

Who Gets Custody? Current perspectives of Social Work Students

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Abstract

Society and the American family are changing, leading to an increasing amount of single parent households. This study investigated the attitudes of social work students regarding non-traditional child placement by surveying 23 participants at a small mid-western university. It was hypothesized that the students would have more of a negative feeling toward the non-traditional child placement versus the traditional child placement (which refers to the child being placed in the custody of the biological mother). Results indicated that there was no significant negative attitude towards the non-traditional child placement situation and that custody is generally viewed as equal. Findings did not support the hypothesis and literature in that more of a negative attitude would be placed on the non-traditional child placement. Implications for practitioners is the need to be educated on child custody practices to continue a trend of equality.

Introduction

The American family structure is changing and therefore leading to an increasing amount of children who live in a single-parent household. Of the 19 million children living in single parent households in the United States, 84% live with only the mother, whereas 16% live with only the father (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). As family structures are changing, so must attitudes and knowledge about the non-traditional child placement. Although an increasing amount of fathers are involved in a child's life, there still are significant disadvantages to the non-traditional custody seeker financially and emotionally. Our broad research problem is the perceived lack of support in society for non-traditional child placement in divorce situations.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2002) children are more than four times as likely to live with a single mother (23%) than to live with a single father (5%). Does this indicate that fathers are not capable of parenting, or does this represent the gender bias in custody decisions? Custodial mothers are more likely than custodial fathers to have custody of two or three children versus one child. Can mothers provide better care for their children than non-traditional parents? For the purpose of this study non-traditional child placement includes anything other than the child being placed in the custody of the biological mother (Cohen, DeVolt & Strong, 2005). Literature was reviewed and the attitudes surveyed of social work students regarding non-traditional child placement. Social work students were selected for this study because professional social workers will most likely have some involvement in the child placement process.

Literature Review

In researching custody placement in non-traditional situations there was a lack of studies in support of the non-traditional custody placement over the traditional custody placement. The search engine EBSCO Host was the main source of finding literature. There is little research on homosexual parents and custody placement. There is also a lack of domestic research regarding non-traditional child placement and most research in this area was conducted in European countries. Much of the research involved the controversy of father versus mother in questions of custody, and the minimal literature found in support of non-traditional custody suggests that there is gender bias in decision making regarding child placement (Braver et al., 2002).

Research affirms that there is an increasing amount of fathers awarded custody and the number of fathers who stay at home to care for children is increasing; there still lies a gender bias against this increasing number of non-traditional custody placements. Society needs to be aware of the potential dangers of gender bias for rewarding traditional custody placement and focus on the well being of children (Cooly, Hall & Pulver, 1996; Braver, Cohen & Cookston, 2002; Silverberg Koerner & Wallace, 2003; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005).

Non-traditional custody placement is still at a large shortcoming in the legal system. Based on what is known from the literature, fathers are at a disadvantage, when wanting to take on a non-traditional role, to gain full physical placement of the child during a divorce proceeding (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). There is significant difficulty financially, socially and emotionally for males who are willing to take on the non-traditional role. There is evidence that a father plays a very important part in the development of a child. Furthermore, there is little evidence that the child would adjust better when living with the parent of the same sex. In order for society to gain a more positive stance regarding non-traditional child placement, it is necessary to evaluate the attitudes of those who are directly involved in the decision making in custody cases. Current studies show a lack of research involving non-traditional parents including homosexual parents disputing custody placement, grandparents who are awarded custody and fathers who have physical placement of the child. The current study focuses on the attitudes of social work students and their stance on non-traditional child placement including fathers and homosexuals.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that used in this study is the Feminist Theory (Chibucos et al., 2005). This theory emerged during the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Although this theory was originally meant to empower women, over the past 30 years this theory has progressed into a variety of theoretical perspectives encouraging change in social structures. The feminist perspective actively seeks to change social conditions under which women and oppressed groups live. It also has developed into a theory where gender is viewed as a social construction and argues that gender and gender relations are vital to all social life. From a feminist perspective, research must recognize the values and biases that exist among researchers and all members of society.

As applied to this study, the Feminist Theory would suggest that because of the slow movement of social change in today's society and of gender oppression, regarding

traditional custody placement more positive attitudes would be portrayed in traditional custody placement versus non-traditional placement situations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the central research question, “what are the current attitudes of social work students regarding non-traditional child placement,” to identify current attitudes of social work students in order to advance the knowledge and rights of non-traditional parents in divorce situations. Based on the literature and the Feminist Theory, it is predicted that our sample group will be in favor of the traditional child placement versus the non-traditional child placement situation. It is also predicted that the sample will support findings that fathers have a significant disadvantage for custody placement based on gender bias. It is hypothesized that the social work students will favor traditional child placement versus non-traditional child placement as supported by Braver et al. (2002).

Methods

Participants

The site of this study was at a small Midwestern university. Participants included 23 social work students. Of these 21 were female and two were male. The age range of the participants were seven participants from 18-21 years of age, nine between the ages of 22-25 and the remaining seven were 26 years or older. In terms of academic status, there were six juniors, 15 seniors and two non-traditional returning students.

Research Design

The purpose of this is to identify current attitudes from the sample population and then be able to use that data to generalize about a larger population of similar students in a social work course. This survey design type is best described as a cross sectional study design in that it capture attitudes from a cross section of the population at one point in time. The form of data collection was self administered questionnaires. The rationale for using this method is that it was the most efficient method to gather the data directly on campus due to the fast pace of the research course, convenience, low cost, and the quick return of data. The study used a non-random purposive sample design, as the purpose was to gather information from students in a specific course who would have the knowledge base to answer questions regarding non-traditional and traditional child placement. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; this study received approval from the IRB.

Data Collection Instrument

In order to address social work students regarding non-traditional child placement a survey was designed. The survey included a cover letter with an implied consent which included a description of the study, definition of any terms not commonly known, risks and benefits, time commitment, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and contact information of the research team and the supervisor as well as the instructions for completing the survey. The survey consisted of three demographic questions relating to gender, age, and academic status. Participants were then given five closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the

respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were formed by the literature and theory regarding what factors related to the attitudes of non-traditional child placement.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity, because the questions and concepts addressed in the survey are literature inspired and cover a full range of concepts under the larger topic. The questions address a broad range of issues regarding non-traditional child placement as well as traditional child placement. To increase the validity, the survey was piloted to two undergraduate students. Feed back indicated that the survey was clear and ready for distribution.

Procedure

To collect data for the study, the professor teaching the social work class was approached. We explained the research study and how we would like to survey his students. A copy of the survey was sent to the professor before the survey was administered. The students in the social work class room were approached on Tuesday, October 26, 2006. Students were asked to participate and informed that the survey was voluntary. The implied consent form was read aloud in order for the objective to be clear. The survey was not randomized in order to obtain the targeted sample number. To maintain the most confidentiality possible and for more accurate reports participants were provided a manila envelope to put surveys in when completed. To get the most accurate information possible, the instructor of the class and the researchers were not present in the class room while the survey was being taken. Because the information in the survey could be considered sensitive subject content, it was believed that standing in the class room with the participants might increase the socially acceptable responses instead of their authentic attitudes. Collected surveys were kept in a secure locked location in the room of one of the researchers until data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

The data was first "cleaned" for any missing data. The "cleaned" surveys were then "coded" using acronyms for each variable. The first three questions on the survey were demographic variables: age, academic status, and gender. Each survey statement was a dependent variable and given an acronym name: To determine gender roles influencing child placement (RLS), if the participant had feelings that the heterosexual mother is the first choice for full child custody placement (FST), if the participants believe that homosexuals deserve an equal opportunity for custody placement regardless of sexual orientation (EQL), if lesbian mothers have preferred child custody placement over fathers (PFD), and if fathers deserve the same type of opportunity for child placement as mothers (OPP). To analyze the data, the data-analyzing computer program called *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)*, was used.

Results

All variables were subjected to a frequency distribution analysis. Results indicated that there was no missing data. The Cronbach's Alpha measure of reliability in our analysis was 0.403.

Table 1

Frequencies

Variable	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
RLS	17.4%	17.4%	4.3%	39.1%	21.7%	100.0%
FST	26.1%	17.4%	13.0%	26.1%	17.4%	100.0%
EQL	0.0%	0.0%	8.7%	21.7%	69.6%	100.0%
PFD	17.4%	39.1%	39.1%	4.3%	0.0%	100.0%
OPP	0.0%	4.3%	4.3%	21.7%	69.6%	100.0%

Note. (RLS) = Traditional gender roles influence custody placement; (FST) = Heterosexual biological mother is the first choice for full child custody placement; (EQL) = Homosexuals deserve an equal opportunity for custody placement regardless of sexual orientation; (PFD) = Lesbian mothers have preferred child custody placement over fathers; (OPP) = Fathers deserve the same type of opportunity for child placement as mothers.

Discussion

Overall, the hypothesis was not supported by the findings. It was hypothesized that the majority of students would be opposed to non-traditional child placement. Our findings suggest that social work students are divided regarding traditional child placement and non-traditional child placement, with an equal amount of students agreeing or strongly agreeing and also disagreeing and strongly disagreeing to non-traditional child placement. Results were not supported by the findings from Brescoll and Uhlmann (2005) in that society often places more of a negative attitude on non-traditional child placement than on traditional child placement. Results found that more students were in favor of equal opportunity between males and females, and heterosexual versus homosexual parents. However, the results of the question regarding heterosexual biological mothers being the first choice for full child custody placement were equally divided. Findings show that society may be shifting and non-traditional child placement may be becoming more socially acceptable. A few students added comments at the end of the survey stating that they believe it depends on the situation if the custody placement should be viewed as equal between traditional and non-traditional child placement.

The lack of support for the hypothesis is contributed to a couple factors, including a lack of research on students' attitudes regarding non-traditional child placement and the lack of education in society regarding non-traditional child placement. Based on the literature, we believed that fathers and other non-traditional child placement settings are at a significant disadvantage for child custody placement. A study conducted by Brescoll and Uhlmann (2005) found negative attitudes toward non-traditional parents in society. Also, Braver et al. (2002) found that the bias in the legal system tends to favor mothers. This study is interesting because our results showed more of a positive attitude towards non-traditional child placement compared to the current literature. It was also hypothesized that social work students would be in favor of the mother having child

placement versus the father or grandparent having child placement. This is also supported by the findings from Braver et al. (2002).

According to the Feminist Theory, because of the slow movement of social change in today's society and of gender oppression there would be more positive attitudes portrayed in traditional child custody placement than in non-traditional child custody placement situations (Chibucos et al., 2005). This supports the hypothesis but disagrees with the findings. Results show that the majority of social work students agreed or strongly agreed with equality between the non-traditional child placements versus the traditional placement. Therefore, gender oppression is not as prevailing with the attitudes of the social work students.

Limitations

Due to the small sample size, it is unlikely that the results of this study can be generalized beyond social work students. Another limitation is the lack of randomization as a result of time constraints and number of available participants. Another limit was the lack of gender and ethnic diversity in the sample.

Implications for Practitioners

Results suggest that non-traditional child placement, defined as anything other than the child being placed in the custody of the biological mother, is still not as socially acceptable as traditional child placement, which is defined as a child being placed in the immediate care biological mother according to social work students. However, this study does support the equality of placement between males and females. This study can be used to inform current persons involved in the child custody placement such as social workers, *guardian ad litem* or attorneys.

Implications for Future Research

Recommendations for future research are to use a larger, randomized, and more diverse sample in order to allow for generalization of the attitudes of persons involved in the child custody placement process. If this study were to be replicated we would suggest either re-wording or discarding the statement: if fathers deserve the same type of opportunity for child placement as mothers (OPP). According to the reliability statistics, the Cronbach's Alpha would increase from 0.403 to 0.512 if this question were taken out of the survey. This question is too broad and does not specifically relate to non-traditional child placement and also generalizes equality between males and females. We also believe that child custody assessors need to be educated on child custody practices to continue a trend of equality.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, it is hoped that society will learn to create equal opportunity for non-traditional child placement. According to the 2002 U.S Census Bureau, approximately 16.5 million children live with only their mother, whereas only 3.2 million live only with their father and 2.8 million live with neither parent. We deem that the attitudes of the social work students are more towards equality between the traditional and non-traditional child placement, even though current literature supports the traditional child placement. In conclusion, we hope to contribute one small step to the

literature and hope that non-traditional child placement will be viewed just as equitable as traditional child placement.

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