of .75.

(c) IPV offenders make false IPV and child abuse allegations. This 2-item scale had an alpha internal reliability coefficient of .79.

(d) IPV survivors' resistance to coparenting hurts child. This 2-item scale had an alpha internal reliability coefficient of .70.

(e) IPV not relevant in custody-visitation decisions. This 2-item scale had an alpha internal reliability coefficient of .70.

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) Scale. This measures a desire for group-based dominance using a 7-point Likert scale of agreement (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). We used

[5] We conducted a pilot study in order to test the implementation of surveys, and conduct psychometric analyses of measures. We used Dillman's (2005) procedure for recruitment by mail. Through our analysis of 62 respondents we substantially reduced the number of survey items by eliminating those that did not add to the reliability of a scale.

[6] Some of those reporting both "private" and "court" settings might have meant they worked privately but received court referrals, since it is unlikely someone could be employed by county government while in private practice. The question was, "In what settings do you conduct evaluations?" rather than asking the source of employment.

[7] Some sampling bias can occur if only one method is used (Dillman, 2005). We found that those who responded by mail were significantly older, had conducted custody evaluations longer and had less domestic violence knowledge than those who responded by e-mail.

[8] One item on alienation and exaggerated reporting was modified from an unpublished survey by Jennifer Hardesty; the original item was, "In many divorce cases where women allege domestic violence, the claim is exaggerated to alienate fathers from their children."

the SDO6 in this study, which correlates in expected ways with attitudes toward sexism, ethnic prejudice, gay rights, environmental policies, and capital punishment (Foels & Pappas, 2004; Pratto et al., 2000). We pared the 16-item version to three items with a reliability coefficient (alpha) of .69.

Modern Sexism Scale (MSS). This scale assesses subtle sexist attitudes from "*strongly agree*" to "*strongly disagree*" (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Based on our pilot study, we pared the 8-item scale to 5 items, with a reliability coefficient of .78, comparable to other studies (Garos, Beggan, Kluck, & Easton, 2004).

Belief in a Just World (BJW) Scale. This measures a belief that the world is basically just on 7 levels of agreement-disagreement. The scale has been used in numerous studies, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .79 to .81 (Rubin & Peplau, 1975), and correlates with Dalbert and colleagues' 6-item scale of belief in a just world (Loo, 2002). We pared the 20-item scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) to 4 items and achieved an internal reliability coefficient of .66.

Evaluator characteristics. We included questions similar to those used in other studies of custody evaluators (Bow & Boxer, 2003; LaFortune, 1997) that asked about the approximate number of custody evaluations conducted over entire careers and the past year; the setting in which they practiced; and gender, age, educational level, and type of advanced degree.

Knowledge acquired on IPV. We asked respondents how many times they used the following sources to acquire knowledge about IPV: workshops, lectures, consultation, articles, books, videos, radio and Web pages.[9]

Areas of knowledge acquired. We asked respondents whether or not they had acquired knowledge about the following topics: (a) prevalence of IPV, (b) causes of IPV, (c) types of perpetrators, (d) postseparation violence, (e) screening for IPV, (f) assessing dangerousness in IPV cases, and (g) children's exposure to IPV.

Knowledge of victims. We used a checklist for respondents to indicate whether they had personally known a victim of IPV who was their father, mother, sibling, other relative, friend, coworker, acquaintance, or neighbor. There was also an option to check "myself" as a survivor.

Practice history. The main dependent variable used items regarding custody arrangements and visitation similar to those used by Bow and Boxer (2003). We asked respondents to "estimate the percentage of times that you recommend, or would have if in that position, the following custody arrangements" in cases in which "one parent was clearly a perpetrator." Options were:

(1) SOLE LEGAL and PHYSICAL custody with VICTIM of domestic violence;

(2) SOLE LEGAL and PHYSICAL custody with PERPETRATOR of domestic violence;

(3) JOINT LEGAL custody and PRIMARY PHYSICAL custody with VICTIM;

(4) JOINT LEGAL custody and PRIMARY PHYSICAL custody with PERPETRATOR;

(5) SOLE LEGAL custody with VICTIM and JOINT PHYSICAL custody;

(6) SOLE LEGAL custody with PERPETRATOR and JOINT PHYSICAL custody;

(7) JOINT LEGAL and PHYSICAL custody.

Possible responses were "never, 0%," "seldom, 1–9%," "occasionally, 10–49%," "half of the time, 50%," "most of the time, 51–89%," "almost always, 90–99%," and "always, 100%."

To reduce the number of variables and to increase variance, we created a single, weighted scale of recommendations based on a principal component factor analysis (varimax rotation): 7 was assigned to *sole legal and physical custody given to the perpetrator* and −7 to *sole legal and physical custody given to the victim* (*joint legal custody, with physical custody to perpetrator* = 6; *sole legal custody to perpetrator with joint physical custody* = 5; *sole legal custody to victim, with joint physical custody* = 4; *joint legal and physical custody* = 3; *joint legal custody, with physical custody to victim* = 2). Evaluators were then asked to estimate the percentage of times they recommended no supervision of parent–child visits, supervision by a friend or relative, and supervision by a professional or paraprofessional. Weights were assigned to the visitation options to create a scale of "least safe supervision" based on factor weights from principal component factor analysis: 3 if "*no supervision of visits*" was chosen, −2 if *supervised by friends and relatives*, and −3 if *supervised by professionals or paraprofessionals*.

Responses to IPV case vignette. In a second dependent measure, we used a vignette created by Dalton, Carbon, and Olsen (2003), with some modifications (vignette is included in the measures online; see supplemental materials link). It included three incidents of severe violence by the father and claims by the mother that he "controls her every move." We added psychological test results for each parent, school reports on their son, and the employment status of the parents. We asked an open-ended question: "What initial hypotheses would you want to explore in this case?" allowing for up to three open-ended responses. Two doctoral students and the first author grouped responses independently into themes and two masters-level social work students coded the responses. There were two themes with adequate interrater reliability and enough cases for analysis: (1) *Coercive or controlling violence/behavior.* We coded responses in this category if the respondent mentioned "controlling," "coercive," or "dominating" violence, or behavior (not necessarily involving violence). (2) *Mother's mental health problems are result of IPV*. These codes described the mental health problems of the mother in the vignette as being caused by IPV. The interrater agreement for the coercive-control category was 94% and for mental health category was 98%. The first author resolved conflicting codes.

We posed a set of questions that asked the likelihood, from 0% to 100%, that either parent would cause psychological harm to the child in the future, the mother was exaggerating, the father was minimizing, and recommendations for custody and visitation arrangements. We formed 5 items on custody arrangements into a weighted scale based in part on a factor analysis and the assumption that *custody awarded to the father* was the most negative outcome for the mother. It was assigned a weight of 5, whereas *custody to the mother* was assigned a weight of −5. Intermediate weights were: 2 for *joint legal custody with primary physical*

[9] The frequency options for four knowledge acquisition activities (books, radio programs, films and videos, workshops) differed from the other four (articles, lectures, professional consultations, websites read) based on the results of the pilot study (0, 1–5, 6–10, 11–20, over 20 times; and 0, 1–10, 11–25, 26–50, 50–100, over 100 times, respectively).

custody to the mother, 3 for *joint legal and physical custody*, and 4 for *joint legal custody with primary physical custody to the father*. There is good evidence of cross-validation for the vignette and actual recommendations because correlations for the same items ranged from $r = .22$ to .52 and averaged .36. The two weighted scales had a correlation of $r = .52$. For vignette visitation recommendations, the same weights used for actual recommendations were used and were supported by factor analysis. The correlations across the same items between the vignette and actual practice averaged .40 and the two weighted scales correlated .50 with each other. Descriptive statistics for interval variables (minimum, maximum, mean, and *SD*) are in a Table online. See supplemental materials link. (More information on the methods can be found in Saunders, Faller, & Tolman, 2011).

Analysis

We used bivariate correlations and *t* tests to test the hypotheses. We used hierarchical regression analysis to examine the extent to which IPV-custody beliefs contributed to outcomes beyond the contributions made by other sets of variables. We analyzed the possible impact of knowledge acquisition with both bivariate and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) methods. An outlier analysis resulted in the removal of one case. A multivariate statistical power analysis revealed that the sample size was more than adequate for the analyses. To protect against Type I errors because of the large number of tests, we use Bonferroni's correction, but also report results for $p < .05$ to provide direction for future studies.

Results

Bivariate Analysis

Gender. As predicted, male evaluators were more likely than female evaluators to believe that mothers make false IPV allegations ($M = .7$ vs. .3; $t = 3.5$; $p < .001$). Male evaluators were also more likely to believe that victims alienate the children ($M = .5$ vs. .2; $t = 2{,}8$; $p < .001$), hurt the children when they resist coparenting ($M = 7.8$ vs. 6.8; $t = 3.5$; $p < .001$), and that IPV is not an important factor in custody decisions ($M = 6.2$ vs. 5.6; $t = 2.3$; $p < .05$). Women were more likely to believe that perpetrators alienate children from their mothers ($M = 11.7$ vs. 10.5; $t = -2.3$; $p < .05$). Male and female evaluators did not differ in their custody recommendations. Men were more likely than women to believe that unsupervised visitation was the best option in the vignette ($M = -5.1$ vs. -12.8; $t = 1.9$; $p < .05$). Using ANCOVA, the above belief differences were explained to a small extent by differences in patriarchal beliefs and setting. Differences were not explained by differences in IPV knowledge acquisition or knowing a victim.

Core beliefs in relation to custody beliefs and recommendations. Patriarchal norms correlated significantly with all five IPV-custody belief measures and all five custody-visitation outcome measures in expected directions. Higher scores on the sexism scale were related to the beliefs that: IPV is not important in custody decisions, victims make false allegations, victims alienate the children, victims hurt the children because they resist coparenting, and fathers do not make false allegations ($r = .10-.34$; average $r = .23$). Sexist beliefs correlated positively with recommendations for sole or joint custody to the perpetrator, and unsupervised visits ($r = .10-.28$; average $r = .19$). In addition, the belief that the world is basically just was related positively and significantly to the same custody beliefs as the sexism scale ($r = .10-.13$; average $r = .12$) and was also related to past recommendations for sole or joint custody to the perpetrator ($r = .13$). The belief in social hierarchies was related positively and significantly to the beliefs that victims make false allegations ($r = .09$) and alienate their children ($r = .11$) and that fathers do not make false allegations of abuse ($r = .12$).

Knowing survivors of IPV. Beliefs and recommendations about custody-visitation and the vignette responses did not differ by whether the evaluator was a survivor of IPV. However, several significant differences were found based on whether one's family members were survivors. Those with two or more family members who were survivors were significantly more likely than those with zero or one member to believe that IPV is important in custody-visitation determinations (one-way analysis of variance, $F = 3.7$; $p < .05$), that mothers do not make false IPV allegations ($F = 4.3$, $p < .01$) and that the child in the vignette needed supervised visitation ($F = 3.2$, $p < .05$). Knowing a friend who was a victim of IPV was related to the beliefs that alleged IPV victims do not make false IPV allegations, $t = -2.4$, $p < .02$, do not alienate children from the other parent, $t = -1.8$, $p < .05$ and that the best interest of the child in the vignette would require supervised visitation for the father, $t = 1.7$, $p < .05$.

Areas of IPV knowledge acquired. As shown in Table 1, those who acquired knowledge of IPV *screening* and *postseparation* violence were significantly more likely to believe that IPV is important in custody cases, alleged IPV victims do not alienate children, these victims do not hurt children if they resist coparenting and fathers tend to make false allegations ($t = 2.2$ to 3.5). They were also more likely to believe that custody to the victim in the vignette was in the best interest of the child. Knowledge of the *prevalence* of IPV and *types of perpetrators* were significantly related to three of the beliefs in expected directions ($t = 1.95$ to 3.5). Knowledge on *assessing dangerousness* was significantly related to two of the beliefs and knowledge of *children's exposure to IPV* to only one. Knowledge of *children's exposure to IPV, prevalence, postseparation violence* and *screening* were significantly related to custody-visitation recommendations and the focus of vignette assessment in expected directions.

Methods of IPV knowledge acquisition. The frequencies of workshop and lecture attendance were significantly related to all four beliefs about custody and IPV in expected directions (Table 2). Workshop and lecture attendance were also related to the beliefs that custody to the survivor-mother and supervised visitation for the father were in the best interests of the child in the vignette. Workshop attendance was also related to evaluators hypothesizing in the vignette about the father's coercive-controlling behavior ($M = 3.9$ vs. 3.6; $t = -2.9$; $p < .01$) and IPV causing the mother's mental health symptoms ($M = 3.9$ vs. 3.6; $t = -2.4$; $p < .02$). The frequencies of professional consultations and reading books and articles were related to the beliefs that IPV is important in custody decisions, alleged victims do not make false IPV allegations or alienate the children and the mother's mental health symptoms may be due to IPV. Reading Web sites was related to the beliefs that IPV is important in custody decisions,

Table 1
Custody Beliefs and Recommendations Significantly Related to Areas of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Knowledge Acquired

Custody beliefs and recommendations	Areas of IPV knowledge acquired						
	Prevalence of IPV	Causes of IPV	Types of perpetrators	Postseparation violence	Screening for IPV	Assessing danger in IPV cases	Children's exposure to IPV
IPV important in custody cases	**			*	*		
Mothers do *not* make false IPV allegations					**		
Mothers do *not* alienate children	*		***	***	***	*	*
Victim does *not* hurt child when resists co-parenting			*	***	***		
Belief in false allegations of IPV & child abuse by father	***		**	***	***	***	
Recommended custody to victim	*						
Recommended supervised visits							*
Vignette: custody to victim				*	***		
Vignette: supervised visits							
Coercive-controlling behavior					*		
Mental problems from IPV	**						

Note. The means, standard deviations and percents are contained in a table available online. See supplemental materials link.
* $p < .05$ level (1-tailed). ** $p < .01$ level (1-tailed). *** $p < .001$ level (1-tailed).

there should be supervised visits for the father in the vignette and the mother's mental symptoms may be a consequence of IPV.

Relationships among IPV-custody beliefs. As hypothesized, the belief that mothers make false IPV allegations was significantly related to several other beliefs: that survivors make false allegations of child abuse ($r = .40$), IPV is not important in custody decisions ($r = .50$), survivors alienate children from the other parent ($r = .72$) and children are hurt when survivors are reluctant to coparent ($r = .51$). The belief that mothers make false IPV allegations was significantly related to several beliefs about the vignette: that the mother would cause psychological harm to her child ($r = .38$), the father would not cause such harm ($r = .39$), the mother is exaggerating her reports of violence ($r = .50$). and the father is *not* minimizing ($r = .35$). The evaluators who responded to the vignette by saying they would explore coercive-controlling behavior as a cause of the violence and would consider the mother's mental health symptoms as a consequence of IPV were more likely to believe IPV is important in custody decisions, mothers do not make false IPV allegations, victims do not alienate the children and victims do not hurt the children when they resist coparenting ($t = 2.3$–3.6; p value averaged .005). Those who would explore coercive-controlling violence and the mental health consequences of IPV in the vignette were also more likely to believe the father would harm his son psychologically ($t = -3.0$, $p = .002$; $t = -3.8$, $p = .001$) and minimized his violence ($t = -2.8$, $p = .005$; $t = -3.3$, $p = .001$).

Beliefs about custody and IPV related to custody-visitation recommendations. Evaluators' self-reported history of recommending custody that favored the offender over the victim (weighted scale) was related significantly to all four beliefs about alleged IPV victim-mothers: that they alienate children from the other parent, they make false IPV allegations, IPV is not important in custody decisions and alleged victims hurt children if they resist coparenting (Table 3). A preference for recommending "no supervision of visitation" over supervised visitation (composite scale) was related to the belief that IPV is not important in custody decisions ($r = .21$). Contrary to expectations, this preference was more likely among those who would explore coercive-controlling

Table 2
Bivariate Correlations Between Evaluator Beliefs and Frequency of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Knowledge Acquisition Methods

Custody beliefs and recommendations	Methods of IPV knowledge acquisition							
	Books	Radio programs	Films or videos	Workshops	Articles	Lectures	Consultations	Web sites read
IPV not important in custody	−.13**	.01	.01	−.15**	−.10*	−.12*	−.11*	−.14**
False IPV allegations by mother	−.11*	−.01	−.06	−.19**	−.08	−.15**	−.09*	−.04
Parental alienation by mother	−.08	.03	.02	−.16**	−.10*	−.15**	−.08*	−.07
Victim reluctant coparent	−.01	.03	.04	−.16**	−.07	−.08*	−.00	−.03
False allegations by father	.03	−.02	−.01	.01	.02	.01	.06	.03
Sole or joint to custody to perpetrator	−.01	−.02	−.01	−.03	−.06	−.07	.01	−.04
No supervision of visits	−.06	.01	.03	.04	.03	.04	−.03	−.08
Vignette: sole or joint custody to perpetrator	.01	−.02	−.02	−.16**	−.03	−.10*	−.09*	−.03
Vignette: no supervised visits	−.10*	−.00	−.02	−.13**	−.12*	−.10	−.09	−.11*

* $p < .05$ level (1-tailed). ** $p < .01$ level (1-tailed).

Table 3
Bivariate Correlations Between Beliefs and Custody-Visitation Recommendations and Vignette Responses

Custody-visitation recommendations	IPV not important in custody	False IPV allegations by mother[a]	Parental alienation by mother	Victim reluctant coparent	False allegations by father[b]
Past Cases					
Weighted Composite Scale: Sole-joint custody to perpetrator[c]	.25**	.25**	.20**	.36**	−.07
Weighted Composite Scale: No supervised visits vs. supervised	.21**	−.07	−.12**	−.04	−.08*
Responses to vignette					
Composite Scale: sole-joint to father vs. sole to mother	.42**	.52**	.48**	.56**	−.09
Composite Scale: No supervision vs. supervised visits	.43**	.19**	.16**	.21**	−.13**
What is the likelihood of future psychological harm to the son by the mother?	.21**	.38**	.42**	.30**	−.10*
What is the likelihood of future psychological harm to the son by the father?	−.38**	−.39**	−.24**	−.34**	.16**
What is the likelihood that the mother is exaggerating the extent of the violence?	.23**	.50**	.43**	.31**	.09*
What is the likelihood that the father is minimizing the extent of the violence?	−.27**	−.35**	−.25**	−.29**	.19**

Note. IPV = intimate partner violence.
[a] Factor score from three items. [b] Allegations of IPV and child abuse. [c] Most of the weight is from: SOLE LEGAL and PHYSICAL custody to VICTIM of IPV; JOINT LEGAL custody and PHYSICAL custody to victim of IPV; JOINT LEGAL and PHYSICAL custody.
* $p < .05$ level (1-tailed). ** $p < .01$ level (1-tailed).

behavior as a hypothesis in the vignette ($t = -2.4$; $p = .02$). The preference in the vignette to give custody to the father was significantly related to all four beliefs: that survivors alienate children, mothers make false allegations of IPV, survivors hurt children when reluctant to coparent and that IPV is not important in custody decisions (Table 3). Those who would explore coercive-controlling violence as a factor in the vignette were more likely to give custody to the victim ($t = 4.1$; $p < .001$). The preference was most strongly related with the belief that IPV is important in custody decisions ($r = .43$) and that the mothers' mental health symptoms in the vignette were probably due to the domestic abuse ($t = -2.33$; $p < .05$).

Supplementary finding. Evaluators in private or private-court settings, compared with those in court settings, were significantly more likely to believe that alleged victims make false IPV allegations ($M = .6$ vs. .3; $t = -3.2$; $p < .001$), alienate children from the other parent ($M = .4$ vs. .1; $t = -2.7$; $p < .01$), and hurt the children if they are reluctant to coparent ($M = 7.4$ vs. 6.5; $t = -2.9$; $p < .01$).

The higher the number of total evaluations conducted and the higher number in the past year, the less likely evaluators were to believe that victims hurt children by being reluctant to coparent ($r = -.13$; $r = -11$). The more total number of evaluations conducted, the more likely evaluators were to believe that supervised visits would be in the child's best interest in the vignette ($r = .20$). The more evaluations in the past year, the more likely they recommended unsupervised visits ($r = .17$) and sole or joint custody to the perpetrator ($r = .14$).

Multivariate Analysis

Although many hypotheses were supported when assessing the association of individual variables, assessing the relative weight of sets of variables can yield additional, important information. The percent of variance explained in predicting custody-visitation recommendations by sets of independent variables ranged from very low to very high. The highest percent of variance explained in predicting the vignette recommendation that the father have custody were IPV-custody beliefs (e.g., false allegations, alienation, cooperative parenting; 40%, $p < .001$) and vignette beliefs (e.g., future harm to the son, perpetrator minimizing, victim exaggerating, 57%, $p < .001$). These two sets of beliefs also explained, to a much lesser extent, the variance in actual recommendations that the perpetrator have custody and that no supervision of the father was needed in the vignette case (10%–18% of the variance, $p < .001$). The set of value-based, or "core" beliefs (i.e., sexism, just world, social dominance) was related significantly to all four outcomes, but much less strongly than other beliefs (2%–8%, $p < .001$–.05). The set of IPV knowledge methods and areas was related only to the vignette recommendation to give custody to the perpetrator (9% of the variance, $p < .01$). Demographics (age, gender), setting (private vs. other), and number of victims known as a set had the weakest associations with outcomes, significant only in predicting the recommendation of custody to the perpetrator in the vignette (4%, $p < .01$).[10] Because evaluators with particular demographics (e.g., age, gender) or background (e.g., knowing a victim of IPV) might be more likely to seek knowledge about IPV, we also conducted the analysis with these variables

[10] We do not report beta weights because highly correlated independent variables cannot be interpreted easily. The variable with the highest bivariate relationship will "speak for" its closely related independent variables and make beta weights uninterpretable.

controlled (ANCOVA). The variance explained increased somewhat with covariance analysis; however, significance was not achieved because of the large number of variables.

Table 4 shows the results of separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses in predicting custody or no supervision being recommended for the perpetrator. The scales for past history and vignette recommendations were standardized and added for this analysis into two scales, custody and visitation. Demographic variables were entered first, followed in order by core beliefs (sexism, belief in just world), number of victims known, knowledge of IPV and finally with custody-IPV beliefs (e.g., false allegations, alienation, IPV not important, victim coparent). The results show that the core beliefs added significantly to the prediction of custody and visitation recommendations beyond the demographic variables (8% and 2% of variance, respectively). Even more striking was the significant and large increase seen in the addition of the IPV-custody beliefs, after controlling for all other independent variables, in predicting custody or nonsupervised visits for the perpetrator (32% and 11% of variance, respectively).

Discussion

That some IPV allegations are false is not in dispute and research is needed to establish the actual rates. However, we were interested in studying the relationship between evaluators' belief that false allegations are common and their attitudes, knowledge, and background. As predicted, the belief in false IPV allegations was significantly related to other beliefs about IPV and custody, such as the belief that survivors alienate children from the other parent, harm the children if they do not coparent, and IPV is not important to consider in custody and visitation decisions. In addition, evaluators who said they would explore hypotheses about coercive-controlling behavior and mental health consequences of IPV in the vignette were more likely to believe IPV is important in custody decisions, mothers do not make false IPV allegations, and refusing to coparent does not harm the child. These findings are very similar to those of Haselschwerdt and her colleagues (2011). Also as predicted, the belief in false IPV allegations was related to recommendations for custody-visitation arrangements that would increase abuser-child contact. Such recommendations were also related to beliefs about controlling behavior, alienation and coparenting. Although male and female evaluators did not differ in their custody recommendation, men were more likely to believe unsupervised visits for the vignette couple were in the best interests of the child. As hypothesized, male evaluators were less likely to believe IPV allegations, similar to the findings of LaFortune and Carpenter (1998). Supporting another hypothesis, having a family member as an IPV survivor was related to the belief that mothers do not make false IPV allegations. These evaluators also were more likely to have recommended custody to the victim and supervised visits with the offender. Unlike findings in some other studies (e.g., Yoshihama & Mills, 2003), being a survivor of IPV was not related to beliefs or recommendations.

All but two of the seven areas of IPV knowledge acquisition were related to the belief that mothers do not make false allegations and to related beliefs. Knowledge of screening and postseparation violence were related to the most beliefs in expected directions, and also to recommending custody to the victim in the vignette. The frequencies of workshop and lecture attendance were related to recommending custody to the mother-survivor in the vignette and supervised visits for the father. Workshop and lecture attendance were also related to all four beliefs about victims in expected ways. In addition, workshop attendance was more common among those who would explore hypotheses about coercive-controlling behavior. This latter finding is consistent with that of Haselschwerdt and her colleagues (2011) who found that evaluators with extensive IPV training were more likely to perceive power and control as the central dynamic of IPV. Professional consultations and reading books, articles and web sites were also related in expected directions to several beliefs. There was support for the hypothesis that beliefs regarding patriarchal norms, a just world and social dominance would be related to the belief that mothers make false IPV allegations. More important, these core beliefs, especially patriarchal norms, were related to all five outcomes that favored offenders. These findings indicate that broader beliefs supporting discrimination against women and social hierarchies underlie specific beliefs about custody and IPV.

In multivariate analysis, beliefs about custody and IPV had the strongest relationships with recommendations. The core beliefs (e.g., patriarchal norms, just world, social dominance) had the next

Table 4
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Major Recommendations: R^2 Increase With the Entry of Each Block

Blocks	Custody to perpetrator: Past cases and vignette			No supervision of visits for perpetrator: past and vignette		
	R^2	R^2 increase	F for R^2 increase	R^2	R^2 increase	F for R^2 increase
1. Demographics (age and gender)	.01	.01	2.9	.01	.01	2.3
2. Core beliefs (sexism and just world)	.10	.08	18.9***	.03	.02	3.3*
3. Number of victims known	.10	.00	0.5	.04	.01	2.3
4. Intimate partner violence (IPV) knowledge areas and methods	.11	.01	1.8	.04	.00	0.7
5. Beliefs about custody and IPV	.34	.32	35.0***	.15	.11	12.9***

Note. The blocks of variables were forced to enter the equations in sequences of five blocks as indicated.
* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

strongest relationship with recommendations. Methods of acquiring knowledge, areas of knowledge, demographic characteristics, setting and number of victims known had the smallest overall relationship with recommendations.

When interpreting the results of the study, several limitations need to be kept in mind. First, there is no national list of custody evaluators available for sampling, and thus the representativeness of the sample is unknown. Second, the invitation lists included nonevaluators who were asked to select themselves out of study. Because we do not know how many nonevaluators were on the invitation lists, a response rate could not be calculated and self-selection bias could not be assessed. We were able to determine some characteristics of survey completers versus noncompleters and nonbias factors, like experience with IPV, were found. Third, reports of beliefs about controversial topics, even on anonymous surveys, may be influenced by social desirability response bias. Fourth, although measures created for the study showed good construct validity, some of the internal reliabilities were at the low end of acceptability. Fifth, portions of the study focused on all forms of IPV to build upon prior research. However, evaluators' responses are likely to vary depending on the type and severity of IPV. Finally, the correlational design does not allow us to posit any causal ordering of the variables, for example we need to be cautious in assuming that knowledge leads to attitudes and not the reverse. Future research can attempt to overcome these limitations. Bow (2006) details the strengths and weaknesses of various child custody research methods and Hardesty and Chung (2006) offer some directions for future research.

Despite the study's limitations, it has several important implications. IPV workshop and lecture attendance were the methods most often associated with outcomes supportive of IPV survivors. However, information obtained through websites, a low-cost means of training, was also related to outcomes supportive of survivors. Even when controlling for evaluator characteristics and core beliefs, IPV custody beliefs predicted custody decisions. These beliefs may be particularly amenable to change through training. Given our results that showed a relationship between the belief in false allegations and other beliefs and practices not supportive of survivors, training needs to provide accurate information on: the actual rate and nature of false allegations and parental alienation; the reasons that survivors are reluctant to coparent; the mental health consequences of IPV; and the importance of understanding coercive-controlling behavior. One guidebook details the ways in which evaluators may incorrectly pathologize IPV victims and misapply PAS (Dalton, Drozd, & Wong, 2006). The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (Dalton et al., 2006) and the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (2006) emphasize that IPV is its own specialty and extensive, special training is required, especially on the topic of assessment.

The link between beliefs about custody and broader beliefs about patriarchal norms, justice and social dominance indicates a connection to evaluators' deeper values, an issue addressed in recent texts on evaluations (e.g., Gould & Martindale, 2007). Educators can use value-awareness exercises to increase awareness of internal value conflicts, with subsequent changes in attitudes and behavior (e.g., Grube, Mayton, & Ball-Rokeach, 1994). Greater objectivity and less bias are likely to result when evaluators use standardized evaluation formats or templates (Hannah, 2010; Neustein & Lesher, 2005; Schafran, 2006). In addition, several professional organizations provide standards and guidelines that emphasize comprehensive, multimethod assessments (American Psychological Association, 2010; Association of Family & Conciliation Courts, 2006; Dalton et al., 2006). While evaluators are learning new methods for risk assessment and differential assessment and recommendations (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008), they need to be reminded of the complexity and limitations of the screening process (Ver Steegh, Davis, & Frederick, 2012). This study might also provide guidance in selecting child custody evaluators. A report from the National Center for State Courts (Keilitz et al., 1997) recommends maintaining a roster of court-approved evaluators who have been screened for their accurate knowledge about IPV. In conclusion, the findings from this study can provide guidance for IPV training and for choosing custody evaluators, leading ultimately to greater safety for all family members.

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