

## **Policy and Ideology: The Impact on Women's Lives**

Nonie Harris

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## **Introduction:**

This paper will present preliminary findings from my PhD research, still in progress. The intention of my study was to use a feminist, post-structuralist framework to critically analyse two child care subsidy systems (in California and Australia) that appear to vary greatly in terms of ideological context and service implementation (Fincher, 1996). This comparative analysis was used to explore the link between government ideology, service policies and structures and the everyday lives of women who use these services. The aim of the study was to provide insight into the real impact of government ideology on women's lives, providing a basis for future service planning that best meets the needs of women. The voices of the women using the services (in both countries) were particularly valued.

Personal experience was the impetus for this study. Working in child care service planning in California and in Australia, and also as a user of a variety of child care options in both locations, provided me with a unique perspective on the alternate services. Involvement with a Californian state funded "workfare" program particularly highlighted for me the situation of welfare-dependent mothers struggling to enter the workforce without the support of adequate child care subsidies. Comparatively, Australia's subsidised services appeared comprehensive and accessible. This alerted me to the possible consequences for women of policy that was constituted in differing and possibly unsympathetic ideological contexts.

This study has relied on a feminist research perspective, emphasising critical theory and feminist post-structural approaches. As Smith and Noble-Spruell (1986) have noted, "feminist research ... should work towards a theory and practice that combines the personal and the political throwing light on how everyday struggles are linked to social structures" (p. 145).

## **Topic Importance**

### Recommendations from Feminist Researchers

Ruth Fincher (1996) encourages the formation of broad questions regarding child care which she argues have become too focused on the operational details of child care and too remote from the big issues.

O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver (1999) provide encouragement for comparative research that focuses on the welfare state and gender, arguing that a comparative analysis forces the researcher to abandon preconceived notions. "We have broken with the common practice of individual scholars analysing their own countries" (p. 10). This point is further emphasised by noting that comparative studies are particularly relevant in the beginning of the new century where a comprehensive mapping of social policy patterns is becoming more relevant. Particularly, O'Connor et al (1999) argues, in the context of globalisation.

I would also argue the voices of the women using services are often missing in broader policy debates. These broader debates reinforce the contention that social policy is a top down process (Dalton et al, 1996) and fail to value women's agency and their ability to resist the patriarchal social structures within which they live.

### Current Political Environment

In 1996 a conservative, federal government was elected in Australia. In the subsequent years child care funding has diminished (Bullock,1998) and the government's public rhetoric has begun to match the welfare reform rhetoric of the Clinton and Bush administrations. Minister for Employment Services Tony Abbott's (1999) comments reinforce this trend through the adoption of the mutual obligation principle and his claim that "... welfare reform is the debate Australia has to have ... It's not the US way of term limited welfare – but it's not the old situation of semi-automatic entitlement to welfare, either" (p.15).

As Australia moves towards the adoption of its own welfare reform, research that identifies implications for the everyday lives of women under these presently differentiated systems is highly relevant.

### **The Relevance of Child Care Subsidy to this Study**

I would argue that child care subsidy is a key site for understanding the complexities of ideological impact on women's lives for the following reasons. Child care is at the nexus of women's participation in the public and private spheres. Bennett (2001) argues further that "...child care reflects the high degree of ambiguity that the welfare state holds for women ... It reflects the degree to which women are subordinate as citizens and relegated to the private domain as it suits the goals of the state" (p35). Child care subsidy is particularly important because the cost of child care is relevant to women's ability to avoid poverty and move out of poverty. "Feminists and child care lobby groups maintained that ... affordable child care services were fundamental to gender equity and were essential in order for women to have genuine choices about entering the paid workforce" (Brennan, 1998, p. 182). Also it is worth emphasising that child care subsidy is the primary mechanism for public funding of child care in both Australia and California.

This research is entirely consistent with Fincher's (1996) urging; "It is important that the imaginative centring of child care issues in a range of social justice and gender equity discourses should continue" (p. 166).

### **Methodology**

Data collection was completed in two phases; phase one in California and phase two in Australia. It involved:

- (i) Identification and analysis of relevant documents.
- (ii) Qualitative semi-structured interviews with people involved in the formulation of policy and the delivery of services in the child care subsidy field.

- (iii) Qualitative semi-structured interviews with women using subsidised child care services.
- (iv) Case studies of a subsidised child care service delivery systems.

The findings detailed in this paper are based on qualitative interviews conducted in California with women who receive child care subsidy and also (to a lesser extent) the staff who administer the service and the City Council which funds the service.

### **Understanding Child Care Subsidies in California and Australia**

In Australia child care subsidy is administered and allocated by the Commonwealth Department of Families and Community Care. In the USA child care subsidies are funded at the state level, largely through non-profit organisations who contract with the state to provide subsidised child care services. (SHOW OHP OF VARIOUS PROGRAMS)

During my research I focused on one of the non-profit agencies which administers a subsidy program. Palo Alto Community Child Care (PACCC) is similar to other such programs in California. It is unique, however, in that it receives funding from the Palo Alto City Council rather than the state. This was advantageous from a research perspective as the policy formulators from the City Council were accessible.

I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with six women (of 30 service users) who received subsidy through PACCC. I also undertook a case study on the agency which involved multiple interviews with staff including the agency director, staff who administer the subsidy program, the City administrator and the Mayor of Palo Alto.

The goal of the PACCC subsidy program is "...to provide the opportunity for children to have a safe and healthy child care environment that will enhance their development while the child's parent(s) or guardian(s) are working or attending school or job training to attain self-sufficiency and improve their family life." (OHP ON SERVICE ELIGIBILITY)

## CHILD CARE SUBSIDY PROGRAMS IN AUSTRALIA AND CALIFORNIA

	<b>CALIFORNIA</b>	<b>AUSTRALIA</b>
<b>WHO ADMINISTERS CHILD CARE SUBSIDIES?</b>	LOCAL NON-PROFIT AGENCIES	COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT
<b>AVAILABILITY OF SUBSIDY FUNDS</b>	LIMITED	UNLIMITED
<b>SUBSIDY PAYMENTS ARE MADE TO</b>	CHILD CARE PROVIDER	CHILD CARE PROVIDER OR PARENT
<b>ELIGIBILITY</b>	LOW INCOME FAMILIES - NUMBERS LIMITED BY AVAILABILITY OF FUNDS	ALL FAMILIES - ON A SLIDING SCALE
<b>AVAILABILITY OF SUBSIDISED SERVICES</b>	MULTIPLE AND EXTENSIVE WAITING LISTS	NO WAITING LISTS
<b>PARTICIPATION OF CHILD CARE PROVIDERS</b>	THOSE WILLING TO ACCEPT SUBSIDY	ALL APPROVED AND REGISTERED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS
<b>TYPE OF WELFARE SERVICE</b>	RESIDUAL (SAFETY NET)	UNIVERSAL (PRIMARY WELFARE PROVISION)

### **Findings**

The data gathered for this study proved to be rich and complex with a variety of implications. I will provide a summary of some of the findings focusing on what I believe to be the most interesting of my understandings

- **Accessing the Service - But if You Don't Know You are Lost**

The funding limits of this service meant that the child care subsidy was difficult to access. Women who were able to successfully access the service tended to be highly resourceful and socially skilled. Women in more vulnerable positions and isolated from community resources may therefore be less likely to access the child care subsidy.

*"One of the things I pride myself in now is being knowledgeable about what is in my community for me to use as resources. But if you don't know that then you are lost and if you don't get hooked up with someone who is going to tell you then you are even more lost ... because people are afraid - not afraid but ashamed to ask for help."*

*"... I think we educate ourselves in subsidy and I think you really need to be a good player, a good player and educated player."*

*"You have to be very aggressive when you need help and I have found you have to do a lot of the footwork."*

*"If they don't have some sense of 'I need to know how to navigate' they may fall through the cracks." (Subsidy Program Coordinator)*

- **Stigma and Welfare - Extending Your Hand**

Women using child care subsidy were keenly aware of the stigma attached to using welfare services. They felt the need to keep their use of the service confidential in order to avoid what they perceived would be discriminatory treatment from other parents at the child care facility. Women also constructed themselves as 'worthy' workers needing a helping hand as opposed to 'unworthy' welfare dependents.

Confidentiality regarding the receipt of child care subsidy was important to the women:

*"I don't want anyone to sneer at me because I'm not on the same social and economic level that they are."*

*"... if they new I was subsidised for child care, I think they would look at you differently and look at you as a lower class person because they are paying full price and you are not".*

Women had a clear sense of the stigma attached to 'welfare' and the need to construct themselves as 'worthy':

*"You know because society already has an image projected on a single parent to begin with and you know sometimes it is very difficult to extend your hand and ask someone to grab it to help you along the way...but for myself being a black woman - that you know that we all have these kids an dare looking for the system to take care of them and that type of thing. But even though I was married I have always worked. I have always tried to do the best for my children by taking care of them myself and asking for very little help."*

*"... the type of person and the upbringing that I had, my pride would get in the way (from using federal assistance). So I would do, I would work for myself, I would work at night ... And I mean, I say no I wouldn't, but faced with feeding my family or not ..."*

*"The term subsidy is negative ... what is the difference between a subsidy and a scholarship? Scholarship is for the mainstream and subsidy is for the poor people. Nobody wants to be put in the box of subsidised services" (City Child Care Coordinator).*

- **Maintaining Women in Low Wage Occupations - A Black Mark to Get a Pay Raise**

Women needed to consider the effect on their subsidy payment if they were to receive a pay raise. Their decision was to stay at their current income level and not seek advancement in their work place.

*"I probably wouldn't go very far, I would probably choose to stay exactly where I am now - unless I can make a very big leap. See the problem is the leaps aren't big but the transitions of how much you pay into the child care - they don't coincide."*

*"... they want you to get promotions, they want you to continue to make more money but it is almost, the balance isn't there. It is almost a deterrent ... It is almost like a black mark to get a raise."*

*"We have parents call us - 'If I get this raise I'd get this much. Could you tell me where I'd be on the fee schedule? It's like 'if I can just get them into elementary school at this fee rate it will be fine'. It's kind of sad but that's the reality." (Subsidy Program Coordinator)*

- **Living with Racism - You People Don't Belong Here**

The African American and Hispanic women who participated in this study (5 of the 6 respondents) were prepared to live and/or work in a community they felt was unwelcoming and racist in order to access quality child care and maintain themselves in employment.

*"...there is nothing that has really drawn me into this community - that's wanted to make me be more of a part of Palo Alto - there is nothing that has drawn me out - to say you know we embrace you in our arms - come on let's be part of this...maybe it's social or ethnic - I don't know. It's just really hard to be here and fit in here."*

*"Not all Caucasian people are like that. I mean I've grown up with them all my life - my mother always kept us with a mix. My heart is out for all people. I don't see colour but I have to realise there is colour because you see it all around you, so you have to be careful..."*

*"And I know - people, little kids - and this happens every blue moon, would say things like 'You people don't belong here, blacks are supposed to be in Africa.'"*

- **Motivation for Providing the Service - Not out of the Kindness of Their Heart**

The women believed that the motivation of the City Council for providing the subsidy service was about serving the interests of the City and not about meeting the needs of women and their children.

*"I doubt it is out of the kindness of their heart. ...Because the City would be a lot further than it is and better if it was the majority that really cared about helping other people."*

*"I know their hearts are not in it. ... But that's probably the only reason they did all these things (the subsidy program) because they do get extra money."*

*"I just don't see any real heartfelt commitment on the part of the City to enhance the lives of women.... I think they (the service users) are right on actually. I've been thinking about it a lot since we talked and I think they are right – I think their perceptions are right. The reason that it (the subsidy service) is palatable to the City is that it is with PACCC (a child care agency)" (City Child care Coordinator)*

*"Economic issues play into behaviour and play out socially. I think some people come here expecting Palo Alto to be opening and welcoming and it's not. It's like the right thing to do but we can't go the next step and incorporate these people completely - noblesse oblige (rank imposes obligation)" (Palo Alto Mayor)*

### **The Impact on Women's Lives**

If you are a woman using this service what would be the impact on the materiality of your life?

Initially you have to be highly resourceful and socially skilled person to find the service. You would have to live or work in a city you don't feel part of to access the service that

you need; potentially exposing yourself and your children to racism if you are from a minority group. You are therefore also isolated from your informal supports. You have to make sure you don't do too well in your job because a pay raise will mean you will lose all or part of your subsidy. If you did not receive the subsidy your only options would be to leave your children unattended or give up work and fall into poverty. You have to position and construct yourself as a worthy person who is a good worker and a good mother who just needs a little help because the shame associated with being on welfare is too great. You need to keep part of your life secret (ie that you receive subsidy) so you and your child won't be discriminated against. You are also therefore isolated from forming friendships and support with other women in a similar situation to your own. You are aware that you are receiving a service provided by a government agency that cares little about your welfare as a woman and a mother.

### **Conclusion**

These quotes give you some insight into the impact of a service that has been formulated in a policy context that is unsympathetic to women.

I have examined the implications for women's lives of a residual/safety net service that is poorly funded with limited availability. The implications of this type of service provision are profound. The service enables a small group of resourceful women and their children to live above (but not too far above) the poverty line. The cost to them of this privilege is great not only in terms of shaping their life choices but also affecting the way they construct themselves as citizens. This study also is a reminder of the valuable role of child care in women's lives and also of its precarious and vulnerable position as it is manipulated by the state to meet the needs of the market. The needs of women and children are lost.

Currently in Australia child care subsidy is still a universal provision. If we move toward a residual/safety net child care subsidy provision, and there is some evidence of this, then the small gains made by women regarding choosing, in a supported way, to participate in either the public and private spheres will be further eroded. The time has come for the feminist movement to recognise the implications for the everyday lives of women of inadequate social provision and reclaim child care as a central tenet.