Flip sides of the same coin: Similarities and differences in mothers and fathers perceptions of ‘appropriate’ uses of child support monies

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Abstract
In this paper we explore the tensions between mothering and fathering identities as they relate to the ‘appropriate’ use of child support monies. Our exploration uses data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 31 resident mothers and 26 non-resident fathers, living in Brisbane and Tasmania. Despite differences in perceptions of how child support money was used there was a large degree of consensus on what constituted “appropriate” expenditure of child support, such as schooling, clothes and extra-curricular activities. The main difference was that mothers – and most notably those on low incomes – had a broader definition of child expenses that also included essentials such as housing, transport and the payment of household bills. Regardless of how they spent child support money, mothers’ discourses of their finances, budgets and uses of child support reinforced their identities as ‘good mothers’ focused on ensuring their children’s needs and wants are met and use child support money to this end. Fathers questioned a mother’s ability or desire to spend child support properly and appropriately for the benefit of the children. In so doing, they reinforced fathering identities that are referenced to control of household finances – both their own and those of their ex-partner.

Keywords: child support, divorce, money, motherhood, fatherhood
Introduction

Paying and receiving child support is not a simple exchange of money. Transactions between parents often have an emotional edge, and can exacerbate rather than bridge seemingly disparate – and often competing – interests (Smyth and Henman 2010). In short, child support money has a meaning beyond what it can buy as legal tender. With a few exceptions (for example Simpson 1997; Dudova 2006; Natalier and Hewitt 2010), most research treats child support as a market exchange, the transfer of financial resources from one household to another that has material implications for mothers, children and fathers (Seltzer, Schaeffer et al. 1989; Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Losoncz 2006; Wilson 2006). These studies are important but they address only the material dimensions of child support at the expense of insights into how mothers and fathers interpret meanings and appropriate uses of child support money.

In this paper we aim to broaden sociological approaches to child support by exploring the interpretative dimensions of child support. We present resident mothers’ accounts of how child support money is used, and non-resident fathers’ perceptions of how it should be used. We argue that divergence in how payees and payers describe the appropriate uses of child support money camouflages shared understandings. Both mothers and fathers agreed that child support money should be for children, but there was disagreement about what constitutes money spent on children.

Social meanings of child support money

According to Zelizer (1989; 1994), people routinely assign different meanings to, and separate uses of, particular monies. Disputes arise over money when parties to an interaction have contradictory understandings of their relationship, when their values clash or they are pursuing conflicting interests, or even when they have adopted difference techniques for earmarking (Zelizer 1994). Child support as a ‘type’ of monetary exchange is particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding and disagreement because it is paid and received in the context of changing relationships, family structures and family practices. The issue is complex, however, and it is likely that the process of negotiating child support after separation both shapes mothering and fathering identities and responsibilities, but these identities are also shaped by the
negotiation process. Irrespective of the causal direction, the value and legitimate use of child support is likely to be informed by these identities.

Within intact couple households men’s and women’s income is often treated differently and their spending decisions differ: usually men have more control over household expenditure and have more discretionary spending money (Pahl 1995; Vogler, Brockman et al. 2006). When a couple separates, two households are formed and significant change occurs in the power over and the management of money. Resident mothers are responsible for the management and allocation of money within their household, and the money received from their former partner is an entitlement sanctioned by the state and paid for the benefit of the children of a relationship (Fehlberg and Mclean 2009). Couples no longer make joint decisions about what will be purchased and how much will be spent on the children. Fathers may feel that their financial contributions are hidden from view, incorporated into the household budget as income without acknowledgement of where the money came from and the meaning of that money, whether that is a gift, or an expression of love, or a claim to authority (Bradshaw, Stimson et al. 1999; Natalier and Hewitt 2010).

Methods

The study uses interview data collected in 2006 and 2007 from 58 separated parents, 30 resident mothers and 28 non-resident fathers, who all had children aged under 18 and were liable to receive or pay child support. It should be noted that the study was conducted during a period of significant child support reform, and it is likely that the liabilities and entitlements of some participants would have changed since the study. But that should not have any implications for the results presented here, which focus on how people understand the appropriate use of child support money, rather than the amounts they paid or received. None of our respondents had been married to each other, so it should also be noted that former partners’ perspectives are not available to verify consistency of reports. Participants were recruited using a mixture of strategies, including snowball sampling, posting flyers at University campuses in Brisbane and Tasmania, and advertising with a variety of separated parents support groups. In Tasmania the majority of interviews were obtained through response to the flyers and then snowballing. In Brisbane the interview recruitment was evenly split between snowball sampling and separated parents groups (for both mothers and fathers). The interviews were semi-structured and explored
negotiation, payment, receipt and use of child support money (see Appendix 1 for interview schedule). Our analysis is guided by a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, focusing on the ways in which people make sense of their worlds and in doing so create those worlds (Silverman 2001).

At the time of the interviews, the social and demographic profiles of the resident mothers and non-resident fathers in our sample had both similarities and differences. The majority of participants in the study were aged 30-49 years old. Most were not currently living with a partner. The majority had two or more children, although more resident mothers had only one child. The biggest differences were in relation to income, the amounts of child support paid and received and custody arrangements. Four of the fathers received government benefits as their main source of income, compared to seven mothers. The average annual income for fathers was AU$58,000 and for mothers it was AU$32,000. In relation to the amounts of child support, four of the fathers paid between AU$0-$5 a week in child support, whereas seven mothers received the same amount. The average child support amount paid by fathers was AU$73 and the average received by resident mothers was AU$60. The fathers had a range of parenting time and care arrangements. Five fathers had 50/50 shared care of their children, and were still liable for child support. Of the remainder, most had regular contact, usually every second weekend. Another four had minimal contact such as school holidays only. Finally, three fathers reported little or no contact with children in that they saw them once a year or less. In contrast all mothers had primary care of their children.

Results

Mothers’ use and interpretation of child support money.

There is a strong theme running through mothers’ discussions of their finances, budgets and uses of child support (if they received it): financial decisions are referenced to their children’s needs and wants. This is articulated by Cynthia, who, when asked about her budget and financial situation replies: ‘I mean basically my whole life is and my whole expenditure is based around maintaining the household and the children.’ (3 children; income = $49,000 pa; CS received = $760 pw).

Whether or not child support is earmarked varies depending on how much is received, the regularity of payments, and the extent to which child support is integral to the basic financial
stability of the household. Some mothers are financially secure and child support is strictly segregated for child related expenses and extras. For example, Georgia’s (3 children; income = $106,000 pa; CS received = $380 pw) high household income allows her to direct child support payments to child specific costs:

'It [child support] gets used on the kids, first thing that comes out of it is my daughter’s child care and then anything that the kids need. Anything other than that, I have a sub account on my account, so I put money away in that for Christmas, Easter, Birthdays, things like that, so money pretty much goes onto the kids.'

These mothers who have relatively high levels of financial security talk about separate accounts, and ‘setting aside’ child support monies for specific child-related expenses – they are spending money for their children by spending money on their children. For these women, child support money’s meaning is as a resource for the good of children.

At the other end of the income spectrum, child support is used for ‘extras’ by those women who were on low incomes and received irregular payments. These mothers cannot incorporate the money into their budget, no matter how useful it might be, because they could not rely on its receipt. For example, Tina, who has four children and an annual income of $40,000 struggles to meet household costs, has received almost none of the child support money due to her. When money is paid, it is a windfall, and spent on ‘treats’ for her children:

‘It bought clothes for the kids, we bought clothes and shoes and all the sort of things they sort of need. Took them out for tea, treated them, the things that we can’t usually afford to do.’ (Tina; 4 children; $40,000 pa; CS received=$0 pw).

For those mothers in marginal or low wage employment or relying solely on welfare, regular child support payments are spent on more fundamental basics, mainly housing and household costs, and medical expenses for children. They discuss these choices in ways that foreground children’s welfare, but children’s needs and the use of child support are located more broadly within the needs of the household as a unit. For example, Lisa (1 child; income = $26,000 pa; CS received = $75 pw), who mothers an autistic child, acknowledges the importance
of child support in meeting the needs of her son and contributing to the viability of the household – both she and her son benefit.

‘Oh, it’s [child support] vital. I couldn’t survive without it….not with all the other stuff, the special needs and all the other stuff that goes with it. We just wouldn’t make it through.’

In contrast to the mothers with higher household incomes, child support money has a greater material significance. Low incomes require women to spend money for the benefit of children, although it is not used exclusively for their children.

The women who spend child support money on more general household needs also describe their decisions in terms of their children’s welfare. But breaking the nexus of spending money for children through spending money on children could call into question their mothering identities as they are articulated through spending decisions. Belinda’s (1 child; $38,000 pa, CS received= $300 pw) discussion of child support money exemplifies this. Belinda has earmarked child support – which her ex-husband pays reliably – to service a personal loan that financed her last move into better housing. Belinda herself needs the money to cover a deficit in her budget that is her own legal responsibility, and one that she did not contract during the course of spending money directly on her child. Nonetheless, Belinda discusses her spending decisions in ways that emphasize traditional, child-centred mothering. She attributes her low income, and by implication her using child support money to meet her loan repayments, to her care responsibilities: ‘It is hard actually, and I have always chosen to work casually and part-time. I didn’t want to work full-time because she was my priority and so I have remained poor. …’.

Additionally, child support money offers some recognition of, and recompense for, her mothering – and its financial costs:

‘I think that it [child support] is more important [than other sources of money], because it is also recognition from your ex partner that you are really in the sole care of that person. … I have been responsible for all of her costs and I have often wondered, I don’t think the maintenance I have received will cover all of her financial needs, I don’t know really, but I don’t think so. Certainly not now.’
Belinda locates her budgeting decisions within the broader context of the costs and constraints of mothering. She thus broadens the definition of the interests of children to include more than separate and identifiable needs or desires.

The mothers in this study use child support in different ways, according to their financial situation and the reliability of child support payments. But irrespective of how child support is used or allocated within households, their narratives reinforce normative ideas of mothering as primarily centred on the care and support of children and the privileging of children’s needs often at their own expense.

**Contestations: Father’s understandings of appropriate uses of child support**

In part, fathers’ descriptions of how child support should be spent reflect those of the mothers in this study. They believed that money should be used for the care and support of children. Despite this common understanding with mothers about the appropriate uses of child support money, the non-resident fathers in our study often react with anger and frustration at the perceived misuse of their child support monies by mothers. It is common for fathers to openly question the ability of mothers to manage child support money properly and spend it appropriately. For example, Isaac describes the amount he pays as ‘too high’:

‘My experience of raising a child is completely different to [ex-partner’s] experience, so my figure is extremely low; hers is extremely high and so I made a placatory gesture by offering that amount. I don’t think it has any... it’s far too high for what it costs to bring up a child. I know that with my son.’ (Isaac 2 children; income = $31,000 pa; CS paid = $77 wk)

Many of the men in this study talked about their struggle to meet their child support liabilities but the common concern that the amount of money they paid was ‘too high’ was also informed by their perspective of what money should be spent on, and their suspicions over what in fact their ex-partner did spend it on:

‘I really have a lot of doubts that it’s all going on the children. When we were married there was no way we were spending that. We couldn’t; we didn’t have $300 to spend on the kids. It’s as simple as that. So how they can deem
that as being what the children cost; it obviously isn’t and that is they’re changing it.’ (Matt; 2 children; income = $62,000 pa; CS paid = $300 pw).

If the amount of child support paid is believed to exceed the perceived direct costs of raising a child Matt, and other fathers in the study, assume that the money is being used to pay for the mother’s costs and desires. Matt’s doubts the money was ‘all going on the children’ highlights the differences in perceptions of spending money for the children and spending money on the children. (It should be noted, that fathers’ understanding of how money is used within the mother’s household is based largely on assumptions rather than actual knowledge of the other household budget. Despite this most had formed strong opinions about how their child support payments were being spent.)

For many of the men in this study, any money that benefited their ex-partner, whether directly or incidentally is being used inappropriately. Bill (2 children; income = $100,000 pa; CS paid = $300 wk):

‘… but I think the basic difficulty is that she thinks that the $1350 should pay a portion of housing, fuel, vehicle expenses and everything else. My argument is well, they’re things you would have whether there were children or not and they’re all the expenses that I pay. The money should be exclusive for piano lessons, clothing, sports, subscriptions, all things that the children get other than food, shelter, fuel and vehicle, which I have all those expenses as well. (Bill 2 children; income = $100,000 pa; CS paid = $300 wk)

Bill’s discussion about the exclusive earmarking of child support monies for specific purposes and uses reflects the reported practices of mothers who enjoy financial stability and regular receipt of child support money. However, his comments, which are reflective of the expectations of many other fathers in the study, fail to acknowledge that mothers on low incomes do not have the luxury of buying ‘extras’, such as piano lessons, with child support money if it is received; the realities of meeting the bills for day-to-day existence do not allow for the choice of ‘treating’ their children with child support monies.

When the fathers in this study describe their perceptions of their former-partners’ use of child support they are not giving us an insight into how the money is actually spent but they are
articulating their understanding of mothering and fathering across households and the role that money plays in these practices and relationships. Many fathers question how child support is being spent in mothers’ households, and by implication they question their former-partners’ ability to be ‘good’ mothers while reinforcing their authority over money.

**Conclusion**

Much of the work on child support presumes that mothers and fathers have different and often conflicting understandings on the appropriate calculation, management and uses of child support (Parkinson 2007). However, this study shows some consensus in that mothers and fathers agree that child support money is for their children and that children should be supported financially after separation. The differences arose over whether money need be spent directly on children. As a group, mothers had a broader definition of child expenses that included essentials such as housing, transport and the payment of household bills. In particular mothers on low incomes were likely to identify meeting these costs as an essential use of child support and being a good mother.

Mothers’ discourses of their finances, budgets and uses of child support reinforce their identities as ‘good mothers’ who are focused on ensuring their children’s needs and wants are met, and use child support money to this end. Fathers’ perceptions of their former-partners’ use of child support question whether mothers allocate and spend money properly and appropriately for the benefit of the children. In so doing, fathers define their former partners as practicing bad mothering and reinforce fathering identities that are referenced to control of household finances. It is likely, that underpinning these perceptions is the difficulty non-resident fathers have in reconciling their legal obligation to pay child support for their children, on the one hand, with the experiences of mothers raising children in a low income or lone parent household that necessitates sharing expenses, such as housing costs and bills.
References


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Appendix 1

Interview schedule: Child Support and Housing Outcomes: investigating the links.

Preamble:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. We want to ask you about your experiences with the payment and receipt of child support and how this contributes to your housing situation. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers – we just want to know what you think. Also remember that if you want to stop the interview at any time, for any reason, please do so; or if there are any questions that you don’t want to answer you don’t have to.

1. What kind of housing are you living in now? Do you rent, own/buy? Why did you select the type of accommodation you are in now?
   a. Do you like where you are living? What would you change if you could? How does where you are living impact on your life more generally (Probe: relationship with kids, opportunities available to you, life satisfaction)?
   b. How does it impact your children’s lives?

2. Tell me how the situation with child support unfolded with your ex-partner. Originally how did you decide how much child support was going to be paid, and in what way; and has that arrangement changed over time? Generally are you happy with the current arrangements?

3. How is your relationship with your ex-partner? In what ways has your relationship with your ex-partner impacted the course of action you chose in relation to child support; and has that had a flow-on effect for your housing options?

4. In what ways does the receipt of child support affect your housing options and affordability (Probe: does it free up money that you use for housing-related costs, such as rent, utilities)? Why or why not?

5. Have you sought or received any other kinds of assistance (and not necessarily financial)? If so, did this help with your housing situation? How do/did you feel about receiving child support?