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**The Declining Trend of Child Support Cases in Monterey County, California: An
Ethnographic Study Exploring the Dynamics of Case Closures**

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Abstract

Child support is a topic rarely treated in anthropological literature. This ethnographic research study fills part of the gap created by this oversight by examining the recent phenomenon of the declining child support caseload in Monterey County, California to ascertain the specific factors influencing the parent's decision to close the case. A more holistic picture of the closure process is painted by looking at case closures from the perspectives of the caseworkers and parents through interviews, observations, and surveys of a total of 53 participants from varied backgrounds. Overall, this study found that misconceptions of the child support system, displeasure and frustration with the way the system works, and dissatisfaction with the amount of money received are leading factors in the parent's decision to close the case. These findings suggest that the declining trend of child support cases in Monterey County is impacted largely by parent dissatisfaction with the child support system and the agency itself.

Introduction

What is child support? Child support agencies were originally created in 1975, when Congress passed Title IV-D of the Social Security Act in an effort to reduce public expenditures on welfare (OCSE). This law requires every state to set up child support agencies and an enforcement system to collect funds from the non-custodial parent to be distributed to the custodial parent. In California, the child support system operates under the authority of the Department of Health and Human Services, the California Department of Child Support, and the Office of Child Support Enforcement, as well as local child support agencies in each of the counties. The focus of this project is on the local level of this hierarchy, with data collection taking place at the Monterey County Department of Child Support Services (or MCDCSS, hereafter also referred to as “the office”) in Salinas, California.

Child support itself is a complex system that has proven complicated for many to navigate. One of the goals of this paper is to clarify some of the common misconceptions regarding child support and child support agencies. Simply put, child support agencies collect monies from the non-custodial parent (the parent who takes care of the child or children the least amount of time) to provide to the custodial parent (the parent who takes care of the child or children the most amount of time) based on a court order. A set amount is to be paid each month to the State Disbursement Unit in Sacramento, California, where the payment will then be processed for distribution to the custodial parent. Child support agencies have specific authority granted to them similar to that of a law-enforcement agency: they have access to databases to locate individuals, the power to set up wage garnishments, the authority to suspend driver’s licenses, business licenses,

and passports, and, most significantly, the ability to enforce child support court orders. The role of child support is to collect money from non-custodial parents for custodial parents who might otherwise have difficulty obtaining financial assistance from the biological father (or mother) of their child.

To apply for a child support case, a parent, either custodial or non-custodial, must fill out a 32-page application that requires information about the custodial and non-custodial parties, paternity, and family relationships (CDCSS 2016). Next, a child support officer who is in charge of establishing new cases will process the application and may contact the parent requesting the case for additional information. Once all the necessary information has been collected from both parties (the non-custodial and custodial parents), the case will be brought before a judge to set up the amount of child support to be paid each month; this is the court order that will be enforced by the agency. Either parent may request a modification to this amount, which may or may not be granted based on such circumstances as income. There is a \$25 one-time annual fee that is charged on a new case that has collected more than \$500 per year. Other than this amount, child support agencies retain none of the funds paid by a non-custodial parent. These agencies are funded entirely through state and federal funding.

During the past five years, the total number of child support cases has been steadily declining within the state of California, as well as in most of its counties. In the *Annual Report to Congress*, prepared by the Office of Child Support Enforcement under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, California reports a substantial decrease in total caseload over a seven-year period (fiscal years 2007-2014), having declined from 1,659,287 cases to 1,257,376 cases statewide (OCSE 2014). The *National*

Child Support Strategic Plan FY 2010 – 2014, which is prepared by the Office of Child Support Enforcement, reveals that one in four children in the nation is served by the child support program and that child support is crucial in “supporting the economic security, health, and social well-being of children and their families” (OCSE 2013:2). The phenomenon becomes even more significant when custodial parents are otherwise struggling to financially provide for their child or children. Considering many social and cultural factors, such as generally increasing birthrates between 2000 and 2010 (CDPH 2016), a weaker economy, and higher rates of unemployment, one would expect to find a greater number of child support cases being retained, yet the opposite is occurring. Taking into account the occasional cases that are closed due to the child reaching maturity and no longer being eligible for child support and those where the non-custodial parent cannot be located, therefore automatically closing the case, this still leaves a large number of cases being closed for unknown, unspecified, or uncertain reasons. In Monterey County alone, more child support cases are being closed each month than are being opened. Why is this happening?

The aim of this study is to answer the important question of why the total number of child support cases in Monterey County, California is declining by specifically looking into the lives of parents who are closing a case or who have closed a case in the past and ascertaining the factors that have influenced the decision of these parents. To address this issue more holistically and from multiple perspectives, I collected data from caseworkers and parents through interviews, observations, and surveys. The interviews and surveys focused mainly on the factors that influenced the decision to close the child support case by examining each parent’s experience with the child support agency, the parents’

perceived benefit of having an open versus a closed child support case, and how the particular, individual circumstances of each parent participant shaped the choice to close the case. In this paper, I argue that factors categorized under the two overarching themes of *Problems with the Child Support System* and *Problems with Money, Payments, and Relationships* are responsible for most of the parents' decisions to close their child support case, thereby driving the declining caseload trend.

Based on interviews with caseworkers and my own observations, the public generally views child support as a strict system that provides further difficulties for parents rather than assisting them in their day-to-day lives. Parents' decisions to close their child support case can be substantially influenced by their being under the impression that having an open case is negatively affecting their relationships, especially those with the non-custodial parent, and the non-custodial parent's relationship with the child or children (Laakso 2002; Lin and McLanahan 2007; Teachman 1991). As such, it is important to note that the social arrangements surrounding each parent and the pressures, influence, and support that results from these relationships have a marked impact on the decision-making process and the experience that results during and after case closure. In this paper, I examine one such relationship, namely that between the custodial mother and the non-custodial father, and its impact on the mother's decision to close the case. Furthermore, I explore how frustrations emanating from dealing with the child support agency affects the decision to close the case, addressing such issues as fairness, bias, and enforcement, as all of these have been shown to influence how a parent interacts with and feels about child support and the child support agency (Bartfeld and Meyer 1994, Ellis 2001, Huang, Han, and Garfinkel 2003). Finally, I will examine how

parents can become what I term “victims of bureaucracy,” where dealing with the child support agency – a bureaucratic entity – becomes such a large burden that the costs of closing the child support case greatly outweigh the benefits of keeping it. In other words, although these parents are exercising power by choosing to disassociate themselves from the child support agency, they become victims of this bureaucratic entity because they have been unable to achieve their goal of receiving child support payments.

In approaching the topic of child support, it is important to note a distinction between official child support awards – those that are facilitated through the assistance of public service agencies, such as the fieldsite for this project (the Monterey County Department of Child Support Services, or MDCSS) and which can be legally enforced – and unofficial child support, typically defined as gifts, money, or other contributions a non-custodial parent makes to his or her child or children (Teachman 1991). I will discuss how, when, and why such alternate arrangements affect the decision to close the official child support case, and how this, in turn, affects the overall declining trend of the caseload. Furthermore, I will examine the effects money has on choice, with emphasis on how the non-custodial parent’s ability to pay affects the decision to close the child support case (Sorensen 1997). Additionally, I will discuss how pressure and coercion from the non-custodial parent, the family of the non-custodial parent, and even the custodial parent’s own family affects the parent’s decision to close his or her child support case, as well as how changing perceptions and public image of the child support system, especially relating to the “bad guy” and “collection’s agency” image, and its benefits, influences the parent’s decision to close the case (Razzano 2014, Lin and McLanahan 2007).

Fieldsite

When I first began this research project, it was my intention to experience the child support office like a child support caseworker would on a day-to-day basis. During my nine weeks of fieldwork, I commuted to the Salinas office, facing traffic like any other commuter, working from 9:00 in the morning to 5:30-6:00 in the evening, every Monday through Friday. The Salinas Valley is an interesting sight, as agricultural fields line just about every major road, and the bustle of farm equipment mixes daily with the rush of the busy worker. The Monterey County Department of Child Support Services is located in a tucked-away area of Salinas, California, next to a small airport, warehouses, manufacturing plants, and business parks. In a small lot bordering acres of farmland, the child support office is found among a handful of other agencies, including the Department of Social Services, the One-Stop Career Center, and a small field office for the United States Department of Agriculture.

Finding the office can be a struggle. When I conducted my fieldwork, there were a number of construction projects occurring that obscured the location of the office even more, with parking lot entrances being blocked and view of the building obscured. It is also important to note that Salinas lies near the northern edge of Monterey County. Since this child support office serves all of Monterey County, those parents who are located further south can have significant difficulty in reaching the office. It can be a time consuming and costly trip for those who have to travel the 110 miles from Monterey County's southern-most reaches, which is especially problematic for the less-affluent parents who may not own a car or even be able to take time off to go to the office.

As I entered the lobby of the office on my first day, I noticed the bland decorations, as well as some more surprising features: the gray walls, a monochrome mural, pictures of government officials, an American flag, a play area for children, metal chairs set up as a waiting area, metal detectors barring the doors of the interview rooms, and bulletproof glass separating the public area from the staff area. A standing-height counter with three separate windows and an additional sit-down payment window comprised the interaction space of public and private. I announced my presence and was greeted by a manager who then showed me the cubicle where I would be sitting during my time there, gave me a tour of the office, and introduced me to the staff. Everyone was very welcoming and friendly. As I toured the building, I took note of the genetic testing room (for establishing paternity), the interview rooms, and the main area where each and every child support caseworker was sitting in a cubicle. What the décor was lacking, the caseworkers made up for in personality. The office atmosphere was very warm and friendly, with cooperation being advocated over competition. Many of the caseworkers I interviewed described working there as being part of a family: the work takes precedence and everyone wants to help the families that comprise the caseload.

Methods

Population, Inclusion Criteria, and Recruitment Strategies

First, I want to touch briefly on the characteristics of the population of child support case holders, the inclusion criteria for this study, the participants, and the methods used for recruitment. Monterey County is a very diverse region – which was one of the critical factors that led to it becoming the chosen field site – with an equally

diverse population. The cases handled by the child support agency represent the diversity of Monterey County, with a mixture of people from different backgrounds comprising the caseload. More than 415,000 people call this county home. The median income per household is \$59,168, but incomes can and do range widely, from approximately \$20,000 annually to more than \$150,000, indicating a substantial income disparity. Although parts of Monterey County are fairly wealthy, such as the Pebble Beach and Monterey Peninsula areas, there are other parts of the county that represent the lower end of the income spectrum; about 17% of the total population falls below the federal poverty level of \$24,250 for a four-person household (OASPE 2015). In terms of ethnic background, the population is equally diverse. According to the latest census report, Monterey County is 55.4 % Hispanic or Latino, 32.9% White, 5.7% Asian, and 2.7% African American¹.

As this research project is primarily concerned with the experiences of the parents in closing their cases – with the additional perspective of the caseworkers – the main recruitment plan focused on finding parent participants. To qualify for inclusion in the study, parents needed to have a child support case that was either being closed at the time of the study or had been closed within the last few years. The caseworker inclusion criteria specified that all those who had worked on or with case closures were qualified to participate in the study. Potential parent participants were identified through the Monterey County Department of Child Support case files (based on lists of parents who had closed their child support case within the last five years) and contacted through the use of recruitment letters, phone calls, and emails. Caseworker selection was based on voluntary recruitment.

Data Collection Methods

¹ Groups with less than 1% representation were not included

Data collection for this study involved a mixed methods approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. In preparation for fieldwork, the following methods were identified as necessary to gather the needed data: audio-recorded interviews (interview styles were structured, semi-structured, and informal); participant observation in the office; and archival and textual research to establish context (this included gathering of relevant statistics). However, due to unforeseeable factors, these methods were not sufficient in the field and were further expanded to include mailed-out and online anonymous surveys for parents.

Here, I will address each of the methods in more detail. Interviews are one of the primary methods of gathering ethnographic data and were one of the most indispensable tools during the course of this study. As previously mentioned, each interview was audio-recorded. The types of interviews utilized for this project included structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and informal interviews, in addition to naturally-occurring discourse that was not recorded on an audio device but recorded in daily field notes.

Two separate interview guides were created with specific sets of questions for the parents and for the caseworkers. Interviews were split into two components: the structured interview component and the semi-structured interview component. In the structured interview component, participants were asked a series of rigidly structured questions that required specific answers from the participant and which were used to establish a biographical background of the participant, including age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and level of education. It should be noted that the participants were given free choice in associating/identifying themselves with a particular ethnicity and socio-economic class. In the semi-structured interview component, participants were

asked a series of questions designed to establish attitudes toward child support, the system, the closure process, and other such factors, as well as to gather the history of their particular child support case and surrounding issues. Participants were given greater freedom in answering and more time to add details. During the course of this section of the interview, participants were also asked follow-up questions based on particular topics mentioned.

Informal interviews took place in a variety of different formats. These were not audio-recorded but detailed notes were taken immediately after they took place. Also placed in this category is the idea of naturally-occurring discourse; small talk to establish rapport with participants would be one example. All interviews were conducted at the Monterey County Department of Child Support office in either a small conference room (for caseworkers) or a small interview room (for parents). It should be noted that the closing interviews with parents conducted by the caseworkers take place in small, dimly-lit, and very confined “interview rooms” that separate the caseworker and the parent with a thick slab of bulletproof glass. When I inquired why both the lobby and the interview rooms, which were also secured, in some cases, with metal detectors, required such extensive security, it was relayed to me that there have been some problems in the past with parents (in this case, non-custodial fathers) acting violently, potentially putting staff at risk.

Participant observation took place within the context of the office as a whole and within interviews. On some occasions, I would be present for a closing interview being conducted by a child support caseworker with a parent. Notes were taken on behavior and what was said, but these interactions were not audio-recorded. I also informally observed

caseworker behavior within the office to gain a sense of the morale, cooperation, competition, and other factors influencing behavior between colleagues. Overall, I completed observations in the following circumstances: the caseworker while handling phone calls from parents who were calling about closing their case; the in-person interviews between parent and caseworker during the closing process; and inter-office interaction.

The use of archival and textual research was a critical component in gaining both extensive quantitative data such as statistics on caseloads (local, statewide, and nationwide) and California demographics (birth rate, death rate, population, etc.) as well as further qualitative data on factors that may be affecting the declining trend of open cases. The qualitative data gathered for this project utilizing archival and textual research include parent forums on child support, media articles, and professional opinions on the topic of the child support system.

Finally, anonymous online and mail surveys were added as a method for this study when it became difficult to recruit sufficient parent participants, possibly due to the public perception of child support and related topics. It is important to note here that parents did not respond well to recruitment phone calls, often changing to an angry tone, sometimes hanging up without letting me explain why I was calling. As my primary recruitment strategy for parents was proving to be less than optimal for the needs of the study, the development and deployment of anonymous online and mail surveys that allowed parents to share their feelings and experiences confidentially increased parent participation by over 3,000%. These surveys were comprised of similar questions to the formal interviews, while being crafted to make participation more enticing.

Data Overview

Overview of Data Collected

Data were collected from fifty-three participants through the various methods mentioned in the preceding section of this paper. As previously indicated, the participants for this study were split into two main pools: parents and caseworkers. For the caseworkers, collected data include eleven primary interviews (structured and semi-structured), six follow-up interviews (semi-structured only), and several informal interviews and communications that were recorded in the field notes. For the parents, collected data include one formal in-person closing interview (where the caseworker interviewed the parent regarding a case closure request), which I was allowed to observe and later interview the parent; one in-person closing interview that the parent gave me permission to observe but not to be interviewed; and one scheduled formal in-person interview with a parent who had closed her case several years ago. Surveys were the most productive means of data collection from the parent pool. Overall, I received thirty responses to the online survey and nine responses to the mail survey. Through archival and textual research, data and statistics were gathered, such as opinion pieces from online forums about child support, written by either parents or professionals; media and academic articles regarding child support; caseload trends, locally, statewide, and nationwide; procedure, regulations, and laws pertaining to child support, both locally and statewide; and California demographic information (including birthrate, death rate, and, average age).

In total, eleven caseworkers, with varying job titles and descriptions, were interviewed, six of whom were prompted for a follow-up interview. The caseworkers stem from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and education, characteristics that were self-reported. Out of the eleven caseworkers interviewed, the ages can be grouped as follows: two were in the 30-39 age range; three were in the 40-49 age range; three were in the 50-59 age range; two were in the 60-69 age range; and one was in the 70-79 age range. The average age of the caseworker participant pool was 52, with the youngest caseworker interviewed being 34 years old and the oldest 73. Seven out of eleven caseworkers interviewed were female, and four were male. In terms of ethnicity, five caseworkers self-identified as Hispanic, four self-identified as Caucasian, and two self-identified as African American/Black. Socio-economic class self-identification was split into two groups: the majority (n = 9) identified as being in the middle class, and the minority (n = 2) identified as being in the upper-middle class. Educational backgrounds were extremely varied, with six caseworkers reporting “some college” as their highest level of education, three caseworkers reporting having an AA or AS degree as their highest level of education, one caseworker reporting having a BA or BS degree as their highest level of education, and one caseworker reporting having a Graduate degree (Master’s and above) as their highest level of education. Finally, the caseworkers were divided into two distinct job categories: Child Support Case Establishment Worker (n = 2), who are responsible for opening new cases, and Child Support Case Enforcement Worker (n = 6), who are responsible for enforcing current cases, with supervisors (n = 2) and complaint resolutions officers (n = 1) also being interviewed.

In total, forty-two parents with diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and education became participants in the study. Out of the forty-two parents who participated, age information was unavailable for thirteen parents, with the remaining twenty-nine participants being grouped as follows: two were in the 20-29 age range; nine were in the 30-39 age range; fourteen were in the 40-49 age range; and four were in the 50-59 age range. The average age of the parent participant pool was 41, with the youngest parent participant being 24 years old and the oldest 59. Twenty-six out of forty-two parent participants were female and three were male, with gender information not being available for thirteen participants. The large disparity between the number of female and male participants stems from the fact that mostly women are opening and closing cases, as they are more often the custodial parent. In terms of ethnicity, thirteen parents self-identified as Hispanic, twelve self-identified as Caucasian, two self-identified as African American, and two self-identified as Asian. Socio-economic class self-identification was split into three groups: fifteen participants identified as being in the middle class, thirteen participants identified as being in the lower class, and one participant identified as being in the upper-middle class. Educational backgrounds were extremely varied, with four parents reporting High School as their highest level of education (one was a drop-out), ten parents reporting having “some college” as their highest level of education, four parents reporting having an AA or AS degree as their highest level of education, six parents reporting having a BA or BS degree as their highest level of education, and four parents reporting having a Graduate degree (Master’s and above) as their highest level of education. Finally, the overall caseload at

MCDCSS is comprised of approximately 90% female custodial parents to 10% male custodial parents, a ratio that was, interestingly, also represented in my participant pool.

Out of the three interviews conducted with parents, two of them occurred in the midst of the parent (in both cases, the mother) requesting to close her case. The other was a scheduled formal interview with a parent (also a mother) who had closed her child support case some years ago but was interested in sharing her experience. The closing interview is an important part of the case closure process in which a caseworker interviews a parent as to why he or she is requesting to close the case (these interviews can occur in person or over the phone). During the interview, the caseworker proceeds through a checklist that was designed to facilitate a discussion regarding the case closure request, making sure that the parent is aware of the benefits of keeping the case open, as well as the implications of closing the case. Caseworkers also inquire whether the parent requesting the closure is being pressured, harassed, or coerced into closing the case.

Through analysis of all collected data, I uncovered several important themes. In this paper, I will be exploring two of these themes from the perspectives of the parent(s) and the caseworker, looking specifically at problems and frustrations with the child support system and money, payments, and relationships.

Theme 1: Problems and Frustrations with the Child Support System

A major goal of this project is to gain an understanding of the factors that influence a parent's decision to close a child support case from the perspectives of parent and caseworker. To illustrate the first theme, which I have entitled "Problems and Frustrations with the Child Support System," I have selected a number of excerpts from

the interviews with caseworkers and parents and the anonymous online surveys with parents. It should be noted that every single parent respondent indicated that they were frustrated, distressed, and/or dissatisfied with the child support system. All names are pseudonyms.

Julia is a 40-year-old caseworker of Hispanic background. In her interview, she discussed many issues that parents call her about, informing me that parents often feel frustrated with how the system works. A particularly interesting point she made was when she was asked about public perception of the agency. Julia replied:

We're the bad guy. We are the bad guy. We take people's money and we believe all these lies. Because anybody, any woman can, come in here and open a case against anybody...And it's totally ok. Nobody questions it. Nobody. If you say he's the dad, he's the dad. In that area, I do agree with the men. You know, you're right...we're taking her word for it. She says you're the dad, that's why you have to cooperate with our office...And genetic testing is free through our office. Our office offers it. If you don't think you're the dad, you better speak up now.

From this quote, we see that Julia believes that the child support system is flawed, seeming to favor the mother versus the father, which is a major source of stress and frustration for the parents. According to Julia, the public image of the agency is affected by this bias towards assisting the mother but being harsh on the father, which further shapes parents' expectations on who will receive help and to what degree. The

perceptions of mothers and fathers in terms of responsibility and child support can be better understood through the lens of the principles of equity and equality as described by Lin and McLanahan (2007). The former states that the rights of the father are linked to the father's fulfillment of his obligations, while the principle of equality approaches the question of rights in a more egalitarian way, stating that fathers should have rights regardless of having fulfilled their obligations (Lin and McLanahan 2007).

In terms of these two principles, there is a major difference in how mothers and fathers viewed rights and responsibilities when it comes to child support: mothers favor the equity principle, wherein fathers must fulfill obligations before being allowed certain rights (e.g. visiting the children), whereas fathers clearly favored the equality principle (Lin and McLanahan 2007). A similar trend is seen in my own results. Caseworkers and parents (mostly mothers) often suggested that fathers should only be allowed the privilege of visiting their children and spending time with them if they have fulfilled their obligations, in this case, paying their monthly child support. Unfortunately, the way in which the system currently tends to treat non-custodial parents, who are, for the most part, men, is not reflective of the equality principle. This has led to the idea that the child support, as well as the judicial, system does not care about fathers (Johnson, Levine & Doolittle 1999; Lin and McLanahan 2007). As a result, fathers often harbored distrust towards the system and were unwilling to participate and meet the demands placed upon them.

In further interviews, a similar theme can be observed; parents are often frustrated or upset because the system does not seem to be working in their favor, especially when it comes to collecting money and enforcing support. When I asked Victor, a 47-year-old

caseworker of African American ethnicity, about the typical responses he gets from parents for whom collecting support has been difficult, he replied:

So, in dealing with that parent, most certainly, the response that I'm probably going to get is frustration that we can't collect for that parent.

The caseworkers often remarked that this is a common response: many parents call the office whilst in a state of exasperation as a consequence of not having received any money. Due to the fact that there are more custodial mothers than fathers, it is frequently the custodial mothers who call to complain about the lack of funds received, which ties into a perception issue on the part of the non-custodial fathers. In my interviews with caseworkers, I inquired about their general experiences with parents and why they call the office, and found great consensus that fathers tended to view child support as a hostile system that was “out to get them,” a finding reported elsewhere as well (Johnson et al. 1999). In turn, this is related to another shortcoming in the system: payments must first be sent to the central disbursement unit in Sacramento, California before being distributed to parents. This leads to a delay in receiving money for the custodial parent, causing further distress to ensue.

This issue raises another key point that several of the caseworkers made: the fact that child support had switched from a local system, which meant that each agency was an independent entity, to a statewide and interconnected system, which has linked all child support offices in California, has posed difficulties for both the caseworkers and the families involved. The switch occurred in 2007 and has, since then, caused caseworkers

increased frustration due to additional paperwork and a much slower computer system. Helena, a 59-year-old caseworker of African American ethnicity who also handles complaints from parents about child support and related topics, confided that she dislikes the statewide system. She says:

You know what I would like? I wish we went back to just being an individual agency and not be linked statewide...because statewide, there's a lot of things we can and cannot do, and, I just felt like when we were with...the DA's office, that those allowed little things that we could do...We can't manipulate the [statewide] system- um- yeah, that's the one thing I would like to go back to, 'cause there are a lot of little issues [with the] statewide system...

Helena noted that the new statewide system, which has been in effect for about 10 years, has put many limitations on the things caseworkers can do to help parents. Throughout her interview, she expressed a desire to return to the old system, where they were a local, independent agency running under the supervision of the district attorney's office. This same sentiment was expressed in three other interviews with caseworkers, making it a significant overall theme. It is interesting to think about this idea in terms of institutional memory (Coffey 2003). Many of the caseworkers currently employed at MCDCCS have been working there since before the system switch occurred, meaning that they remember the ways in which the agency used to run. It turns out that caseworkers were much happier with the old system, as the new system places several limitations on their work.

Rather than suffering from “institutional memory loss” (Coffey 2003), the office staff remembers too well, leading to problems on the part of the caseworkers coping with change.

In addition to its shortcomings, there is also the question of fairness of the child support system. Victor, the caseworker mentioned earlier, raised crucial points in one of his interviews that also relate to the next theme. He states:

*...I see some things that are not really fair to fathers who are paying and I understand that this system that we're on is really designed for the non-custodial parties who are **not** paying, but what that does is that it negatively affects some of the parties who are paying [...] For an example, the system was designed to suspend licenses for non-custodial parties. Well, we have some parties that are paying support and they may not be paying the full amount for various reasons, cut hours, reduced hours, reduced pay to keep their jobs with the economy. Whatever the reason, they may be paying less, but the system will suspend their license because they're not paying the full amount. That's really not beneficial to those parties who are trying to do their best and comply, so that's one thing that concerns me.*

The system was designed to punish the non-custodial party (the party ordered to pay child support, which may be either the father or mother, but is typically the father) who is not paying the court-ordered amount. These punishments include revocation of a father's

driver's license, which affects the father's ability to make a living, since he may then be unable to get to work, and the threat of jail time. In my own results, as well as in other's research, we see that men often stop paying child support because they feel as though they are left with too little to survive on for themselves, with the further concern that the child support system just does not seem to care about their own well-being (Johnson et al. 1999; Sorensen and Zibman 2001). Many fathers want to pay child support but are too poor to pay (Sorensen 1997; Johnson et al. 1999). Through the way the current system is set up, those who are doing their best to pay are being punished as well, which is a point that several of the parent survey respondents made. This represents a monumental failure on the part of the child support system, as it is not taking into account that non-custodial fathers may be *willing* to pay their child support obligations, but are *unable* to do so.

From a caseworker's perspective, we see that certain limitations and design factors of the system tend to shape the experience of the parents relying on and utilizing it. As a result of such factors, many of the parents complained that child support was unfair, frustrating, and stressful. Daniella, a 47-year-old mother, shares she was frustrated with the child support process and that closing her case seemed like a better option than dealing with the stress. When asked why she closed her case, she replied:

I closed my case due to a lack of enforcement and frustration of the process [...] The case is extremely frustrating. [...] Giving up seemed like a better option than dealing with the loopholes and incompetencies [...] Closing was of more benefit to me because it was exasperating to deal with [child support].

Maya, a 24-year-old mother, shares this sentiment. She notes that dealing with child support and the many processes associated with it was stressful, time consuming, and not worth it. In the end, she had no further desire to deal with child support, leading her to close her case. Maya stated:

[Child support] was a hassle. It wasn't helping me. They were always contacting me, wanting info from me that I didn't have. They weren't willing to raise child support unless I filled out and provided a whole bunch of documentation on why [...] I did not want to deal with the stress and BS anymore.

Much of these data reflect the female voice of custodial parents, but as previously mentioned, non-custodial fathers faced similar struggles with paperwork, the child support system, and the judicial system. Although my own research was not broad enough to include the scope of the court system and its influence on the experience of both custodial and non-custodial parents, others have found that poverty, race, and being a man all influenced court decisions negatively (Johnson et al. 1999). At the macro-level, immigrant families, who represent a small proportion of the overall caseload, are faced with poverty, discrimination, racism, language problems, immigration laws, and legal and illegal status (Fong 2004). A significantly larger proportion of the caseload, however, faces these very same struggles. Although official income of families is not generally recorded, data suggest that many families fall into the low-income category. The

dissatisfaction stemming from the way in which their families are treated caused many men to “opt out” of the system, which is partially reflected in the reasons offered for why cases are closed (Johnson et al. 1999). Frustration and dissatisfaction on the part of the non-custodial father leads to a lack of payments, money, and frustration on the part of the custodial mother, who then decides to close the case, due to the perception that it is just not worth pursuing.

Elena, a 43-year-old custodial parent, explains this dissatisfaction well. The main reason she closed her case was due to her dissatisfaction with the system. She responded:

I feel unsatisfied with the way the system runs. Rules, laws, or whatever you want to call it, don't work the way they put it in paper. Unfortunately, I am one of a thousand single mothers who struggle every day to meet the needs of my children because the system cannot locate the individual responsible for half of the support of his children. The system cannot find him and I see him all the time [...] It's disappointing but what can I do? I can't do much.

It appears that Elena's dissatisfaction with the system, which also seems to be a disappointment, stems from the fact that the laws, rules, and regulations relating to child support do not transfer well into real-life situations. This links back to the concept of bureaucratic rigidity (Foster 1990) that builds on Weber's model of bureaucracy, which states that there are “fixed and official jurisdictional areas, which are generally ordered by rules” and that, in general, bureaucracy actively segregates the resulting official

activity from the sphere of everyday life (Gerth and Mills 1946:196-197). Merton's model of simple bureaucratic rigidity posits that bureaucratic offices (child support agencies certainly fall under this category) pressure their employees to be prudent, methodical, and disciplined in following prescribed rules (Foster 1990). This is occurring in child support offices, as there are many rules and regulations that need to be followed. However, as we have seen with Elena's case, following rules can work to the disadvantage of the parent seeking out the service in the first place. In this way, bureaucratic rigidity, and bureaucracy itself, is linked to case closures. Going back to Elena's case once more, the system failed her because the father could not be located through the process that child support caseworkers are mandated to use, leaving her to deal with her family's finances by herself. Additionally, this in itself also represents another shortcoming of the system; if the father cannot be located within a specific amount of time, the computer system *automatically* closes the case, leaving the mother without child support.

My one in-person formal interview with a parent took place with a 44-year-old mother named Amanda. She arrived earlier than our interview had been scheduled and immediately met with some difficulty when she talked to one of the lobby staff. When I met with her in one of the interview rooms (she had indicated that she would like to meet at the office), she began by relaying to me her story of entering the building. It turns out that the staff wanted her to fill out a form with her name, address, and social security number, which she refused to do. This, in itself, is a prime example of how the rules and regulations of the office conflict with the mission to help people and make them feel welcome, another cause for distress in the already distressed parent.

In Amanda's interview, she frequently expressed a strong desire to help her ex-partner by closing her child support case, indicating that she did not feel it was fair for her to keep the case open as arrears piled up, even after the kids had emancipated. She states:

I've improved myself to where I didn't need the money as badly. I could have kept going and kept on getting it so that they could live comfortably and go to college without worrying about it, but, it just didn't seem fair, to him, so I closed the case [...] Like, this money thing, it had to stop. I don't know what I would have done if someone had told me to pay \$1,200 a month for kids, you know? [...] It's good. I know it took a big load off of him, cause he, you know, because everybody is entitled to enjoy their life, so... He shouldn't be having to pay me for the rest of his life.

When asked about how she felt when she was in the process of closing her case, she responded:

Honestly, I felt good about it. I was a little nervous, just because I was like, oh my god, this is a lot of money, the things I could do with that money, get greedy or whatever, but no. I felt good about it. And I felt good being able to tell him that, and uh, I don't feel bad about it. I don't regret it.

Overall, this mother frequently expressed her desire to ease the father's burden of having a child support payment as one of the major factors that influenced her decision to close her child support case. Both this desire to help ex-partners and a major frustration with how the child support system works are major themes that surfaced in interviews and surveys.

As illustrated by examples from the caseworkers and the parents, the child support system has many shortcomings that lead to frustration on the part of the parents, and sometimes even the caseworkers, who often feel as though they are limited by what the child support system will let them do to fulfill the office's mission of helping families and assisting parents.

Theme 2: Money, Payments, and Relationships

Another important theme uncovered in the interviews and surveys relates to money, payments, and parental relationships. The typical public image of child support has been described to me by several participants as being a collections agency, and nothing more, leading to a belief that caseworkers are solely interested in taking money from the fathers (or the mothers, depending on who has been ordered to pay child support). The Father's Fair Share study, which focused on poor men who owed child support, found that many of the participants disliked how the child support system treated them, with some going so far as to say that they are "pimps," only out for money (Johnson et al. 1999:85). This is an interesting concept, as my own results indicated a strong sentiment on the parts of both the mothers and fathers involved in the system that child support is only after collecting payments. Caseworkers, however, were against this

idea; all participants interviewed stated that they feel that child support is much more than a collections agency and that what they do helps families.

Vanessa, a 35-year-old caseworker of Hispanic ethnicity, represents this view. She feels that child support can be a helpful tool for parents so that money becomes less of an issue between the parties involved. Vanessa posits that by taking money out of the equation and letting the child support agency deal with it, parents can focus more on parenting rather than finances. In her interview, she said:

...I tell them [the parents] that if you guys are having a hard time already with visitation and picking up and dropping off the kids, this is one less thing you have to worry about. You don't have to hound him for the money and he doesn't have to feel harassed that you're hounding him for the money [...] That way, you know that we're monitoring [referring to the child support payments] and you guys can concentrate on your parenting.

Vanessa's viewpoint is supported by evidence from the literature. It has been suggested that parental behaviors can offset economic effects, meaning that child well-being is influenced by more than just money (Thomson 1994).

Still, many parents indicate that their main reason for closing the case is that money would either never get to them fast enough or it would never be enough, in the sense that the full amount due (as based on the court order) was rarely received. When given the option of either receiving cash or a direct deposit from the other party or

waiting for payments to process through the system, parents tend to choose the former. Helena, a caseworker, makes a special point of this, stating:

They [the parents] want the money immediately, they don't want to go through the child support agency. So it's always the same response. I get the same response every time: I want my money now.

This is a factor that the caseworkers deal with on a daily basis, and a leading factor in case closures. Viewing this occurrence through the lens of economics and personal choice, we can apply Knight's (1921) model of situational decision making, wherein he cites that there are two types of choices: "risky" or "uncertain" (Chibnik 2011). In the former, decision makers (in this case, the parents) can gauge the probabilities of certain outcomes based on particular decisions. In "uncertain" situations, decision makers do not know what the probabilities are of any particular outcome. Most situations represent a combination of the two (Chibnik 2011), which is certainly accurate in the instance of child support case closure decisions: parents know that closing the case can potentially have detrimental effects on their income and financial well-being, but they have no way to gauge how much of an impact it may have, since non-custodial parents are often unreliable in the amount and frequency of payment. Although Chibnik (2011) found that people have a tendency to diversify and attempt to convert situations from "uncertain" to "risky," my data, in terms of parental choice, do not reflect this type of thinking. Parents tended to close cases and take lump sum payments, which represent one-time, short-term payoffs, over keeping their case open and receiving a steadier, albeit smaller, payment.

Emma, a 41-year-old Hispanic mother, is a good example to illustrate this concept. She chose to receive a quick cash payment from the father rather than dealing with the child support agency, the process, and the wait. She stated:

...child support was not making me a priority. I would get 10 dollars here and there. So when the father came to me with a lump sum, I took it...

Not only do we see that Emma was dissatisfied with the amount of money child support was getting her, we also see a larger issue: the institution is not caring about the individual. From what I have observed in parent/caseworkers interactions and as the results of my interviews, it is becoming evident to me that parents are often misinformed and undereducated about the child support system. Tronto (2010) has found a similar result in institutional settings. Due to the fact that parents are less educated about the child support system than the caseworkers, who have the benefit of routinely being exposed to the system in all its intricacies, some caseworkers have the tendency to look down on parents in their caseloads. Other times, there is miscommunication between the caseworkers and parents, leading to the *perception* that the child support system/agency/caseworker does not care, whereas in reality, the opposite is often true and the caseworkers are doing everything in their power to help. Helena, a caseworker, has the following to say about caring:

Yes, we do collect child support but we do a little bit more than that and we can help people there, 'cause I think that people think all we do is collect money, and we don't care what's going on in your life. So I really

think that we should show people that we do care, I think it really makes a difference in people wanting to go ahead and pay their child support, without saying, you know what, they're getting on my case, and I don't like being bothered, and I don't wanna pay my child support.

This quote illustrates what is often reported by the caseworkers: parents perceive that the system and the caseworkers are uncaring, whereas caseworkers typically express words and actions that are consistent with caring attitudes. In Emma's case, this erroneous perception, coupled with the fact that the non-custodial father offered her a lump sum payment, caused her to close her case.

During the first closing interview I observed, the mother, who was of Hispanic descent and appeared to be in her mid-30s, permitted me to sit in on her interview with the caseworker, but declined a formal interview. Although the closing interview was short (they typically take less than 15 minutes), I noticed some important details: 1) the mother appeared nervous and agitated, 2) she spoke very quietly, and 3) she appeared as if she wanted to "get it over with." Her agitation appeared to be related to her current relationship with the father of her children: she indicated that her relationship would be improved if she closes her case. It has often been found that the relationship between the mother and the father has effects on decisions regarding child support (Laakso 2002, Lin and McLanahan 2007, Teachman 1991). If the relationship is good, mothers are less likely to file for child support (i.e. they feel that being without a child support case benefits them more), with the inverse being true as well (Laakso 2002). My own findings corroborate this idea: mothers tended to close their child support case when they

perceived an opportunity for relationship quality improvement, even when they needed the financial assistance that child support offers them.

While discussing this idea with caseworkers, I found that many of them had interacted with a parent who was under the *false* impression that closing the child support case would lead to an improvement in the relationship, in addition to believing the promises the non-custodial parent (usually the father) was making in terms of paying child support in the future. According to these reports, it appears that fathers tended to play the role of a “good” partner/father, leading the woman to close her case. Then, a few weeks later, the relationship will have deteriorated and the mother re-opens the child support case. This happens very frequently, and many of the child support cases have been closed and re-opened several times. Julia, a 40-year-old caseworker, shares her experience:

And specially when they open and close a case every other month, I already know they're gonna reopen it in a couple months cause I can see the pattern, you know. I try and discourage them not to close the case, but you know, they're in love. They're in love and just once the romance fades, they'll come back and re-open the case and then it just creates more work for me. They have to fill out the forms; I have to process all the forms. The application has like 20 pages! [...] I close cases all the time based on a feeling. On a weekend. You know, he promised to pay this time, but like I said, I see the pattern, they open and close their case every month. They never follow through on their word. [...] They had a good weekend and he

promised and sweet-talked her. But most of the time, I notice that I don't get through to them, they do still close the case. But I always let them know, you know what, we can always re-open the case. And I do, I bring up the amount. Look, he owes you like \$30,000, are you sure you want to forgive this debt? I mean, he's never paid you, like in the last eight years, what makes you think he's gonna start paying now? [...] And then they come back and they're all crying. I don't know why he lied! You know, he said- I thought he was gonna do good by me and the kids, but now he's cheating again, he left me again. Whatever. Or he beat me. [...] I do remind the- I do bring up the past. I'm like, you know, you remember that you closed the case back in January, and then again in March, and then again in July? In the last year, we've opened and closed the case, do you really think this guy is going to change? Do you really think that he'll do good by you and the kids? And yeah, they're like yes, they're convinced. They're like, 'Yes, he's a new man. We went out this weekend. We went to Santa Cruz. He bought the kids some toys and we went to McDonald's; it was awesome! We're gonna try and make it work.'

And very rarely does it work. Almost all of the caseworkers indicated that opening, closing, and re-opening a child support case was a standard and common occurrence.

The second closing interview with a parent was more successful in terms of data collection. Sara, a 37-year-old mother, who was dressed in shabby clothes and looked unkempt at the time of our interview, has three children from three different fathers with

each child having a separate child support case. She came into the office to close the child support case against her current boyfriend, saying that she realizes that he is not a “financially stable person” and never makes the payments. Since he is in financial strains, she expressed a desire to help him, saying:

I don't think it's fair making him pay \$100 a month when he's struggling and I'm going out to eat every night [...] I want to help by taking the bill away.

Most importantly, she emphasized, and repeated often, a desire to “move on with [her] life.” She expressed no desire to re-open her case in the future.

Violet is another parent who shared a similar experience to that of Emma, Amanda, and Sara. She was also receiving very little money through the child support agency, which led her to close her case. She states:

It is not worth the time, the stress, or the effort to collect support. [...] Why should I subject myself to the stress and time suck of filling out forms when at best I'd get no more than \$60 a week? It just didn't seem worth the effort.

Like many parents, Violet is of the opinion that child support is not worth the hassle when the typical payments received are very low. Many parents reported receiving less than \$100 a week, even though they were supposed to receive a much more sizable amount according to their court orders. It should be noted, however, that this is not necessarily a

problem with the system. If the party that is supposed to pay child support never makes a payment through the agency, then no money can be disbursed to the custodial parent. Nevertheless, there is a definite correlation between receiving little or no money through the child support agency and case closures.

The topic of “unofficial child support,” any contributions made to the child or children by the non-custodial parent that is not a direct monetary payment to the custodial parent through a child support agency (e.g. baby wipes, food, vacations, clothes, etc.), needs to be addressed as well (Teachman 1991, Laakso 2002). Several authors suggest that the amount, quality, and kind (official vs. unofficial) of child support depend, at least in part, on the relationship between mother and father (Laakso 2002, Lin and McLanahan 2007, Teachman 1991). Furthermore, unofficial child support appears to be very common, with all of the caseworkers reporting that “diapers and wipes” and other contributions made by the non-custodial father often outweigh the amount provided through official child support (i.e. payments made through the office). Rose, a 54-year-old caseworker who mostly deals with establishing new cases, was asked about coercion and harassment in the closing of child support cases and mentioned something interesting in terms of unofficial child support. She states:

When dad's doing all the talking, that's kind of a clue. Oh, yeah, we're gonna close the – we – we're gonna close the [case] and then I'm gonna help, and life will be good. And I'm buying diapers and wipes. I don't know what it is here, diapers and wipes seem to be the big campaign, I'm really helping, that's all I'm buying.

Philip, a 58-year-old enforcement caseworker, relates the same attitude towards unofficial child support contributions. He states:

I always tell them, keep track of your payments. Buy yourself one of those little receipt books, you know. You are only required to give her, you know, x amount of dollars per month, per the court order. Anything else, we're going to consider it a gift, you know. If you want- well, I bought diapers, I bought toys for my kids. No, that's not child support, that's called being a dad, you know. That's just being, you know- especially with the guys who go, well, I bought them food (laughs). Yeah, that one kind of burns me.

Evidently, caseworkers have a somewhat narrow perspective when it comes to unofficial child support. Since it cannot be counted towards the official child support owed as per the court order, it is considered a gift. In the view of the parent, however, time and other non-monetary contributions made to children have immense value. For instance, the idea of “social capital,” time spent with children, is represented to be an important part of child rearing and support (Coleman 1988, Johnson et al. 1999). The caseworker perspective is problematic as it fails to see that other parental contributions have value as well. In addition to being a problem in terms of the money, payment, and relationships theme, it is also related to a shortcoming of the child support system in that other forms of value are ignored.

Another study has revealed that fathers provided for their children with any means possible, even if this meant not paying official child support. Under federal and state laws, these contributions are not counted towards official child support obligations, sending the message to non-custodial parents that failing to make official payments is an indicator of not caring for their children (Johnson et al. 1999). Based on reports by the caseworkers and parents interviewed, there is a strong feeling of dislike towards the child support system due to this fact and many cases have been closed due to feelings of dislike for the system, stemming from issues regarding money and payments.

Conclusions

Child support is a complex and struggling system that faces many limitations. These limitations are often the cause behind parent and caseworker distress and frustration, which is one of the leading factors why parents choose to close their child support cases. In relating to the child support agency, parents, especially fathers, view themselves as maltreated and disrespected, which leads into the erroneous public perception that the office treats mothers more fairly. There is a divide between how parents perceive the situation and how caseworkers perceive the situation, and these misunderstandings cause many of the frustrations and dissatisfactions with the child support system that I have outlined in this paper. The role of money, payments, and relationships in case closures is significant due to their overall ubiquity and the stress and frustration associated with them. The two themes are certainly highly interrelated, as one of the main functions of any child support agency is to enforce support and collect money from the non-custodial parent. Here we see a further interrelation between system

problems and money problems, all of which culminate in increased distress in the parent, who may, as a result, close his or her child support case.

The factors that go into a parent's decision to close their case are many, varied, and complex. Nevertheless, child support policy makers would do well to take into consideration the following recommendations: 1) caseworkers should receive more extensive training in how to effectively communicate with parents seeking the child support agency's help since many closures appear to stem from a dislike for the agency, of which caseworkers are the main representatives; 2) the child support system itself needs to be reworked to address the issue of negative consequences for non-custodial parents resulting from not paying the full child support amount as court-ordered due to poverty or extremely low-income, in which case, punishing the parent with license-suspension, for example, would only result in more negative consequences for both the non-custodial and custodial parents; and 3) providing more educative services on the child support system to aid parents in navigating the complex process, thereby alleviating some of their stress and frustration.

This study has begun to examine the question of personal choice and decision-making in child support case closures from an anthropological perspective. The methods and approach utilized in this study differ from other studies in that I have focused on the experiences of the people, caseworkers and parents, involved in the social trend of the declining child support caseload, rather than approaching this topic using a less human-focused lens. Future research may want to examine the question of personal choice and decision-making in child support case closures in more depth, by focusing analysis on parents only. Additionally, as the scope of this study was not broad enough to include

non-custodial parent perspectives directly, future research might also examine how non-custodial parents convey their child support stories compared to their custodial counterpart, as well as exploring the inherent gender dynamics in child support cases.

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