

**“It’s not just about the money”: non-resident father’s perspectives on paying
child support**

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Abstract

We examine fathers perceptions of paying child support using in-depth interviews with 26 separated or divorced non-residential fathers in Australia. While the majority of fathers agree that continued financial support of their children is important, child support is a difficult component of their lives. Difficulties arise not only because of the financial costs, but changes in the father-provider role after separation. The payment of child support is viewed as a continuation of the provider role, but fathers have little or no control over how much money is contributed and how that money is spent. Consequently, most fathers question the amounts they have been assessed to pay and how the money is being spent on their children. These responses suggest that policy reforms aimed at changing non-residential fathers child support behaviours need to be sensitive to non-material aspects of the payments not just capacity to pay.

Key words: child support, fatherhood, non-residential fathers, meaning of money

Relationship breakdown has become a common feature of modern family life (Beck-Gernsheim 2002). As a result a large and growing number of families in Australia, as well as other developed nations, are sharing responsibility for the care of children across two households (ABS 2007). With the increased incidence of parenting apart a wide range of complex social issues have emerged, such as how separated parents negotiate co-parenting across households and the rights and role of fathers (see Wilson 2006 for an overview), and parent and child well being (see Amato 2000 for an overview). Central to these issues is the payment and receipt of child support. Child support is one of the most contentious aspects of post-separation parenting, but is also important for its contribution to social and economic outcomes for children.

Typically issues to do with child support are problematised in financial terms, in relation to the amounts of support paid, or not paid. Most child support research investigates the material implications of the (non)payment of child support for mothers and children, finding that mothers and children are economically disadvantaged relative to fathers after relationship breakdown and that in many circumstances child support payments help alleviate that disadvantage (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Bianchi et al. 1999; Smyth and Weston 2000). However, many fathers do not comply with their child support obligations and understanding why they don't is important for both research and policy (Losoncz 2006). Researchers have noted that often the little we know about fathers experiences of child support come from mothers reports (Seltzer and Brandreth 1994; Smyth 2004). Other research has identified inconsistencies between men's and women's reports of non-resident fathers participation in their children's lives (Braver et al. 1991; Smyth et al. 2003). Thus the current child support literature is characterised by an emphasis on mothers and children's experiences with limited knowledge of father's experiences, even though non

resident parents, typically fathers, are the target of most child support policy reforms (Caruana 2004; Curran and Abrams 2000).

The aim of this paper is to provide an examination of non-residential father's perspectives on the payment of child support. Our examination incorporates both economic and symbolic aspects of their experiences. In economic terms, the payment of child support impacts upon the resources available within the non-residential fathers' household. However, money is also invested with symbolic meaning and social significance (Zelizer 1989; Zelizer 1996). Therefore, when fathers pay child support they are not only transferring money into another household – they are making statements about fatherhood, love and power. Our research emphasises both dimensions of the transfer of child support monies across households, as both are important for understanding why father's do or don't pay child support.

Child Support Policy and Legislation in Australia

In Australia, the payment and receipt of child support is managed with reference to the Child Support Scheme (CSS) under the auspices of the Child Support Agency (CSA). Since its inception in 1988, the scheme has defined the support of children as a private responsibility while putting in place substantial legislative scaffolding to manage payments (see Walter 2002). However, parents are not legally required to calculate and manage their child support payments under the Child Support Scheme. Many separated parents have private child support agreements. Consequently, there are no clear figures on the proportion of separated parents who operate within the scheme and the amounts they pay or receive through child support (Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support 2005). Nevertheless, Australian survey data indicates substantial

proportions of parents within the scheme are not paying their full child support liabilities (Losoncz 2006), and that many residential parents report receiving no child support at all (Natalier et al 2008). Therefore, the public and administrative supports for child support do not necessarily translate into payment and receipt of child support at the individual level.

The child support scheme in Australia has recently been the subject of intense policy and legislative scrutiny, resulting in substantial changes to the scheme (see Henman 2005 for a more detailed account of the changes). These changes to child support legislation were largely motivated by a societal shift in discourses surrounding separated parenting. Public debate in Australia, as in Britain ([Smart 2004](#)), has been dominated by fathers' rights groups who argue for legal recognition and protection of non-resident fathers' involvement in their children's lives, seemingly reconstructing fatherhood in ways that de-centre its economic dimension.

Nevertheless, the emphasis of many recent changes to Australian child support legislation has been on the re-calculation of child support liabilities to more accurately reflect the expectations and costs of parenting across two households. Particularly the costs as they affect non-resident parents. One of the main motivations of these changes is to increase the incentive for non-resident parents to pay child support (Caruana 2004). Thus, despite the changing discourses around fatherhood, recent policy changes have approached concerns about child support primarily as a financial issue.

Fatherhood and child support

Over the last few decades a small but growing body of research on non-residential fathers' experiences of parenting has emerged (See Marisgold et al. 2000; [Wilson 2006](#) for recent

reviews). The majority of research, and consequently what we know about non-residential father's relationship with child support, originates from the US and is quantitative in nature. In a recent review of this literature Wilson (2006) identifies only a handful of studies that investigate factors contributing to father's payment of child support. This research provides evidence that the payment, or non-payment, of child support is partly a financial issue for fathers. For example, a US study by [Braver et al. \(1993\)](#) found child support compliance is associated with a fathers' income and employment status. Where father's who are employed and earn higher income are more likely to pay child support.

A relationship also exists between payment of child support and contact with children, where non-resident fathers who have greater involvement with their children are more likely to pay child support (Seltzer et al. 1989; [Thompson 1994](#)). It is likely that this association is due to at least in part to a selection effect, whereby fathers who are more committed to parenting are both more likely to pay child support and want to be involved in their children's lives ([Veum 1993](#)). One limitation of this research is that most of these studies treat child support as a process of economic exchange, i.e. an exchange of time with children for money, rather than understanding the meanings attached to the exchanges and we argue here that both are important.

Money, meaning and power

Even though the economic implications of the payment and receipt of child support are important, particularly because of the related impact on mother's and children's financial well being, this approach is ultimately incomplete if it does not acknowledge the symbolic dimensions of the transactions. The work of [Zelizer \(1989; 1994; 1996\)](#) has highlighted the ways in which

the exchange of money is invested with social meanings that affect its value and legitimate use. From this perspective money is both an instrumental tool and an expressive one; both quantifiable and difficult to assign a value to. When money enters into a family household it is refracted into a multiplicity of monies, all part of a complex social economy. The resultant uses of monies are “the powerful, visible symbols of particular types of social relations and meanings. But they are more than this, they directly affect social relations and meanings” (Zelizer 1994, p. 211).

Qualitative work on divorced and separated parents suggests that the payment of child support can be more fully understood with reference to change and continuity of fathering identities and practices, and in particular changing power structures ([Burgoyne and Millar 1994](#); [Dudova 2006](#); [Simpson 1997](#)). When parents live together, men’s position in the household is tied strongly to their ability to provide economic resources to the family (England and Farkas 1986). The arrival of children suspends or limits women’s participation in paid work but men’s involvement is not substantially changed when they become fathers ([Craig 2007](#); [Gjerdingen and Center 2005](#)). Thus, men’s caretaking of their children in couple households is predominantly defined in economic terms. While discourses of fatherhood are changing to incorporate emotional and physical care of children, the ideology, and associated gendered divisions of labour, of the father as the provider continues to dominate couple households ([Baxter 2002](#); [Bianchi et al. 2006](#); Wall and Arnold 2007).

The economic dimension of fatherhood in couple households entails more than channelling money from the public sphere into the domestic economy. In these households power over

money is multi-faceted, incorporating control over financial decisions, management of finances and budgeting decisions ([Pahl 1983](#); [Vogler and Pahl 1994](#)). In an Australian study [Singh and Lindsay \(1996\)](#) find that money within marital relationships is organised and interpreted with reference to discourses surrounding marriage and the family and these communal discourses make it difficult for couples to talk openly about power. Singh further argues that in marriage “questions on equality, power and control are seldom asked about money” (1997, p. 72). Once the relationship ends, these issues are thrown into stark relief.

When fathers live apart from their children, the economic dimensions of fatherhood are problematised. The difficulties arise both in the formalisation of the amounts of money that are contributed and who controls these contributions ([Burgoyne and Millar 1994](#)). In a review of research into non-residential fathers [Wilson \(2006, p. 302\)](#) comments, “In all qualitative studies non-residential fathers talk of a pervasive sense of being controlled and feeling powerless”. In a large UK study of separated and divorce parents [Smart and Neale \(1999\)](#) find that for the fathers in their study power is often perceived to lie with decision makers in the legal system and with the mothers of their children. The financial responsibility, and associated power, once claimed by fathers is now enacted by mothers who remain the primary day-to-day carers of children and control the household economies within which the children live. However, [Smart and Neale \(1999, p. 146\)](#) also argue that many of the perceived instances of mothers’ abuse of power are more appropriately conceptualized as situational power, derived from their position as primary carers of the children. Under these circumstances the social meaning of money is important, as the financial exchange of child support across households is in one sense a continuation of

economic fatherhood, but in an altered form. Obtaining a better understanding of these issues and tensions that surround the payment of child support is the primary motivation of this paper.

Methods

This study is informed by a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. We argue people make sense of their worlds and in doing so they create those worlds ([Silverman 2001](#)). We do not claim this study uncovers pre-existing truths about parents' 'real' motives for paying, receiving or avoiding child support; rather, the data reflects participants' accounts of their experiences and beliefs, which offer an insight into complex, cultural meanings of the payment of child support.

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 26 non-resident fathers who were liable to pay child support. (These interviews were part of a broader study that investigated the links between child support and housing experiences of both mothers and fathers (Natalier et al 2008)). A mixture of recruitment strategies were employed including, snowball sampling, posting flyers, and advertising with a variety of separated parents support groups (such as Parents Without Partners, Sole Parents Association of Australia). The sample includes people from a range of backgrounds but some groups were difficult to recruit. In particular, the sample is ethnically homogenous and includes only heterosexual parents. Further, the use of support/interest groups to contact potential participants may have contributed to a preponderance of people who have experienced emotional, financial or legal stresses as a result of the relationship breakdown; these concerns will shape how they interpret their circumstances. But ultimately, the aim of qualitative research is "not to generalize about the *distribution* of experiences or processes, but to generalize about the *nature* and interpretive processes involved

in the experiences” (Rice and Ezzy 1999: 43); the range of experiences found in our sample allows us to meet these aims.

The majority of the non-resident fathers were aged 30-49 years old. Most were not currently living with a partner. The majority had 2 or more children. The fathers had a range of incomes, with four receiving welfare as their main source of income, half of the sample had annual incomes over AU\$45,001 and four had incomes over AU\$100,000 a year. Fourteen percent of the respondents pay between AU\$0-\$5 a week in child support, 39 percent pay between AU\$6 - \$75 a week and almost half pay AU\$100 and above a week. While we had a wide range of custodial arrangements represented in our sample, most fathers had substantial parenting time with their children; we defined substantial time as having their children two or more nights a week. Five fathers had 50/50 shared care of their children, but were still liable for child support. Of the remainder four had regular contact, usually every second weekend. Another four had minimal contact such as school holidays only. Finally, three fathers reported little, or no contact with children in that they hadn’t seen them for at least one year. Table A1 in the Appendix provides more information about the demographic and child support characteristics of the sample.

Under the Australian Child Support Scheme, parents organise their payment in three major ways: 1) CSA Collect, whereby parties register an agreement and organise collection through the CSA, sometimes this is done by garnisheeing the wages of the non-resident parent; 2) CSA Private Collect where the CSA registers the agreement but payment is made directly between the parents; and 3) self-administration, where the arrangement is entirely private and between the

parents (CSA undated). Overall in our sample around 79 percent of the fathers had some involvement with the CSA. Of these only 29 percent had arrangements in place where the CSA handled the payment transfer (CSA collect), and for 7 percent of fathers their wages were garnisheed. Most fathers, 50 percent, were paying under CSA Private Collect. Of the remaining 21 percent, 14 percent of fathers had no formal arrangements in place and 7 percent were not paying any child support. All fathers in our sample who were not paying child support stated that they had come to a mutual agreement with their former partner, although we don't have information from their partner to verify this.

The interviews lasted from 15 minutes to 1 ½ hours with most taking around 40 minutes. The interviews were guided by a list of topics of interest, including their housing history and the history of how child support arrangements have been negotiated and managed since separation, rather than detailed questions asked in a set order. With the permission of the respondent all interviews were electronically recorded and fully transcribed. Analysis of the data was in part guided by the questions raised in the existing literature but was also inductive, drawing meaning from patterns in the data. Through critical and reflexive reading of the rich description gathered in the interviews, we identified the manifest material and latent symbolic dimensions associated with the payment and receipt of child support; we explore these findings, below.

Economic implications of paying of child support

For the men in this study, child support is often a source of frustration, anger and disillusionment. In part the difficulties arise because of the financial burden of paying child support; the money matters for the men in this study because they feel it has an impact on their

household budgets. Regardless of income level, fathers say they feel financial pressure in paying child support. For some, the relationship is direct: any money transferred out of their household makes it difficult to make ends meet. Brian (4 children, income=\$13,000pa, CS=\$7pw) comments, “So Child Support can take a person... I’ve actually been told that the pension is below the poverty line, you’re living below the poverty line and Child Support takes more out of that”. Fathers on high incomes, paying significant amounts of child support also feel the financial pressure – for example, Jack, who earns \$150,000 and pays \$577 child support each week for his two younger children explains:

‘So, it’s a big chunk of my income. ... Oh, when I first started I just didn’t have any money in the bank, from month to month. You know, at one stage I didn’t know how I was going to survive.’ (Jack, 4 children, income=\$150,000pa, CS=\$577)

The relationship between the payment of child support and financial strain reported by the fathers in this study is not verifiable through the methods used, and previous research has established that compared to fathers, mothers and children have lower levels of financial well being after relationship breakdown ([Bianchi et al. 1999](#)). Some of the fathers in this study had large incomes, such as Jack in the above quote, but still felt the financial pressure of attaining certain living standards. However, child support obligations, as an absolute amount or as a proportion of income, are only part of the issue, for example, Liam, who earns more and pays less than Jack, above, says:

‘... the child support system is very unfair, I feel it is very unfair to me and that holds me back in terms of what I can do financially, ... If feel like I deserve something out of that, so I deserve to have a nice house, my children deserve to have nice things’. (Liam, 2 children, income=\$250,000pa, CS= \$300 wk)

Perceptions of difficulties with child support are also related to the context of financial reversals and emotional loss experienced as a result of the relationship breakdown. In the following quote, Garth links his financial difficulties, attributed to the payment of child support, litigation costs and the effects of the resultant stress on his ability to manage his business, into a broader emotional response:

‘I just managed to carry the house and carry my job and my sanity, just made it to the edge. And from the edge I haven’t gone any further. I haven’t gone backwards but I certainly can’t go forwards because the money situation is just so tight ... The whole picture has an enormous impact. The debt level that I’ve been left in, and also the maintenance money is a punch in the face every month’ (Garth, 1 child, income=\$40,000pa,CS=\$90pw).

Garth’s circumstances are not typical of most of the fathers in the sample. He was subject to distressing allegations by his former wife, and was party to court proceedings over the living arrangements of his child. Nevertheless the theme of his story – trying to be ‘a good father’ in hard circumstances – winds through other fathers’ accounts. The description of child support as ‘a punch in the face’ suggests that child support is not simply a financial transaction and cannot be disentangled from the emotional upheaval of the relationship breakdown, the negotiation of shared parenting and the consequent changes in men’s approach to fatherhood. In light of this,

we turn now to the latent, social meanings of child support as they are described by the fathers in this study.

Social meanings of child support payments

Child support as a continuation of the provider role

Despite separating and parenting across households the ideology of economic fatherhood remained strong among the men in our sample. Most fathers viewed child support as an important and appropriate way of taking responsibility for their children. However, there are differences among respondents in how they express that importance, depending on custody arrangements, income and how much is paid in child support. The majority of fathers interviewed were assessed to pay AU\$100 a week or more in child support. They see their contributions as the difference between a poor and adequate quality of life for their children. By paying child support these fathers are enacting the role of economic provider. In the two quotes below, Matt articulates the connection between his contributions and his children's standard of living, whereas Sam more directly refers to the continuation of his breadwinner status.

'I don't want to deny my children anything and I don't want to...initially I was, as hard as it was financially, I was quite happy to pay child support and I've been paying the last two years without any problem at all' (Matt, 3 children, income=\$62,000pa, CS=\$300wk).

'The father has to go to work to support the children, I would love to quit my job and buy a mobile home and do whatever but I can't do that because I have to make a conscious decision to support my kids and the best way for me to support my kids is by being the main breadwinner of a broken family.' (Sam, 2 children, income=\$80,000pa, CS=\$325wk)

Respondents who pay smaller amounts of child support place less emphasis on the impact of their contributions while still acknowledging the importance of economic dimensions of fatherhood: “I think it’s [paying child support] taking responsibility for the children which I, obviously, did have a part in their being here so…” (Adam, 3 children, income=\$12,500pa, CS=\$38.50wk). However, these fathers are faced with a dilemma: symbolically their contributions are important to them, but the financial impact of their contributions is limited. In these circumstances, they emphasize the contributions they plan to make in the future. In the following quote, Brian explains his small contributions with reference to his low income – he contributes an appropriate amount given his circumstances, and so shows his commitment to fulfilling the economic dimension of fatherhood. His commitment is further reinforced through presenting the hypothetical scenario of sudden wealth:

‘I believe every parent who fathers or mothers a child should contribute, in accordance with their circumstances on a daily basis. So if I am a millionaire tomorrow, she’ll [former wife] pay nothing for my son and he’ll have everything’ (Brian, 4 children, income\$13,000pa, CS=\$7pw).

In contrast, Josh wants to pay more money than the minimum CSA-defined obligations but his wife will not accept any additional contributions. He continues to value the economic dimensions of fatherhood and regains some control over his ability to support his children by planning for a future where he can more freely and substantially contribute financially to his children’s wellbeing:

‘...I’ve started to put that money aside for the boys in the future. That’s something that at some point I will invest for them or I will do something for them with it anyway. I always see them as being a big part of that so. Yeah, I just want to, somehow, contribute as best I can’. (Josh, 2 children, income=\$30,000pa, CS=\$6.50wk)

In summary, the fathers participating in this study expect to maintain a financial relationship with their children. Even in separated households the ideology of economic fatherhood remains strong and men’s relationships with their children are tied to a continuation of the provider role.

Child support and the loss of the provider role

While the respondents talk about their child support contributions in ways that reinforce the ideology of ‘father as provider’, the nexus between fatherhood, money and power observed in couple households is broken. The provider role is undermined in two key ways. First, part of the control over the amount and frequency of money contributed is often, although not always, relinquished to the Child Support Agency. Second, fathers lose situational authority in determining how money is used within their former partner’s household. Thus, the role of provider, with its implications of authority and determination of how money should be allocated and spent is undermined and sometimes lost.

Resentment with the involvement of the Child Support Agency in the determination of the amount and/or transfer of child support monies is tied, at least in part, to the loss of power and control over payments. Several of the fathers in our sample initially had informal arrangements for financial transfers in the months, and sometimes years, after separation. Often, but not always, these informal arrangements entailed separated fathers’ continuing to directly contribute

to the running of their former partners' household, such as allocating money to the mortgage, phone, or electricity bills rather than paying child support *per se*. These informal arrangements become an obvious continuation of the economic fatherhood role, where in some circumstances the bills remained in the father's name. However, when payments become formalised through the Child Support Scheme, where control over the amount of the money paid is taken from fathers and placed in the hands of the Child Support Agency, this can become a source of anger and resentment.

Barry's story is indicative of this scenario. After separation Barry continued to pay the mortgage and household bills for his former wife who had primary custody of their two children. Several months after separation Barry's wife contacted the Child Support Agency, without informing him that she was doing so, to begin more formal arrangements for child support managed through the Child Support Agency and paid directly to her.

'So, that day when the Child Support Agency got on to me and said, right, well she wants us to collect the payments now. This is what you have to pay. I said, "Fine, if that's the way she wants to do it." She wants to go along this way of things. So I just rang everybody up that I knew; the phone company, the electricity – what else was there – private health insurance; everything that was in my name, I just cancelled the whole lot. Fine, I'm not paying for it any more, you can go to buggery. You know, so... eventually, a few things like the phone bill, she banked up a thousand dollar phone bill in two months that she refused to pay and it was in my name still. So I eventually paid that but then I just farmed it off to the Child Support Agency'. (Barry, 2 children, income=\$40,000pa, CS=\$140wk)

With the formalization of his child support payments Barry did not contribute more than when he was directly paying the mortgage and bills – indeed, he thought he may be paying less – but his anger is shaped by the undermining of that important aspect of economic fatherhood: control over the allocation of the money. He exercised what remaining control he had over that money by cancelling all the bills in his name.

Respondents who had little or no contact with the Child Support Agency were more likely to feel that their arrangements were fair. Conversely all fathers who have contact with the Child Support Agency feel that at some point in the process they have been treated unfairly. For the fathers in our study the involvement of the Child Support Agency meant the loss of control over the amount and regularity of the transfer of money to their children. Hence some fathers we interviewed avoided the involvement of the Child Support Agency even at a financial cost to themselves, in an attempt to retain control over the financial arrangements with their former partner.

The second way in which the economic dimension of fatherhood is undermined by the child support process is through the loss of situational authority over monies paid, which now rests with their former partner. The majority of respondents expressed concern over how child support money was being spent by their former partner. For most respondents, spending was appropriate if the child support payments were quarantined from the general household budget and used only for child-specific expenses. For example:

‘My argument is well, they’re things you would have whether there were children or not and they’re all the expenses that I pay. The money should be exclusive for piano lessons,

clothing, sports, subscriptions, all things that the children get other than food, shelter, fuel and vehicle, which I have all those expenses as well. We both have those expenses, so if I pay her \$1300 on top of that then that should be exclusively for the kids'. (Bill, 2 children, income=\$100,000pa, CS=\$300wk)

Flowing from this logic is a concern that the other parent is benefiting from the child support monies, either in conjunction with their children or at the expense of the children. In the following quote, John makes a series of judgments about the cost of children and flowing from this, the motivations and spending decisions of the other parent, despite having no contact with his child or former partner.

'I would think that most children of his age would cost \$20 or \$30, \$40 a week in food and bits and pieces and so forth and a bit for clothing and so forth, but obviously \$420 a month, which was what [other parent] wanted and what she got, is her house payment. ... Well, a good percentage of the house payments. So, no I would like to see it go to education. ... Any fool knows that a six year old child doesn't cost \$420 a month to run.... So it isn't about looking after the child. It is about what... what you have to pay, it's more of a fact that, you know, she's getting financial benefit out of it as well.' (John, 3 children, income=\$45,000pa, CS=\$105 wk)

In many circumstances claims of inappropriate spending of child support monies are supported by observations of children's lack of appropriate clothing or toys, observations which call into question not only mothers' spending priorities but their ability to mother appropriately and meet the physical needs of children.

'I can't see how it's about the children at all when it comes to the money side of it because it's about the money going into the mother's account. There's no accounting where the money goes. Often I've gone and bought things for the kids, shoes and other things for the kids school, because they've gone to school with shoes that are falling apart, with clothing that's stained, heavily stained.' (Matt, 3 children, income=\$62,000pa, CS=\$300wk)

In these accounts, the visible manifestations of child-specific consumption, such as education, clothes and toys are defined as more appropriate expenses than other necessary goods and services related to providing for children such as housing, food, or transport. This reflects a desire to sustain material proof of the economic provider role and relatedly, regain control over spending decisions. However, as exemplified by the above quotes, these fathers understanding of the costs of raising children are vague and often reflect an unrealistic expectation of the costs of raising children. Ted's comments further illustrate this point:

'When they are with me they still have needs that need to be dealt with and I need to provide for them out of my pocket at the time....Nappies and everything else. Because those don't seem to be supplied in the last two visits I've had. They're pretty costly... Yes, I would have thought my \$12.56 every fortnight was going towards that. (Ted, 3 children, income=\$12,000pa, CS=\$6.50wk)

Underpinning fathers concerns is the lack of transparency into how child support money is allocated in their former partners' household. Given this many respondents called for greater accountability in the spending of child support money, for example James states: "I would like to

see perhaps with Child Support that monies that are gathered are spent on known costs. Let the mother produce those costs” (James, 3 children, income=\$85,000pa, CS=\$166wk). Alternatively, some fathers indicated that they would prefer to pay direct child related bills or expenses. This reflects a literal translation of economic fatherhood, in that they are able to define legitimate costs and at least partially control the flow of money into and out of the household:

‘Oh, I’d pay bills. You know, here’s a bill for school fees, here’s a bill for clothes, here’s a bill for something else and I’d pay those instead of just throwing cash. You know, she’s earning enough money to support the family as far as food is concerned and rent. She’s renting a place. I’d prefer to pay what’s actually required to be paid, not just throwing money away’. (Jack, 4 children, income=\$150,000pa, CS=\$577wk)

Some fathers had sufficient economic resources to regain at least partial authority over expenditure on their children by making financial contributions in addition to the required child support amounts. This re-establishes their position as the provider for their children, with a sense of authority and control over the money that is contributed and what it is spent on. For example Bill states: “So, from my point of view I sort of pitch in when I can; I throw a bit extra in when I can but I make sure that I always know that’s at my discretion” (Bill , 2 children, income=\$100,000pa, CS=\$311wk).

It should also be noted, that resentment is not universal. The following quote from Josh makes the issue of control over child support manifest, but he is reconciled to not having control over his contributions and views his child support payments as one source of income to be pooled in the household budget.

‘At the end of the day I just realised that I didn’t have any... basically, by the way the situation had gone I’d lost any control or any influence in that situation and even if she was making choices in her life that I wasn’t happy with I had no control over that. And by giving her money for [sons name], to be spent on [sons name], then I was still... regardless of what she did with her money, it was still actually going to make his situation better’. (Josh, 2 children, income=\$30,000pa, CS=\$6.50wk)

Irrespective of fathers’ knowledge of the costs of raising children and how those costs are met by their former partner, their perceptions are important for what they indicate about expectations of an ongoing relationship with their children. The concerns expressed in the interviews and the form they take – that the amount of money being transferred is more than is required to provide for children and is not appropriately managed – echoes the presumptions underlying control and access to money in heterosexual couple’s households. While women often manage the expenditure of money in couple households, men have at least some authority, and in many circumstances more authority, over the how the money they contribute to the household is spent. When fathers no longer live with their children, but continue to pay money in child support, this aspect of the provider role is undermined.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study we examined fathers experiences of paying child support, incorporating both the financial impacts and symbolic meanings of money into our understanding of their experiences. Most research into child support has taken a materialist view of the monies with a focus on the

financial well being of mothers and children, or treated child support monies as an economic exchange for time with children . In contrast, we argue that an understanding of how child support figures in the lives of non-resident fathers requires an engagement with social meanings as well as material implications. In taking this view we find that much of the resentment fathers experience with child support is to do with the loss of decision making authority over the monies are spent.

For the men in this study, child support is often a source of frustration and resentment; even those who have good working relationships with their former partner have had to negotiate both material and symbolic difficulties. Child support is a financial constraint upon these fathers' lives but the changes in the economic fatherhood role around the control of money are a greater source of distress. Within couple relationships the father-as-provider has some, or most, authority over how money is allocated within the household, but in separated households this power is undermined or lost. All fathers in our study experienced a sense of powerlessness in relation to their child support payments. This is related to the loss of power in determining the amount and frequency of payments as well as a loss of situational authority over the allocation of their child support money within their former partner's household. This is reflected in several ways in our interviews. The fathers didn't know how their child support money is used by their former partner, questioned whether it is being spent appropriately on child specific costs and want greater transparency in the child support process. These concerns and claims indicate more than ill-will and a lack of communication across households; they provide an insight into the changes in the nature of fathering that occur with separation.

Within the interviews, fathers rarely explicitly drew upon the language of power. But it remains a touchstone of their perceptions of the opportunities and barriers of fathering post-separation. Previous qualitative research has found that many non-residential fathers report feeling powerless in their dealings with their children (Wilson2006); our interviews revealed that much of the powerlessness felt by fathers in the payment of child support is linked to changes in the provider role. The majority of fathers in our study (79 percent) had their payments determined by the Child Support Agency, and so they had little or no control over how much money they contributed and when. This was linked to feelings of resentment and anger as well as perceptions of being treated unfairly. Many fathers thought they paid more than was required to support their children, although their understanding of the costs of raising children was vague and probably unrealistic.

Despite a context of social and political discourses of fatherhood emphasising more emotional and care work, most fathers in this study agreed that paying child support is an important and appropriate way of taking responsibility for their children. In most instances our respondents, particularly fathers paying large amounts of child support, strongly identify with a continued role of financial provider for their children. This contrasts with a recent qualitative study of non-resident fathers in the Czech Republic, which identified a significant minority of fathers who explicitly rejected the role of father-provider ([Dudova 2006](#)). Current debates in Australia and the U.K. emphasise fathers' contributions to the emotional and physical care of their children, they are no longer primarily providers; this focus echoes sociological comment about the changing discourses and practices of fatherhood. But the findings of this study indicate that changes to family structures do not necessarily mean traditional responsibilities are marginalised.

The majority of the fathers in our study shared parenting of their children (over half the sample had three or more nights a fortnight of care) and paid child support. They valued and protected both aspects of care, but it is clear from their concerns that financial support of their children was a core component of their fathering practices.

These findings are important for on-going child support initiatives. Legislation and policy in the area is typically aimed at modifying the paying behaviour of non-resident fathers without a full engagement with their experiences and interpretations of their situation ([Burgoyne and Millar 1994](#); [Seltzer and Brandreth 1994](#); [Smyth et al. 2003](#); [Thompson 1994](#)). The emphasis on how much children cost commonly leads to an adjustment of how liabilities are calculated but this may ultimately have a limited impact because the policies do not take into account the non-financial losses associated with the transfer of child support monies, such as loss of control and authority over the amount and use of the money. Developing policies that are sensitive to this issue may improve outcomes for mothers and children as well as fathers.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Fathers selected socio-demographic and child support characteristics.

Selected characteristics	Fathers
	n=27
Age	
Less than 29 years	4
30-39 years	33
40-49 years	44
50+ years	19
Total %	100
Current partnering status	
Registered marriage	14
Lives with partner	4
Does not live with a partner	82
Total %	100
Number of children	
1 child	18
2 children	39
3 or more children	43
Total %	100
Annual income (individual)	
Quartile 1: \$12,000 - \$28,000 (low)	25
Quartile 2: \$28,001 - \$45,000	25
Quartile 3: \$45,001 - \$85,000	25
Quartile 4: \$85,001 - \$250,000 (high)	25
Total %	100
Amount of child support paid or received	
\$0 - \$5 week	14
\$6 - \$75 week	39
\$76 per week and above	47
Total %	100
Child support transfer arrangement	
Not applicable	7
CSA – Private collect	50
CSA – Collect (including garnisheed)	29
Private arrangement	14
Total %	100
Typical Child contact	
None (not seen children for at least a year)	12
Minimal (holidays, fortnight, day visits)	36
Substantial (over 110 nights year), but less than 50/50	36
50/50 shared	16
Total %	100