MOTHERING ON THE MARGINS: THE EXPERIENCE OF NONCUSTODIAL MOTHERS

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Michelle L. Bemiller

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ABSTRACT

In patriarchal societies, there is a connection between being a woman and being a mother. It is assumed that not only will women want to be mothers, but that they will practice intensive mothering tactics (Hays 1996). In other words, mothers will spend massive amounts of time and energy on their children, they will buy their children anything they want and they will sacrifice their wants and needs for those of their children. If women participate in intensive mothering, they are evaluated as good mothers.

These standards of behavior, however, have been found to be virtually impossible to maintain, especially for women who are in financial straits and who are not able to spend large quantities of time with their children. The noncustodial mother is one such woman. Using one-on-one semi-structured interviews, this dissertation examined sixteen noncustodial mothers’ experiences with motherhood as non-normative mothers.

Findings indicated that the relinquishment of custody, whether voluntary or involuntary, is a difficult life event for mothers. The mothers in this study experienced drastic changes in their mothering lives as they transitioned from custodial to noncustodial caregivers, including changes in contact with and control over children, changes in the mothering role, and the experience of stigmatization due to their “deviant” mothering status. Despite the changes in their mothering role, the majority of the mothers still tried to maintain intensive mothering strategies. Some succeeded, others failed. As a
result of attempting to maintain these standards, the mothers experienced depression and
guilt.

The findings of this dissertation have sociological and policy implications. Findings
demonstrate the need to redefine what it means to be a family and more specifically, what
it means to be a mother. Recommendations are made regarding how to make these
changes happen, as well as for future research on this population.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In a recent interview regarding the adoption of her son, Maddox, actress Angelina Jolie was asked, “Besides the effects of sleep deprivation, what else have you learned (about being a mother)?” Her response spoke volumes about the ideology that surrounds mothers and mothering today. “He taught me so much about life and being a woman. I wasn’t really a woman before I became a mom. I feel like a woman now” (Keeps, 2003: 156).

While this is one statement from one woman, it points to the dominant discourse that has existed for mothers from the late 19th century to today. This discourse has emphasized the importance of women not just being mothers, but being “good” mothers by society’s standards. This ideology of the “good” mother has meant caring intensively for one’s children and putting their well-being ahead of one’s own (Glenn 1994; Hays 1996). Feminist scholars have begun to debunk the myth of the “good” mother, arguing that it is unattainable by anyone’s standards (Hill Collins 1990; Pope and Wyer 1990), and yet this ideology remains intact. This dominant ideology of motherhood has been rooted in the life experiences of white, middle class women’s access to resources, negating the experiences of all other women (Hill Collins 1994; Glenn 1994; Hays 1996; Phoenix et. al, 1991).
The existence of such an unattainable standard is problematic for mothers in general, but it is particularly problematic for women who do not have the resources to live up to this standard (e.g., finances and living arrangements). The noncustodial mother is one such woman. Living apart from her children most of the time, the noncustodial mother deviates from the dominant model of mothering that emphasizes women’s role as primary caregiver, becoming a non-normative mother.

Women who did not receive custody of their children were not always viewed as deviants. In fact, historically women did not receive custody of their children. Children were viewed as the property of fathers. Views of noncustodial mothers have shifted over time and mothers are now labeled as deviants if they are not custodial parents (Schur 1984; Hill Collins 1994; Hays 1996).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, roughly one million children were living with their divorced fathers in 2002, almost doubling the number of children living away from their mothers in 1982 (Census 2000). Despite the increase in the number of noncustodial mothers, little information exists on this population as Arditti and Madden-Derdich (1993), Arditti (1995), Fischer and Cardea (1981) and Greif (1987a, 1997) have noted.

Most of the research on noncustodial mothers to date was conducted in the 1980s (see Fischer 1983; Greif 1987a, 1988; Edwards 1989) followed by a couple of studies in the 1990s (see Ferguson 1994; Santora and Hays 1998). This research has demonstrated the difficulty in adjusting to the role of noncustodial parent, as well as the social stigma that these mothers experience (Greif 1987a; 1995; Greif and Pabst 1988; Ferguson 1994; Herrerias 1995). With the exception of a few studies, these past studies have failed to link theory to research findings in this population. Notable exceptions can be found in
Babcock (1997), Clumpus (1996), and Greif and Pabst (1981). These researchers used identity theory, social constructionism, and role theory to better understand the experiences of noncustodial mothers.

The interest in noncustodial mothers during the 1980s and mid 1990s was most likely due to the changing structure of the court system, which began to emphasize a more gender-neutral approach to custody decisions (Fox and Kelly 1995). During this time, due to societal pressures, judges began to challenge the tender years doctrine. The tender years doctrine stated that mothers were better equipped to provide for young children’s physical and emotional needs (Salt 1985-86). At the same time, fathers were beginning to become more involved in their children’s lives pre-divorce, participating in many of the caregiving tasks (Boland 2004). Therefore, it was no longer assumed that mothers were the better parent, and fathers began to seek and gain custody in increasing numbers (Greif and Pabst 1988; Greif 1995; Thompson 1983). Research on this topic has since declined despite the changing structure of the family, and more liberal attitudes that correspond with this changing structure (Thorne with Yalom 1992).

Because of changes that have occurred (or are occurring) in individual lives and social systems, Greif and Pabst (1988) noted the significance of studying noncustodial mothers’ current life experiences. Since the majority of research conducted on this population occurred almost a decade ago, it is possible that noncustodial mothers’ experiences may be very different today. Thus, the primary focus of this dissertation will be to examine the current experiences of noncustodial mothers with mothering and motherhood, given over a decade of growth in this population. In so doing, this
dissertation will provide a much needed theoretical examination of noncustodial mothers’ experiences using the social construction of motherhood as a theoretical framework.

Overall, the purpose of this dissertation is to understand the lived experiences of noncustodial mothers from a feminist sociological standpoint. Rothman (1989) and several other feminist researchers (e.g. Hill Collins 1992; Glenn 1994; Hays 1996) have indicated a need to change existing definitions of motherhood to encompass the diversity of mothering experiences for women today. This dissertation focuses on how noncustodial mothers define and enact mothering as noncustodial parents. Importance is placed on how these women enacted mothering prior to their noncustodial role, as well as how they think about themselves as noncustodial mothers and the experiences that they have had with family, friends, children, ex-spouses, and the court system in this nontraditional role. The voluntary or involuntary nature of the relinquishment of their children is also addressed. The element of “choice” involved in this process could influence how mothers define and experience their status, allowing for deeper understanding of how noncustodial mothers’ ideas about mothering and motherhood fit or diverge from the dominant ideology of motherhood.

By better understanding these women’s lived experience and identifying their personal and social needs, programs that deal with parents and children, both therapeutically and within the court system, will have a better grasp on how to address the situation of families when fathers are awarded custody. Through these women’s stories, we will have a better understanding of not only the experience of being a noncustodial mother, but also the changing structure and nature of family life today. This dissertation provides valuable data regarding the noncustodial mother; data that will
supplement the literature that exists on divorce, custodial mothers and fathers, and noncustodial fathers. It provides a new lens through which to examine family structures and processes by shedding light on the gendered experience of being a noncustodial mother, emphasizing how dominant ideologies shape women’s experiences as noncustodial mothers. Findings from this study indicate that since noncustodial mothers were unable to live up to dominant expectations of motherhood, they experienced a great deal of guilt and shame that negatively impacted their well-being and how they viewed themselves as mothers.

This dissertation used a feminist framework to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of noncustodial mothers in society today. Feminism is particularly useful in understanding the experience of marginalized groups, such as noncustodial mothers, because of its focus on the structural and processual inequities that exist between the powerful and the powerless (Allen and Baber 1992; Chafetz 1994; Hill Collins 1990). As a framework, feminism allows for the active participation of noncustodial mothers in defining and understanding their subjective experiences.

Noncustodial mothers who have never married or are divorced are one marginalized group, receiving the label of “outsider” or “other” (Schur 1984; Hill Collins 1990; Clumpus 1996) because they do not maintain custody of their children in a society that views mothers as the primary caretakers of children and because they are no longer a part of the idealized heterosexual, nuclear family. To study the experiences and perspectives of this group, I collected data through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with never married and divorced noncustodial mothers. I conducted this research with the understanding that each participant had her own story and her own experience as a
noncustodial parent based on her lived experience in the situation (Hill Collins 1998; Smith 1987, 1990). Special attention was given to the women’s individual definitions of mothering (e.g., what it means to be a mother, how they enact mothering), which may or may not coincide with prevailing images of motherhood.

The overarching goal of this project was to provide a better understanding of the experience of being a noncustodial mother in today’s society by exploring these women’s personal and social experiences as mothers. The project was guided by the following research questions:

1) What have noncustodial mothers’ experiences been like in the court system as they participated in the custody process?

2) How do noncustodial mothers define and enact mothering in light of dominant definitions of mothering and motherhood?
   a. Do they enact a mother role and what does this look like?
   b. Have their definitions and enactments of being a mother and doing mothering changed based on their position as noncustodial parents? In other words, how does their present role of mother compare to their role prior to relinquishing their children?
   c. How has the voluntary or involuntary nature of their relinquishment affected their ideas about mothering?

3) How do they perceive themselves as mothers?
   a. How do the women see their experiences of being a noncustodial mother?
   b. How do they think that others view them?
c. How have their interactions with others (e.g., ex-partners, parents, friends, acquaintances) influenced how they see themselves as mothers?

Before delving more deeply into the mothers’ stories, it is important to situate this research within the existing literature that relates to the issues addressed here. This literature is addressed in Chapter II. Here I first discuss the connection between being a woman and mothering, dominant definitions of mothering, and mothers who resist prevailing definitions that surround mothering and motherhood. After discussing issues regarding mothering, past research is provided on the noncustodial mother. Beginning with the literature on child custody more generally, the research on noncustodial mothers from the 1980s and 1990s is presented. In Chapter III I outline my research design and methods. In Chapter IV, I discuss the women’s custody decision and custody arrangement as well as the experiences that they have had within the legal system. Chapter V examines how noncustodial mothers define and enact mothering based on dominant definitions of motherhood. Specific attention is placed on the transition from custodial to noncustodial mothering, with an emphasis on changes that occurred and how these changes affect the women’s feelings about themselves as mothers. Mothers are discussed as resisting or accommodating dominant definitions and expectations of motherhood. Finally, I discuss the implications of my research, its limitations, and make suggestions for future research directions in Chapter VI.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to better understand the experiences of marginalized mothers, this dissertation takes one group of mothers, mothers who are noncustodial parents, and analyzes their experiences mothering. Noncustodial mothers’ experiences with mothering and motherhood are situated within the existing literature on gender, the social construction of motherhood, and past research on noncustodial mothers.

**Woman as “Other”**

The ideology of motherhood in society is strongly linked with gendered norms of behavior. In order to fully understand the experiences of noncustodial mothers, it is important to situate these women’s stories within the context of gender inequality in a patriarchal society. Feminist gender theory views the relative position of women and men as created through social interaction (Lorber 1994; Risman 1998; West and Zimmerman 1987) and embedded within institutional inequality (Johnson 1997; Lorber 1994; Schur 1984).

According to West and Zimmerman (1987:2), we “do” gender in everyday interactions. In other words, gender is accomplished in interactional situations. According to this theory, when individuals act in gendered ways they are continuously creating gendered meanings and social structures. So, gender is created and maintained as individuals consciously and unconsciously engage in behaviors that are
linked with specific gender meanings. Failure to “do gender” appropriately leads to negative appraisals (see also Lorber 1994).

Johnson (1997) argued that individual level meanings are embedded within patriarchal social institutions, defining patriarchy as a society that is, “male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered,” (p.5). Accordingly, one of the key elements of a patriarchal society is the oppression of women. This oppression exists within the political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, and domestic spheres (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Johnson 1997). In stating that patriarchal societies are “male identified,” Johnson (1997:5) meant that core cultural ideas about what is considered “good, desirable, preferable, or normal” are linked with our views on men and masculinity (see also Smith 1987). Thus, what is defined as normal is based on men’s lives and their experiences. One key example of this is found in the use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people in general. Johnson (1997:6) asserted that when we use “man” to refer to all human beings, or “he” when referring to doctors, we construct a symbolic world where men are in the forefront and women in the background.

Similarly, in a seminal article examining sex role stereotypes and clinical judgments of mental health, Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, and Vogel (1970) found that clinicians had different concepts of health for men and women and that these conceptions were based on prevalent sex role stereotypes in society. In this study, clinicians were given a 122-item questionnaire that asked them to rank a male, a female, or a mature adult as healthy on each stereotypic item. Findings indicated that clinicians had high agreement regarding what healthy characteristics were for males, females, and mature adults in general. Clinicians’ concept of health for a healthy male was similar to
those for a healthy adult while the clinicians did not find healthy women to be equivalent to healthy adults. Overall, men were defined as healthy while women were viewed as pathological based on sex role stereotyping. The authors indicated that clinicians’ acceptance of sex role stereotypes perpetuated the existence of these stereotypes in society. Both Johnson’s (1997) and Broverman et. al’s (1970) assertions demonstrate how women’s devaluation leads them to become social outsiders with their experiences marginalized or completely ignored in patriarchal societies.

Johnson stated that patriarchy exists in larger social structures as well as in the minds of individuals. Individual participation in patriarchy, however, is guided but not determined by these structures. Men and women choose to act in ways that conform to the dominant social order within particular social contexts. They conform because those who comply with existing social arrangements are rewarded with social acceptability while those who deviate are punished. Johnson argued that even when some people challenge patriarchy, it brings little change because the deep structure of patriarchy is so embedded within social institutions.

Similar to Johnson (1997), Risman (1998:28) has argued that gender is a structure that is “deeply embedded as a basis for stratification, differentiating opportunities and constraints.” This differentiation occurs at the individual, interactional and institutional levels of analysis. At the individual level our gendered selves are developed through gender socialization. At the interactional level we “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) based on cultural expectations and taken-for-granted situational meanings (Risman 1998). Gender inequality exists at the institutional level of analysis in formal organizational structures and through the distribution of material advantages and
ideological discourse. Risman (1998:6) has stated that gender has “ideological and material components that affect social life at every level of analysis.” In other words, gender at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels of analysis shapes the gender structure around us.

Prior to Johnson (1997) and Risman’s (1998) examinations, Schur (1984) described gender as a normative system through which females were evaluated and controlled. According to Schur, when gender norms are violated, women are labeled as deviant (Schur 1984) or, as many feminist scholars have indicated, as inessential “other” (de Beauvoir 1953; Chafetz 1994; Clumpus 1996; Hill Collins 1994; Laws 1979; Schur 1984). As Judith Long Laws (1979:4) stated, “In our society, male is normal (not merely different) and female is deviant, or Other.” Being female carries a stigma in and of itself (Laws 1979; Schur 1984). Women are evaluated on the basis of their femininity. If they deviate from gender norms associated with femaleness, they are labeled as deviants. Schur (1984) noted that women were stigmatized for being female, and on top of this, were also punished and stigmatized for violating norms related to being female (e.g., maternity norms, beauty norms, sexuality norms). Thus, they become double deviants.

I would argue that the noncustodial mother is deviant on three fronts. First because she is a woman, second because she is divorced or was never married, and third because she does not live with her children. Thus, she is stigmatized because of her failure to meet the ideological mandates of motherhood.

The Making of Gendered Ideology: Wives and Mothers

Ideology is a set of beliefs concerning an area of social life. People hold gender ideologies, religious ideologies, and so on. According to Theborn (1980:2) ideology has
the ability to “operate in the formation and transformation of human subjectivity.” While ideologies can be held by individuals and may influence individual action, ideology is not a personal or individual-level concept. Ideologies are developed within a cultural context and are related to the political, economic, social, and historical elements of society.

According to Theborn, the state holds a great deal of power in influencing dominant ideologies. The state has the power to influence individual beliefs and it has the power to endorse ideologies that maintain the status quo. Those who control the state will favor ideologies that reinforce their control of power.

Within a social system, multiple ideologies exist and compete for prominence. While ideology is inherent within social structure, individuals have agency and make choices within this structure (Theborn 1980). Theborn argued that for individuals, ideologies are in competition in telling them who they are, what is right, and how they should act. If an individual’s social position is defined by contradictory ideologies, they will choose how to react to this contradiction. That is, they may choose to accept or reject ideological constraints. In the case of mothering ideology, Hill Collins (1994:45) asserted,

Mothering occurs within specific social contexts that vary in terms of material and cultural resources and constraints. How mothering is conceived, organized, and carried out is not simply determined by these conditions, however. Mothering is constructed through men’s and women’s actions within specific historical circumstances. Thus agency is central to understanding of mothering as a social, rather than biological, construct.
Yet, we must remember that, as Johnson asserted, those who conform are rewarded. So, when faced with competing ideologies regarding marriage and family, women may choose to adhere to dominant ideologies regarding marriage and mothering or they may choose to resist and redefine these ideologies for themselves. Whatever their choice, a dominant discourse prevails within the larger social structure.

In Western society the prevailing image of the family is that of a husband, wife, and their dependent children. Since becoming president in 2000, Bush and his administration have called for the adoption of policies that help strengthen this version of family, defining it as a positive and healthy environment for children (Bush 2002). These policy initiatives further endorse the ideology that the best family form is the heterosexual married couple with dependent children. Proponents of marriage promotion policies argue that committing to marriage will not only improve family life, but will also reduce poverty for women and children (Fagan and Rector 2000). Catlett and Artis (2004) found that marriage promotion advocates have erroneously used social science research to demonstrate the benefits of these policies, when in reality many negatives are attached to marriage (e.g., continued poverty, domestic violence). When asked if they feel marriage is a viable option, many women state that marriage has more risks than benefits. For example, Edin (2000) found that low income women preferred remaining single to marriage because of the prevalence of domestic violence in marital relationships.

Support of such policies has led to the marginalization and stigmatization of other family forms (e.g., homosexual unions, never married women, divorced families). Debates regarding the ideal family form have been waged by social scientists as well. Probably the most cited example of this debate can be seen in the very public dispute
between David Popenoe and Judith Stacey regarding the state of the American family. Popenoe’s argument is that the American family is declining. Age at first marriage has risen, the rate of marriage has decreased, more individuals are choosing to remain childfree, there has been an increase in the numbers of working mothers, and the divorce rate has increased dramatically (Popenoe 2001). Overall, his argument is that the two-parent nuclear family is better for children, and that scholars should be concerned about this decline within the family.

In response to Popenoe’s assertions, Stacey (2001) argued that scholars must re-conceptualize the family. According to Stacey, viewing the family as a positivistic, empirical institution is problematic. Stacey argued that the family is not an institution, rather it is “an ideological, symbolic construct that has a history and a politics” (Stacey 2001:545). In the United States, this family ideology has typically encompassed heterosexual, married, nuclear, domestic units in which males are the primary breadwinners and females are primarily the homemakers. It is a family form that is wrought with gender inequality (Stacey 2001).

Rather than stigmatizing individuals who live in nontraditional families, Stacey asserted that family sociologists should be focusing attention on legal, economic, and social policy reforms that may help to change structural problems that impact children of divorced and single parent families. She argued for restructuring work schedules and benefit policies to accommodate familial responsibilities, redistributing work opportunities to reduce unemployment rates, paying women and men equally so that both may earn a family wage, providing universal health care, and so on. Overall, Stacey (2001:547) stated “family sociologists should take the lead in burying the ideology of
‘the family’ and in rebuilding a social environment in which diverse family forms can sustain themselves with dignity and mutual respect.”

In a similar vein, Hill Collins (1990), Hattery (2001), Rothman (1989), and Thorne and Yalom (1992), have also argued for redefining and embracing alternative family forms. The dominant discourse on family, however, is ultimately influenced by the state and the implementation of state mandated family policies. These initiatives attempt to constrain women, keeping them in the ideologically mandated position of wife, a position that many researchers have argued is restrictive and often unfulfilling (Hill Collins 1994; Johnson 1988; Schur 1984).

The emphasis placed on heterosexual marriage is not new. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, women were choosing to not marry, rejecting their mothers’ primary identification as wives, and seeking to achieve their own personal accomplishments. This choice, however, was met with resistance due to the cultural emphasis on marriage. Women who did not abide by this cultural ideology were labeled as “mannish lesbians” (Johnson 1988: 235). Accusations of lesbianism served to discredit female professionals, keeping them in heterosexual marriages and out of public affairs (Johnson 1988). The existence and ramifications of these accusations demonstrate society’s compliance with “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1994:322). According to Rich (1994:322), “Heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women.” The institution of marriage is part of “compulsory heterosexuality.” Women have married out of necessity, in order to survive economically, to have children in a financially secure, socially acceptable relationship, and to be seen as “normal” by society’s standards (Rich 1994).
In her book, *Strong Mothers Weak Wives*, Johnson (1988) argued that women’s disadvantage in the occupational world was linked to the ideology that women were married, would be married, or had been married. Johnson (1988) further explained that women’s low wages and job segregation were directly related to employers’ assumption that women were married and would be supported by their husbands. The common belief was that women should have less demanding jobs because their primary purpose was to maintain a good marriage (see also Schur 1984). These assumptions stem from colonial and postcolonial times when married women and women with children were encouraged to stay at home in order to raise moral and healthy families (Kessler-Harris 2004).

According to Kessler-Harris (2004), more recently wage work seems to have become a precondition for feminism. The late-twentieth-century United States provides an example. As married women entered the labor force, equal employment opportunity was encouraged. Despite this move, there is still a contradiction between the need for women’s labor and the desire to maintain a traditional patriarchal family form, explaining why women’s labor remains relatively cheap despite their skills and experience (Kessler-Harris 2004).

While the belief that women will marry and be supported by their husbands may be less manifest today, marriage is still emphasized for women and the nuclear family is still the cultural ideal. In other words, stigma still exists for men and women who have divorced (Etaugh and Birdoes 1991) or who have never married and have children (Fineman 1995, Struening 2002). As a case in point, Martha Fineman (1995: 101-102) explained the stigmatization of never married and divorced mothers in the following:
[While] many single mothers in both the divorced and never-married categories are also poor and this contributes to the societal designation of them as ‘deviant,’ their real offense—the ‘true’ indicia of their pathology—is their singleness. It is this demographic characteristic that embodies the challenge they present to the asserted necessity and inevitability of the heterosexual family in our society.

According to Struening (2002), even more so than divorced mothers, never married women with children represent a rejection of the idea that the heterosexual marriage is a prerequisite for motherhood. Never married women call into question the necessity of women’s economic dependence on men as well as the legal union of man and woman. Because single mothers have formed families without marrying, they generate a great deal of anxiety about “the integrity and durability of the male headed family” (Struening, 2002, 137). Struening further argues that when the heterosexual family unit is threatened, scapegoats are often found to explain away the decrease in marriages and increase in divorce rates. The anxiety that goes hand in hand with single parent families, high divorce rates, and blended families can be displaced onto women who are frequently perceived to be undeserving mothers (e.g., single, never married mothers) (Struening 2002). Never married mothers’ are seen as irresponsible mothers because they have not followed the proper steps to ensure the well-being of their children, and thus, do not deserve to have these children. Never married mothers serve to make divorced mothers appear more respectable and serve as a reminder to any mothers contemplating divorce of the stigma associated with mothering without a husband. While divorced women are still stigmatized for leaving heterosexual marriages, they are less stigmatized than never
married mothers because they at least participated in the idealized family form at one point in their lives (Struening 2002).

In an attempt to understand public perceptions of divorced individuals, Hoffman and Willers (1996) found that divorced persons were perceived as less moral and more psychologically deviant than married persons. Similarly, Dolan and Hoffman (1998) conducted a study of perceptions of parents’ marital and custodial status using vignettes depicting persons as married parents, divorced parents with custody, and divorced persons without custody. Their findings indicated that married mothers were the most highly evaluated individuals of the three vignette groups. Married mothers were viewed as better adjusted interpersonally, less psychologically deviant, and more moral than the comparison groups. These studies indicate that the ideology of marriage and family remains intact leading individuals who deviate from this ideal to feel as though they need to explain or defend their position (Kitson with Holmes 1992; Riessman 1990).

Mothers, Mothering, and Motherhood

Schur (1984) asserted that being or becoming a wife is part of the normative gender system for women. The gender norm that tends to have the strongest impact on personal and social judgments of women, however, is the traditional role of mother. In order to fully understand the experience of women as mothers from a feminist standpoint, it is important to distinguish between mother as a status, mothering as an activity, and motherhood as an institution. While each of these categories has distinct meaning, they are inextricably linked (Phoenix, Woollett, and Lloyd 1991).

According to Devault (1991), to be a mother one simply must be acknowledged as a mother by oneself and by others. In other words, she must self-identify as a mother and
have that identity reflected in her social interaction with others. Given this definition, one need not perform “mothering” (e.g., caregiving and nurturing) activities in order to maintain the status of mother (see also Phoenix et. al, 1991). Mothering, on the other hand, involves taking physical and emotional care of another. These activities are often linked with notions of the “good” mother. For example, women who are self-sacrificing and love unconditionally fall into the category of the “good” mother (Glenn 1994; Hays 1996; Johnson 1997). The “good” mother is one who refers to “expert” opinions on how to raise their children (e.g. self-help books), caters to their children’s every whim (both emotionally and materially), and worries exhaustively about their children’s well-being (Hays 1996). These notions of the “good” mother are directly linked to the social construction of motherhood as an institution.

Yet, what constitutes the “good” mother varies culturally and historically (Gillis 2002; Hays 1996; Phoenix and Woollett 1991). According to Gillis (2002), the connection between giving birth and being a mother is recent in Western society. In earlier centuries, providing care and nurturance post-birth was often impossible because of demographic, economic, and cultural reasons. Given the high levels of fertility and mortality that existed in Europe and North America until the 19th century, there was simply no way that all women who gave birth could also mother all of their children. Yet, children during this time did not lack for mothering. Wet nursing was a common practice and it was not unusual for children to be informally adopted out to other relatives. Those who “mothered” were not restricted by age, race, or gender. Older sisters were often referred to as “little mothers”, slave women who nursed white children.
were called “mammies”, and nurturing qualities were attributed to both men and women (Gillis 2002: 115).

More recently, ideologies of motherhood have been constructed by the authoritative voices of patriarchal culture (Pope and Wyer 1990). According to Pope and Wyer (1990:13-14):

…the maternal is personal; the maternal is political. Mothering-whether expressed as intimate, private experience, as professional specialty, or service work; whether as academic discourse, government policy, or literary form-cannot be understood apart from the forces of ideology and power that surround, suffuse, and shape it at every point.

In our culture, this dominant ideology assumes that women will have children and will care for them with devotion and unwavering love (Glenn 1994; Hays 1996). As Glenn (1994) noted, mothering and womanhood are inextricably linked. Because of women’s reproductive role in giving birth to children, motherhood is viewed as natural, universal, and unchanging (Glenn 1994; Phoenix, Pope and Wyer 1990). This connection between womanhood and motherhood leads to the assumption that all women should be mothers or should at least want to be mothers (Edwards 1989; Morrell 1994; Schur 1984). Furthermore, once the status of mother has been achieved, women should demonstrate that they are more committed to their child(ren) than to anyone else in their lives, including themselves (Ackerman 1996; Farrell 1994; Glenn 1994; Gurdorf 1989; Hays 1996; Lamb 1997; Rothman 1989; Villani 1997; Warshak 1992).

According to Hays (1996), this commitment is demonstrated through the implementation of intensive mothering tactics. Hays (1996) described intensive
mothering as a form of mothering that requires women to expend massive amounts of
energy, time, and money to raise their children. Women who live up to these societal
standards are deemed successful and those who do not are labeled as failures (Hays 1996;
Morrell 1994).

Hays (1996) asserted that this form of mothering is contradictory to the capitalistic,
patriarchal social structure within which we live. At the same time that self-interest and
individualism is promoted, mothers are expected to be selfless and giving. Other
feminists state that this dominant ideology is not only contradictory, but also unrealistic,
restrictive in scope, and unattainable for most women (Pope and Wyer 1990).

To date, the dominant ideology of motherhood has been based on the life
experiences of white, middle class women, negating the experiences of all other women
(Hill Collins 1994; Glenn 1994; Hays 1996; Phoenix et. al, 1991). Assumptions of
universal mothering are problematic given the differential access to resources that
individuals have based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. To debunk the myth that
mothering practices are universal, more attention must be paid to the experience of
women of color, lesbian mothers, working class women, and single mothers (Hill Collins
1990;Glenn 1994). Women in different social circumstances have different experiences
of motherhood and may have different understandings of what it means to be a mother.

Many feminists have already begun to challenge the dominant discourse on
mothering, insisting that differences among women are just as important as
commonalities and demonstrating how men’s and women’s actions and definitions about
mothering can lead to a redefinition of this role (Glenn 1994). Feminists are particularly
sensitive to these issues and have conducted research that situates women’s experiences
with motherhood and mothering within a dynamic, interactive context of social, political, and historical factors (see Hill Collins 1994; Hays 1996; Phoenix et. al, 1991; Rich 1976; Rothman 1989; Villani 1997).

**Resistant Mothers**

While the dominant ideology of intensive mothering is evident within our culture, not all mothers participate in this type of mothering. Depending on racial, ethnic and social class backgrounds there are varying degrees of conformity to this dominant model. Thus, competing ideologies of motherhood do exist. Feminists that examine resistance have looked at how oppressed women take action on their own behalf by undermining their subordination. For example, women have enhanced their lives in both material situations (e.g., improving women’s working conditions) and symbolic situations (refusing to conform to common conventions of gender) (Lewin 1994).

In her research on women hospital workers with children, Garey (1999) demonstrated the power of the dominant mothering ideology in shaping the choices made by mothers who are employed full time. By working a full time job, Garey’s participants fell outside of the dominant ideology of mothering, but were still governed by this ideology. They practiced several strategies to attempt to meet this cultural ideal, later resorting to redefinitions of the mothering role that fit better with their lives.

To deflect negative appraisals for working, the employed mothers in Garey’s study attempted to make their actions as mothers known to others around them. They practiced what Garey (1999:29) referred to as “maternal visibility”. The women asserted that they were always there for their children both physically and emotionally, that they participated in family activities regularly (e.g., dinnertime), and participated in organized
extra-curricular activities with the children. Many mothers went as far as to take days off or worked the night shift so that they could participate in their children’s activities during the day. For many of the mothers this resulted in severe sleep deprivation because the mothers made their paid work invisible by doing it when they would ordinarily be sleeping.

To reconcile the contradiction between mothering and working in paid labor, many of Garey’s participants began to redefine their mothering role, arguing that “good mothers” provide for their children and by providing for their children serve as role models of accomplishment and self-sufficiency. Thus, employment became a dimension of good mothering. This more inclusive definition can also be seen in Hill Collins’s (1987; 1994) work on black mothers. Hill Collins (1987:124) wrote that,

African-American women have long integrated economic self-reliance with mothering. In contrast to the cult of true womanhood, in which work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of Afrocentric definitions of Black motherhood.

Similarly, Segura (1994) found that many of the mothers she interviewed felt that being employed was part of their mothering identity because economic support of their children was necessary for the children’s survival. In fact, they embraced an ideology of motherhood that valued both the domestic and economic aspects of motherhood. Aymer (1997) looked at migrant women domestic workers who lived apart from their children and found that their definitions of motherhood also included economic support of their children who lived with relatives in the Caribbean.
Uttal (1996) interviewed 31 working mothers about the meaning of childcare. The way that mothers defined and internalized the need for childcare demonstrated their contestation of dominant definitions of motherhood. Most notably, Uttal found that the women’s discussions of using childcare challenged the assumption that mothers should always be present in their children’s lives and that mothers are all-powerful. The women in Uttal’s study discussed mothering as transferable and did not feel that it was essential to be in their child’s lives twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. A finding that is in stark contrast to the dominant ideology of motherhood.

Hill Collins (1992) pointed out that the institution of black motherhood is constantly renegotiated and shows a great deal of diversity. Not only do black women see working as part of their mothering identity, they also rely on networks of individuals for assistance in mothering their children. Thus, bloodmothers as well as othermothers-(grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins) - care for children. While the dominant culture encourages women to become biological mothers, othermothers are revered in the African American community for their role in raising children. Being a mother is seen as empowering as bloodmothers and othermothers shape the lives of the children in the community. This type of mothering has been described as an activist form of mothering because of the changes wrought within communities and individuals by the work of mothering.

In her study of 31 Anglo-American, African American and Hispanic American women, Uttal (1999) also found that African American and Hispanic American women were more likely to use kin to take care of their children. Her finding demonstrated however, that while some of these women found kin care to be a better, more desirable arrangement for their children, other women indicated that they used their kin for
childcare because their kin had limited employment opportunities. Uttal’s (1999) findings suggest that there are cultural differences with regards to using kin for childcare as well as why relatives are available for childcare.

The Noncustodial (M)other

While much has been written about mothering, and motherhood, research has largely ignored the experiences of noncustodial mothers. The dominant paradigm of motherhood is particularly problematic for women who have given up or lost custody of their children and thus are unable to meet the cultural standards for motherhood. They are seen as failing as mothers in terms of intensive caregiving and the provider role, since they are often in a precarious financial situation (see Clumpus 1996; Fischer and Cardea 1981; Greif and Pabst 1988).

Because of their deviation from accepted mothering practices, noncustodial mothers are often labeled as “other” relative to the norm of two parent families and divorced families where mothers retain primary custody of the children. In other words, the noncustodial mother is measured against the cultural standard of the good mother who has her children with her, and the noncustodial father, who is assumed to be continuing in the gender-appropriate role of providing financial support for the children. Women’s relinquishment of their children is viewed as a serious violation of gender norms related to mothering (Morrell 1994; Santora and Hays 1998). As demonstrated in past research, this violation results in a stigmatized identity (Clumpus 1996; Greif 1987a; Greif and Pabst 1988). Goffman (1963:5) argued that an individual is stigmatized based on “an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated.” In this case, what society
anticipates is that mothers will be the primary caregiver to their children regardless of marital status.

Goffman (1963) noted that stigma can be evident or difficult to discern. In the first case, the source of stigma is obvious (e.g., race, abominations of the body), while in the second case, the stigma can be hidden or less visible. As Schur (1984) has noted, women are stigmatized first and foremost because of their status as women. Goffman would see this stigma as a “discredited” identity because gender, for the most part, is obvious in social interactions. Women who become noncustodial parents still hold the “discredited” identity of female, and they also acquire a “discreditable” identity due to their deviation from gendered proscriptions regarding mothering. This identity is “discreditable” because it is not necessarily a status that is known, yet if discovered, will result in stigmatization.

Child Custody

To better understand the experience of being a noncustodial mother, I will focus on child custody procedures, as well as the existing literature on noncustodial mothers. To better identify with noncustodial mothers’ experiences it is important to have an understanding of the evolution of child custody in the United States. Prior to the 19th century, when custody was an issue, the courts automatically gave children to their fathers. Women had no legal existence and were considered the property of their husbands, thus the children also belonged to the father. Over time, the legal status of women and children changed so that the courts, as well as society, viewed both women and children as human beings rather than property (Riegal 1970).
After the American Revolution, home and work became separate spheres. A decline occurred in domestic production because of the rise of the factory system, and women began to focus more energy on childcare. As children garnered more attention, emphasis was placed on the necessity of education for children (Riegal 1970). Throughout the 1800s children came to be seen as needing special care and being a mother came to mean caring physically and emotionally for children. Viewed as the parent most able to provide emotional sustenance, mothers were delegated more responsibility for children and in turn, obtained more prestige in the eyes of society. This responsibility for children increased through the early part of the 19th century as the mother was labeled the primary parent (Boylan 1985).

By the late 19th century the judicial system changed so that either parent was able to receive custody. Yet, the presumption of the courts was that young children should remain with their mothers. This became known as the “tender years doctrine” (Salt 1985-86). More recently, the “tender years doctrine” has not been as widely endorsed by the legal system because, theoretically, both mothers and fathers are considered as equal candidates for custody (Clark 1987). The rejection of the “tender years doctrine” was due to changes in gender expectations for men and women (Fox and Kelly 1995). Currently, the court follows the presumption that children should be placed where the “best interests” of the child will be met. In other words, children should be placed in a home where they will be secure and their development will be enhanced (Wall and Amadio 1994).

Fathers or mothers may have sole physical custody of all children, or the mother and father may have split custody, meaning that one or more children may be living with the
mother while other children from the marriage may be living with the father (Hawthorne 2000; Seltzer 1994). The typical arrangement is for one parent, usually the mother, to have physical custody of all dependent children and for fathers to have visitation with their children every other weekend (Seltzer 1994). More recent rulings have favored joint or shared custody, an arrangement where children spend an equal amount of time with their mothers and fathers (Crosbie-Burnett 1991; Maccoby and Dornbusch 1996).

While mothers are more likely to be awarded custody (Emery 1988; Bray 1991; Seltzer 1994), more fathers are beginning to obtain custody, especially when mothers are financially unable to support children (see Clumpus 1996; Fischer and Cardea 1981; Greif and Pabst 1988), mothers are mentally ill (see Greif and Zuravin 1989; Santora and Hays 1996), mothers have drug or alcohol problems (Greif and Zuravin 1989), or when children request to live with their fathers (Arditti and Madden-Derdich 1993; Fischer and Cardea 1981). Mothers may voluntarily relinquish custody of their children or they may be forced to involuntarily relinquish custody. Herrerias (1995) described the voluntary noncustodial mother as someone who has willingly entered into either a formalized legal or informal agreement where one or more children live with another caretaker, usually their biological father. The involuntary noncustodial mother has been forced to relinquish custody of her children through some form of protective services intervention, criminal confinement, long-term mental or physical health recuperation, child kidnapping, or court custody finding on behalf of someone other than the mother. Research has indicated that when fathers challenge mothers for custody, they win the majority of the time (Fox and Kelly 1995).
Noncustodial Mothers in the 1980s

Research on noncustodial mothers in the 1980s was mostly descriptive, focusing on several key themes: social beliefs about and reactions to noncustodial mothers, reasons for relinquishing custody of children, relationships with children, and adjusting to and coping with the status of noncustodial mother.

Social judgments. As previously noted, society views any childfree lifestyle as deviant for women, and being a noncustodial mother is no exception. In the case of the noncustodial mother, research has found that women without their children feel negatively judged and stigmatized by both personal acquaintances and the general society. As a case in point, in their sample of 17 mothers without and 14 mothers with custody, Fischer and Cardea (1981) found that in both groups, mothers felt that society had a negative view of women who had relinquished custody of their children. This study also found that over half of the noncustodial mothers had received negative reactions from friends and family.

In a follow-up study of societal attitudes towards mothers without their children, Fischer (1983) polled 34 respondents from the human development and family studies faculty and graduate students at a university in West Texas. The respondents were asked to compare married couples with children to those with childfree lifestyles (i.e., homosexual couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples, empty nest couples, married couples without children, couples who lost children to accidents, and noncustodial parents). Using a seven-point scale, respondents were asked to rank the categories on two dimensions: whether the situation was common or uncommon in society and whether
society approved or disapproved of this lifestyle. Findings indicated that respondents thought society most disapproved of homosexual couples and noncustodial mothers.

In her study of 100 mothers, Edwards (1989) reported mixed results regarding noncustodial experiences. Some of the women in her study spoke of being stigmatized by family, friends, and acquaintances, while others pointed to the strong support that they received from people in their lives. Thus, not all women incurred harsh judgments because of their status. This issue warrants more exploration into individual experiences with social stigma in the role of noncustodial mother, focusing attention on factors that may lead women to internalize experiences differently. How women experience the stigma of being a noncustodial mother may affect their everyday life as well as their mental and physical well-being.

**Reasons for relinquishment.** Mothers give up custody of their children for a variety of reasons, ranging from financial to emotional difficulties. Fischer and Cardea (1981) found that twenty-nine percent of the noncustodial mothers in their sample relinquished custody because they believed it was in the best interests of the child to do so. They believed this because they felt that the children’s fathers were in more stable financial positions. In a follow up article, Fischer (1983) described five circumstances under which mothers relinquished custody of their children: 1) the mother chose to leave home to find herself (i.e., to explore educational and job opportunities, to engage with friends); 2) the couples chose this situation because of a joint custody decision or because of a situation where the mother was going to be away from home a lot (e.g. she commuted to work); 3) the father’s choice (e.g., the father pressured the wife for custody); 4) the children’s choice; and 5) the court’s choice. Meyers and Lakin (1983) had similar
findings in their study of 70 women living apart from their children. Women relinquished custody due to financial reasons, a desire for their child to live in a stable home, the pursuit of new or former careers, to “find” themselves, and to accommodate children’s wishes to live with their fathers.

For her doctoral dissertation, Herrerias (1984) studied 130 noncustodial mothers using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Herrerias (1984) found multiple reasons why these mothers relinquished custody of their children, including financial limitations, emotional problems, threats of legal custody fights, and being in a volatile relationship with their current partners. Using a sample of 517 noncustodial mothers, Greif and Pabst (1988) found that the three most common reasons for relinquishing custody were financial (34%), mother’s inability to parent (32%), and the children’s choice to live with their fathers (24%). More specifically, women stated that they could not afford to raise the children, the father could provide more for the children, they could not afford to hire an attorney for a court battle, they could no longer handle or discipline the children, and the children preferred to live with their father. The women who were most likely to relinquish custody of their children were those who had felt overwhelmed by parenthood from the beginning.

On a much smaller scale, Zuravin and Greif (1989) examined eight low-income noncustodial mothers from their original sample of 518 mothers. Their findings indicated that children were involuntarily removed from their mothers’ homes by child protective services because they were being neglected or abused. All eight of these noncustodial mothers reported problems with at least one of three mental health problems with depression being the most prevalent.
**Relationships with children.** Research has examined the relationship between noncustodial mothers and their children post-divorce. Using questionnaire responses from 1,136 custodial fathers, Greif (1987b) surmised that ex-wives were involved in the lives of their children. Seventy-three percent of the ex-husbands polled indicated that their ex-wives were somewhat or slightly involved with their children, while only seven percent of the men indicated that their ex-wives were very involved. It should be noted that these findings were only indicative of face-to-face interaction, they did not account for contact by mail or telephone. Greif (1987b) found that mothers tended to be more involved with their children when: 1) the father shared responsibility for the break-up with the ex-wife; 2) custody was gained through mutual agreement; 3) the father was earning the higher income; 4) the father was raising one or two children (rather than three or more); and 5) the mother lived nearby.

In a comparison of noncustodial mothers and fathers, Furstenburg, Peterson, Nord, and Zill (1983) found that mothers were more likely to have higher levels of contact with children than noncustodial fathers. Noncustodial mothers were more likely to visit their children regularly, to have overnight visits, and to write letters and phone the children. These results, however, should be looked at with caution given the difference between the sample of noncustodial fathers (n=395) and the sample of noncustodial mothers (n=28).

Herrerias (1984) found that, upon relinquishment, roughly 97% of the 130 women in her sample maintained an active relationship with their children. The majority (71%) were happy with their decision to give up custody, and with their mother-child relationships. Nearly 77 percent described their relationships with their children as close
and caring. Similarly, Greif and Pabst (1988) found that mothers remained involved with their children after relinquishing custody. Out of 517 noncustodial mothers, roughly 23 percent of the mothers claimed to be very involved, 33 percent were somewhat involved, 29 percent were slightly involved, and 15 percent were not involved at all.

Adjustment and coping. Adjusting to and coping with the role of noncustodial parent is a complex process. Some women adapt quickly and cope well in this new role, while others experience difficulties associated with relinquishing their children. Greif (1987a) found that one third of his sample of 517 noncustodial mothers were comfortable being noncustodial parents, were comfortable telling people that they were noncustodial parents, did not feel guilty about their noncustodial status, felt the children were better off where they were (i.e., outside of mothers’ custody), and were satisfied with their relationship with their children. Focusing on these women’s experiences, Greif (1987a) found that mothers’ comfort was most highly correlated with their satisfaction with their relationship with their children, not feeling guilt, and believing that the children were better off with their fathers. Personal factors that were predictors of comfort included the choice to voluntarily give up custody, the reason the mother gave for the divorce (e.g., if she felt that the blame was shared she was better off), the reason why the mother did not have custody (e.g., mothers whose children wanted to live with their father were better adjusted), the stress at the time of relinquishment (i.e., mothers who felt less stress were better adjusted), mother’s religion (i.e., those with no religious affiliation felt more comfortable), and the way the mothers dealt with changes in their lifestyles (i.e., those who felt content with a changing financial lifestyle were more comfortable as noncustodial mothers).
In their book *Mothers Without Custody*, Greif and Pabst (1988) found that women who demonstrated the highest level of adjustment reported seeing their children often and having grown up in a family with liberal views on the role of mothers and fathers in children’s lives. Similar to Greif (1987a) and Greif and Pabst (1988), Edwards (1989) found that out of the 100 noncustodial mothers she surveyed, more than 90% expressed satisfaction with their decision to relinquish custody because they felt that it was in the best interests of the children financially, physically, and emotionally.

Fischer and Cardea (1981), on the other hand, found that mothers had a difficult time coping with their noncustodial status. This research indicated that noncustodial mothers were under a great deal of stress, were economically disadvantaged, and lacked a sufficient support system. Paskowicz (1982) found that the majority (60%) of the noncustodial mothers she studied had psychological problems. Sixty one percent of these women had involuntarily relinquished custody of their children. Paskowicz, however, did not distinguish between the mothers who involuntarily relinquished custody and those who voluntarily gave up their children with regards to emotional problems. In other words, she did not compare between the two groups, so we cannot assume that the presence of emotional problems existed only for women who involuntarily relinquished their children.

Edwards (1989) found that the women in her study used a variety of coping tactics, some positive, some negative. Methods of coping included staying in contact with their children, keeping a journal about their feelings, staying physically active, reading self-help books, using pills and alcohol, going to therapy, staying active with people, and staying busy.
Noncustodial Mothers in the 1990s

Research from the 1990s repeated many of the themes of the 1980s, again focusing on social reactions and beliefs about noncustodial mothers, reasons for relinquishing custody of children, mothers’ relationships with their children, and adjustment and coping. Research during this time became more theoretically grounded as researchers began to explore the social construction of noncustodial mothers (Clumpus 1996) and the noncustodial mother’s mothering identity (Babcock 1997). In an effort to improve and better understand noncustodial mothers’ experiences, researchers also began to focus on noncustodial mothers in the court system as well as making therapeutic and policy recommendations for these women.

Social judgments. Noncustodial mothers’ continued to feel that society judged them harshly during the 1990s. Ferguson (1994) used two case studies to highlight the experience of being a noncustodial mother. Using these two cases as well as past literature, Ferguson pointed out that women are prepared for the role of mother through gender socialization from an early age. Further, the mothers are blamed for children’s pathologies, are expected to be self-sacrificing, and experience inequality when they work in the paid labor force. These stereotypes, and the outcomes from these stereotypes, lead to negative evaluations of noncustodial mothers and also impacted women’s choices when relinquishing custody (see also Babcock 1997). Accordingly, Ferguson recommended support groups to help noncustodial mothers adjust to this role.

Using one on one interviews obtained through MATCH (Mothers Apart from Their Children) Clumpus (1996) explored the lives of 10 noncustodial mothers. Her goal was to understand how the social construction of noncustodial mothers as “unfit” parents
affected these women’s self-perceptions. Clumpus (1996) found that the noncustodial mothers in her sample perceived themselves as deficient and to blame for their situation. Because of these perceptions, the mothers separated themselves from their children, family, and friends.

Using a convenience sample of 120 participants from the general population (60 male and 60 female), Dolan and Hoffman (1998) conducted a study of perceptions of parent custodial status using vignettes depicting persons as married parents, divorced parents with custody, and divorced persons without custody. Their findings indicated that participants were most likely to rate both mothers and fathers who were noncustodial parents negatively. However, over all other parental forms, noncustodial mothers were the most negatively evaluated parents in the study.

Reasons for relinquishment. During the 1990s, reasons for relinquishing custody remained consistent with research in the 1980s. Arditti and Madden-Derdich (1993) studied 13 noncustodial mothers using qualitative and quantitative methods. They found that the most cited reasons for relinquishment of custody were the children’s choice, intimidation from an ex-spouse, court decisions, and financial problems. Arditti and Madden-Derdich pointed out that these responses demonstrated women’s lack of choice in the relinquishment process, leading to mothers feeling marginalized and oppressed. Clumpus (1996) found that lack of resources led to the relinquishment of children and subsequently, to an unequal distribution of power between noncustodial mothers and their ex-spouses. Essentially, these women perceived that their children became tactical pawns in their ex-husbands’ attempts to control the post-divorce relationship.
Santora and Hays (1998) interviewed 26 noncustodial mothers about their experiences. Of the 26 women interviewed, 21 reported that they had either voluntarily relinquished custody of their children or that there was a mix of voluntary and involuntary reasons involved with this decision. Of the 26 women, eight indicated that they relinquished custody because of finances (e.g., couldn’t afford daycare, couldn’t afford an attorney); four gave up custody because of a concern for their children’s well-being; three cited emotional problems as their reason; and two were afraid of their ex spouses. The children of three mothers requested to live with their father, and two gave their children up for adoption because they were not married and this conflicted with their religious beliefs.

While many women claimed structural difficulties as the main reason for relinquishment, many felt that the children were better off with their fathers. That is, they believed that the father was better able to provide for the children emotionally and financially (see Babcock 1997; Herrerias 1995).

Relationships with children. In an attempt to fully understand the relationship between noncustodial mothers and their children, the research in the 1990s focused on both quantity and quality of visitation. While past research from the 1980s addressed the issue of quality to a degree, most of the attention focused on quantity of visitation, excluding parents’ actual involvement in their children’s daily lives and activities. As Greif (1997) noted, parents may pay child support and visit their children regularly, but this is not indicative of involvement in their children’s daily lives. For example, noncustodial fathers have been dubbed “Disneyland Dads” because they do not actively
participate in their children’s day-to-day routine (e.g. helping with homework), but instead engage in social and recreational activities (Hetherington 1993).

In two studies completed by Arditti, quantity of visitation was addressed, but quality of visitation was largely ignored. Arditti and Madden-Derdich (1993) found that over half of the 13 mothers in their study indicated that they saw their children several times a month and felt that the visitations went well, for the most part. Mothers did, however, report that they felt a decline in closeness with their children after the divorce.

Arditti (1995) argued that there are clear distinctions between noncustodial mothers and fathers, especially with regards to involvement with their children. The literature cited in this review pointed to the fact that mothers were much more likely to feel a connection with their children despite their living arrangements, and that they were more likely to try to maintain an active relationship with their children through visitation, phoning, mailing letters, and so on. While this article focused on the connection between mothers and children, involvement in children’s day-to-day lives was ignored.

In their work, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) examined divorced families in California, demonstrating that noncustodial mothers were more involved in day-to-day aspects of parenting such as buying clothes, keeping track of doctor appointments, and supervising homework than were noncustodial fathers. Noncustodial fathers also reported more problems monitoring their children’s activities during visitation than did noncustodial mothers. Other studies have found the opposite to be true, demonstrating that mothers are just as likely as fathers to have reduced involvement in their children’s lives once custody is relinquished (e.g., Herrerias 1995).
Stewart (1999a) examined visitation with children using the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households focusing on mothers’ and fathers’ own reports of social ties to absent children. Stewart examined participation in leisure activities as well as school and organized activities, finding no statistically significant differences between noncustodial mothers’ and fathers’ activities with children. In other words, both mothers and fathers were equally likely to engage in leisure activities as well as school and organized activities.

In a departure from past research, Stewart (1999a) addressed structural impediments to visitation activities (e.g. living far away from children, lack of finances). Stewart found that parents who lived further away from their children were less likely to see their children and when they did see their children were more likely to participate in leisure activities rather than school or organized activities. Parents with low levels of education were more likely to focus on leisure activities when they were with their children. Level of earnings had no impact on the choice to participate in leisure versus school activities. Overall, Stewart’s findings revealed that both noncustodial mothers and fathers have similar types of visitation patterns, leading to the conclusion that emotional issues and practical barriers make day to day contact with children difficult to maintain, regardless of parents’ gender.

In a similar analysis using the same dataset, Stewart (1999b) found that nonresident mothers, were slightly more likely to maintain contact via phone and mail than fathers. About 30% of nonresident mothers talked to their children several times a week compared to 20% of fathers. She found no difference between how many times mothers and fathers saw their children during the year. Yet, overall, children spent significantly
more weeks visiting nonresident mothers than fathers. Over two thirds of nonresident fathers reported never having had their children come to stay with them compared to half of mothers. Over one third of nonresident mothers reported that their child stayed with them for over one month in the last year, compared with only 14% of fathers.

Adjustment and coping. Adjustment to and coping with the role of noncustodial parent remained salient for women during the 1990s. Santora and Hays (1996) asked their 26 participants how they had coped with the status of noncustodial parent. The majority pointed to the need for a nonjudgmental social support network composed of family, friends, other noncustodial mothers, and support groups to help them in adjusting to this role. When asked what they would recommend to other women in similar positions, the women recommended redefining one’s role as a mother, recognizing that this is a time for grieving, allowing this process to take place, using prayer and spirituality, educating oneself about women’s issues, and doing things for your children (e.g., making scrapbooks).

Of the 26 women in Santora and Hays’s (1996) study, the majority (69%) experienced significant levels of anxiety and/or depressive symptoms, half reported significant health problems, and five of the women were using antidepressants. Santora and Hays (1998) stated that therapists should be sensitive to these women’s predicaments, and acknowledge that their clients had multiple losses related to their divorce and custody. They asserted that, because of the complex situations of noncustodial mothers, caution should be used when diagnosing noncustodial mothers with disorders. Instead, Santora and Hays stated that therapists might want to teach
clients behavioral techniques to cope with their changed status, and that therapists should make note of cultural influences that might have influenced women’s experiences.

Babcock focused on the effect that noncustodial status had on the salience of identity and general self-esteem for noncustodial mothers. Her most important finding was that all of the 41 noncustodial mothers that were interviewed had experienced negative appraisals on at least one occasion. In order to compensate for these negative appraisals, Babcock deduced that the noncustodial mothers were attempting to fit the ideal model of mothering by altering their mothering role to more closely match social expectations of mothers. According to Babcock’s analysis, the mothers increased physical visitation and contact by phone and letter, demonstrating their dedication to their children. When these efforts to be more like “traditional” mothers failed, the mothers redefined their mothering role, becoming more like sisters, aunts, or friends to their children. The participants claimed that these relationships were mutually satisfying for themselves and their children.

The courts. In a departure from past research, the research of the 1990s began to focus on women’s experiences with the court system and how custody was actually determined within the legal system. As more fathers were awarded custody of their children, the reasons for this increase were explored as well as mothers’ visitation, child support, and overall treatment in the system. Using data from 509 divorce cases in Michigan during the early 1980s, Fox and Kelly (1995) examined who was most likely to receive sole physical custody in final court judgments. Their findings indicated substantial gender differences in the effects of socioeconomic and legal process variables on custody outcomes.
More specifically, they found that fathers were more likely to gain custody of older male children than female children. When shifting attention to socioeconomic factors in custody decisions, they found that mothers were more likely to be awarded custody of their children if they had a college degree. Education did not play a role in the court-based custody decision for fathers. Mothers’ income had no effect on whether or not she obtained custody. On the other hand, fathers with high incomes were less likely to have custody of their children. This was not because the court was unlikely to give higher income fathers custody, but was related to the high opportunity costs involved in being the sole custodial parent of a child or children. In other words, these fathers opted to not go for custody. Courts were less likely to give custody to unemployed fathers while women’s employment status had no effect on custody decisions.

Shifting to the legal process, findings indicated that when husbands were the plaintiffs in custody cases, they were more likely to obtain sole custody of the children (Fox and Kelly 1995). Fox and Kelly (1995) argued that this finding was indicative of the shift to gender-neutral custody outcomes. This study also found that when a court investigation took place regarding the children’s current living situation that fathers were more likely to gain custody of the children.

Using 1,153 court case records from 10 Minnesota counties in 1986, Christensen, Dahl, and Rettig (1990) examined the differences in treatment of noncustodial mothers and fathers by the courts. Christensen et al. (1990) found that noncustodial mothers pay child support less frequently than noncustodial fathers. More specifically, out of 114 noncustodial mother cases, 38 mothers paid support. When noncustodial mothers paid child support, they also paid less child support than noncustodial fathers (i.e., 20% of
their income versus 25% of fathers income). Upon closer inspection, it was found that noncustodial mothers pay less because of their disproportionately low incomes in comparison to men. More specifically, noncustodial mothers had a net yearly income that was about 63 percent of noncustodial fathers. Noncustodial mothers were likely to be employed in jobs with few fringe benefits and were also less likely to have pensions in comparison to noncustodial fathers.

Using in-depth interviews with legal service professionals (i.e., District Court judges, attorneys, guardian ad litems, court evaluators) from Denver, Colorado, Causey and Duran-Aydintug (1997) explored child custody determinations for lesbian mothers. Their findings indicated that, depending on the county in which the child custody trial took place and on the judges’ personal biases, a lesbian mother could be denied custody of her children based solely on sexual orientation. The researchers pointed to the conservative bias in the court systems regarding family structure. They stressed the importance of embracing new definitions of family that do not perpetuate the ideal norm of the heterosexual married couple.

Treatment recommendations. Based on their findings, researchers made specific treatment recommendations. For example, West and Kissman (1991) gave several treatment recommendations. First, therapists should be aware of their own biases regarding motherhood. They should not internalize or act on negative stereotypes that abound regarding the noncustodial mother. Therapists should take a holistic, multidimensional perspective that acknowledges the problematic relationship between women and the environment in which they live. This would help in better understanding the relationship between individual problems and the social context in which women live.
Therapists should also distinguish between mothers who need help working through feelings of victimization after having given up or lost a custody battle and those women who are ready to move beyond this life event toward growth and self-development. West and Kissman (1991) argued that it is also important to normalize women’s experiences of relinquishing custody. One way to assist in this normalization process is to recommend peer support groups where noncustodial mothers would have common experiences with others in a group environment.

Greif (1997) explored several themes within the literature on noncustodial mothers, with a focus on how mothers lose custody of their children and how they cope with this loss. His overall recommendation was for therapists to maintain consistent therapeutic relationships with noncustodial mothers, claiming that with consistent treatment, the mothers’ stress would be reduced.

Past research from both the 1980s and 1990s provides information about social judgments of noncustodial mothers, why women relinquish custody of their children, the mothers’ relationships with their children, as well as how they cope with the transition from custodial to noncustodial parent. The 1990s saw a more theoretically rigorous examination of noncustodial mothers’ experiences, using a social constructionist framework (Clumpus 1996), as well as identity theory (1997) to better understand the situation of noncustodial mothers. This literature also explored women’s experiences within the court system and made therapeutic recommendations.

With the exception of Babcock’s (1997) study, the literature on noncustodial mothers has failed to examine how noncustodial mothers define motherhood in general as well as how they define and enact mothering in light of dominant definitions of mothering. It is
important to understand how noncustodial mothers define motherhood and mothering because these definitions affect how these women perceive themselves as women and mothers. How noncustodial mothers define and enact mothering may influence their day-to-day interactions with their children, ex-spouses, family, and so on. It may also affect how they perceive themselves as individuals as well as how they cope with the status of noncustodial parent. Beyond the individual effects, this dissertation will contribute to the literature on gender and deviance by providing insight into women’s experiences as non-normative mothers.

In this dissertation I explore how dominant ideologies of mothering and motherhood (e.g., intensive mothering, dominant definitions of motherhood) influence noncustodial mothers thoughts and actions as mothers. Specifically, I explore women’s definitions and enactments of mothering pre and post-relinquishment as well as the voluntary or involuntary nature of the relinquishment and how it affects definitions and enactments of mothering. The findings of this research will be situated within the existing literature on mothering, as well as the literature on noncustodial mothers.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN

The goal of this dissertation was to investigate the lived experiences of noncustodial mothers through the use of one-on-one interviews, which are conducive to raising consciousness about women’s experiences in their own words (Devault 1996). The focus of the dissertation was on how noncustodial mothers defined and enacted mothering as well as how they negotiated being in the position of noncustodial parent. In this chapter, I begin by discussing my use of feminist methodology as a methodological framework. Next, I discuss the meaning of lived experience and its importance to the study of noncustodial mothers. This is followed by a discussion of the sampling strategies used in collecting my data as well as a description of the sample. Next, I present the in-depth interview process, followed by a discussion of the methodological implications and concerns encountered throughout the course of this project. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how the data were analyzed and interpreted.

Feminist Methodology

Feminist qualitative methodology guided my research process. I chose this methodology because of its woman-centered focus and concern with dismantling power dynamics between the researcher and research participants. From the onset of this project, the mothers who participated in this study were seen as the experts of their stories, providing me, the researcher, with important information about the lived
experiences of noncustodial mothers that I could not have otherwise obtained. Here I provide
the reader with the basic assumptions of feminist methodology, demonstrating its relevance
as a methodological framework for this study.

According to Devault (1996) feminism is both a movement and a set of beliefs that seek
to improve women’s social positions within society. With this goal in mind, feminist
methodology has a shared commitment to three goals: 1) to reveal the diversity of women’s
lives by focusing on what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed in their lives, shifting
the focus away from men’s concerns; 2) a concern for minimizing harm and negative
consequences to women in the research process by leveling hierarchies of power and control
in relationships between the researcher and research participant; and 3) seeking a
methodology that supports research of value to women, leading to social change or action
that benefits women (e.g., changing theory, bringing new topics into the discipline, or raising
consciousness about women’s issues) (see also Chafetz 1997, Cook 1983; Devault 1991;
Millen 1997; Reinharz 1992).

Feminists argue that mainstream social scientific methods are problematic because
respondents are situated as objects of research, objectivity is assumed in investigations, and
researchers are detached from the knowledge making process (Cook 1983; Reinharz 1992).
Farganis (1986) asserted that positivist claims to objectivity are problematic on four fronts: 1)
they lack the awareness that positivism is rooted in a specific social order; 2) findings are
reported as if they were isolated from the social processes that surround them, 3) knowledge
is viewed as inherently neutral, and 4) the biases embedded in the observer’s point of view
are ignored. Similar to Farganis’s point, Collins (1990:205) asserted “Scientists aim to
distance themselves from values, vested interests, and emotions…and thus decontextualize
themselves in order to become detached observers and manipulators of the natural world.” In
sum, feminists claim that distance from the subjects of inquiry is problematic because it does not allow for rapport to emerge where the respondent feels comfortable sharing her story with the interviewer. In fact, the use of standardized measures in positivistic research leads to data that are “fragments of decontextualized human experience” (Sprague and Zimmerman 2004: 41). By applying such methods, the gap between researcher and research participant is widened and in-depth understanding is compromised (Sprague and Zimmerman 2004).

In contrast, feminist researchers embrace subjectivity and personal experience. They reject the stance of the researcher as objectively detached from research and research subjects (Allen 2000; Klein 1983; Reinharz 1992; Sprague and Zimmerman 1989). In fact, feminists deny the possibility or desirability of objective outcomes (Sprague and Zimmerman 1989). Reinharz (1992) elucidates this point as she emphasizes the role of the feminist researcher in the research process, noting that many feminists have used their own personal experiences to drive their research. Feminist researchers often describe the ways their research stems from their own personal experiences, something that is not common in most mainstream research. For example, Katherine Allen (2000) demonstrated how her experiences in a diverse family led her to ask questions about the historical changes in family structure, and Carolyn Ellis (1993) used her experience with the sudden death of her brother to show how stories fit somewhere between fiction and social science.

More pertinent to this dissertation, both Catalina Herrerias (1995) and Harriett Edwards (1989) wrote about their status as noncustodial mothers and how their personal situations influenced their choice to study this population and the research questions they decided to explore. In her British study of noncustodial mothers, Clumpus (1996) also indicated that it was her “insider” status as a noncustodial mother that encouraged her participants to speak with her, knowing that they were in a safe environment where they would not be judged.
Through the use of personal experiences, feminist researchers are able to identify with and empathize more with their participants, which allows for a stronger connection between the two. Sharing common experiences and engaging with participants person to person creates a “safe” environment, helping to produce a setting where participants feel more comfortable discussing their personal experiences. While many feminists advocate this research approach, they also acknowledge that researchers are not limited to topics that are in line with their personal experiences. In other words, it is not necessary to have personally experienced something in order to study it, or to have a personal relationship with one’s research participants (Reinharz 1992).

Feminists acknowledge the agency of the research subject in the construction of her own lived experience and strive to give women a voice by asking practical and policy relevant research questions that privilege the subjective experience of the participants (Allen and Baber 1992; Collins 1990; Smith 1990; Cook 1983). Overall, feminist researchers understand the importance of exploring women’s experiences as different from those of men as well as from other women (e.g., on the basis of race, class, motherhood, and so on).

A key method for understanding women’s experiences has been the one-on-one interview because of its conduciveness to raising consciousness about women’s experiences in their own words (Devault 1996). It is not imperative, however, to use qualitative methods to understand women’s experiences. In fact, it has been argued by some feminists that quantitative methods can also serve to make women’s experiences visible and are sometimes necessary in understanding trends over time (Sprague and Zimmerman 1993). Along these lines, Devault (1996) points out that qualitative methods practiced in a nonfeminist way can easily contribute to the failure of noticing women and their concerns. Thus, in doing research (whether qualitative or quantitative) from a feminist standpoint, one must be certain to have a
commitment to including women and their concerns. The point is not to simply know about women, but to provide a more accurate, comprehensive understanding of society by including women’s experiences.

**Feminist Methodology: The Current Study**

Through the use of qualitative feminist methodology, the goal of this research was to examine the lived experiences of noncustodial mothers from their perspectives. I used a feminist framework first and foremost because of its ability to emphasize women’s subjective experiences as noncustodial parents. My goal was to make visible women’s experiences with motherhood as secondary caregivers. By examining how mothers construct and enact mothering and motherhood as noncustodial parents, I draw attention to what has not been adequately explored in past research on this topic.

Rienharz (1992) noted that feminists use an array of research methods ranging from interviews to multiple methods. The choice of method is dependent on the research problem to be studied. I chose to use semi-structured one on one interviews, seeing it as the best method to explore lived experience because of its emphasis on the mutual exchange of ideas through interaction between the researcher and the participant. The in-depth interview gave women a voice, providing them an opportunity to talk about their lived experiences as noncustodial mothers in their own words. At the beginning of each interview, I would tell the respondent that I viewed her as the expert of her story. I was there to listen and later communicate her story in her own words. By acknowledging the women as experts of their own stories, I was attempting to dismantle the power dynamic between myself as researcher and the women as participants in the study. Since each woman’s story was unique, the women ultimately guided the interview as they discussed their experiences. This is another example of how I attempted to shift the power and control to the respondent. My overall goal
in doing this research was to provide valuable research on women’s experiences with mothering as noncustodial parents, leading to outcomes that would benefit these women as well as other marginalized mothers.

**Lived Experience**

Understanding the lived experience of each noncustodial mother was essential to this study. According to Denzin (1994) individuals understand their lived experiences through epiphanies (sudden flashes of intuition). These epiphanies can radically alter the meanings people give to themselves and their lives, and are often experienced during times of crisis (e.g., divorces, incidents of family violence, the loss of a job). By listening to the stories that people tell about their life experiences, the researcher is able to draw attention to moments of crisis that occur in an individual’s life, providing thick description about these experiences. According to Geertz (1973) thick description occurs when an anthropologist or ethnographer provides a detailed explanation about social phenomena so that an outsider can understand these issues.

For noncustodial mothers, the crisis that led to the experience of an epiphany was the relinquishment of their children. By doing one on one interviews with these women I was able to gain insight into each woman’s lived experience. Thus, the noncustodial mothers’ lived experience was based on each woman’s individual story, not on the researchers’ presuppositions of how things should have been or were.

Husserl (1970), the father of phenomenology, emphasized the need to use reflective intuition to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and comprised of awareness. Husserl emphasized that phenomenology begins when the self brackets, or holds in abeyance, preconceptions about the world in order to discover the true meaning of the things themselves (Hammond, Howarth, and Keat 1991). Husserl’s goal was to clarify the general essence of
the phenomenon being investigated to obtain a concrete descriptive analysis. Used as a research method, this eidetic or descriptive phenomenology rests on the argument that there are essential structures to any human experience. When these structures are captured in consciousness they take on a meaning that is the truth of that experience for the participants. Essentially, when listening to individuals’ experiences, the researcher enters the participants’ life world, or world of lived experience (Cohen and Omery 1994). While studying the lives of noncustodial mothers I adhered to Husserl’s understanding of lived experience by listening and recording all observations in the respondents’ own words. By studying noncustodial mother’s lives through their descriptions, I provide more of an awareness of their subjective experiences in their own words.

The Sample

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval from the Office of Research Services and Sponsored programs in March of 2004, I began trying to locate participants. My first interview was conducted in the summer of 2004 and the last in the fall of 2004. In order to be considered for the study, a woman needed to be over the age of 18, she needed to have relinquished custody one year prior to the interview, and her child or children needed to have been living with their fathers (her ex-partner) for at least one year. I chose to include only women who had relinquished custody to their ex-partners because one of the research goals was to better understand the interaction between ex-partners and how that influenced the women’s feelings about being a noncustodial mother as well as their relationships with their children. The choice to focus only on women who had relinquished custody at least one year prior to the interview was based on Arendell’s (1995) research that indicated that persons whose divorces were more recent had different perspectives than those who had been

1 A copy of the IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix A.
divorced for a longer period of time. The divorce itself was a difficult life event and required at least a year or more to regain a sense of stability. I assumed that this would be true for women who had relinquished custody of their children as well.

Convenience sampling was used: sampling cases that were available at the time of the study (Singleton, Straits, and Straits 1993). In locating participants, I utilized several convenience sampling strategies. My choice to use several sampling methods was based on similar research where the researcher had difficulty in obtaining participants. For example, Arditti and Madden-Derdich (1993) solicited participation from 40 noncustodial mothers through the use of court documents. Out of the 40 contacts, only 13 agreed to participate. The researchers argued that the low response rate was due to the fact that noncustodial mothers are so mobile that the letters soliciting participation failed to reach them. The researchers also stated that through telephone solicitation, many women declined to participate in the study out of fear that their ex-spouses would find out and use it against them in some way.

Clumpus (1996) also asserted that locating noncustodial mothers was difficult. Her own status as a noncustodial mother gave her access to some women in an organization called MATCH (Mothers Apart from Their Children), however, she still was only able to obtain ten women for her study. Given the difficulties encountered by these researchers’, the sample for this research was collected through the use of flyers, court records, and snowball sampling.

**Flyers.** I first attempted to locate participants by placing flyers around the university campus, in social support agencies, local coffee shops, Laundromats, and in several therapeutic settings². As indicated by past research, many noncustodial mothers opt to relinquish custody of their children in order to pursue an education (e.g., Ferguson 1994;

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² I placed flyers in clinics that serve lower income individuals (e.g. where they use a sliding scale for payments), as well as private clinics that served middle to upper income individuals.
Past research has also demonstrated that many noncustodial mothers seek therapy or participate in various social service programs in an attempt to deal with their noncustodial status (e.g. Greif and Pabst 1988; Greif and Emad 1989; Santora and Hays 1998). Thus, the university, therapeutic settings, and social service agencies seemed to be logical places to post flyers soliciting participation. I also decided to cast a wider net by targeting other more public locations (e.g., coffee houses, beauty shops, and Laundromats).

Flyers described the purpose of the study, indicated that women would receive $25 for their participation, and provided my contact information. This method proved to be relatively effective. Through the use of flyers, eight women contacted me about participation in the study. Two of these women took flyers from coffee shops, one took a flyer from a Laundromat, one from the university, one from a social service agency, and 3 from therapeutic settings. The diversity of where women picked up flyers seems to indicate that noncustodial women can be found in a variety of locations, and that these women were motivated to participate in this study.

Court records. My second sampling strategy was to send letters to women who had been involved in a custody case in Summit County at least one year ago. Through public records from 2000-2003, I was able to identify 50 women who had taken part in a custody case. I sent letters to all of these women. Much like the flyer, the letter provided an overview of the study, indicated that the women would be paid $25 for their participation, and provided my contact information. Out of the 50 letters that I sent out, I received one response. I was not all that surprised that I had such a low response rate using this method since past research has indicated the difficulty in locating noncustodial mothers through public records (e.g. Arditti

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3 A copy of the flyer can be found in Appendix B.
4 A copy of this letter can be found in Appendix C.
and Madden-Derdich 1993). I found this to be true as many of the letters were sent back to me for lack of an accurate address.

**Snowball sample.** After I began to conduct interviews, I found that snowball sampling was an effective method for locating noncustodial mothers. In each interview that I conducted, I asked the respondents if they knew of any other women who fit the criteria for the study. Two respondents provided me with the names and phone numbers of women that they felt would be interested in talking to me about their experiences. Friends and colleagues also proved to be excellent sources for potential participants. Five women were referred to me through these individuals. Upon receiving the names and numbers of these women I contacted them by phone to see if they were interested in participating. All of these women agreed to participate.

**Sample Diversity**

The final sample consists of sixteen women from northeastern Ohio. The women ranged in age from twenty seven to forty eight years of age. Of the sixteen women, 75% were white (n=12) and 25% were African American (n=4). Incomes ranged from zero income to women who earned $70,000 a year. The mean income for the sample was $21,000. Seventy five percent of the sample were divorced (n=12) and 25% had never been married (n=4). Using the modified CES-D, eight of the sixteen women indicated that they were experiencing a high level of depressed mood at the time of the interview and eight women were experiencing a low level of depressed mood. Four of the eight women who were not experiencing depressed mood at the time of the interview were taking medication for depression.

The decision to relinquish custody of children can be either voluntary or involuntary. As noted in Chapter II, the voluntary noncustodial mother is someone who has willingly entered into either a formalized legal or informal agreement where one or more children live with
another caretaker, usually their biological father. The involuntary noncustodial mother has been forced to relinquish custody of her children through some form of protective services intervention, criminal confinement, long-term mental or physical health recuperation, child kidnapping, or court custody finding on behalf of someone other than the mother (Herrerias 1995). Seven of the women in the sample (about 44%) had involuntarily relinquished custody of their children, four had voluntarily relinquished custody (25%), and five women had experienced a situation of voluntary and involuntary relinquishment (31%). Those women who had experienced both voluntary and involuntary relinquishment had separate custody disputes involving more than one child with their ex-partner or multiple ex-partners. A detailed description of the demographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Table 3.1.
Table 3.1: Sample Description

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Personal Income</th>
<th>Total Family Income</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Total # of Children</th>
<th># Children Living w/Dad(s)</th>
<th># Children Living w/Others, Not Dad</th>
<th>Custody Decision</th>
</tr>
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<td>42</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
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<td>$70,000</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>V and I*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>$0 **</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* V=voluntary; I= involuntary
** Husband supports
*** Receives disability income but did not report this as personal income during interview
****Boyfriend supports, but did not report this income during the interview
*****No income reported during interview
Interview Process

To understand the experiences of noncustodial mothers, the primary data collection strategy was the in-depth interview. Field notes were also taken to enhance the data provided by the interviews. Two interviews were conducted in the spring of 2004 to test the flow of the interview guide and to determine if the questions were addressing issues relevant to the study. These early interviews provided useful insights regarding question structure and content. The questions were effective and the interview guide flowed well, demonstrating that the questions were tapping into noncustodial mother’s experiences. Both interviews lasted about an hour and a half.

While these interviews were useful in providing information about the interview guide, they are not part of the data that were analyzed for this study. Neither interview participant fit the criteria of the study, and were chosen simply as pilot interviews. The first interview was conducted with a woman who had been a noncustodial mother ten years ago and had since regained custody of her children. So, her interview was retrospective. I had intended for the second interview to be a part of the sample, but upon beginning the interview, I realized that I had not done an adequate job of screening this participant on the telephone prior to conducting the interview. In my excitement to get an interview, I forgot to ask her if her children were living with her ex-partner. After we started the interview I realized that her children were living with her parents. In my field notes I stated:

After beginning the interview, I realized that she (the respondent) did not fit the criteria for the study. Her children are currently living with her parents because her life is in disarray. They have been living with them (her parents) for about 9 months. So, initially I was upset that she didn’t fit the criteria, but I had already set up the interview and couldn’t leave at that point. She was
really counting on the $25 to help her with her rent. So, I figured I could use it as a pilot interview, later publications, or might even be able to use some of the quotes that she gave me in the dissertation. This is something I need to look into.

The interview did yield interesting data that I plan to use at a later date when I extend this research to include other custody arrangements. After this interview, I also realized that I needed to create a sheet of screening questions to ask women on the telephone to ensure that they fit the criteria of the study.

The next sixteen interviews lasted between forty five minutes and two and a half hours. When I spoke to the women on the phone we determined a location for the interview. While I suggested their homes as potential interview sites (simply to make the interview easier for them), I found that many of the women were homeless and did not have their own homes where we could do interviews, or it was easier for some women to meet me at my place of work or at another location.

At the beginning of the interview, each participant was given an informed consent form that I read aloud while the participants followed along. The informed consent form provided an overview of the study as well as the relevant contact information. The participant was advised that her involvement was voluntary and confidential. I told each participant that her name and the names of her children would be changed to pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. I gave each participant the option of choosing her own pseudonym. Three of the sixteen women chose a name for themselves.

Each participant was notified that if she chose to stop the interview at any time or chose to not answer some of the questions posed during the interview, that she could do so without

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5 A copy of the informed consent form can be found in Appendix D.
negative consequence. I also asked for the participant’s consent to tape record the interviews. This form allowed the respondent to approve or disapprove the use of a tape recorder during the interviews, to hear the tapes after the interview if they chose before the tapes were used, and to approve or disapprove the use of recorded interviews for professional presentations and publications. All of the women signed the appropriate forms, indicating their consent to participate in the study and to have their stories tape recorded and used in publications and presentations.

I used an interview guide, although I rarely found the need to follow the guide directly. Since the women were the experts of their stories, I let the women tell their stories with only occasional prompts from me. I began the interview with a warm up question that asked the women to provide some background information (e.g., family life, age at marriage, etc.). This was a relaxed, non-threatening question that allowed the women to become comfortable talking with the tape-recorder on. It also proved to be an excellent way to segue into information about their noncustodial status and ideas about mothering. With the exception of one interview, all of the respondents used this question as a springboard for moving directly into the core interview questions without my having to ask the questions directly. These core questions focused on how the mothers defined mothering in general and for themselves in particular; about their mothering practices and if these have changed since becoming a noncustodial parent; how acquaintances and family have responded to their status as noncustodial mothers; and how they feel about being a noncustodial parent. They were also asked to describe their interactions with family, friends, their children, and their ex-spouses and about their adjustment to the noncustodial parent role. Upon completion of the one-on-

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6 A copy of the audio tape consent form can be found in Appendix E.
7 The interview guide is provided in Appendix F.
one interviews, each participant was given an exit survey that asked demographic questions (race, income) as well as questions from a modified version of the CES-D⁸.

For their participation in the study, participants were given $25. The respondents were told that even if they were unable to finish the interview that they would still be paid the $25. This was also stated in the informed consent form. Women were paid at the end of the interview and were provided a signed receipt. This money was given to the respondents in order to defer any costs that they may have incurred while participating in the study (e.g., childcare, gas money, lost wages).

With the exception of one respondent, all of the participants accepted the money. The respondent who chose not to accept the money stated that she did not want to be compensated for the interview. She simply wanted her story to be heard in the hopes that the “right people” might read the research and later assist women like her. In my field notes, I noted that Debbie, a 42 year old mother of three stated that, “she didn’t do the interview for the $25, but because she felt she had something to share. She said if it helps me or somebody else than that’s enough for her.” In the end she, and the rest of the women, did take the money.

Funding for respondent compensation came directly from my personal funds.

Upon completion of the interview, each participant was notified that if they wished to receive preliminary results of the project that they might do so by using the contact information (phone, address, and email) provided on the disclosure form that I gave them at the end of the interview. This disclosure form also contained several social service agencies that the women might contact if they wished to further discuss any of the sensitive issues that may have emerged during the interview⁹.

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⁸ The exit survey is located in Appendix G.
⁹ A sample disclosure form is located in Appendix H.
After leaving the interview site, I would take detailed field notes about each respondent, key themes that emerged in the interview, the physical setting, my feelings during the interview, and any other relevant issues that I felt might assist in my future analyses of the data. At first I took these notes by hand and typed them when I got home. After doing this a couple of times, I found that often times I would be too tired after an interview to write detailed notes and type them when I got home. To remedy this problem, I taped my field notes at the end of each respondent’s audiotape while I drove home. These notes were then transcribed with the interview at a later time.

Methodological Issues and Concerns

Gender and age of the interviewer. I conducted all sixteen of the in-depth interviews in this study. Research on same gender interviews indicates that people have a sense of rapport with a person of the same gender. For example, in Greif and Pabst’s (1988) study of noncustodial mothers, Pabst completed interviews with the mothers with the understanding that the women would feel more comfortable talking to another woman. I believe that being a young female proved to have its advantages during the interview process. I believe that the women felt more comfortable talking to another woman about their experiences. The women disclosed sensitive, personal information about their feelings about themselves as mothers and about their experiences with their ex-partners and children. This sensitive information led many of the women to become emotional during the interview. I do not believe that the women would have felt comfortable discussing these issues or expressing these emotions with a male.

I also believe that my age was a positive factor during the interview. Several of the women stated that they were surprised that I was so young. They stated that they had expected someone much older since I am getting my doctorate degree. Since I was younger
than the women I interviewed, I believe that this helped to dismantle the power dynamics between the researcher and participants. It appeared that the women felt that they were the authorities of their stories, knowing much more than someone younger with less life experience.

**Emotional nature of the interviews.** As I noted above, the interviews proved to be emotional experiences for the women I interviewed. In fact six of the sixteen women cried throughout the course of the interview. I told these women on several occasions that we did not have to finish the interview or that we could stop the tape and take a break if they wanted. None of the women wanted me to stop the interview. In fact, all of them said that it felt good to get the emotions out. Mo, a thirty three year old mother of four, stated that she was glad to talk about the situation, to “get things off my chest to someone who would simply listen and not judge me or try to give me advice.” Other women echoed these sentiments, stating that the interview was “therapeutic” and “a cathartic experience.”

The emotions that the interviews evoked also affected me during the interviews. On several occasions I felt myself tear up along with the participants. The interviews were emotionally draining for the women and for me. I would go home after the interviews and feel exhausted.

When I transcribed the tapes of these interviews, I also found that it was difficult to understand some of what the women were saying because they were crying while they were trying to talk. In these cases, I did the best that I could with my interpretation of what they were saying. I also had written notes that I referred to that helped me to reconstruct what the women were talking about during these emotional times.

**Traveling to interview sites.** The emotional nature of the interviews was not the only issue that affected my mental state as an interviewer. I also found that traveling to interview
sites was problematic. In fourteen of the sixteen interviews I agreed to meet women at their homes or some other location of their choosing. I found this to be difficult because I have a very poor sense of direction. I stated in my field notes that, “One downfall of driving to people’s homes is that I keep getting lost. I’m terrible with directions and this has been problematic for me on several occasions.”

After the respondent decided on an interview location and provided me with the full address of the interview site, I would use Mapquest (an online direction program), to find detailed directions to the sites. Unfortunately, Mapquest was not always accurate and on a couple of occasions I was late getting to the interview because I got lost. On one occasion I actually had to call the respondent to have her help me find her house. These occasions were not only embarrassing for me, but also affected my mental state prior to the interview. When I was late or had gotten lost, I found that I felt very disoriented at the start of the interviews and had difficulty concentrating. To remedy this problem, I would leave a full 30 minutes earlier than necessary to allow for getting lost time.

**Physical setting.** The physical setting of the interview proved to be both beneficial and problematic. By allowing women to pick the time and location of the interview, I was giving them control of the situation from the beginning. Ten of the interviews were done in the women’s homes, one was done at a friend of the respondent’s home, two were done at the women’s mother’s homes, two were done in my office at the university, and one was done in a local restaurant. When I first started doing the interviews I would suggest the women’s homes as a potential interview site. What I later found, however, was that some of the women did not have their own homes and were staying with friends or family. For example, Anita, an African American mother of six children, was homeless at the time of the interview so I met her at her mother’s home for the interview. Similarly, Sherri’s home was being
renovated so she chose to do the interview at a friend’s house. Other women chose locations based on their proximity to work and school. Two women, Rachel and Mo, decided to meet me in my office at the university to do the interview. Annie was meeting me after work and chose to do her interview at a local restaurant.

When interviews were done in the women’s homes or the homes of family or friends, the women seemed to be more comfortable and relaxed, which certainly affected the women’s comfort level during the interview. These locations, however, provided difficulties because oftentimes children or grandchildren were at the homes with respondents, random people would stop into the homes to talk to the respondents, and the telephone rang during several interviews.

The entrance of outside people and telephone calls led to several interruptions during the interviews, which impacted the flow of the conversation. For example, while I interviewed Trina, a mother of three, one of her friends stopped by to see how she was doing after her trip to Columbus. While the tape was rolling, she talked to her friend for ten minutes. This was all recorded on the interview transcript. During this same interview, Trina’s eight year old son was watching television in the living room while we did the interview in the dining room. I worried that his presence might impact what Trina was talking about in the interview since he was within hearing distance. This didn’t seem to pose a problem for Trina, who spoke very candidly about her experiences. The problem came when the son set a firecracker off in the living room while we were talking. This interrupted the interview and also affected both of our emotional states during the interview. Trina lived in a transient area, or what she called, “the projects”, so I was apprehensive about being in the area in the first place. So, the firecracker going off in the home was even more unsettling than if I had been in another location. When I interviewed Sherri, a mother of six, we did the interview at her friend’s
home in one of the bedrooms. During the interview, Sherri’s boyfriend, friend, and two sons came into the interview and listened at various times. Again, Sherri didn’t seem to be bothered by this, so I don’t think that she censored what she was telling me based on their presence.

On several occasions I did fear for my safety in the home interviews. Four of the sixteen interviews took place in notoriously high crime areas and I was doing the interviews in the evenings after the women got off of work. When I interviewed Sherri, there was a party going on at her friend’s home. As I mentioned above, we did the interview in her friend’s bedroom while people drank and partied in the rest of the home. At one point, a fight broke out between two of her male friends while we were doing the interview. The men were swearing at each other and one of the men pushed the other up against the door of the room where we were talking. Sherri appeared to be unfazed by this, while I was pretty shaken up. This definitely impacted my comfort level, but I tried to hide my nervousness so as to not impact the interview.

Since it was summertime and many of the women did not have air conditioning, they suggested that we do the interview outside where there was a breeze blowing, or they would open up windows and turn on fans. I found that in these incidences, the quality of the tape recordings was compromised. While I could still hear what the women were saying, it took much longer to transcribe because of the background noise of cars, people outside, and the fans. One participant’s comfort level was impacted by being outside because she had allergies that were affected by the bushes we were sitting near. Throughout the interview she made references to her allergies and was constantly itching her nose. I suggested changing locations, but she said she would be fine.
The issue of background noise also emerged when I interviewed Annie, a mother of three, at a local restaurant. When I met her she was sitting in the bar area of the restaurant where the jukebox was playing. I was afraid that the music would impact the quality of my tape, but it actually was not a problem because Annie spoke very clearly, so I was able to hear everything that she said. The only real problem during the interview was the interference of the waitress who stopped by on several occasions to refill drinks and to bring Annie her food.

The women who were interviewed in my office seemed fine with the location. I was the one who was uncomfortable. In my field notes from Mo’s interview, I noted,

> We did the interview in my office at school. It was an ok environment except I worried that someone would knock on the door or my officemate would come in during the interview. At one time the phone did ring during the interview which interrupted our conversation.

Problems with tape recorders. The use of audiotapes was problematic during three of the interviews. While I was interviewing Grace, a mother of one son, my tape recorder’s batteries stopped about fifteen minutes prior to the end of the interview. I didn’t realize this until we were almost completely done with the interview. Luckily I had been taking detailed notes during the conversation and was able to reconstruct what Grace had been talking about when the tape stopped. On the other two occasions, the tapes were eaten by the transcriber I was using to type the data. Fortunately, I was able to fix the tapes and finish the transcription. In future interviews, I took extra batteries along and continued to take detailed notes in case these situations occurred again.

Respondent’s expectations regarding interview. On a couple of occasions I worried about the respondent’s expectations regarding participation in the project. The women were
all very excited about having someone to talk to who would communicate their experiences as noncustodial mothers. On a couple of occasions, however, I got the feeling that the women expected that their participation was in some way going to lead to changes in their personal circumstances. Both Anita and Gloria were very angry with the legal system’s treatment of their cases and insisted on showing me legal documents that they had from their cases, which led me to feel as though they thought I could do something for them. Gloria, a mother of three, was dealing with a particularly difficult situation. She believed her ex-partner was sexually molesting their six year old daughter. He was given custody of the child because Gloria had been denying him visitation based on her fear that he was abusing the child. She wanted to show me documents from therapists, doctors, and lawyers that documented this situation, to prove to me that she was not lying about her ex-partner’s abuse of her daughter. At the end of the interview, she stated, “I hope that you can help me. I need help.” I explained to her that I really couldn’t do anything about her case, that I was simply there to document her story. She said, “Still, you never know whose hands your paper may fall into.” These expectations made me uncomfortable, and sad that I could not do more for these women.

Self disclosure. As noted previously, the use of feminist methodology allows for mutual interaction between the interviewer and the participant. Feminists acknowledge that researchers come to their research with a particular standpoint that is related to their subjective experiences. In my case, I have some personal experience in a noncustodial family. Having married a noncustodial father with two children from a previous marriage, I am aware of some of the positive and negative aspects of being a noncustodial parent. When applicable, I planned to use these personal experiences to relate to the respondents and develop rapport in the interview with the knowledge that oftentimes, having a sense of
common ground encourages participation from an otherwise reluctant participant (Reinharz 1992). I realized, however, that I needed to be selective about using these experiences, as they would be beneficial in some interactions and detrimental in others. In doing the interviews, I found that I quickly got a sense for whether or not disclosing this information would be useful or detrimental. The interjection of my experience was useful when women were happy in their custodial arrangements. I realized that they would have been detrimental had I interjected them in interviews with women who were particularly angry with the stepmothers of their children. I soon realized that I had other things in common with the women that I could use to build a sense of rapport. For example, when I interviewed Maggie, a mother of three, I found that we both had a love of animals. So when I first got to her home we spent a lot of time talking about our pets, which made the interview very conversational. When I interviewed Linda, I found out that she was a stepmother just like me, so we did discuss that commonality. Jean, a mother of three, lived in the same apartment complex as me, so we shared that common ground. These commonalities did assist in creating a sense of rapport between the participants and myself.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was guided by the grounded theory method discussed in Strauss and Corbin (1998). According to Charmaz (2004:497),

Grounded theory methods consist of a set of inductive strategies for analyzing data. That means you start with individual cases, incidents, or experiences and develop progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, to explain, and to understand your data and to identify patterned relationships within it.
Theoretical analysis is based on the stories of the individuals whose worlds you are studying (Charmaz 2004).

Grounded theory method dismantles the boundaries that exist between data collection and analysis. Through the research process, theory is generated through the continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. Accordingly, multiple perspectives must be sought and understood through the data collection process. In other words, multiple voices must be attended to as the researcher participates in a constant comparison of data. Grounded theory method assumes that effective theoretical coding is enhanced by theoretical sensitivity. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the more sensitive researchers are to issues of class, race, gender, power, and so on, the more attentive they will be in the coding process.

In keeping with grounded theory method, the analysis process began during the actual interviews. While doing interviews I completed detailed field notes in which I made memos regarding themes that were emerging during the interview. After completing each interview, the data were transcribed. Transcription of data took between 4 and 8 hours, depending on the length of the interview. The typing of transcripts allowed me to become more familiar with what the women were saying, leading me to add questions to the interview guide for future interviews and to make notes regarding emergent themes.

The second stage of the analysis involved the actual coding of the data. The interview data and field notes were entered into NVIVO, a data software tool used to explore and interpret textual data. NVIVO was useful in managing, tracking, and discovering patterns in the data. Using NVIVO, each interview was coded to create conceptual categories that reflected the participants’ subjective experiences as noncustodial mothers. At first, the coding process yielded broad conceptual categories that were further refined and elaborated on
during the axial coding phase of the analysis. At this point I was able to create tree diagrams within NVIVO that allowed me to better understand the complexity of the data.

During the selective coding process, I identified two dominant themes that emerged from the analysis. The first theme I named “The Custody Decision” and the second I called, “Shifts in Mothering.” In the first theme, I explore the women’s voluntary or involuntary relinquishment of custody, the custody arrangement, and the women’s experiences in the family court. “Shifts in Mothering” examines the transition from custodial to noncustodial mothering, focusing on changes women experience as noncustodial mothers (e.g., changes in contact with and control over children, changes in the mothering role and changes in mother’s experiences with others). Mothers’ feelings about themselves as mothers and their accommodation to dominant expectations of motherhood are also discussed.

For each theme, subcategories of the broad themes were printed and analyzed. After printing off the text, I was able to complete theoretical sampling, comparing cases to one another (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In other words, I was able to identify similarities and differences in the women’s experiences. While writing up the analysis, I continued to go back into the data to make certain my interpretations were grounded in the women’s experiences.

By the end of the data collection and analysis process, sixteen women had told their stories about being noncustodial mothers. At the beginning of this project, I had planned to collect about 25 interviews. After collecting and analyzing the sixteen women’s stories, however, I found that I had reached “theoretical saturation” (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Theoretical saturation occurs when new interviews yield little additional information (Schutt 1999). In other words, after collecting sixteen interviews, I was no longer finding new information that would change or expand my theoretical model, and the major themes continued to be repeated. The goal of the analysis was to develop a theoretical framework
that was grounded in the lived experiences of noncustodial mothers. The emergent themes were then linked to the existing research literature. In the next chapter, I examine the custody decision.
CHAPTER IV
THE CUSTODY PROCESS

Divorce and single parenthood are increasingly common life events. When the termination of a relationship occurs, mothers are the most likely parent to be awarded physical custody of any dependent children produced in the relationship (Seltzer 1994). Custody may have been formally granted through legal proceedings, or informally decided upon by the mother and father. In the past twenty years, the likelihood of children living with their fathers after the break up of a relationship has increased significantly (Census 2000).

Because cultural mandates that surround motherhood in our society emphasize that mothers should be the primary caregivers of their children (Glenn 1994; Hays 1996), when mothers do not have custody of their children people wonder why, often labeling these women as deviant (Greif and Pabst 1988). While conducting this study, I was faced with questions regarding the women that I interviewed; questions from academics, family, and friends. “Why don’t these women have custody?” “What is wrong with them? I mean they must have done something wrong to not have their children.” “Aren’t these bad mothers?” “What kind of mother gives up her child?”

Through interviewing the mothers in this study, I found that these questions could not be answered with one definitive response. The reasons for relinquishing custody as well as who is awarded custody are very complex issues. While some women have
children who are living exclusively with their ex-partners, other women have children who are living with their ex-partners and also with family (e.g., mothers, sisters). Three of the sixteen women in this study fell into this category (Anita, Sherri, and Shirley). When applicable, their experiences with family as custodial caregivers will be compared to their experiences with their ex-partners as custodial parents.

In this chapter I share the experiences of sixteen mothers who have given up or lost custody of their children. I explore the voluntary or involuntary nature of the custody decision, focusing specifically on the reasons behind the relinquishment of custody, and how these women felt about the custody decision. Then I discuss the women’s involvement in the court system, drawing attention to the custody arrangement (i.e. visitation and child support), and the women’s experiences within the system (see Appendix I for a detailed model of these themes).

Giving Up Custody

Determining if women voluntarily or involuntarily give up custody of their children is a difficult task. Herrerias (1995) provided a concrete definition of voluntary and involuntary relinquishment, seeing voluntary relinquishment as a choice made by the women while involuntary relinquishment occurred when mothers were forced to relinquish custody of their children through some form of protective services intervention, criminal confinement, long-term mental or physical health recuperation, child kidnapping, or court custody finding on behalf of someone other than the mother. Greif and Pabst (1988), on the other hand, pointed out that it is important to take women’s perceptions of the custody situation into consideration. Since this study is based on women’s experiences as noncustodial mothers, I followed Greif and Pabst and asked
the women to discuss whether or not they saw their situation as voluntary (having given up custody) or involuntary (having lost custody). Four women indicated that their decision was voluntary, seven of the women saw their decision as involuntary and five of the women indicated that they had experienced both an involuntary and a voluntary experience with one or more of their children.

In this section, I will focus only on the women’s experiences with giving up custody. While five of the women had also experienced an involuntary relinquishment, these experiences will be discussed under “losing custody.”

Including women who experienced both a voluntary and an involuntary loss of custody, nine women saw themselves as having given up custody of one or more of their children. While the mothers described their choice as voluntary all said that they felt they had no other alternative at the time because they were suffering from structural and personal constraints (e.g., financial difficulties, mental illness, alcohol and drug problems, father’s were in better school districts) that led them to make a decision that they may not have otherwise made or because their children chose to live with their fathers, a decision that the women again felt was outside of their control.

Annie, a 45 year old mother of three put this issue into context the best when she stated, “My decision to give up the kids was basically voluntary and I know this is repetitive but it was not about me. And so voluntary is the right word although I wouldn’t have chosen it.” She further stated, “My decision was based on everything I could control, everything that I couldn’t control, and the only thing that I thought was best for Andy.” Similar to Annie’s experience, Lenore, a 35 year old mother of 3, claimed to have given up custody because it was best for her children at the time because she was
suffering from bipolar disorder. After stating this, she said, “But it wasn’t a choice that I
felt I had any…I made the decision but I felt I had no choice. How’s that?”

Because of the contradictions present when discussing the issue of choice, I used one
woman’s discussion of the difference between giving up and losing custody to frame the
women’s experiences. Sherri, a 45 year old mother of six, had a situation where she had
voluntarily given up custody of three of her children and had involuntarily lost custody of
one. Throughout the interview she referred to her situations as having “given up custody”
and “lost custody.” I asked her to elaborate on the difference between giving up and
losing custody and she said:

When you sit down and discuss and you have reasons and you feel better. You
can tell them (the children) exactly why. You feel like you have control over the
situation. You actually do have control of the situation. It is a thought out plan, a
thought out procedure that you are making. It’s not because you got in trouble over
here and you know and now you running to try to cover your butt and save your kids.

So that’s the difference between losing and giving up.

Based on her explanation, I labeled the women as voluntary relinquishers if they
specifically stated that they chose to give up custody, they stated that they had control of
the situation, or if they discussed their decision-making as based on what was in the best
interest of their child at the time. The women relinquished custody because of financial
difficulties, alcohol and drug addiction, spending time in jail, the father was in a better
school district, the children chose to live with their fathers, and mental illness. Table 4.1
provides a list of the women who gave up custody as well as their reason for giving up
custody. After table 4.1 is a detailed description of each woman’s experience.
Table 4.1: Reasons for Giving up Custody

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of Children Given Up</th>
<th>Reason for Giving up Custody</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mo</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Financial Difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Drug and Alcohol Addiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherri</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jail Time (2)* and Child’s Choice (1)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Child’s Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Child’s Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Child’s Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Child’s Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenore</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Child’s Choice (1)* and Mental Illness (2)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some women had multiple reasons for giving up custody. In these cases the number of children who were given up for each reason is in parentheses.

Financial difficulties. Mo was a 33 year old mother of four children. Mo gave up custody of her children because she was homeless after her divorce was finalized. She had to move in with her parents and felt that it was too much to ask of her family to allow both her and her children to move into their home. Because her ex-husband, Ken, was better off financially, she was willing to let him have temporary custody of the children until she could get back on her feet. After the order was signed, Ken took the children to North Carolina without her knowledge. At the time, Mo felt that this was the best decision to make for her children:

I gave him temporary custody you know to have custody of them due to the fact that I was homeless, you know, and I had nowhere to go. I didn’t want to put my kids through that you know? It was bad enough that I was in that situation but four innocent children, you know, they shouldn’t have to go through that.
Despite the fact that Mo felt this was the best decision she could make for her children, she had a very difficult time when she gave the children to their father. Mo began to cry: “It was very emotional. I held their faces and we all cried. And it was emotional for me I mean I felt like a zombie. I mean…for a couple of months I couldn’t…I mean my mom would say, ‘you gotta eat, you know? But I would just go straight to my room.”

At the time of the interview it had been over a year since the children started living with their father and Mo was still having difficulty adjusting. She said, “People always say I should be happy with what I have and that I’ve made it through so much, but it’s always easy coming from somebody else’s mouth, but after you’ve lived through it and gone through it day by day not having your children you just give up.” She did acknowledge that she was doing better. When she first gave up the children she spent almost all of her time in her room crying and now she has started to go out with some friends. At the end of the interview she stated, “I feel like the end of the great race is me being happy and being with my children and me becoming a nurse. That’s just like one of my goals in life and I’m going to get there sooner or later.” When I interviewed Mo, she was not currently doing anything toward reaching this goal.

Alcohol and drug addiction. Anita was a 48 year old mother of six children. Her children ranged from 6 to 31 years of age. She had relinquished custody of three of her six children. Two of her children she gave up voluntarily because she was in and out of drug and alcohol rehabilitation facilities. One of these children was given to the child’s father and one was given to her sister.

After Anita had given birth to her thirteen year old son Lance, she was placed in a rehabilitation facility so she gave up custody to her sister: “She’s (her sister) had Lance
ever since he was like five weeks old. And you know that’s my sister and she couldn’t have children so I didn’t want to get an abortion so I had him and he was conceived out of a one night stand and I love him dearly but he’s my sister’s now.” Anita still saw Lance on a regular basis, and he knew that she was his mother. Several years later, Anita ended up in another rehabilitation facility and her other son, Luther, was placed in a children’s home at the age of thirteen. At the time of the interview Luther was fifteen years old. The children’s home was going to adopt her son out so Anita’s ex-husband came to the facility and she gave him custody of Luther. In both of these situations, Anita claimed that she was looking out for the best interests of her children.

Jail time. Sherri was a 45 year old mother of six. Sherri had two children who lived with her sister and two children who lived with two of her ex-husbands. Sherri had voluntarily given custody of two of her sons to her sister, and her daughter to her daughter’s father. When Sherri’s sons, Zander and Allen, were 9 and 10 years old, Sherri had to do time in jail for a contempt of court charge. At this time, Sherri signed custody over to her sister so that the boys could be signed up for school while she was in jail.

After this, her sister kept custody of the boys for seven years. While Sherri felt good about giving custody to her sister at the time, she later found that her sister was instrumental in keeping her from making important decisions in her children’s lives, which made her feel disempowered and angry about her decision. Sherri’s daughter chose to live with her father, and is discussed below in the section on children’s choice to live with their fathers. Sherri’s fourth child, her youngest son, was an involuntary situation that is discussed under losing custody.
School district. Maggie, a 43 year old mother of three boys who had been married and divorced twice, experienced both a voluntary and an involuntary custody situation. Maggie’s eldest son, Greg, lived with her first ex-husband and her other two sons, Kyle and Lance, lived with her second ex-husband. Maggie felt that her decision to give up custody of Greg was voluntary while her decision to give up Kyle and Lance was involuntary.

While Maggie was married to her second husband, Hank, she moved in with her father and mother because of problems she was having with the marriage. Maggie wanted her son to be in a stable home in a good school district so she felt it would be in Greg’s best interest to live with his father. Eventually Greg’s father went to court for sole custody and Maggie felt that this was a good living situation for Greg: “I wasn’t going to fight him, because why? I know Sam is a good dad. He’s an excellent dad. So I told Greg, I think right now you’re better off with your dad.” Maggie stated that she felt good about this situation.

Child’s choice. In some circumstances, the children chose to live with their fathers. Debbie, Grace, Annie, Sherri, Jean, and Lenore all shared this circumstance. Children chose to live with their fathers for a variety of reasons. In Debbie’s case, a 42 year old mother of three, her daughter chose to live with her father because she didn’t want to leave her home and her school. Nicole was seven years old at the time of the divorce and Debbie stated:
I gave her the choice of whether she wanted to stay with her dad or come with me. So she stayed with her dad. So that’s how that came to be that he was the custodial parent. I just didn’t want to be…I just wanted to give her a choice of what she wanted to do. I didn’t want to create a big…I didn’t want to create more trauma for her than it would have been. So she chose to live with her dad and that was ok.

When Nicole was 13 years old, she decided to come and live with her mother until she was 17. When she turned 17, she moved back in with her father because she had a boyfriend who was five years older than her and Debbie felt this was inappropriate and would not allow the boyfriend in her home.

Grace, a 30 year old mother of one son, had a similar situation. When she divorced her ex-husband, her son was three years old and wanted to be with his father. She said:

When my son was 3, my son was begging for his father a lot and we tried to get back together, tried to make it work. It didn’t work. I made the choice to let him stay with his father. It seemed like he was emotionally unstable because he wanted to be with his father. So that’s the choice I made. He stayed with him and then when the divorce…it took 4 years for the divorce…by the time the divorce was finalized he’d been in that household for so long I didn’t want to put him through the stress of changing households, so he stayed with his father. I just felt like he was a boy and I’m a woman and his dad is going to teach him more about being a boy and being a man and how men are supposed to be.

Grace does not remember a lot about the day that her son went to live with his father. She said she remembers it was very difficult for her and that at the time she felt she was doing
the right thing for her son. Despite feeling that she did the “right thing” for her son, Grace suffered from depression related to giving her son up and had been hospitalized for this depression on several occasions.

Annie, a 45 year old mother of three, had two children who chose to live with their father. Her first son, Andy, chose to live with his father at the age of 13 because he felt his father needed him to help around the house after the divorce. Her second son, Paul, chose to stay with his father after Annie relocated to a new city for work. With her first son, Annie remembers feeling “heartbroken” when he went to live with his father: “It just was a decision I felt I couldn’t change. There was nothing I could really do about it.” With her second son, what Annie remembers most is the day that she signed the final papers in court, giving custody to her ex-husband. “That was just awful. I was not ready to give him up.” Yet Annie has adjusted well to the situation, focusing attention on her career, traveling, and her new partner. She acknowledges that giving up custody of her children was what was best for them. It was “about them, not about me.”

In a similar circumstance, Sherri’s daughter, Tanya, chose to live with her father and her aunt because when she was living with her mother she was “the only girl being raised around all boys (i.e., her brothers).” Sherri and the rest of the family felt that this was in Tanya’s best interest. “It was a joint, that was the one thing. It was a joint family decision of Tanya being with her dad. You know for the best of Tanya as far as being a teenager.” Sherri felt good about this decision and saw Tanya on a regular basis.

Jean, a 42 year old mother of three who had experienced both a voluntary and an involuntary situation, was having difficult times when her son, Steven, decided to live with his father. She was homeless after her second divorce, and her son told her and the
court that he wanted to move in with his father. She says, “I didn’t really blame him, you know? So I just kind of cooperated there. I wasn’t going to fight for custody because I was down on my luck. I was homeless. That’s why I didn’t fight.” She felt at the time that this was a good decision, but now wishes that she could see her son more often and have more decision-making power where he is concerned.

Lenore, a 35 year old mother of three, was married and divorced twice. She had one child from her first marriage and two children from her second marriage. She claimed to have voluntarily relinquished custody of all of her children. Her first child, Allen, chose to live with his father. Lenore felt good about this decision, “That was a good choice. I don’t regret any of that. He’s (her ex-husband) a police officer and my son wants to go into the Marines and they live in Stow and its good. But my other two, that’s what I regret.” Lenore’s other two children were given to her second ex-husband because Lenore suffers from bipolar disorder.

**Mental illness.** Lenore’s bipolar disorder was diagnosed later in life after she initiated her second divorce. After being diagnosed, she was hospitalized for a small period of time. While going through her second divorce, her ex-husband brought up her bipolar disorder in court. Lenore knew that having bipolar disorder might lead to the loss of her children so she signed custody over to her ex-husband.

That’s why I gave up custody because I thought it would look better if I gave him custody than if he actually took it. So I just gave it to him. Cause I know to get them back it would be easier because I could say I gave him custody as opposed to they took them from me and gave them to him.
And I knew right then that I wasn’t ready to take care of them. I couldn’t. And I wanted what was best for them.

When asked how she felt the day that the children started living with their father Lenore says, “I felt really bad. And I cried of course. But I felt like that’s what I had to do. You know? I couldn’t even take care of myself, how could I take care of…and I don’t want my kids to turn out like…you know? I don’t want them to have the same problems that I’ve had.” To help her cope with her children living apart from her, Lenore claims that she has turned to God:

I pray. I know that I’m doing right. God knows what I’m doing. So I feel good about it. It’s in God’s time not my time. I would love to have my kids right now. It’s not time. Because I can’t speed up the process because it would interfere with God’s plan. And that’s how I believe now. It’s not my plan.

**Losing Custody**

Greif and Pabst (1988) pointed out that women who gave up custody voluntarily tended to have a different experience during the custody decision process and afterwards than mothers who gave up custody involuntarily. This was also true of the women in this study. In total, seven women indicated that they had lost custody of their children while five indicated that they had experienced a voluntary and an involuntary situation. So, twelve women out of sixteen had at least one experience that they described as a custody loss.

The women who had experienced both a voluntary and an involuntary situation were particularly interesting. These women were much more interested in sharing the experiences that they perceived as involuntary with me, often times talking very little
about their experiences with giving up custody. In fact, many times during their
interviews I realized that they were not discussing the child that they voluntarily gave up
at all. At that time, I would attempt to direct the conversation to include these children.
The women would then share their experiences with these children, but would quickly
return to discussing the children that they felt they had lost. These situations were clearly
more salient for the mothers because the elements of choice and control had been
removed. In these situations, the women felt that they had been “wronged”, “played”, and
“deceived.”

There were many factors involved in the loss of custody (e.g., drug use, allegations
of child abuse and endangerment, kidnapping). I have divided custody loss into three
categories: the kidnapping of a child or children, deception, and the loss of custody based
on a court decision in favor of the father. Table 4.2 provides an overview of the women
who lost custody of their children as well as the reason for this involuntary
relinquishment. After Table 4.2, a description of each woman’s experience is provided.

Table 4.2: Reasons for Losing Custody

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of Children Involuntarily Given Up</th>
<th>Reason for Custody Loss</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Deception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberta</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherri</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trina</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Court Decision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kidnapped. Debbie was a 42 year old mother of 3 daughters who had experienced both a voluntary and an involuntary relinquishment. Her two eldest daughters, Wendy and Jean-Anne, were born during her first marriage. About six months after she and her first husband separated when her daughters were one and two years old, her ex-husband kidnapped them.

I started working nights in a restaurant and he had them for the weekend and I came home one morning and he was supposed to bring them home from the weekend, and there was a note on the door that he decided it would be better for everyone if he just took them. And I was like, ‘I don’t think so. That’s not how it works.’

Debbie was determined to find her children and enlisted the help of the police, a private investigator, and the FBI. At the time, Debbie was unable to press charges because back in the 1980s, when this happened, she was told that there were no laws to protect her children against their father taking them out of the state. Whoever had possession of the children at the time had custody. Debbie felt lost and out of control but she was determined to find her children and get them back. She searched for them for 22 months. She found them in New Jersey and took them back without a fight from her ex-husband.

Maggie, a 43 year old mother of three, also had a voluntary and an involuntary custody situation. Similar to Debbie, her children were kidnapped. The difference, however, was that her second ex-husband did not take the children out of the state. In fact, Maggie and he were still living in the same house. She lived upstairs and he lived in the basement where his business was located. Maggie was planning a visit to her father’s home and was putting her youngest son, Lance, into the van; her middle child, Kyle, was
in the house waiting for her to come and get him. She ran into the house, leaving Lance in the van. While she was in the house, her ex-husband ran out of the basement, grabbed Lance, and refused to give him back. The next day Maggie went back to the house to try to talk to Hank and he proceeded to take her second son, Kyle, out of his high chair and down the basement, telling Maggie that he was calling children’s services on her. Her ex-husband called children’s services, alleging that Maggie had a drinking problem and was unable to take care of the children. Maggie denies that this allegation is true, yet she lost custody of both children to Hank in a custody battle several months later.

Maggie said that the day the children moved in with Hank was terrible. “I cried. I was so just so hurt because I knew I’d never…he (Hank) promised me he’d make my life hell and he’s doing it too.” At the time of the interview, Maggie was still in court trying to regain custody of her children. It had been seven years since she lost custody. Maggie is not coping well. She says when she is not with her children she is either working or sitting at home by herself. She cries often.

Deception. Rachel was a 32 year old mother of two who lost custody of her 11 year old daughter when she was 3 months old. Rachel met and married her ex-husband during her time in the U.S. military. Shortly after they married, Rachel became pregnant with her first child, a daughter named Jessie. When Rachel found out she was pregnant she and her husband decided that they did not want to raise a child in the military. When both parents are on active duty in the military, one parent has the option of being released from active duty. Rachel’s husband thought that he should be the parent released. According to Rachel he said, “Let me get out because if I don’t get out first I won’t be
able to get out. The mother can always choose to get out on a hardship. I’ll get out of active duty and you get out on a hardship and we’ll raise our daughter in Virginia.”

Rachel agreed to this and they began packing up their things for him to move to Virginia. The plan was for him to move with their daughter and Rachel would join him after she was released from duty. Her husband took everything with him; Rachel was left with only the clothes on her back. She says, “I was really anxious to get out of the military but he doesn’t have a job, he doesn’t have medical coverage, and we were not going to go that route with a child. I’m like, ‘you need to get a job, I need to be with my daughter.’”

Rachel did not know at the time, but her husband had gone behind her back and filed for divorce, alleging that Rachel had abandoned him and their daughter. Rachel had no idea that he had made these allegations, so when the case went to court the first time, Rachel was “nowhere to be seen” and her husband was automatically granted custody of Jessie. After Rachel found out that this had happened, she was given an attorney through the military and was able to get the abandonment charge dropped. At that time Rachel said:

I got the abandonment charge taken away but he’d already had custody and at the time I was active duty in the 18th airborne core which is deployable anywhere in the world in 18 hours. So my ex-husband and I came to the agreement that for that time, until I could get out of the military, she should be with him because he was with his family and I had no one. I had no home, I had nobody to take care of her. She would have been in daycare for at least 60 hours a week and I didn’t think that was fair.
Because her husband was unemployed at the time of the divorce, he was granted spousal support and child support, so Rachel was forced to stay in the military in order to pay these expenses. She remained in the military until her daughter was 3 ½ years old. At that time, she felt guilty taking her child out of the only home she had ever known. “I didn’t feel that because I wanted her and I needed her that I had the right to do that to her. And she’s been there ever since.” Rachel had a difficult time with the situation because of the lies and deception that her ex-husband perpetuated. She said she really did not start feeling better until she married again and had her second child who is now 6 ½ years old. This child helped her to move on with her life. Even though her daughter lived in another state, Rachel maintained contact with Jessie, seeing her several times a year.

Court decision. Several women lost custody of their children during legal custody battles. Roberta, a 37 year old mother of 3, lost her children to her ex-husband after they separated. Roberta had been having an extra marital affair and her husband threw her out of the house. Roberta says that her husband used intimidation to keep her from her children, yelling and screaming at her that it was her decision to break up their marriage and that the girls should not have to suffer for her mistakes. According to Roberta, he would scream, “This is where the kids grew up, you can’t uproot them, you can’t take them.” After being thrown out of the house, Roberta did not have a place to live or a job. When she and her ex-husband went to court to finalize the divorce and custody arrangement, the court granted her ex-husband custody with the provision that a shared parenting plan would be implemented. This plan was never followed by her ex-husband. Roberta saw her two youngest daughters, but had no relationship with her oldest
daughter. Roberta claimed that the poor relationship between her and her eldest daughter was created by the nasty comments that her ex-husband made about her to the child.

When it was decided that the children would live primarily with their father, Roberta said, “I didn’t like it at all. I think I thought somehow they would come to visit more, and they didn’t.” Roberta was not happy with the situation. To help her cope with her new status as a noncustodial mother, Roberta tried to find other mothers like herself to talk to, but had very little luck.

Shirley was a 36 year old mother of 2 daughters. Shirley lost custody of her daughters as a result of her drug and alcohol use. From her early twenties up until recently, Shirley used cocaine and alcohol on a regular basis, and was in a series of abusive relationships. Her daughters were the product of two of these relationships. After having her second daughter, the hospital found cocaine in Shirley’s system and she was placed in a mental hospital where she was diagnosed with depression. Shirley got out of the mental hospital after a few weeks and moved in with her mother and her two daughters. After moving home, Shirley began drinking again and quit taking the medication she was prescribed for her depression. Because of this, her family called children’s services and her children were removed from the home. Shirley, kicked out of her mother’s home, moved to North Carolina. A custody hearing took place for her two daughters, but since Shirley left the state and was not at the hearing, her eldest daughter was placed in the custody of the child’s father and her youngest daughter was given to her sister. This custody arrangement has been in place for seven years.

When asked how she felt the day that her children were taken away, Shirley says, “I felt unbelievably crushed. I freaked out. I didn’t look at any child’s pictures for three
years. At all. I didn’t want to be around kids.” At the time of the interview, Shirley had visitation with her first daughter and was in the process of trying to get visitation with her second daughter. She is now in Alcoholics Anonymous working on her addiction problems.

Similar to Shirley, Wendy, a 47 year old mother of two, lost custody of her children because of her drug use. Wendy’s husband filed divorce charges because of her cocaine addiction. Upon filing for divorce, her husband also pursued custody of their two children. Wendy said:

It was a really nasty custody battle, very expensive and he won it. There were some issues…neither one of us was innocent of anything. There were drugs involved, I was real guilty. He was guilty but he wasn’t looked at that way in court because he made the charges first and whenever you make those charges, if it’s true or not, they yank those kids from the parent and it doesn’t matter if it’s the mom or the dad. So I was the one on trial for that. So he won. Yeah, he won. And he left.

When the custody decision was made, Wendy said she felt “Awful, like I didn’t want to live. That’s one of the worst feelings you could have. Desperate, sad, angry, all of those emotions that tear you up.” Since losing custody, Wendy has given up cocaine and has an ongoing relationship with her children.

Gloria’s story of custody loss was particularly sad. Gloria was a 44 year old mother who had never been married. She had 3 daughters from three different partners. After the relationship ended between Gloria and her second daughter’s father a shared parenting plan was reached in court. Gloria would get her daughter Sara for one week, and Sara’s
father would get his daughter the following week, and so on. After coming home from
visitations with her father, Gloria noticed that her daughter would “act strange.” She was
listless and did not want to be touched. According to Gloria, this was not typical for Sara.
When it would come time for her next visit with her father, Sara, who was two and a half
at the time, would scream and cry, clinging to her mother. Gloria had Sara examined by
doctors and psychiatrists. These professionals all told her that her child was being
physically and sexually abused by her father.

Based on this information, Gloria denied Sara’s father visitation. Because of this,
Sara’s father took Gloria to court and she was found to be in contempt of court for not
following the visitation agreement and the judge determined that custody should be
granted to Sara’s father. Gloria was appalled and did everything that she could to get this
decision overturned. She even went as far as getting the Akron Beacon Journal and
Channel 5 News involved in the story, and tried to hide in a house two doors down from
hers so that the police could not take her child away. These tactics did not work and Sara
was given to her father.

At the time of the interview, it had been four years since the court hearing and Gloria
claimed that her daughter was still being abused. “Sara, I have seen her several times
where she has complained saying stuff is wrong with her. Vicki (Sara’s sister) seen her
before Halloween and she had a black eye….he (Sara’s father) said she woke up that
way.” Gloria was still pursuing this case in court and hoped to eventually get her
daughter back. She said, “How can they recommend he have custody when there is
substantiated abuse, how can they recommend custody go to him?” The day that Sara left
her home was a very difficult time for Gloria:
Oh my God, it was horrible. My life completely changed after Sara was gone. I couldn’t take being in the house. I didn’t want to be there because there were so many memories for me. It was just too hard. Everywhere I looked I would see Sara.

Gloria had such a difficult time adjusting to this loss that she contemplated suicide. The birth of her third child, Sage, with her new partner has made a big difference in her mental health and overall outlook, although Sara feels as though she has been replaced by Sage. According to Gloria, Sara often asks why did she kept Sage and not her. When Gloria first gave birth to Sage, Sara asked, “Do you love her more than me?” and Gloria responded, “Heaven’s no! How could I? She just came. I had to say that. What else could I say?” Gloria’s eldest daughter, Vicki, is nineteen years old and is attending college.

Jean was discussed earlier. She had two daughters and one son. Her son voluntarily chose to live with his father, and Jean did not fight this decision. Jean, however, did fight the decision for her daughters to live with their father.

When Jean was in the hospital giving birth to her son, it was Christmas time and her first ex-husband had visitation with their two daughters, Lydia and Aubrey. Steven brought the girls to the hospital to see their new brother, but only for 15 minutes. The next day, Jean was served with papers that said her ex-husband was going for temporary custody of her daughters because Jean was physically unable to care for the girls. Jean claimed that this was not true and that she had doctor’s notes that indicated that she was in perfect health to care for her children. The official custody hearing did not take place until one year after the temporary order was granted. When the case was heard before the
court, Jean claimed that her ex-husband had several witnesses on his side of the
courtroom vouching for his parenting skills and she had only her sister and her attorney.
In the end, her ex-husband was granted sole custody of her daughters because the court
felt that Jean was unable to physically and financially care for her two daughters while
trying to care for a newborn baby. When her husband was granted custody Jean “just
collapsed. I had to be sedated. They were my heart, my everything, my life.”

Like Jean, Anita also had a voluntary custody relinquishment that was previously
discussed. Anita was a 48 year old mother of six. Anita lost custody of her youngest son,
Carson, when the police were called because of allegations of child abuse involving her
older son, Luther. When the police arrived they found that Anita had no food in the
home. She claimed that she had no food because the refrigerator was broken and she was
keeping food at a neighbor’s home.

Based on this incident and her ongoing problems with drugs and alcohol, the police
charged her and children’s services was called to remove the child from the home. A
couple of months after this incident, the case went to court and based on Anita’s past
record of drug and alcohol abuse as well as her child endangerment charge, her ex-
husband was granted custody of their son, Carson. She said that this was “the most
devastating thing I ever experienced. Aside from going to the ground this is worse to
come and take your child, your little baby out.” Anita had basically given up on trying to
get her son back or even trying to visit him on a regular basis.

Sherri, a 45 year old mother of six, lost her son Gordon due to her past history of
child endangerment and her involvement with the justice system. Sherri had a past history
of being in the court system for alcohol charges as well as domestic disputes with her ex-
partners and one of her older sons. Based on these allegations, Gordon’s father, Richard, took Sherri to court for custody. Because he also had a criminal history, physical custody was given to his mother, Gordon’s grandmother, and legal custody was given to Richard. Since the original custody battle, Richard’s mother passed away and he was given sole custody of Gordon. When Gordon started living with his father and grandmother, Sherri said she felt sad: “I missed my baby. I mean I missed him. They took him, you know?” She claimed that if she didn’t have friends and family around her during this time that she probably would have “went berserk.”

Linda was never married to the father of her daughter, Starlene. Linda was a 37 year old mother with 3 children. Linda lost custody of her daughter because of allegations of child endangerment. Linda was at work one day and had her thirteen year old niece babysitting Starlene, who was 2 years old at the time. Her niece was walking the baby in her stroller when the police were called and Linda was accused of child endangering because the thirteen year old was seen as being too young to walk the baby. Shortly after this, she was served custody papers by Starlene’s father. Linda believed that Starlene’s father called the police as part of his strategy to make her look bad in court so that he would be granted custody:

It was a strategy. They knew what they was doing. They had already given me the papers for custody, so when I went to think that I was having just a regular hearing for this custody issue his lawyer immediately went to the judge and asked for an emergency motion to remove her from my home to his home because of the new charges of child endangerment that I just got.
In the end, Starlene’s father was awarded custody. Linda insisted that it was because “he paid a very, very ritzy lawyer and I was pro se (without an attorney).” The day she lost custody of Starlene, Linda was in shock, but eventually felt that it was for the best because she knew that he had more than she did and would be able to meet all of her daughter’s needs. At the same time, Linda said, “But I still didn’t want to lose custody of her.” Linda had a difficult time adjusting to this loss, but eventually had another child, which she said helped her cope.

Trina was a 27 year old mother of three. She had never been married, but all of her children have the same father, something for which she was very proud. Trina had an extremely volatile relationship with her ex-partner, filled with emotional and physical abuse. In 1999, Trina was not feeling well and left her five year old son alone in the house while she ran down the street to a friend’s house to get some medicine. It was one o’clock in the morning and Trina decided to stay at her friend’s house for awhile since her son was in bed. Not long after, her son was wandering in the streets looking for his mother. The police were called and her youngest child was removed from the home. Her two older children were not at home at the time.

Soon after this incident, the school reported suspected child abuse to the police and children’s services. Children services wanted to remove the children from the home that day, but Trina was able to get ahold of her sister, who took the children as Trina was taken to jail. These charges led to a custody hearing in which her ex-partner was given sole custody of the children based on her prior history with children’s services. At first Trina was upset by the decision, but eventually she realized that she needed a break, so it was not as bad as she had first perceived. At the time of the interview, Trina had all of
her children living with her because her ex-partner had never picked them up from an extended visitation that she had during the summer.

The loss of custody proved to be much more traumatic than giving up custody for the women in this study, and was connected to various life stressors. The mothers lost custody because of their involvement with children’s services, drug and alcohol problems, and because their ex-partners kidnapped their children.

For the most part, women who reported feeling good about their decision and as adjusting well to their status of noncustodial mothers were women who had voluntarily relinquished custody. This becomes quite apparent when examining the women who had voluntary versus involuntary situations. These women felt better about their voluntary situations than their involuntary situations. That is not to say that they did not have difficulty with the voluntary situations, because they did. They simply were not as salient for them as the involuntary situations. These situations were much more outside of the women’s control. Having made this distinction, it is important to remember that choice and control are relative experiences and that given another set of circumstances, the women would have made other “choices” in both their voluntary and involuntary relinquishments.

Women who were better adjusted also tended to have occupations in which they earned at least a living wage or they had a higher level of education than the women who were less well adjusted. These women included Debbie, Rachel, Annie, Sherri, Lenore, Wendy and Roberta. Having an education may have influenced women’s experiences because they were better able to process what happened to them and to analyze their situations. Women who had careers may have adjusted better because their career
provided an opportunity for them to distance themselves from the difficult circumstance they were experiencing and provided another source of identity than that of mother.

Involvement in the Family Court System

In order to understand women’s experiences as noncustodial mothers it is important to be aware of their involvement in the family court system. With the exception of one woman, Mo, all of the mothers had some involvement with the family court. Women’s involvement ranged from custody hearings in family court to determine custody arrangements (i.e., visitation and child support) to interactions with children’s services and the police. I first examine the custody arrangements set forth by the family court, followed by a discussion of women’s thoughts and feelings about the family court system.

**Custody arrangement.** Typical custody arrangements involve one parent having sole physical custody of a child and the other parent having what is called standard visitation. Generally speaking, standard visitation allows the noncustodial parent to see their child every other weekend, one day a week, alternating holidays, and for half of the summer. These agreements can and often are modified in court based on the wants and needs of the parents and children (Hawthorne 2000; Seltzer 1994).

More recently, there has been a movement towards the implementation of shared parenting agreements. Shared parenting plans allow for both parents to have access to their children on a 50/50 basis or on a 30/70 basis. Shared parenting plans are seen as positive plans for parents who are able to get along. Shared parenting plans are not recommended for parents who have toxic relationships in which the children would be
exposed to constant bickering between their parents on an ongoing basis (Maccoby and Dornbusch 1996).

Custody agreements also include provisions for child support. If a child is living with one parent, it is expected that the noncustodial parent will pay child support to the custodial parent. This support is calculated differently depending on the individuals’ financial circumstances (Christensen et al. 1990).

Visitation. The majority of the mothers had standard orders of visitation (n=11). A few of the mothers were able to obtain a shared parenting plan for at least one of their children (n=2), and two of the mothers were only permitted supervised visits at the offices of Children’s Services. These supervised visits would take place one day a week for two to three hours. One of the women, Mo, had no visitation policy set up through the courts. When she gave up custody of her children, she obtained the necessary paperwork from the courts, filled it out herself, and had it notarized at a bank.

While these plans were mandated through the court system, they were rarely followed by the mothers and fathers. Some women saw their children more than the original plan stipulated, while others were denied access to their children on a regular basis. The level of access that women were permitted to their children was dependent upon their relationship with their ex-partners. If the women had good relationships, they saw their children more often than women who had adversarial relations with their ex-partners. For example, when Roberta, a 37 year old mother of three, and her ex-husband went to court for their divorce and custody hearing, it was determined that they would have shared parenting. According to this plan, both parents were supposed to have the same rights as parents and to make decisions about how the children were being raised.
The children’s primary residence was to be with their father, but Roberta was supposed to see the children “all of the time.” Roberta claims that this plan was not followed:

He’s (her ex-husband) the one that wrote it and he didn’t follow it at all.

His lawyer wrote it actually. It was about all the kids seeing me and my oldest one never did and he never did anything to encourage her to or if he did I didn’t know it because she never came.

Roberta claimed that the agreement sounded fair on paper, but was not fair in reality.

In contrast to Roberta’s situation, Wendy, a 47 year old mother of two, was granted a standard order of visitation in the courts. At the beginning of the divorce, Wendy acknowledged that her ex-husband and she had real problems with anger and communication. Her ex-husband tried, but did not succeed, in denying her visitation. Over the years, she and her ex-husband have worked out their differences and have a very unique relationship. At one point in time, Wendy did not have a place to live, so she lived with her ex-husband and her two children for a year. Because of the change in their relationship, Wendy and her ex-husband worked out a plan outside of the court system that allowed her to have open visitation with her children. This plan was also successful because of the fact that Wendy lived one street over from her ex-husband.

Similar to Wendy’s situation, Trina, a 27 year old mother of three, was given standardized visitation with her children through the court system but she and her ex-partner created a shared parenting agreement on their own. Trina saw the children for six months and her ex-partner saw them for six months. She stated that they were fed up with the system trying to “play us against each other” and so they took matters into their own hands.
Child support. According to Christensen et al. (1990) noncustodial mothers paid child support less frequently than noncustodial fathers because of their disproportionately low incomes in comparison to men. Out of the sixteen women I interviewed, three were paying child support to their ex-partners. The women who were not paying child support did not pay for financial reasons (i.e., they could not afford to pay or the court did not order it because of their financial circumstances) or because they had come to an agreement with their ex-partners that they did not have to pay support.

It is not surprising that many of the women were unable to pay support. After divorce it has been documented that women’s incomes decrease substantially (Peterson 1996). This was certainly the case for Wendy, Maggie, Mo, and Anita. Wendy was a 47 year old mother of two children. After Wendy’s divorce, she was making minimum wage and just barely getting by. Maggie, a 43 year old mother of three, worked part time at a department store, earning only $8,000 a year and was unable to pay her support. After her divorce, Mo, a 33 year old mother of three, was living with her parents and earning $7 an hour at a bank, leading to her inability to pay support. Anita, a 48 year old mother of six children, had not paid her child support for several years. She said:

But anyway, on these papers that I just recently got from divorce court they sayin’ that I made $17,000 so now I need to go and plus they’re asking me for child support in an amount that is so ridiculous. Where do they think I’m going to get this money? I’ve never got paid child support for not one of my children. Not one. I’m a deadbeat mom as far at they’re concerned (laughs). They want you to pay but you can’t see your child.
Women who never married had financial difficulties similar to divorced women. Trina, Gloria and Linda could not afford to pay their ex-partners child support, even though it was ordered through the court. Linda, a 37 year old mother of three, was fired from her job and has had problems with her health, so she has been unable to find work. Despite her job loss, she was still expected to pay $250 a month in child support. Linda had stopped paying her support. As a result, the child support office has put a lien on her home. Linda laughs as she says:

There’s a lien on my house, my bank account they tried to attach, my driver’s license…I cannot drive because I owe child support unless I give them a lump sum payment just to be able to drive a car.

If you want to get a job, how you gonna get a job with a suspended license? So, there’s a lot of issues.

Sherri, a 45 year old mother of six, and Lenore, a 35 year old mother of three, were never ordered to pay child support because their ex-husbands did not want the money. Similarly, Annie and her ex-husband agreed that because Annie, a 45 year old mother of three, paid for a substantial amount of her son’s needs that she should not have to pay child support. They made sure that this was stipulated in their custody agreement:

I always paid for everything. I always paid for his scout stuff, I always paid for extracurricular things at school. His pictures, his books, supplies, clothes, coats, shoes…you know the whole nine yards. So I told my ex husband, ‘I can’t continue to pay for all of his extracurricular things and his scout things if I have to pay support. And the only person who is going to be hurt from that is Paul. Right? Because I don’t know that you can or will
pay for all of those extra things, so if you’ll make this deal with me then we can work through this. I carry all the benefits, I pay for all the extra hospital bills, I pay for all the extra doctor bills, I pay for all the extracurricular everything as long as I don’t have to pay support because I can’t do that. I mean I don’t make a lot of money. I make enough to get by but I can’t pay for both. As long as you agree to that then I’ll let him stay there which is what he really wants. So that’s the arrangement we made, so no I don’t pay support.’

Debbie, a 42 year old mother of three, and her ex-husband worked out a similar agreement. “We’ve not ever had…we’ve never paid each other child support. We’ve always just provided her whatever she needed. So that was almost 10 years ago that we’ve been divorced because she’s almost 17 right now.” Wendy was originally ordered to pay support, but her ex-husband eventually told the court that he did not expect her to pay support because of her financial situation. Paying child support was never discussed in court for Shirley or Roberta.

Reactions to the court process. In the state of Ohio, child custody is determined by the best interests of the child standard. This standard considers the wishes of the parents and children as well as their living situations that could impact the children’s well-being. The standards considered in the state of Ohio include: 1) the wishes of the parents and children regarding the children’s care; 2) the children’s relationships with parents and siblings; 3) the child’s adjustment to home, school, and community; 4) the mental and physical health of all persons involved in the children’s lives; 5) the parent most likely to facilitate visitation and communication with the noncustodial parent; 6) whether either parent has failed to make child support payments; 7) either parent’s history of child abuse
or neglect; 8) whether a parent has willfully denied a parent visitation; and 9) whether either parent lives or is planning to live outside of the state (Boland 2004).

While these are the criteria set forth in making determinations of child custody and welfare, the mothers in this study argued that the court often failed to follow these guidelines and was, in fact, a corrupt and unfair institution that favored individuals who had money. Mothers who lost custody and mothers who gave up custody viewed the court in this way. While all but two of the women in this study had a negative experience with the family court system, some mothers had a much stronger aversion to the system than others. Women’s experiences were influenced by the amount of time that they had spent dealing with the court system, their financial circumstances, and their level of knowledge regarding systemic processes.

Maggie, a 43 year old mother of three, had spent the last seven years in court, fighting to gain and maintain access to her two youngest children. Because of her lack of money, Maggie had been representing herself in court while her second ex-husband had an attorney by his side the entire time. Maggie was not aware that legal aid was available for mothers like herself.

Maggie was convinced that the presence of a lawyer benefited her ex-husband in the custody outcome. Maggie claimed to have “gotten the shaft from day one” because she could not afford legal representation. Maggie saw the court as unfeeling and not operating in the best interests of the children:

They don’t care about…I think whoever has the money and the poor people walk. This whole system on divorces and everything is just not right. I’m sorry but it’s not. I just wish the court system would change
and stop thinking of people that have the money rather than the people
that don’t have the money. It should be the people who are more concerned
about the children than themselves than their money or whatever. Money
isn’t everything but it seems to be everything nowadays. It (the system)
S-U-C-K-S.

Similar to Maggie, Linda, a 37 year old mother of three, expressed the need for legal
representation. She also attended her custody hearing pro se (representing herself), while
her ex-partner had a “ritzy” lawyer by his side throughout the process:

Dogged. They dogged me. I thought they would try to respect the fact that
I tried to represent myself. They call it pro se when you don’t have any legal
representation. But I learned that they respect the one paying the money.
They really do. They all rub noses and drink tea and crumpets together
anyway. His (her ex-partner) attorney knew the judge and here I am just me.
You know? I really look at it that way. I felt so railroaded. Money talks.
Money talks. If you got money, you get a lawyer, that’s all it takes.

Grace, a 30 year old mother of one son, agreed with both Maggie and Linda. Grace
had given up custody of her son three years ago and wanted to go back to court to try to
regain custody. Grace’s son lived in Florida and she rarely saw him because of the
geographic distance. When she did visit him, she said that he was not doing well at his
father’s home and that his father was abusive. Her son wet the bed, he cried when he had
to go back to his father’s home, and he begged to stay with her. Grace had not started the
process to regain custody because she did not have the money and she claimed that the
system was so backlogged in Florida that her case would not be heard for several years.
She spoke at length about how screwed up the court system was and that it was unfair that she would have to pay $10,000 to do what was right for her child: “I should be able to talk to the judge and tell the judge that my son is being beat with a belt and wets the bed and that he wants to live with me without having to pay all that money.”

When Gloria went to court for her divorce and custody hearing, she spent so much money that she had to file for bankruptcy: “Coincidentally the divorce was finalized when I didn’t have any more money. That’s when my lawyer decided he was done. The only money I had was what was in my house. But that’s when everything ended. When my money ran out.” Two of the women that I interviewed, Jean and Gloria, spent over $20,000 each trying to win their custody disputes. Roberta understood that custody battles could be very costly, so she did not try to fight her ex-husband when he took her to court for full custody of her three daughters. She said, “I would have fought it but like I said, I didn’t have a lot of money and custody battles cost thousands of dollars and I didn’t have the money.”

Anita, a 48 year old mother of six children, had been involved with the court system for several years. Not only had she been in court, but she had also been involved with children’s services. In her experience, the system discriminated against those individuals who did not have money, failing to follow the best interests of the children involved:

Once you get into the system they just peck away at you. ‘Till there’s nothing left. You know the legal system is so messed up, is so corrupt. It’s just ridiculous. It’s corrupt and you don’t see it and they takin these people’s
children and putting them in places where they don’t belong. And that’s children’s services and they need to stop it. They need to stop it. Some children do need help but all of them, most of them need to be reunited with their family. They talk about family unity. That is not their agenda. I do not see it. All I seen is them tear apart families. Separate them. Put this child here and this child there. They took my child and gave him to his drug addict dad.

Gloria, a 44 year old mother of three daughters, echoed Anita’s sentiments, regarding the system as corrupt and not operating in the child’s best interests. Gloria’s ex-partner was granted custody of her six year old daughter despite the fact that Gloria had substantiated reports from doctors and counselors that her daughter was being physically and sexually abused by her father. When the case went to court, Gloria lost custody because she was denying her ex-partner visitation to protect her daughter. During the court proceedings, the allegations of abuse were never entered as evidence because “the papers mysteriously disappeared.” Gloria told the court that she had copies of the papers that documented the abuse, and the court told her they did not want to see them, that “he’s (her ex-partner) changed. He’s gone to counseling and he’s changed.” Gloria insisted that the system was “about politics, not fairness. It’s not in the best interests of the child.”

Other women also talked about activities that their ex-partners were involved in that should have labeled them as unfit parents in the court, yet this information was not admitted because the men had attorneys that were able to get this evidence dismissed. For example, Wendy, a 47 year old mother of two, lost custody of her two children because of her cocaine habit. Yet, her ex-husband was using cocaine and was selling methadone.
This was documented by the police and the FBI, but was not admitted into the court hearing. Similar to this, Lenore’s ex-husband was arrested for possession of 7 kilograms of cocaine and spent one night in jail. Other than that, he did no time because he had information on some “dirty cops.” This was also not admitted into the custody hearing.

Other children were regularly put into custody of a father who had abused their mother. Anita’s ex-husband had been arrested several times for abusing her during their relationship, one time while she was pregnant with her youngest son Carson. Both Sherri, a 45 year old mother of six, and Trina, a 27 year old mother of three, had ex-partners who physically abused them as well. Both women had also pressed charges for these attacks. Lenore filed three domestic violence charges against her ex-husband while they were married. Despite the arrests for domestic abuse, these men still received custody of their children.

Some of the women indicated that if they had been more knowledgeable about the system that they probably would have been more successful. Linda, a 37 year old mother of three children, spoke of the need for an attorney not only to win the custody case, but also to understand the bureaucratic process of the system:

If I had to do it over again I would find some kind of…I would keep putting the court hearing off until I had a lawyer. Because a lawyer would have informed me of my rights and what was in my best interests even as far as if they made the decision to let him have her they would have been there to help spell out how it was going to be.

Anita, a 48 year old mother of six children, felt that because she did not understand the court process that she was taken advantage of: “If you don’t know then they can do
whatever they want to you. And that’s what they did.” According to Gloria, a 44 year old
mother of three daughters, if an individual has a low income, they can be provided an
attorney through the family court. None of the other women that I talked to were aware of
this provision, and they suffered because of this lack of knowledge. At the time of her
interview, Shirley, a 36 year old mother of two daughters, had court papers that needed to
be filled out in order to get visitation with her second daughter. Shirley discussed her
inability to understand the paperwork, saying she would have benefited from access to an
attorney.

Summary

Giving up or losing custody has proven to be a traumatic life event for the women in
this study. Women who gave up custody tended to feel better about their decision and to
adjust to the status of noncustodial mother better than mothers who lost custody. Yet,
giving up custody was still not perceived as freely chosen by these women.

Whether women gave up or lost custody, all of them (except Mo) had been in the
court system in order to settle the custody arrangement, including child support and
visitation. The majority of these plans involved mothers having standard orders of
visitation in which they got to see their children every other weekend, one night a week,
and for half the summer. While custody arrangements were implemented through the
court system, they were not always followed by the mothers and fathers. If mothers and
fathers had congenial relations the fathers were more likely to give mothers greater
access to their children than the visitation plans required. Only three of the women paid
child support, either because they could not afford to pay support or because the fathers
told the court that they did not want support.
The women’s involvement in the court system was perceived in a negative manner. Mothers saw the system as catering to those individuals who had money and could afford to pay attorneys. Some of the women had negative experiences simply because they did not understand the court processes and again, were unable to afford an attorney to help them through the process. The mothers also saw the system as corrupt and unfair, often times not following the best interests of the children standard. In the next chapter, I will explore how the women’s lives changed as they made the transition from custodial to noncustodial mothers.
CHAPTER V
SHIFTS IN MOTHERING

The stories of the women in this study demonstrate the difficulty that noncustodial mothers have attempting to live up to contemporary standards of mothering. Despite difficulties related to visitation, communication, and finances, however, the majority of the mothers worked very hard to implement intensive mothering strategies with their children. In this chapter, I will discuss the transition from custodial to noncustodial mothering. The focus of this chapter will be on changes that noncustodial mothers go through as they become noncustodial parents and how those changes affect how the women see themselves as mothers.

It is important to note that these women’s stories are based on their perceptions of what they did as custodial mothers and what they currently do as noncustodial mothers. As the mothers discussed their perceptions of themselves as custodial mothers, they discussed their mothering role, focusing attention on their mothering practices. When discussing themselves as noncustodial mothers, the women talked about their level of contact with their children as well as how much control they had over their children’s lives. They also discussed their mothering role and their experiences of stigmatization as deviant mothers (see Appendix J for a detailed model of these themes).
Custodial Mothering

Characteristics of Mothers and the Mothering Role. The sixteen mothers interviewed had all been or were currently custodial parents to one or more of their children. Thus, they had experienced mothering on a full time basis, all had participated in the mothering role. According to Brown and Foye (1982), a role is socially constructed and denotes the activities and attitudes that correspond with a given status position. From their experiences as custodial mothers, the women described the role of mother in ways that correspond with the “intensive mothering” model (Hays 1996).

All of the women felt that mothers should be caring, nurturing, patient women who make sacrifices for their children. It is for this reason, according to Gloria, a 44 year old mother of three daughters, that children should be with their mothers on a full time basis:

Fathers don’t have a lot of patience with children. They really don’t. They’re just different than we are. We’re more loving and nurturing and caring people. We teach them how to feel. They pick up what we (mothers) do. Children need their mothers. A mother is there for her children until the day she dies. A mother puts her life on the line for her children.

Several other mothers echoed Gloria’s sentiments. According to Grace, a 30 year old mother of one son, mothers are “nurturing.” Mothers are “there when times get tough. I’ve always thought fathers are supposed to be more stern and mothers are supposed to be there to catch them when they think it’s the end of the world. You know?” Roberta, a mother of three daughters, felt that mothers should be, “loving, patient, and kind.” Both Maggie, a mother of three sons, and Anita, a mother of six children, felt that mothers
should be “understanding.” They should give “guidance.” A mother should always, “Think of their child first and not be selfish.”

The mothers connected being a “good” mother with specific caregiving responsibilities. Being a mother was not just about being a nurturing, loving person, but also about fulfilling your child’s needs. Mothering responsibilities were exhausting; they included protecting your children, buying things for children, being involved in children’s education and extra curricular activities, being a disciplinarian, meeting their basic needs (e.g. food, shelter), shaping their morality, giving them advice, and entertaining children. In a nutshell, according to the women I interviewed, a mother does “everything” for her children, and is “there full time.”

All sixteen of the mothers discussed these responsibilities at length. For example, Grace, a 30 year old mother of one son, felt being a mother was just like “being a wife”:

You’re taking care of things. You pack lunches and you get up with them in the morning and you make sure you get up in a good mood with them so you can send them off in a good mood. You don’t wake up grumpy and you know start them off on a bad note or…going for bike rides, going to the park, going to museums, educating them, sitting down and reading books with them, saying prayers, going to church. Getting involved with sports. Being a mother, being a part of it as a mother. Bringing pizza or whatever. All the things that mothers are supposed to do. That’s what a mom is supposed to be.

Sherri, a 45 year old mother of six children, also discussed an all encompassing mothering role:
Be there for your child, provide…make sure they have…I don’t have no
definition for it because if you’re a good mother, you know. There’s just
something that’s within the mother and child. Good mothers…you’re home
and give direction, guide them, keep them clean, they eat and send them
to school. But I think it consists of more than that with each child or the
individual mother and child.

Lenore, a mother of three children, claimed to do “everything” for her children:
I cooked for them. If they wanted eggs for breakfast I’d cook eggs. They had
a full course dinner. I always made good dinners. In the summer we always
went to the beach, I studied with them. They knew all the presidents…they
knew all the presidents because I studied with them…they were always learning
so, I was a good mom.

All of the mothers modified their lives to accommodate the responsibilities that came
with motherhood. In fact, many of the mothers quit their full time jobs and school in
order to dedicate their time to mothering on a full time basis. These modifications
allowed the mothers to fulfill the cultural mandates of motherhood, sacrificing their
wants and needs for those of their children. For example, Roberta, mother of three
daughters, worked only part time so that she could spend the majority of her time with
her children. Wendy, a mother of two children, quit her job to stay at home full time
when she had her children. Prior to having her children, Annie, a mother of three
children, was attending college. When she got pregnant she stopped going to school
because she felt her children were more important than her education. The other women
told similar stories of sacrifices made for the sake of their children.
Some of the mothers were happy about the modifications made to their lives while others were dissatisfied with the lives that they felt they were forced to lead because they became mothers. Trina, a 27 year old mother of three children, claimed that she “put a lot of stuff on hold to be there for them (her children). That’s why I really don’t have an initial career.” Trina was angry when she found out that she was pregnant. She was in the eleventh grade, and did not want the baby:

My mom made me have it. I really didn’t want the baby. I did not. I was about to be in the twelfth grade. I found out the year I was in eleventh grade.

So I was pregnant my whole eleventh grade year. My twelfth grade year I had already made plans when I graduated I was going to Atlanta. This is what I was planning on doing. I was going to go to sign up for school in Atlanta and I was going to start my life there. I felt like I gave up a lot.

With her first two children, Debbie, a mother of three daughters, felt that she was too young to be a mother. She was divorced from her children’s father at the age of 21, and she felt that her freedom was taken away because she was solely responsible for taking care of the children:

I didn’t enjoy motherhood with Jeannette and Jean-Anne. I love them. I mean I love my children to death, don’t misunderstand me but…you know I just felt really…I felt a lot of resentment. I went right from high school to motherhood so I didn’t have a lot of freedom to figure out who I was.

While Roberta, a mother of three daughters, stated that she, “liked it (motherhood) pretty much,” she acknowledged that sometimes you do not like being a mother because it is a lot of work. She felt like all of the work fell on her because her husband worked evenings.
and she really needed more help with the home and children. Annie, a mother of three children, made a similar statement, claiming that she did the majority of the work both inside and outside of the home, leaving her disenchanted with both her marriage and motherhood.

Other mothers loved being full time mothers. Wendy, a 47 year old mother of three, claimed that she liked being a mother and felt lucky that she was able to stay at home with her children. Both Lenore, a 35 year old mother of three, and Mo, a 33 year old mother of four, said that they, “loved being a mom” when they had custody of their children. Lenore went as far as to say that she loved being a mother so much that she did not want to work. She said: “I always wanted to be a stay at home mom and just raise my kids the right way. The biblical way.”

Despite whether or not mothers were happy with the adjustments that they made to their lives for their children, all of the women continued to comply with culturally mandated expectations of motherhood as custodial parents, regardless of race or social class. Thus, the ideology of the “good” mother was clearly internalized by the women in this study. One woman, Debbie, a mother of three children, noted society’s role in defining what a good mother was or should be while other mothers cited specific individuals who had shaped their definition of what a mother should be. For example, Grace, a 30 year old mother of one son, did not see her own mother as an adequate parent and said that she learned about what kind of mother she wanted to be from other people’s mothers: “I’d have to say I learned a lot from what I lacked as a child. What I thought things were supposed to be or what I saw at other people’s homes is what I didn’t have in mine. It changed me in…that’s how I wanted to be as a mom.” Maggie, a mother of three
sons, noted her family’s role in shaping her ideas about mothering: “I was brought up to think of my children first before me. I’m not selfish. Everything goes for my children first.” Maggie felt that her mom was an excellent role model as a mother: “She was excellent. She was always there. She understood.” Mo, a mother of four children, also used her mother as a standard for being a good mother, stating that she was always there for her with an open heart and an open mind.

**Noncustodial Mothering**

As women transitioned into the status of noncustodial parent, they acknowledged changes that occurred for them as mothers. The majority of the women in this study had standard orders of visitation which meant that they were able to see their children every other weekend and once a week. This meant that the women had less contact with their children and therefore less control over their children’s lives than they did as custodial parents. Because of the lack of contact with their children, their mothering role changed. In this new mothering role, their experiences with others (e.g. family, friends, acquaintances) also changed. These changes affected how the women saw and felt about themselves as mothers as well as whether or not they accommodated or resisted dominant expectations of motherhood.

**Maintaining contact and control.** For the mothers in this study, there was a connection between the amount of contact that the women had with their children and the level of control that the mothers felt that they had over their children’s lives. Even though most custody arrangements were mandated in family court, these arrangements were rarely followed by the mothers and fathers. Some women saw their children more than the original plan stipulated, while others were denied access to their children on a regular
basis. Thus, the ability to maintain contact and control was dependent upon the relationships that the women had with the father of their children. If the women had good relationships, they saw their children more often and had more decision making power than women who had adversarial relations with the fathers. In essence, the fathers, as well as anyone else who might be connected to the children on a full time basis (e.g., new wives, girlfriends, family as custodial caregivers), became gatekeepers who were able to deny the women access to and control over their children on a regular basis.

The most effective way to maintain contact and control over children was through physical visitation. When the mothers were unable to maintain physical visitation, because of their schedules or due to denials of visitation by custodial caregivers, they would call their children on the phone. Many women also talked about corresponding with their children in letters or online.

**Physical visitation.** When the mothers saw their children, they claimed to be involved in quality activities (e.g., taking to doctor’s appointments, helping with homework, doing hands on activities). In other words, the women participated in activities that were instrumental to the children’s growth and well-being as opposed to just activities done for the purpose of entertainment. They did not fit the “Disneyland dad” label that is often placed on noncustodial fathers (see Hetherington 1993). Annie, a 45 year old mother of three children, specifically alluded to this in her discussion of what she and her son would do when she had visitation:

We mostly just hang out. Um, one of the things that annoyed me when I first got divorced was that my ex husband…I used to call him the entertainment director…because every weekend he would take them to some
thing. Some…and I couldn’t afford to do it. So it rather annoyed me. So one of the things that I want is just sort of the normal, the everyday. And yes we do things sometimes but we also do nothing. We just hang out, watch TV, play cards. He’s (her son Paul) a big thinker so we talk about the craziest things from politics to um, philosophy, to religion…”

Roberta, a 37 year old mother of three children, also had quality visitation with her daughters. She saw her youngest two children 2-3 times a week and would also go to all of their extra curricular activities. Not only would Roberta attend her children’s activities, she would also be the parent to drive the children to and from these activities. Roberta was also very involved in taking her children to doctor’s appointments. In fact she stated that she felt that she did more of these types of activities now than when she was a custodial parent.

Shirley, a 36 year old mother of two, saw her oldest daughter quite frequently both during the week and on weekends. When she had her daughter they:

Rode bikes and went for walks and did drawing together. I took her to gymnastics practice at the Y in our community. She takes gymnastics. I just taught her how to do a cartwheel. She watches TV, I take her swimming. We play games together, and we play catch and we play Frisbee and we do nails and hair.

Wendy, a 47 year old mother of two children, also visited with her children frequently. She said: “They’re over here a lot. Every weekend and in the summer and they’re over here in the evenings.” When her children would visit, Wendy did activities with them at home.
Maggie, a 43 year old mother of three sons, did not get to see her children as frequently, but when she did see them they participated in activities at home as well: “When they’re here we’re hanging out riding bikes or we’re out catching balls or we go to the park, we roller blade. We are always doing something together.” Maggie also talked about helping her children with their homework when they visited: “On Sunday Kyle has to do one chapter. It’s mandatory. That is a routine. Because he’s doing bad in reading. And Lance has got to…I make a list of words for him and he’s got to write them because he’s doing bad on his N’s.”

Because of her infrequent visits with her daughter, Linda, a 37 year old mother of three children, felt that it was necessary to hold her daughter a lot when she saw her. She also talked about spending time together, playing games, writing, coloring, and taking walks. She said, “It was nothing major. There’s not too much that we do but we spend a lot of time together.”

While the women talked about the importance of spending time doing quality activities with their children, oftentimes these were the only activities that the women could afford to participate in with their children because of their precarious financial situation. Wendy, a mother of two children, talked about the financial difficulties that single mothers experience:

Money is always an issue for a single person with two kids and just trying to get by. Sometimes its frustrating to not have the money to do the things you want to do. But I’m doing better than some people I know so I try to remind myself and be thankful. Yeah. We do volunteer work. Because they do have
so much stuff and so much is given to them I thought this would be a good chance for them to give.

Jean, a 42 year old mother of three children, talked about her financial difficulties as well, stating that when she saw her son, they participated in activities that did not cost any money: “I’ve been so financially strapped that it’s been hard. We do stuff at home.”

Mothers who lived far distances from their children had more difficulties with physical visitation. These women were more likely to participate in leisure activities than women who were in close proximity to their children. Oftentimes these activities were quite costly for the mothers, but they continued to participate in the activities despite the financial costs. For example, Rachel, a 32 year old mother of two children, lived in Ohio and her daughter lived in Virginia. Because of the geographic distance, she would try to go to Virginia for a long weekend at least every other month to see her daughter. During these weekends, Rachel would rent a hotel room that had an indoor pool for her daughter to use. Rachel acknowledged how expensive these weekends could be:

It’s expensive. You know for me to go down there for a long weekend I have to stay in a hotel and I choose to stay in a hotel that has an indoor pool because the town’s pretty small and there’s not much to do there so I want the kids to have a good time. I want it to be a family thing. For me to go down there for a weekend I drop $500 on the weekend. And that’s if I don’t buy them toys or clothes or you know. You’ve got to eat out every meal. So it’s very expensive. It’s not something I can do every weekend or every month. So I kind of set aside to do that.
Rachel acknowledged the time, effort, and money that she had to put into seeing her daughter, and planned to continue these efforts. She stated that the effort and money spent was a product of the guilt that she felt because she could not be with her daughter on a full time basis.

Grace, a 30 year old mother of one son, also was unable to see her son as frequently as she would have liked to because he lived in Florida. She would usually see him for a month in the summer and during this time would make sure that he was able to participate in a lot of extra curricular activities, which coincidentally, cost her a lot of money as well. These mothers’ experiences were similar to Stewart’s (1999) finding that parents who lived further from their children were less likely to see their children and when they did see their children were more likely to participate in leisure activities.

Other mothers did not have as much geographic distance between them as Rachel and Grace, but still had a difficult time seeing their children. For example, Sherri’s son lived two hours away from her, but she had no driver’s license so she only got to see him when she had the money to take a bus to his father’s home for visits. Anita’s son lived one hour away, but she also did not have transportation to go and visit with her son.

**Phone calls and letters.** When mothers were unable to physically see their children, they attempted to maintain contact by phoning their children and by writing them letters. Annie, a mother of three children, would talk to her son at least once a week, sometimes every day. Roberta, a mother of three daughters, also maintained contact by talking to her children frequently on the phone. Wendy, a mother of two children, would call her children everyday. In fact, she said that after work, she would get home and the first thing she would do was call her children to see how they were doing. Jean, a mother of three
children, talked to her son regularly on the phone and used “instant messaging” on the computer to communicate. Both of her daughters were older than 18 at the time of the interview, so she did not mention her communication with her daughters.

Both Rachel and Grace would try to talk to their children at least once a week. Grace also attempted to maintain contact with her son by mailing him letters: “I mail him letters and pictures. I have pictures I need to send him now actually. We had portraits taken before he left. I mail him cards, Easter baskets, Christmas, birthday, notes in between just to say hi.”

Similar to physical visitation, some women were able to communicate by phone with their children more frequently because they lived in the same town. Thus, the women did not have to pay long distance charges to speak with their children like the women whose children lived in different states. Women who spoke frequently to their children also tended to have good relationships with the individuals who had control of their children’s lives (e.g., fathers, stepparents, grandparents).

The gatekeepers. Women who had regular contact with their children tended to feel that they had some level of decision making power where their children were concerned. Again, the level of contact was related to their custody arrangement and the types of relationship that the women had with their ex partners and other individuals who had control over their children’s lives.

Two women had unique situations. Because they had been involved with Children’s Services Board (CSB), they were forced to have supervised visitation once a week with their children that lasted for about 3 hours. In this situation, control was taken away from them not only by their ex partners, but also by the social service agency. For example,
Gloria, a 44 year old mother of three daughters, had an ex partner who had custody of their daughter and Gloria was only able to see her daughter once a week at CSB for about three hours. She felt that she had very little control over her child’s life because she could not see her daughter whenever she wanted to and because her ex partner made all of the decisions regarding their child’s well being. Gloria was particularly angry about one incident that occurred around Christmastime. She had purchased toys for her daughter and took them to supervised visitation. When her ex partner came to pick up their daughter from the visit, he refused to take the toys home. There was nothing that Gloria could do to make him take the gifts. This was one key incident in which Gloria felt that her power and control had been removed. Gloria argued that noncustodial parents, whether mothers or fathers, have no power. She stated, “He (her ex partner) gets to make all the decisions, everything. And that’s not right. A noncustodial parent should have just as much access to that child as the custodial moms or dads.”

Despite the roadblocks put in front of her by her ex partner and CSB, Gloria still tried to maintain some level of control over her daughter by making contact with her daughter’s school. This was an unsuccessful attempt because the school had only sent her one piece of information for the entire school year. Like Gloria, Anita, a 48 year old mother, was also involved with CSB and had supervised visitation. However, Anita gave up on seeing her child. She was so angry about being told when she could see her child that she quit going to visitation:

I didn’t want to visit them at…for no….I did go and visit them for awhile but I decided that it was too much for me. It was too much for my mental state and for me it was too much. It was too depressing and I couldn’t handle
it. To go and see my baby for an hour and not try and take him. You know?

You know that’s not…you go see your baby for an hour a week. I don’t really have any rights with my own child. My rights had been destroyed and tromped on. Used like a dishrag.

The majority of the women (n=14) had to communicate with ex partners, and to a lesser degree, other family members as custodial caregivers (n=3). Some women had amicable relationships with these individuals while others had very volatile connections. Regardless of whether or not the women got along with ex partners and family, they felt that they did not have as much control over their children’s lives as they did when they were custodial parents. Women who were able to maintain contact with their children, however, did feel more in control than those who were being denied visitation and communication.

Relationships with gatekeepers (ex partners, family) were complex. Many women talked about establishing relationships with their ex partners and family as a process. When relationships were first terminated, and the women relinquished custody, the women and these gatekeepers did not get along. During this time, ex partners and family would deny mothers visitation, the ability to talk on the phone with their children, and contact through the mail. This also meant that mothers had very little say in decisions being made in their children’s lives.

Rachel, a 32 year old mother, and her ex husband had been divorced for eleven years and still did not get along. Rachel felt that their communication was poor because her ex husband had tried to reconcile their relationship several years ago and she had turned him down. Because of his anger toward her, he talked negatively to their daughter about
Rachel. When her daughter was very young, her ex husband went as far as to tell her that Rachel was her aunt, not her mother. Rachel had to prove to her daughter through photographs that she really was her mother.

Rachel felt that she had no decision making power at all where her daughter was concerned. All decisions were made by her ex husband and his new wife:

They don’t tell me of any school functions. If there’s something going on the only way I hear of it is from Jessie if she happens to mention it.
They don’t invite me to anything. Never. She graduated from fifth grade and she’s going to a new school. They never once mentioned it. They never once invited me.”

This lack of involvement made Rachel feel disconnected from her daughter’s life. Her ex husband regularly told her: “You’re not part of her everyday life. We don’t even mention your name.” Rachel stated that she believed her ex husband made an effort to exclude her from her child’s life because “that’s the way that he wanted it to be.” In an attempt to gain some control, Rachel visited her daughter’s school and requested that information be sent home to her regarding her daughter’s progress. She went to the front desk and said:

By law I can receive a copy of my daughter’s report card and I can receive a copy of her school schedule. And they said, ‘oh yes, Mrs. Smith, we’ll do that.’ I’ve never seen it. So they (her ex husband and his wife) must have called him and he must have said I don’t want her to get that information.

Mo, a 33 year old mother, felt that she had been completely cut out of her children’s lives. Mo’s ex husband would not give her an address or phone number so that she might
connect with her children. Not only had she not seen her children for almost a year, she also felt that she had no power over what was happening in their lives.

Grace, who had one son, was in agreement with Rachel and Mo. She felt that she had no decision making power where her son was concerned. She had attempted to get information from her son’s school, but her ex husband put only himself down as the person who was allowed to see information regarding the child. Unlike Rachel, however, Grace felt that she and her ex husband had a relatively good relationship. The problem was her ex husband’s new wife:

About the only person that I have a problem with since the divorce, or during the divorce was the girl he got engaged with while we were still going through our divorce. I had problems with her. She doesn’t let him handle…him and I can’t handle our business together. She has to handle it and it’s not really her…in my eyes it’s not really her place to handle it, you know what I mean? I didn’t marry her or have children with her. She shouldn’t have the right to intervene with what he and I choose for our child.

Because of her ex husband’s new wife, Grace was not permitted to talk to her ex husband on the phone about their son and was oftentimes not permitted time on the phone with her son. Lenore, a mother with three children, also had problems with her ex husband’s new wife. The stepmother regularly tried to keep Lenore from talking to and seeing her children: “Me and him are ok. We’ve always been ok. It’s her. So he has to act different when she’s around so she don’t get mad.”
Trina, a 27 year old mother of three, had experienced a similar situation with her ex partner’s new girlfriend. Trina was extremely angry that the girlfriend was making decisions about her children and that she was being cut out of her children’s lives by this new woman. Trina felt that her ex partner’s girlfriend was trying to take her place:

You’re not their mom so why you acting like that? When he (her ex partner) let me into their house they had a family picture up of him and my kids and this bitch. So I told him, you need to take that down because that’s not their mom. I fair warned him. They let me back in the house by myself and I drew a mustache on that mother fucker so they couldn’t put it back up. I bet you don’t have no more pictures of her ass with my kids back up on the wall. That’s not their mama!

Trina had been in several disputes with the girlfriend over decisions that she was making about Trina’s children. For example, Trina expressed anger that her ex partner’s girlfriend did not take care of her daughter’s hair the way that she would have if she were there on a full time basis. Trina was also angry because her children were restricted to certain rooms in their father’s home. In her home they were allowed to be in any room that they chose.

Linda, who had lost custody of her daugther, had an interesting experience with loss of control. Her ex partner had hired a babysitter for their daughter and the babysitter started to take control of Linda’s daughter’s life, making important decisions. The babysitter even convinced Linda’s ex partner to stop letting Linda see and talk to her daughter. Linda felt she had no control over this situation: “He’s (her ex partner) going to make her decisions for her because he’s with her. I feel like my hands are tied.”
Over time, however, many relationships that started off on a negative note improved. For example, Roberta’s relationship with her ex partner was very negative right after their divorce. While Roberta saw her youngest two daughters regularly, her ex husband never encouraged her oldest daughter to visit with Roberta. After a couple of years, the relationship became more amicable. Roberta stated that her ex husband would call her and ask for her opinion about decisions he was making regarding their daughters. Unfortunately, Roberta was unable to repair the damage between herself and her eldest daughter.

Annie, a mother who had given up custody of two of her three children, also stated that she and her ex husband did not get along at first, but over time they began to realize that their relationship was not about them, but about their children. So they got along and made decisions together. When she and her ex husband went to court to change custody of their son Paul, Annie said: “Frankly the magistrate who saw the case was very complimentary. She said, ‘I wish you guys would teach a class on how to get along.’” Because she and her ex husband were able to tolerate one another, Annie was able to be involved in Paul’s education, and would talk to his father about decisions regarding Paul on a regular basis.

Similar to Annie, Wendy, a mother of two children, and her ex husband had a rocky relationship after their divorce. Wendy’s ex husband had her followed by a private detective for a year after the divorce, trying to catch her doing something illegal so that he could keep her children from her. After a couple of years, the two became friendlier. At the time of the interview, Wendy lived one street over from her ex husband and children and she saw them frequently and made decisions regarding the children with her
ex husband: “He’ll ask my opinion, if my son wants to go somewhere he’ll ask if I think he should go. If I’m left out of anything I feel like it’s the school. I’m left out of the loop a little bit because I’m just not there to help them with their homework because of my work schedule.”

Shirley, a mother of two daughters, had a good relationship with her ex partner, and stated that he would call her regarding decisions about their daughter: “He’s called me and asked me about certain things. What do you think I should do about this or that. Do you think it would be ok if she did this. Girl stuff.” Shirley’s sister, who had custody of her youngest daughter, was a different story. Shirley was not permitted to see her daughter or talk to her daughter at all. Shirley claimed that her sister: “Wishes I were dead.” So Shirley has not seen her youngest daughter for several years and has no decision making power. Similarly, Sherri’s sister also had custody of two of her sons at one point in time. When her sister had custody, Sherri, a 45 year old mother was denied access to her children and control over her children’s lives: “All I know is that she kept on tellin’ me that I couldn’t see my children that she was goin’ to do this…”.

Even though some ex partners get along well, they do still run into power struggles. For example, Debbie, a mother of three daughters, felt that she and her ex husband communicated well about their daughter. Yet, Debbie acknowledged that having power and control over your children is a tricky issue when you are the noncustodial parent, despite how much contact you have with the child. When Debbie and her ex husband divorced, Debbie made sure that in the custody agreement it was stated that she could see or talk to her daughter whenever she wanted: “I kind of put that clause in there and that was a big help because then that way it took away the control factor from the other parent...”
to say she could or couldn’t see me because it wasn’t my turn or my time or whatever.”

In this way, Debbie was able to maintain some level of control over when she could see her daughter. Even so, her ex husband still made the majority of the decisions regarding their daughter. Debbie felt that even though she got to see her child, she did not really have control over decisions that were being made regarding her daughter’s life. When she would try to talk to her ex husband about decisions related to her daughter he would say, “Well I’m the custodial parent. So…you don’t have anything to say about it.”

Past research on visitation has addressed the quantity of visitation that women had with their children. Findings indicated that noncustodial mothers tended to have more visits with their children than noncustodial fathers (Arditti and Madden-Derdich 1993; Arditti 1995). These studies, however, failed to discuss the connection between gatekeepers and visitation. These findings have demonstrated that women only have regular visitation if they are on good terms with their children’s custodial caregivers.

Overall, having positive relationships with the gatekeepers of their children benefited the women. Not only were they able to see the children more, they were also able to make decisions regarding their children’s lives, which helped the women to feel connected to the mothering role. Being at the mercy of these individuals, however, did not sit well with the mothers. The women stated that they were still the children’s mothers, and they really did not feel that they should have to answer to anyone about when they saw their child and about decisions regarding the children. Yet they knew that given their situation, they had to “play the game” if they wanted to maintain relationships with their children.
The Mothering Role

Despite the fact that many women were able to see their children relatively frequently, they still did not have as much contact with their children as they did when they were custodial parents. While some mothers had more success maintaining the mothering role than others, it was inevitable that their lives as mothers changed to some degree. Roberta, a 37 year old mother of three, talked about her changing responsibilities as a noncustodial mother:

Well it’s kind of different. I don’t know. I think it’s a little different if you’re a parent and you have to call them on the phone. I don’t do as much because they’re not here every night so I don’t cook every night. It doesn’t feel like the day to day things are so demanding like the cooking and the shopping. You’re not there so you don’t know what’s going on. And sometimes you’ll call and no one’s there and you wonder where everyone is and what they’re doing.

As a noncustodial parent, Debbie also felt that her role as mother was different from when she had custody of her daughter:

It’s more like you’re more like the novelty parent when you’re not the custodial parent. You’re the one they go over and have fun with and you do fun things and then they leave. You don’t have to deal so much with the day to day reality attitude, you know, that kind of thing.

Unlike these two women, Shirley was uncertain about what her role as a mother was since her daughter did not live with her: “What position do I really play? What is my role? I don’t know, you know?”
As the mothers experienced changes in the mothering role, they did one of two things. Most mothers (n=11) attempted to accommodate cultural expectations of motherhood by maintaining intensive mothering strategies. A few mothers (n=5) resisted these definitions and expectations related to the mothering role. Table 5.1 provides a summary of which mothers were resisters and which were accommodators as well as the voluntary or involuntary nature of the relinquishment.

Table 5.1: The Mothering Role: Relinquishment of Custody in Relationship to Accommodation and Resistance of Intensive Mothering Standards

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<td>Debbie, Anita, Sherri,</td>
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<td>Maggie, Jean</td>
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Resistant mothers. Five of the mothers in this study fell into the category of resistant mothers. Resistant mothers were mothers who rejected dominant definitions and expectations of motherhood. These mothers did not attempt to modify their mothering role to fit the dominant expectations of motherhood. Instead, they either actively or passively resisted cultural expectations of motherhood. Active resisters were mothers who recognized dominant expectations of motherhood and chose to resist these definitions by redefining their mothering role in some way. Passive resisters were women who only resisted dominant expectations of motherhood because they felt that they could not meet the cultural expectation of motherhood.
Debbie, a mother of three daughters, actively rejected societal definitions of mothering because she felt they were limiting, leading women to feel guilty if they could not accommodate these expectations:

I think that’s something that’s put upon you by society. Beliefs of what a mother should be or shouldn’t be, you know? And there are lots of different circumstances of why a mother wouldn’t have her children. It’s not because you’re a bad mother or you’re not a good enough mother. It’s just because the world is changing and your children might be in a better place. Sometimes I think we expect ourselves to be perfect and then when we’re not we really have a lot of guilt and shame that we didn’t do a good job as a mother. And I’m coming to a point in my life where I’m realizing that it’s just ok and you don’t have to be perfect to be a mother and a mother to me should just, I think the most important thing a mother can give their child is unconditional love.

As a custodial parent, Debbie participated in intensive mothering tactics, purchasing items regularly for her daughter. When her daughter moved in with her father, Debbie did not feel that she should still have to provide the “extras” for her daughter:

When she left and moved in with her dad, at that time I was paying for her car insurance. She had a cell phone, a phone in her bedroom…I mean I was paying all kinds of stuff for her. And I said well if you want to go live with your dad, that’s ok, and it’s not a punishment, but I’m not paying $350 a month for car insurance a month for you and I’m not paying for your phone anymore. You know? And sorry, but that’s the way it goes. And it wasn’t in a retaliation kind of thing I just felt like I wasn’t going to
be a doormat, you know? She was kind of mad at me at first, but oh well.
She doesn’t live in my house. Why should I feel obligated to provide her
the things that I would feel obligated to if she did live here? You know?

Linda, who had lost custody of her daughter, passively rejected the cultural mandates
of motherhood because she understood that she was unable to fulfill them due to the fact
that she did not see her daughter on a regular basis. Linda also rejected these expectations
because she could not afford to participate in intensive mothering strategies. Linda’s ex
partner spent a lot of money on their daughter, buying her everything that she wanted.
Linda felt that this was the wrong way to raise her daughter. In this way, she rejected the
intensive mothering tactic that encourages mothers to spend massive amounts of money
on their children:

All these material things that he gives her. But I give her love. I know he
loves her too but he’s on a material kick and that’s why it was easy for
him to be judgmental of me because I would go with the basics really.
I couldn’t afford to really go out to Sears and the malls and buy
expensive $40 outfits for a child that’s going to outgrow it.

Linda had also come to terms emotionally with the fact that her daughter would
probably be living with her ex partner for the rest of her life. She was comfortable with
not participating in the mothering role for her daughter: “I’m coming to grips with the
fact that she may be the child that I may not raise. I may not be the one raising her.”

Anita, a mother of six children, passively rejected the culturally expected mothering
role because she was being denied the possibility of fulfilling those expectations of
mothering. Between her ex-husband and the Children’s Services Board, she had very
limited access to her child and no control over decisions about his life. She quit the visitations with her son because it was too difficult having someone tell her when she could or could not see her child. Anita was very depressed about not seeing her son, but she claimed she was numb and had “given up” on trying to be with him: “You know when you can let all that go then you don’t have any feelings inside yourself then you a good one. A good one means that you just became unremorseful. All your feelings done shut down and you don’t have no feelings for nothin’. ” Because of the disconnection from her child she did not think of herself as a mother: “I don’t do anything as a mother. I don’t know.” Anita also felt that children should be raised by extended family, not just by the mother. In fact, Anita had one child who was living with her sister and at other times in her life, Anita’s children had lived with their grandparents as well as their older siblings.

Trina, a mother of three children, actively resisted the expectation that a mother should be the full time caregiver of children and that mothers should be married. Trina firmly believed that the father should have as much responsibility for children’s needs as the mother. Trina’s definition of a “good mother” also did not comply with dominant expectations of motherhood. Trina stated that a “good mother” was her friend Leslie because:

She left her husband when her baby was six months old and she never looked back. That’s what I think is a good mom. Because her daughter is about to be 18 years old this year and she just got married when Dory was 15 but she took care of those kids all that time by herself. And when she walked out of that man’s life I had never seen nobody do that before ever
in my life. I never seen nobody just walk away from a relationship and never go back. And that’s what she did. She told me she was leaving and I thought she was playing. She never went back. And I commend her for that. I really do. Because some people don’t have enough strength to do that. They think that they supposed to be with that man. No. That’s my strength. That’s my backbone right there when I think about her that’s what makes me think about myself and that’s why I am the way that I am right now because she is my strength.

Sherri, a mother of six children, also believed that mothers should not be the sole caretakers of children, and thus fit the model of an active resistor. She felt that fathers were just as good at caring for children as mothers, sometimes better. She also had relied on extended family (i.e., her mother and sister) for assistance when caring for her children.

Of these five women, four were African American. Their ideas about mothering closely followed Collins (1992) discussion of African American mothers. According to Collins (1992) black women often rely on networks of individuals for assistance in mothering their children. These women saw extended family as essential in caring for their young, violating the white middle class standard that mothers should care for their children on their own (Hays 1996). While resistant mothers had experienced guilt or depression at one time during their lives as noncustodial mothers, at the time of the interview, these women (with the exception of Anita) seemed to have adjusted better to their noncustodial status than many of the women who were attempting to accommodate dominant expectations of mothering.
Accommodating mothers. Accommodating mothers continued to comply with cultural expectations of motherhood as noncustodial parents. When they had visitation with their children these mothers attempted to maintain the mothering role that they held as custodial parents (e.g., helping with homework, cooking, tucking children into bed), and to maintain characteristics that they thought mothers should have (e.g., nurturing, sacrificing). For example, Maggie, a mother of three sons, cooked for her children every time they visited her home: “Every time they say they’re hungry I’ll ask them, ‘ok hotdogs or sloppy joes?’ And they’ll say, ‘can we have four sloppy joes?’ anything they want or I have they got.” Wendy, a mother of two children, also talked about maintaining her mothering role:

I cook for them. They eat better over here then at their dads. I pick them up Friday and take them back Sunday night so they eat more there…he does a lot of drive in instant food so that drives me crazy. So here we don’t eat out hardly ever. Everything I make so they get home cooked food and that makes things better.

These women’s discussions of providing good meals for their children fall in line with DeVault’s (1991) discussion of feeding the family as gendered work. According to DeVault, feeding, like most other household labor, is performed as a direct service to family members. Feeding the family is done most often by mothers out of love for their families.

Mothers also attempted to accommodate dominant definitions of motherhood by buying things for their children and paying for their children’s extra curricular activities and medical needs, even though they might be having financial difficulties. Rachel, who
spent a great deal of money to visit her daughter in Virginia every other month, also went to great lengths to buy her daughter material items that she felt she needed:

When my daughter was down for a visit last summer I took her and bought all of her school clothes. Usually I don’t have her this late in the season so they have done the shopping already and I just ship a whole bunch of clothes. Well we went together and did the shopping and got shoes and backpacks and all of this stuff.

Grace, who had one son, also paid for many of her son’s needs: “I pay child support, I take him to the dentist, I pay for flights out here, I buy all of his school clothes for him.”

Despite the fact that she could not pay her rent, Maggie, a mother of three sons, also purchased things for her sons: “They got a 64 back there and a Game Cube up here. Tell me they ain’t spoiled. They’re only kids once. I’ve got clothes galore for them. I bought them brand new clothes they haven’t even worn.”

When possible, mothers who accommodated cultural expectations of motherhood were also involved in their children’s educations. For example, Annie, a 45 year old mother of three children, thought that it was very important that she stay connected with her son’s school. In fact, she was instrumental in making certain that Paul was in the appropriate classes for his tenth grade year. To ensure this, she drove two hours to his school to meet with his counselors. Annie also discussed the fact that she would be the parent to take Paul on college visits when the time came. Maggie also maintained contact with her sons’ schools and helped them with homework when she had them for visitation. Gloria, a 44 year old mother of three daughters, would make cupcakes for her daughter’s school parties as a way to stay involved as a mother.
Some accommodating mothers saw their children on a regular basis, so they were able to participate in the mothering role more frequently than mothers who were being denied visitation or who had limited visitation. Regardless of how often they saw their children, however, accommodating noncustodial mothers were not able to participate in intensive mothering on a daily basis and as a result, experienced emotional difficulties.

Grace, a 30 year old mother of one son, experienced symptoms of depression when her son was not with her. She said she felt like she could not get going, that her “engine stopped running.” She felt that if her son lived with her on a full time basis that her mental health would be much better. She claimed that when her son would leave after visitation it was like grieving for the loss of a loved one. Crying, Grace said: “To me it’s a grieving process. It’s very hard. When I was at my lowest of lows I always wondered if it would be easier if I was gone because I wouldn’t have to suffer being 2,000 miles away from him. But I know that that wouldn’t be fair to him.”

Rachel, who had lost custody of her daughter, talked about feeling guilt because of her inability to fulfill the mothering role on a day to day basis:

There’s an amazing amount of guilt that even though in my heart I know I made the right decision at the time, I didn’t know how it would turn out. And I did it for what I thought were the best reasons. But there will always be guilt for the fact that I wasn’t there. I didn’t see her first steps, I didn’t hear her first words. I wasn’t there. I don’t get to be there for recitals. I don’t get to be there for those things that I think are very, very important but, so….I’ll have guilt for the rest of my life about that. But I’ve got to live
with that guilt and that’s my cross to bare for what happened and that’s my responsibility in it.

So, when Rachel does get to see her daughter, she participates intensively in the mothering role: “We do a lot of really fun stuff when she comes here and part of that’s guilt because I have to make up for a whole year. But a lot of it is that I really enjoy my children and I put my children first and that’s not how my ex husband is.” In contrast to Rachel, Wendy saw her children frequently, yet she still felt a great deal of guilt that she was not there for them all of the time:

I think I feel insecure that I can’t do some of the things I would like to do and feeling guilty about what I did, what I could have done. There’s a lot of guilt left yet. I don’t know how long it takes for that to go away and maybe it doesn’t.

Experiences with Others

As women transitioned from custodial to noncustodial parents, they had differing experiences with significant others (i.e., friends and family) and acquaintances. Some women were stigmatized because of their noncustodial status. Most of the women, however, felt that while people saw them differently as mothers, there was no “real” stigma attached.

Receiving support. Overall, noncustodial mothers were not stigmatized by their significant others. In fact, the opposite was true. Family and friends were supportive of the women’s situations and expressed great sadness and anger on behalf of the mothers. Roberta, a 37 year old mother of three, stated that her family was “Upset kind of. They are supportive.” Similarly, Roberta’s friends, “Think it’s bad because I think most of my
friends think that I’m a good mother and they don’t…they think it’s kind of sad I think.”

Gloria, a 44 year old mother of three daughters, has also received support from friends and family:

Most people have known for a million years (about her situation) and they just can’t believe how crooked the court is. People that know me very well cannot believe that this is going on with her (Gloria’s daughter).

My neighbor who lives two doors down is a retired school teacher. I’ve known her my entire life. She could not believe how crooked this is.

Maggie’s parents thought that it was wrong when she lost custody of her sons: “They (my parents) think it’s sad. It was Mother’s Day and we had a big picture of everybody and mom was happy…but she feels bad for me and she adores the boys. She just knows how bad I’m hurting.” Maggie has also experienced support from friends at work: “They know I’m trying to fight for them. They feel sorry that it happened this way.”

Mo, a 33 year old mother of three children, has a good friend who cannot believe the things that Mo has had to endure: “My good friend whose been through this she’s been…she’s like, ‘what you’ve been through, you could write a book.’” Trina’s mother encouraged her to take care of herself for once instead of worrying about her children: “My mom was more or less like just do what you need to do for yourself right now. And just worry about yourself.”

Actual stigma. Some of the women experienced actual stigmatization. According to the mothers, actual stigmatization occurs when women hear derogatory comments or experience negative nonverbal communications (e.g., dirty looks, stares) from strangers or those close to them when their noncustodial status is revealed. This stigmatization
affected how they felt about themselves as individuals and as mothers. Annie, a mother of three children, had relinquished custody of two of her children at different times in her life. Her first experience with relinquishment did not result in stigma. When Annie relinquished custody of her eldest son, she claimed that her friends and family were very understanding: “With Andy, mostly people were understanding because they knew enough, the people that I cared about knew enough about the situation that they understood.” With her youngest son, however, the situation was different:

With Zack, so many people said well you just moved up there to move in with your boyfriend and it has nothing to do with your kid and you’re abandoning him. Even people that I was very, very close to. And that hurt me badly. It was not about that. It hurt me when people were…they made the assumption that I was just letting him go with my ex husband even though I don’t think he’s a great parent. And that’s just not the case and it hurt me. It hurt me badly. There weren’t a lot of people who said that, um, but two or three and that was enough.

Aside from significant others, some of the women claimed to have been stigmatized by acquaintances or people they met. This stigmatization affected how the women felt about themselves as mothers. Rachel, a 32 year old mother of two, for example, stated:

There was a stigma because I didn’t have my daughter with me. Because when people would find out that I had a daughter, that I was divorced, automatically the question would be, ‘what did you do? How did you lose custody of your daughter? The mother always gets custody. Were you drinking? What were you doing?’ I always felt almost
embarrassed to tell people because there was an accusation. There was something wrong with me because I didn’t have her. And that was uncomfortable for me.

Similar to Rachel’s experience, Jean, who recently lost custody of her son, stated that people at work thought that she must have done something terrible to not have her children. Jean worried about what these people thought of her as a mother and felt that she had to defend herself by telling the details of her story to anyone who would ask:

People at work would do that. Think that I had to have done something really screwed up to not have my kids. After I tell them what happened then they change their minds. It’s bad enough that I had to try to prove myself to the court but then to these people too. It hurt me at the time. I think that they think that I’m not a good mom because I don’t have my kids.

Grace, who gave up custody of her son, experienced stigmatization from her ex husband’s new wife: “She insults me about who I am as a mother. She’s said things that I’m a sorry…that I don’t know how to be a mother, that she’s the mother of my child and I’m not there so I’m not his mom.”

Anita, a mother of six children, claimed that she was viewed as “less than human” when people would find out that she did not have custody of her child:

You know. You get called names. People look at you. I feel people talk about me and they say she don’t even have her kids. You know? And they take it as you’re…that makes you below board instead of being above board. Oh well she’s a good mothers, she’s got her children.
She’s got everything goin’ on. It’s like they say things like, they don’t say you a bad mother. They just say she ain’t even got her kids. And if you don’t have your kids then that automatically makes you something wrong with you. You’re not a person. You got some sort of defect like a big S on your shirt. Scarlet letter.

Describing noncustodial status as “below board” Anita captured her experience of feeling discredited as a mother and a person. The key here is that “if you don’t have your kids” that is all the evidence needed to devalue and stigmatize the woman.

**Perceived stigma.** The experience of actual stigma was described four of the women interviewed. This differs from Babcock’s (1997) findings where all of the women (n=45) in her sample had experienced actual stigma. In the current study the majority of the women experienced perceived stigma. According to the mothers, perceived stigma occurred when the mothers thought that others were stigmatizing them because of their noncustodial status, but had no direct experiences of the effects of stigmatization. In other words, the women may not have actually heard negative comments, but because of their awareness of their deviant status as mothers, they assumed that this was going on behind their backs.

It is not surprising that the women believed that they were being negatively judged given the reactions that I have received from individuals when they found out the topic of my dissertation. As I mentioned in Chapter four, people automatically would think that there was something wrong with these women because they did not have custody of their children. As a case in point, I attempted to solicit respondents from Parents Without Partners, a national organization for single individuals who have children. After sending
out this email, I received the following response from one noncustodial father from the organization:

   I didn't know there existed such a thing as a "non-custodial mother".
   
   You see, the mother is awarded primary custody 90% of the time-
   that's a fact. The remaining 10% are either dead, serving life sentences,
   or are catatonic.

While it is true that the majority of mothers do still receive custody of their children (Boland 2004), those who do not are not “dead, serving life sentences, or catatonic.” This remark, however, demonstrates the anger and misunderstanding that leads to negative perceptions of noncustodial mothers. The women in the study assumed that these types of statements were made about them on a regular basis.

   Debbie, a mother of three daughters, worried that people would believe that she was a bad mother because her daughter did not live with her:
   
   I would be very conscientious about that, you know? That people wouldn’t understand why my daughter doesn’t live with me. Like they would think I was a bad mother or that CSB had taken her away from me or…you know? I would feel really conscientious about it and I don’t know if it was that other people had that perspective of me or I was conscientious of my own feelings about them having that perspective of me.

Similarly, Grace claimed that she knew that when people found out she was a noncustodial mother that they judged her. Yet she could not think of a time that she had
actually experienced stigmatization. She feared that people must think that she was on
drugs or something and that was why she did not have her son. She stated:

In society it’s expected that mothers will have their children and
fathers don’t have that expectation. When dads don’t have their
kids no one wonders why. I can guarantee that if I walked down
the street today and told five people that I don’t have my child,
one of them would ask me what is wrong with me.

Roberta, a mother of three daughters, would not talk about her custody situation with
people that were not close to her because of the fear that they would judge her. She
agreed with Grace that society assumes that mothers should have their children and when
they do not, they are judged: “I kind of think that people expect that, that mothers have
the kids. That’s why I don’t talk about it. They think something must be wrong with her
if she doesn’t have her kids. But if there was a man in that situation you think it’s
normal.” Lenore, a mother of three children, echoed Roberta’s statement, feeling that
people felt that she was a “bad mom” because she did not have her children.

While Annie had experienced actual stigma, she was also concerned about outsider’s
perceptions of her as a mother: “I don’t know this for a fact, I just sense it that people sort
of see me as, yeah, you’re the one that gave him up. And I sense that. I don’t like that. I
don’t like that feeling.” Because of this sense, Annie was reluctant to tell people that she
was a noncustodial mother, but she faced the stigma head on, claiming that she did not
have any need to “hide who I am or what I am or what I’ve done or why I’ve done it
because I know that I’ve made the right decision. But it doesn’t still keep me from feeling
badly about people judging me. But I tell them and if they do it’s their thing and there’s nothing I can do about it anyway.”

Perceptions about noncustodial mothers, however, do not just come from external forces. Noncustodial mothers possess internalized stereotypes about non-normative mothers. Even though Gloria, a 44 year old mother of three daughters, was a noncustodial mother, she had judgmental thoughts about women who did not have their children, and she feared that people felt the same way about her as a mother:

I’ve always looked at mothers who didn’t have their children as something wrong with them. Why would a mother not have her child? If I met somebody and she told me I don’t have my kids I would think what did you do wrong or why didn’t you want your child? Why would you let the father raise the child. That’s our job. We’re mothers. We have this motherly thing. We’re to raise children. I would be afraid people would think that of me.

The fact that the women perceived that they were being stigmatized demonstrates the power of one word: custody. Sherri stated that the word custody itself “takes a lot out of the parents. If you don’t have that word custody or guardianship in the relationship, it would be much better.” Wendy, a mother of two children, also felt that telling people that her ex husband had “sole custody” of their children was stigmatizing. Because of this, she was hoping to have the custody arrangement changed to joint custody so that she could tell people that she shared custody of her children:

Just to say that I have joint custody and that we share…because we do share custody but it’s not legal, it’s not on paper and I’d really like it to
be on paper just because. You know there’s something…usually the
mother gets the children and people don’t think twice about dads having
visitation but when it’s the other way around it’s kind of…I think people
look down on the mother like there’s something wrong with her. They
think mom’s not there because she doesn’t have custody. But I am there.
These women’s experiences with actual and perceived stigma demonstrate just how
powerful social definitions and expectations of motherhood can be. The knowledge that
they might be perceived as “bad mothers” led many of the women to hide their status of
noncustodial parent because they understood that they would be discredited as mothers.
Rachel talked about being “embarrassed of herself” as a mother while Jean felt that she
had to defend herself as a mother so that people would not think or say bad things about
her mothering abilities. Anita felt that she was viewed as “having a defect.” Wendy and
Sherri felt that the word “custody” was stigmatizing and they had to defend themselves
because they did not have sole or joint custody of their children. These reactions to actual
and perceived stigma demonstrate how stigmatization affects women’s experiences as
noncustodial mothers.

Thoughts about Self as a Noncustodial Mother

Many of the noncustodial mothers’ thoughts about themselves as mothers changed as
they became noncustodial parents. While women’s perceptions about themselves were
shaped by their experiences of real and perceived stigma, as demonstrated above,
noncustodial mother’s thoughts about themselves as mothers were shaped much more
strongly by their ability to maintain contact and control and to maintain the mothering
role. Some women felt good about being noncustodial mothers while others disliked not seeing their children everyday.

Several mothers talked about feeling as though they were no longer mothers because they could not see their children regularly or make decisions about their children’s lives. Lenore, a 35 year old mother of three, felt that she could not be a mother because she rarely got to see her children: “I wish I could be one (a mother). I’m not one right now because I don’t even see them.” Similar to Lenore’s statement, Maggie, a 43 year old mother of three, felt that she was no longer a mother because her children were not living with her: “Am I a mother now? I want to be a mother to my children but it feels like I’m not a mother. I mean it’s just like, I get to visit with my kids. That’s not actually being a mother. It’s not.” Anita, a 48 year old mother of six children, also talked about feeling as though she was not a mother because she did not have her children. Rachel, a 32 year old mother of two children, grappled with whether or not she saw herself as a mother:

Being a mother is the person that’s there everyday. The person that does the caring and the loving and all of that and part of that does exclude me from being Jessie’s mom. But there is the biological thing. I am her biological mother and just because I wasn’t there doesn’t mean that I didn’t love her. So I think maybe the mother, even if she wasn’t there, is the person who loves you and the person at the end of the day, when it comes right to it, would do anything for you. And in that way I am Jessie’s mother. And biologically. I do talk to her once a week on the phone and I do…I do those things. I’m just not there physically. And
I guess the physical part is the biggest difference. I think a mother is supposed to be there.

While other mothers still identified as mothers, they felt that their ability to mother differed from when they were custodial mothers because of changes they experienced in the mothering role. These changes affected women’s feelings about mothering. For example, Grace, a 30 year old mother of one son, felt that she could not be the mother she had always wanted to be: “When this all happened it devastated me because I can’t be that mom. I’m not that mom.” Grace felt that she was unable to fulfill her mothering role because she could not cook or clean for her son, she could not tuck him into bed, or wake him in the morning. Grace continued: “Being the mother I am now I’m a long distance friend. You know what I mean? I pay child support and I do all I can while he’s here but I’m not an everyday mom.”

Similar to Grace, Annie, a mother of three children, felt that she was more like a friend to her son than a mother: “We’re pals but because I don’t supervise him like a parent might supervise a teenager. I don’t supervise him on a daily basis so it feels to me a bit like not being a mom. It makes sense but I don’t know how I feel about it.” The difference between Grace and Annie was that Annie felt positively about being a noncustodial mother: “I really like not having them at home now.”

Roberta, a mother of three daughters, talked about the mothering role and how she could not fulfill it as a noncustodial mother. According to Roberta, mothers were supposed to: “Take care of their basic physical and emotional needs and then when they’re older you have to provide for them and nurture them and still be there for them. The things I can’t do for them.” Shirley, a mother of two daughters, agreed with
Roberta’s statement about fulfilling the mothering role: “I think good mothers are the ones that I hear about that raise their kids as a single parent and rose above tough times and raised their kids together as a family. Which I’m not.”

Despite feeling that she was not a “good mother” Shirley stated that she enjoyed being a noncustodial mother: “You get the benefits of being the mom without having to be the primary caregiver. You know, it’s like the dads that get to visit every other weekend and every Wednesday. You know? I get to visit with the kids but I get a break. And they call me mom. Kind of mean, huh?”

In spite of what one might expect, the involuntary or voluntary nature of the relinquishment did not affect how women felt about being noncustodial mothers. For example, Gloria, a 44 year old mother of three daughters, lost custody of her daughter and felt that she was a “failure as a mom. I feel I let her down.” On the other hand, Mo had “chosen” to give up custody of her children but still felt badly about herself as a mother. She felt that she had “let her children down.” Similar findings can be seen with the other women in the study. Grace “gave up” custody of her son but “hated” being a noncustodial mother. At the same time, Maggie “lost custody” and also disliked being a noncustodial mother.

Summary

The transition from custodial to noncustodial mothering was not an easy one. While women’s understanding of what mothers should be (i.e., caring, nurturing) remained consistent, their ability to fulfill the mothering role changed as they became noncustodial parents. The ability to fulfill the mothering role was affected by whether or not the mothers were able to see their children (i.e., maintain contact) and make decisions about
their children’s lives (i.e., maintain control). Custodial caregivers (i.e., gatekeepers) were instrumental in determining whether or not women could maintain contact and control. Women who had amicable relationships with these gatekeepers were more likely to see their children on a regular basis and in turn, to be able to have some control over the decision making about their children’s lives.

Despite their ability to maintain contact and control, most of the mothers attempted to maintain the mothering role that they held prior to relinquishing custody. These women were discussed as “accommodators”. Other mothers rejected that role and were referred to as “resistors.”

Interestingly enough, whether women gave up or lost custody of their children did not affect how they felt about being noncustodial mothers. Women who had involuntarily relinquished custody were just as likely as women who had voluntarily relinquished custody to be depressed about the fact that they could not see their children or make decisions about their children’s lives. Mothers who were accommodating or resisting dominant expectations of mothering, however, differed in their feelings about being noncustodial mothers. Resistant mothers tended to be better adjusted than accommodating mothers, perhaps because they were rejecting definitions of motherhood that are viewed as constraining by many feminist researchers (Collins 1994; Glenn 1994; Hays 1996). These women had become accepting of their noncustodial status; sometimes by force and other times by choice.

How women saw themselves as mothers was also attached to their experiences of real and perceived stigma. Having been stigmatized or perceiving that individuals were stigmatizing them for their noncustodial status affected the women’s experiences as
mothers, making them feel self-conscious and uncertain about disclosing their noncustodial identity. So, many women hid their noncustodial status, sharing it only with those they could trust (e.g., significant others).

The findings of this dissertation are important on several levels. The experiences that noncustodial mothers have with mothering have theoretical implications as well as implications for sociology and the legal system. These implications and directions for future research are discussed in Chapter Six.
CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation I set out to address three research questions with an overall goal of understanding noncustodial mothers’ experiences as non-normative mothers. After reviewing the theory and research related to this topic, I developed the current study to answer the following: What have noncustodial mothers’ experiences been like in the court system as they participated in the custody process? How do noncustodial mothers’ present role of mother compare to their role prior to relinquishing their children? How do they perceive themselves as mothers in this new role? How do they think that others view them? How have their interactions with others (e.g., ex-partners, parents, friends, acquaintances) influenced how they see themselves as mothers?

In this chapter, I summarize my major findings on each research question, discuss the limitations of this study and discuss ideas for future research in this area. I conclude with a consideration of the sociological and policy implications of these findings.

Research Questions and Major Findings

I addressed three questions in this dissertation. In this section, I summarize my key findings in relationship to each question. My first question addressed women’s experiences in the legal system. All in all, the mothers in this study felt that they had a negative experience in the court system. The mothers emphasized the court’s bias toward the parent who had money to pay for an attorney, stating that the court really did not care
about the best interests of the children. The women’s experiences were influenced not only by their lack of money to pay an attorney, but also by their general lack of knowledge regarding systemic processes. As a result, the women not only lost custody of their children, but also received visitation plans that they saw as less than satisfactory.

My second research question examined how noncustodial mothers defined and enacted mothering in light of dominant definitions of mothering and motherhood. With this question I specifically focused on how noncustodial mothers enacted their mothering role pre and post relinquishment of their children and how the issue of “choice” in the relinquishment process affected their thoughts and feelings about mothering.

With regards to this question, results indicated that the majority of the noncustodial mothers worked to maintain the intensive mothering strategies that they practiced as custodial parents. All sixteen of the women in this study had been custodial parents to one or more of their children. As custodial parents, the women complied with cultural expectations of motherhood. As they transitioned from custodial to noncustodial mothers, they experienced many changes. The mothers did not have as much access to or control over their children because of their visitation plans and because of barriers put in place by custodial caregivers (i.e. gatekeepers). Therefore, the mothers had difficulty living up to dominant expectations of motherhood as noncustodial mothers.

In this study, most children lived with the women’s ex partners, and some lived with other family members. The women’s accounts revealed that either situation presented difficulty and conflict. I found this to be interesting having assumed that family would be easier to deal with than ex partners as caregivers. Thus, both family and ex partners
served as gatekeepers who could allow or deny access to children, affecting women’s ability to participate in mothering practices.

Despite this difficulty, the majority of the women (n=11) attempted to participate in intensive mothering strategies (e.g., buying things for children, participating in children’s education, worrying about children, traveling long distances to see children) whenever possible. Five of the mothers resisted dominant expectations of motherhood either because they felt unable to fulfill these expectations or they felt that society’s definition of motherhood was too restrictive and was unfair to women in their position. Mothers who attempted to participate in intensive mothering or “accommodated” dominant expectations of motherhood tended to feel guilty and depressed if they were unable to live up to these social standards while resistant mothers, for the most part, adjusted relatively well to their position as noncustodial parent.

With regard to the issue of “choice”, results indicated that even when women felt that they had voluntarily given up custody of their children, relinquishment was never truly perceived as a choice. Women had structural and personal constraints that ultimately influenced their decision-making process when they gave up custody of their children.

While women who gave up custody tended to adjust better to the noncustodial role than women who lost custody, they still were not completely at peace with this decision. The women who adjusted better tended to be mothers who had higher educations as well as occupations that they viewed as important in their lives. Women with higher educations seemed to have processed their experience more thoroughly than those who did not have an education beyond high school. These women were able to reflect on and
analyze their experiences from an intellectual standpoint. Mothers with occupations tended to be doing better than mothers who were unemployed or who were working in low wage jobs. Mothers with occupations invested a great deal of their identity in their work, giving them something beyond motherhood. For example, Debbie was a nurse and saw her occupation as extremely important to her. Similarly, Annie was a banker whose work was an important part of her life. Work served as both a distraction from the loss they experienced as mothers and also as a sense of personal achievement. These women’s experiences coincide with Thoits’s (1983) research which found that the possession of multiple roles can be psychologically beneficial to individuals as they give life a sense of purpose and meaning.

While some mothers adjusted better than others, the majority were not satisfied with their status as noncustodial parents. Despite what one might think, the element of “choice” when relinquishing custody did not appear to affect how the women felt about being mothers. For example, Mo claimed that she chose to give up custody of her children, yet she felt badly about herself as a mother because of this “decision.” On the other hand, Maggie lost custody of her children and she felt the same way as Mo. It is likely that women who “gave up” custody did not feel any different about mothering as noncustodial parents than women who had lost custody because the choice was limited by circumstances beyond their control.

My last research question dealt with women’s perceptions and feelings about themselves as noncustodial parents, emphasizing the role of significant others and acquaintances in shaping women’s experiences as mothers. The women’s experiences as mothers was connected to their ability to live up to dominant expectations of motherhood
(as discussed in research question one). As stated above, women who attempted to accommodate dominant expectations of motherhood experienced guilt and depression while women who resisted these expectations, for the most part, accepted their new positions and felt better about themselves as mothers. Besides the women whose family had custody of some or all of their children, the mothers felt they had supportive family and friends who helped them to deal with their noncustodial status.

The majority of the mothers reported that they had not experienced actual or real stigmatization because of their noncustodial status. They did, however, perceive that they were being negatively judged by people on a regular basis. This is contradictory to Babcock’s (1997) research that indicated that all of the 45 women in her study had experienced actual stigmatization on at least one occasion.

The experience of real or perceived stigma influenced how the women felt about themselves as mothers. Mothers who claimed to have experienced stigma, or perceived that they were being stigmatized, were self conscious about disclosing their noncustodial status to people who they did not know. So, many women hid their noncustodial status, sharing it only with those they felt they could trust. The mothers’ perceptions of stigma demonstrated just how powerful dominant expectations of motherhood are within our society. While the women had not heard negative statements, they believed that people judged them because they were not living up to cultural expectations of motherhood.

Theoretical Relevance

In doing this research, my intention was to better understand the experiences of non-normative mothers through the use of both theory and research. With the exception of Babcock (1997), Clumpus (1996), and Greif and Pabst (1981), past research has failed to
use theoretical frameworks to understand noncustodial mothers’ experiences. Babcock used Identity Theory, Clumpus used Social Constructionism, and Greif and Pabst used Role Theory to better understand women’s experiences. While these theories were useful, they did not fully tap into the ideological constraints that dominant definitions of motherhood have on noncustodial mothers. Because I was interested in how noncustodial mothers define and practice mothering given physical separation from their children, I used the Social Construction of Motherhood to examine women’s experiences. My findings indicated that most of the women attempted to conform to dominant cultural constructions of motherhood. Mothers who conformed discussed having learned to mother from their own mothers as well as other mothers whom they had admired growing up. These role models had practiced intensive mothering strategies and the women in this study internalized this approach to mothering. When the women attempted to live up to dominant definitions of motherhood, they suffered. More specifically, mothers who adopted our culture’s mothering ideology experienced guilt, shame, anxiety and depression because they were unable to adequately fulfill these cultural expectations. Thus, the data in this dissertation support past research that has indicated that dominant definitions of motherhood lead to negative experiences for mothers who are unable to comply with these standards.

While this was true of eleven of the mothers, five of the women did not conform to these expectations, and felt they were better off because of their resistance. Past research has identified resistant mothers as those who redefine their role as mother to include characteristics outside of dominant definitions of motherhood. For example, the mothers in Garey’s (1999) study redefined “good” mothers as those who work to support their
children. Both Segura (1994) and Hill Collins (1992; 1994) indicated similar findings regarding the interconnectedness of work and motherhood for women. In Babcock’s (1997) study noncustodial mothers found that they did not fit cultural definitions of motherhood so they began to redefine themselves as more like sisters or aunts to their children. The five resistant mothers in this study, however, rejected dominant definitions and expectations of motherhood without attempting to redefine their role of mother. While these mothers had practiced intensive mothering strategies as custodial parents, they recognized their inability to participate in these intensive strategies as noncustodial mothers. They, however, did not feel the need to defend their inability to live up to these standards, instead accepting a modified mother role.

Overall, however, the mothers attempted to comply with dominant mothering expectations. When the majority of the mothers could not live up to these standards, they were very hard on themselves, experiencing guilt and depression. They also perceived that they were being negatively judged because they could not live up to these standards and felt embarrassed because of their perceived inadequacies.

The women’s experiences of guilt, depression, and embarrassment because of their inability to live up to these standards demonstrate just how powerful the ideology of motherhood is in our society. Because the women felt that they were not living up to social standards of motherhood, they felt stigmatized and as though they needed to hide the fact that they were noncustodial mothers. They understood that they possessed a discredited identity if people knew about their status and a discreditable identity if others found out about their noncustodial position. This stigmatization does not apply to noncustodial fathers because men are not expected to be the primary caretakers of
children pre or post divorce. Noncustodial mothers’ non-compliance with gendered expectations magnifies their stigma, placing them in the category of “other” in comparison to custodial mothers who are fulfilling the socially appropriate role of mother.

Limitations

With all research there are limitations and the present study is no exception. First of all, a more diverse sample would be desirable. Initially I limited my sample to women whose children lived with their ex husbands, to better understand how the relationship between divorced parents might affect women’s experiences as noncustodial mothers. As the study unfolded I expanded the sample to include never married noncustodial mothers.

Additionally, age, ethnicity, geographical region and social class is lacking in my sample, which is a predominately white, middle aged, lower class sample. More diversity with regards to race, class, and age may reveal a greater range of experiences. This research, however, did provide insight into the experience of working class and African American women, adding to prior research that has tended to focus on white, middle class mother’s experiences.

Future Research

This dissertation was an exploratory study of noncustodial mothers’ experiences. It explores one group of women’s experiences as non-normative mothers. While this research has provided important insights into women’s experiences as noncustodial mothers, there is still much work to be done in this area. Several directions for future research are suggested by the findings of this dissertation, and the questions left unanswered.
Future research should examine the experiences of women in different custodial situations. Children live with ex partners, but they also live with family, friends, and foster parents. Examining these custodial arrangements would provide insight into issues of access and control with other caregivers besides ex partners. This would allow for further exploration into how women’s ideas about mothering are affected by their interactions with other “gatekeepers” besides ex partners.

By understanding women’s experiences with ex partners and other caregivers, we would be able to compare whether one custodial arrangement leads to better mental health outcomes for women than the other, as well as whether one allows for better mother-child interactions. In other words, a study of this nature would be able to answer questions such as: Do women fair better when family has custody of children as opposed to ex partners? Is family more likely to allow access to children than ex partners? The findings of this study indicated that there was no difference between family and ex partners as caregivers. Both were difficult situations. However, this finding was based on only three cases and might be different with a larger sample.

Additionally I think it is important to include a more diverse sample of women. A more ethnically diverse population would allow for a better understanding of how mothering differs depending on culture. For example, Aymer (1997) found that migrant women from the Caribbean had very different definitions of motherhood than white women. In future research with a more diverse racial sample, I might find that noncustodial mothers from different cultures define motherhood and mothering differently than the white population. Including women of different social classes would also provide insight into women’s experiences as mothers. Middle to upper class women
may experience intensive mothering differently than lower class women and they also
may experience stigma more or less intensively based on their social class position.

Using different research designs may also be useful. Perhaps combining one on one
interviews and focus groups might be an interesting next step. Doing focus group
interviews might provide for interesting questions to further explore in one on one
interviews. While one on one interviews yielded in depth, rich data, focus groups may
have been useful in getting women to share experiences with women like themselves.
The use of focus groups may have led women to speak more in-depth about their
experiences as mothers as other women brought up points that the women may not have
thought of on their own.

The findings of this study might also be used as a starting point for survey research
that could be collected from a larger group of people. For example, the themes that
emerged from this qualitative project could be used in survey research that is
generalizable to the population of noncustodial mothers. Some of these themes include
women’s experiences of stigma, experiences in the legal system, denial of visitation and
communication, and relationships with ex partners.

One theme that was not intensively examined in this study was women’s experiences
of abuse from their partners pre and post relinquishment of their children. I plan to delve
deeper into my data on this issue, examining the types of physical, sexual and emotional
abuse that women experienced as well as how ex partners used children as weapons
against the mothers (i.e., denying visitation, communication). This is an area that has
received little attention in the literature on violence against women.
Some unanswered questions remain regarding women’s experiences in the legal system. I think it is important to examine the structure of the system itself, talking to lawyers, judges, police and children services workers about some of the issues that were brought up by the women in this study (e.g., lack of police involvement, lack of legal representation). By understanding the custody process from these “experts” positions, the research may bring to light problems inherent in the system that need to be changed to benefit noncustodial women.

**Implications**

**Sociological implications.** This research has several implications for sociology. Most importantly, this dissertation provides insight to the experiences of one alternative family form, the noncustodial mother. This dissertation provided an examination of women’s perceived experiences as they shift from custodial to noncustodial mothers. The way that mothers experience and adjust to this status change as well as their experiences of real and perceived stigma as non-normative parents demonstrates just how powerful the dominant ideology of motherhood is in our society. This ideology limits mothers’ experiences by dictating how women should mother, and stigmatizing mothers who do not comply with these expectations. The power of stigmatization encourages women to participate in intensive mothering strategies if they want to be seen as “normal” mothers. As a result, the majority of the mothers in this study worked very hard to participate in intensive mothering strategies, leading to depression, guilt, and anxiety when they were unable to fulfill these expectations.

For some time now, feminist scholars have been arguing that motherhood is experienced differently by women in different social circumstances (see Hill Collins
Thus we would expect single mothers to experience motherhood differently than married mothers, lesbian mothers to have different experiences than heterosexual mothers, and so on. The findings of this dissertation further demonstrate the need to change or redefine what it means to be a mother. A more comprehensive theory is called for that takes into consideration women’s differential access to resources based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Motherhood is best understood as a dynamic process that changes depending on social, political, and historical factors (see Hill Collins 1990). A new definition of motherhood is needed that challenges the dominant ideology that women have to live with their children in order to be good mothers.

Because the dominant ideology is so strong, one might ask how we actually go about changing definitions of motherhood. I believe that making this information available for public consumption may assist in the process of redefining experiences. One way to do this is through educating people about different experiences of motherhood. This could be done through the provision of research on this topic in the form of books and articles that are accessible to the general public, not just to academics. In an attempt to educate the public about this issue, I intend to turn this dissertation into a book that is accessible to scholars and the general public.

Policy implications. The population of noncustodial mothers continues to grow, yet noncustodial mothers are unaware of one another. The women in this study discussed the fact that they did not know other mothers like themselves, but they would like to find these women. Roberta, for example, talked about trying to locate other noncustodial mothers in online chat rooms. She found this to be very unfulfilling, stating that the women ended up bashing men during the whole conversation, which annoyed her. The
formation of moderated social support groups exclusively for noncustodial mothers on a local level would be beneficial for these women. In these groups mothers could talk about their experiences with motherhood as noncustodial parents. If these women knew of other women who were experiencing similar issues as themselves, it might help to improve their mental health. These support networks could be created through the legal system, therapeutic communities, or non-profit organizations that focus on women’s issues.

Changing our political structure would lead to the possibility of changes in definitions of motherhood. The encouragement of marriage promotion policies by conservative political leaders leads to a very narrow view of family and motherhood. These policies see the heterosexual, nuclear family as the only “normal” and productive family structure. These policies help to create an ideology that encourages intensive mothering by placing the wife at the center of childcare in these families. Any other family form is frowned upon and maintains an ideology of motherhood that is virtually unattainable. Anyone who participates in a non-normative family structure is perceived as a deviant, “bad” parent by our current political regime and also by the general society. This is especially true for single mothers and for the noncustodial mothers in this study.

From a legal standpoint, it appears that the system was not meeting the needs of the noncustodial mothers in this study. More specifically, indigent women were not being told about the possibility of legal representation in their custody disputes and their negative experiences with their ex partners were not being taken into consideration. Ex partners’ illegal activities and perpetration of partner abuse were not being examined in custody hearings. As a result, women were losing custody of their children and were being given less than satisfactory visitation plans. In order to rectify this problem, the
system (e.g., judges, clerks, lawyers) must be made aware of women’s precarious financial positions and women should be told about the possibility of receiving legal representation. It is also important that if women are representing themselves that they be educated about the legal process. Otherwise, women will continue to be at a disadvantage in the court proceedings. This could be achieved through the provision of an advocate in the court system that provides information to any individual who lacks knowledge about the court process.

Judges must also be made aware of the importance of examining intimate partner violence in couples with children. Women’s allegations of their partner’s abuse must be taken seriously. Any allegation should receive an investigation. This is a new area of research; in fact in the forthcoming issue (August, 2005) of *Violence against Women* this topic is addressed. I think this is an important step in drawing attention to the problems inherent in the criminal justice system. By providing research that draws attention to the issue, changes might occur that benefit victims of abuse and their children. Most importantly, the system needs to begin to listen to the voices of the women whose lives are being shaped by decisions over which they have little control.

As can be seen, the ideological mandates of motherhood are quite restrictive for noncustodial mothers, leading to many negative experiences for these women. This dissertation has brought to light the experiences of sixteen mothers, highlighting trials and triumphs as noncustodial parents. This dissertation is just the tip of the iceberg. More research must explore the lives of these women as well as the lives of others who are “mothering on the margins.”
REFERENCES


Wolchik, West, Westover, Sandler, Martin, Lustig, Tein, and Fisher 1992
March 23, 2004

Michelle Bemiller
1397 Hunters Lake East
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio 44221

Ms. Bemiller:

The University of Akron's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) completed a review of the protocol entitled "The Experiences of Nondisabled Mothers". The IRB application number assigned to this project is 2000-0317.

The protocol qualified for Expedited Review and was approved on March 23, 2004. The protocol represented minimal risk to subjects. Additionally, the protocol matched the following federal category for expedited review:

Research on Individual or group characteristics or behavior or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

This approval is valid until March 23, 2005 or until modifications are proposed to the project protocol, whichever may occur first. In either instance, an Application for Continuing Review must be completed and submitted to the IRB.

Enclosed are copies of the informed consent documents, which the IRB has approved for your use in this research. Copies of these documents are to be submitted with any application for continuation of this project.

Please note that within one month of the expiration date of this approval, the IRB will forward an annual review reminder notice to you by email, as a courtesy. Nevertheless, please note that it is your responsibility as principal investigator to remember the renewal date of your protocol's review. If your project is funded, failure to comply with IRB requirements could jeopardize your continued funding.

Please retain this letter for your files. If the research is being conducted for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, you must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Sincerely,

Sharon M. Whorton, Associate Director

Cc: John Zipp, Department Chair
    Kathryn Felley, Advisor
    Phil Allen, IRB Chair
Research on Noncustodial Mothers: $25 pay

I am seeking noncustodial mothers to participate in important research on the experience of being a noncustodial parent. Interviews last about 2 hours. If your children have lived with their fathers for at least one year, please contact me for more information about participating in the study. For your participation you will be paid $25.

Michelle Bemiller
University of Akron
(330) 940-2979 or (330) 972-7940
Email: mbemill@uakron.edu
Dear ____________,

My name is Michelle Bemiller, I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Akron working on my dissertation research. My dissertation topic is, “The Experience of Being a Noncustodial Mother.” Up until now, much of the research on noncustodial parents has focused on the experience of being a noncustodial father. I feel that it is important to hear women’s stories about being noncustodial parents as well.

To locate noncustodial mothers, I have been posting flyers in the community and have also done some research at the Clerk of Courts office regarding the custodial status of children. Your file was one of the many files that I came across in doing my research. I am sending you this letter in the hopes that you might be willing to talk to me about your experience as a noncustodial mother. Your input would be confidential and you would remain anonymous in the research project. Interviews last about 1-2 hours. For your help you would be paid $25. The information that I am obtaining from noncustodial mothers is part of my dissertation and will also be part of professional presentations and publications that will give insight into mother’s experiences.

I hope that you will be willing to tell me your story to further my knowledge as well as other’s knowledge of mother’s experiences as noncustodial parents. If you would be interested in participating in this important research, please call me at (330) 940-2979 or (330) 972-7940.

Thank you for your time,

Michelle Bemiller
APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a study being conducted by Michelle Bemiller, a doctoral level student from the College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Sociology, University of Akron, Akron, OH.

The project focuses on the lives of noncustodial mothers. Specifically, the project is to look at how noncustodial mothers became noncustodial parents, how they are coping with this status, how they interact with their significant others (i.e., family, friends, ex-partners, children, etc.), their social experiences, and their experience with the legal system.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview at a convenient time and place for you. The interview should take about 1 hour of your time.

Participation in the project is completely voluntary. If you do not want to participate in the project, you may withdraw at any time.

Your confidentiality will be protected throughout the study. Any audiotapes of interviews and any other data obtained from you will be kept confidential and will not be viewed by anyone but the researcher and his/her advisor. All audiotapes will be retained in a locked cabinet or other locked storage area. The tapes will be erased at the completion of the project.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits to you as a participant, aside from helping us have a better understanding of noncustodial mothers.

If you have any questions about the research project, you can call me at (330) 972-7940 or my advisor Dr. Kathy Feltey at (330) 972-6877.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by The University of Akron Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Questions about your rights as a research participant can be directed to Ms. Sharon McWhorter, Associate Director, Research Services, at (330) 972-8311 or 1-888-232-8790.
Thank you for your participation!!

I consent to participate in this project:

________________________________  ______________
Name        Date
APPENDIX E

AUDIO TAPE CONSENT FORM

I agree to audio taping at __________________________________________
on __________________________________________.

________________________________________.  __________________________
Signature                                         Date

I have been told that I have the right to hear the audiotapes before they are used. I have decided that I:

__________ want to hear the tapes   ____________ do not want to hear the tapes

Sign now below if you do not want to hear the tapes. If you want to hear the tapes, you will be asked to sign after hearing them.

Michelle Bemiller from the University of Akron may/may not use the tapes made of me. I know that I will not be identified in anyway during the use of information from the tapes. Information obtained from the tapes or transcriptions of them may be used for

___This research project   ___Professional Presentation   ___ Professional Publications

________________________________________.  __________________________
Signature                                         Date

________________________________________
Address
APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Background information (childhood, parents-relationship with mom and dad, relationships, marriage, when had children, divorce-when, why, how did they feel about the divorce, how do they feel about the divorce now, how have people reacted to them being divorced)

2. There are different ideas about what a mother is. What does mother mean to you? Do you know someone who you would consider a good mother? Who is that and what do they do that makes them a good mom? Do you know someone who you would consider a bad mom? Who is that and what do they do that makes them a bad mom? What was your experience like with your mother? Do you perceive that your mother was a good mother?

3. How long have kids lived with dad? Who made that decision (was this a choice that you made or was this an involuntary situation determined by a social service agency, the court, etc.)? As a mother, how did you feel about that decision? What were you thinking at the time? What were you feeling?

4. Can you talk to me a little bit about the day that the children started living with their father? How did you feel on that day? What was that day like for you? For the kids? How did you explain this to the children? How did they react? What emotions were you experiencing at the time?

5. When kids were living with you, what did you do as a mother? How did you feel about being a mother?

6. Since your children live with their father on a regular basis, has anything changed for you as a mother? What activities do you participate in now as a mother when you have your kids? How do you feel about being a mother now? When you don’t see the kids, what do you do? Do you contact them in any way?

7. How do you feel about being a noncustodial mother? What do you see as the pluses of being a noncustodial mom? Negatives?

8. What is your relationship like with your ex-husband? Has he ever denied you visitation or made it difficult for you to be with your kids? How has this made you feel? Do you have any kind of decision-making with the kids? Is your ex married again? What is your relationship like with his new spouse? How does she treat the kids?

9. What is your relationship like with your kids?

10. What have your experiences been like with others regarding your noncustodial status? How do others perceive you do you think? Have you ever experienced any negative treatment because of being a noncustodial mother? Could you elaborate on any particular experiences you’ve had with family? Friends? Acquaintances?
Do you tell people in conversation that you are a noncustodial mother? What are general reactions? How do you feel about these reactions?

11. In retrospect, if you could change anything about your situation what would it be?

12. What advice would you give other mothers like yourself?
APPENDIX G
EXIT SURVEY

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

1. What race do you consider yourself to be? _____________________.

2. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
__________________.

3. Are you employed? If yes, what do you do for a living?
__________________________.

4. On average, what is your yearly income? ______________________.

5. Do you pay child support? If yes, how much do you pay a month?
______________.

Below is a list of some of the ways that you may have felt or behaved in the past week. Please indicate how often you have felt this way.

1. I was bothered by things that usually don’t bother me:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)

2. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)

3. I felt depressed:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)
4. I felt that everything that I did was an effort:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)

5. I felt hopeful about the future:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)

6. I felt fearful:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)

7. My sleep was restless:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)

8. I was happy:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)

9. I felt lonely:
   a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
   b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
   c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
   d. All of the time (5-7 days)

10. I could not “get going”:
    a. Rarely or none of the time (less than one day)
    b. Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
    c. Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
    d. All of the time (5-7 days)
11. If you have experienced any of the above symptoms, for how long has this been going on?
   a. For the past week only
   b. For about a month
   c. For several months
   d. For a year
   e. For several years

12. Did these symptoms begin before or after your children stopped living with you?

13. If you have experienced these symptoms, have you sought treatment for these symptoms? _________________

14. Are you currently taking any prescription medications for these symptoms? If so, what medications? ____________________.
APPENDIX H

DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

Thank you again for participating in my study on noncustodial mothers. If you should wish to obtain any of the preliminary results that I find after analysis of the data, feel free to contact me with your request at (330) 940-2979 or (330) 972-7940. Or, you can email me at mbemill@uakron.edu. This information will not be ready for several months as I am still in the process of collecting data.

If after completing the interview you feel that you would like to further explore any of the issues that may have arisen for you during the interview, I have provided a few community service resources for your use.

Family Visitation and Mediation Services
(330) 630-1868

University of Akron Clinic for Child Study and Family Therapy
(330) 972-6822
* payment is calculated on a sliding scale based upon your income. Service is never denied to those who cannot pay a fee.

Family TIES
(330) 762-2557
* offers short term parent counseling, education, and support groups
APPENDIX I
MODEL 1

THE CUSTODY PROCESS

Giving Up Custody

Losing Custody

Court Involvement

Custody Arrangement

Reactions to Court
APPENDIX J

MODEL 2

SHIFTS IN MOTHERING

Perceived Custodial Mothering

Mothering Role Ideology

Practice

Intensive Mothering Strategies

Contact and Control

Mothering Role

Accommodation and Resistance

Noncustodial Mothering

Stigma: Perception versus Reality