

Processes in family courts reflect gendered hierarchies that perpetuate patriarchal power structures and disadvantage women and other gender minorities (De Simone & Heward-Belle, 2020). These disadvantages are compounded for poor, immigrant, and other socially disadvantaged groups. The courts wield coercive power over families, and social workers play a critical role in evaluating and supporting families navigating these systems. Despite these social justice implications, family matters in civil courts remain an understudied area of social work research and a site of insufficient attention for social work advocacy and practice. In particular, child custody and visitation decisions for divorcing and separating families involve long-term or permanent changes to family structures and are consequential to children's wellbeing. Cases involving family violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV) and child maltreatment, also carry the risk of continued harm to adult and child survivors, and in extreme cases, are matters of life and death. My dissertation examines the conceptualization and understanding of IPV in custody cases and how decision-makers' recommendations reflect the influence of gendered and other hierarchical power structures.

I use a critical intersectional perspective, situating individuals and families within their broader ecological context and relationships to power, and qualitative thematic analysis to elucidate processes of decision-making in custody cases involving IPV. This includes how decision-makers conceptualize IPV, how these conceptualizations reflect hierarchical power structures and institutional values, the influence on custody recommendations, and the role social identity factors play. Further, I articulate what this suggests about the structural and institutional changes needed to mitigate harm to and increase safety for families.

My research will inform our understanding of the underlying beliefs implicated in decisions about child custody in the civil courts, clarify advocacy and support needs for families in the civil courts, and identify the training and resource needs of family court decision-makers. Findings will highlight the role of social workers within the civil court system and suggest possible avenues for advocacy and practice – both in and out of the courts – that will further mitigate harm and provide support for families navigating custody disputes in the context of violence.