

Women's child support labour: provisioning and the gendered work of negotiating child support transfers

Abstract

The Australian Child Support Scheme is marked by high levels of debt and unreliable, partial and non-payment, which exacerbate mothers' financial insecurity. These issues are primarily explored through a focus on fathers' willingness and ability to pay child support, with little acknowledgement of mothers' efforts and agency in managing its transfer. In this paper we synthesize data from three in-depth interview studies with women who were due to receive child support to describe mothers' negotiation of the receipt and use of child support. We argue that women's efforts are a form of labour. There are four dimensions of child support labour: emotion work, information work, interaction work and budget work. We conclude that this labour produces outcomes that can benefit them and their children but through inter-personal and structural disparities in socio-economic power, men also benefit from this work.

Keywords: women's labour; child support; post-separation parenting; provisioning; patriarchal dividend

Author: Dr Kay Cook RMIT University , Dr Kristin Natalier University of Tasmania, Dr Hayley McKenzie Deakin University

Introduction

For the parents of over one quarter of Australian children (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012) child support is an important element of parenting across households. However, child support is inadequately conceptualized in both social scientific and policy work. Child support is overwhelmingly described as a transfer of money between parents to contribute to the costs of raising children when parents live apart. People, mostly fathers, *pay* child support and people, mostly mothers, *receive* child support. These approaches present child support as a simple and uncontested transfer. They render invisible the high proportion of non-payments, late payments and partial payments (Child Support Agency 2010). They do not account for women's responsibility to manage the failure or reluctance of their former partners to pay child support in the appropriate amounts and timeframes. In short, current approaches do not recognize child support as women's work.

We argue that child support is the product of women's labour. This labour has four dimensions: emotion work, information work, budget work and interaction work. This work reflects and reproduces the gendered dynamics of power and socio-economic disadvantage with both the State and women's former partners. Through

these processes, child support contributes to mothers' and children's wellbeing while also contributing to the patriarchal dividend (Connell 1995) enjoyed by former partners and by men as a group.

In making this argument we are applying and extending Neysmith and Reitsma-Street and colleagues' (Neysmith et al 2010, Neysmith and Reitsma-Street 2005) conceptualisation of provisioning. Provisioning involves women securing the necessary financial, material and intangible resources for themselves and for those with whom they exist in relationships of responsibility. The work of provisioning is embedded in these relationships: they shape the type of the work, its extent, how and when it is undertaken, and whether it is voluntary or mandatory (Neysmith and Reitsma-Street, 2005:383). The concept shifts the focus away from the dichotomy of paid and unpaid labour and emphasizes the connection between work and relationships. This is an important strategy in recognizing the existence and intersection of multiple types of women's work (Neysmith et al 2010).

Our paper highlights the implications of the neo-liberal shift of responsibility for wellbeing away from the public sphere and into the private sphere. There is far more analysis of the implications of requiring women's engagement with the paid labour force than there is empirical studies on women managing the responsibility of care and provisioning in neo-liberal contexts (Neysmith et al 2010). As providers of care in families and communities, women are likely to experience the direct impacts of the privatization (and marketization) of care, and to respond to those impacts on others' lives (Neysmith et al 2010). Australia's Child Support Scheme (CSS) has seen a movement to the privatization of child support agreements. This is evident in the option of self-administered child support agreements but also in a series of on-the-ground Department of Health and Human Services – Child Support (DHS-CS) (previously the Child Support Agency) processes that in practice make women responsible for reporting and pursuing non-compliance, while also bearing the costs of that non-compliance (National Council of Single Mothers and the Children 2014).

Methods

This paper re-analyzes and synthesizes three qualitative research projects that explored single parents' experiences of child support policy. The aim of qualitative

research is to gain understanding of the complexity and texture of social processes, rather than mapping their distribution in a population. The potential of this contribution is increased when the findings of multiple qualitative studies can be compared to identify the common findings and themes across samples, as we are doing in this paper. Study one explored the relationship between child support assessment and receipt and the housing outcomes of separated parents with 30 payee mothers and 28 payer fathers. Study two explored 19 single mothers' experiences of domestic violence and Centrelink benefits. Study three explored the child support experiences of 20 single mothers entitled to receive child support.

Each project adopted an interpretivist approach, which understands people as making sense of their worlds in interaction with others (Silverman 2001). All three projects used semi-structured, in-depth interviews in order to provide nuanced and detailed accounts of single parents' experiences and how these experiences were interpreted. The use of in-depth interviews enabled a greater understanding of the complexity inherent in social policy processes; specifically how women worked to manage the financial and relational dimensions of child support payments. Our analysis made use of abduction, which is reasoning toward the best explanation (Shank 2010) and involves the 'back-and-forth' interplay between the identification of surprising phenomena within the data and higher order explanatory frameworks. Across the three studies, the time and energy women spent managing their child support transfers was a common yet surprising theme. Conceptualisations of provisioning and women's work (Neysmith et al 2010, Neysmith and Reitsma-Street 2005) then provided a way of organizing and further analyzing these data.

Findings

In the following discussion we present a typology of four dimensions of child support labour: emotion work, information work, budget work and interaction work. This typology is a heuristic device to capture the existence and complexity of women's child support work, but in many cases the dimensions intersected with others to shape the experience and outcomes of that labour.

Emotion work

Emotion work is managing one's own, one's children's and one's former partners' emotions. In the context of child support this includes not pursuing payments in order to keep the peace, justifying a former partner's non/payment patterns to their children to protect the relationship between fathers and children, and managing one's own emotions dealing with former partners and welfare bureaucracies.

In the following quote, Ella illustrated the work of managing relationships between children and former partners. Ella described her decisions to withhold information that might have increased the amount of child support she was assessed to receive, in order to protect her child. In this case, there were two children who were in a shared care arrangement, however one child did not feel comfortable living with her father and lived full time with her mother (Ella). For child support assessment Ella reported shared care.

I have tried to talk to the child support agency and they have said things like oh if you have proof of how often your daughter stays here, which can be like a diary and a statement from her, but then when I have mentioned that to him he um gets really aggressive and threatens to take us to court and make [daughter] go and stay with him, and so I step back because I obviously don't want to cause her to be upset. And she doesn't want to stay there. She doesn't feel welcome, she doesn't feel, and it's not so much him but his girlfriend. So, you're in a bind you know whether you want to do the right thing, well of course you choose to do the right thing by your child but your child loses financially. But I think emotionally its better (Ella, \$620 child support each month, shared care for one child and payee has sole care of the other child).

Ella's comments highlight the way negotiating relationships is a form of child support labour. In these contexts, women's provisioning activities can lead to less money as they prioritize other life necessities, for example, emotional wellbeing.

Information work

Information work is the work of making claims. It includes mothers providing or withholding information about own and their former partner's finances, and ensuring they are conforming CSS processes and regulations. When child support is not paid, or not paid in full, it is incumbent upon single mothers to pursue the issue through reporting, collecting evidence for their claims, and demanding the DHS-CS pursue the debt. When there are no payment issues, mothers must navigate the complex process of calculating entitlements and managing work and reporting responsibilities. Child

support payments impact on income support entitlements when the 'expected' amount of child support is used to calculate the appropriate income support, unless mothers report a discrepancy. This link has implications for the amount and stability of income.

Mothers in our study managed child support payment discrepancies to ensure government income support stability rather than maximizing their potential household income. For example, Sally reported an administratively accurate and empirically inaccurate amount of child support. Sally had yet to receive any child support from her former partner and did not want the inconsistency between assessment and receipt of child support to impact her regular government income support payments.

When I applied for the part pension, I asked them [Centrelink] to set it where they took, I asked them to pretend that I was getting paid child support, so that way, if I ever did get the money, I didn't have to pay them [Centrelink] back (Sally, \$274 child support assessment but yet to be received, recent court order to determine contact between payer parent and children of every second weekend).

Sally chose not to report the 'received' amount of child support to Centrelink, which would increase Family Tax and other benefits. Her primary focus was on managing information to avoid overpayment of income support. For women who experience child support arrears, income stability can take precedence over the amount of income, as they attempt to avoid the spectre of paying back benefits from their already insufficient income.

Information work had implications for budget work (we discuss this next) and also intersected with emotion work. Sally also engaged in information work to manage her former partner's anger:

They [DHS-CS] realised that he's not paying – he should be paying more. They wanted me to file a complaint against him so they could investigate him, and I said I wasn't prepared to do that because we didn't have any court orders in place. I wasn't going to rock the boat and I just had to play my cards really close to my chest and just be really careful with what I did. 'Cause he's got a bad temper (Sally).

Again, we see the ways in which the work of provisioning locates generating money within the work of managing other necessary resources, not all of which are material.

Budget work

Budget work is the often-complex process of integrating child support in the context of a household budget. This includes earmarking child support for child specific costs, using child support for the general welfare of their household or meeting their family's needs within a constrained household budget – one that is more constrained because of their former partner's non-payment, partial payment or late payment of child support. Trudy and her former partner had a business prior to their separation and she believed that his reportable income for child support purposes was not accurate. Trudy identified the stress associated with this and her need to provide for her children.

I would go to do the groceries and that, and that money had to cover everything. That was very stressful, not being able to get more [child support] money and prove that he [ex-partner] had more money. Cause like you have to prove and have documentation of why you think their income's higher than what it is, well what do you do? You have broken up. It's not like, it's not like you know where they're getting their money from or what they're doing. You know that they're, you know, have more than what their income's saying (Trudy, child support has varied and she was receiving \$250 at the time of the interview. One child lives with her former partner and one child lives with her).

The strategies involved in this work involved women's attempts to make ends meet in order to fulfil their responsibilities to, and express their care of, their children. This is not to argue that fathers do not also struggle to balance their budget in ways that meet their children's material needs, but rather women's social and economic positioning sharpens the challenges and necessity of this work.

Interaction work

Interaction work refers to moving oneself, children, and former partners through time and space. It is particularly relevant in the context of managing and reporting shared

care arrangements, and it is also evident in women's attempts to manage paid labour and relationships between children and their fathers. This second scenario is evident in Pippa's account of organizing visits and paid work:

He'd ring up and say can you bring [child] over, and I would. But then I started working a lot and every time he rang I would sort of be oh, no, I've got to work tomorrow and the next day I'll bring her around on Thursday or whenever, and that wasn't good enough for him. From that, I wasn't accommodating of what he needed and all that sort of crap, so I just gave up, really ... It became a real one way street and I was doing everything in order for him to see her and he was doing nothing (Pippa, minimum child support order and ex-partner has no overnight care of their child).

Pippa's negotiations reflect Lacroix's comments (2006, 193) that when separated parents are negotiating over money and care, 'the work of keeping them [fathers] in negotiations, of securing their willingness to share, falls to the mothers'. This work then has implications for mothers' ability to meet the demands on their time while also ensuring their choices do not undermine the amount and possibility of child support payments.

Discussion and conclusions

The participants in our study pursued their emotion, information, budget and interaction work in the context of unique relationships but this work and its outcomes were structured by the gendered socio-economic and policy context. The realities of lower income, unstable attachment to the labor force and higher levels of care responsibilities combine with the neo-liberal state's responsabilization of women to meet the care needs of their families and communities, to position women as responsible for provisioning for their children and themselves. As a result, women are located in precarious relationships of partial dependency on the state and their former partners.

Relationships are both gendered and precarious given women's responsibility for ensuring their own and their partner's compliance with child support and welfare benefits regulations. This responsibility is imposed in a context where child support policy and political claims have reinforced men's authority over 'their' money while

de-valuing or ignoring women's time, money and other material and non-material contributions to their children's needs (Cook and Natalier 2013).

Thus, women's provisioning occurs in relationships of disparate power between parents, as well as the gamut of emotions that are part of being a mother and a former partner. These relationships demand and shape women's child support labour in its emotional, information, budget and informational dimensions. They require trade-offs between provisioning that meets material needs (e.g. income) and provisioning that meets other needs, such as safety, emotional stability, or the on-going presence of a father in their child's life.

This work benefits not only children and mothers, but fathers as well, in ways that build the patriarchal dividend (Connell 1995). When mothers are responsible for child support labour, fathers may accrue time, money, social and emotional benefits: they do not work under the same responsibility of managing money, time and emotions to meet the daily needs of their children and the demands of the state. These are the benefits that are the result of being male in the context of broader structures of dominance and submission. They accrue to men as a group irrespective of their personal desire for these advantages.

We conclude that recognizing the patriarchal dividend that arises out of women's child support labour provides a basis for re-orienting the gendered discourses and economics of women's 'dependency' on men and the state. Women's child support work, like other forms of relationship based labour, is an unacknowledged and appropriated resource that frees up men's time and facilitates men's engagement in paid labour. It is perhaps time to query and calculate men's financial dependence on their former partners.

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