

Gendered and cultural moral rationalities: Pacific mothers' pursuit of child support money

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Abstract

To date, much of the analysis of child support has drawn on normative Western understandings of family structures and the organisation and enactment of gender relations within that structure. There has been an absence of an examination of the way that ethnicity interacts with gender to shape the decisions that mothers make about whether or not to pursue child support. Drawing on interviews with nine Pacific mothers eligible to receive child support, this article shows that their decisions involve a complex negotiation and reconciliation of their Pacific cultural values with mainstream gender ideals and practices commonly associated with 'good' mothering. The findings from this exploratory project underscore the importance of incorporating ethnicity and culture in research on child support and contribute, albeit in a preliminary manner, to an important gap in the child support literature.

Keywords

Child support, entitlements, ethnicity, family obligations, good mothers, Pacific mothers

Introduction

A key rationale for the development of child support policies in liberal welfare states, such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, during the late 1980s and early 1990s was and remains improving the economic and social well-being of sole-parent families (Baker, 2008). Child support policies¹ emerged in a historical context characterised by (a) rising numbers of sole-parent families, (b) a system of child maintenance that relied on expensive civil litigation and produced unpredictable outcomes, and (c) a shift in state governance from Keynesianism to neoliberalism, with its associated effort to offset the cost of welfare provisions by re-privatising childrearing costs through a re-emphasis on the family obligation to financially provide for dependants (Fraser, 1989).

Child support policies were additionally developed in a changing landscape of gender relations. Hence, they were articulated in gender-neutral terms, requiring non-resident parents – father or mother – to financially contribute to their children's upbringing through a payment to the resident parent – again, either mother or father. However, given that parenting remains gendered, with fathers making up the vast majority of non-resident parents and mothers the majority of resident parents (Elizabeth, 2016), child support policies differentially affect men and women. It is therefore understandable that a great deal of child support literature adopts a gendered lens (e.g., Cook & Natalier, 2013; Natalier, 2012; Natalier & Hewitt, 2010, 2014; Smyth & Weston, 2005). Such research reveals, for example, that discontent with child support schemes is gendered, with fathers as payers being dissatisfied with both the amount of their child support liabilities and their lack of control over the use of payments, and mothers being unhappy about the low rate of child support they receive relative to the actual costs of raising children as well as low collection and enforcement rates (Cook & Natalier, 2013; Smyth & Weston, 2005; St John & Fletcher, 2011).

Despite the significance of and ongoing need for research that adopts a critical gender lens on child support policies, the analysis contained within this literature is ethnocentric: normative ideas about family structure, the organisation of gender relations, and the nature and scope of family obligations that more closely approximate the lives of White, middle-class families tend to be the literature's starting, and often unspoken, assumption. What is left unexamined therefore are the issues and challenges that surround child support schemes for ethnic minorities, many of whom adhere to a more extended family structure and hold different assumptions about moral obligations to provide care and financial support for family members. The absence of any exploration of the way ethnicity and gender shape interpretations of, reactions to, and experiences with child support schemes is especially perplexing when the multi-cultural nature of the populations of Anglo-Western countries, including Aotearoa/New Zealand, is acknowledged.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Pacific people² are an important ethnic minority that make up 7.4% of the total population according to the 2013 Census (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Within Pacific cultures, 'family' remains an extended structure comprising multiple generations, often including aunts, uncles, and cousins (Barcham, 2005; Grattan, 2004; Stewart-Withers, Scheyvens, & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2010). That an extended family structure remains prevalent among Pacific peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand is reflected in the relatively high percentage of those of Pacific ethnicity living in multi-generational households, which sits at 36% compared with 12% for the total population (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).³ The implications of an extended family structure stretch beyond living circumstances to include normative expectations about financial obligations to kin (Cahn, 2008). In contrast to Western cultures that prioritise the needs of nuclear family members, Pacific cultures typically place considerable emphasis on obligations to provide financial support to the extended family (Fleming, 1997; Grattan, 2004; Stewart-Withers et al., 2010). Another pertinent aspect of Pacific family life in Aotearoa/New Zealand, for our purposes, is that Pacific (and Māori) children are more than twice as likely as children from other ethnicities to be living in a sole-parent family (Families Commission, 2014).

The high rates of sole parenthood in Aotearoa/New Zealand's Pacific community, in combination with culturally distinctive norms about family structure and family support, make research into how Pacific parents interpret, negotiate, and experience Aotearoa/New Zealand's child support scheme timely. Drawing on interviews with nine Pacific mothers eligible to receive child support, this article shows that the decisions mothers make about pursuing child support entitlements involve a complex negotiation and reconciliation of their Pacific cultural values with mainstream gender ideals and practices commonly associated with 'good' mothering. In other words, ethnicity and gender interact in these women's lives to shape and, in many cases, constrain their pursuit of child support entitlements. The findings from this exploratory project underscore the importance of incorporating ethnicity and culture into research on child support and contribute, albeit in a preliminary manner, to an important gap in the child support literature.

The following section outlines the multiple meanings of money transfers within families, exploring first normative gendered understandings attached to money transfers within heterosexual nuclear households and then contrasting such a construction with the ways in which money transfers are framed within Pacific families.

The meaning of money transfers between family members: A gift, an obligation, or an entitlement?

A growing body of scholarship has emerged over the last few decades that explores the socio-cultural, and to a lesser extent gendered, values attached to money (Pahl, 1989, 1995; Singh, 1997; Zelizer, 1994, 1996, 2005). In particular, Zelizer's work has challenged the treatment of money as simply a medium of economic exchange, arguing that although money is usually defined as a neutral and meaning-free medium of exchange, it is actually laden with personal, socio-cultural, and historical significance. As a result, money is inevitably invested with meanings that transcend its exchange functions.

The transfer of money between heterosexual intimate partners is one area that illustrates the infusion of monetary transfers with socio-cultural and personal meanings. Historically, Zelizer (1994) argued that monetary transfers in nuclear family households within the United States, up until around the 1930s, were constructed as 'gifts' that husbands voluntarily bestowed on their wives. Because money was defined as a gift, it had identity and relational-constituting properties. Giving money to their wives produced husbands as generous and virtuous; they became 'good' husbands and fathers through this practice. The practice also established an economy of gratitude (Hochschild, 1989, 2003) – an expectation, which may or may not have been realised in practice, that wives express gratitude and deference to their husbands for their largess.

As a result of increasing recognition of women's unpaid contributions to the household during the early 1900s, Zelizer (1994) noted that the idea that money transferred by husbands to wives was a gift began to give way to the idea it was a moral obligation requiring regularisation in the form of an allowance. The shift in the construction of money-sharing practices in nuclear households from gift to obligation, while still emphasising the voluntary nature of financial exchanges between husbands/fathers and wives/mothers, circumscribed these exchanges. Defined as a family obligation, the transfer of money from husbands to wives became normatively and morally regulated; both husbands and wives came to expect that money earned would be shared across the nuclear family household.

Being defined as a family obligation did not entirely eradicate the previous construction of monetary transfer as a gift, nor did it remove its identity-constituting possibilities. Those husbands who, then and now, act as good family providers by ensuring their wives have access to sufficient income to meet the family's needs are seen as good men. Yet, although the shift in the meaning of monetary transfers operated as a source of moral constraint, it did not fundamentally undermine a key basis of men's power in heterosexual relationships; their position as breadwinners and hence owners of most, if not all, of a couple's monetary resources remained intact. Normative constructions of heterosexual masculinity, both then and now, incorporate the power to exert considerable influence over the distribution and use of the family's money (Fleming, 1997; Pahl 1995; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Although the current dominance of pooling a family's financial resources in a single bank account represents a contestation of this vestige of patriarchal power, research continues to show that partners who contribute less money to the pool feel less entitled to influence how it is spent (Elizabeth, 2015).

Zelizer's (1996) contention that one construction of income transfers in nuclear families is that of a gift remains highly salient with respect to explanations of monetary transfers in the context of parental separation. Parental separation fundamentally transforms familial life, altering, for example, the way in which money is transferred between parents and the meanings given to any monetary transfers. Voluntary financial contributions made by non-resident fathers to their former partners for their children, especially those over and above the

child support liabilities, are often constructed by fathers in ‘gift’ terms (Natalier & Hewitt, 2010). The construction of informal child support payments as a gift keeps intact a historically rooted patriarchal gender regime that, respectively, locates the giver/payer and the receiver/payee in a dominant and a subordinate social position, and creates an economy of gratitude marked by expectations that the recipient will display a sense of indebtedness. In addition, the construction of men’s post-separation financial contributions to their children as a gift upholds their identities as ‘good’ fathers who continue to fulfil their breadwinning roles, as opposed to ‘deadbeat dads’ who abandon their responsibilities for their children.

However, formal child support schemes transform the meaning of monetary exchanges between separated parents from that of a gift that is ‘freely’ given by fathers to mothers to what becomes an imposed entitlement (Crowley, 2003). In contrast to gift and obligation money, monetary exchanges that are understood and treated as entitlements are rooted in a rights-based rationale that is typically codified in law. When money is constructed as an entitlement, it changes power relations, placing the recipient rather than the giver in a position of power and reducing the payer’s level of agency (Zelizer, 1996). Thus, formalised child support has the potential to shift control over familial finances from fathers to mothers, thereby rewriting the power dynamics typically manifest between heterosexual partners (Burgoyne & Millar, 1994; Smart & Neale, 1999), and undermining the basis for mothers’ feelings of gratitude and indebtedness to their former partners.⁴ Put differently, the pursuit of formal child support removes any vestiges of the money being a freely bestowed gift or voluntarily met obligation with positive identity-conferring attributes associated with ‘good’ fathering (Natalier & Hewitt, 2010).

Monetary transfers between family members are also an important feature of Pacific family life. Family support via financial transfers, amongst other things, is a central component of Pacific cultures, operating as a way family ties and cultural identities are developed, nurtured, and maintained over time (Pasikale & George, 1995; Stewart-Withers et al., 2010). In this cultural context, family obligations are broadly defined such that money is shared within and across the extended family group. Thus, it is common for the transfer of money for Pacific peoples to extend beyond the boundaries of couple partnerships and nuclear family households (Brown, 1994; Cowley, Paterson, & Williams, 2004; Duncan, 2008). Examples of the collectivised treatment of money and the prioritisation of family needs over individual needs include contributing towards *fa’alavelave*⁵ and sending remittances to family remaining in the islands.

Despite being more collectively oriented, the organisation and negotiation of family obligations, particularly in terms of income sharing, do share some resonances with those of Palagi⁶ families.⁷ For example, a majority of the 32 Pacific families that took part in Fleming’s (1997) study relied on male breadwinners as the main source of financial provision for the family. In addition, as highlighted in Sua’ali’i-Sauni, McTaggart, and Von Randow’s (2009) qualitative study of Pacific families, care and support provisions of and for children are to a large extent gendered: fathers primarily fulfil breadwinning roles and mothers fulfil caregiving roles. The expectation that it is primarily parents who will work together to provide for their children remains, even in situations when parents separate. However, in the absence of support from non-resident parents or when support provisions are insufficient, extended family networks operate and intervene as an invaluable source of support for sole parents.

In situations where family members try to evade their family obligations, informal sanctions are in place that affect the social standing of both individuals and families within their extended family networks and broader Pacific communities (Maiava, 2001; Prescott & Hooper, 2009). For example, attempts by individuals or nuclear family units to avoid obligations to wider kin are often met with significant socio-cultural pressure to comply and are censured because it represents a failure to adhere to Pacific cultural values (Cowley et al., 2004).

In the discussion that follows, we pay attention to implications of Pacific socio-cultural values and expectations in shaping the meanings Pacific mothers give to child support money and whether or not they pursue its receipt. The findings from this research echo those of other studies (Natalier, 2012; Natalier & Hewitt, 2010, 2014) that found normative gender ideas regarding the organisation and distribution of power and money in the family shape how child support is interpreted and understood. However, given the different cultural expectations attached to family obligations and the means through which such obligations are met, the Pacific mothers' narratives unsurprisingly signal some important points of difference, as we show below. Although Pacific people are not a homogeneous ethnic group, Pacific people in many ways share similar cultural values and norms associated with family life and have therefore been discussed together in this article.

The study

This study provides an opportunity to examine the way Pacific mothers understand and frame their access to child support and how these understandings are informed by socio-cultural constructions of family obligations and 'good' mothering. In accordance with other studies that have explored the socio-cultural values attached to child support (e.g., Cook & Natalier, 2013; Natalier & Hewitt, 2010, 2014; Smart & Neale, 1999), a qualitative research methodology was employed. The first author conducted nine semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with Pacific mothers. The data in this paper are derived from participants' accounts, drawing on their understandings of parental obligations in the wake of parental separation and the meanings they gave to child support payments.

Participants were recruited in two ways: four through advertisement posters displayed across the Auckland region, in language nests,⁸ Plunket offices,⁹ and community centre notice boards; and another five via an e-mail invitation that language nest managers distributed to parents whose children attended a language nest in the Auckland area. The poster and e-mail invited participation from Pacific mothers who were no longer intimately involved with the father of their children and who were eligible to receive child support money.

Although an interview schedule was created that reflected the project's research questions, the interviews were conversational in style, with many topics arising organically through the mothers' talk. One of the benefits of having a semi-structured interview style was that participants were able to raise issues and themes independent of being prompted, thereby giving the participants some control over the interview process and content of the data collected. On average, the interviews lasted 65 minutes, with the shortest interview running for 50 minutes and the longest for 80 minutes. The time and place of the interviews varied according to the preference of the participants. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The participants were varied in terms of ethnicity, age, number of children, income source, socio-economic status, living arrangement, care and contact arrangement, and child support arrangement. Of the nine mothers, four identified as Samoan, two as Tongan, one as Fijian, one as Cook Island, and one as both Samoan and Tongan. The age of the mothers ranged from 22 to 49 years. Six mothers had one child and the remaining three had two. The ethnicity of their respective partners also varied: five were identified by the mothers as Pacific, two as European, one as Indian, and one as Māori. All of the participants in this study were intimately involved with the fathers at the time of their child(ren)'s conception. Seven of the mothers were employed in paid work (four full time and three part time), one received a student allowance, and one received welfare support. The income level of the mothers varied considerably: one

third reported an annual income of less than \$20,000, another third between \$20,000 and \$40,000, and the remaining third earned over \$75,000. The living arrangements also varied: four lived in sole-mother households; four had extended family living arrangements; and one lived with her new partner and daughter.

The women reported a range of care and contact arrangements: one mother had a 50/50 shared care arrangement, and three reported regular contact in the form of phone calls and scheduled weekend and holiday visits. Two mothers reported occasional contact, which was described as infrequent phone calls and sporadic visits. The remaining three mothers reported little or no contact between their children and their former partners. Child support arrangements also differed across participants. At the time of the interviews, three mothers had formal child support arrangements (i.e. administered through Inland Revenue¹⁰), four had informal child support agreements, and two mothers reported not receiving any child support.

A thematic analysis was conducted drawing on the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved a two-step coding process. The first phase involved reading each transcript to gain a general sense of the interview and to identify points of interest, including potential themes. At the end of the first phase of analysis, seven discrete thematic categories had been identified: family, care work, paid work, money, father's role, pursuit of child support, child support policy. The second phase involved systematically re-examining and recoding thematic content, looking for more focused ideas within broader themes. This process led to the identification of similarities and differences, with respect to each theme, among the women in the study.

We begin our discussion with what the women had to say about post-separation parental moral obligations before turning our attention to the mothers' reflections on their current child support arrangements.

Child support money: A paternal obligation

All the mothers in this study spoke of child support as money fathers were obliged to pay in order to fulfil their paternal role. For example, one said:

Of course he needs to give me money. ... We're not together but that doesn't mean that my son doesn't need to be looked after by both his parents. ... I remind [my ex-partner] that ... he has a part to play. I'm playing mine and he needs to play his. (Samoan, formal child support)

Another mother similarly talked of child support in terms of a moral obligation of fatherhood:

I have no problem telling [my ex-partner] what my son needs. ... And when he gives me money "hell, yeah!" I always take it. ... He tries to make me feel bad about it, but no way ... that's what he should be doing. And if anything he needs to give me way more than he does. (Tongan, informal child support)

Although all the mothers in this study felt that fathers should pay child support, with the majority believing it should be privately worked out between them, the amount of child support money being received by mothers with informal arrangements did not necessarily reflect their preferences. Even though the children were primarily in their care, with the mothers incurring most of the costs associated with caring for the children, it was their ex-partners who largely determined the type, amount, and frequency of their child support contributions. One mother, in describing how she and her former partner settled on the child support amount, said,

He said, "this is what I can afford". ... And I just thought I'm not going to bother with it. ... he decided on [the amount], I didn't, and I haven't made a big deal about it. ... I don't know if it's my preference, it's just the way it's happened and I haven't challenged it. It's not that I don't want [more] money, because I do. (Tongan, informal child support)

Only one mother was satisfied with the private arrangement she had in place, and she received extensive financial and intensive emotional support from her ex-partner for both herself and their son. The other three mothers all expressed a number of dissatisfactions over their child support arrangements. A prime source of dissatisfaction was their frustration over receiving what they viewed as insufficient child support contributions, particularly when the fathers claimed to have few financial resources yet consumed in highly contradictory and individualistic ways. None of these mothers wanted to contest the irregularity of payments and the amounts determined by their ex-partners because they did not want to, as one Tongan mother put it, 'rock the boat' or, as a Fijian mother said, be accused of 'holding on to the kids because of the money.' Furthermore, all three of these mothers, as well as the two who did not receive any child support money, eschewed the idea of formally pursuing child support money. About this possibility, one of the mothers with an informal child support arrangement said,

He has been giving me money for our son the last few months ... and damn right he should; that is the least he can do for his son. ... But with filling out all the paper work to get proper child support, I really don't think that I'll go that route. I work full-time and I have family to turn to and ... he does give me some money. (Tongan, informal child support)

This mother, like other mothers in the study, defined child support money as a family obligation through sentiments such as 'damn right he should', but she and most of the other mothers in the study rejected the idea of child support as an enforceable entitlement.

Informal child support and gendered moral rationalities

The framing of child support as a family obligation best realised through an informal agreement can be understood by drawing on Duncan and Edwards' (1999) work on 'gendered moral rationalities.' Duncan and Edwards found that sole mothers' decisions to engage in paid work were primarily informed by moral ideas about 'good' mothering. A 'good' mother was defined as someone who placed the needs of their children and family at the forefront of deliberations over paid work; considerations of economic gain were secondary. Duncan and Edwards described mothers' assessments of the costs and benefits to children of engaging in paid work as gendered moral rationalities. The assessments were gendered because they relied on ideas tied to 'good' mothering; they were moral because they hinged on what was considered the 'right' and proper thing to do for children; and they were rationalities because they provided a guideline for mothers to draw on to make decisions.

Duncan and Edwards' (1999) framework can be used to make sense of the decisions made by the mothers in this study about whether or not to formally pursue child support as an enforceable entitlement. In this setting, the mothers articulated a seemingly non-ethnically specific gendered moral rationality that stipulated the right thing for them to do to secure their children's needs for financial support and ongoing paternal contact. The 'good' post-separation mother is one who maintains a relationship with her ex-partner, at least for her children's sake, even facilitating the father-child relationship (Elizabeth, Gavey, & Tolmie, 2010). In the context of child support, being a good post-separation mother means negotiating with fathers and even deferring to their preferences over the form and amount of child support in order to keep fathers involved in their children's lives. For mothers, informal child support payments, even when they are low, represent a (partial) fulfilment of fathers' obligations to financially provide for their children. The treatment by mothers in this study of child support as a family obligation, rather than an enforceable entitlement, operated as a means through which they could continue to act morally in relation to their children; by treating child support as a paternal obligation, mothers kept intact the rituals associated with, and the meanings attached

to, fathers' financial contributions to their children, thereby facilitating a positive relationship between the father and child.

Indeed, all the mothers with informal arrangements worried that mandated payments would undermine co-operative parenting relationships, something they believed would have a negative impact on their children. And this contributed to mothers' decisions against pursuing a formal arrangement. For example, one mother said,

I don't think I could ever go ahead with [formal] child support ... I could just see him making a big fuss about it ... ringing me and trying to argue with me about it. ... [My son] doesn't need that. It is bad enough that he has to grow up without both his parents together ... I don't want him to see us fighting all the time ... about money. (Tongan, informal child support)

The mothers' decisions to treat child support as a moral obligation of fatherhood meant that they received less financially, but it also meant they could demonstrate care for their children by keeping fathers involved and keeping intact an image of these fathers as providers. Informal child support payments therefore marked fathers out as beneficent, but they also behaved expressions of gratitude from mothers. Additionally, it denoted the father-child relationship as one that was marked by love. For example, the same mother quoted directly above later said,

We both have [our son's] interest at heart. ... I just keep hold of that and also I just want to have a good relationship with my son's father for [my son]. ... I don't want to fight with him about money ... so I don't really make money an issue. (Tongan, informal child support)

The mothers, in this way, hint at the transformation in the meaning of child support money that occurs through that the formalisation of child support transfers: child support money goes from an expression of a father's love and care to one of a state-imposed requirement of parenthood. In so doing, fathers' payment of child support loses its positive identity-constituting potential. Yet, formalisation also raises the prospect of tainting the mothers' moral identities. More on this below.

Informal child support money and cultural moral rationalities

The women in this study not only negotiated their pursuit of child support by drawing on gendered moral rationalities – rationalities they likely shared with post-separation mothers of other ethnicities – they also drew on what we refer to here as 'cultural moral rationalities.' As a modification of Duncan and Edwards' (1999) framework, cultural moral rationalities refers to mothers' understandings of the right and moral thing to do in the context of their Pacific cultural values, particularly cultural notions attached to family obligations. As previously mentioned, provisions of support are a central feature of Pacific cultures and are closely tied to the construction of both individual and collective cultural identities (Grattan, 2004; Stewart-Withers et al., 2010). It is expected that family obligations to provide care and support will be voluntarily and adequately fulfilled. Exchanges of support within and between families operate as a way of signifying family connections as well as a way of maintaining family solidarity and family pride.

In situations where parents separate, it is customary for each parent to turn to their own families – nuclear and extended – for the care and support they need (Stewart-Withers et al., 2010). Speaking about the support she received from her family, one mother said,

my sister[s] ... have helped a lot with my [son] because I haven't had a relationship with his father since he was quite young. ... My older sister and father were living in [Australian city] and when my son was four or five, he went and lived in Australia with them for three years¹¹ ... during that time I ... started to build my career. ... Unconventional, but quite common within Pacific families that you share the raising of that child with your extended family, and quite normal. (Samoan, informal child support)

However, it is anticipated that the parent with care may informally pursue their former partner for support, either practical or financial. However, since families gain and maintain a sense of pride and solidarity through fulfilling family obligations, in situations where the father and his family does not voluntarily contribute towards the care of the child or if the child is not socially acknowledged, the mother and her family may avoid pursuing any form of support from the father and/or his family in an effort to maintain a sense of family pride. Thus, mothers who pursue formal child support may run the risk of being shamed and criticised for acting in ways perceived as ‘too Western’ by turning to the state to enforce a parental and familial connection that is not voluntarily upheld. Inadvertently, pursuing formal child support also creates the possibility that a mother’s family might be perceived as failing to adequately provide for her and her children or, worse, that her family is not pulling together to support her. A mother’s decisions to pursue child support can be further constrained by the close relational nexus within which they live, making it difficult to enact entitlement behaviours without their family knowing, especially in situations where the mothers’ former partners are themselves Pacific and are known to the mother’s family. For example, one mother said,

when I got pregnant we were living [in a small church community in Samoa] ... his mother was saying stuff about [my moral reputation] and telling everybody that [their son] was not [my son’s] father. ... I would never ask [the father of my son or his family] for money for my son ... after everything [they] have said about me and my family, and even my son. ... I [am] just happy in the end I [can] say to him I raised my son alone. ... they can never say anything about me and my family because they have nothing to do with my son. ... For some reason, the little money [I have] stretches. ... There [is] never a day where ... I [have] no money. I [have] always been blessed that there was always some money to spare. (Samoan, no child support)

The formal pursuit of child support thus creates a moral dilemma for Pacific mothers: on the one hand, child support money is often critical to meeting their children’s needs but, on the other hand, their formal pursuit of this money jeopardises the moral status of their identity and their family’s identity.

The comments made by the mothers in this study indicate that the parental responsibilities enshrined in Aotearoa/New Zealand’s child support policy have some cultural resonance. However, the point of departure for most of these mothers was the method of extraction; child support monies could be informally negotiated, but there was ambivalence about formally pursuing it because the latter contradicted gender norms as well as Pacific cultural norms. The informal payment of child support can be accommodated within Pacific culture because it is congruent with Pacific ideas about family obligations; it is not mothers and their families with their hands out trying to force the payment, but money that is accepted because it is a form of support from the fathers. Informal child support payments are therefore a means through which mothers can work together with their former partners to care for their children while simultaneously maintaining the social standing of their families.

The accounts provided by the Pacific mothers in this study highlight some of the tensions that exist when child support is constructed through policy in entitlement terms. The synergistic influence of both gender and cultural norms on these mothers constrained their uptake of a position of entitlement to child support. Although these same dilemmas constrain women’s actions more generally through a requirement that they adhere to a morality that privileges the father–child relationship over material security, Palagi women do not face the same kinds of accountabilities as Pacific women with respect to ethnic constructions of identity. Pacific women face the prospect of being seen as bad in gendered terms if they pursue child support as an entitlement – they are bad post-separation women/mothers for doing so – but they may also be seen as bad in cultural terms if they seek a formal child support arrangement – they become *bad* Pacific mothers.

Formal child support

However, the gendered and cultural moral rationalities that shape individual understandings of family obligations are not prescriptive. Instead, as Finch and Mason (1993) found, the normative and moral expectations entrenched in family obligations operate more like guidelines that shape decision making rather than rules to which family members must strictly adhere. At the time of the interviews, three mothers had formal child support arrangements in place. On the face of it, their pursuit of formal child support arrangements would seem to undermine the claims made in preceding sections. However, in the same way that Finch and Mason (1993) found that individual and relational circumstances shaped the way family obligations were negotiated by the participants in their study, so too did individual and relational circumstances of the mothers in this study shape the way they dealt with fathers' financial obligations.

All three of the mothers in this study with formal child support arrangements made formal claims to regularise the frequency and amounts of payments as well as to avoid conflictual and anxiety-provoking contact with the fathers. Speaking of her decision to formalise child support, one mother said,

I had wanted to keep the peace. I was like, "... let's just do it between us, like grown-ups". But he didn't have that capability. So we went through that process of back and forth arguing about what the amount should be for maybe six months before I filed papers for child support. ... It just became too stressful. (Cook Island, formal child support)

Another mother said,

I tried to do it informally first. I did say to him rather than go through child support let's work out an arrangement. ... Initially he was like "yeah" and then all of a sudden he wasn't meeting his commitments and responsibilities ... and as for money it just became quite ugly. He was basically accusing me of getting money from him for my own benefit, even though I was the primary caregiver and I was getting \$50 a week. You know, what was that contributing to?! So I decided at that point, this isn't going to work. I'm going to go down the track of formalising child support ... [but] only after an informal arrangement didn't work. (Samoan/Tongan, formal child support)

As evidenced by these descriptions, there was a temporal dimension to formally pursuing child support. For these mothers, the formal pursuit of child support was only considered appropriate when private arrangements could not be established and maintained over time. By first pursuing an informal arrangement, the mothers showed they were willing for their actions to be guided by the gendered and cultural moral rationalities discussed above. Consequently, their pursuit of a formal child support arrangement was not a challenge to their moral identities but a product of men's failure to fulfil their parental obligations. That these mothers sought to be good *Pacific* mothers is further underscored by their openness to reconsidering their formal arrangements if their ex-partners were willing to work with them in a meaningful way to establish an informal arrangement.¹²

Nonetheless, the ultimate decision of these mothers to pursue formal child support arrangements is worthy of further consideration. Did these mothers place more weight than the other mothers in this study on the need for fathers to realistically fulfil their financial obligations to their children? If so, why? Interestingly, something that set the circumstances of these mothers apart from the other mothers in this study was that in all three cases the fathers concerned were not embedded within the mothers' Pacific networks. Although these mothers did not speak to this specifically, this may well have enabled them to engage in entitlement behaviour knowing that their behaviour was unlikely to become known to their own kin or, for that matter, their wider Pacific community.

Conclusion

The meanings given to child support money are multiple, contested, and unstable. Because child support can be defined as a gift, obligation, or entitlement, the pursuit and payment of child support is laden with implications for the moral identities of all those involved (payer, payee, and their extended families) as well as for relations of power between them. Although defined as entitlement money through child support policy, the narratives of the Pacific mothers in this research point to the complex and subtle ways their gendered parenting and ethnic social position operated to constrain entitlement behaviour.

Their preferred treatment of child support as obligation money shows they negotiated their role as separated mothers in relation to normative gendered and cultural rationalities. The normative construction of family obligations within Pacific cultures means that Pacific mothers who separate from the fathers of their children should be able to rely on their own kin to provide them with financial support if that is necessary. Thus, for Pacific mothers to pursue formal child support risks not only their own moral identities but also the moral identities of their extended kin. However, the existence of a formal child support arrangement among a third of the mothers in this study indicates that gendered and cultural moral rationalities do not act as an absolute barrier to its pursuit. Notably, though, all three of these mothers had sought an informal arrangement first and remained open to such an arrangement in the future.

The advantage of negotiating an informal child support arrangement is that it appeases fathers, enabling these men to see themselves and be seen by others as good fathers who continue to fulfil the moral obligation to provide for their children. Indeed, by not seeking a formal child support arrangement, Pacific mothers create the possibility that some fathers will see their payment of child support as a gift and as an expression of love for their children. In keeping fathers on side, Pacific mothers also constitute themselves as good post-separation mothers. Informal child support has another advantage: it does not contradict the emphasis within Pacific cultures of practices of financial support that transcend household and even national boundaries. By acting in congruence with Pacific cultural norms, mothers with informal child support thereby affirm Pacific culture and identity.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, the claims we have made throughout this article are necessarily limited and are reflective of the particularities of the study and its sample. The gendered moral rationales the Pacific mothers in this study drew from are likely to be drawn on by mothers more broadly. However, to further ascertain similarities and differences between mothers of different ethnicities requires further research to be undertaken. Not only do the conclusions we have reached require more extensive investigation but many questions remain to be answered. For instance, we were not able to examine whether the way Pacific mothers negotiate child support payments differs between those who have Pacific ex-partners and those who do not. Nor do we know what impact being Island or New Zealand born has on the pursuit of child support and the meanings given to this money. It is also possible that there are differences between Samoans, Tongans, Cook Islanders, and so on that would only be revealed in a much larger study. In spite of these limitations, our research clearly points to the role that ethnicity and culture plays in the meaning of and negotiations over child support money.

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Notes

- 1 Significantly, Aotearoa/New Zealand's child support scheme does not include a pass-on provision, something that is out of keeping with other schemes. In the Aotearoa/New Zealand case, mothers who apply for a sole parent welfare benefit must also apply for child support. Any child support money collected is retained by the Crown up to the value of the main benefit paid to the parent with care; only after this threshold is reached is child support money passed on to beneficiary mothers. We do not discuss the pass-on provision because it did not inform any of our participants' decisions about whether or not to pursue child support (or at least if it did, it was not discussed in the interviews). For information on the workings of Aotearoa/New Zealand's child support scheme, see <http://www.ird.govt.nz/childsupport/>.
- 2 In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Pacific peoples predominantly refers to those of Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Niuean, Tuvaluan, and/or Tokelauan ancestry.
- 3 High rates of extended family co-residence also arise out of material circumstances. Pacific people by and large remain low-income earners who face high housing costs, thereby making co-residence a way to efficiently manage scarce economic resources.
- 4 In the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand's child support scheme, the requirement for mothers receiving a welfare benefit to formally apply for child support monies adds another level of complexity to these relations of power by subordinating both the payer and the payee to the power of the state.
- 5 A Samoan term translated as times when family support is needed; this support typically materialises in the form of financial support. A Samoan term is being used here, as opposed to an English word or a word from another Pacific language, because the mothers used this word to describe this practice that is prevalent among Pacific families.
- 6 A Samoan word translated as a person of European descent. A Samoan term is being used here because the mothers used this word to describe people of European descent.
- 7 However, there are some important differences, too. Within Pacific cultures, the husband–wife relationship comes secondary to the parent–child relationship (Pasikale & George, 1995). Similarly, the overall control of money does not necessarily reflect the gendered patterns present in Palagi families (Pahl, 1995); instead, access to and control over money is hierarchically arranged by age (Fleming, 1997).
- 8 Language nests refer to early childhood education centres that take an immersion-based approach to language revitalisation.
- 9 Aotearoa/New Zealand's support service for the health and well-being of children under five years.
- 10 Aotearoa/New Zealand's child support collection agency.
- 11 The father did not pay any child support while the child lived in Australia.
- 12 To the extent that a maternal preference for informal child support arrangements is the result of gendered moral rationalities, we might anticipate Palagi mothers sharing this preference too.

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