

Assessing Parenting in Child Custody Evaluation: Use of the Parent-Child Relationship Inventory

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Abstract

The Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI) (Gerard, 1994) assesses a number of important dimensions of parenting. PCRI scores based on 214 child-custody litigants are described, providing unique empirical data that include gender comparisons. Most content scales had scores one-half to one standard deviation better than standardization sample means. The defensiveness scale has questionable utility because it identified only 3% of parents as faking good, a much lower proportion than other tests with similar respondents. There were no differences between scores of mothers and fathers, which suggests adequate gender fairness. Interpretation of test results needs to consider research on parenting dimensions and styles, gender and parenting, and defensiveness on psychological tests. It is crucial that information from other evaluative methods be integrated with test results.

Keywords: child custody, defensiveness, evaluation, gender, parenting

Child custody evaluation has a primary goal of clarifying what is in children's best psychological interest. Therefore, there is a great deal of focus on interactions between children and parents. Psychological testing is routinely used to try to shed light on parent and child interactions from an objective standpoint, though there has been long-standing concern about the need for valid and reliable parenting measures (Coffman, Guerin, & Gottfried, 2006).

Although there does not appear to be a universally agreed-upon, complete model of parenting competence (Azar, Lauretti, & Loding, 1998), relevant theory and research have identified a number of dimensions or types of family functioning believed to be particularly important. For example, as pointed out by Darling and Steinberg (1993), even though early theories of parenting differed from one another in important ways, they were similar in emphasizing emotional warmth, hostility, control, and involvement. More recent, though long-standing models of family functioning (e.g., Beavers & Hampson, 1990; Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983; Marschak, 1960) and approaches to measure parental competence (e.g., Azar et al., 1998; Budd, Clark, & Connell, 2011), similarly all emphasize the importance of communication, how emotions are manifested, characteristics of behavioral control, and parental involvement with children.

Also, a number of scholars, clinicians, and forensic evaluators have focused on the general categories of parenting style initially proposed by Baumrind (1966). Those

categories are authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting. Authoritative parenting has generally been described as including relatively reciprocal communication within families, including parents being open to input from children and accepting of child psychological autonomy, while parents maintain the executive role through supervision and child management. Authoritarian parenting is characterized by more strict parental control, with limited opportunities for child input and psychological autonomy. Permissive parenting involves relatively little supervision and children having a great deal of freedom. A modification of Baumrind's model described parenting style as varying along two dimensions, responsiveness and demandingness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). This modification included dividing the permissive style into distinct patterns of indulgent versus neglectful parenting. In general, authoritative parenting has been found to lead to superior outcomes for children (e.g., Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992), although exceptions have been identified. For example, authoritarian parenting has been found to be associated with assertiveness among African-American girls but timidity among children from European-American backgrounds (Baumrind, 1972). Garcia and Gracia (2009) reported that indulgent parenting appeared to have been the most successful style with a sample of Spanish adolescents.

Parenting style has been conceptualized as providing a psychologically important context for more specific parenting behaviors (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). For example, a parent informing a child about the importance of school achievement would be experienced quite differently within an authoritarian versus authoritative context.

The relationships between children and parents are recognized as important in laws that pertain to child-custody determinations. For example, the Uniform Marriage and Divorce Act (UMDA) (National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, 1979) is relied upon at least in part by many statutes that pertain to child custody (Elrod & Dale, 2008-2009). The UMDA indicates that the relationship between the child and each parent is a factor to be considered in custody determination, and other states that do not rely upon the UMDA typically make reference in relevant statutes to the parent-child relationship. According to the Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychology (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013), forensic examiners need to include a focus on legally relevant factors in their assessments. Even aside from theory, research, legal factors, and professional guidelines, it is clear that parent-child relationships have an intrinsically central role in custody evaluation.

Gender fairness is especially important in custody matters because, although custody disputes between same-sex couples are beginning to emerge, evaluations characteristically compare the parenting of mothers and fathers. Numerous professional principles and guidelines (American Educational Research Association, APA, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999; APA, 2002; APA, 2013) address the importance of fair, relevant, valid, and applicable psychological test use. The APA (2010) Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings state that psychologists must strive to engage in nondiscriminatory evaluation practices, including about gender.

Prior research and psychological testing with custody evaluation parents has yielded different findings about gender fairness, depending upon the tests, all of which have been measures of adult psychopathology and personality functioning. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) showed only small gender differences in mean scale scores that were not clinically significant when used in custody evaluation samples (Bagby, Nicholson, Buis, Radovanovic, & Fidler, 1999; Bathurst, Gottfried, & Gottfried, 1997). When the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI) (Morey, 2007) was used with custody evaluation parents, the gender differences in mean clinical scale scores, with one exception, were small and generally reflected findings of research on gender prevalence in psychological disorders (Hynan, 2013). When the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-III (MCMI-III) (Millon, 1994) was used with a custody evaluation sample (McCann et al., 2001), women had higher frequencies than men on three scales that represent personality dysfunction, despite the fact that there was no research evidence that women suffered from those personality disorders more frequently than did men (Hynan, 2004). There does not appear to be any previously published custody evaluation research data with a parenting measure that includes gender differences.

The PCRI is a parental self-report measure. Survey research (Ackerman & Pritzl, 2011; Quinnell & Bow, 2001) indicated that it has been one of the more commonly used measures of that type in custody evaluation. According to the most recent survey (Ackerman & Pritzl, 2011)¹, the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 2012) has been the most frequently used parenting measure. Prior to the 2012 improvements in that measure, its standardization sample included 13 times as many women as men, which limited its past usefulness in custody evaluation. The Child Abuse Potential Inventory (Milner, 1986) has a specific use only to assess moderate or greater levels of child physical abuse, and its best general use is in settings in which the base rate for such abuse is approximately 50%, which is quite different from what is found in custody evaluation cases.

The APA (2010) Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings state that there should be a focus on parenting attributes. The PCRI endeavors to assess a number of crucial parenting dimensions from the perspective of the parent. However, it is not directly focused on parenting styles as conceptualized by Baumrind (1966) or Maccoby and Martin (1983). It does not assess all important aspects of parenting, and self-perceptions of parenting may not reflect the experiences of the child or others. Heinze and Grisso (1996) recommended the PCRI as a useful instrument in child-custody evaluation, and the test manual (Gerard, 1994) described steps taken to attain scoring that is gender balanced.

There are six PCRI content scales and one validity scale included in this investigation. Higher scores on the content scales represent more positive functioning. The Parental Support scale (SUP) pertains to the degree of emotional and social support received by

¹ That survey has been subject to criticism (Martindale, Tippins, Ben-Porath, Wittman, & Austin, 2012) which is beyond the scope of this article.

a parent. The Satisfaction With Parenting scale (SAT) assesses the degree of enjoyment and fulfillment associated with being a parent. The Involvement scale (INV) represents the level of a parent's interaction with and knowledge of the child. The Communication scale (COM) measures parental perception of communication quality with the child. The Limit Setting scale (LIM) focuses on the parent's experience in carrying out limit setting. The Autonomy scale (AUT) represents parental ability to promote child independence. On the validity scale, Social Desirability (SOC), lower scores indicate greater defensiveness by portraying the parent-child relationship in a socially desirable light.

SOC is particularly important because parents in custody evaluations are often expected to present themselves in a positive light, to the point that some may represent themselves unrealistically. It is relevant that parents in custody evaluations have been found to manifest moderately elevated defensiveness on the MMPI-2 (e.g., Bagby, et al., 1999; Bathurst, et al., 1997; Strong, Greene, Hoppe, Johnston, & Olesen, 1999) and the PAI (Hynan, 2013).

The PCRI shows evidence of adequate reliability. The test manual indicates that internal consistency is strong; test-retest stability reported in the test manual is good over an interval of one week and acceptable when the interval is five months (Gerard, 1994, pp. 29-30). When used with parents of adolescents, the test-retest reliabilities were generally higher over one year than they were in the test manual for five-month duration (Coffman et al., 2006).

Gerard (1994) reported evidence of test validity with three different samples. However, Otto and Edens (2003) pointed out that, other than those samples, there were insufficient data about the correspondence between PCRI scores and extratest criteria such as psychosocial or academic functioning. More recently, Coffman et al. (2006) described evidence of good PCRI validity with parents of adolescents. Parental PCRI content scale scores generally had positive correlations with ratings of family cohesion one year later. Correlations with ratings of family conflict were generally in the predicted negative direction, except that, for fathers, they were nonsignificant for INV and COM. Also, Coffman et al. reported there was strong evidence of validity in terms of correspondence between mothers' PCRI scores and adolescent perceptions of parent-child relationships and family environments, but there was not similar correspondence when the PCRI scores of fathers were used, perhaps representative of different types of relationships that adolescents tend to have with their mothers versus fathers. It is important to note that the AUT scale generally did not show evidence of validity. In other research, the PCRI has been used in areas such as adolescent behavior problems (Oliver, Guerin, & Coffman, 2009) and autism (Osborne & Reed, 2010).

A main objective of this study was to provide relevant PCRI comparison data for evaluators. The availability of relevant reference data is especially useful when there are characteristics of individuals being tested that include a reasonable expectation of response patterns different from the standardization sample. For example, for the

practicing custody evaluator, it would be very helpful to know whether elevated scores were indicative of a possibly high level of parental functioning or whether they were just similar to those manifested by most individuals undergoing custody evaluations.

In addition, there were three specific predictions about the research findings. First, it was expected that the results would show, compared to the standardization sample, moderate elevations on content scales, based on patterns of defensiveness found in prior research on parents in custody evaluations (Bagby et al., 1999; Bathurst et al., 1997; Hynan, 2013; Strong et al., 1999). Second, based on informal observation obtained through practice, it was predicted that gender differences would be absent or very small. Third, it was expected that SOC would identify only an extremely small proportion of respondents as defensive, also based on informal observation.

Method

Participants

Archival data from the author's practice in suburban Chicago served as the database. All 214 participants were legal parents. The number of participants was far above the requirement for a conventional power level of .80 (meaning an 80% probability of rejecting a false null hypothesis) given a statistical significance level of .05 and a goal of identifying at least a medium effect size (Cohen, 1992).

Parental demographic data were based on information completed on the PCRI answer sheet. Mothers averaged 37 years of age (SD = 6.16) and fathers 40 (SD = 7.66). Mothers had a mean of 14 years of education (SD = 2.60) and fathers 15 (SD = 2.52). There was a mean of 1.72 children per family (SD = .74). The vast majority of participants were Caucasian.

Materials and Procedures

All tests were completed as aspects of evaluations ordered by court. Twelve tests were completed in accordance with a local court rule for a condensed evaluation, and the rest were completed according to standard orders without any such limitation. All tests from 2000 through 2009 were used. Almost all tests had no unanswered items. None of the tests had more than seven items unanswered or that included more than one response. Gerard (1994) indicated that tests with eight or more unanswered or multiple-response items should not be interpreted. Also, all tests had adequate response consistency, as evidenced by all having a maximum Inconsistency score of 1. The author administered all tests in paper form in the office setting. All were computer scored by Western Psychological Services.

Results

Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 1. There were general content scale elevations in comparison to the PCRI standardization sample. Four scales (SUP, SAT, INV, and LIM) were elevated about one-half to one standard deviation when compared to the standardization sample.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the PCRI Scales for the Sample of Child Custody Litigants

Scale	Total (n = 214)		Mothers (n = 106)		Fathers (n = 108)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
SUP	56.09	9.29	55.67	8.51	56.51	10.06
SAT	60.89	7.10	60.28	6.61	61.49	7.54
INV	58.27	10.26	57.58	9.19	58.95	11.22
COM	54.03	8.05	53.31	6.75	54.74	9.13
LIM	60.24	9.12	60.36	9.04	60.13	9.23
AUT	52.09	8.84	51.97	8.48	52.20	9.21
SOC	14.01	2.19	14.14	2.23	13.88	2.15

Note. All are T-scores except for SOC, which has a raw score only. SUP = Parental Support; SAT = Satisfaction with Parenting; INV = Involvement; COM = Communication; LIM = Limit Setting; AUT = Autonomy; SOC = Social Desirability.

A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted with gender as the between-subjects factor and the seven scales as the multiple-dependent measures. The analysis was not significant, multivariate $F(6, 207) = .68$. Similarly, univariate analyses of variance for all scales were nonsignificant.

Only 3% of the current sample was identified by the SOC scale as responding in a defensive manner. A raw score of 9 or below on SOC is defined as the cutoff for defensiveness (Gerard, 1994). Table 2 shows the distribution of SOC scores.

Table 2: Frequency of SOC Scores for the Sample of Child Custody Litigants

Score	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
7	1	.5	.5
8	2	.9	1.4
9	4	1.9	3.3
10	5	2.3	5.6
11	12	5.6	11.2
12	28	13.1	24.3
13	33	15.4	39.7
14	27	12.6	52.3
15	52	24.3	76.6
16	32	15.0	91.6
17	6	2.8	94.4
18	9	4.2	98.6
19	2	.9	99.5
20	1	.5	100.0

Note. SOC scores can range from 5 through 20. No parent had a score of 5 or 6.

Discussion

These test results provide the first known comparison scores for custody evaluators regarding the PCRI or the current edition of any other parenting measure. The findings also represent a potential starting point for future research on parenting measures used within the child custody evaluation context.

The research hypotheses were largely supported by the results. There were moderate elevations on four of the six content scales when compared to the standardization sample. There were no significant gender differences on any scales. Also, only an extremely small proportion of respondents were classified as defensive.

The current findings are very different from PCRI results with a court-ordered custody mediation sample reported by Gerard (1994). That sample manifested mean scores on most content scales that were considerably below the standardization sample means. The different patterns of results are likely due in part to parents in mediation not having had the same type of motivation as parents under evaluation to present themselves positively. Also, parents who have very positive views of their own parenting may be especially likely to agree to a custody evaluation because they are optimistic about its outcome, whereas such positive self-regard may not make any difference in terms of mediation participation.

The absence of gender differences found in the current study suggests that the PCRI has adequate gender fairness and this is likely due, at least in part, to the construction

of PCRI norms. It is instructive to note that, prior to the establishment of the final norms, statistical comparisons of mothers and fathers on content scales were carried out using linear T-score transformations that were not the same as the transformations used in the final version of the test. Those statistical comparisons showed that mothers had higher scores than fathers on INV and COM, and fathers had higher scores than mothers on SUP and LIM. On each of those scales, the differences were statistically but not clinically significant. Those gender differences contributed to the construction of separate sets of content scale norms for mothers and fathers. An inspection of the transformations from raw scores to T-scores generally shows only very small differences between mothers and fathers, except for extremely high or low scores on some scales (Gerard, 1994, p. 39-40).

It is noteworthy that, very recently, descriptive data for the Parenting Stress Index for a sample of child custody litigants has been published in tabular form (Abidin, Austin, & Flens, 2013, p. 368), but no gender comparisons were included. Also, those data were based on the older, third edition of the test instead of the current one that includes equal numbers of women and men in the standardization sample.

Whereas neither gender has superiority in parenting competency (Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur, 1998), it is important, especially for evaluators, that research has found a number of different patterns in mother-child versus father-child interactions. For example, meta-analyses (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997; van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997) found that the statistical association between maternal behavior and mother-infant attachment security was considerably stronger than the one between paternal behavior and father-infant attachment security. Also, with infants, mothers are more likely to pattern the length of their verbalizations to the child's utterances, whereas the verbalizations of fathers tend to be more diverse and represent apparent expectations for higher levels of behavior (McLaughlin, White, McDevitt, & Raskin, 1983). Especially with young children, the type of attachment that occurs with mothers tends to be more characterized by comfort and soothing, whereas the type that takes place with fathers tends to be more adventurous, playful, and engaging of the external world (Bornstein, 2002; Pruett & Pruett, 2009). For children from elementary school years through adolescence, interactions with mothers tend to be both more positively and negatively emotionally charged than with fathers (Laursen, 1995; Russell & Russell, 1987; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Adolescents tend to be more comfortable discussing emotional material with mothers and more tend to look to fathers to obtain factual or practical information (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). It is noteworthy that these patterns of gender differences are consistent to some extent with the modest gender differences in PCRI scores, when linear T-score transformations were used, regarding mothers' higher scores on INV and COM.

The finding that only 3% of the current PCRI sample was identified as responding in a defensive manner is similar to the result of a simulated custody evaluation study (Tobin, Seals, & Vincent, 2011). In contrast, prior research (Bathurst et al., 1997) found that the

MMPI-2 *L* and *K* scales identified 20% and 21% of custody evaluation subjects as having responded in a defensive manner.

The current PCRI data were taken from the author's larger custody evaluation database that includes the MMPI-2 and the PAI. When the PCRI was administered, parents usually completed the MMPI-2 and PAI, also. Analyses from that database found that the MMPI-2 *L* and *K* scales identified 36 and 42% of clients as defensive. On the PAI Positive Impression Management scale that measures defensiveness, 22% had T-scores of 68 and above, which is identified as the cutoff for test validity.

The PCRI manual indicated the cutting score of 9 on SOC was set in order to identify the 5% of the standardization sample who responded in the most defensive manner (Gerard, 1994). However, there was no more specific reason given for having set 5% as the cutoff point beyond which interpretation is not recommended.

Especially when compared to the proportions of custody evaluation respondents who answered questions defensively on the MMPI-2 and PAI, the SOC scale appears inadequate in terms of identifying defensiveness within this context. Because most evaluators administer the MMPI-2, and a significant minority administer the PAI (Ackerman & Pritzl, 2011), it is reasonable to expect that the use of the PCRI in custody evaluations is frequently accompanied by one or both of those measures. Therefore, custody evaluators would likely get a more accurate assessment of defensiveness on the PCRI by using the defensiveness scales of the MMPI-2 and/or PAI, especially if those measures were administered during the same appointment.

It is important for evaluators to be cognizant about both the strengths and other limitations of the PCRI. Although it covers important and relevant content areas and now has comparison data specific to custody evaluation, it does not cover all relevant aspects of parenting and would benefit from more extensive reliability and validity data (Marchant & Paulson, 1998). Grisso (2003) posited there are likely inherent limitations in the type and extent of information that can be extracted from parental self-report. Although it could be argued that the PCRI should not be used due to the ineffective SOC scale and limitations in extratest validity data, scales of defensiveness found on other tests can be used, and the extant validity evidence together with the current reference sample support its being appropriately utilized in custody evaluations, as one of a number of assessment methods.

Of course, it is important to combine the results of any psychological test with other sources of relevant information. For example, it is crucial to carry out direct parent-child observations, obtain information from knowledgeable collaterals, and interview children about their perspectives regarding interactions with parents (e.g., Austin, 2002; Gould & Martindale, 2007; Hynan, 1998; Hynan, 2003).

The primary limitation of the current study is that the results were all drawn from one practice in a circumscribed geographical area. It is also a limitation that there were very

few non-Caucasian respondents. However, such characteristics have also been present in some past research. For example, the largest published custody evaluation psychological test sample (Bathurst et al., 1997) was also from one practice.

It is noteworthy that a number of demographic characteristics of the current sample are similar to prior custody evaluation test research. The age range and education level of parents as well as the mean number of children per family in this PCRI sample are similar to available data of prior studies (Bagby et al., 1999; Bathurst et al., 1997; Ezzo, Pinsoneault, & Evans, 2007; Strong et al., 1999). Such demographic similarity suggests that the current sample is not a highly unusual one and gives reason for optimism that the results have generalizability to other geographical areas and practices.

It would be optimal if there were larger normative standardization samples of custody-evaluation litigants for the PCRI and other tests that would include geographic and ethnic diversity. However, such data have never been available, and it is reasonable to expect that reality to continue. There clearly is limited motivation among academics to carry out such research (Grisso, 2005). Close to two decades ago, in acknowledgment of the persistent division between scholars and practitioners, leading psychologists (Stricker & Trierweiler, 1995) emphasized the value of collecting data from local practice settings, potentially to be combined with the same type of information from other locations to advance the scientific and professional integration of the field.

Custody evaluations strongly benefit from the appropriate use of empirical foundations. The productive use of such empirical data in custody evaluation practice requires careful deliberation about the information gained through diverse methods, preferably including the use of judgment aids to guard against excessive reliance on intuition (Kahneman, 2011).

A major step forward in the interpretation of psychological tests of custody-evaluation participants would occur if there were other sources of accurate data available about parent-child interactions that would allow external validation specific to the child custody context. For a number of reasons, however, this is a particularly challenging task. For example, the multi-faceted, complex reality of parent-child interactions makes it difficult to identify and put to use a sufficient number of good-quality criterion measures. It can take years to accumulate enough data for a sufficient sample size, which contributes to practical barriers to attempts to measure test reliability or validity over an extended duration of time. Also, the defensiveness sometimes present in custody-evaluation participants can lead a significant proportion to be guarded about their parenting and children, thereby making accurate data collection difficult. An additional area of useful future research would involve efforts to reach greater understanding of cultural differences in parenting, both generally and in terms of psychological measurement.

The current research is important because it contributes scientifically objective parental self-report data about a number of important dimensions of parent-child interaction. It is the first step with the PCRI to enhance the empirical framework of custody evaluations.

Such evaluations have been perceived by some authorities to represent primarily evaluator personal values and biases (e.g., Emery, Otto, & O'Donohue, 2005). More specific criticism has been aimed at a number of tests used in custody evaluation (e.g., Erickson, Lilienfeld, & Vitacco, 2007). Others, whether practitioners or academics, would provide considerable potential advancement for the field by publishing empirically grounded information, regarding psychological testing, other methodology, or the process of integrating information and arriving at inferences.

The knowledge that children of divorce are more than twice as likely as most children to have significant adjustment problems (Kelly, 2012) may help provide motivation to those in the divorce field to improve the quality of custody evaluations. Potential advancements in relevant scientific knowledge about families of divorce need to be combined with improvements in cognitively processing the wealth of data collected in evaluations. Such potential advancements are crucial, and yet, in evaluation practice, there also needs to be focused consideration of how to apply such general scientific knowledge and principles to the particular facts and circumstances of each case. Children and families of divorce would be the main beneficiaries of such steps forward.

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