

Mothers are Non-resident Parents Too: A Consideration of Mother's Perspectives on Non- residential Parenthood

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To date, the major focus of research and debate relating to non-resident parenthood has been directed towards fathers and the extent to which they remain involved in the lives of their children after separation/divorce. This paper is concerned with the less common, but still important, group of 'role-reversal' families in which the mother becomes the non-resident parent. Adding a maternal perspective to the debate is necessary because although they remain a small proportion of all non-resident parents, the number of mothers occupying this position is quite substantial and steadily increasing. Recent calculations based on detailed single parent family statistics collected for the latest Census suggest that there were 232,283 non-resident mothers in Great Britain in 2001 (ONS, 2002). A similar situation exists in the US where the number of noncustodial mothers has tripled since 1980 to reach the current level of over two million (U.S Census Bureau, 2004).

Drawing upon findings from a narrative study the paper explores women's personal perspectives on non-resident parenthood. The presented findings generate unique insight into a range of intersecting psychosocial forces that shape women's experience and understanding of their atypical post-divorce parenting arrangement.

Voluntary and Involuntary non-Resident Motherhood

A review of the fledgling literature that is specific to non-resident motherhood shows a distinction between situations where mothers lose custody and those where mothers relinquish custody voluntarily (Arditti and Madden-Derdich, 1993; Herrerias, 1995; Greif and Pabst, 1988). This study builds upon previous work by developing a typology of four different 'types' of non-resident mother experience.

The paper discusses some of the significant issues raised by participants when describing their particular situations and demonstrates how women's satisfaction with, and acceptance of their non-resident mother status was linked to their perceived degree of choice in the matter. For those who took part in this study, positive evaluations were only given by women who had voluntarily chosen this option. Involuntary non-resident mothers were totally opposed to father residence on the grounds of child welfare need. This reflected a perception of paternal nurturing capabilities as being insufficient and underdeveloped in comparison to their own as a mother.

Salience of Maternal Choice Regarding Child Residence Decisions?

The presented findings raise some important issues about the complex processes that lie behind child residence and post-divorce parenting arrangements, and the ways in which gendered societal and internalised expectations impact on the experiences of non-resident mothers and fathers. It is argued that because it is a culturally non-normative arrangement non-resident mothers experience societal disapproval and stigma. Moreover, unlike

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fathers, they are required to explain the 'whys' and 'hows' of their atypical situation. These hurdles can make it more difficult for women, and indeed for the family as a whole to accept and adjust to their altered positions. There are also questions raised concerning the 'workability' of legally enforced role-reversed parenting arrangements. In line with previous research,(e.g. Ferguson, 1994; Greif and Pabst, 1988) this study indicates that where mothers are totally resistant to father residence, parental relationships are very likely to be intractably hostile which may result in adverse consequences for child(ren).

It is argued that more information is needed regarding the distinct experiences of both mothers and fathers if there is to be a more comprehensive understanding of non-residential parenting. Also, the steady rise in the number of non-resident mothers suggests a need for further investigation of parental-role-reversal post-divorce parenting arrangements. Specifically how this type of arrangement impacts upon child welfare and whether this type of post-divorce parenting arrangement can be acceptable to men and women as individuals and also to society in general.

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