

Everyday negotiations for care and autonomy in the world
of welfare-to-work

The policy experience of Australian mothers, 2003-2006

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Declaration

No part of this thesis has been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge, any theories or research that are not my own have been acknowledged in the text.

Abstract

A significant new direction in Australian income support policy was introduced in 2002. Known as Australians Working Together, this development changed the basis of social security entitlement for parents. Throughout most of the twentieth century, low-income sole mothers, and later sole fathers and parents in couple families, could claim income support throughout most of their children's school years. The primary grounds for their entitlement were low income and parenting responsibilities. Australians Working Together introduced compulsory employment-oriented activities to Parenting Payment entitlement for parents whose youngest child had turned 13.

This thesis investigates mothers' experience of this new welfare system. Using Dorothy Smith's 'everyday life' approach to research, it draws upon qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse Australians Working Together. The research is grounded in a longitudinal interview survey of Australian mothers of teenage children who were subject to these changes. The analysis moves from their experience outwards through the four levels of analysis in Williams and Popay's welfare research framework. The thesis examines mothers' day-to-day worlds, the opportunities and constraints they navigate, the policies and institutions which shape their opportunities, the political framing of those policies, and wider social and economic transformations.

In their negotiation of the social security system, mothers are striving for recognition of autonomy and care. They want their capacity to determine for themselves how to live their lives to be acknowledged. They would like the social contributions they make through employment, education and voluntary work to be recognised. They struggle for their unpaid work caring for their families to be valued. They wish that they had sufficient material resources to care well for their families. The thesis develops a theoretical framework to examine these struggles drawing on the work of Honneth, Fraser, Lister, Sennett, Fisher and Tronto, Daly and Lewis. This multi-level, everyday life analysis reveals the possibility of reframing the social security system around mutual respect.

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Research Participants

I provide here a brief summary of each of the mothers who participated in my research. The descriptions are pieced together from the interview transcripts. Some women who did not wish to be tape-recorded and so I rely solely on my notes but I have done my best to represent their voices and their circumstances as they told them to me. If I interviewed someone more than once, the demographic information relates to our first interview, when they first described themselves and their families to me. I have changed some aspects of the women's stories to protect their identities. The names are all pseudonyms which mothers selected themselves.

Alia, 34, western Sydney, Parenting Payment Partnered. Alia speaks Arabic and Farsi and a small amount of English.

I have three children. The 17 year old is at TAFE, the others are at school, they're 14 and 13. I've received Parenting Payment since coming to Australia. My husband, he is unemployed. He has depression. He has been given three months from Centrelink to recover. I am studying English – I have 520 hours, I have used about 300 hours. When it is hot, I find it hard to go because of my asthma. But I want to study, I am willing to study, it is not because I had to. I love studying. I've never had a job, but for work, if they could find me suitable work, no problem.

Ana, 50, western Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Ana speaks Arabic and Farsi and a small amount of English.

I have five children. They are 25, 24, 23, 18 and the youngest is 15 nearly 16. My 18 year old daughter is a bit slow. She can't concentrate. She can't express herself properly. I am doing both my own and my daughter's job. I am taking English classes here at the centre, but not reading and writing, I can't read or write. I've

been to two meetings at Centrelink. I said to them ‘Whose going to give me a job? With my age? My language?’ I’m sick. I can’t walk properly. I have heart problems, a disk in my back hurts. I can’t even finish my housework, so how can I do tasks at work?

Belle, inner Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Belle was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

I went back to uni when my son was two, when my marriage broke up. Straight onto Parenting Payment. I had a plan of where I would be and what qualification I would have. I have constructed myself as Centrelink’s pinup girl who got a PhD while being on sole Parenting Payment. [My son] looks like a bloke even though he is only fourteen. I have pulled back teaching partly because he was unwell half way through last year and needed a lot more of my attention. He’s all right now though, he’s all right.

Caroline, 48, inner Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Caroline was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

I’ve got two boys living with me now [the youngest is 15]. Well, it is a big responsibility, big responsibility, a lot of hard work. A fulfilling job, tiring, an important role I feel. It’s very hard when you’re on your own. I live just around the corner from [my oldest son]. I started TAFE this year, because I knew I was coming off the pension next year, and I thought, ‘Well, I’ve got this opportunity to do it’. And I did work experience a few weeks back and they liked me that much they employed me. I haven’t ever looked for work, it always comes along

Cheryl, 36, western Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Cheryl was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

I have two children. I have a daughter who's 15 and a half and she's actually working part time, she has three different jobs. My son's just started high school, he's 12. I actually do dog minding and dogs come and live with me and people pay a small fee and I have a couple of cleaning jobs as well. My husband passed away 10 years ago, he took his own life. My children needed to basically get themselves back together. They're really good kids, we talk a lot, they've done a lot of counselling. I think it's helped build their self esteem up and make them very confident children. I was working full time in school holidays, which I just didn't think was very fair to my children. As far as I was concerned they'd already lost one parent, they didn't need to lose another one to a business. So I ended up giving it up. But found that I need to do something in my life to fulfil my life.

Erica, 50, southern Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Erica was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

My son is nearly 14. He had health problems, primarily hearing problems were picked up, and like many parents, you do the rounds. You get on the health merry-go-round trying to find the right answer the right decision for your child. It was a full time job when he was very young. He was diagnosed as ADHD that was confirmed at a very young age. They wanted to medicate him then which is why I decided to be hands on because I thought, even if he was, it's too young to want to medicate a child at that age. With that Centrelink were part of my life from early on. But it's good, it's a good life and it's good to see him doing well, the effort paying off. The work I do is really good work with good people. They were incredibly understanding of the needs of my child, so I stuck with them.

Grace, 39, inner Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Grace was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

I've got two children, 12 and 13. My son who's 13 ½ has had some behavioural problems. When I was working, the thing that I found was I'd get calls from the school saying, 'Oh, he has left the school grounds, you've got to go and find him' and it impacted on my work, quite significantly. I lost my job. It's undermined my self-confidence as a parent. It has been actually a juggling act then of trying to manage him, as well as then think about what sort of work I can do that can fit into that. And in the meantime of course, I came down with depression and it's progressively got worse. Over the last two years I've actually tried to do two things. One is start my own business, [but I need to raise the capital]. I think single mothers are quite ingenious, very resourceful people. I came up with an idea of writing a book.

Helen, 36, western Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Helen was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

I have just one child, luckily for me [we laugh]. He's 14. It's been a pretty hellish year. A few months ago he was diagnosed with diabetes. He's been pretty all over the place. The first couple of months he was really good. With anything traumatic, you cope and cope and cope, and then eventually it just gets the better of you and you kind of fall apart for a while. So we've had a couple of months where we just kind of fell apart. I think I was extremely depressed and just couldn't cope with it. In the last month it's just been getting slowly better. I've had part time work, mostly admin kind of stuff, you know, secretarial, so I've been receiving part payments. I have also studied as well for a couple of years. I'm going to study full time from next year, while I still can be working towards getting an education. I think that is the good thing about, about the Parenting Payment.

Kumiko, 37, inner Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Kumiko speaks Japanese and has learned fluent English.

My sons are 15 and 17 and they're both in high school. I became a single parent about five years ago and since then I have been getting help from Centrelink. The last job I had was waitressing, I then got pregnant. I'm doing a Bachelor of Fine Arts. My major is sculpture. I find it very hard, I feel tired all the time, and I've been to the doctors and all that but they can't find anything wrong with me, they think it is all stress. I want to study, but my situation is very hard. Once my son turns 16 they are going to cut off my single parent pension. Then I might have to apply to Austudy, but everyone has said it's much harder that way. It's about two-thirds of single parent pension. And I have hard time just managing [the cost of] how they eat.

Margaret, 42, inner Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Margaret was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

I am 54, a single parent with three boys, the oldest one's 18. He is studying and has just got a part time job. The next boy is 15. He is in year 10 and has a part time job at a café. And then there is a 14 year old, he's in year 8. He's currently not attending any school. We are just about to enrol him in distance education because he is refusing to go to any school, but we are still looking at options. So, that's the family. I am actually working, teaching, well not right now because I have cancer, but prior to that I was working.

Mary, 42, western Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Mary speak Arabic plus another two languages. She is learning English.

I have seven children, one died; now I have six. The father is dead. I have an 18 year old, and 16 and 14 year old. In December another

one is going to be 12. There are two elder ones. You know because of the war, we went separate direction so I miss contact with them. I came [to Australia] in 2003. I'm studying English. I'm doing part time, two days a week. They said if you know English, maybe when you reach level four, then you can do other courses so you can get a job. When I was in [my home country], I used to work as a nurse in the afternoon, in the morning I worked in a child care centre. But here they want you to go to go to TAFE or maybe to uni to get that job, to be a nurse. So I'd like to study to be a nurse.

Naomi, 41, inner Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Naomi was born in New Zealand and speaks fluent English.

My son, he's 12, so he's in his last year of primary school, about to start secondary school next year. I've brought my son up on my own since he was one and a half. He is quite well adjusted, I hope. I moved here from New Zealand. It's been a long time, maybe sixteen years. I have been studying for three years, so this is my third year I have been receiving Parenting Payment. Prior to that – intermittently. I might do a Dip. Ed. [Diploma of Education] next year. I haven't decided. I think with my son starting school, the secondary school, I think I might want to slow down a bit and spend some time with him this year, be with him through these changes. It's only a short window of time for me to be a parent to him in that way, so I really want to do that.

Nicole, 31, western Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Nicole was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

I'm a single mum, I've got three children, my eldest will be 15 in June, he's a boy. And then there's [my daughter], she'll be 13 soon. And then there's my youngest, she'll be 11 next Wednesday. She doesn't live with me she lives with her father. Not having a car we

don't really go anywhere. We hang around the house a lot. My mum and dad are really good, they come and take us out. I had an accident a couple of years ago, which sort of knocked me around for a while. I've been trying to get on track and maybe try and get back to some kind of study or maybe get a job or something.

Pam, 42, southern Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Pam speaks fluent Greek and English.

Well, I've got two children. The girl's 19 and the boy's nearly 14. They are both living with me. My son had a car accident five years ago, a serious car accident. He was in hospital for 11 weeks. After the accident every little thing would upset him. So something this small would become this big. You can tell he is a lot better, but once every month or once every two months he could have an outburst. I've got blood pressure and a lot more problems too. I have got really bad arthritis, really bad. I had a stroke at birth so my left side is weaker than my right side. My mother passed away [recently] and we moved into the house. It's a lot better. Better area. I'm financially better off. I've got a bit of a social life. My son's a lot better, he seems better at school this year. My daughter's happier, I feel safer because it is a better neighbourhood and I am not so stressed out.

Tara, 50, inner Sydney, Parenting Payment Single. Tara was born in Australia and speaks fluent English.

I have two boys, 12 and 14. Although the children are older now, they almost require more supervision, especially to do their homework. I don't get Parenting Payment currently because I have too much income from working nearly full time in casual jobs. I have a social work degree but I've never used it. I've always worked in casual jobs. I work as a teacher's aide at my sons' school, in the holidays I work at the races, and also in holiday care.

It's good to be connected to Parenting Payment in case I get sick. I see it as a bit of a safety net. All the casual work is a bit of a juggle. When all this stuff came out about Mutual Obligation, I was a bit angry. They think all single mothers are living in the western suburbs and having children with lots of men.

Zahra, 42, western Sydney, Disability Support Pension.¹ Zahra speaks Arabic and Farsi and a small amount of English.

I have three children too, sixteen and a half, 14, 13. Our 14 year olds are in the same class. My husband is my carer, he gets Carers Allowance. I get the pension. Everyday I feel worse. [I have no employment experience in Australia or Iraq] I have enough work at home. If it comes to work, I'll leave that to my husband. But if there was a place just for women, where they could tailor, that would be wonderful.

¹ When I asked Zahra what kind of pension she received, she did not know, and showed me her Pensioner Concession Card. I then learned she was receiving Disability Support Pension, not Parenting Payment. I kept her in the study because she was one of two women from non-English speaking backgrounds who did not know what kind of payment they received. The other, whose youngest child was aged over 17, I did not include in the study.

Introduction

It's like I feel like damned both ways. If I work then I am a bad parent, and if I stay at home I am also a bad parent because, hey, I'm reliant on social security and I should be supporting myself. So that's what I mean, so the conflicting messages. And I know I shouldn't probably internalise it, but you can't help it. It's kind of like you get it no matter which way you turn. Other people say it to me, I've had friends and family say to me, 'Well, why aren't you working at the moment?' Or, when I was working part time, 'Don't you think you should be doing full-time work?' Or, when I wasn't coping with full-time work, it was like, 'Maybe you should drop down to part-time work.' It's like no matter what you do you're not going to win anyway. So I've just sort of – I've now kind of reached this point where I'm aiming for peace. (Grace)

Since 2002, Grace and thousands of other Australian parents, most of them mothers, have faced radical changes to the income support on which they rely to provide for their families. A new and strong focus on employment for income support recipients was introduced in Australia through the federal government's 'Australians Working Together' package of 2002, expanded in the 'Welfare to Work' package of 2006. While sole and partnered low-income parents had previously been entitled to income support throughout their children's infancy and most of their school years on the basis of their caring responsibilities, this is no longer the case. The Australians Working Together reforms introduced compulsory

participation in employment or employment-oriented activities for parents of school-aged children for the first time.

The new policy required Parenting Payment claimants, sole and partnered, to agree to undertake at least 150 hours of employment-oriented activities every six months, around six hours per week. Claimants attended an annual compulsory meeting with a personal adviser to draw up this agreement. However, many parents were already busily in jobs, study or job search. This thesis arises from a concern about how parents like Grace, who raise their families with the assistance of government income support, deal with changing demands from the state brought about by the implementation of Australians Working Together while managing competing demands from their children, employers and the community. I explore mothers' experience of this new policy, both those mothers who already met the activity requirements and those who did not.

The thesis is grounded in the everyday worlds of Grace and other mothers who I interviewed for this research, as they go about the daily business of preparing meals, picking their children up from school, caring for parents and friends, shopping for bargains, stretching meagre budgets between income support payments, attending meetings at the local social security office, travelling to their jobs, negotiating with bosses, spending time with friends and somewhere amidst this finding time for themselves. I examine the everyday implementation of Australians Working Together to determine how these women responded to the new policy direction, what reactions were possible, and why. My analysis starts with the perspective of mothers and moved outwards to develop a policy, social and economic context for the possibilities and constraints under which the new policy was enacted.

The demands Grace encounters happen every day. She said her children's behaviour was most difficult when she was working full time; she believes that this was because they were not receiving the mothering attention they needed. She found it difficult when tired from a day at work to 'not only cook dinner for two children, but listen and try and sort them out and manage them, help them with homework'. She also described her workplace supervisor, who purported to understand Grace's responsibilities as a sole parent but would nonetheless tut and

sigh, if she needed to leave work because of her children, saying ‘Oh, *again*. You have to leave the office *again*.’ [Grace’s emphasis.]

Grace is trying to negotiate her way between being a mother, an employee and a welfare recipient. Conflicting expectations, she says, become ‘internalised’; she feels social pressures as she tries to find a way to be that will give her ‘peace’. As a good mother, should she devote herself full time to her children? As a good citizen, shouldn’t she be in employment? How can she both work full time and care for her children full time? If she gives priority to employment, her children might suffer, but she also knows she is not doing what ‘good mothers’ should do. If she tries to find a midway point and works part time, she finds she is no longer considered a committed enough employee. If she quits her job to care for her children full time, as she knows she should as a good mother, she knows that she is also demonstrating she is a bad mother, because she should be in employment. ‘No matter what you do you’re not going to win anyway.’

Grace is articulating the difficulty of negotiating gender and citizenship. This is a central concern of recent feminist scholars undertaking welfare regime analysis that reveals the ways gender affects the kinds of claims mothers can make on the welfare state (for example, Giullari and Lewis 2005; O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999; Skevik 2005). As a woman and a mother, she understands she has certain obligations to her family; as a citizen, she knows she has obligations to the community. Grace finds these obligations almost irreconcilable. This complex of responsibilities and obligations is apparent too in the experience of other parents, and is present, although with different emphasis, in the language and rules of policy and in the principles of the Australian welfare regime. Theories of care and recognition provide insight into the gender and citizenship struggles to which Grace alludes here.

Nearly all the interviews started with talk about family. This was partly an effect of my questioning, because I felt that I needed to understand people’s family situation (how many children they have, how old they are, how their health is, how the family interacts, how they feel about being a parent) to have a context for the other things they would tell me about their lives (work, study, dealing with Centrelink, plans for

the future). This focus on family was amplified and maintained by the interviewees. Grace, when I gave her an overview of the topics I thought we might end up discussing, launched immediately into the subject: ‘Well I might start off with parenting, cause that’s kind of like the big thing. I’ve got two children, 12 and 13.’ The centrality of family for mothers highlights the need for a theoretical knowledge of care and the place of care in policy. In chapter one, I canvass feminist theories of care to develop an understanding of care which informs my analysis throughout the thesis.

Grace, in observing that she feels ‘damned’ both when she takes employment and when she relies on income support, is articulating her experience of disrespect as a mother and a welfare recipient. She told me:

It’s just a whole lot of things that make the sole parenting experience in some ways quite negative when it could be quite positive. I just feel like sometimes maybe if – not that mothering were valued more – but if there wasn’t so much criticism of them, of single mums particularly, and if we got a lot more positive or affirmative messages, then maybe the stress on some of us would be less.

Later, in an email, Grace explained how she felt about being a welfare recipient:

Never has the government ... asked me what I need. Well for the record, first I need to get well ... and some youth programs so that my kids have safe supervision (rather than none) when I do go back to work (yes, I still have hope that one day I’ll find the right job). Mostly a recognition that I have a brain, and I can make choices.

Grace’s experience of being misrecognised and feeling that her needs are ignored is a common one. The UK Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, for example, reported that ‘the lack of respect for people living in poverty was one of the clearest and most heartfelt messages which came across to us as a Commission’

(cited in Lister 2006:94)². The mothers who participated in my study emphasised the personal contact they have with staff in Centrelink offices as central to whether they experienced Australians Working Together as respectful or disrespectful.

While engaged in struggles regarding the recognition of care, Grace also experiences particular forms of disrespect which arise from her status as a claimant of social security benefits. In chapter one, I explore the work of key theorists of respect and recognition, drawing on the insights of their work to expand my analysis of mothers' experience of Australians Working Together. Together, theories on care and recognition underpin much of the other theory I draw upon to interpret the experience of Australian parents who claim income support.

Relocating the subject of welfare research

I took an everyday life approach in the design of this study. As Dorothy Smith (1987:98) explains, this involves treating the everyday life of mothers as a sociological problematic, or taking the standpoint of women as the starting point for research. In an everyday life approach, research participants are treated as having a unique perspective and understanding of an issue. This makes them experts, just as being a sociologist or policy analyst or theorist makes someone an expert, but mothers' expertise is of a different nature. Grace and the other mothers I interviewed have an understanding of their circumstances that derives from living the policy and negotiating every day through that policy, as well as social norms, immediate family needs and demands, and other policies. It is my task, as an analyst of social policy, to explore how the daily acts and decisions of mothers fit with social relations. In this thesis, I have made the everyday approach primary in the writing as well as the research design. It is for this reason that Grace appears at the outset of the thesis. In discussing her personal experience, Grace articulates the concerns of the thesis. Furthermore, as one of those affected by the policy, her voice should carry weight.

² The Australian equivalent, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2004) made no similar observation. Not, it would seem, because Australians living in poverty do not experience disrespect, but rather because of a lack of recognition by the Committee itself. Only one of the Committee's 95 recommendations encouraged engagement with people living in poverty about their needs.

Smith (1987:89) describes the everyday world as:

...that world we experience directly. It is the world in which we are located physically and socially. Our experience arises in it as conditions, occasions, objects, possibilities, relevances, presences, and so on, organized in and by the practices and methods through which we supply and discover organization.

Research that starts with the everyday does not finish there. Treating people's everyday lives as a 'sociological problematic' means exploring the interactions between the quotidian and broader social structures and relations (Smith 1987:98). This is most important because it means that everyday life research reaches out from the experience of participants; their experience is the basis from which to explore relations of power, social trends, discourses, norms and expectations. While 'on the one hand the surface of the everyday (its manifest content) needs to be given the closest of scrutiny ... on the other hand the project is precisely to go behind the scenes and reveal underlying structures and latent contents' (Highmore 2002:8).

The contributions of everyday approaches to policy analysis

Situating research within the quotidian highlights the gaps, overlaps and contradictions between policy assumptions and social structures, institutions, norms, practices and ideologies in parents' daily lives. However, such an approach is uncommon in policy research, especially in research on Australian social security policy. My study builds on and expands the small number of studies which take an every life approach to policy analysis by critiquing policy logics from the perspective of the mothers who are most affected by that policy. The studies described below demonstrate utility of research which has taken an everyday life approach informing policy understanding.

Lone Mothers, Paid Work and Gendered Moral Rationalities by Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards (1999) is an outstanding example. Duncan and Edwards (1999:6) describe their methodological approach as 'going inside the "closed box"' of lone mothers, by which they mean ceasing to treat lone mothers as a homogenous

group, one category in a table of family types, and instead recognising that lone mothers are heterogenous and so looking more closely for their differences, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach led Duncan and Edwards to understand the ‘gendered moral rationalities’ that inform lone mothers’ decisions about employment, family and welfare. Duncan and Edwards interviewed British, German, Swedish and American lone mothers in geographical clusters and small social networks. By analysing the results within and across geographical categories, they were able to uncover the effect of location, culture, and circles of family and friends on lone parents’ decisions. In this way they linked lone parents’ daily lives to broader social and economic structures, but they also demonstrated that national employment markets, social attitudes and debates generally influenced parents less than did local labour markets, local attitudes and local care arrangements.

Duncan and Edwards (1999) demonstrate that lone mothers’ employment decisions are rational, but do not follow the model of rational economic man that policy makers tend to expect. Rather, mothers’ rationality is gendered and moral. It is gendered because parenthood, care work and the labour market are fundamentally gendered. Mothers continue to undertake the majority of all unpaid care work and face a labour market which is structured around gender lines so that women’s employment is concentrated in certain occupations at certain levels (Cass 2006:252; Craig 2004:14; Millar 2003:20). Lone mothers are strongly guided in their employment decisions by their understanding of what is best for their children; they want to take the moral actions of good mothers. In addition, by recognising the importance of local geographies and social strata, Duncan and Edwards show that local labour markets and understandings of good mothering informed by localities and class result in different mothers in different situations making different decisions, all of which are rational.

Duncan and Edwards (1999:288-292) use their results to examine UK welfare-to-work policies for lone parents and found three ‘mistakes’. The first, the ‘rationality mistake’ was policy makers’ assumption that lone parents will be rational actors, understood to be rational economic men. Duncan and Edwards demonstrate that when policy assumptions about the basis on which people make decisions are misguided, the resulting policies can only have a limited effect, because people will

not necessarily respond to policy interventions in the way it has been assumed. The second, the 'economic mistake', is seeking to make income support claimants 'employable', and so addressing the 'supply side' of employment, but failing to attend to the creation of jobs, the demand side. If employment is available but is mostly poorly paid, then lone parents' poverty and reliance on income support will not be reduced. The third is the 'geographical mistake': due to policy ignoring the spatial divisions of labour and lone parenthood. Neither employment opportunities, social opportunities nor lone parenthood are evenly distributed geographically. Pockets of unemployment and pockets of disadvantage affect the opportunities available to lone mothers.

In her study of American mothers in receipt of income support negotiating the demands of their families and their state-funded higher education programs, Nancy Naples (1998), drawing on Smith's (1998) feminist methodology, reveals the work, usually invisible, that women undertake to link and maintain the various arenas in which they live. These include creatively stretching small budgets, sharing unpaid care with other mothers and supporting other students as mentors (Naples 1998:40). Sometimes they experience conflict between income support rules, requirements regarding their education and the needs of their families. For example, they need to enrol full time in order to receive financial assistance, but a lack of flexibility on the part of the education institution means that mothers with sick children can fail the course if they miss classes that contain essential pieces of assessment. Where a child is chronically ill, its mother may be unable to attend classes full time, thereby losing her entitlement to financial support. These sometimes impossible, often stressful, conflicts can be best uncovered by speaking to those whose lives require that they be experts at identifying and creatively negotiating such matters daily.

Carol Cleaveland (2005) undertook an ethnographic study to investigate why women sometimes refuse employment even if they became ineligible for income support as a result. By engaging with women in Philadelphia who had taken this action, Cleaveland was able to understand what might otherwise appear to be irresponsible behaviour. The women in her study did not leave employment because of a lack of commitment to the world of work, or because they did not grasp the consequences of living without an income. Rather, in the move from

welfare receipt into very low paid, menial jobs they were responding to what they perceived as a lack of respect by employers who regarded them as occupying the very bottom of the company hierarchy. Resigning from their employment following incidents in which they were poorly treated was the only way they could retain some sense of dignity. Akesha, one of the respondents explained:

I tried to stick in there but every time I turned around my manager was there giving me attitude. You know, I tell her, I don't have to respect you but I chose to respect you because you're my elder. But just like you want to be respected, I would like to be respected also.
(Cleaveland 2005:50)

The actions of these women have tended to be interpreted as evidence of personal deficiencies: a failure of their work ethic or an inability to do such things as arrive at work on time. Policy responses have been developed accordingly and so address personal 'barriers' to taking and retaining employment (Cleaveland 2005:54-55). Taking time to examine the women's point of view not only reveals their sense of a loss of personal dignity, but also structural inadequacies. The employment women are being directed to upon leaving welfare is frequently menial and insecure and offers little prospect for advancement. It is also so poorly paid that many continue to live in poverty despite working full time. Welfare programs in the USA rarely attempt to improve conditions in the local labour market. A top official in Oregon's welfare service, upon being presented with research findings that demonstrated a need to improve the low wage labour market, 'explained patiently to us that these were issues over which he had no control' (Morgen 2002:754). The women in Cleaveland's (2005:55) study, 'recognizing that continued poverty was almost inevitably their future fate, with or without the help of programs ... chose to engage in small acts of contestation and resistance in order to have some feeling of agency and dignity in the face of these structural realities.'

Research into how low-income working mothers organise their time illustrates how an everyday life approach can inform public policy. A study by Kevin Roy and his colleagues (2004), shows how American mothers negotiating time, obligations, to children, other family members, employment and government agencies, strive daily

for their own best paths. Women working in low-income jobs and caring for young children, creatively manage competing, overlapping and often unpredictable demands on their time, within the confines of limited child care options, poor public transport and the fixed schedules of public agencies (Roy et al. 2004:175-176). They find their own way through a complex maze of obligations and resources.

The authors challenge the assumption of some policy makers and welfare researchers that 'poor families make ill-informed decisions and do not exhibit a work ethic' (Roy et al. 2004:177). Instead, they demonstrate that mothers working for low-incomes search daily for the optimal time-configurations for their family lives, exhibiting creativity and excellent time-management skills. Their research contributes evidence to policy debates regarding the importance which mothers place on time in making decisions about welfare receipt and employment. It is not only money but also time that women take into account when balancing the costs and benefits for themselves and their families of ceasing to receive welfare support and enter into employment, or vice versa. Like the other studies cited above, this one highlights possible structural improvements which could assist low-income working mothers in their day-to-day lives, including better and more flexible child care, better public transport, greater flexibility on the part of government agencies in when and how they engage with the public, and enhanced employment conditions that offer security, good pay and work-family benefits (Roy et al. 2004:176).

A framework to bring everyday life into welfare policy research

The everyday life approaches to policy research described above resonates with the framework for welfare research developed by Fiona Williams and Jennie Popay (1999). Reflecting on the state of welfare research, Williams and Popay find that the field tends to be polarised between those who explore the field at a structural level and those who focus on individual recipients. They argue that each approach, on its own, is inadequate. The former tends to neglect individual experience and agency, so that welfare recipients are 'shadowy, largely forgotten inhabitants of the research terrain'; the latter tends to overlook the social and economic environments in which people live and the structures which constrain and facilitate their choices (Williams and Popay 1999:157).

Williams and Popay (1999:179) propose a new framework, one which they anticipate will operate beyond existing dichotomous approaches. The framework encompasses four interconnected levels of analysis:

- the welfare subject
- the social topography of enablement and constraint
- the institutional and discursive context of policy formation and implementation
- the contextual dynamics of social and economic change.

Research should, they conclude, attempt to engage with all levels of analysis; not necessarily all equally but taking account of influences at all four levels (Williams and Popay 1999:182-183). I have used an everyday life approach to do just that, focus on the experience of individuals in their day-to-day world, while seeking to understand their actions, choices, dilemmas, priorities, confusions, frustrations and triumphs by analysing not only how they themselves interpret their situation but also the availability and types of opportunities and resources they can or cannot access; the policies and institutions that shape these opportunities and the discourse that describes those policies; and wider social and economic transformations, such as changing labour markets, new international policy agendas, and shifting patterns in demography and household formation.

Bringing these levels of analysis to Grace's experience, illustrates that her frustration lies partly with a lack of employment opportunities and a lack of flexible employment which would allow her to meet her children's needs while also being a good employee. Lone mothers have much higher rates of unemployment than partnered mothers and few believe they have the necessary skills to find a job; of those who are working, many are working fewer hours than they would wish (Dockery and Stromback 2004:438; Gray et al. 2003:3,17). Grace has no family to care for her children while she is at work, nor can she find after-school care that will accept her son, because none can accommodate his behaviour which can be quite challenging at times. Grace has difficulty finding suitable employment despite having gained tertiary qualifications, something that is not possible for most

mothers in receipt of income support, many of whom have not finished high school (Butterworth 2003:26).

Grace is aware of policy rhetoric:

I'm receiving lots of messages from outside, you know, like through the media, listening to public debate going on policies and the reality is that trying to juggle it all is not as easy as what it's made out to be ... I'm just really depressed. I've tried it and I've failed. And this further obligation on me, it somehow says, 'Oh well, yeah you're parenting but you're not quite good enough, you're not participating enough'. Or, 'Parenting and trying to raise two well-adjusted children and to be there for them is not quite good enough, you still have to do an extra bit'

Grace regards the introduction of a compulsory activity requirement to income support and the associated discourse of obligation and participation, as a comment on the inadequacy of the social contribution she makes through parenting. This adds to her sense that there is no way to satisfactorily balance being a parent with other obligations.

At the fourth level of Williams and Popay's analytical framework, Grace's experience is shaped by broad and sweeping changes to welfare regimes. Increased obligations for welfare recipients are being introduced widely, in many countries, for many 'categories' of recipient, as welfare regimes move away from what is termed 'passive' welfare. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) set an agenda for radical change among its member countries in 1994, advocating 'active labour market policies' (OECD 2006:24). Many countries, including Australia, followed its guidance, restructuring the social contract between citizen, community and state (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999:147). Welfare system reforms have been accompanied by broad changes to labour markets, also along the lines advocated by the OECD which called for greater 'flexibility' in working time and wage and labour costs. Australia has taken

a similar but not identical path to that of other liberal welfare regimes such as the UK and USA (Mahon 2001:27).

The research methods of an everyday life research design

An everyday life approach to policy analysis starts with the perspective of the people affected by the policy. In this study, taking an everyday life approach meant conducting interviews with mothers who were subject to the compulsory components of Australians Working Together. However, interviews in themselves are not sufficient; other methods are required to develop a context for mothers' experience and so I also undertook quantitative analysis, literature reviews, and analysis of policy logics, frameworks and official representations of the policy 'problem'.³

I carried out a qualitative longitudinal study with Australian mothers claiming Parenting Payment whose youngest child was aged between 12 and 15 years old. I selected this group because the Australians Working Together compulsory activity requirements targeted parents whose youngest child was aged 13 to 15. It is rare in welfare research to focus on both lone and partnered mothers, and on mothers of teenaged children. Most research about parents and income support is conducted with sole mothers of preschool-aged children.

The qualitative study involved 33 in-depth interviews with 16 mothers. Where possible, I interviewed mothers between two or three times over a period of two years. All respondents were women.⁴ All but one lived in Sydney, in the inner, southern or western suburbs; the other lived in a small regional town in New South Wales. Only one mother was married. The remainder were living in one-parent families, and of these two mothers were widowed.

I contacted potential research participants through a range of indirect methods using a passive sampling technique. I approached a diverse group of organisations for

³ The research methodology was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sydney, reference number 6950.

⁴ No fathers responded to my invitation to participate in the study, which is perhaps not surprising. As I show in chapter 1, they constitute a small proportion of all Parenting Payment recipients.

assistance and with their permission promoted the research to their members or service users. I placed flyers at doctors' surgeries, community and neighbourhood centres, sports centres, family associations and Centrelink offices. I posted several notices on a national lone parent email list and sought help from Catholic and public high schools, lone parent associations, divisions of general practice, family support organisations, women's health centres, migrant support centres, and Lebanese, Filipino, Vietnamese and Arabic community organisations. I published articles in the newsletters of several of these groups. I also spread word through friends, colleagues and family. Low-income parents of teenage children proved difficult to find. They appeared not to be linked into services like parents of younger children. Mothers rarely responded to flyers, posters or newsletter articles. The most successful approach was word of mouth. Most mothers who took part in the research did so after a friend of a friend, community worker or other trusted person told them about the study.

In arranging and conducting the interviews, I sought to ensure that mothers were as comfortable with the process as possible, did not incur any costs and maintained a sense of control. For this reason, I met them in a public place of their choosing or, if they did not offer a suggestion, a place which we selected together. Most interviews took place in parks, libraries, community centres and cafes near their homes. At each interview, participants received \$30 to cover any costs they may have incurred by meeting with me. As well as travel costs, this might also include, for example, the price of a take-away meal that evening because the time spent on the interview would otherwise have been used to prepare dinner. It was also my intention to recognise the value of their time. The interviews were loosely structured and conversational. While guiding the direction of our conversation across the range of topics I anticipated I would need to explore, I also tried to allow the participants to lead the discussion and raise aspects of their experience I had not previously considered. With the respondents' permission I made audio recordings of the interviews, which were later transcribed. Three women preferred that the interview be conducted in Arabic, not English, so I spoke to them with the aid of an interpreter. Two of these women did not wish to be recorded, so my analysis of those interviews is based solely on my notes.

I also arranged to interview personal advisers who work in Centrelink offices. The Department of Family and Community services and then Centrelink gave me permission to approach five Sydney Centrelink offices. As when recruiting mothers for the research, I again used passive techniques. I contacted the manager at each of the offices and explained the research project. The managers then provided the advisers with information about the research so that the advisers could elect whether or not to participate. I made an appointment with four advisers to conduct an interview in their workplaces. Some of these interviews we did in the open plan office space where they worked and for others we retired to a separate meeting room. I assured the advisers that their contribution to the project would remain confidential and would not be identifiable in the analysis.

The pseudonyms which I use throughout this thesis were chosen by the interviewees. Most respondents liked the chance to select the name by which they would be depicted and found choosing a name to be fun. The names they selected generally convey something of their cultural background. One mother did not wish to select a pseudonym, so I suggested a name to her.

I selected the themes through which I analysed the data by immersing myself in the interviews and the transcripts to determine which issues were most important to mothers as 'expert practitioners of their everyday worlds' and which also spoke to key aspects of welfare policy (Smith 1987:161). I analysed the interviews by these themes and by key words, reading and listening to the material again and again. I then used NVIVO to code the data so that patterns and disjunctures became apparent. In analysing the interviews I was seeking to understand how small daily acts fit within a complex of social relations (Smith 1987:167); that is, how the elements of everyday life for a woman claiming Parenting Payment are organised by and contribute to a web of interacting family, policy, social, educational and economic relations. Parents' conception of themselves as welfare recipients, as parents and as employees (or potential employees) varied widely and not only from person to person; often each mother had a complex and varying understanding of herself.

Australians Working Together was implemented during the period in which I was conducting this research, so when I first met the mothers I interviewed they had mostly just faced or were about to attend their first compulsory interview with an adviser. In our subsequent interviews, they had generally met again with an adviser and drawn up an enforceable Participation Agreement which set out their engagement in specific activities for a period of six months. These parents were experiencing compulsory requirements as income support claimants for the first time. I interviewed the advisers in late 2005, after Australians Working Together had been operating for two years.

The qualitative data is supplemented by analysis of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia (HILDA) survey. HILDA is a nation-wide panel survey of Australian households that collects data on a wide range of topics including families, income, employment and wellbeing (Headley et al. 2006:vii). The survey has been carried out annually since 2001 and, at the time of writing, had been funded by the Australian Department of Families, Communities and Indigenous Affairs to continue data collection until 2012 (FACSIA 2007:7). I have drawn on the wave four data collected in 2004 when 12,408 people in 6,987 households took part in the survey (Headey and Warren 2007:vi). The data is weighted using cross-sectional weights. In 2004, 413 respondents said that they were currently in receipt of Parenting Payment and 519 said they had claimed Parenting Payment at some time in the previous year. Due to the small number of Parenting Payment recipients in the HILDA survey, I clustered sole and partnered claimants together in my analysis. While there are significant differences between the sole and partnered claimants, analysing data on the two groups together provided me with sufficient cases for a valid analysis, which would not have been possible otherwise.

The complexity of mothers' lives required a broad body of literature to aid interpretation. In this thesis I draw upon extensive reviews of literatures regarding welfare-to-work policies for parents and other claimants, balancing the demands of work and family, care, respect and recognition, policy implementation, the policy space, street level bureaucrats, contemporary modes of welfare service delivery, lone parents and lone mothers, income support claimants, low-income families,

poverty, policy language, feminist welfare regime analysis, citizenship and social security policy, gender and time use, the interaction of tax and transfer policies, effective marginal tax rates, feminist economics and employment conditions for low-income workers. Where possible I have sourced Australian studies, but I also draw upon research from Britain, Europe and North America.

To better understand the policy logics at work in the social security changes which took place under *Australians Working Together* and *Welfare to Work*, I undertook an analysis of ‘official talk’ about welfare reform (Bessant 2002). I examine how the policy ‘problem’ in Australian welfare reform has been represented when ministers argue for the need for change (Bacchi 1999). Such arguments most often occur when a review of the social security system is announced and a new approach is advocated prior to the passage of legislation. In order to uncover policy logics, the official depiction of the ‘problem’ and the rationales for reform, I read and analysed the following speeches, reports, white papers and other official pronouncements from the Prime Minister, Ministers, Centrelink and the Chief Executive Officer of Centrelink:

- Australia, House of Representatives. 2005. ‘Employment and Workplace Relations Legislation Amendment (Welfare to Work and Other Measures) Bill 2005: Second Reading.’ *Debates*. (Kevin Andrews, MP, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service). 9 November. 2.
- Australia, House of Representatives. 2005. ‘Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Australians Working Together and Other 2001 Budget Measures) Bill 2002 Second Reading Speech.’ *Debates*. (Larry Anthony, MP, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs). 16 May. 2309-2311.
- Centrelink. 2002a. *Mutual Obligation Requirements*. Centrelink.
- Centrelink. 2002b. *Parents and Employment: A Guide to Support Your Workforce Participation*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Centrelink. 2004a. *Helping Parents Return to Work*. Canberra: Centrelink.

- Australia, House of Representatives. 2005. 'Appropriation Bill (No.1) 2005-2006: Second Reading Speech.' *Debates*. (Peter Costello, MP, Treasurer). 10 May. 55.
- Howard, John. 1997. *Address at the Official Launch of Centrelink (Commonwealth Services Delivery Agency)*. 24 September. Canberra: Parliament House.
- Newman, Jocelyn. 1999a. *The Challenge of Welfare Dependency in the 21st Century*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Newman, Jocelyn. 1999b. *The Future of Welfare in the 21st Century*. 29 September. Canberra: National Press Club.
- Australia, Senate. 2002. 'Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Australians Working Together and Other 2001 Budget Measures) Bill 2002 Contingent Motion.' *Debates*. (Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Family and Community Services). 12 December. 7974.
- Vardon, Sue. 2000. 'One to One: Personalised Service Delivery.' *Case Management: Fact or Fiction. Case Management Society of Australia, 3rd Annual Conference*. 11 February. Melbourne.
- Vardon, Sue. 2001. 'Corporate Governance: Building Trust and Credibility, "Trust Us, We're From Centrelink."' *Institute of Public Administration Conference*. 24 August. Brisbane.

Together, the qualitative and quantitative data, literature reviews and analysis of government rhetoric provide the resources needed to conduct an everyday life analysis of Australians Working Together.

Thesis overview

My everyday life analysis of Australians Working Together highlighted three areas for particular attention. Firstly, mothers' conceptions of the policy situation and what they see as the primary issues requiring policy change and how this compared to the presentation of policy issues by officials. Did the official presentation of the policy 'problem' resonate with the circumstances of welfare recipients and their views of the problems?

Secondly, talking with mothers about Australians Working Together led me to understand the centrality of the personal adviser interviews to the policy implementation and delivery. For mothers it was not until they met with the advisers at Centrelink that the policy was enacted. As a result I investigated the ‘street level’ implementation of the policy.

Thirdly, it became apparent that mothers made detailed, careful, calculations about employment, education and other activities. In doing so, they incorporated a far wider range of factors than the policy rationale provides for. Mothers’ attempts to balance the relative advantages and disadvantages of employment and income support led me to consider Parenting Payment as a policy which enables rather than inhibits employment. These three issues form the focus of the thesis. I explored them using the methods outlined above drawing particularly upon theories of care and recognition in my analysis.

In chapter one, I lay down two foundations upon which this thesis rests. The first is a detailed description of Australian social security policy for parents, focusing particularly on the Australians Working Together set of policies which were in place when I conducted my research. I also describe the Welfare to Work policies which replaced Australians Working Together. The policy detail provided in this section underpins the analysis of later chapters. Chapter one also sets out the theoretical framework that guides my analysis. As I have explained, mothers’ descriptions of their lived experience of welfare policy led me to two bodies of theory: care and recognition. Feminist theorists have sought to ensure that care is incorporated into sociological, economic and policy analysis and encouraged policy makers to recognise its importance. In doing so, theorists have investigated the meanings and place of care. The fine-grained understanding of care they have developed makes possible a more nuanced comprehension of the experiences of Parenting Payment claimants, whose lives centre around the provision of care. As welfare recipients and as mothers, Parenting Payment recipients are engaged in constant negotiations for recognition. Theories of respect and recognition, as articulated by Axel Honneth (1995, 2003), Nancy Fraser (2003), Richard Sennett (2003) and Ruth Lister (2002b) speak to this aspect of mothers’ experience. The importance of respect becomes most apparent when mothers negotiate their

compulsory activity agreements. The work of these theorists provides a framework within which to analyse the meaning of respect, the effect of disrespect and how recognition might be achieved.

In chapter two, I introduce the mothers I interviewed. They explain how they view themselves and how they perceive they are regarded by policy and society. They describe stereotypes about lone motherhood and welfare recipients, particularly stereotypes about lone mothers who are also welfare recipients. I add to parents' rebuttal of these myths by investigating demographic data about lone parents, income support claimants, their employment and their plans for the future. Also in chapter two, I focus on parents' understanding of good parenting and how this informs their views on income support and employment. Mothers here explain the key policy issues from their perspective.

In chapter three, I detail the policy context for this research. Chapter three expands on the national discursive and institutional settings for welfare reform in Australia, locating these, in turn, within broader international moves to reconfigure welfare. While exploring the nature of Australian welfare reform under Australians Working Together, I examine the policy logics underpinning these changes and how they shape the policy conception of parenthood, motherhood and care; welfare receipt, entitlement and obligation; and responsible citizenship, dependence and employment. In this chapter I describe the policy logic that people claiming welfare assistance are, for that very reason, demonstrating an inability to make rational decisions in their own best interest, and are, therefore, not full citizens and not entitled to full autonomy. As a result, parents are also denied the autonomy to arrange family care as they see fit – perhaps not a surprising outcome given the policy preference for paid work over unpaid work and the failure as a result to recognise the value of care.

Chapter four focuses on the administrative mechanism that lies at the heart of the welfare reform agenda – interviews between parents and personal advisers. It is clear from mothers' description of welfare-to-work policies, that the adviser meetings can constitute the entirety of their knowledge of the policy and their experience of its implementation. This means that their experience of these (often

short) encounters is critical in determining how they engage with the policy. As demonstrated in chapters two and three, there is a disjuncture between mothers' understandings of their own needs, motivations and actions and those embedded in the policy. In chapter four, I demonstrate how parents are interpellated by the policy, or how the policy addresses parents as though they were of a particular type, how this is mediated by personal advisers, and how parents respond. I start by looking at the way in which adviser appointments are set: the letters Parenting Payment claimants receive notifying them that they are required to attend a meeting. Uniquely in welfare policy research, this study recognises that parents attending an adviser meeting walk into an office space that embodies conceptions about clients and the relations between staff and clients. I explore the effect of the physical environment on mothers' approach to the meeting. I then examine Australian mothers' negotiations with their personal advisers to discover why some meetings were considered satisfactory and useful by parents and others were regarded as not useful or even offensive.

In the fifth chapter, I examine the calculations which parents described undertaking when considering employment. Policy descriptions of the decision to take a job centre on the financial imperatives, but surprisingly, given the primacy of financial 'incentives' to welfare-to-work policy, there is little research on how these operate in practice. Mothers described complex calculations of the economic costs and benefits of employment, measuring effective marginal tax rates, taper rates, benefits that arise from the use of concession cards and the intersection of social security and public housing earnings rules. In contrast to claims made in orthodox economics, much of the reasoning behind parents' employment decisions was not straightforwardly financial. In the second section of chapter five, I explore the family-friendly arrangements that parents can access at work, how they reconcile their family needs with employment and the role that Parenting Payment plays in developing satisfactory arrangements. I use logistic regression analysis of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia survey to demonstrate the inaccessibility of the most basic of in-work benefits among part-time workers, regardless of their education or employment experience. This leads me to conclude, as did a number of mothers in the study, that Parenting Payment could be regarded as a work-family benefit that enables rather than inhibits parents' employment.

In the conclusion, I bring together the key themes of the thesis in order to reflect on the implications of my research for the Welfare to Work policy changes which came into effect in 2006 and 2007, replacing Australians Working Together.

In planning this research and reviewing the literature on welfare policy for parents, I could not imagine pictures of mothers' lives equal to the insight that they themselves gave me. With their help I developed an understanding of the complexity of navigating every day as a parent and a welfare recipient. Without their expertise, I would never have acquired such a depth of knowledge about welfare-to-work policy in action.

Chapter one

Policy history and theoretical frameworks of care and recognition

Two foundations uphold the analysis which I develop in this thesis: the policy and the theory. In this chapter I lay down these foundations in detail. I begin by giving an historical overview of Australian social security policy and the development of income support, tracing the expansion of eligibility from widows to mothers to parents. I document the development of welfare reform under the Liberal/National Coalition Government led by John Howard: Work for the Dole, the establishment of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform and the Australians Working Together package announced in the 2001-2002 federal Budget. I next describe Australians Working Together as it was implemented for Parenting Payment recipients. Welfare to Work, the package of policy changes which replaced Australians Working Together, started to be developed not long after Australians Working Together began operating. Welfare to Work was announced in the 2005-2006 Budget and implementation began in 2006. This first section of chapter one is descriptive. It presents information about the policy which is necessary in order to understand the analysis which follows in later chapters. I interpret the meaning of these policy changes in the remainder of the thesis, focusing on Australians Working Together, as the policy in operation when I undertook my field work. I return to Welfare to Work in the concluding chapter, when I reflect on the implications of my findings.

The second body of foundational material I explore in this chapter is the theoretical framework. As I noted in the introduction, theories of care and theories of recognition are central to my interpretation of Australians Working Together in the

everyday. An understanding of recognition and care underpin the other theoretical considerations which arise throughout the thesis.

I start by investigating care. Family was central to the thinking of the mothers who participated in this study. The ways in which they understood care, managed it, felt about it and accommodated it resonated with the work of feminist theorists who have strived to incorporate care within sociological and policy analyses. In contrast, at a policy development level, there was little discussion of care, despite the focus of *Australians Working Together* on mothers who receive income support. Feminist policy analysts have documented a shift in policy assumptions in the twentieth century from a male-breadwinner, female-care-giver family model to an adult-worker model (for example, Cass and Brennan 2003; Giullari and Lewis 2005; O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999; Shaver 2002a). These theorists' analytical frameworks are grounded in theories of care, and arise through a well-developed understanding of the nature of care work. In this chapter, I explore theoretical conceptions of care including those developed by Clare Ungerson (1983), Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto (1990), Arlie Russell Hochschild (1995) and Mary Daly and Jane Lewis (2000).

Finally, I examine theories of recognition. Here I draw principally upon the work of Axel Honneth (1995, 2003), Nancy Fraser (2003), Richard Sennett (2003) and Ruth Lister (2002b). As Grace's comments in the introduction make clear, seeking respectful relations with the state and with Centrelink officers is critically important for Parenting Payment recipients. Honneth provides a framework within which to interpret struggles for recognition and the effect of disrespect, while Sennett offers a nuanced understanding of the meaning of respect for welfare recipients. Fraser and Lister bring recognition for the unpaid work of care into the analysis. Fraser emphasises the importance of redistribution as a distinct dimension in analysis, arguing that it should not be subsumed by recognition.

Social security for Australian families: a brief history

In this section I provide an historical overview of Parenting Payment and its place in the Australian social security system, leading to a discussion of the policies of

Australians Working Together and Welfare to Work. I present the policy packages to provide a context for the coming analysis. The meaning of these policy developments is investigated throughout the thesis. In chapters two and three, I explore the differing interpretations of the policy issues as seen by mothers and by public officials, which leads me to reflect on policy developments in terms of feminist welfare regime analysis; the transition to normative models of the adult worker; and the growing emphasis on employment as the core citizenship responsibility. In chapter four, I examine the policy meaning in practice by investigating the day-to-day implementation of Australians Working Together. In chapter five, I delve into mothers' employment decisions and evaluate the meaning of policy in terms of incentives to employment and support for mothers' employment.

Like many other Australian income support policies, Parenting Payment has its origins in the national, publicly funded social security system which burgeoned during and immediately after World War II. The system was developed to provide income support to people without paid work due to unemployment, ill-health, disability, retirement or caring responsibilities (Shaver 2002a:333). It was built on the existing invalid and aged pension systems which were introduced in 1908 and 1909 respectively and on the war widows' pensions which were paid following passage of the World War I *Repatriation Acts* of 1917 and 1920 (Carney and Hanks 1994:30; Cooke 2003:465).

The first federally managed, publicly funded social security payment for sole parents was legislated in 1942 under the *Widows' Pensions Act* (Carney and Hanks 1994:212). The pension provided assistance to mothers of dependent children who were *de jure* widows or divorced by their husband, deserted by their husband for more than six months, or living alone because their husband had been hospitalised for insanity. *De facto* widows also qualified if their relationship had persisted for at least three years. While many sole mothers benefited, select groups could not receive support under this payment; namely mothers who themselves left or agreed to end a relationship, mothers deserted by *de facto* husbands, mothers who were never *de jure* or *de facto* married, and wives of prisoners. Those who were not eligible for the Widows' Pension could apply to their state governments for

assistance that was worth less and was more discretionary than the Widows' Pension (Brennan and Cass 2005:6). A moral distinction was made between 'deserving' mothers who demonstrated a commitment to marriage, and the 'undeserving', who failed to enter the institution or left it. Only those of 'good character' could claim support (Carney and Hanks 1994:212). There was a racial dimension to the moral entitlement of the pension, with migrants (excepting British migrants), indigenous peoples from Africa, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, and most Indigenous Australians excluded from entitlement (Kewley 1973:215). The racial exclusions persisted until 1966 (Carney and Hanks 1994:212 note 12).

All sole mothers were brought under federal schemes in 1973 with the introduction of the Supporting Mothers Benefit, expanded in 1977 and renamed Supporting Parents Benefit to include fathers caring for children alone (Whiteford, Stanton and Gray 2001:26). Extending eligibility to fathers marked an important shift in policy logic. Sole motherhood was no longer the basis of entitlement; it was, instead, sole parenthood. The Widows' Pension persisted until 1989 when the Sole Parent Pension was introduced, combining payments for unmarried and widowed or divorced parents into the one payment (Cass 2005:40). Until the 1990s, federal cash assistance programs assumed that participation in paid employment would interfere with lone parents' ability to care for their children and so income support was provided so that parents would not be forced to choose employment over care (Carney and Hanks 1994:220). The payments were made in acknowledgement of the absence of a family breadwinner (Whiteford 2001:65). That is, the policy assumption was that parents could either be carers or workers, not both. Moreover, mothers had moral responsibility to their children to be carers.

The trend towards a policy assumption that parents could, if they chose, be both carers and workers began with the Social Security Review. The Social Security Review was established in 1986 by the Minister for Social Security, Brian Howe. Headed by Bettina Cass, the review was tasked with examining the social security system with a particular focus on three areas, one which was income support for

families with children⁵. The review argued that changes to the existing system could reduce poverty in one-parent families. Key recommendations included providing support to parents in seeking employment and improving their skills, and removing barriers to employment (for example, by increasing the amount parents could earn at a paid job before their benefits were affected) (Raymond 1987:129). Such measures were designed to improve the financial independence of lone parents. Shortly afterwards, in 1989, the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) program began. JET was a voluntary program available to parents in which JET advisers provided information and referrals about education, employment and child care (Whiteford 2001:74).

Parenting Payment, which brought together payments for lone and partnered parents, was established in 1998 (Whiteford, Stanton and Gray 2001:27). Parenting Payment was available to parents whose youngest child was aged less than 16 years and whose household had a low income. Recipients could be either lone parents or in heterosexual couples.⁶ In the case of couples, the individual classified as the main carer received the payment, which was means-tested both on her income and that of her partner. While similar, the payments for lone and couple parents had important differences, because Parenting Payment Single was a pension and Parenting Payment Partnered was an allowance. The Australian social security benefits grouped together as pensions have more generous rates of payment, greater annual increases in payment rate, and more additional benefits than allowances.⁷ Pensions also have a higher earnings disregard, allowing a higher level of earnings before the recipient's entitlement is reduced, and when earnings do affect pensions, the taper rate, the rate at which benefits are withdrawn, is lower.

Australians Working Together

The Australians Working Together package has its origins in a form of reciprocity which was introduced to social security policy in the 1990s. The Keating Labor

⁵ The other areas for focus were social security and workforce issues and income support for the aged.

⁶ Same-sex couples are not recognised by Australian social security law. The primary carer for a child with same-sex parents may be eligible for Parenting Payment (Single).

⁷ Pensions include the Aged Pension and the Disability Support Pension; allowances are paid to unemployed people and young people as Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance.

Government first developed this concept as ‘Reciprocal Obligation’ in its Working Nation package (McClelland 2002:216). Reciprocal Obligation required long-term unemployed people to engage, through a more individualised system, in the programs and assistance that were offered to them. Penalties could be applied if this obligation was not met. Prior to this development, the primary obligation of unemployed people was to meet the ‘work test’, that is, to demonstrate that they were seeking full-time employment. Following its election in 1996, the Howard Liberal/National Coalition Government replaced Reciprocal Obligation with ‘Mutual Obligation’ (see appendix two for a timeline of social security policy reform under the Howard Government). The slightly different term was associated with a shift in meaning: in Reciprocal Obligation the ‘obligation’ was to take advantage of the assistance offered to improve one’s situation, whereas in Mutual Obligation it became an obligation to give something to the community in return for income support (McClelland 2002:216). Mutual Obligation was first put into practice in the Work for the Dole program. Announced in 1997, Work for the Dole required unemployed people aged less than 25 years who had been unemployed for more than six months to engage in 25 hours of prescribed work per week in order to be eligible for income support (Harris 2001:18). Participation in Work for the Dole usually lasted for six months.

In 1999, the Minister for Family and Community Services, Jocelyn Newman (1999b), announced the government’s intention to undertake ‘comprehensive reform’ of the Australian welfare system (see appendix two for a list of Howard Government ministers active in social security reform). The Howard Government established the Reference Group on Welfare Reform (hereafter the Reference Group), headed by Patrick McClure, ‘to provide advice on possible initiatives to prevent and reduce welfare dependency among people of workforce age’ (Newman 1999b:3). The extension of a Mutual Obligation framework was one of the six guiding principles for the Reference Group. Parenting Payment recipients, unemployed people and income support claimants with disabilities were highlighted as groups requiring particular attention. Following the release of an interim report for community consultation, the Reference Group (2000) published *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society*, which became known as the McClure Report. The McClure Report proposed changes in five areas:

- Individualised service delivery
- A simpler income support structure
- Incentives and financial assistance
- Mutual obligations
- Social partnerships

With regard to Parenting Payment, the McClure Report recommended that recipients with school-aged children attend a compulsory annual interview for advice about education and employment, and that recipients with high-school-aged children should be required to agree to a plan for their employment, education or other form of employment-oriented participation (Reference Group 2000:43). The Australian Government response, *Welfare Reform: A Stronger, Fairer Australia*, endorsed many of the Reference Group's recommendations, including the changes to Parenting Payment (Australian Government 2001). The welfare changes were announced as 'Australians Working Together' in the 2001-2002 Budget.

Australians Working Together legislation was introduced to Parliament in May 2002, but was not passed by both houses until March 2003. The bill faced considerable opposition from the Senate, where a majority, consisting of the Australian Labor Party, the Australian Greens and the Australian Democrats, was concerned about extending the concept of Mutual Obligation to new groups of income support recipients, particularly families, and was also worried about the effects of harsh penalties. On 12 December, the last day of Parliament in 2002, parliamentarians debated for 25 consecutive hours in an attempt to pass both the Australians Working Together legislation and another controversial bill that sought to extend the authority of the national security services. Both bills bounced back and forth from the Senate to the House of Representatives, but by 10.30 the following morning neither had passed into law.⁸

⁸ The bouncing back and forth of the bill from the Senate to the House created an historic precedent during this all-night sitting on the last day of Parliament for the year. The Senate split the bill and approved half of it; the section which contained extra funding and introduced the Working Credit. The other half, containing the measures regarding Mutual Obligation and penalties, the Senate retained for further consideration. The House, however, rejected the Senate's authority to split the bill and asked that the Senate consider the bill as it was originally presented. While not insisting on

It was only following a deal made with the Democrats that the government succeeded in passing *Australians Working Together* through both Houses of Parliament (Morris 2003:10). It occurred during a week in which the Australian Democrats formed a majority with the Liberal/National Party in the Senate to support the passage of a number of bills that would not have succeeded without Democrat support. *Australians Working Together* passed into law on the second of two days in which no less than 24 ‘priority’ bills were listed for debate by the Senate. Most of the 24 were accepted. The Democrats agreed to support the *Australians Working Together* bill after the government conceded to changes that softened breach penalties and agreed to create a task force to investigate breach penalties (Morris 2003:10).

The implementation of *Australians Working Together* began in September 2002, before the legislation had been passed by parliament, as the first stages of implementation did not require legislative reform. For parents in receipt of Parenting Payment whose youngest child was aged six to 15, this involved attendance at a compulsory ‘participation interview’ with an ‘adviser’. The meetings were to occur annually and the adviser would provide information and advice about employment and training. The full implementation of *Australians Working Together* began a year later in September 2003, following the passage of *Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Australians Working Together and other 2001 Budget Measures) 2003*. *Australians Working Together* clustered Parenting Payment claimants into three groups: those whose youngest child was preschool-aged, in primary school or in secondary school. The first group, those whose youngest child was aged less than six years, faced no new requirements. The second, parents whose youngest child was aged between six and 12 years, continued their compulsory annual interviews with personal advisers with no further requirements.

its decision to split the bill, the Senate sent a message to the House that splitting a bill was an amendment like any other amendment and that the Senate expected the House to treat it as such, thus extending the bounds of appropriate Parliamentary procedure (Harris 2005:447-448, 826-828).

The third group included the mothers in this study, those with a youngest child aged between 13 and 15 years. Like parents with younger children, these parents had to attend an annual interview; however, this group were obliged at their interview to develop a Participation Agreement. The agreement would set out recipients' commitment to meet a 'participation requirement' of 150 hours spent on employment-oriented activities every six months. The 150 hours could be spread out over the full six months, averaging just over six hours per week, or could be concentrated into a shorter period. The interviews were conducted by JET advisers who had experience of providing information to parents through the JET program.⁹ Parents with primary-school-aged children were also offered the option to create a participation plan, but were not compelled to do so. The activities in the agreements could include paid employment, education and training and vocationally oriented voluntary work.

Failure to attend a compulsory meeting or to comply with a Participation Agreement could result in 'breach penalties'. The first two 'breaches' in a period of two years resulted in a reduction of Parenting Payment for 26 weeks; the first penalty a reduction of 18 per cent, the second of 24 per cent. For the third penalty, all payments were stopped for eight weeks (National Welfare Rights Network 2004:2). If, upon receiving notice of a first penalty, the parent subsequently complied with the activity requirement, their payments could be reinstated at the full amount; the second and third penalties continued for the full duration whether or not parents eventually fulfilled the requirements. The taskforce created to examine the impact of penalties, established as a result of negotiations to pass *Australians Working Together* through the Senate, handed its report to the government in December 2004 (Yaxley 2005). At the time of writing the report had not been made public, but a leaked copy was said to conclude that 'penalties imposed on welfare recipients have been excessive, unfair and counter-productive' (Yaxley 2005). The taskforce recommended that penalties not last beyond eight weeks.

⁹ As noted above, the JET (Jobs, Education and Training) program first began in 1989. It was a voluntary program designed to support parents in taking up opportunities for employment or study.

Welfare to Work

Moves towards further changes to the Australian social security system started prior to the full implementation of Australians Working Together. In June 2003, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Workforce Participation (2005:xiii, hereafter Standing Committee on Employment) was asked to investigate measures that would increase employment participation and consider ‘how a balance of assistance, incentives and obligations can increase participation, for income support recipients’.

With regard to Parenting Payment, the Standing Committee on Employment (2005:150) recommended that the Australian Government ‘review strategies for encouraging increased participation’. By the time the report, *Working for Australia’s Future: Increasing Participation in the Workforce*, was released in March 2005, Australians Working Together had been fully implemented for 18 months. Evaluation evidence was not yet available, but the recommendation that Australians Working Together strategies should be reviewed was based on testimony from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations that ‘early signs indicate[d] a positive improvement’ (Standing Committee on Employment 2005:149).

Two months later, Welfare to Work was announced as part of the 2005-2006 Budget (Costello 2005). Welfare to Work substantially extended the participation requirements for sole and partnered parents claiming income support. In contrast to Australians Working Together, Welfare to Work passed into legislation after little parliamentary debate. The Howard Government was able to hasten its passage because the Liberal/National Coalition had achieved a majority in both Houses of Parliament in the 2004 election. Two bills to enable the Welfare to Work changes were introduced to the House of Representatives on 9 November 2005: the *Employment and Workplace Relations Legislation Amendment (Welfare to Work and Other Measures) Bill 2005* and the *Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare to Work) Bill 2005*. The same day, the bills were referred to the Senate, which in turn, also on the same day, referred the bills to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee. The short time frame given by the

Senate for the Community Affairs Legislation Committee to consider these two bills provides a stark example of the speed at which the legislation was debated. The Senate requested that the Committee complete its examination of the legislation, undertake community consultations and report back to the Senate in *less than three weeks* on Monday 28 November.

The members of the committee belonging to the Australian Labor Party, Australian Democrats and Australian Greens wrote a dissenting report in which they were disparaging of the short time given to the committee to consider the bills:

These bills represent the most drastic changes to the provision of social security in Australia since the introduction of the Social Security Act in 1947, affecting hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable Australians. By so severely limiting the time frame of this inquiry, the government has diminished the capacity of Senators, and the community in general, to appropriately consider the details of these changes. Given the importance of these proposed Welfare to Work measures, this should not have been the case. (Community Affairs Legislation Committee 2005:66)

The government majority in the committee recommended that both pieces of legislation be passed, subject to just one recommendation: that large families be exempt from participation requirements (Community Affairs Legislation Committee 2005:vii). The legislation, slightly amended, passed into law in the final sitting days of Parliament in December 2005. The Welfare to Work changes were passed in the same five-day period in which Parliament also passed legislation to radically change industrial relations and further extend anti-terrorism laws (Murphy 2005:4).

Welfare to Work introduced greater activity measures for parents in receipt of income support, made social security considerably more employment-oriented and substantially complicated the array of payments and requirements. Again the policy divided parents into groups according to the age of their children, but now it only distinguishes between parents with preschool- and school-aged-children. These

groups are further divided into new and existing claimants, with some additional distinctions made between one- and two-parent families.

Parents of preschool-aged children experience no differences under Welfare to Work, neither those who are new to the system nor those already in receipt of payments. These parents, whether partnered or single, continue to be entitled to Parenting Payment with no additional requirements to attend adviser interviews or engage in employment or training.

For parents with school-aged children, however, the situation is more complex. Parents, both sole and partnered, already in receipt of Parenting Payment on 1 July 2006 remain eligible for Parenting Payment until their youngest child reaches 16, but the activity requirements for these parents has increased. Once their youngest child reaches 7, they are required to undertake 15 hours of employment per week. Those parents not in employment are to seek such employment, plus engage in a 'Mutual Obligation' activity for 150 hours within a six-month period once every year. Alternatively, these parents can study full time to satisfy their Mutual Obligation requirements; part-time study must be combined with employment or job search.

New claimants who are the primary carer in a couple relationship and whose youngest child is aged six or over are no longer eligible for Parenting Payment Partnered. Instead, these parents have to apply for Newstart Allowance, the payment which, until Welfare to Work, was the benefit for unemployed adults seeking full-time employment. To remain eligible for Newstart, partnered parents must be employed for at least 15 hours per week, or seek such employment. If not employed, parents are also required to engage in a Mutual Obligation Activity for 150 hours for six months each year. Education is not an acceptable activity for these parents. If they wish to study they have two options: either seek or take 15 hours of employment in addition to their studies; or study full time and apply for Austudy, which attracts a lower rate of payment.

New claimants who are sole parents face a slightly different set of rules again. Sole parents who have a child aged six or seven may apply for Parenting Payment.

While in receipt of this benefit, they must comply with the same set of requirements as existing Parenting Payment claimants; that is, 15 hours of employment per week, or job search plus Mutual Obligation activity for 150 hours within six months. Like existing claimants, new lone parent claimants can study to meet the activity requirements. Once new claimants' youngest child reaches eight years, they are no longer eligible for Parenting Payment Single, and, like their partnered counterparts, must apply for Newstart Allowance. Once claiming Newstart, they must to comply with the same set of requirements as partnered primary carers on Newstart. Education in itself no longer fulfils their activity requirements.

Failure to comply with any activity requirement may result in an eight-week suspension of payments, both for Parenting Payment and Newstart claimants. This new set of arrangements for parents is extremely complicated (please refer to appendix one, table A1, which sets out some of the differences which depend on the age of the youngest child). The sketch I have provided here demonstrates only the most substantial differences between parents in a variety of circumstances; the policy's intricacies reveal further complications and variations in entitlements, supplementary benefits and exemptions from requirements.

The most critical difference between Parenting Payment and Newstart is the amount of payment sole parents receive. As noted earlier, Parenting Payment Single is a pension, while Parenting Payment Partnered and Newstart are both allowances. Lone parents on Newstart face a lower level of benefit plus higher taper rates which begin at a lower rate of earnings than they do for lone parents receiving Parenting Payment Single (please refer to appendix one, Table A2, for detail on the earnings mechanisms for each payment). As a result, lone parents combining part-time employment with receipt of Newstart keep substantially less of their earnings when compared to someone with the same income receiving Parenting Payment Single (Harding et al. 2005:13-14).

Administrative contexts and other family policy

At the time of my fieldwork, Parenting Payment recipients were affected by a number of other family policies and policy environments. I cover the most directly

pertinent of them in this section. Centrelink administered all Commonwealth income support payments on behalf of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS).¹⁰ Parenting Payment was the responsibility of FACS until the October 2004 federal election, after which responsibility for most 'working age' income support payments, including Parenting Payment Single and Partnered, was transferred to DEWR. Centrelink is a statutory authority which operates within a purchaser/provider framework, these two departments being its largest clients (Centrelink 2005:12-15). The personal advisers who conducted the annual interviews with parents were employed by Centrelink.

There are two other forms of financial assistance available to Parenting Payment claimants; Family Tax Benefits and Child Support. In 2000, as part of a substantial restructuring of the Australian tax system, the Australian Government introduced Family Tax Benefits Part A and Part B. These replaced a number of other family assistance payments. Family Tax Benefit Part A is means-tested on parental income. If a couple family, the means test applies to joint parental income (Cass and Brennan 2003:54). Family Tax Benefit Part B has no means test on the primary earner's income, which means that sole parent families, regardless of earnings, are eligible for the full Part B payment. However, for couple families, Part B is means tested on the income of the so-called 'secondary earner' and eligibility ceases at a low level of earnings. As a result, mothers in couples faced strong financial disincentives to employment (Cass and Brennan 2003:55).

The Child Support Scheme began in 1988, replacing previous child maintenance provisions. Under the scheme, non-resident parents are assessed by the Child Support Agency, which collects the payments from them and directs them to the resident parent via the social security system (Walter 2002:18-19). The level of the payments is determined according to the income of both parents and the proportion of time which children spend with each parent (Keebaugh 2003:166). Child

¹⁰ In January 2006, FACS became the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) and then, in late 2007, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

Support payments are received by slightly less than half of all sole-parent families (Keebaugh 2003:159).

This first half of this chapter has outlined the social security policy environment in which I conducted my study. The changes introduced under Australians Working Together significantly altered the social security landscape for low-income parents in Australia, and were radically extended under Welfare to Work. Both policy packages placed little emphasis on care and strong emphasis on the obligations of income support recipients.

Theorising care and respect for parents in receipt of social security

Care

When I interviewed mothers receiving income support, everything came back to families; they were the centre around which everything else had to fit. The participants spoke of their lives as infused with care and care responsibilities, primarily for their children, but also for other family members and friends. The care they described is a mixture of love and responsibility: the two dimensions of care differentiated by Clare Ungerson (1983:31) as *caring about* and *caring for*. The former is a 'sense of feeling affection' for someone, 'based on spontaneous feelings of affinity'; the latter is essentially 'servicing their needs' (Ungerson 1983:31). In making this distinction, Ungerson emphasises the difference between the emotion of care and the work of care. Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto (1990) further and more finely categorise care into four interrelated elements. Like Ungerson they regard care as consisting of *caring about* and *caring for*, for which they have similar definitions, but they also add *caregiving* and *care-receiving*. Fisher and Tronto (1990:42-43) distinguish between the 'responsibility [for] initiating and maintaining caring activities' involved in caring for and the 'more continuous and dense time commitment' involved in caregiving, which is concrete, hands-on work. They also include those who are cared for, recognising that as care recipients they are active participants in acts of care.

Separating and analysing different dimensions of care allows for the examination of the resources required for care work, the relationships involved and the social

contexts in which it takes place. This is an important counter to the popular conception of care as something that occurs spontaneously and easily as a result of women's love, captured classically in the image of a Madonna-like mother holding her child (Hochschild 1995:331).

She is at home, not in a public place ... the caregiving seems natural, effortless. She is sitting, quiescent, not standing or moving – stances associated with 'working'. She seems to enjoy caring for the child and as the child's face often suggests, she is good at caring. (Hochschild 1995:331)

This is a feminine, private and natural ideal of care (Hochschild 1995:331). In contrast, treating *caring about* as different to *caring for* draws attention to the labour involved in *caring for*: labour which requires time, material resources, knowledge and skill (Fisher and Tronto 1990:41). Access to these resources is mediated by locality, class, race and family structure (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Fisher and Tronto 1990).

All the mothers I interviewed stressed the highly time-consuming nature of caring for children. As time-use research confirms (see for example Bittman and Pixley 1997; Craig 2004), the tasks mothers perform require a lot of time: maintaining a household for themselves and their children; cooking, washing, cleaning, shopping, tidying; overseeing children's development as they play, socialise, learn day-to-day life skills and complete their homework; keeping children safe by supervising their activities and watching over their environment.

Care work does not only take the form of intensive one-on-one provision (Fisher and Tronto 1990:39). Employed parents also manage care remotely, ensuring their children are safe, secure and nurtured; for instance, by coordinating the collection of children from school and their transfer to after-school care, making telephone calls to and from children who are at home on their own, or researching the best care providers and choosing among schools, family members, friends and paid carers and then ensuring that these non-parental carers provide good quality care (Hochschild 1997:77; Morehead 2001). The work of coordinating care is ongoing, adapting to

new circumstances as children's needs change and, for many parents, as their employment situation changes. The unpredictable hours of many part-time jobs exacerbate the complexity of weekly childcare arrangements (Brennan 1998:225; Pocock 2003)

Raising children is costly (Valenzuela 1999). Mothers talked to me about the material resources essential for the delivery of care: a warm safe home supplied with power and water, good and plentiful food, access to transport and medicines. Yet poverty sometimes threatened these essentials. Mothers also described other resources that might facilitate their ability to care for their children; these included many items owned by most households: a car, a washing machine and a clothes dryer, a computer (Saunders et al. 2007:34-35). In addition, of course, money is required for paid care, such as after-school care or holiday programs.

Parents require time to develop the knowledge and skill needed to provide good care, time to develop and revise care provision, and to update it as children and circumstances change. They also need time to interact with and learn from other parents and others who know and care for their children: friends, family members, teachers, children's friends and their family.

A mother's ability despite meagre resources she can command can be regarded as a mark of her quality and commitment as a carer. As Fisher and Tronto (1990:43) note

One of the most pervasive contradictions involved in taking care of concerns the asymmetry between responsibility and power. To the extent that women are assigned responsibility for maintaining and repairing our world, this contradiction between responsibility and power becomes especially severe: the 'caring woman' makes things better, regardless of how little she has with which to work. Where responsibility is great but power is limited, women are expected to compensate for deficiencies in the caring process.

Although mothers require resources to provide care, the degree to which they can mobilise these resources is often shaped by strong and persistent ideologies about motherhood and fatherhood, dependence and independence. These ideologies are manifest in the mothers' own beliefs and actions around care, the attitudes of their families, friends and neighbours, the structure of the labour market, and state policies, including those on welfare and employment (Duncan and Edwards 1999:42-49, Lister 2002a, Young 1995:548). I will explore this issue further in chapter three, but for the time being I note that the neo-liberal equation of independence with paid employment and the elevation of this form of independence to the primary virtue of citizens renders caregivers and care-receivers invisible and relegates them to second-class status (Young 1995:548). Not only is their ability to command the resources they require to provide and receive care hampered, but their struggles are largely unseen or ignored as they and care work is devalued. Mothers who can afford to parent full time due to the financial support of a husband may perhaps be an exception, but even they feel the need to justify being 'just a mum' as more and more mothers enter the workforce (Wilson et al. 1999:14). Neither do these ideologies accommodate the experiences of fathers who parent alone: the assumption is that full-time care work is done by mothers and a father's role in a family is to provide through employment (despite media images of the 'new father' who participates in his children's care) (Connell 2005:374).

Mothers also grapple with care relations within the household. Children are not passive recipients of their parents' care. Instead they are active members of the family who voice their expectations, make demands, and contribute to the running of the household (Ridge 2007).

Caregiving, is time-consuming, hands-on labour, but it can also be seen as a gift, generously and freely given. This interpretation is evident in the Madonna-like mother described by Hochschild. Meyer and her colleagues (2000:2) have criticised feminist scholars' use of the term 'caregiving' because they feel that it 'implies the care is given freely, either at no cost or at a cost that the giver is willing and able to shoulder. Implicit in the term is the notion of choice.' Instead, as they point out, the choice to care is highly constrained by ideologies around gender and care, the uneven gender distribution of paid and unpaid labour, unaffordable market care and

unstable, inadequate social support. While this is true, I believe they underestimate the complexity of gift giving. As Sennett (2003:217) observes, drawing on the large anthropological literature, gift exchanges are asymmetrical; it is this asymmetry which creates an emotional bond between people. Gift giving is reciprocal, but the reciprocity, in contrast to market transactions, is neither equal nor simultaneous. A mother's gift of care to an infant is an obvious example: it is done in a framework of gendered norms and obligations, within a gendered labour market and policy environment, but without any expectation of a concurrent return of care from the child.

While it is useful to distinguish between forms of care relating to love and affect and those which are about tending and care work, it is also important that we retain the connection between care as work and care as an emotion. Care is, as so often termed, a 'labour of love' (see, for example, Borchgrevink and Holter 1995; Finch and Groves 1983). As Hilary Graham (1983:27) emphasises, care is more than 'a kind of domestic labour performed on people'. She uses a psychological perspective to unveil the emotionality of care and, in so doing, highlights its centrality in relationships and identity (Graham 1983:29-30). Although more and more women are entering employment and more men are doing care work, femininities continue to be constituted by women's relationship with the domestic world and masculinities by men's activities in the economy (Connell 2005:371).

Others have drawn attention to the emotional labour involved in care work. Himmelweit (1999:30-35) notes that care is usually understood to consist of both physical and emotional activities; the emotional labour involves the carer managing her own emotions, as well as tending to the emotions of her charges. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1995:333) adds, 'all the moments when we are also trying to get into the task in the right spirit, with the appropriate feeling, can be considered the emotional work of care'. The emotional significance of care is not limited to care for people, but also care for the home. Jorun Solheim (1995) argues for the psychological importance of housework by drawing a parallel between the home and the women's body. She argues that women's work in the home is intimate and personal, a performance of ritual cleansing of a feminine space (Solheim 1995:57-

58). This is one reason why, she suggests, it can be difficult for men to fully participate in housework, even where they are keen to do so.

However, as we have seen, in enacting care, infused as it is with emotion, parents nonetheless face limited resources, constraints due to their social status, competing ideologies, and negotiations with their children and others who receive their care. In researching the care practices of parents in receipt of income support, I will maintain a dual focus on the emotions as well as the labour of care.

Mary Daly and Jane Lewis (2000) develop the concept of 'social care' to further the analytic potential of the notion of care in welfare regime analysis. They define social care as:

... the activities and relations involved in meeting the physical and emotional requirements of dependent adults and children, and the normative, economic and social frameworks within which these are assigned and carried out. (Daly and Lewis 2000:285)

Daly and Lewis draw on the multi-dimensional descriptions of care developed by other feminist theorists to create this concept. So, they too emphasise the labour involved in care and the financial and emotional costs of providing and receiving care, but they also factor in the obligation and responsibility which tend to underpin the provision of care. Because they seek to make social care a concept relevant to welfare regime analysis, Daly and Lewis draw in the broader frameworks in which care is situated. These frameworks include the degree and form of state influence on whether the labour of care tends to be paid or unpaid; how the costs of care are distributed among individuals, families and society; and the social relations of care and how these are reinforced or challenged by the state (Daly and Lewis 2000:285). This multi-layered approach makes the concept of social care compatible with a tiered everyday-life analysis moving outwards from the welfare recipient who is a care provider or receiver.

Respect and recognition

Theories of care provide a good basis for an analysis of parents' provision of care, of their relationships with their children, of the juncture between paid and unpaid care and of the role of the state and the market in care provision. However, the relationship between the welfare recipient and the state requires the exploration of a further field of scholarship, one which was suggested by the most common complaint about being a welfare recipient among the mothers I interviewed. Although they did not always articulate it explicitly in this way, mothers were often concerned about relations of respect and disrespect.

Recognition, for Axel Honneth (1995), is constitutive of ourselves. We require mutual recognition for our development as individual social beings.

The reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee. (Honneth 1995:93)

That is, our understanding of ourselves not only depends on our recognition by others, but also on recognising ourselves in the recognition of others.

Honneth builds on the work of Hegel and Mead to present a theory of recognition consisting of three spheres: love, rights and solidarity. The first, love, refers to our primary affective relations with family, friends and lovers. These are interdependent relationships which enable subjects' independence by providing an assurance of a continuity of care (Honneth 1995:105-107).

For it is only this symbiotically nourished bond, which emerges through mutually desired demarcation, that produces the degree of basic individual self-confidence indispensable for autonomous participation in public life. (Honneth 1995:107)

The second sphere is that of legal recognition, or rights. In this sphere we find our claims for equality as persons – that is, for universal rights. Honneth (1995:120) maintains that realising one has universal legal rights and shares legal recognition with others in the community is the basis for self respect. The third sphere is that of solidarity and social esteem, in which we establish our difference as unique individuals. This final sphere of recognition is underpinned by principles of individual achievement (Honneth 2003:149). It constitutes a process of mutual recognition of skills and social contribution and is, as a result, the source of our sense of self-worth or self-esteem (Honneth 1995:129).

For Honneth (1995:173), recognition is essential to our sense of self due to the intersubjective nature of personal identity. He writes:

The only way in which individuals are constituted as persons is by learning to refer to themselves, from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other, as beings with certain positive traits and abilities. The scope of such traits – and hence the extent of one’s positive relation-to-self – increases with each new form of recognition that individuals are able to apply to themselves as subjects. In this way, the prospect of basic self-confidence is inherent in the experience of love; the prospect of self-respect, in the experience of legal recognition; and finally the prospect of self-esteem, in the experience of solidarity (Honneth 1995:173).

Recognition in each of the spheres of love, law and solidarity contributes to our personal identity and sureness in ourselves. As a result, misrecognition in these spheres could damage our sense of self-confidence, self-respect or self-esteem.

Richard Sennett’s (2003) reflection on respect and inequality has particular relevance to Honneth’s third sphere of recognition, where independence is asserted and esteem is gained. Sennett explores the respect that occurs when we are necessarily unequal due to an uneven distribution of talent. He outlines three areas in which people in modern societies can earn or fail to elicit respect. He describes these succinctly as ‘make something of yourself, take care of yourself, help others’

(Sennett 2003:260). This observation appears to resonate with Grace's frustration with being 'damned both ways'. By not engaging in employment she could be regarded as failing to make something of herself or take care of herself. By not mothering full time, she is not devoting herself to her children as she might. For her, seeking respect in one realm results in disrespect in the others.

The first form of respect relates to self-development. People make something of themselves by developing and applying their abilities or skills (Sennett 2003:63). This is the case regardless of inequalities in talent. Highly talented people who do not make the most of their ability do not earn this form of respect, whereas someone who is striving to the best of their ability does. However, meritocratic principles that see rewards given to the talented have negative consequences; people compare themselves unfavourably to those who are more talented (Sennett 2003:65-94). So while people can gain esteem as a result of their talent, they can also experience low self-esteem if they feel they are not achieving as they ought even where they are doing the best they are capable of. Even if Grace did not feel disrespect from others, she might experience low self-esteem by comparing herself to other mothers, other employees, others in her family, etc. The solution, Sennett (2003:83-4,98) argues, is partly to be found in the notion of craftwork, because work that is craft relies on the worker's own standards rather than those of others. The worker is focused on doing this work well and, as a result, 'The craftsman can sustain his or her self-respect in an unequal world' (Sennett 2003:98). Perhaps for Grace, 'aiming for peace' might include re-conceiving the work of motherhood as a craft.

Sennett relates care of oneself to dependence and independence. In liberal welfare regimes, independence has come to be associated with adulthood. By being independent one can demonstrate one's maturity; dependency indicates that one is an immature adult, or a less than full citizen (Fraser and Gordon 1994:18; Shaver 2001). Furthermore, dependence is highly gendered. It has a long history of association with femininity, unpaid domestic labour and a wife's supposed dependency on her husband (Fraser and Gordon 1994). Sennett observes that dependency has a dual meaning. In the private sphere, in our relationships with friends, relatives, lovers and children, dependency binds us together; but in the public sphere, dependency has become shameful (Sennett 2003:101-102).

The third area of respect has its basis in helping those who need assistance. Sennett draws on anthropological literature on gift-giving to demonstrate some of the complexities of these relationships. Giving can be a manipulative act, or a pitying one with an undercurrent of contempt; warm and compassionate, or cold and bereft of emotion. Any of these gifts can be difficult to receive. A manipulative gift requires something in return. A pitying gift is demeaning, underscoring the inequality between the giver and the receiver. Even a freely given, compassionate gift can be painful to receive, as ‘it lays a heavy burden of gratitude on the recipient, who may have nothing to give back but submission’ (Sennett 2003:149). The Australian welfare regime has its origins in charity and traces of these gift-giving relations remain. For this reason, and to avoid ‘burn out’ among compassionate givers, ‘some strategists of welfare reform have tried to imagine the provision of care divorced from sentiments of compassion’, and yet, Sennett (2003:150) argues, ‘most people cannot accept the provision of care as a neutral function’.

There are many connections between Sennett’s characterisation of respect and Honneth’s typography of recognition. Sennett’s notion of gaining respect through self-development relates directly to Honneth’s sphere of solidarity. This form of respect is akin to self-esteem and social esteem due to one’s application to furthering oneself and making a social contribution using talents and developing skills. Recognition of achievement in this sphere is the source of respect for independence, particularly with regard to using skills in employment or business to raise the financial resources necessarily to support oneself and family. The private realm of dependence belongs in Honneth’s sphere of love, where neediness among friends and relatives is the basis for mutual support.

Helping others, the third source of respect described by Sennett, relates to all three of Honneth’s recognition spheres. Helping others in the area of intimate relations is about love, helping others on the basis of our equal claims as citizens refers to our legal rights, and helping others in the public world of work is a social contribution on which we base our claims for social esteem. (Although, as will be explored further below, in the labour market, the financial rewards for some forms of helping

others, especially the care work largely performed by women, is valued considerably less than other forms of social contribution.)

Dependency in the public realm is my prime interest here. If it is in the sphere of achievement and solidarity that a person's social contribution is recognised, then a failure to recognise that someone is making such a contribution constitutes misrecognition. This can be very painful. As Sennett (2003:3) explains:

Lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen – as a full human being whose presence matters.

To Honneth, the experience of disrespect is psychologically wounding because it cuts to the centre of the self, which is constituted in relation to the recognition of others. A lack of recognition of our abilities and contributions can damage our sense that our abilities *are* valuable and that our acts *are* contributions; this can undermine our self-esteem (Honneth 1995:134). If we believe that we are not recognised unjustly, for instance because our self-confidence and sense of equal worth are such that we insist that our actions are achievements, then we are likely to experience indignation or rage (Honneth 1995:136; 2003:144).

Welfare bureaucracies were developed with the assumption that the *institution* ought to define what claimants need; it is a feature of rational bureaucratic systems to place restrictions on how the resources they provide can be used (Sennett 2003:177). In doing so, these bureaucracies commit the 'glaring error of denying that the clients [are] competent to participate in the terms of their own dependency' (Sennett 2003:178). Mutual respect, in contrast, would rely on mutual recognition of autonomy. Just as we grant doctors autonomy to treat patients, because they have specialist knowledge of medicine that we do not understand, so doctors ought to grant autonomy to patients, who know about their own illnesses in ways doctors could never understand (Sennett 2003:122). In the same way, a respectful welfare system would accept in its clients what it does not understand about them and so treat their autonomy with respect (Sennett 2003:262).

Honneth (2003:144) regards our emotional reactions as the basis of our compulsion to struggle for recognition. He (2003:154) also argues that, under capitalism, struggles for the redistribution of material resources are struggles for recognition. It follows that, a social group whose achievements are not recognised and who feel disrespected, will fight to have these achievements valued as social contributions, and, thereby, for a different pattern of redistribution. Such 'redistribution struggles are definitional conflicts over the legitimacy of the current application of the achievement principle' (Honneth 2003:154). Honneth presents the creation of the welfare state as an example of a recognition struggle that successfully redrew the boundaries between the sphere of legal rights and that of solidarity.

The development of social-welfare measures can be understood such that individual members of society should be guaranteed a minimum of social status and hence economic resources independently of the meritocratic recognition principle by transforming these claims into social rights (Honneth 2003:147)

This repositioning of the boundaries between the sphere of legal equality and solidarity was associated with a redistribution of material resources. Members of society can only make use of their legal autonomy if they have the economic resources to do so (Honneth 2003:149).

Nancy Fraser, however, strongly disagrees that redistribution is adequately treated when it is considered to be a form of recognition. She does not dispute the intertwined 'mutual irreducibility' of recognition and redistribution; rather she strongly argues against treating recognition and redistribution as opposing or exclusive categories (Fraser 2003:26, 48). Nonetheless, she posits that the two ought to be treated as distinct analytic concepts. In this way she hopes to ensure that struggles for redistribution do not get lost in what she perceives as a trend towards emphasis on recognition in identity politics.

Fraser treats recognition as a cultural matter and redistribution as economic. Their separation for critical analytical purposes brings both to the fore, so that addressing

redistribution claims, for example, does not unintentionally cause misrecognition (Fraser 2003:63). Fraser (2003:65) provides an example:

Redistributive policies have misrecognition effects when background patterns of cultural value skew the meaning of economic reforms, when, for example, a pervasive cultural devaluation of female caregiving inflects support for single-mother families as ‘getting something for nothing’. In this context, welfare reform cannot succeed unless it is joined with struggles for cultural change aimed at revaluing caregiving and the feminine associations that code it. *In short, no redistribution without recognition.* (her emphasis)

Honneth claims he does not overlook redistribution; however, while he *does* explain redistribution struggles within his recent work on the theory of recognition (Honneth 2003:141-2), he did not give redistribution the same degree of significance when he outlined his tripartite framework in his influential earlier work, *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995). In contrast, one of the strengths of Fraser’s argument is her explicit focus on redistribution as a concept that is both distinct and closely intermingled with recognition.

In addition, Fraser offers a clear normative framework with which to judge how claims for recognition and redistribution are addressed. Just policy responses ought to be transformative rather than affirmative (Fraser 2003:74). Affirmative measures seek to address the inequitable outcomes of misrecognition and maldistribution. Transformative measures, by contrast, tackle the root causes. Transformative approaches to recognition attempt to break down the categories into which people are classified and from which misrecognition stems (Fraser 2003:74). For example, the binary categories of tax-payer/welfare recipient would be reconceived in recognition of the fact that most citizens both pay taxes and receive welfare support. This could have positive benefits for redistribution. If we no longer regard welfare as a transfer of money from the tax-payer to the welfare recipient, but as a pool into which we all contribute and from which all benefit, we might be more willing to distribute the resources equitably. Fraser (2003:77) argues that transformative

approaches to maldistribution tend to be universalistic and solidaristic with positive recognition effects.

Fraser and Honneth's disagreements on this issue are many and lie deep and I have hardly touched on them here.¹¹ Nonetheless, both contribute to our understanding of recognition. Honneth does this by articulating the psychological dimensions of recognition and by demonstrating how struggles for recognition occur not just within distinct spheres, but also over the boundaries between them; Fraser does it by providing a framework that separates redistribution from recognition for the purpose of analysis. Sennett's work expands on and provides greater insight into the lack of respect which results from dependency in the public realm. In exploring the operation of modes of recognition for those who find it hardest to attain, he explains how mutual respect could lead to a better system of welfare and a more responsive, kinder welfare bureaucracy.

Ruth Lister brings many of these arguments together in relation to welfare. She notes, for instance, that the UK tendency towards redistribution 'by stealth', while benefiting many families living in poverty, does little to create public support for the need for such policies (Lister 2001:98). Moreover, a successful approach to redistribution would, Lister (2001:102) contends, entail striving for equality of respect. In this she is arguing for an extension of the redrawing of the boundaries between Honneth's spheres of solidarity and legal rights. Our status should be determined more by our equality as citizens and less by our differentiation in terms of achievement. The opposite case is put by others, such as Peter Saunders (2003), who considers that achievement contributes too little to our status and that the welfare state undermines rather than enables us because it does not require us to derive more of our status from our individual achievements, particularly in employment. Lister (2002b:105) counters, drawing on Honneth, that it is rights which are essential to our maintenance of self-respect: we require both the self-respect which derives from our legal status, and the self-esteem which we gain through individual achievement.

¹¹ For more points of disagreement and also agreement see Thompson (2005) and the introduction to Fraser and Honneth (2003).

Conclusion

It is evident that the place of care in the Australian welfare regime is shifting and diminishing. While the trend in the Australian welfare regime throughout the twentieth century had been to gradually expand eligibility for income support on the basis of parental care-giving responsibilities, in the final years of the century and the first years of the twenty-first century, eligibility was contracted. The implementation of Australians Working Together meant some parents could no longer provide full-time care, and Welfare to Work continued and reinforced this trend. This direction in welfare policy stands in contrast to the calls for welfare regimes to better recognise care; expanding the notion of 'work' because 'other forms of work such as volunteering and community work, as well as care work, do not really count, even if lip service is paid to their value' (Lister 2002b:100). Like Williams and Popay (1999), Lister (2002b:103) notes that people living in poverty and people claiming welfare have little opportunity to voice their own needs and the state grants their own interpretation of their needs little recognition. In this context, mothers claiming welfare payments struggle for respect and for recognition of care.

While care and recognition are very different theoretical fields both have a great deal to contribute to research on welfare and parenting; particularly regarding recognition for care; care as work, as a social and emotional activity, and as a social contribution. The notion of social care provides a framework in which to analyse care as a form of labour which takes place both in the public and the private world and moves, sometimes daily, between the two. The welfare state and the labour market both influence how and where care is practised. Most notably, the increased participation of women in employment and policy makers' new concern with the employability of welfare claimants is leaving less time for unpaid care in the home, but not necessarily opening opportunities for this care to be provided elsewhere (Daly and Lewis 2000:288; Hancock 2002). The claims for recognition of parents in this study are, however, not only based on their status as carers. As welfare recipients, they experience particular forms of disrespect. These can be damaging and painful, as recognition is vital to our sense of self. Instead, we could reconsider the relationship between welfare recipients and the state as one which could be

based on mutual recognition, and so recognise both welfare recipients' autonomy and the value of their unpaid care work.

Chapter two

‘They should live on the pension for a month.’

Exploring the everyday lives of Parenting Payment recipients

[Welfare recipients] need to go back to the workforce and everything but the government is making it tough. They [the government] should live on the pension for a month, live in housing commission, or lose a loved one who was the breadwinner. (Pam)

Pam’s objection was one I often heard. A number of the mothers I interviewed said that politicians, bureaucrats and policy makers did not understand what it was like managing on income support complaining that policies did not adequately meet their needs and were designed to address an agenda that did not always match with their own. In this chapter, I respond to these complaints by setting out the important policy matters that mothers see in their day-to-day lives. I investigate how the participants in this study saw the key issues for themselves at the nexus of parenting, welfare receipt and employment. Their articulation of the issues shapes this thesis. I intersperse this discussion with quantitative evidence that describes the population of parents in receipt of income support and their circumstances. This chapter focuses on the first two of Williams and Popay’s levels of analysis: the welfare subject and the social topography of enablement and constraint. The former, the welfare subject, includes people’s accounting for and understanding of their own experiences, their identities and their agency (Williams and Popay 1999:180-181). The chapter explores how people view themselves and how they creatively negotiate their way. Their capacity to do this is related to the second level of analysis, enablement and constraint – how risks, opportunities and resources are distributed throughout society.

This chapter begins the process of connecting mothers' personal experience with their environment: their employment opportunities, their caring obligations, their financial situation and the policies with which they engage. I introduce the mothers I interviewed for this study and they explain their diverse understandings of good mothering and the importance of care. Care, in all the senses described by Fisher and Tronto (1990) – caring about, caring for, caregiving and care receiving – is part of mothers' daily lives. Mothers provide care differently and place different emphasis on different aspects of care, but the strength of their commitment to care underpins the other aspects of their lives. I explore how their decisions about employment and study are underpinned by their understandings of care and how these understandings lead to what Duncan and Edwards (1999) term gendered, moral, rational decisions.

Next, I draw together some of the evidence about Parenting Payment to present a more generalised picture of claimants, their backgrounds and their activities. In particular, I examine levels of participation in employment, education and voluntary work, which are very high among Parenting Payment recipients. For some, however, taking part in such activities is difficult, and I investigate the range of factors which might inhibit or facilitate mothers' participation. At the end of the chapter, I draw on interviews with mothers to explore the matters they regarded as difficult or most needing change in their experience of Australia's income support system. In doing so, I am pursuing an epistemological commitment to begin policy analysis with the everyday lives of mothers, adopting a methodology which asks how the policy problem is presented (Bacchi 1999) – here asking mothers to identify the policy problem. The problems mothers highlighted were poverty, the 'hassles' and confusion of bureaucratic requirements and the significance of personal interactions with staff for their experience of welfare receipt.

Good mothering

The mothers I interviewed had varied understandings of what constitutes good mothering. Mothers' commitment to their children has both personal costs and profound rewards. The love and pride they felt observing their children grow and develop was strong. Erica said of her life with her son:

It's a good life, I must say. It's a very satisfying life and it's good to see him doing well – the effort paying off despite a lot of hurdles.

Like Erica, many other mothers spoke of the pleasure they took in their children's lives. Pam told me that as a result of her son's involvement in a car accident six years before I met her, 'I had to put my life on hold, basically, to help my son live independently like he is now'. Pam was proud of the independence her son had achieved and satisfied with the results of her work, while acknowledging that this had come at the cost of developing other areas of her life. Naomi slowed her progress in her studies and reduced her income so that she could provide her son with more support when his transition from primary to high school proved difficult:

So this year I decided I would be more available for him. I stopped working weekends, because he just hadn't had me around on weekends. And I've done that and it's great. I had to get a tutor for him, I had to put more energy into him than anything, and it was absolutely worth it. I mean it would be worth it if my studies took me another four years, I don't care, because this is fundamental, for a child to have a parent there.

Part of the satisfaction these mothers felt in their children's development arose because they viewed parenting as work involving effort and skill. Pam's son had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), but his condition had improved over time, as had Pam's ability to help him during his 'outbursts':

You can tell he is a lot better, but once every month or once every two months there could be an outburst. But I am able to calm him down a lot better than before.

Pam developed skills specific to her son's needs. She learned how to respond to his hyperactivity and which techniques and approaches best helped him to become calm. She has acquired a particular set of skills tailored to her son. The skills

required for mothering are deployed in a range of activities, from specific tasks to the labour involved in piecing together an entire patchwork of care (Balbo 1987:55; Fisher and Tronto 1990:41). Like Pam, the other mothers in this study developed their parenting ability over time. The time they felt they needed to mother their children and the time involved in refining relevant skills affected mothers' decisions about other activities in their lives. This is apparent in the cases of Pam and Naomi above. Both Pam and Naomi felt the need to be available for their children, but their understanding of what this meant was very different. For Pam, it meant being at home full time; for Naomi, it meant being at home on the weekend.

Mothers' gendered moral rationalities

Mothers' decisions regarding employment and study were informed by their understanding of what was best for their families and how they viewed good motherhood.¹² In each family, different factors and different beliefs led to different decisions. Parents have very different understandings of children's needs. An Australian study of parents who were not in paid work in the late 1990s asked how old they felt their children would need to be before they returned to employment. The answers ranged from one year through to high school (Wilson et al. 1999:13). These responses reflect not only the differing interpretations of children's needs at different ages, but also the fact that some children require more care than others due to disabilities, problems at school, mental health issues and so on. These differing understandings, which occur within the constraints and opportunities afforded by the social and economic environment in which mothers live, can be analysed in three clusters of mothering and employment orientations.

For the first group, being a good mother involves being physically present for their children (Duncan and Edwards 1999:120). In such cases, personally providing care is of such moral importance that it overrides any financial benefits which might be gained from employment. Pam, for example, explained being available for her son

¹² As I explain in chapter four, among the mothers I interviewed, most of those who were working were already employed prior to the introduction of Australians Working Together, so the new policy did not feature in most of their employment decisions. Some mothers entered into programs of study following their adviser meeting, but while Australians Working Together was a factor in these decisions, it did not carry the same weight as the women's understanding of good motherhood, their family's best interests and the benefits of employment.

meant putting 'her life on hold'. For Pam, her son's need for her as a mother precluded the possibility of employment.

For the second group, employment forms a distinct part of their lives from which they derive personal satisfaction. Cheryl, for example, said:

I was working full time in school holidays, which I just didn't think was very fair to my children ... they'd already lost one parent, they didn't need to lose another one to a business. So I ended up giving it up, and didn't end up working for six months at all. But I found that I'm not that type of person. I need to do something in my life to fulfil my life.

Cheryl felt the need to be present for her children, so as not to be 'lost' to them like their father who had died, but she felt she needed employment to feel personally fulfilled. Eventually she found she could accommodate both needs by taking up dog-minding, a job she could do in her own home, and house-cleaning, which she could do when her children were at school. Cheryl could be understood in Duncan and Edwards' (1999:120) terms as 'primarily [a] worker'. By this Duncan and Edwards do not suggest that those who are strongly oriented towards employment are any less committed to their parenting, but rather that it is important to them to retain a sense of themselves as workers in addition to being mothers. They have a dual moral commitment to the well being of children and the well being they personally derive from employment.

A third group are those who feel that their own training and employment is beneficial for their children and therefore part of their responsibilities as parents. Mothers who see employment as an important element in their parenting are described by Duncan and Edwards (2003:313) as 'mother/worker integral'. They seek to offer an example to children either as employee role models or as financial providers – or both. A number of mothers I interviewed had studied while receiving welfare payments to ensure they would have access to good employment (and a good income) in the future, something which they felt they and their children needed. Belle, for example, studied from first-year university through to the

completion of a PhD while receiving Parenting Payment. She told me how she felt after her graduation when she worked full time for a semester, supporting herself and her son with her earnings:

For me I was pleased that I could at least support myself, and I had worked towards that. And on my own too. Not like waiting bloody tables or doing something, not sacrificing myself or my child, but trying to make sure that we both prosper, spiritually and intellectually and as a family. And for me that has been the most important thing and Parenting Payment, bless our system, permitted me that. And it allowed me to pursue and to reach towards another kind of life. I mean it wasn't easy, it really wasn't easy, but I've got somewhere.

All the parents I interviewed showed evidence of being guided by 'gendered moral rationalities' in their decisions about employment, education and income support. The good of their children, however they understood it, was at the heart of these decisions. The high value which parents place on care is evident in quantitative studies, too. Among Parenting Payment recipients, 83 per cent say that the child care they provide is the most important activity they do, in comparison with employment, education, other forms of care and other unpaid activities (Saunders et al. 2003:66).

Parenting teenagers

Mothers' understandings of their children's needs were informed by the particular circumstances of their children. For the mothers I interviewed, this meant taking account of the specific care needs of teenagers. Many mothers observed that parenting teenage children posed unique challenges, due to the significant transitions which occurred for this age group, such as starting high school and going through puberty, and also because there was a risk that teenagers might, as Pam described it, 'go off the rails'. Belle said, 'A kid hits puberty and it's like handling a two-year-old [but] with vocabulary, and testosterone as a boy. They are as needy as small ones are.' Erica perceived that Australians Working Together contained:

... an assumption that a child that age is less work. Now I can tell you, maybe, but not necessarily so ... A child that age is less work in terms of, you know, the basic feeding and that type of thing, but we are dealing with adolescents, my god, adolescents!

Mothers' commitment to parenting shaped their decisions about employment and study. Cheryl, for example, said:

Ultimately I would actually like to go back to university and become a child counsellor. That's my ultimate goal. I'm waiting for another year or two, till my son's gone through that rebellious stage, which is normally about the 15/16-year-old mark that you generally find your child loses the plot a little bit, and I want to be there to pull him back into tow.

Belle's son's needs as a teenage boy were part of the reason she worked in casual, part-time jobs: 'I am still available to the child, and you need to be'. Erica, by observing her son's peers, felt that her son had benefited from the time she spent with him rather than in employment.

A lot of his form friends at primary school, well that is an exaggeration, a decent percentage of them, have fallen apart ... We're talking drugs, we're talking truancy, we're talking total messes. And the common denominator I see in all of it is parental involvement or lack thereof. And they may be a lot better off financially than I am, but you know, I made the right decisions.

Additional care responsibilities

Many mothers care responsibilities extend beyond the ordinary day-to-day care needed by teenage children. For some, health poses particular additional challenges. As already indicated, a number of the mothers I interviewed had children with special health or support needs. These ranged from behavioural problems and ADHD to intellectual disability, depression and diabetes. Helen's son was diagnosed with diabetes a few months before I first interviewed her. When I

met her again nine months later, she explained the enormous effect it had on their lives.

The first year was hell ... The first six months is horrendous and then the following six months is still pretty hard and then after a year you can kind of, you know, they can live normally. But it takes about that long for your lifestyle to [adapt] and it is just a big change. And definitely for the first six months there is no way I could have done anything else.

For others the additional needs of their children were ongoing. For example, Ana's 18 year old daughter required her mother's support due to intellectual disability, and Erica's son, who has ADHD, would not eat or complete homework without her supervision. As lone mothers, they largely managed their children's needs alone.

Many also needed to manage their own poor health or disability. Nearly all the mothers in this study had current or recent health problems. Alia has severe asthma which has stopped her from attending English classes because, with no private transport and too little money for public transport, she cannot endure the long walk to class. Grace and Helen had depression when I interviewed them; Nicole has had depression and is wary it might re-emerge. Kumiko said she was 'tired all the time', her doctors could not find a cause but suggested that it could derive from the stress of managing on her own after leaving a violent relationship, and her almost daily use of chemicals in her art course. This fatigue has not stopped her full-time study, but it makes it hard. Margaret had stopped work while she received treatment for her recently diagnosed cancer. Mary attends counselling to manage the ongoing consequences of the trauma she experienced as a refugee: leaving her homeland where her husband died and her house was burned down while her family was in it. Fleeing the country she lost contact with two of her children, before spending years in refugee camps where she felt unsafe. Only four of the 16 mothers in this study, Tara, Naomi, Caroline and Cheryl, did not need to manage difficulties with their own health or that of their children.

Ill-health and disability are common among Parenting Payment claimants, particularly among sole mothers. Butterworth (2003:26) found that nearly half of all Parenting Payment Single claimants have problems with physical health or disability and the same proportion reported mental health problems (see table 1 below). Also, nearly half had experienced sexual or physical violence. These incidences are much higher than among mothers in general. Parenting Payment Partnered claimants faced these issues at rates only slightly higher than among non-claimant mothers. Parenting Payment Single recipients are also considerably more likely to face a combination of problems (mental health issues, substance abuse, physical ill-health or disability, and experience of violence) than other mothers (Butterworth 2003:27-28).

Table 1. Incidence of mental or physical ill-health and disability, and experience of violence among mothers

	Parenting Payment single claimants (%)	Parenting Payment Partnered claimants (%)	Non-claimant mothers (%)
Mental health problems	47	27	22
Physical condition or disability	47	33	32
Physical or sexual violence	47	23	21

Source: Adapted from Butterworth 2003:26

In addition to caring for their immediate family, some mothers also provide care for extended family. Erica and Cheryl cared for family members as well as their own children. Erica's mother, who lived interstate, was admitted to hospital. This placed sudden demands on Erica. She explained:

So I am in that position where I have got an 84 year old mother and a son who is still at school ... I am not day-to-day caring for my mother, but I am sort of her closest in terms of that [everyday care], so it is a bit odd. It is actually difficult doing it by distance ... Emotionally difficult, but it is also expensive, it's terrible. What a position to be put in, 'Sorry Mum, can you ring back after 7pm? It's cheaper'. You can't do that, you've just got to speak.

Saunders et al. (2003:34) report that four per cent of Parenting Payment Single and nine per cent of Partnered claimants were engaged in the care of an adult during the fortnight they were surveyed.

In summary, the mothers receiving Parenting Payment who participated in this study placed a very high value on the care they provided to their children and were strongly committed to these responsibilities. Their understandings of how to be a good mother and how to provide good care varied considerably, but the lives of all the mothers I interviewed revolved around care. The kind of care they provided also varied, partly because of their different understandings, but also because of the particular care needs of their children and sometimes those of other family members too. Most of the mothers I interviewed had problems with ill-health or disability and many also had children with high care needs. Taking care of their own and their children's health was time consuming and demanding. Sometimes most of a mother's energy and time was used in the provision of such care.

The availability of Parenting Payment makes a mother's decision to put care first a viable one, as she can supplement any employment income with income support. Erica goes so far as to say that financial support from Parenting Payment contributed to her ability to parent as well as she could:

So it is helpful to think I have done the very best, but I couldn't have done it without Parenting Payment help.

Parenting Payment claimants

I did not directly ask mothers about stereotypes of welfare recipients or lone parenthood, but several of them identified what they described as widespread assumptions or generalised attitudes. Helen, like a number of mothers, spoke of a very specific Parenting Payment stereotype:

There's also that mentality about Charlene in the western suburbs [of Sydney] having 12 children so that she can get 30 dollars a fortnight more. I mean, give me a break.

Tara discussed the same image: 'They think all single mothers are living in the western suburbs and having children with lots of men.' Cheryl said people regard her as 'just a single mum. You know, "You're not doing anything for yourself, to better yourself."' The stereotypes these women identified depict Parenting Payment claimants as single; with large numbers of children; wanting to claim income support in preference to employment, and even deliberately having children in order to increase their level of payment; unmotivated; and not seeking to improve their prospects for financial self-reliance. There is a class element too, as working-class families have traditionally been associated with the western suburbs of Sydney and Charlene is seen as a stereotypical working-class name.

Familiarity with national rhetorics which stigmatise lone motherhood and income support claimants is widespread among sole mothers (Duncan and Edwards 1999:42-45). The interview extracts presented above make reference to several elements of this national stigmatising language. Australian conservative commentary has expressed concern about the high cost of sole-parent families resulting from rising numbers of income support claimants (Reekie 1998:63). Parenting Payment is presented as encouraging women to have children, and therefore both costly to the state and supportive of morally problematic behaviour.

So who are the parents who claim income support? There is considerable evidence available in Australia providing basic demographic descriptions of Parenting Payment claimants and establishing their rates of employment, study or other occupations: the kinds of employment-oriented activities sought under Australians Working Together. There is much less evidence on the nature of mothers' employment, the benefits that work does or does not provide, the other unpaid work in which mothers engage and parents' perspectives on the needs and aspirations of Parenting Payment claimants. I will set out some of the evidence on mothers' employment and other activities here and then, throughout the thesis, drawing on

my own research and that of others, I paint a picture filling some of the gaps in evidence.

A demography of Parenting Payment

The popular perception that most parents receiving income support are women is accurate. Most Parenting Payment claimants are mothers and the majority are lone mothers. In 2003, slightly less than three-quarters of claimants received Parenting Payment Single and close to 29 per cent received Parenting Payment Partnered (FACSIA 2006:56,58). Women made up 92 per cent of the first group and 90 per cent of the second group.

The common belief that parents on income support have large numbers of children was identified by several interviewees. It was connected to myths about teen pregnancy. However, most Parenting Payment recipients have just one or two children: the average number of children aged less than 13 living with Parenting Payment Single recipients is 1.4 (Barrett 2001:14). Parents whose youngest child is in their teen years form a small proportion of claimants. The largest proportion has children who are preschool-aged. Far from being teenagers, claimants are most commonly aged in their early thirties (FACSIA 2006:52).

The majority of Parenting Payment recipients are locally born. Australia is the country of birth for 80 per cent of Parenting Payment Single claimants; five per cent of these are Indigenous (Barrett 2001:14; FACSIA 2006:57). A much smaller proportion of Parenting Payment Partnered recipients were born in Australia, just 64 per cent (FACSIA 2006:53). Sole parents born overseas most commonly immigrated from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Vietnam and Lebanon; partnered parents came from Vietnam, the UK, Lebanon and China (FACSIA 2006:57,59).

In the financial year 2003-2004, Parenting Payment Single was paid to nearly 450,000 claimants (FACS 2004:table 48). This was an increase from 313,500 sole parents who claimed assistance in June 1994 (FACSIA, 2006:56). In contrast, the number of partnered claimants declined each year after Parenting Payment Partnered was created, from 236,550 in June 1998 to 181,500 in June 2003. Paul

Henman and Julia Perry (2002) have demonstrated that the number of social security claimants rose due to a complex of demographic and policy reasons. Widespread demographic changes have led to more single person or single-parent households in Australia, so that more individuals are eligible to claim assistance. In addition, income support policies have introduced equity measures so that both members of couple households can claim support, rather than the male ‘head’ of the household claiming for his partner. Finally, welfare rules were amended to allow more people to combine employment and income support. These measures were intended to encourage a higher employment rate among recipients, in the belief that it would lead to financial self-reliance, and to address the high rates of poverty among welfare claimants, including Parenting Payment recipients.

Education and voluntary work

Parenting Payment claimants are engaged in a range of activities in addition to caring for their children and other family members. Among Single claimants, this activity is most commonly employment, whereas Partnered claimants are most likely to be doing voluntary work (see table 2). I will focus here on parents’ education and voluntary work and explore employment and job search in detail in the following section.

Table 2. Activities of Parenting Payment recipients in one fortnight

	Single (%)	Partnered (%)
Paid work	35.1	16.6
Self employment	7.4	12.3
Job search	22.7	11.8
Study	15.7	9.8
Volunteer work	22.7	30.1

Sample: Single n=208, partnered n=204. Source: Saunders et al. 2003:34

As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, for some mothers, entering into education was a way to further their own and their children’s wellbeing. In their 1998 study, Saunders et al. (2003:34) found that fortnightly activities included study for 16 per cent of Parenting Payment Single and 10 per cent of Partnered recipients (see table 2.2 above). They spent an average of 31 hours in study each fortnight (Saunders et al. 2003:46). More than half of the group were studying towards an undergraduate or postgraduate degree and a quarter towards a pre-vocational qualification

(Saunders et al. 2003:54). Like the mothers in my research who were studying, they were motivated by a desire to improve their employment prospects (56 per cent) or to attain a better qualification (34 per cent). Another study found that very high proportions of Parenting Payment claimants who were not employed or studying at the time they were surveyed said they would like to participate in education. More than half of the Partnered claimants and more than a third of the Single claimants said they would 'like to be studying now' (Carlile et al. 2002:136).

A number of Parenting Payment claimants volunteer their services each fortnight. This is most common for Partnered recipients, among whom nearly a third engaged in voluntary work, while just over a fifth of Single recipients volunteered (Saunders et al. 2003:34). Parenting Payment recipients spent an average 12 hours in voluntary work each fortnight (Saunders et al. 2003:46). This was far higher than among non-claimant parents who averaged three to four hours per fortnight (Carlile et al. 2002:139). Often their voluntary work takes place at schools or other educational institutions (45 per cent), but they also work for welfare and community organisations (21 per cent) and sports and recreation groups (19 per cent) (Saunders et al. 2003:55). Unlike education, their voluntary work was rarely motivated by a desire to improve their employment prospects. Only one in ten said they volunteered for the employment experience. Instead, most parents volunteered to help out in the community and help other people (69 per cent), out of personal interest (35 per cent) or as a way to keep active and meet people (26 per cent). These data show that the level of motivation and participation in study and voluntary work is high among Parenting Payment recipients, in contrast to the stereotypes outlined above.

Employment

While the stereotypical lone mother described by Tara and Helen was not in employment, evidence shows that rates of maternal employment, including lone mother employment have increased. From 1983 to 2002, lone mother employment rose from 32 per cent to 48 per cent; partnered mothers' employment increased from 42 per cent to 63 per cent (Gray et al. 2003:1). Despite following the same trend towards greater rates of employment, lone and couple mothers have entered different types of work. Mothers in couples have increased both their rates of full-

time and part-time employment, whereas for lone mothers the majority of their increased employment has been in part-time jobs (Gray et al. 2003:3). These employment rates rose in a period when there were no compulsory employment-oriented requirements for mothers claiming income support.

Tara, Erica, Naomi and Caroline are examples of mothers in employment. All have long employment histories. They, like many mothers, and like many lone mothers, have found employment they can maintain while also caring for their families. Tara worked selling tickets at the races for 27 years, but when her sons started school, she took other work so that she could be near them, and now combines a job in after-school care with work as a teacher's aide. Erica works for a consultancy firm from home. Naomi was starting her own business when I last met her, but before that she had worked in a nursing home while completing her university studies. Caroline has worked cleaning houses for many years and recently started in a position in a nursing home.

These mothers are part of the large proportion of Parenting Payment recipients who are engaged in paid work. The HILDA survey shows that in one week in 2004, 33.5 per cent of Parenting Payment recipients were employed and 46 per cent had been employed sometime in the previous financial year (HILDA, my analysis, see appendix three). These figures are supported by other research findings. For example, in just one fortnight 35 per cent of lone parents receiving Parenting Payment were employed, as were 17 per cent of partnered claimants (Saunders et al. 2003:34,46). Parenting Payment Single claimants are employed at a higher rate than any other category of income support recipients in Australia. The partners of Parenting Payment Partnered claimants are also connected to employment. Just under half of Parenting Payment Partnered recipients have a partner who is earning a very low income (43 per cent) and a similar proportion have a partner who is seeking work and receiving unemployment benefits in the meantime (46 per cent) (FACSIA 2006:53).

There is evidence that the labour market is not providing the employment opportunities that parents are seeking. Parenting Payment Single claimants who are employed work for an average of 26.5 hours per fortnight (Saunders et al.

2003:34,46). Many would like to have more work. Twenty per cent of lone mothers working part time would prefer to be working full time, whereas for couple mothers the equivalent figure is just eight per cent (Gray et al. 2003:17). Gray et al. (2003:17) suggest that, when considered alongside the decline in the rate of full-time employment among lone mothers in the decade to 1996, this preference demonstrates that many lone mothers are not finding the full-time employment for which they wish, and are taking part-time employment as a second option. Lone parents work hours which they consider to be insufficient for a long time; the Australian Bureau of Statistics calculated that lone parents had been underemployed for a mean period of 98 weeks, a median of 43 weeks (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004:15). Many of these would receive Parenting Payment to supplement their income. It is common for Parenting Payment Single recipients to spend long periods of time combining stable employment with receipt of income support (Flatau and Dockery 2001:56,58).

Casual employment is more common than permanent employment among Parenting Payment beneficiaries than it is among other parents. Forty-four per cent of Parenting Payment recipients were working in casual jobs in 2004, compared to 26 per cent of other mothers and just seven per cent of fathers (HILDA, my analysis, see appendix three). Belle is one such person. Since completing postgraduate studies she has been seeking a permanent academic position, without success. Instead she has worked in a series of casual, part-time jobs, which offer fewer hours and less security than she would wish. She explained that ‘the worst period is December, January, February’ because there is little work available outside of the academic year.

Unemployment and barriers to employment

Among those Parenting Payment recipients not in employment, many are seeking jobs. Close to two-thirds (63 per cent) of the Parenting Payment Single claimants who took part in the pilot Australians Working Together program would have preferred to be in employment and 40 per cent had looked for a job in the previous two months (Carlile et al. 2002:115). All participants were selected for the study because they were not then working. Nearly half (48 per cent) of Parenting Payment Partnered claimants wanted employment and almost a third (32 per cent)

had been seeking it. A 1998 survey sought information about job search among Parenting Payment recipients in the previous fortnight. Twenty-three per cent of Single and 12 per cent of Partnered recipients reported recent searches for employment (Saunders et al. 2003:34). HILDA data show that in the survey week in 2004, 11 per cent of Parenting Payment claimants were unemployed, compared to 3.8 per cent of other mothers and 1.6 per cent of fathers (HILDA, my analysis, see appendix three). This indicates that Parenting Payment recipients who are not employed are looking for work at a far higher rate than their non-claimant counterparts. They are looking for jobs and not finding them.

A lack of employment experience and training is frequently regarded by Parenting Payment recipients as an impediment to their employment. Dockery and Strombeck (2004:438), reporting on an evaluation study of the pilot Australians Working Together program, found that 50 per cent of claimants who were not employed said that they did not have the necessary work skills to find a job. Mothers who claim Parenting Payment are more likely than other mothers to have no employment experience at all. Four per cent of those receiving Parenting Payment Single, six per cent of mothers claiming Parenting Payment Partnered and just one per cent of non-recipient mothers had never been in paid employment (Butterworth 2003:26).

The level of education completed by Parenting Payment recipients tends to be lower than among mothers in general. The Social Research Centre (2005a:5) reports that nearly two-thirds of Parenting Payment claimants with children aged 13-15 had not completed secondary school. Pam, Helen, Ana, Zahra and Alia all fit within this group, and Ana and Pam said they had no formal education at all. Twelve per cent had completed high school and a further 13 per cent had a vocational or trade qualification (Social Research Centre 2005a:5). Erica, Naomi, Grace and Belle are all tertiary educated; a level of qualification held by 14 per cent of Parenting Payment claimants (Social Research Centre 2005a:5). This improves their employment prospects. On the other hand, mothers who left secondary school before they were 17 are less likely to be in the labour force; that is, they are less likely to be either employed or looking for employment than mothers who stayed longer in education (Gray et al. 2003:11). Both solo mothers and partnered mothers

who have post-secondary qualifications are more likely to be in employment than mothers who have spent less time in education (Gray et al. 2003:12).

English language proficiency is very closely tied to labour force status for both couple and solo mothers. In both groups, mothers with poor spoken English skills are far less likely to be in the labour force. Gray et al. (2003:11) estimate that fifty-seven per cent of couple mothers and 73 per cent of solo mothers with poor English ability are not in the labour force¹³ (see table 3 below). There were also very high rates of unemployment among mothers from non-English speaking backgrounds. At six per cent, couple mothers who speak English poorly are nearly three times as likely to be unemployed as those who speak English as their first language. The unemployment rate for solo mothers is 16 per cent for those who speak English poorly, even higher at 20 per cent among mothers for whom English is their second language but who speak it well, and only ten per cent among sole mothers for whom English is their only language. This shows that many mothers from non-English speaking backgrounds are seeking employment, but they are often not successful in their search.

Table 3. Predicted labour force status of solo and couple mothers by language proficiency, 1996

	Full time	Part time	Unemployed	Not in labour force
Couple mothers				
Speaks English only	24.7	40.4	2.0	33.0
Speaks English well	28.6	30.6	3.1	37.6
Speaks English poorly	20.9	16.5	5.8	56.8
Solo mothers				
Speaks English only	20.6	29.4	10.4	39.6
Speaks English well	13.6	17.3	19.7	49.5
Speaks English poorly	0.6	9.9	16.1	73.4

Source: Gray et al. 2003:11, tables 1 and 2.

A large proportion of Parenting Payment recipients are not in the labour force. In 2004, in one week, 55 per cent of claimants were not in the labour force, compared

¹³ The authors note that the numbers of sole mothers with poor spoken English are small and suggest that these estimates be treated with caution (Gray et al. 2003:14).

to 34 per cent of mothers as a whole and eight per cent of fathers (HILDA 4.1, my analysis. See appendix three). Alia is one such mother. She has three children, aged 13, 14 and 17. All are studying and all live with her and her husband. She and her family moved to Australia from Iraq two years ago. In Iraq, Alia studied up to the equivalent of year nine and since she arrived in Australia has focused on learning English.

While Alia has never had employment either in Australia or Iraq, she believes that taking a job can be good for women who would otherwise be confined to the home. When I asked Alia about her employment prospects, she told me:

If there is suitable work, I will work. But I think I will have problems with the language and veil. In [my local area], yes, but in the city I don't think I would find work [because of my veil].

Alia thought that factory work would be a viable option, but is concerned she will experience discrimination as a Muslim woman if she leaves her local area. Like Alia, the other women I interviewed who were not employed and not seeking employment, found that their ability to seek or take a job was limited by language, education, literacy, and their own and their children's health.

Mothers such as Pam and Tara felt that they were subject to age discrimination when seeking employment. Pam, who was 42, said, 'the older you are, it's harder to find a job'. Tara was concerned the casual work she had hitherto relied upon would become less easy to secure, as 'Fifty-four is not a very employable age'. Age-related discrimination interacts with gender discrimination to create 'gendered-ageism' (Industrial Relations Victoria 2004:ch2,17). As a result older women are less likely to be successful when applying for employment than other candidates.

The high unemployment rates and high rates of women not in the labour force suggest that many, perceiving how unlikely they are to find employment, may become disheartened and decide to search less frequently, if at all.

Among Parenting Payment recipients who are seeking employment, 38 per cent of single claimants and 49 per cent of partnered claimants think their job prospects are poor (Carlile et al. 2002: 130). They attribute this to a combination of reasons related to the labour market (no jobs, or no suitable jobs), their own skills (lack of relevant skills, no recent employment experience, limited English language ability), and also the market's inability to accommodate them due to their age, family responsibilities, ill-health or disability and employer attitudes (see table 4 below).

Table 4. Parenting Payment recipients looking for work and rating their chances as poor: Reasons for rating chances as poor

	Single (%) n=83	Partnered (%) n=306
Do not have skills	45	43
Own age/too old	30	33
Family responsibilities	30	20
Transport problems	25	15
Too long out of work	24	20
No suitable jobs	20	22
No jobs at all	17	12
Employer attitudes	11	11
Own illness/ill-health	10	12
Own disability	2	6
Language barrier	1	10
Other reasons	15	35

Source: Carlile et al. 2002:131

In sum, the majority of Parenting Payment claimants want employment. There is a considerable body of evidence to demonstrate that their rate of employment is high, particularly in contrast with other claimant groups. Those who are working are labouring in jobs with shorter hours than they would prefer. There is also evidence that among those who are not in employment, a considerably higher proportion than among mothers as a whole are seeking but failing to find paid work. In this group, the unemployed and those who are not in the labour market, there is evidence that mothers' ability to undertake employment is affected by discrimination on the basis of age and gender, limited employment experience, shorter time in education and training, their own and their children's ill-health, and other caring responsibilities. As Parenting Payment Partnered claimants more often come from non-English speaking backgrounds, they are more likely to face language barriers to employment than Single claimants. As a result, many mothers have a low opinion of the

likelihood of finding paid work. Nonetheless, three out of four lone parents have a job or look for employment at some time each year (Whiteford 2001:83). This stands in stark contrast to the stereotype of the unemployed mother described earlier in this chapter. It also calls into question government officials' depiction of Parenting Payment claimants as being unwilling to take employment and thereby setting a bad example for their children, as I detail in chapter three.

Key policy issues for mothers claiming Parenting Payment

I focus now on problems and difficulties the research participants identified with regard to welfare and employment. Given their beliefs about motherhood; their activity in employment, education and voluntary work; their ambitions; and the constraints they face, as outlined above, what did they consider to be the key policy issues? I do not mean to give the impression that mothers regarded their situation as essentially problematic. Generally they did not. Rather, I focus on the difficulties they discussed to uncover the primary needs mothers identified with regard to Parenting Payment.

Parenting Payment Poverty

Sole parenthood for most mothers in this study placed substantial limitations on their ability to engage in employment. While most of the mothers were committed to employment, if they were to mother in the manner they wished, they had little time available in which they could fit paid work. Naomi, for example, said:

Being a single parent, for most, well, for thirteen years, it's meant I haven't been able to earn. And not that I have minded not having [a partner], it's not that. I mean whether I had a partner or not, I would have always wanted to be a mum, because I think it's what having a child is about – being a parent. It's not as if I wanted to run away from my parenting duties, but I appreciate having had the pension to support me to help me be able to do that. But it's poverty! Absolute poverty!

As a mother, Naomi wanted to be available for her son but she also wanted to study to improve her employment prospects. By claiming income support, she was able to

study and to parent while earning little or no income. However, the money she received barely covered the costs of her household expenses and university fees.

Parents were strongly aware of the resources required to provide care for their children: the time, material resources, knowledge and skill identified by Fisher and Tronto (1990:41). Money was the most frequently mentioned of these. Many commented on how much teenagers eat. The cost of children for low-income families rises as children age. At 2002 rates, the cost of a child aged 13-15 years was estimated to be between \$43 and \$75 per week higher than it was for a child aged less than 5, and yet the total combination of Parenting Payment and other family assistance for a solo parent with a teenage child was only \$1 higher than the payments to parents of younger children (Davidson 2003:4-5). Parents received almost the same level of benefits, despite the higher costs of older children.

Alia struggled to care for her family with the Parenting Payment she received, although, as she explained, she was grateful that any assistance was available at all.

I like how Centrelink gives payment to families. But the payments are not enough, especially when the children are studying. Thank god they are giving money. Maybe we are not worthy for a payment, in other countries they don't give payments.

Alia compares her situation to those of other women in other countries. She has personal experience of this, having migrated to Australia from Iraq just two years before we met. She feels lucky in comparison to women in Iraq and grateful for Parenting Payment, but finds the money she receives does not stretch far enough.

Parenting Payment is targeted towards families with the lowest incomes. Sole-parent families are amongst the poorest in Australia. In Australia in 2000, 22 per cent of sole-parent families were experiencing poverty; nearly twice the proportion of couple families, at 12 per cent¹⁴ (Community Affairs References Committee 2004:247-248). More than half of all Australians who live in poverty live in

¹⁴ Measured at 50 per cent of average income before housing (Community Affairs References Committee 2004:223).

families that are primarily dependent on government payments as their main source of income (Harding and Szukalskz 2000:4). The Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2004:227) found the low value of income support payments was partly responsible for the high rates of poverty among sole-parent families.

Among the mothers I interviewed, five combined employment with their income support payments. Two of them, Belle and Tara, received an income high enough to prevent them claiming Parenting Payment at the time I met with them. However, Belle's employment was intermittent and Tara's jobs were casual and at times unpredictable. Both relied on Parenting Payment when paid work was insufficient or unavailable. Among the mothers who were not employed when I interviewed them, few had any additional source of income: only some received Child Support from their children's fathers and one received rental income from a small flat in her backyard. It is, then, highly likely that these mothers and their children were living in or close to poverty. This was reflected in their discussions about maintaining finely tuned weekly budgets in which every cent counted. As Nicole put it: 'I stress week to week' about money. Margaret argued against what she considered a stereotypical perception that parents receive generous amounts of income support:

Certainly anyone within the department or anywhere in the universe who thinks that it is easy, and that people are having a high time and whooping it up on Centrelink payments, haven't a clue. It ain't easy. You barely survive. You are constantly saying to your kids, 'No, I am sorry, I can't afford that.' It ain't easy.

The difficulty of managing from week to week on a low income is particularly marked for families relying on income support. Analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that in one year, among families claiming income support, two-thirds of lone parents and nearly two-thirds of couple parents could not pay their bills on time or needed to seek financial assistance from friends or family during the previous year (Bray 2003:7). Slightly less than half of the lone parents and one-third of the couple parents went without heating or meals, or had to sell or

pawn their possessions, or sought assistance from community organisations because they had insufficient money.

Reporting income and other Centrelink 'hassles' and confusions

Gendered moral rationalities led some mothers to seek, study towards or take employment in response to their very low incomes. As a result, they were constantly balancing the needs of their families with those of their education or paid work. Those who found employment which accommodated their family observed that combining a job with income support substantially increases the paperwork and reporting for parents. Some saw the complexity and hassle of welfare rules as the policy and implementation area most requiring improvement. Just prior to my first interviews, the requirements for income reporting by Parenting Payment recipients changed. Previously parents had been obliged to present a quarterly income statement if they had any earnings. The new rules asked parents to report their earnings every fortnight. As a recent modification, this rule featured in the interviews of a number of those who were employed. It was not only the new system but the complexity of income reporting that parents wanted to discuss. This issue featured strongly in my conversations with Erica.

Erica worked from home and her income changed from week to week depending on the hours of work that were required of her. For Erica, reporting her income to Centrelink formed a large part of her relationship with the organisation. It illustrated for her the complexity of the rules, the frequency with which they were changed and the capacity of the organisation to be flexible. This subject arose when I asked if her hours of work changed frequently. Erica described her experience of many years of changing income reporting requirements.

Under the fortnightly reporting system, Parenting Payment claimants reported the gross pay they expected to receive based on the hours they had worked in the previous fortnight, whether or not they had yet been paid. This posed difficulties in situations where the pay period did not match the Centrelink reporting fortnight and for those whose hours of employment changed from week to week (Pearce et al. 2002:43). Both were a problem for Erica. She was paid monthly and so needed to estimate her pay for Centrelink and call back with adjustments if she had calculated

incorrectly. This worked for a while, but then Erica's life became a lot more hectic. Her boss, with whom she had been employed for many years, went into hospital. The firm was very small, composed of just a few people, and without her employer, Erica's job was at risk. Her hours fluctuated more than they had previously and she was uncertain if she would have ongoing employment. In addition, Erica's mother, who lived interstate, became very unwell and Erica often flew to visit her while also trying to manage her care remotely by telephone.

It wasn't too much trouble at first and then when my income was going all over the place – and I didn't even know, depending upon my boss's health, what was happening – it became quite an issue ... you have to do it on a certain day, so if something had come up, which it did several times – like I have got an elderly mother and all the rest of it – you are doing other stuff and you think, 'Oh, I haven't reported,' you know.

Eventually, Erica contacted Centrelink to ask what she could do to make it easier to report her income.

Erica: I phoned them up and said, 'Look, um, blah, blah blah,' and they said, '... it's because you are not on a regular income.' So, in the end I negotiated with my employers – it wasn't anything Centrelink did – [and we arranged] that we go back to something that we did ages ago. That is, work out an average of what I would be earning, get paid a [regular] wage, but still report my hourly rate and at the end of three or six months, renegotiate the hours. And they accepted that and they put me on I think it is \$70 I get now, something like that, but it just takes a great load off.

Megan: So does that mean you don't have to report to Centrelink?

Erica: No, not at all, not until I renegotiate. At the moment I am being underpaid for the value of the work I am doing ... and at the

end of maybe six months we'll either negotiate an increased hourly rate or increase my hours or whatever.

Erica's circumstances are not unusual among Parenting Payment claimants. Many work in jobs in which their income changes frequently, many work for small businesses that are vulnerable to their employers' circumstances and many care for family members, particularly elderly parents, in addition to their children.

Perhaps what is unusual is Erica's assertiveness. She was not willing to accept a complex and inconvenient arrangement. Instead, she negotiated for something different. What remains for Erica, though, is her impression of dealing with Centrelink throughout these years. Her story, as she relayed it to me, was designed to illustrate the complexity, inflexibility and inconvenience of interactions with Centrelink. Any alternative that might improve these relations was initiated by Erica, not Centrelink.

For Caroline, reporting her income was just another hassle she could do without:

It annoys me. It's just that – no they haven't been too bad I suppose -it's just the fact that you have to report back to them with all your earnings, it's a bit of a nuisance ... you have ring up every fortnight and I just find that a nuisance, because I forget half the time. You know, I've got other things on. Well, I go to TAFE Mondays and that's my day I have to ring up and you have to do it each fortnight.

Margaret was frustrated by the many letters she received which presented conflicting information about her income:

What annoys me about them is that quite often you get five letters within three days all saying different amounts ... They don't get it right the first time. It will take four or five letters before they actually sort it out ...

Many mothers found Centrelink rules and requirements confusing. This extended beyond income reporting to many other elements in their day-to-day contact with Centrelink. Often this related to the large volume of correspondence they receive from Centrelink: letters, booklets and brochures explaining rules, announcing new requirements, stating or questioning entitlements, or requiring confirmation of their current circumstances. Grace, when I asked her about the Centrelink materials that explained Australians Working Together, remarked, ‘Booklets – huge books! Yes, a new encyclopaedia to add to my collection.’

Caroline was overwhelmed by the large number of items which arrived in her letterbox and so did not read them closely but relied on a friend to digest and explain Centrelink requirements as they changed:

Oh, they are always giving you booklets. You’re always getting stuff in the mail. I just don’t look at them, I just have a bit of a flick through ... It just takes too long to read them. I just don’t read them. I’ve got a friend who, she’s also on Centrelink payment, cause me and her have both got a child the same age actually ... and she reads everything that comes ... She tells me all that’s in it. So I get the information there.

Cheryl felt that she kept up to date with the ever-changing requirements, but worried for others who could not read as well as her.

They constantly change their policies so much we don’t know where we stand. And you are getting so much paperwork and little fine print. A lot of it’s worded that – I mean I had a good education, so I’m quite flexible with the words ... I can read the policies and understand them. A lot of other women can’t.

In their review of social security penalties, Pearce et al. (2002:27-28) identified the complexity and overly technical nature of much of Centrelink’s written correspondence as a problem for income support claimants. The Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2002:20) similarly found that claimants often

misunderstand or are confused by the information and letters they receive. As a result of these investigations, Centrelink undertook to review its communication with regard to the administration of penalties (Commonwealth Ombudsman 2002:xiv-xxii). At the time I interviewed Parenting Payment recipients, this review may not yet have led to revised letters and brochures, but their experience highlights the importance of easily understandable information. This is especially the case when a failure to comprehend Centrelink requirements could lead to penalties. The expansion of breaches for which penalties could be applied under Australians Working Together made parents vulnerable. The penalties for non-compliance were a reduction of benefits by 18 or 24 per cent for six months or no income support at all for eight weeks.

Some Parenting Payment recipients face particular difficulties in reading and understanding Centrelink communication. Those with limited literacy, reading disabilities, visual impairment or little knowledge of the English language are highly likely to misunderstand Centrelink letters or not to read them at all (Pearce et al. 2002:27). The high proportion of Parenting Payment recipients who have not completed high school and the large group of Parenting Payment Partnered recipients from non-English speaking backgrounds outlined in the previous section suggests that many may face such problems.

The mothers I interviewed who were from non-English speaking backgrounds struggled with communication from Centrelink. Mary, who requests an Arabic interpreter every time she has contact with Centrelink, usually receives letters written in English. Speaking through an interpreter, she told me:

Normally I just receive my letters in English. If I say I need an interpreter that is when I receive it in Arabic.

It is only directly after communication with Centrelink in which Mary has advised them of her need for an interpreter that she receives letters written in Arabic. Telephone calls also take place in English. Mary explained how these conversations usually run:

If they call me they will say, 'Are you, maybe, Mrs Smith?' Then if I hear my name I say, 'Yes.' And they say, 'This is Centrelink.' That's it.

Sometimes that is the end of the conversation. Other times, if they are at home, Mary will ask one of her children to listen to the Centrelink officer and explain what they are calling about. When her children are not available, Mary requests an interpreter. However, even when Mary spoke with Centrelink officers through an Arabic interpreter, either in person or over the telephone, she was sometimes unsure if she properly understood, because the interpreters often speak an unfamiliar form of Arabic. She explained:

When I go to Centrelink, I get a Lebanese interpreter. And you know, the Arabic they speak is a little bit different. And sometimes from Syria. They bring a Syrian [interpreter]. And it's really very hard for me to understand. So sometimes you don't get it. They repeat, repeat. Sometimes you pretend you get it, but you don't really get it.

To be polite, Mary sometimes pretends she understands what she is being told. This places her in a very vulnerable situation in which it seems highly likely she will unwittingly fail to comply with a Centrelink requirement and receive a penalty as a result. Ana also struggles with Centrelink communication. Ana has never learned to write in Arabic and was just learning to read and write in English when I met her. She found Centrelink letters written in English impenetrable. If Ana or Mary were to receive a penalty, there is little chance that they would understand that they could appeal the decision or understand the processes that such an appeal would involve.

The extent of misunderstanding to which language can lead is demonstrated by Zahra. She came to participate in my study with her friend Alia. Both knew that the study was about Parenting Payment. Zahra, like Alia, had very limited English language proficiency. Zahra had a youngest child aged thirteen and she knew that she received 'the pension'. When I asked her for more details, Zahra could not tell me what kind of pension it was. She showed me her Pensioner Concession Card

and I discovered that Zahra was not receiving Parenting Payment, but the Disability Support Pension. It is easy to imagine that mothers like Zahra would misunderstand Centrelink requirements, since she did not even know the name of the benefit which she received.

Interactions with Centrelink staff

Another commonly perceived problem when contacting Centrelink offices lay with interactions with staff. Parents enlisted a range of strategies to manage these interactions. Belle, for example, said

I have had to learn to wheel in my temper, to put aside my insight into the absurdist kind of organisation, or lack thereof, in the place, and reconcile myself to the fact that every time I go there, there will be a new system in place and I won't know what it is ... And so I have just made it my personal goal to get the person I have to deal with, first of all, to smile, and then to laugh. And so I always go in and I say, 'Hi, how are you! Isn't it hot, or, aren't you glad it's nearly the weekend or nearly four o'clock?' I just crap on like that and I am just annoyingly pleasant.

Others suggest 'just doing what they tell you' or going armed with as much information as possible, gleaned from friends, brochures and the web, or being well organised. Overwhelmingly, parents stressed the importance of being polite. These strategies are a response to two related issues raised by parents: the heavy workload and perceived lack of staff training at Centrelink offices; and the pervasive stereotypes of welfare recipients that they encountered in and outside of these offices. By smiling, being polite and having all the necessary paperwork on hand, parents could avoid making what they regarded as an already stressful day for the staff even more difficult, thus increasing their chances of a good outcome. By smiling and being polite, especially when coupled with demonstrating their commitment to employment or training, parents could avoid being regarded as 'dole bludgers' by staff.

Parents did not believe that all or even most staff would respond in this way – in fact, most said their contact with Centrelink was positive. Nevertheless, many felt that derogatory treatment was an eventuality for which they needed to be prepared, because they knew it happened occasionally. Pam, for example, took this approach, despite saying she had never encountered negative attitudes at Centrelink. She explained to me:

Pam: Some people there are okay but there are some people, they look down at you because you are on a family payment, if you are on the pension ... There are some people that think, 'Oh, well I am working, you should be. Why are you on the pension? You should be working too.'

Megan: At Centrelink?

Pam: Yeah, at Centrelink. Some people can give you that impression. Not all, but some people can come across that way ... I haven't come across anyone else like that.

Megan: Oh, you haven't?

Pam: No. But I know there are people like that. Sometimes you go into Centrelink and you will be in line and you are waiting to be served and that, and you see how other people are talking to other clients and everything. I've been lucky so far it hasn't happened to me, but if it does I can pick it up straight away.

Interactions varied according to which office mothers attended or which staff member they saw. This was Margaret's experience:

I myself have actually on occasions, when I have been depressed and had to go and say, 'Look I need to go on the pension again', just burst into tears, you know, in their office, because the questions seemed so pointless, and when you didn't bring this piece of paper,

or you know. Occasionally you would get the odd person that makes you think the money is coming out of their income or something. You know, that you feel like you practically have to kiss their boots. Those feelings are awful ... [but] when we first moved to [another] office I was absolutely delighted at the treatment there, the people were fantastic. Everyone I saw there was being treated politely. I actually wrote to them and said, 'Congratulations. This is great, pleased to see this, keep up the good work.'

Mothers' sense that they were being treated with suspicion arose in a context of heightened scrutiny of all beneficiaries. In the year 1999-2000, Centrelink conducted 2.3 million 'customer entitlement reviews' designed to uncover fraud and error in payments¹⁵ (ANAO 2001:24 note 13). The reviews were intended to find underpayments as well as overpayments, but it is nonetheless understandable that many parents felt they were being treated with suspicion, given that the number of reviews was equal to more than half of the 4.3 million income support payments made that year (FACSIA 2006, my calculation). In the year that more than two million reviews were conducted, only 2,881 convictions were made for fraud (ANAO 2001:24).

Low-income parents have mixed experiences of support services. They most value the services which offer non-judgemental, respectful and practical assistance (Attree 2005:335). Parents fear being judged by service providers and this can stop them seeking assistance. When they have no choice about attending a service, as is the case with Centrelink, it is not surprising that some approach the interaction with a degree of caution, attempting as much as possible to maintain control over it. So they offer an idealised impression, and in doing so give a performance which is 'moulded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented' (Goffman 1959:35). That is, knowing the expectations of

¹⁵ The Australian National Audit Office (2001:76) notes that Centrelink does not generally pursue an overpayment as fraud, even if the claimant had a legislative obligation to provide certain information and has been overpaid because he or she failed to do so. More commonly, payments are cancelled or reduced and penalties incurred.

staff, parents present a particular impression of themselves as polite and respectful claimants. This is not a cynical act, but rather an attempt to be treated with respect.

Conclusion

Mothers were guided in making decisions about their family lives by gendered moral rationalities (Duncan and Edwards 1999). They made decisions that were rational for their families, given their understanding of good mothering and of the care needs of their children and other family members. As I have demonstrated, their understandings varied widely. Some felt the need to be physically available for their children for many hours each week and so had little, if any, space for employment or education. Some felt that study or employment were elements of good mothering, as these activities would better their family's circumstances, most notably in terms of higher weekly incomes, but also to provide a good example to their children. Some understood their mothering responsibilities as separate to their need to maintain employment or education for their own good. A strong commitment to care underlies all of these different perspectives on motherhood.

Mothers' commitment to employment, education or other activities means that Parenting Payment recipients are actively engaged in the public sphere at high rates. They are employed at a higher rate than any other beneficiary group; they study to increase their qualifications; and they volunteer. There is considerable evidence, however, that the labour market is not providing the jobs which Parenting Payment claimants need. Some work for long periods of time in jobs which do not offer the hours of work mothers would prefer. Being unable to work enough hours to be self-sufficient, mothers claim Parenting Payment to supplement their income. Others seek employment without success; the rate of unemployment among Parenting Payment claimants is high compared to other mothers. Age discrimination, inappropriate hours, insufficient jobs, and a lack of positions which accommodate family responsibilities make it hard to find a suitable job. In addition, Parenting Payment recipients experience disadvantage at a higher rate than other parents and this affects their capacity to participate in paid work. Ill-health or disability among mothers or their children, limited English language skills and problems with literacy make finding employment difficult for some and almost impossible for others. As a

result, some mothers have been out of the labour market for quite a while, so they do not have recent employment experience or up-to-date skills. This means that even if their health, language or literacy improves, finding employment continues to be difficult.

Mothers negotiate social security policy in the context of their diverse interpretations of what it means to be a good mother, their strong commitment to care, and their high rates of employment, study and voluntary activity. The issues that mothers identified in their experience of social security policy and practice relate to three areas. Their most important concern related to their ability to be good mothers for their children. This encompassed the best balance between employment and being at home to care for their children as well the importance of finding enough money. Parenting Payment recipients experience high levels of poverty and manage tight budgets. Mothers were highly attuned to their weekly incomes. Their second area of concern was the complexity of welfare rules which seemed to be endlessly changing. Mothers who were employed raised this issue in particular, as reporting their earned income often complicated their dealings with Centrelink. Mothers found Centrelink letters and brochures confusing and some were overwhelmed by the high volume of correspondence they received. Mothers from non-English speaking backgrounds particularly struggled to understand Centrelink communication, especially letters written in English, but spoken English, even when interpreted, could be difficult to comprehend. The third area mothers identified related to creating respectful relations with agency staff. Mothers were on constant alert for the stigma and disapproval as sole parents and welfare recipients, which led them to approach staff carefully, attempting to manage interactions with them to maximise the likelihood they would be shown respect.

The mothers I interviewed felt able to draw on social security in order to arrange their lives in the way they felt was best for their children. Some chose to stay at home full time, some to draw on income support while studying so as to improve their employment prospects, some to supplement income from the part-time or intermittent jobs which they could combine with parenting. These were constrained choices. The decision to study to improve one's chances of better employment was partly driven by an understanding that it would be impossible to support a family on

a single low-wage job. The decision to combine part-time employment with income support arose partly because of a lack of family-friendly arrangements in full-time employment, the assumption on the part of some employers that primary carers are less reliable, poor employment conditions in part-time jobs and the very low levels of cash assistance available through Parenting Payment. The level of care that parents feel they should provide to their children is dictated partly by the particular needs of their children and the limited formal care services available for teenagers.

In the next chapter, I explore government perspectives on the key policy issues as articulated in arguments promoting *Australians Working Together*. I find that mothers' perspectives on the key issues in income support policy are generally different to those espoused by officials. There were similarities, for instance, in the importance placed on employment. However, for mothers, employment and study revolved around the best interests of their children. Mothers did not uniformly assume that being employed as a parent was best for their children. Children and family lay at the heart of mothers' thinking, in contrast to the almost peripheral place of care in *Australians Working Together* policy.

Chapter three

‘Welfare Dependency’, ‘Mutual Obligation’ and the need for employment

The representation of welfare reform by Australian officials

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the transformation of Parenting Payment under Australians Working Together to set out the ‘institutional and discursive context of policy formation and implementation’ (Williams and Popay 1999:179). Viewing care as a form of labour invites an analysis of the conditions under which it is conducted and the role of the welfare state in mediating and setting these conditions (Daly and Lewis 2000:285). Recognising the gendered norms and obligations which underpin the provision of care invites an exploration of the language of parental obligation as the state challenges or reinforces norms of care. I now begin this analysis of the welfare policies with which the parents I interviewed lived and the government rhetoric that surrounds that policy. I study how policy and governments construct parents in receipt of welfare: that is, how they speak of mothers and fathers, welfare and welfare claimants. This allows me to explore the fusions and fissures in the Australian welfare regime, between policy, mothers’ interpretations and research evidence.

In the previous chapter I examined how mothers presented the key policy issues at the juncture of parenting, employment and welfare; in this chapter I examine how public officials present that problem. I begin by investigating how the concepts of ‘welfare dependency’, ‘mutual obligation’ and ‘customer service’ are articulated by the representatives of the Australian Government when discussing the need to

implement changes to the welfare system. To do so I review what Bessant (2002) describes as ‘official talk’, as it occurs in speeches, reports, white papers and other official pronouncements, in order to examine how social security is represented as ‘problem’ and the solutions which are offered to address that problem (Bacchi 1999). In arguing the need for change to the Australian welfare system, government representatives claimed that policy had to address entrenched problems with welfare recipients and the welfare system. The former was commonly expressed in terms of ‘welfare dependence’, the latter in the context of a need to reframe the relationship between welfare claimants and the welfare state through ‘mutual obligation’ implemented in a ‘customer service’ model (C Howard 2006; Yeatman 2000).

In the second half of this chapter, I interpret the concepts of ‘welfare dependency’ and ‘mutual obligation’ and their place in Australians Working Together policy by drawing on two strands of welfare regime analysis. The first is the male-breadwinner/female-care-giver model and its transition to an adult-worker model. The second is a gendered understanding of citizenship. These analyses reveal the policy logics or ‘the assumptions, principles and premises’ which underpin and inform policies developed by welfare regimes (Lewis 1997:6). Gendered policy logics are reflected in welfare policy in multiple ways, including assumptions about how caring for children and employment are shared by mothers and fathers and the basis on which parents, as citizens, can make claims on the state for support. All these have implications for the kinds of policies which are developed and the lives of those the policies affect. Policy logics have shifted throughout the twentieth century; no longer do welfare regimes tend to view women primarily as wives and mothers unlikely to participate in the workforce; instead they increasingly expect all adults to engage in paid work (Lewis 1997:6).

This chapter provides a backdrop against which welfare recipients’ experience of income support can be understood. The environment in which they live will no doubt affect how parents perceive themselves and their relationship to the state as citizens, parents, welfare recipients and workers. There may be, as Pfau-Effinger (1998) suggests, tensions between the gender culture and the gender order; that is, the expectations and intentions of parents may not match those of the state and the possibilities offered by the labour market. An analysis of the texts of welfare

change is most illuminating when accompanied by an analysis of how official talk is embedded in practice (Harris 2001:23). Throughout the remainder of the thesis, I will explore how the rationalities set out in this chapter are operationalised and implemented in the practices of social security administration and the experiences of parent claimants.

In concluding this chapter, I offer Ruth Lister's social justice agenda as a means by which to address the discordance between mothers' and policy makers' interpretations of the policy problem. This agenda, which resonates with the concerns of mothers outlined in the previous chapter, would involve:

- public acknowledgement of the role played by benefits in tackling poverty
- public discussion of the value accorded to different kinds of work – both paid and unpaid
- the more general involvement of those experiencing poverty in the politics of poverty (Lister 2001:69-70).

Rationales informing policy change: 'welfare dependency', 'mutual obligation' and customer service

'Welfare dependence'

In 1999, Jocelyn Newman, Minister for Family and Community Services, announced her intention to establish the Reference Group on Welfare Reform (see appendix two for a list of Howard Government ministers active in social security reform). It was one year after the Liberal/National Coalition Government had been elected for their second term in office. The Minister was setting out her government's position on the need for welfare reform. She described her concern with the current state of affairs as follows:

... there are examples around Australia where job opportunities are available and our entrenched culture of welfare dependency has meant that certain members of our community are not only

prepared, but feel entitled to exploit the social safety net instead.
(Newman 1999b)

The Minister depicted a ‘culture of welfare dependency’. This ‘culture’ she argued, led to some beneficiaries refusing to accept available jobs, thus deliberately exploiting the social security system. In describing ‘welfare dependency’ as a culture, the Minister gave the impression that electing to claim benefits rather than take employment is a mode of exploitation that is fairly widespread, something that is part of the condition of being a beneficiary. In her reference to ‘welfare dependency’, the Minister conflates two different registers of meaning. The first is the dependence of one person on another, or on an institution, for subsistence: in this case receipt of social security. The second is a moral and psychological state of excessive neediness and lack of will (Fraser and Gordon 1994:6). It appears, then, that by being dependent financially on income support, claimants also exhibit moral and psychological dependency. This reference to the pathological mode of dependency invokes the term’s other most common contemporary use: drug dependency. The connection has been made explicit by some, for example, in the book titled *Australia’s Welfare Habit and How to Kick It* (Saunders 2004). In this depiction of welfare, claimants are ‘addicted’, prepared to do anything to maintain their ‘habit’. The ‘problem’ is blamed on benefit claimants who lack the moral gumption to do the right thing and on the welfare system for allowing people to languish in a ‘culture of dependency’.

Minister Newman described ‘welfare dependence’ as a large and growing problem, demonstrated by the rising numbers of people claiming social security:

Let me give you some feel for the extent of welfare dependency. While we have record levels of employment, there are now around 2.6 million people of workforce age on government income support payments – around 1 in 5. Ten years ago, the figure was around 1.5 million people, or around 1 in 7. The number of children in workless families is disturbingly high. Some 900,000 Australian children are in households with no adult in paid work. (Newman 1999b)

In this statement the Minister claimed that even though employment levels had increased, more people were in receipt of income support than ever before, implying, in tandem with her previous statement, that this was because people on income support were refusing the jobs available to them.

Not only was Jocelyn Newman concerned about the number of welfare recipients, she also drew particular attention to the '900,000 Australian children' of people who are not employed. Six years later in 2005, as Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews (2005a:3) made very similar claims:

At a time of sustained economic growth and unemployment at 29-year lows, it is unacceptable to have 2.5 million or 20 per cent of working age Australians on income support. Of these, more than 1.3 million people are in receipt of Parenting Payment or the Disability Support Pension and have few, if any, participation requirements. It is also unacceptable to have 700,000 children growing up in jobless households, in which two or three generations of Australians may not know what it is like to have a job, let alone steady employment and regular income.

I note in passing that in the six years from 1999, when Jocelyn Newman presented her statistics, to 2005 when Kevin Andrews presented his, there appears to have been a fall from 2.6 to 2.5 million people in receipt of income support and an even steeper decline from 900,000 to 700,000 children whose parents were not employed. If these figures can be taken as accurate, it would appear that Australians Working Together, which started in 2002-2003, could perhaps have been considered to have had some success. The Minister made no mention of this. Instead, once again, it was implied that welfare recipients refuse employment and that the many children whose parents did not have jobs are the children of Parenting Payment and Disability Support Pension claimants.

A key concern regarding the children in families without employment was ‘intergenerational welfare dependency’. Larry Anthony, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, said:

Parents, both partnered and single, who remain out of the work force and on income support for long periods of time often face great difficulty in returning to the work force later on when the children are older. This is due to a lack of recent experience, skills, contacts and/or confidence. This can create a significant risk of poverty and long-term welfare dependency for both themselves and their children. (Anthony 2002:2310)

The transfer of ‘welfare dependency’ between generations again treats ‘dependency’ as pathological. It further suggests that parents who rely on income support are failing in their duty as parents to act as positive role models for their children.

In Anthony’s statement, and in the others above, welfare receipt and employment are presented in opposition to one another, describing a situation in which parents receiving welfare were not employed and those who were employed did not receive welfare. Contrary to the evidence presented in the previous chapter of the large proportion of people who claim Parenting Payment while in employment, parents were regarded as being either in work *or* in receipt of social security benefits.

Anthony saw the cause of parents’ difficulty returning to employment in the parents themselves. They lacked ‘recent experience, skills, contacts and/or confidence’. He made no mention of the labour market: the availability of jobs or location of jobs in local areas; the gendered nature of employment; prejudice against older women, lone parents and mothers by potential employers; a disinclination on the part of employers to take on new staff who do not have recent employment experience; or a lack of training provided by government or employers to equip parents returning to employment with appropriate skills (Wilson et al. 1999:19-20). Any of the above could affect mothers’ employment prospects. Under *Australians Working Together*, policy rhetoric was concerned with the need to transform parents so as to increase employment rates; it was not concerned with labour markets.

During *Australians Working Together* debates, the government described employment as the best means to address the poverty of parents and their children (Yeatman 2000:172). By taking employment, parents would increase their income and their long-term financial security and raise the material wellbeing of themselves and their children. Making the argument that employment is a parental responsibility implies that Parenting Payment claimants are breaching the norms of parenthood by being out of work. This was apparent when the *Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Australians Working Together and other 2001 Budget Measures) Bill 2002*, was introduced into the House of Representatives. Anthony (2002:2310) explained why the policy was developed with increasing requirements as children age:

The introduction of a part-time participation requirement will encourage and help parents prepare to return to work as children grow older, the usual situation for most parents with school-aged children.

The Minister presented the policy as ‘encouraging’ Parenting Payment claimants to adhere to the ‘usual’ trajectory for parents with children. It is important to note that the Minister spoke of ‘parents’, not mothers, although, as we saw in the previous chapter, nearly all Parenting Payment claimants are women. Australian mothers do tend to increase their hours of employment as their children age, but Australian fathers do not follow this pattern; instead, most fathers work full time throughout their children’s infancy and schooling (Gray et al. 2003:11). The Minister was really referring to mothers. So the policy was intended to help claimants meet community norms regarding mothering and maternal employment.

In sum, ministers argued that the welfare system was in need of repair because of rising numbers of claimants, many of these being parents. Income support claimants were described as lacking the motivation to seek employment, thus voluntary measures were no longer considered effective. ‘Welfare dependency’ was regarded as pathological, with advocates of reform professing concern about the detrimental effects of long-term benefit receipt (Shaver 2001:279-280). People who

were ‘welfare dependent’ were not considered capable of acting in their own best interests. They needed the state to step in to help them break the ‘habit’. As ‘welfare dependent’; they were not viewed as being the best judge of their own circumstances or needs (Shaver 2001:341). They were depicted as needing the explicit guidance of the state, in what Yeatman (2000:158) has described as a new version of Rousseau’s social contract, in which individuals must be forced to be financially self-reliant. Claimants must be helped to make appropriate choices; that is, helped to know that they should choose employment (Yeatman 2000:163). The proposed solution to ‘welfare dependence’ was mandatory activity requirements. In Australia these have been conceived as part of a new relationship between the citizen and the state, termed ‘mutual obligation’.

Mutual Obligation

‘Mutual obligation’ was a principle introduced early in the Howard Government’s rule, but it was not the first Australian welfare policy to invoke obligation. The previous Labor Government had implemented Reciprocal Obligation, under which unemployed people were obliged to take advantage of an expanded range of programs and assistance, and faced penalties if obligations were not met (McClelland 2002:216). The Howard Government’s Mutual Obligation¹⁶ placed far less responsibility with government and much more with the welfare recipient (McClelland 2002:218). Mutual Obligation was first put into practice by the Howard Government with the introduction of the Work for the Dole program in 1997. Work for the Dole required those young unemployed people who were directed to the program to engage in community work in order to remain eligible for income support. The government plan for welfare reform was the expansion of the principal of Mutual Obligation to other groups of income support claimants.

Early in the government’s program of reform, Prime Minister Howard explained Mutual Obligation:

¹⁶ I have capitalised ‘Mutual Obligation’ where it refers to a particular set of policy initiatives implemented by the Howard Government. I do this to distinguish the term as it was used in a policy sense, which focused on the obligation of the welfare recipient, from its commonplace meaning according to which the mutuality of obligation might be considered to be stronger.

We have a solemn obligation to help those in our community who are deserving of help. Equally we have a right, as a responsible community, to ask of those who are receiving help, where it is reasonable to do so, that they do something in return for that assistance and something that is commensurate with the help and their own circumstances. And that is the principle of mutual obligation. (J Howard 1997)

In this statement, John Howard made reference to several key discursive themes of his government's welfare agenda. Firstly, he noted a 'solemn obligation' to help those who 'are deserving of help'. In doing so, he suggested that there may be some who were not deserving and that those who were not deserving should not be helped. This is an allusion to a long-running rhetorical association between welfare and the deserving and undeserving poor (Bessant 2002:18). The undeserving are seen to contribute to their difficult circumstances through their own moral failings; those who deserve support are those who find themselves in difficult circumstances despite their own concerted efforts to improve their lot or despite their impeccable morality (Dwyer 2000:64,198; Edwards 2006:421). Secondly, Howard posited that it was the community's right to ask welfare recipients to 'do something in return'. This is the notion that by accepting income support, claimants have exercised a right which generates obligations upon them: by fulfilling those obligations people can become deserving welfare recipients (Moss 2001:5). In this way, Mutual Obligation 'balances' the rights and responsibilities of welfare recipients; the contention was that there had previously been too much emphasis on rights, while responsibilities had been neglected (Yeatman 2000:156). Thirdly, this concern with the rights and responsibilities of government, the community and welfare recipients was often discussed in terms of a need for 'balance' and 'fairness' (Harris 2001:20). For example, it was said to be 'only fair' that welfare recipients give something to those who have made sacrifices through their labour and taxes in order for the government to provide income support (Barns and Preston 2002:22-23; Moss 2001:5). Social security claimants were set in opposition to 'taxpayers', regardless of the taxes they paid on their income support or on goods and services (Cass and Brennan 2002:251).

The Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000) in its final report recommended extending the application of Mutual Obligation beyond Work for the Dole: payments to all unemployed people, parents and people with disabilities were to be informed by this principle. In its interpretation of Mutual Obligation, the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, unlike Howard, also focused on the obligations of employers, the community and governments (Moss 2001:8). For the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, Mutual Obligation was the obligation of the whole of society to assist those in need and the obligation of those in receipt of income support to take advantage of the opportunities available to them (Reference Group on Welfare Reform 2000:34). Nonetheless, the obligation largely rested with social security claimants, as they would face financial penalties for failing to meet their obligations. This was not the case for business, communities or governments (Moss 2001: 7-8).

When implemented in *Australians Working Together*, Mutual Obligation gave less consideration to the obligations of businesses, governments and communities than had been sought by the Reference Group on Welfare Reform. For example, Centrelink (2002a) told social security claimants that: ‘Mutual Obligation is about you giving something back to the community which supports you.’ This statement implied that the community was already supporting the welfare recipient (through the provision of cash transfers) and had no further responsibilities; Mutual Obligation referred narrowly to what the welfare recipient gave in return.

Parents were a central target of *Australians Working Together*. Parenting Payment claimants were included in the general web of rhetoric about welfare receipt, but a particular language was directly applied to this group. For example, Jocelyn Newman (1999b), the Minister for Family and Community Services noted that:

Parenting Payment for parents, partnered or separated, represents the Government’s recognition that raising children, especially young children, is an important and valuable role. This in itself is a form of Mutual Obligation. It is critical to give children the best start in life. However, raising children is only part of a lifetime.

Parenting Payment doesn't last forever, and the best approach to long-term security is getting a job.

At first glance, the Minister appeared to recognise the importance of the care work of parents, describing the care of children as 'important and valuable' and in itself 'a form of Mutual Obligation'. As a Mutual Obligation activity, care would be a form of labour and also a means by which parents contributed to the community. However, the Minister quickly qualified and contained this acknowledgement by stating that care work was only 'part of a lifetime'. The solution, for the Minister, was 'getting a job'. The Minister portrayed employment as an essential element of good parenting because through employment parents could provide for the long term (presumably financial) security of their families.

Mutual Obligation was one aspect of the solution to the problem of 'welfare dependency' put forward by the Australian Government. The other part of the problem, as set out at the beginning of this section, was with the welfare system itself. Newman (1999b) explained that the Australian Government intended to 'modernise' the welfare system. She presented the social security system as outdated and inadequate:

The modern conservative approach to welfare emphasises three main objectives. The first is to assist people appropriately when they are in genuine need, to provide an adequate safety net. The second is to stop people becoming dependent, to the extent possible. The third is to help people move to independence as soon as possible ... The social security system has, however, contributed to the growth in welfare dependency, by placing too little emphasis on the second and third of these objectives. While it redresses short-term poverty by meeting immediate needs, it does not have a sustained focus on helping people move beyond reliance on income support to self-sufficiency. (Newman 1999a:7)

Mutual Obligation was the framework through which the second and third of the Minister's concerns, discouraging 'dependence' and encouraging 'independence',

would be addressed. The ‘sustained focus’ the Minister called for would be implemented through a new model of ‘individualised service delivery’, as recommended by the Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000).

Individualised services for rational customers

When the Howard Government responded to the Reference Group on Welfare Reform in 2001, it agreed there was a need for a new approach. Centrelink would institute individualised services:

If people are to participate effectively, whether in paid jobs, voluntary work, or undertaking caring responsibilities, they need to have access to services focusing on their particular circumstances and to be linked to opportunities appropriate to their aspirations ... Centrelink will remain the main gateway to the participation support system, and will manage income support assessment, payment and compliance. (Australian Government 2001:5)

This approach tailored services to the individual circumstances of claimants. Centrelink was to work one on one with beneficiaries to aid in their participation and also to ensure their compliance. Combined with the function of benefit assessment and payment, Centrelink became a ‘one-stop-shop’ (Bessant 2002:17). In keeping with the language of ‘shopping’, social security claimants were re-labelled ‘customers’ (Fairclough 2000:167).

At the same time that income support claimants were depicted as pathologically ‘dependent’ and therefore incapable of making informed decisions about their circumstances, they were also, in some government debate, depicted as rational individual actors. Redefining claimants as customers – people who shop around for the best deal – was part of this. It is questionable whether someone who needs to claim social security benefits because they have no other source of income is actually in a position to look elsewhere for the kind of service Centrelink provides. Nonetheless, Centrelink adopted the new service delivery approach with gusto. The Chief Executive Officer of Centrelink said that to reinforce the new ‘customer service’ model:

... we introduced the 'Customer' everywhere - customer service officers instead of counter assessors; customer service centres instead of regional offices; customer segment teams instead of policy or program branches. (Vardon 2000:4)

Centrelink's customers would receive one-on-one service provision through personal advisers (Yeatman 2000:165).¹⁷

It was in relation to financial incentives to employment that the idea of the beneficiary as rational actor was most prominent. Welfare recipients, in this view, acted rationally if they elected to remain on income support rather than taking a job which offered little additional financial return. Here it was the welfare system which required fixing. This was a key issue raised by the Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000). Together, 'incentives and financial assistance' were one of the five areas in which it made recommendations.

The messages from government on this subject were conflicted. One the one hand, when introducing Australians Working Together into Parliament, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Larry Anthony (2002:2309) said:

There are a large number of jobless families and jobless households. Many households of working age rely heavily on income support, and there are inadequate incentives and rewards for self-reliance ... The working credit will make a real difference to working age customers who are trying to get into the work force. It will give incentives for them to try out a job ...

¹⁷ The Job Network, which was newly created by the Howard Government to provide a competitive market to deliver employment services to beneficiaries, was another key feature of the customer service approach to individualised delivery. Initially a network of more than 300 providers, from the public, private and community sectors, were contracted by the Federal Government to provide individualised employment services (Considine 2001:123). While unemployed beneficiaries were obliged to take a referral to the Job Network as part of their Mutual Obligation requirements, this was not the case for Parenting Payment claimants, who would only be referred if they wished. It was intended that unemployed 'customers' would select the Job Network member in their area which would best meet their job search needs. However, in practice, the options were limited and there was little if any information available to claimants on which to base a decision (Considine 2001:126).

In his conception of how to address a need for greater ‘self-reliance’, incentives and rewards were critical. Indeed the first policy measure announced in Anthony’s second reading speech was the ‘Working Credit’, designed to delay the effect of taper-rates on income support payments by temporarily raising the earnings disregard. Under the Working Credit, recipients acquire ‘credits’ which give them the opportunity to earn some income without affecting their benefits. Each Working Credit is equivalent to one dollar. During periods of time in which a claimant is in receipt of income support but earning less than \$48 per week, they receive Working Credits (Centrelink 2006a). Beneficiaries can accumulate up to 1000 credits or until such a time that they earn more than \$48 in a week. Earnings above \$48 reduce the Working Credit balance. So someone with 1000 Working Credits could earn \$1000 before their income support payment rate is reduced. The Working Credit scheme was designed to allow individuals to ease into their employment income, without immediately facing high effective marginal tax rates. Effective marginal tax rates are the rate at which a claimant who earns an extra dollar through employment loses some of their extra earnings in taxes and benefits. This is an issue I will explore and explain in more detail in chapter five. Working Credit was designed to provide motivation for recipients who made rational, calculated decisions about employment.

A different perspective was offered by Amanda Vanstone, the Minister for Family and Community Services, during the same stage of the Australians Working Together debates. Vanstone (2003:25) dismissed the notion of effective marginal tax rates, ‘a term that suits economists’, as misleadingly implying that people in receipt of social security pay more tax when they work than other taxpayers. The Minister continued:

Those who choose not to work – because they lose welfare dollars by earning their own – have an entitlement attitude ... I am certain that many people don’t dismiss work as an option just because they lose welfare payments when they earn some money for themselves. For them this is an issue of right and wrong. They are aware this is someone else’s hard-earned money, not their own. They make a

conscious effort to work through the income zone where they are replacing taxpayer dollars with their own dollars because they can see what's on the other side. (Vanstone 2003:25)

The Minister considered that it was attitudes more than financial incentives that had to be improved so that social security recipients would take employment. She was, without using the term, invoking the notion of 'dole bludger', someone who lives, or 'bludges', off 'someone else's hard-earned money'. In doing, so Vanstone was positioning welfare recipients in opposition to employees or 'taxpayers', which, as noted above, was a recurring theme in *Australians Working Together* debates. For Vanstone, employment decisions were moral decisions. Someone who knows the difference between 'right and wrong' will 'make a conscious effort' to increase their income despite very high effective marginal tax rates because, although the financial gains may not be large, the moral advantages are sizable. Someone who does not take employment is demonstrating their 'dependency', their inability to know for themselves how to choose the correct course of action.

Penalties for non-compliance were an additional 'incentive'. To ensure compliance with Mutual Obligation requirements, the government expanded the system of penalties to include Parenting Payment claimants. This is a logical extension of a policy understanding that welfare claimants need obligations to be mandated. This requires some mechanism by which to enforce compliance. Vanstone (2002:7974) argued that penalties, or 'breaches', were necessary because 'if you do not have some sort of penalty for not doing what you are meant to do, you end up with a system that does not have integrity and credibility'.

The key rhetorical elements of these policy transformations were welfare claimants' obligation to employment for their own sake and for that of the community; parental obligation to employment as an element of good and 'normal' parenting; the need to ensure compliance through mandated activities tied to penalties for non-compliance; and a new, individualised service delivery system. There was some talk of rational individuals weighing the financial benefits of employment versus income support, but talk about income support which saw claimants as 'dependent' and requiring Mutual Obligation was a far stronger discursive trend. Nonetheless, the Working

Credit and the importance of financial incentives was an important element of the government program of reform. In official talk care and gender rarely appeared.

In championing new directions in welfare policy, the Australian government drew upon language and concepts with long histories and strong community resonance. Exhorting parents to engage in paid work echoed notions that welfare recipients were lazy: not employed because it would involve too much effort (Grover and Stewart 2000:237). Discussions of 'intergenerational dependency' on welfare referenced notions of 'bad mothers', particularly bad single mothers, whose lack of connection with the labour market and 'dependency' had powerful and negative effects on their children (Grover and Stewart 2000:239-240). The descriptions made employment and welfare receipt oppositional, creating a sense that one was either a social security claimant or an employee, and not, as was the case for many people, both employed and claiming income support at the same time. Finally, and very significantly, it was assumed that 'work' was paid market work, and unpaid care went largely unrecognised as a form of work (Rake 2001:212).

The political use of these terms and concepts resonated because they 'contain[ed] sedimented traces of past usages and function as vehicles through which the past influences the present' (Fraser and Gordon 1994:4). They drew upon previous understandings and prejudices, but were inscribed anew. Old stereotypes of immoral single mothers and lazy unemployed people fused into the notion of single mothers who acted immorally by refusing employment, setting a poor example for their children as well as wronging the community.

This language resonated with the public. During the first three years of the Coalition government, community opinion shifted considerably towards a belief that people were unemployed through a lack of commitment to finding employment, and that people in receipt of benefits were 'fiddling' the system¹⁸ (Wilson and Turnbull 2001:401). Three years of sustained government commentary on the unworthiness of unemployed people, willingly relayed by sections of the media, reinforced public

¹⁸ The percentage agreeing with the statement 'Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to' increased from 39 per cent in 1996 to 49 per cent in 1999 (Wilson and Turnbull 2001:401). The percentage agreeing that 'Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another' increased from 20 per cent to 27 per cent.

opinion, especially among working class voters (Wilson and Turnbull 2001). At this time, these beliefs were primarily directed towards the unemployed; there was not the same degree of mistrust towards sole parents. Shaun Wilson and Nick Turnbull (2001:403) speculated that the extension of compulsory programs to other claimants would prove unpopular among those in lower socioeconomic positions because of their 'clear interest in preserving welfare'. However, welfare change has extended considerably beyond the unemployed. During those early years, negative government rhetoric was targeted particularly at unemployed people, especially young unemployed people. Since then, Parenting Payment recipients and people with disabilities have come within government focus and been subject to the kinds of language outlined in this chapter.

From a male-breadwinner model to an adult-worker model and from citizen mother to citizen worker: Implications for care

One of the most notable absences in Australian social security policy language is care. Paid market work receives greater recognition in government rhetoric than unpaid care work. The lack of much explicit discussion of care work in Australian welfare policy talk positions care as a secondary responsibility of parents. Concentration on paid employment obscures unpaid care work, leaving it unconsidered and undervalued (McDowell 2005:372). This is a marked change of direction for welfare policies, which had previously provided income support to mothers in recognition that the provision of care could be a valued full-time task. Hilary Land's observation that 'current welfare policies in Britain both devalue and obscure activities within the home which, until recently, were regarded, if not as work, at least as giving rise to legitimate claims on the state for support' applies equally to Australia (Land 2002:28).

The lack of recognition of care and its importance to mothers is related to a lack of recognition of gender. Policy rhetoric rarely acknowledges that the majority of parents in receipt of income support are mothers. The gender-neutral language of 'parents' obscures the gendered reality of parental care, most of which is provided by mothers. As Mary Daly (2004:143-144) has described it, 'Concepts like work, citizenship, and parenthood are increasingly utilized in a generic rather than gender-

specific way.’ This creates the impression that both men and women can operate as atomised individuals without care-giving responsibilities (Brennan and Cass 2005). Similarly, arguments for the value of employment for all citizens or the obligations of all social security claimants to be in paid work appear, at face value, to be non-discriminatory; that paid work is something that society should be able to expect from all its members (Yeatman 2000:162). But these arguments ignore the different care obligations and gendered opportunities of men and women. The invisibility of gender and care in Australian welfare policy rhetoric can be better understood with reference to the two primary threads of feminist welfare regime analysis: the transition from a breadwinner/carer to adult-worker model of family in policy; and the gendered nature of citizenship.

Who provides care in a welfare regime designed for adult workers?

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Australian policy was underpinned by an assumption that households contained a male breadwinner and a female care-giver (Mitchell 1998:26-28; Shaver 2002a:333). The model describes a policy assumption that the primary responsibility of men is to earn and of women to care (Lewis 2001:153). Although at times and for some groups this has been close to a description of social reality¹⁹, the model is rather intended as an analytical tool which can reveal the gendered assumptions and prescriptions of social policy and a gender-differentiated view of citizenship. Policy assumed a strict division of labour between men and women: as wives and mothers, women cared for the family; as breadwinners, men provided for the family (Sainsbury 1994:152-153). Care work was largely unpaid and mostly done by women in the private sphere. The male-breadwinner policy framework was predominant in Australia in the early twentieth century, but by the late 1990s, Australia, like other liberal welfare regimes, had generally come to espouse a preference for a dual-earner household (O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver 1999; Shaver 2002a:340). Or, as Susy Giullari and Jane Lewis (2005:1) term it, policy development has moved towards assuming an ‘adult-worker model’, one in which all adults engage in the labour market. In Australia at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Prime Minister Howard described the ‘typical’ family towards which the government directed policy as composed of a ‘policeman and a part-time shop assistant’ (Cass and Brennan 2003:52). Social

¹⁹ For middle-class families in the post World War II, period for example.

security policies reflect this shift. *Australians Working Together* obliges women to strive to be part-time workers. Although there is some policy recognition of gender and care responsibilities, the adult worker envisioned is overwhelmingly gender-neutral and relatively free of care-giving duties.

The gender-neutral adult worker in policy language stands in contrast to the gendered reality of home, welfare and employment. As mothers, women have gendered orientations to care; as employees they face a gendered labour market.²⁰ As demonstrated in the previous chapter, women constitute the majority of all parents receiving income support, provide the majority of all unpaid child care and are far more likely to work in low-wage part-time jobs than men.

Normative policy assumptions will not always fit the social reality; this was true of male-breadwinner model assumptions, just as it is true of adult-worker model assumptions (Giullari and Lewis 2005:1). The tensions of this misfit have been identified by Pfau-Effinger (1998:150-151) as arising from the friction between the ‘gender culture’ and the ‘gender order’. Gender culture is the ‘uniform assumptions [which] exist about the desirable, “correct” form of gender relations and the division of labour between women and men’; gender order is gendered institutions and structures. In making a distinction between gender culture and gender order, Pfau-Effinger (1998:156) draws attention to potential tensions and lags between them. There may be a degree of mismatch between the work and family arrangements being encouraged through policy, the preferences of families and the social context in which they live. This occurs, for instance, where mothers are keen to enter employment or increase their hours but find this difficult because of a lack of child care or quality part-time work. As Duncan and Edwards (1999) demonstrate, such tensions differ according to geography, class, age and ethnicity.²¹

²⁰ Fathers caring alone for their children also experience problems due to gender. Employers often assume, for example, that they can disregard their male workers’ parenting obligations (Connell 2005).

²¹ This discordance emerges in policy, too. In Australia, two different transfer policies sought to support different behaviour for high- and middle-income mothers compared to low-income mothers. At the time I was interviewing mothers, the Family Tax Benefit Part B was structured so as to discourage maternal employment in couple families (Cass and Brennan 2003:58; Shaver 2002:340). At the same time, *Australians Working Together* mandated employment or employment-oriented activities for women in families on low incomes, those who were eligible for Parenting Payment.

The disjuncture between policy assumptions and the reality of many people's lives has led Deborah Mitchell (1997:23) to describe Australia as in a transitional stage between a breadwinner and an individual model of welfare. She has termed current circumstances as a hybrid 'partial individual model where women are stranded between the breadwinner and individual models and may be subject to the worst features of both'. Lone parents, at least when claiming income support, fall outside of both the male-breadwinner/female-care-giver and the dual-earner/carer family type. This is also true of partnered parents receiving Parenting Payment, if their joint income is so small they are eligible for the benefit. These particular cases make apparent the assumptions about families which inform policy.

The Australians Working Together requirement that mothers combine employment or some other employment-oriented activity with income support indicates a shift away from a policy presumption that mothers are occupied full time by their care-giving and house-keeping duties. Instead, mothers are exhorted to be both earners and carers. However, as demonstrated by Australian Government policy arguments outlined above, care was rarely specifically mentioned. Despite policy rules allowing time for unpaid care work, care is 'given practically no recognition in the rhetoric' (Skevik 2005:56). Australians Working Together policy as it was discussed did not examine the importance of care or the circumstances in which it occurs; rather it focused on the need for mothers to engage in employment.

In response to persistent policy neglect of care, feminist theorists have advocated the adoption of a new model of adult workers which incorporates care, in recognition that we all need care, give care and receive care (MacDonald 1998:20). Such an approach would see policy encouraging fathers to engage in care as well as encouraging mothers to engage in employment. In this way, the gender dimensions of employment and care would be acknowledged by policy. It could not then be assumed, because care happens without specific policy attention, that care should not be supported by policy. Nor could policy ignore the fact that women are most often the ones providing care. Nor would it impose a male model of employment upon women (Giullari and Lewis 2005:21). Instead of focusing only on low-income women's supposed low employment rates, policy would also focus on the low rates of care provision among men. Arguing this point, Giullari and Lewis

(2005:21) advocate policy which supports all members of society to provide care and engage in employment; a new policy norm of a 'universal carer/worker-worker/carer model'.

Mothers' citizenship

Skevik (2005:43) argues that citizenship provides a more useful framework for the analysis of welfare regimes than the male-breadwinner/female-carer models because of its focus on the relationship between the citizen and the state, a relationship particularly important for mothers who rely on state income support. There are two significant threads in current debates about citizenship as it relates to welfare reform. The first is the transformation of social citizenship such that one no longer receives welfare support by right, instead, for most forms of assistance, rights are tied in new ways to responsibilities; mostly a responsibility to engage in paid work. This has implications for all beneficiaries, including mothers. The second thread is concerned with citizenship status and the grounds upon which someone is conferred with the full benefits of citizenship. In the liberal model, this is classically someone who supports themselves financially through market work. As a result, feminist analyses of citizenship have sought to investigate the status of women as citizens, considering the implications of labour market participation, mothering, or marriage for women's citizenship (see for example, Lister 1993; Lister 1997; O'Connor et al. 1999; Shaver 2002b; Siim, 2000; Skevik 2005). The concept of citizenship that exists in the Australian welfare regime has become narrowly focused on paid labour as the primary realm of responsibility.

The increasing emphasis on paid work for mothers can, in part, be situated within broader welfare regime changes regarding the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The nature of social citizenship has changed (Shaver 2002a). Now many income support recipients must demonstrate that they are worthy of continuing support by showing a commitment to finding and keeping a job. Promoted by the OECD, new approaches to the provision of income support term themselves 'active', in contrast to supposedly 'passive' programs of the past (Lewis 2003:178; Shaver 2001:30-31). Australians Working Together was designed to implement this principle.

Income support policy presents participation in market work as the moral duty of all adults, including parents; a responsibility to themselves and the community as a whole (Shaver 2002a:325,326). This is evident in the Australian Government rhetoric; for example, in welfare changes which ‘recognise the importance of paid employment, whether full time or part time, to Australia’s prosperity and each individual’s own wellbeing’ (DEWR 2005b:1). Shaver (2001:282) sees this as a shift from citizenship as membership to citizenship as participation; participation in paid employment becoming the citizen’s prime obligation. This has been at the expense of other forms of contribution, most notably the unpaid work of parents, especially mothers (Cass and Brennan 2002: 251). Moreover, this re-articulation of the obligations of citizens implies that income support claimants, by virtue of being income support claimants, are failing in their citizenship obligations – that they claim the rights of citizens without fulfilling the obligations. This happens because beneficiaries are considered not to understand what is best for themselves (Shaver 2002a:341). The response in Australia was Mutual Obligation, by which citizens’ responsibilities are articulated and made mandatory. Mutual Obligation is implemented through Personal advisers, who tailor service delivery to the individual ‘customer’. As a result, the relationship between the state and the citizenry has been redrawn as a series of individual relationships. This leads to the possibility that the individualised nature of service provision might ‘open the lives and beings of vulnerable people to intrusion by potentially alien personal and cultural values’ (Shaver 2002a:341).

Focusing on the obligations of welfare claimants can serve to hide the responsibility of the state regarding employment and social security. Similarly, renaming beneficiaries ‘customers’ and social security ‘income support’ serves to hide the previous implicit references to benefits as a social right (Shaver 2002a:341). The rights of claimants are overshadowed by their obligations. This includes the right to decent employment and the obligation of governments to ensure employment is available (McClelland 2002). Government rhetoric contains little discussion of the labour market as a whole and its capacity to provide employment for parents. Australian programs focus on the supply side of employment: getting parents into jobs, rather than job creation programs (McClelland 2002:217). The terms of reference for the Reference Group on Welfare Reform restricted its inquiry so that it

could not make recommendations on economic, tax, industry, wages, education or training policies (Cass and Brennan 2002:249) – despite a labour market which has changed considerably, resulting in a workforce polarised around wages, hours, opportunities and security (Hancock 2002:125). The rhetorical focus on welfare recipients was matched by budgetary priorities, with little spent on labour market or demand-side measures when compared to other OECD countries (Shaver 2002a:338).

The repositioning of citizenship rights and obligations has particular implications for mothers. In Australia, throughout much of the twentieth century, mothers met their obligations through their care work (Skevik 2005:45). Women, as mothers, fulfilled their roles as citizens. There were many exceptions: unmarried mothers had limited eligibility for state assistance, and Aboriginal mothers were only eligible in some circumstances. For much of the century fathers were not entitled to assistance on the basis of caring for children (Whiteford 2001:65). There was a moral element to mothers' citizenship entitlements: those sole mothers regarded as deserving could claim assistance (Brennan and Cass 2005:6). Caring for children was mothers' work, and by being *good* mothers women executed their citizenship responsibilities.

Parents on income support have been increasingly encouraged to be both citizen-workers and gender-neutral citizen-parents, not mothers. This is a considerable change from the post-war period in which most women were expected to work as mothers and homemakers. Citizenship based on care-giving is being eroded in the Australian welfare regime and replaced by citizenship based on market work. Part-time employment is advocated as the ideal minimum for mothers as it allows them to combine mothering with employment. Mothers are constructed as part-time worker citizens.

Positioning participation in paid employment as the key responsibility of citizens has specific implications for care. The paid work of citizenship is regarded as a gender-neutral responsibility, but this ignores the gendered nature of unpaid care work, and in doing so, simultaneously fails to pay attention to and increases the

opportunity costs of care work (Rake 2001:226). More than that, it ignores the value of that unpaid care.

Finally, recasting parents as citizen workers and citizens as customers also raises questions about recognition. Might a system of individual relationships with the state translate in practice into individual questioning of claimants' decisions and actions? What does lack of recognition of the unpaid care work mean for mothers claiming welfare support? As citizens' responsibilities change together with their relationship to the state, what autonomy will parents have to determine their own and their family's activities? I begin to answer these questions of recognition below, and further develop this line of inquiry in the following chapter, when I examine welfare changes by drawing on the experience of mothers who are affected.

Conclusion

The Australian welfare regime has a history of support for the care responsibilities of mothers. However, at the time when I interviewed mothers claiming Parenting Payment, the regime was changing, developing a far stronger commitment to employment as the primary citizenship responsibility, one which should be undertaken by all claimant types. The mothers' commitment to care was at odds with the regime shift away from it. It was not that there was no room for most mothers to continue to care as they wished – most were already doing all that would be required by the new policy – but the discursive emphasis had shifted towards paid work, with a resulting shift away from support for unpaid work. In addition, the shift from treating benefits as a right to treating them as conditional, 'violates the presumption that all citizens are equal in status, dignity and worth' (Shaver 2002a:343). As a result, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, some mothers felt the new welfare-to-work policy did not satisfactorily recognise their care commitments.

The policy which was implemented for parents under Australians Working Together reflects the political framing of the policy. It imposed obligations on parents, in order to 'balance' their right to support, coupling the obligations with the threat of

penalties to ensure compliance. It enforced a trajectory from full-time parenting to part-time employment, supposedly shaping the lives of claimants in the same manner as those of mothers not seeking assistance. It introduced Personal advisers who would act as the pivotal point of interaction between parents and the state.

Under *Australians Working Together*, parents were compelled to take paid employment or to undertake study or voluntary work with a view to paid employment for the first time. This was a marked change from previous approaches which had prioritised the unpaid care work of parents. Employment was strongly advocated and, as will be apparent in later chapters, strongly pushed by welfare administrators; nonetheless, the Mutual Obligation rules allowed parents to continue to spend considerable time on unpaid care work. Only parents of high-school-aged children faced this obligation and they needed to spend just over six hours per week engaged in a compulsory activity. Despite this, *Australians Working Together* rhetoric rarely made mention of care.

The key policy concern of government officials outlined in this chapter was to raise employment levels by supporting a transition from welfare into work, seemingly based on the assumption that Parenting Payment recipients were not employed and unmotivated to be so. This position does not acknowledge the considerable evidence available about the high levels of participation in employment and job search already being undertaken by Parenting Payment claimants (as outlined in chapter two). It also largely ignores the complexity in the lives of those parents who were not in paid work and the resultant reasons why it might be difficult for them to find and maintain appropriate jobs: care responsibilities for children; high levels of disability; health problems; low levels of education, training and employment experience; limited English; and literacy problems. It further ignores the labour market as part of the problem: the lack of appropriate part-time and full-time employment; the availability of employment in local labour markets; and age and gender discrimination (Henman and Perry 2002:231-2).

Mandatory programs were politically justified using derogatory characterisations of the circumstances and motivations of claimants. Reliance on notions of ‘welfare dependence’ and ‘mutual obligation’ rather than evidence has been described as

typical of the Australian Government's broader welfare reform project (Howe and Pidwell 2002: 123-4). Such an approach can lead to poor policy. Commentators such as Bessant (2002) and Henman and Perry (2002) have argued that negative characterisations of the social security system and income support claimants demonstrate a failure by government to critically examine the evidence. Bessant (2002:18) speculates that:

This insistence in the face of such evidence reveals either an inability on the part of policy makers to understand the significance of the information; or a will to produce a punitive and coercive system despite the data that most jobless people actively contribute to their communities.

Whether due to an inability to read the evidence or the intention to create a punitive system, the policy may be poorly targeted and consequently ineffective or even counterproductive as a result (Henman and Perry 2002:331).

Criticism on this issue can be framed in terms of recognition (Lister 2002b:103-104). In pursuing a policy agenda using tough and derogatory language, Lister (2001:66) argues, the British Government 'creates a negative image of the welfare dependent, which is damaging to the self-respect of those reliant on benefit'. As we have seen, the Australian Government has also been criticised for use of derogatory language (Bessant 2002; Henman and Perry 2002). If it damages the 'self-respect' of claimants, policy is disrespectful. Honneth provides a means for a more fine-grained interpretation of this misrecognition. The form of disrespect described by Lister, and alluded to by Bessant, Henman and Perry above, belongs to the sphere of solidarity and social esteem. The use of language which denigrates social security claimants undermines the social contribution which they make and the social-esteem which they experience, thus a form of misrecognition which damages social esteem (Honneth 1995:134). Such disrespect is 'insulting' or 'degrading' and erodes individuals' ability to regard themselves as socially valuable. The effect can be deeply personally damaging by leading to a 'loss of personal self-esteem' (Honneth 1995:134).

I would argue that policy is also disrespectful when it fails to attend to the evidence about claimants, their desires and needs. The policy solution put forward in *Australians Working Together* – to mandate employment-oriented activity, would be unlikely to change the activities of those already engaged in employment or training. If labour market problems are not addressed, mothers who for numerous reasons have trouble finding and keeping a job are unlikely to enter and sustain employment solely as a result of an annual meeting with an adviser and a compulsory activity requirement. By ignoring the high value that many parents place on the loving care they provide for their children, policies may misconstrue the efficacy of financial incentives or penalties to employment (McDowell 2005:372). Furthermore, policies which compel mothers to choose employment over care could result in forcing mothers into action they believe is morally wrong (Barlow and Duncan 2000:38). *Australians Working Together* policy fails or refuses to acknowledge the diversity of mothers as represented in research evidence. It is a form of misrecognition to develop policy for a stereotypical group of parents.

To address the misrecognition she identifies in government welfare and poverty policy, Lister calls for use of a social justice agenda through which a welfare regime could still meet its policy imperatives but also accord respect to welfare recipients. This would involve acknowledging the importance of social security policies for poverty reduction, taking account of the value of both paid and unpaid work, and involving those who experience poverty in the politics of poverty (Lister 2001:69-70). Lister's social justice agenda has striking resonance with many of the issues raised by parents in the previous chapter: living on low incomes, the importance of unpaid care work in the home and a desire to gain more recognition within the social security system. All these were largely ignored in *Australians Working Together*. If parents receiving income support were more involved in welfare debates, perhaps both these areas of concern and their concern with the complexity and inconsistencies of welfare administration could become part of the agenda, replacing the focus on enforcing the 'responsibilities' of claimants.

Chapter four

Enacting policy: Australians Working Together adviser meetings

Introduction

A meeting between an adviser and a claimant lies at the heart of many welfare-to-work programs (Considine 2001; Evans et al. 2003). This was the case for Australians Working Together, which required annual attendance at an adviser interview for all Parenting Payment claimants whose youngest child was aged six years or more; those whose youngest child was aged 13 or more negotiated a Participation Agreement during the meeting. These ‘street-level’ interactions between clients and staff are critical to the implementation of policy.

When I interviewed welfare claimants, it was clear that contact with Centrelink bureaucrats lay at the centre of their everyday experience of welfare policy. The adviser meetings are the focus of this chapter because this aspect of their experience should not lie at the periphery of policy analysis, but be brought to the centre, in recognition of the effect of implementation and administration on how policy is constituted. ‘Policy does not fully exist until the social actors who deliver and receive policy bring it into being’ (Wright 2006:161). The meaning of Australians Working Together more fully materialised for the mothers in this study when they had attended their adviser meetings. When mothers discuss what it is like to claim Parenting Payment, they talk not about the fortnightly receipt of money into their bank account, or how it helps them to support their families, although these elements do feature, but of going to the Centrelink office and dealing with staff in

person or on the phone. It is through these street-level bureaucrats that citizens encounter government (Lipsky 1980:3). The ways in which street-level bureaucrats deliver services, the way they manage benefits and sanctions affects people's access to income support (Lipsky 1980:8-9). Moreover, these interpersonal interactions lie at the heart of parents' experience of welfare policy.

I begin my exploration of parents' experience of the adviser interviews by presenting a conversation between Cheryl and Nicole, two close friends who have children of similar ages (please refer to box below).²² Cheryl and Nicole strongly believed that Parenting Payment should require voluntary work on the part of parents. They raised this issue in each of our three interviews, conducted before they had attended an appointment with an adviser and also after. Their opinion aligns with that of many people in the community, but not with the opinions of many of the mothers in the study. It is interesting that voluntary work was one of the activities allowed under Australians Working Together, but Cheryl and Nicole did not seem to understand this and continued to argue for its inclusion even after attending several adviser meetings. Cheryl and Nicole's adviser appointments were shaped and constrained by many factors: relations of power between government, Centrelink, staff and claimant; the manner and effect of the interpellation which occurred in the appointments; Cheryl and Nicole's own response and performance. Broader matters such as community values of mothering, the local and national labour market and gender relations also helped shape their appointments.

²² Cheryl and Nicole asked to be interviewed together.

Cheryl and Nicole

At the time of this, our second interview, both Cheryl and Nicole had recently been to an appointment with an adviser. Cheryl's was just before her youngest turned 13 and Nicole went with her as support. At Cheryl's appointment, Nicole found out about a course at a technical college that interested her. She enrolled and started studying about a month before she was called into Centrelink for her own interview. Cheryl also applied for a course, but she was not accepted, which she felt, in the end, was for the best, because her mother-in-law had developed serious health problems and needed Cheryl to help care for her. In the lengthy extract which follows, Cheryl and Nicole cover a lot of ground: their thoughts on the support Centrelink should offer to Parenting Payment claimants, child care, their experience of Mutual Obligation, the quality of Centrelink advice, and the nature of their Participation Agreement negotiations. In this wide-ranging discussion, they touch on many of the aspects of Australians Working Together commented on by other mothers in this study. This interview gives a sense of the constraints and possibilities offered at the adviser meetings.

Nicole: ... I don't like the way that you have to go. Like, 'We've made you this appointment, this day this time, you have to come or we're going to cut your payments off.' I think it needs, they need to be a bit more flexible. I had a lot of hassle, because the day and time [of my adviser appointment], I was here [in a vocational course]. That's when I said I can't go. And they didn't want to change my appointment ... And that's when I said, 'Well I'm sorry, we've got to be so much in attendance or we'll fail. I'm not taking time off just to come and see you.' I was a bit rude but I was pretty frustrated. As I said to them, 'You know who I am, you're paying me a pension education supplement ... so obviously you know where I am, so make it for another day or I'm not coming.' They put it off for about a month ...

Cheryl: And like Nicole said, they make you feel less than. And that you have to come in on this day, it doesn't matter if you're going in for major heart surgery or anything, that's just tough cookies.

Nicole: They really hold it over you, because they have the control over your payments. And I don't have any other income apart from what I get from them, so, I don't know, it shits me ...

Nicole: Well, I'm studying at TAFE [technical college], so I didn't understand why I had to go and discuss my options with a JET adviser when I'm already exploring my options. I'm currently there. I just felt that it was a bit of a waste of time – for a start that I had to go ... So what I'm doing at the moment is enough, so that's all right. But then they kind of push you, as well. 'Like, okay so you're doing this now, so what are you going to do when this is finished?' And at the moment I'm still getting my head around all this ... I haven't decided whether I want to go and work in a salon, or whether I want to go and do more study. So I don't actually know. But I had to make an agreement with this lady that I'm going to go and try and get into another TAFE course and a few different things that I've had to agree that I'll definitely do, otherwise they cut your payments off ... You have to make a decision there and then, because they punch it into the computer and they give you a print-out.

Cheryl: It was good in informing you of things, but they're not realistic when you haven't been in the workforce for that long. They think that you can just go in and get a job ... They didn't pressure me in any way, shape or form, but said when my son turns 13 then they will be looking at doing something ... She did kind of intimate that they would leave me alone while I've got someone sick, but that's just a person saying that, that's not the system. So I don't know, I walked out of there a bit – oh, I don't know – it was disappointment. I thought that they were going to offer a little bit more. About getting back into the workforce, about showing you courses. They did show us courses that TAFE offered, and explained that they would actually pay the fees and everything like that for you. That's how Nicole got into the course that she's doing.

Nicole: That's where I found out that I could go ... But then there's no guarantee that you'll get into the TAFE course either.

Cheryl: Well, I didn't.

Nicole: They don't specifically say, 'Yes, you'll get in.' But they do sort of lead you to believe that. 'Okay, right. What do you want to do? You can do this. Okay, yep, you'll do it.' But it doesn't always work that way, because TAFE doesn't always let you in. What I would like do after Christmas is study again for the first six months ... but there's no guarantee I'll get into that. And yet I've had to make the agreement with these people that I will go. And if I'm not accepted, I'm breaking my agreement, so I've got to go back and make another one then. And that's through no fault of my own.

Cheryl: ... And they weren't up to date with their TAFE courses, because yours were totally different, weren't they?

Nicole: Mine were different days, different hours and everything to the information that she gave us. So I applied for this course believing that I'd be there certain days of the week, and I'm not ... [She] totally mucked it around. Had I already had a casual job, I would have had to drop out ...

Cheryl: They aren't kept up to date. They're giving you old information basically.

Nicole: It's wrong information. It can be very frustrating, very upsetting for some people. I always get really frustrated when I'm there ...

Cheryl: It was a good interview, but in a lot of ways, I think a lot of it is unrealistic.

Nicole: Very unrealistic

Cheryl: ... And I thought that was a bit – whilst it was helpful, I felt that it made you feel that there was more potential in you than you thought possible, but it's not in a very realistic way. Because *you* may feel that way, but an employer may not, because it's not practical experience, it's not work experience, it's life experience ... What they're saying is these are things that I can actually do. I can go out and get a job based on these things. Which to me is so unrealistic ...

Nicole: I can do my accounts, I can work out my budget, so I've got bookkeeping experience. I'd like to know how you get bookkeeping experience out of running my household budget.

Cheryl: Yeah. So they think we could go out and get a job on that.

Nicole: Menu planning, because we work out what we're going to cook. I'm just trying to think. There were a few things that really got me ... And cooking, we could be chefs because we cook for our family.

Cheryl: Because we can open a tin and heat it up.

Nicole: I've got down on my file that I'm a qualified dressmaker, because I can alter clothes. I can do hems and seams, I can, when I get around to it, I can make curtains, you know, basic, basic things. I couldn't go and make an outfit for anybody who would go in public in it. But yet they put down that I'm a seamstress, a dressmaker or something. It's just so not honest. We would be dishonest if we did that in our résumé. They've done it on our file and that's okay.

Cheryl: It's like being a child. It makes you feel like you're a child, basically. 'Oh look, I can do all these things, aren't I a good person?' But yet realistically they're just day-to-day activities, and you go into an employer and they're just going to laugh at you if you said, 'Oh, but I cook for my family and I managed the budget in my household, so that's my bookkeeping experience and I answer my own home phone so I can be a receptionist.'

Nicole: ... You can't make every little task that we do into a professional qualification, it just can't be done ... Sometimes I feel like, 'Yep, I can do this.' But then I go back down. I suffer from

depression. I take medication. I don't need people stuffing around with my head. And I feel that that's what they do.

Cheryl: And see I don't suffer from depression, but I went out of there thinking, 'I'm going to get in this course, I'm going to change the world.'

Nicole: You can do anything you want.

Cheryl: ... Because the way they explain things, you think that 'Oh, you know, I can do anything'.

Nicole: ... It's a certain. You feel like, 'Yep!' Not 'Oh, I can do it', 'I am doing it!'

The notion of interpellation provides a useful construct with which to interpret the experiences of mothers' visits to Centrelink offices. Althusser (1977:163) characterises interpellation using the example of a police officer hailing someone, 'Hey you!' The subject who thinks 'Oh, that's me' and turns to the police officer in response has recognised themselves in the call and behaved accordingly. In doing so, they simultaneously recognise that they are the subject of the summons and that they are subject to the person or institution that so summoned them. Social security claimants are interpellated by policy, policy documents, interactions with staff, the space of the welfare office, as well as through the political language that I explored in the previous chapters. They are hailed and they respond.

Parents are not passive in this exchange. They act and direct and shape the proceedings too. In chapter two, I outlined mothers' belief that they had to manage relations with Centrelink staff strategically so as to attain a good outcome. One of the mothers, Belle, described the interaction as involving a performance – a performance that she said was 'Academy Award winning'. Other mothers spoke of monitoring themselves and their behaviour to maximise positive outcomes. In this they were 'presenting themselves', as Goffman (1959) termed it. The adviser interviews were critical occasions for performance because:

... often the interviewer will have to make decisions of far-reaching importance for the interviewee on the sole basis of information gained from the applicant's interview-performance (Goffman 1959:225)

Here Goffman was analysing job interviews, but such a description applies equally to interactions between income support claimants and with Centrelink staff. Interviewees need to pay particular attention to their dress, their manner and their speech both to create a favourable impression and also to avoid making an unfavourable impression (Goffman 1959:225).

Parents are interpellated in a number of different settings. The process of making an adviser appointment was for most mothers the first ‘hail’ they heard as part of the Australians Working Together adviser meetings. The first section of the chapter examines this part of their experience. Nicole found the process of setting an interview time to be inflexible and unaccommodating. For most parents, including Nicole, it echoed the policy language described in chapter three: that of irresponsible citizens who needed compulsion and supervision if they were to do the right thing. The second section follows mothers into the Centrelink office where they encountered another interpellating component of the policy language highlighted in chapter three: the claimant as customer. Services were changed to encourage and require more ‘customer-like’ behaviour from clients and more customer-service-like delivery. As Mark Considine (2001:13) observed, however, ‘changing the service may also require an attempt at changing the identity of those involved’. The interpellation of parents is central to that attempt.

In the central section of the chapter, I explore in detail the experience of three mothers: Caroline, for whom the adviser meeting and its results were very positive; Erica, for whom the meeting was a mixed experience; and Ana, for whom the meeting was largely negative and very worrying. When parents sat down with their advisers they were at the hub of welfare-to-work implementation; the core of Australians Working Together policy was implemented and mediated by the adviser in conversation with the parent. It was this aspect which Cheryl and Nicole repeatedly described as ‘unrealistic’. They felt the adviser was ‘nice’; like most mothers they were not objecting to the personal manner of the adviser. However, Cheryl and Nicole were ambivalent about the nature of the information they received, which they varyingly saw as useful, inaccurate, excessive or insufficient. At the adviser meetings the welfare concerns of parents came face to face with the policy intent. Parents came to the meeting with their desire to prioritise care for

their children, worry about their finances, commitment to employment and education and wariness of how they might be treated by Centrelink staff. Parents also brought to the table their employment experience, or their inexperience and uncertainty regarding employment.

In the following two sections of the chapter, I explore some of the reasons why mothers experienced the interviews the way they did. In the fourth section, I focus on how parents' decision to disclose or withhold information from the adviser affected what the adviser understood of their situation and what was accommodated in their agreement. Family and personal care matters were sometimes the most difficult to disclose, but these matters often had the most profound affect on the activities a parent might engage in. I explore reasons why parents might elect not to disclose information to advisers, the contexts in which they might be comfortable to disclose personal information or feel compelled to do so, and the reasons why care responsibilities may not have been adequately explored in adviser meetings.

In the fifth section of the chapter I examine the meetings from the point of view of the adviser. Advisers came to the meetings bringing policy directives and their personal approach to their job in the context of Centrelink workplace culture and the broader social and political environment. Cheryl and Nicole's adviser, for instance, did not have access to the accurate information about the TAFE course that Nicole enrolled in. Research shows that large workloads and heavy time pressures affect advisers' ability to maintain good networks with other organisations and to ensure the information they have at hand is kept up to date (C Howard 2006). The personal approach of advisers, the environment in which they worked, the policy directives they had to follow, the workloads they carried and the time pressures they faced; all affected the way in which they implemented *Australians Working Together*.

The adviser meetings were the location for important flows of information: from the adviser, information regarding the program and employment and training opportunities; and from the parent, information regarding their circumstances, history and future plans. These flows affected what was written into the Participation Agreements that parents carried with them when they left the adviser meetings. By June 2004, 58,109 Parenting Payment Single claimants and 15,534

Partnered claimants had entered into a Participation Agreement (DEWR 2005a:30). The nature of those agreements is documented in the sixth section of this chapter: the activities which the agreements included and whether or not they were new or existing activities; the effect of the interpellation parents experienced and the manner in which they and their advisers interacted regarding the items which were or were not included in the agreements. Cheryl and Nicole, for example, despite their commitment to voluntary work and their belief that it could help them find paid employment, felt unable to suggest this as an activity they could potentially engage in to meet their activity requirements. Instead, they both found themselves engaged in what they saw as a farcical conversion of household tasks into employment skills.

Receiving notification of the appointment

Contact between a parent and an adviser started when the parent received a letter from Centrelink notifying her that an appointment time had been made. One mother I interviewed gave me a copy of her letter which explained the subjects that would be discussed at the appointment and when it would occur. She was informed that her attendance was required under the Social Security Administration Act and that a different appointment might be made if she could not attend at the prescribed time. These last pieces of information, written at the end of the letter, were presented as follows:

Under the terms of the Social Security Administration Act 1999, you must attend this appointment to discuss options for further assistance.

Your Parenting Payment may be stopped if you do not come to this interview. Please phone us on 131021 if you can not attend. If this time does not suit you, we may be able to arrange a different time.

When explaining to me how their appointment was set, mothers tended to focus on this final aspect of the letter – the requirement to attend and the loss of payments if they did not. Most understood the requirement to attend an interview as Belle did:

‘They make you an appointment and you just have to drop everything and go and attend it.’ Although Belle knew she could change the appointment time if she needed to, she said, ‘Quite often it’s easier to just try and go when they want you to.’ Some mothers attended their appointments even when it was inconvenient for them to do so, because they did not feel that they really could ask for a different time. Pam, for example, went to an interview when her son was sick and at home from school. She left him at home and went to Centrelink because she felt that changing the appointment time would be too difficult.

Some mothers did seek to change their appointment time. Nicole, as she explained above, was informed she should meet with an adviser at a time when she was scheduled to attend her vocational course. She knew that her course met the Parenting Payment participation requirements. She had advised Centrelink about the course and had received a Pensioner Education Supplement, so she knew that Centrelink was aware that she was studying. Her course had an attendance component; if she was not in class for the required time, she could fail the course. If she failed the course, she risked not fulfilling the Parenting Payment participation requirement. But when Nicole called Centrelink to explain that she needed to be in class on the day of her appointment and to arrange a more convenient time to see her adviser, the officer she spoke to ‘didn’t want to change my appointment’. She felt she had to be assertive and ‘a bit rude’ for the officer to agree to reschedule the appointment.

While Nicole believed that her studies indicated that she was already putting a plan for the future into action and that her enrolment at TAFE should therefore exempt her from the requirement to attend the adviser interview, what really frustrated her was being told that she had to attend the interview at a prescheduled time or risk losing her payments. Although Nicole’s letter had informed her that she could change her appointment time, when she called, the Centrelink officer was unwilling to reschedule. Only after Nicole really pushed her point did the officer demur and set a new time. This experience reinforced Nicole’s sense that she was taking part in a process to which she was expected to submit.

Grace attended an adviser interview when she was extremely upset. She had been diagnosed with depression, and it was bad on that day. Despite how terrible she had felt before setting out to Centrelink, Grace did not feel that she could call and postpone the interview. Grace knew that she could change the appointment time in advance if it was inconvenient because she had already done so a fortnight earlier:

My washing machine was being delivered. My washing machine had broken down. I said [to Centrelink] ‘Oh look, I am not going to ring up and cancel [the delivery], I need my washing machine tomorrow. I don’t know, they won’t tell me what time, it’s some time between 7am and 12 noon.’ And the interview was at 10am. I said, ‘I don’t know, I could make it, I might not be able to.’ And she goes, ‘If you don’t make it we don’t pay. We’re going to cut off your payments.’ That was like sticking the knife in. It was, like, how to inflict huge fear.

When Grace called Centrelink, like Nicole, she was first warned that her payments could be stopped if she did not attend the scheduled appointment. Like Nicole, Grace continued to assert her need to reschedule, despite a warning that was so strong it was like ‘sticking the knife in’. Grace persuaded the Centrelink officer to make a new time.

So she reset it for 2 weeks later. Well, in that 2 weeks a whole lot of things had gone wrong at home and I was just really depressed again. And that morning I was particularly down. And when I am talking about depressed I’m talking about, you know, feeling quite suicidal, like, life’s not worth living, I’m not getting anywhere ... I barely had got my kids off to school and I had to turn around and go to the Centrelink interview. And he [the adviser] must have seen – I was in a state.

When Grace was due to attend her new appointment, she was feeling very depressed and did not want to go. However, given the serious warning of the consequences of not attending an appointment that she had received when she first changed the time,

she did not feel that she should try to change it again. Facing the possibility that her payments would cease, Grace attended the rescheduled meeting despite her depression. She cried in the interview and her adviser, saying it was obviously not the best time to meet, cut their meeting short. Grace felt he was sympathetic but untrained to understand her depression.

Nicole had also cried in an adviser meeting. When she attended an earlier interview than the one I describe at the outset of the chapter, her partner had not long broken off their relationship. She was extremely upset and not in the mood for a Centrelink visit. When Nicole and her friend Cheryl discussed the appointment-setting process, they agreed that ‘They really hold it over you, because they have control over your payments.’ I asked Nicole if she had considered not going to the meeting because she was so upset:

Nicole: No, they tell you that you have to go.

Cheryl: You’ve got no choice.

Nicole: You don’t have a choice, you get in trouble.

Ana had her Parenting Payment stopped because she did not respond to the adviser appointment letter. Between managing her Parenting Payment and her daughter’s Youth Allowance, Ana went to Centrelink quite a lot, but she overlooked this appointment. She did not explain why, but it seems likely she did not know she needed to meet with the adviser because she spoke very little English and could not read or write.²³ When Ana visited the office she usually took an Arabic-speaking community worker with her or asked for a Centrelink interpreter. On some occasions, however, when she felt she needed someone really assertive, she would take her older daughter.²⁴

²³ When I met her she had not long learnt to write her own name, and she signed it very slowly, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, on the research consent form that had been translated for her.

²⁴ To demonstrate her daughter’s assertiveness, Ana told me this story. ‘Once I went to give them paperwork about a rent review. They wouldn’t accept the paper I took. Said I had to go to another office, the one that deals with rent. I couldn’t believe it. I said Centrelink is Centrelink, and besides, I can’t get to the other office. The next day, I took my daughter with me. The same person was at counter. They accepted the forms.’

Once they stopped my payments. My daughter went to ask why. It was because I had forgotten to attend an interview ... My daughter is very strong; she doesn't like Centrelink or anyone. If she wants to talk she has to talk. She has a strong personality. They started the payment again straight away.

With her Parenting Payment at risk and not knowing why, Ana wielded her trump card: her daughter. It was not something she liked to do. She preferred to visit Centrelink with her community worker because she liked her manner. 'I feel ashamed with my daughter. I only take her when they have done something wrong.' Ordinarily, she felt the best method for dealing with Centrelink was to 'just take the right forms' and be polite. 'You can't rely on Centrelink for payments and treat them badly.' So although Ana demonstrated that she could turn a situation around at Centrelink by involving her daughter, this was something she rarely did. In general, Ana's approach was one of polite compliance.

Only one mother spoke with assurance about changing an inconvenient appointment time. Kumiko felt that she could determine the timing of her interview. I asked her if she could choose her appointment time:

Kumiko: Yes, yes.

Megan: So what happens, do they send you a suggestion, or?

Kumiko: I think you have to call them within two weeks to make appointment.

Unlike other parents, Kumiko conveyed a sense of control over her adviser appointment time. She did not feel threatened with the loss of her payments and felt that to schedule the interview for a convenient time would be a straightforward matter.

The response of the parents in this study to letters about adviser appointments is consistent with that of participants in the only other study I have found which examines this aspect of Australians Working Together: the *Personal Adviser Evaluation* conducted by the Social Research Centre (2004) for the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. The researchers interviewed Newstart claimants who were refugees, Indigenous, homeless, dealing with major personal crises or recently released from prison. The researchers found that the letters sent to claimants notifying them of their personal adviser meeting failed to adequately explain the purpose of the interview (Social Research Centre 2004:10). While the evaluation participants were likely to face greater barriers to employment and to engaging with the personal advisers than the parents who took part in my research, they nonetheless had similar responses to the letters they received about their appointments. There was considerable anxiety among some recipients who did not understand why they had been told to attend the interview. The responses to the letter ranged from concern that they had ‘done something wrong’ without knowing it, to resigned compliance: ‘You just do what Centrelink tells you to.’ The reactions of the mothers I interviewed suggest that perhaps an additional cause of anxiety may have been the threatening tone of the letters, which warned that benefits would stop if claimants did not attend.

A departmental policy maker explained the rationale for threatening to stop payments:

... a letter which gives them a time and tells them when to come in or their payments are stopped ... acts as a push to make things happen. They can always call and change the time of the interview.²⁵

In this view, the purpose of the letter is to motivate the claimant. In chapter three, I showed that one of the core reasons given for the need for changes to the social security system was to combat ‘welfare dependence’, described as a chronic problem arising from unmotivated claimants who did not recognise that

²⁵ Interview with Department of Family and Community Services policy maker, 22 October 2004.

employment would be in their best interests. If parents were to make good decisions for themselves and their children, they needed to be propelled into action. The need for propulsion was deemed to be so great that a potential loss of income support was the preferred mechanism. This approach to penalties was widespread in liberal welfare regimes at the end of the twentieth century; penalties were used less often as a form of punishment and more often as a form of motivation (Considine 2001:179).

For most mothers the interview-scheduling process had two consequences. First, it ensured that they understood that their Parenting Payment was at risk if they did not comply with Australians Working Together requirements. Secondly, it positioned parents as subjects, subject to Centrelink direction.

Their participation in the process was compelled. To ensure Parenting Payment recipients' engagement, they were first threatened with a loss of income. Before they had even reached the Centrelink office, they were made aware that their livelihood was on the line. Most mothers I interviewed were highly sensitised to the possible loss of payments. In part this stems from their experience. Most could describe cases from their own or their friends' experience in which benefits had been stopped or withheld. They knew it could be difficult to have the payments reinstated and they knew how stressful and worrying it could be. As shown in chapter two, many Parenting Payment recipients lived below the poverty line. The women I interviewed watched their money carefully, managing a tight budget from day-to-day, week-to-week. They knew how hard it would be to manage without that income, even for a very short time. So it is not surprising that they took very seriously the possibility of losing a significant part of their income.

The letter advising parents of their appointment attempts to be helpful. It starts:

We have made an appointment for you with a Centrelink Personal Adviser to look at how we can help you reach your goals ... You may already be doing some paid work, or other activities such as study or voluntary work. But we would still like to talk to you about whether we can help you in any way.

Despite these helpful words, parents already highly conscious that their fortnightly income support relied on their compliance with Centrelink were very susceptible to the possibility that their payments could be stopped if they did not attend the appointment. It was that aspect of the letter that they most strongly remembered. As Erica said, 'It was a threatening letter I thought ... "This is to remind you that if you do not report your benefits will be withdrawn".'

The second consequence of the appointment-setting process was to position parents as participants in a process over which they had little or no control. As mentioned above, only one mother I spoke to believed that she could arrange an interview for a convenient time. A number of the others felt that changing the appointment would be more hassle than it was worth, to the extent that two mothers saw advisers when they were depressed, and cried during the interview. Those who did attempt to change their appointments met with strong resistance on the part of Centrelink. They remembered the officers first reminding them that if they did not attend the appointment at the scheduled time their payments would be stopped. It was only through determination and persistence that these mothers were successful in altering the interview time. Even after this, they were aware that Centrelink officers would have preferred that they comply with original arrangements, despite the mothers' belief in the validity of their reasons for changing the appointment.

Parenting Payment recipients were interpellated in their appointment letters as people needing help and as people who needed to be 'motivated' to accept this help by the potential loss of benefits. The hail that parents heard was perceived as a threat: if they did not comply with Centrelink requirements their payments would stop. Adviser appointments made under the threat of cancelled benefits re-established claimants in subjection to the state. By recognising that the letter did indeed address them, parents were reconfirmed as subjects; they were already subjects, but they recognised themselves afresh (Althusser 1977:103-4). They were not only reminded that the state held control over their income, but that they were subject to the requirements of the state, even when those requirements were inconvenient or seemed illogical. The threatening requirement to attend an adviser appointment reinforced for Parenting Payment claimants their limited claim to

autonomy in this relationship. They felt that they were denied the capacity to engage in even such a seemingly small act as rescheduling an appointment. Parents were not encouraged to believe that Australians Working Together was designed to meet their needs, but rather that they ought to meet the requirements of the program *regardless* of their own needs.

So, having been directed to attend an interview at a specific time and place, with a new understanding that they were subject to the requirements of the welfare system, mothers approached the Centrelink office: some with resignation, some with indignation, some with interest and hope; but few with a sense that they were part of system which they could direct. When they arrived at the Centrelink office for their appointment, they encountered a very different interpellation.

Walking into the Centrelink office

The first thing that parents do when attending a Centrelink office is to walk through the doors and enter the building. This may seem obvious, yet the physical space of public buildings is rarely addressed in policy analysis (Yanow 1995:417). The facades and interiors of buildings that administer public services are designed to embody policy meaning (Yanow 1995:410). New office designs have gone unmentioned in policy analysis of welfare reforms in Australia, despite the deliberate creation of new spaces for new policies. The new offices were intended to facilitate interactions between staff and styled to enable one-on-one customer-service relations.

Prior to Australians Working Together, Centrelink began to redesign its offices by removing cubicles, closed offices and barriers in order to create open-plan offices. The photograph below shows one such space. There are few barriers, so that it is possible to see many desks and therefore many workers. The lines are curved and fluid, almost inviting the visitor to walk through the space.



Centrelink Customer Service Centre. Source: Vardon nd :25

Helen explained how the modified layout of her local Centrelink office changed how she felt about being there:

It used to be all sort of walled off and you had this feeling – like you would be standing there waiting for ages and they would be chatting. You know, you would see people, the tops of their heads, chatting and wandering around –it was a kind of ‘us and them’ divide. And then I went in this time and it is all these open little islands. It almost puts you on an even playing field with them, you know. It makes you feel as though there is kind of respect for you ... that seemed to have made a huge difference to me emotionally. It made me feel like, ‘Oh okay, this is kind of a business setting where they’re, you know, seeing something positive and treating me well.’ So that’s a really good change.

For Helen, changes in the office plan made her visit to Centrelink feel ‘much less threatening and bureaucratic’ and, as she said, ‘more respected’. In the United Kingdom, where the Jobcentre Plus offices were renovated in a similar fashion to the Australian Centrelink offices, research found that people attending the new spaces remarked favourably on how the design made the spaces more approachable;

some felt that relations with staff were improved because the office was less intimidating and stigmatising (Davies et al. 2004:141-142).

Modified office spaces are an element in a move by authorities to foster ‘customer relations’ and the reshaping of interactions between ‘customer’ and agency (Rosenthal and Peccei 2006:69). At Centrelink, as the Chief Executive Officer explained, the organisation ‘remove[d] the symbols of unsympathetic bureaucracy’ and ‘[took] down the high counters which hid our workplace, replacing them with colourful, dignified, open-plan offices’ (Vardon 2000:8). The old symbols of impersonal service in a benefits agency were exchanged for a new design that attempted to create ‘a more personal and relaxed atmosphere in which to do business’ (Centrelink 2003:123). It was more personalised, as accorded with one-on-one service delivery. It is the ‘force of reiterated convention’ makes interpellation possible (Butler 1997:33). In Centrelink, the new office design drew on conventional symbols of personalised customer-service in businesses. The new space hailed its visitors as customers.

The new office layout was so designed in an attempt to create the impression of a more level power relationship between staff and claimants. Centrelink (2003:124) planned to have:

... few physical barriers between staff and customers. The EOP [extended open plan] style ensures more direct customer contact and personalised service. EOP design helps Centrelink project a professional, corporate image and a caring and friendly environment.

The personal adviser interviews were conducted in the large open-plan room at a wide low desk, curved in a way that reduced the strict formality of a typical interview setting. Recipients could see the computer screen on which staff entered their information, the staff’s work was more exposed, and the claimant could be more involved.

Although introducing a new and levelling relationship between staff and claimants, the new office designs continued to reinforce conventions of client/service relationships; otherwise clients might wander through the space claiming it as their own, using the photocopier, helping themselves to forms and information sheets, and sitting alongside rather than opposite staff. While someone could walk from the street straight through the reception area to a staff member's desk, in the Centrelink offices I visited, people behaved as though the counter near the front door actually blocked access from the entrance to the rest of the office. There was a sense of unease when someone broke with this convention and wandered among the desks seeking and calling for a particular staff member. Uniformed guards monitored queues of beneficiaries in some offices, further reminding visitors of their position as clients seeking assistance rather than customers.

Butler (1997:33) writes that interpellation inaugurates a subject while simultaneously citing convention. It is inaugurating when a subject recognises themselves in the moment of interpellation, the interpellation is 'introduc[ing] a reality, rather than report[ing] on an existing one'. This is achieved by drawing upon convention. In responding to the hail the subject thinks, 'That's me, I am one of those kinds of people'. When they walked into a Centrelink office for their appointments, parents were interpellated as customers. The redesigned office was part of the process of 'modernising' the welfare system. 'Customers' were to be 'activated' in this new space where they met with advisers who would provide a personalised service.

It is in this context, then, that many parents approached their adviser appointment. They carried their history of dealing with Centrelink, and the interpellation of the appointment letter and the office space. On the one hand, parents were addressed as though they needed threats to ensure compliance; on the other, as customers choosing to engage with a service. Parents were reminded that the state had the power to withhold their income, but they were also encouraged to perceive themselves as walking into a meeting in which power relations were equalised so that they and their adviser were two participants in a business transaction.

Meeting the adviser and negotiating a Participation Agreement

In this section, I explore in detail three mothers' descriptions of their adviser meetings. Caroline, Erica and Ana were three very different women who had very different experiences. In detailing their interviews, I highlight some of the key issues raised by Australians Working Together implementation in practice. These include: the nature of the 'fit' between the adviser and the parent; the degree to which parents felt comfortable disclosing elements of their lives, particularly the care they and their children needed; and the pressures that parents perceived advisers operated under. Parents were interpellated into particular positions in the meetings, just as they had been in the approach to the meetings. At the same time, they were actors in the process, choosing the manner in which they would engage with the adviser.

Caroline

Caroline lived in a regional town in NSW with two teenaged boys, the youngest of her four sons. Caroline said the adviser interview was designed to help her plan for future employment and financial self-sufficiency. She explained:

I had to go for an interview one time, that was late last year, and because they asked me what I was going to do and what my plans were and that sort of thing. And I did tell her that I was doing part-time work with [a] home nursing service, because I was just doing domestic work with them. And then she said, 'There is a nursing course coming up next year, would you like to do that sort of thing?' We discussed it and, well, actually, it was Centrelink that put me on to it, yes. So then ... when I saw the enrolments in the paper, well I thought I would go up and enrol in the course. So I just went up and enrolled myself.

Having discussed Caroline's current activities, the Centrelink adviser suggested that she might like to expand her skills by enrolling in a nursing course. The idea appealed to Caroline and she later began that training. For Caroline a number of elements aligned to make the interview a success. She had worked in a few different jobs over the past five or six years and was committed to her employment.

Her youngest son would reach his sixteenth birthday six months after we met and she wanted to establish herself so that she could manage solely on her employment income once her Parenting Payment eligibility ceased. In the meantime, Caroline was not particularly concerned about claiming income support, saying, 'I might as well keep it while I can.' Caroline was already employed in work that she enjoyed and her adviser suggested training which would extend her skills in that area, taking her from a cleaner in a nursing home to a nursing assistant.

I started TAFE this year because I knew I was coming off the pension next year and I thought, 'Well I've got this opportunity to do it'. And also Centrelink paid for the course for me, which was \$360 or something. So I thought, 'Well I had better get in and get it done'. And I did work experience a few weeks back and they liked me that much they employed me, you know.

Caroline found studying challenging, but she persisted and was proud to be near to completion and to have found employment already.

It was a bit frightening to get back into study and classroom and all that sort of stuff. But I have enjoyed it, I've met nice people, got a job through it.

Caroline's circumstances, her sense of herself and her plans for the future were well aligned with the purpose of the interview, the adviser's overall approach and the adviser's specific suggestion. An evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents in the United Kingdom found that: 'The quality of fit between the lone parent's needs and the nature and extent of support provided by the adviser appears to be important in explaining its effectiveness' (Lewis et al. 2000:81). Reading Caroline's description of her decision to enrol in nursing training, we see that the advice about the course accorded so closely with Caroline's own interests, that at first she did not remember that the suggestion had come from her adviser. This was an effect of an interpellation in which Caroline was 'steered' in the 'right direction'. In chapter three, I demonstrated that welfare reform in Australia contains a policy rationale that insists that paid work is essential to good parenting and good citizenship and

that income support claimants should seek to improve themselves and attain financial self-sufficiency. The personal adviser mediated this interpellation by the state hailing Caroline with a call that fitted precisely. For Caroline, the interview was a great success. She undertook training in a new area; she proved herself capable of meeting a new challenge; she found she was a good student and a valuable employee; and she was confident she would be able to support herself once she could no longer claim Parenting Payment.

Erica

Erica's experience with her adviser was not so positive. Mediated by a different adviser, the hail was different, as was Erica's response. When she first mentioned the interview to me, she said, 'I have been annoyed when I have come out of Centrelink before, but this time I went away feeling I needed a shower'.

Erica lived in Sydney with the younger of her two sons, aged 14. Erica's employment was very important to her. She took a great deal of pride in her work and was close to her employers. She had worked part time with the same very small firm for more than ten years, but at the time of her adviser interview the business was barely operating because of her employer's ill-health. As a result, Erica had been without paid work for about three months. Like many unemployed workers, Erica was deeply uncomfortable with that status, so she bridled when asked about her history. The way in which one question was asked particularly disturbed her:

The that I told all my friends about was: 'What have you done since you left school?' And here's this 20 years younger than me woman asking, at that stage a 50-year-old woman with a 31-year-old son, who's lived in other states and been involved in running her own businesses in WA, has lived, I feel sometimes, ten lives. She showed me the sheet that she was doing it with and there was, you know, one or two lines [allocated for the answer].

Erica said she was expected to summarise her life since high school into one or two lines. She felt this question, and the space allowed for the answer, assumed she had done very little since leaving school; that she had little employment experience

and/or was very young. There were few other specific questions that offended Erica, but she felt the overall interview implied that she was not committed to employment.

Maybe I was so supersensitive and ridiculous but I don't think so. I just felt insulted. I think there was a presumption in some of them that you are not *wanting* to do anything, you're a *lazy* person or you're a *dole* bludger ... And like I said, there was not one question that you could pull out of there and say, 'Look this is atrocious.' ... It's a sequence of questions can give you that impression, not just one question in isolation. And yeah, there's people out there who are like that, but hey, you don't base your interview on that. As I said, I came away really, really angry ... (her emphasis)

Erica also commented that she felt as though she 'had Tony Abbott's words on my shoulder the whole time'.²⁶ Erica was clearly aware of policy and media debates about welfare receipt and sole motherhood. She mentioned Abbott several times, showing a familiarity with welfare governance which many other parents did not have. The 'words' sitting or weighing on her shoulder were probably those regarding social security for which Abbott is best known. In 1999, as Minister for Employment Services, he accused unemployed people of being 'job snobs' (The Australian 1999:3).

Erica describes being interpellated: 'You're a lazy person.' 'You're a dole bludger.' Unlike Caroline, Erica did not want to recognise herself in the hailing. She said, 'I felt cornered. And this is when I was unemployed.' Erica recognised her socially constituted self (Butler 1997:31). She could see that since she was not in paid work at the time, she would be regarded as unemployed. Judith Butler contends that interpellation still occurs when the police officer calls but the subject protests. Like Erica, the subject might respond, 'That is not me, you must be mistaken!' (Butler 1997:33). Backed into a corner, Erica felt she had to 'keep justifying myself all the time', but since she was unemployed, she felt that her defence carried little weight.

²⁶ Abbott held ministerial portfolios related to employment from 1998 to 2003, first as Minister for Employment Services, then as Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business.

She could not even detail her long work history, because the questionnaire did not allow for it.

Erica also protested the characterisation of her parenting. Her son has a disability and very early in his life she ‘decided to be hands on ... With that Centrelink were part of my life.’ For Erica, claiming Parenting Payment was a necessity because of her commitment to good mothering. Prioritising her son’s care precluded full-time employment. Erica felt that the adviser interview, by stressing the importance of employment, devalued her parenting.

I don’t think my parenting now is valued as much and it’s probably the same with any parent, I guess, whether they’ve got a child with a disability or not ... But somehow it is legitimate when you have got a child under five, but when you have got an older child then your parenting input isn’t as valuable. And that was being emphasised by this ... by a lot of the underlying assumptions, I think, of the interview and what it’s aiming to do.

Erica’s perception of how the state viewed her parenting resembles elements of government rhetoric identified in chapter three; in particular, recognition of paid work in the labour market and a lack of recognition for the unpaid work of parenting. Erica faced a hail which sought to interpellate her as someone for whom parenting had receded in importance in comparison with paid employment. Again, Erica demurred.

However, while Erica did make some protest during her interview and collaborated with her adviser in creating answers to fit the computer-operated form, most of her objection was voiced afterwards when she telephoned friends. Erica made sure that the adviser knew her son had a disability, but did not describe his care needs in detail. ‘I insinuated, I made sure that the officer knew at least a reasonable context of my son’s life and mine.’ Erica is a private person and would not have been comfortable discussing her personal life with a stranger, telling me, ‘I actually never discuss my private situation with most people.’ Nor did she disclose her ongoing health problems at the adviser interview.

For the same reason, it was not until the adviser sought to register Erica for voluntary work to learn basic office skills that Erica revealed that she dedicated more than the required six hours each week to unpaid work maintaining her employer's business. Here Erica was most pleased with the results of her collaboration with the adviser.

She was reasonable, she was very reasonable. So, now what did she write in there? She accepted that, she *personally* accepted that. But I could tell, because in fact she asked, staring at the computer, 'How will we get this?' was her comment. 'How will we put this?' So I got the feeling that unless she did put it in a certain way it wouldn't be regarded as valid. [her emphasis]

Unlike Caroline, Erica did not perceive the hail as emanating from the adviser, but instead from the policy itself and from Ministerial direction. The adviser, prompted by Erica, communicated quite a different message: one of a joint effort to manage bureaucratic requirements. This Erica could recognise herself in. It was the approach she had adopted with Centrelink officers in the past as a way of coping with administrative requirements. She invited them to help her find a better way. The risk in this strategy, which Erica acknowledged, was that officers might not be amenable – if they were sticklers for bureaucratic process, for example. In this case, Erica was fortunate and they developed a Participation Agreement she was happy with.

It is possible that with a different adviser, Erica may have developed the same agreement anyway, as her unpaid work met the activity requirements. However, by feeling that she was collaborating with the adviser to reach a mutually satisfactory result, Erica felt that she and the adviser had a mutual understanding. Both recognised that the other needed to find a way to fulfil the bureaucratic requirements. In doing so, they developed a degree of mutual respect. Despite this, overall, Erica said: 'In the end the questions ... that wasn't me when I looked at it. Because of the type of questions that I had to be asked.' Beyond the level of her personal engagement with the adviser, Erica felt that Australians Working Together

addressed her wrongly. The policy, as it unfolded through the adviser interview structure, could not recognise her. Erica felt the questions she was asked were designed for someone else – not her, whose sense of self was so strongly centred in her work as a mother and her employment.

Ana

Ana has five children and lives with the youngest two, aged 15 and 18. She migrated to Australia before her children were born and has been a sole mother for around twenty years. With her attention focused on raising her children, Ana has learnt only a little English. Her 18-year-old daughter required particular care. Ana described her as ‘a bit slow’.

My daughter can't concentrate. She can't focus. She never does anything. We are both going to a flower-arranging course at [this] centre. But my daughter can't remember what she has learnt. She can't express herself properly.

This daughter claimed Youth Allowance, so as well as managing her own Parenting Payment, Ana took responsibility for her daughter's payments. At the time we met she was trying to arrange for her daughter to transfer to the Disability Support Pension, because she could not meet the requirements of Youth Allowance.

Ana had been to two adviser meetings. She was very worried about the end of her entitlement to Parenting Payment. Ana told me that the adviser said, ‘You need to be prepared to look for a job. The payment will change and it will be less.’ Ana explained that she had told the adviser that she was sick and would not be able to hold down a job:

I can't walk properly. I have heart problems, a disk in my back causes pain. [To me, in English, Ana expanded on how this affected her: ‘Walk slow, slow; not fast, fast.’] I get migraines. I get dizzy. I fall. I have been taken to hospital ... I took my medicine with me to show them, but they didn't look at it. I took a

medical certificate; they said, ‘Everyone is giving us these. It doesn’t mean anything.’

... I said to them, ‘Who’s going to give me a job? With my age, language barriers?’ ... ‘I can’t even finish my housework, so how can I do tasks at work?’ ... I told them about problems reading and writing. I felt they didn’t care ... I told them I need to care for my daughter.

Faced with the end of her entitlement to Parenting Payment, Ana exposed the details of her life to Centrelink. Ana revealed her ill-health, showing her medicines and doctor’s certificate as proof; she exposed her limited English, her literacy problems and the care needs of her daughter. Ana’s strategy was to present herself as earnest and willing to take employment but faced with barriers which made it impossible. She felt the adviser’s response was lacking in sympathy and respect.²⁷ When the adviser told her that medical certificates had no meaning because ‘everyone is giving us these’, Ana felt she was being treated as just another claimant who could not be trusted. Here, Ana felt that her description of her ill-health, her language and literacy difficulties and her heavy care responsibilities was not believed or that these problems were not regarded as significant. More than mistrust, Ana felt ‘they didn’t care’. She felt belittled by a system which could not empathise with her circumstances.

It was not clear to me if Ana entered into a Participation Agreement at her adviser appointment. She had no knowledge of Australians Working Together, only that her Parenting Payment would cease when her son turned 16. However, she was attending English language classes and a flower-arranging course, either of which could have qualified as agreement activities. So it is difficult to know if she signed a contract agreeing to continue with these activities or if her adviser waived the activity requirement. If the latter, Ana did not recall the adviser explaining about the activity requirements or that they had been waived. If the former, Ana had no knowledge of having signed an agreement and so could easily have breached the

²⁷ Of course the adviser’s response was constrained by Centrelink guidelines and practice, as I explore later in this chapter. I do not mean that the adviser *was* unsympathetic, but that Ana experienced her actions as unsympathetic.

agreement without knowing she was doing so. As a result she ran the risk of having her payments withheld or incurring a penalty, just as she had earlier when she unwittingly failed to attend an adviser interview and her payments were temporarily stopped.

Ana's experience disrespect lies partially in a lack of sympathy, without which Ana and the Centrelink officer could not form a relationship of mutual respect. Sympathy can be conceived as the foundation for autonomy (Sennett 2003: 121). Sympathy, as Adam Smith understood it, takes place when someone endeavours 'to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer ... in its minutest incidents' (cited in Sennett 2003:121). In a sympathetic interaction we feel the experience of the other. In an interaction that recognises autonomy, we understand that we might not fully understand the experience of the other (Sennett 2003:121). From Ana's perspective, the adviser who dismissed her concerns did neither. Ana felt the adviser did not trust that she was telling the truth or sympathise with her circumstances. Without a sense of trust or sympathy, there was no sense of respect.

Disclosure and non-disclosure

Decisions whether or not to disclose elements of one's personal life to the adviser are in constant operation in the adviser interviews. In the negotiations about Participation Agreements described above, Caroline, Erica and Ana are deciding which aspects of their lives to present before the adviser and to what effect. Erica, we saw, chose not to explain that she was unemployed due to her boss's ill-health until her adviser sought to place her in voluntary work. It was only then that Erica revealed that she was already doing many hours of unpaid work each week to keep the business afloat. In contrast, when it came to her son's health needs and her approach to parenting, despite preferring to keep such personal matters to herself, Erica thought it best that she alert the adviser to this aspect of her life. Ana, in contrast, determined that it was best to expose all her circumstances, as she felt sure that this would elicit compassion and understanding.

Sennett observes that disclosing one's needs can be shameful. Being needy or seeking help is not in itself shameful; in the private realm of relationships with family and friends, sharing and supporting each other's needs is an element of intimacy. Nevertheless, if our lives are exposed against our will, we suffer from the 'nakedness of shame' (Sennett 2003:117).

Centrelink implemented what it describes as a 'life events' model to service provision. The Chief Executive Officer explained this approach:

... customers will only need to tell us honestly about their circumstances – it is our job to tell them what benefits and services they may be entitled to and to explain as simply as possible what obligations are expected of them in return (Vardon 2001:8).

In this model, claimants are encouraged to set out their circumstances before a Centrelink officer who then determines their entitlements and informs them of their responsibilities. It is understandable and perhaps even desirable that, in the face of the highly complicated system of social security, claimants need not know their entitlements but only explain the circumstances which have placed them in need of support. However, people's lives are complicated and full of detail which may or may not be relevant to a claim. Beneficiaries may make mistakes when determining what aspects of their lives are pertinent. In addition, interviews and tools designed to establish if a citizen has a legitimate claim for assistance can serve a dual purpose: finding those in need and providing the appropriate support, or treating a request for help with suspicion and seeking to reveal that a claim is not genuine (Sennett 2003:173).

In chapter three, I showed that questioning the legitimacy of claims for income support was a key element of official talk about welfare; policy documents and politicians' statements about welfare referred to and brought together stereotypes about 'dole bludgers' and 'bad single mothers'. In chapter two, mothers' discussion of their interaction with Centrelink staff demonstrated that these suspicions appear at the level of implementation. While they do not always encounter distrust from staff, most parents have at some point in the past been treated with suspicion or

have seen or heard this happening to other claimants. Many approach every interaction with a Centrelink staff member with caution, anticipating a negative judgement. As a result, mothers were also wary in their adviser interviews and tended to be strategic in what they chose to reveal about their lives. They were honest about their circumstances but did not necessarily divulge everything.

The nakedness of exposure was exacerbated by the open plan office. Several mothers mentioned feeling constrained in their conversations due to the office layout. Grace, for example, was surprised to be in such a public area, close to the highly used photocopier.

I expected it to be in like a room ... if you speak with one of the social workers they put you in a private interview room. [Where we were] was in a part of Centrelink that was sort of to the back of the office, but it was open. Like, it was this far from the photocopier. It would have been say from here about 4 or 5 metres.

In their adviser interviews, Helen and Nicole each sat close to other staff members with whom they had had negative experiences. Nicole explained, 'I was getting really upset because, as I was explaining to him, you know, "Look, that's the woman that won't put my paperwork through." And so that was making me cry even more.' This lack of privacy made revealing personal matters more difficult.

Yet for the adviser interviews to be successful they rely on exposure. Parents must disclose their employment aspirations so they can develop an agreement with the adviser to meet these aspirations. They must also disclose any 'barriers' to their fulfilment. The question guide that advisers use in interviews assumes that barriers are more likely to be personal than social (see appendix four). Under the section 'Possible Issues', which asks, 'Is there anything stopping you from achieving any of the goals or interests we have discussed so far?' eight of the tick-box items relate to structural issues, such as a lack of transport or care services, cultural attitudes, employer discrimination and 'no suitable jobs'. The remaining nineteen tick-boxes relate to personal matters such as 'low self-confidence', 'lack of career direction', 'lack of employment experience', 'lack of money management skills', 'unresolved

legal issues', 'low language, literacy and/or numeracy levels' and 'poor motivation'. It would be understandable if parents did not feel comfortable exposing these aspects of their lives.

Admitting any of these things or asking for assistance with them need not be shameful, but revealing them before being ready to do so might well be shameful. As Sennett (2003:188) writes, 'There's nothing inherently shameful about it [the statement 'I need help'], so long as it can be *managed* by the person who makes it.' For some parents, the only way to 'manage' the revelation of their need for help in their adviser interview was to choose not to disclose.

As a result, some parents would have entered into Participation Agreements that did not take full account of the complexity of their lives. The Social Research Centre (2005a:9) found that while 64 per cent of parents with teenage children said they were experiencing some form of difficulty (for example, financial, personal, relationship or accommodation difficulties) at the time of their adviser interview, only 36 per cent discussed a problem with their adviser. On average parents were experiencing two difficulties, so it is likely (though not observable from the data) that some parents discussed some but not all of their problems. The most common difficulties were emotional or stress related (42 per cent), severe financial problems (32 per cent) and problems which were being experienced by children (25 per cent). If parents did not divulge a problem that might make it difficult for them to meet their requirements, this issue could not be accommodated in their agreements. When they left the interview, they did so with a contract that would remain in place for six months. While they could contact Centrelink to renegotiate if the activities proved unsuitable, most parents did not know that this was an option. Alexander et al. (2005:79) discovered that only about a third of Parenting Payment claimants understood that they were entitled to modify their Participation Agreement if they needed to because they could no longer comply (Alexander et al. 2005:79). Most did not know that they could change either the hours they spent on activities or the nature of the activities.

Parents who chose to disclose the entirety of their difficulties relied on the officer and the system to treat their concerns seriously. Ana tried to show a Centrelink

officer her medicine, 'but they didn't look at it'. She acquired a medical certificate which detailed the nature of her ill-health, but the staff dismissed it. She explained that she was only just learning to read and write, but 'felt they didn't care'. She told of the high level of care her daughter needed, but because her daughter's disability was not recognised either, the care Ana provided was disregarded.²⁸ Ana did not feel that any of these revelations were treated respectfully. She felt rebuffed as yet another claimant with excuses. As a result she felt powerless.

Margaret met with an entirely different reaction when she reported that she had been diagnosed with a serious illness.

When I found out that I had the cancer, and I was on a part-pension at that stage ... I rang that night and said, 'Well look, this has happened and I now have to stop work altogether to have the operation and chemo and all of that.' And on the phone, the woman just said, 'Fine, I will organise it all now.' I said, 'I've got a letter from my boss.' 'Oh, look, we will sort out the paperwork later, don't even bother.' ... So that has been really good and that happened very smoothly.

In contrast to the officer that Ana spoke to, this officer did not even seem to require the correct paperwork to exempt Margaret from any activity requirement immediately. The 'smooth' way in which this was handled allowed Margaret to concentrate on her health and her family without the additional stress of meeting administrative requirements in order to continue to receive income support. This is an example of a respectful interaction. Margaret's depiction of her circumstances was believed, unlike Ana's, which was belittled.

In Honneth's (1995:114-120) account of the sphere of legal recognition, respect is the recognition of a person's responsibility to act according to the law. It is recognition of each party as autonomously responsible persons who will act according to moral and legal norms. The problem for Ana was that this assumption

²⁸ Ana had been trying unsuccessfully to have her daughter transfer from Youth Allowance to Disability Support Pension.

was not granted to her; her adviser assumed that she was not telling the truth and by doing so denied Ana recognition as a responsible member of society. In legal recognition, two operations happen simultaneously: while on the one hand we presume knowledge of legal obligations, on the other hand we must judge in any given situation whether we are dealing with someone who has the qualities which make these obligations applicable (Honneth 1995:112-113). Honneth draws on Marshall to argue that in modern societies the development of universal human rights invests all of us with the moral responsibility to be granted legal recognition.

The difficulty for Ana and other income support claimants is twofold. On the one hand, they are making a claim for support in a political environment which has undermined the legitimacy of such claims. As we saw in chapter three, welfare recipients have been assumed to be irresponsible precisely because they are drawing on income support. Since a morally responsible adult is deemed to be one who supports him or herself through employment, anyone without employment is therefore either immoral or irresponsible. In appearing to assume that Ana was not telling the truth, her adviser enacted a policy assumption that Ana, as a welfare claimant, would not act responsibly unless forced to do so. The rejection of her medical certificate was not an uncommon one. In the year from 2002-2003, Centrelink refused to accept 46,321 medical certificates, more than twice as many as the year before (Karvelas, 2004:1-2). Ana's adviser was acting within specific institutional guidelines in a political and social climate of mistrust of people who receive welfare payments.²⁹

On the other hand, Ana was dealing with an individual. Her adviser may have been having a bad day; things could have been personally difficult for her before or after she arrived at work. She may just have uncovered serious fraud which made her doubt the integrity of all claimants. She may have worked in an office environment which bred mistrust, she may have just been informed that she was too lenient and that she should treat claims of illness with more caution. There are many reasons why Ana's adviser, as a worker, may have acted the way she did. An enduring feature of mothers' experience with Centrelink, as pointed out in chapter two, is that

²⁹ I discuss the institutional constraints on advisers in more detail later in this chapter.

the nature of their dealings depends on individual staff members. Margaret said the supportive response she received when she reported she was stopping employment while she treated her cancer was ‘fantastic’, but she immediately added that such a reaction was an ‘odd occasion’. Individual staff members are important in a system which relies heavily on the actions and decisions of street-level bureaucrats.

These mothers’ experiences of the adviser interviews show how a ‘work-test’ pushes citizens seeking income support towards greater exposure. More of their lives needed to be presented before the benefits agency to prove their entitlement to assistance. That exposure is ongoing. By being required to expose their lives to the scrutiny of the agency, claimants ‘are being judged as whole human beings – now an adversarial judgment in which the party judged feels naked’ (Sennett 2003:173). The degree to which parents comply with this demand affects the success and appropriateness of a process which relies on claimants to make their whole lives available, or to at least know which aspects of their lives they should reveal.

Family and personal care

Mothers, as seen in chapter two, had very particular ideas about good mothering; about what was best for their children and themselves and how they wanted to achieve this. This involves varying strategies that require different combinations of spending time at home, in paid work and study. Despite this, few of the mothers told me that they discussed their family’s care needs at their adviser interviews. Those who did were either assertive like Erica or felt that full exposure might be in their family’s best interests, like Ana.

Of the fifteen questions in the adviser interview, two relate explicitly to family care (see appendix four). In contrast to parents, who commonly place their families at the forefront of any discussion of their activities, in the adviser meetings, talk of family comes after nine questions relating to employment, work skills, interests, transport, health and literacy. Parents are then asked an open question, ‘Can you tell me something about your family situation?’ Followed by a tick-box question, ‘Who is most responsible for the care of your children?’ Neither of these questions would necessarily elicit information about the care needs of children. The former might,

especially if the parent felt the child's care needs warranted particular discussion, but it is possible to imagine that the question related more to family structure than to care; how many children a mother had, for example, or whether she was married or divorced. Parents have other opportunities to raise their children's care needs. The first two questions, which ask about activities over the last few months and interests provide 'caring' options in their checklists, alongside other options such as looking for work, studying or sporting activities. The final question, 'Is there anything stopping you from achieving any of the goals or interests we have discussed so far?' provides for the possibility of ticking 'family reasons and responsibilities', 'lack of appropriate childcare' or 'lack of respite care'.

The status of care concerns in the Participation Agreement process is clear from these questions. Firstly, the two items which specifically refer to family were raised near the end of the meeting, after considerable discussion of education, employment and health. Secondly, the question which refers explicitly to care asks about who provides the care rather than the nature of the care provision. And thirdly, only one question, the one about family situation, allowed a free-text response to be recorded; the other questions all only offered checklists to tick. The low status of care in the adviser meeting reflects the low status it was given in policy documents and political statements about Australians Working Together, as discussed in chapter three. Barely mentioning care would have aided the interpellation of mothers as workers, not carers.

In research about adviser meetings conducted by the Social Research Centre (2005a:12), just 20 per cent of parents with children aged 13 and over said that they discussed child care with their adviser. This was in response to a multiple choice question in which child care was the only option which related to children's needs, except for, potentially, the option 'personal problems or issues'. So parents may have discussed their children, but not child care. Regardless, this is a very low figure. Especially since, at the time of their adviser interviews, a quarter of parents with 13 to 15 year old children said that their children were having problems (Social Research Centre 2005a:9). Presumably, it would not only be those parents of children who were having difficulties who might wish to discuss their children's care options.

The majority of the mothers I interviewed told me of some difficulty which their children faced, these were most often due to disabilities or illness, but also emotional problems or issues connected with school such as poor attendance or difficulties with school work (as outlined in chapter two). Those who did not report any health or behavioural problems for their children were still centrally concerned with the care needs of their children. Many felt that the teen years required particular and new forms of parenting, supervision and support. Despite strong feelings about the care needs of their children, this was one aspect of their lives that some mothers were reluctant to disclose, even if their children were experiencing difficulties that required greater parenting support. I asked Belle, whose son was diagnosed with depression in the year before her adviser interview, if this was something she raised with her adviser. She said was not sure she would have. When I asked why, she replied:

Because mostly when you are talking to people about things like that they are not well informed enough not to have prejudices.

Similarly, Helen, whose son's behavioural problems became worse when she tried paid work, said that she would not discuss this with an adviser. For her, a lack of privacy in the interview setting affected this disclosure:

The open plan thing works on business-like level, but it wouldn't work for something confidential like that.

Even if there were an expectation on the part of policy makers that the care needs of children when they reached their teens would be fairly straightforward, it seems there was little or no time to discuss the diverse forms of everyday care which mothers provide. Caregiving, caring for and caring about, the elements of care identified in Fisher and Tronto's (1990:42-43) typology, were not given equal weight in the interviews. The adviser interviews provided for a limited understanding of care; when it was considered at all care was primarily regarded as *caregiving* – the hands-on labour of completing care tasks. The coordinating and managing elements of *caring for* someone were less evident, and the love and

affection of *caring about* their children was perhaps given even less room. Of course individual advisers would have probed about care differently and different parents would have insisted on discussing care, but the structure of the interviews did not provide for care of children to be interwoven into parents' activities or a base on which family arrangements were built.

Parents were not required to undertake activities outside school hours (Alexander et al. 2005:2). So perhaps it was felt that if parents completed their activities during the school day, and could be at home after school with their children, then no additional consideration for care needed to be made. Despite this provision, Alexander et al. (2005:88) found that half of the parents did their activities after school hours. Interestingly, many of those parents were not doing new activities but, prior to signing their Participation Agreement, had already chosen to engage in work, study or volunteering at times when their children were not in school. It was parents who were employed who were most likely not to be home when their children were not at school. In general, parents made informal arrangements so that someone else, another parent, a sibling and less commonly a grandparent, relative or friend looked after the children. A few parents took their children with them. None used formal care arrangements. In their study, five children of the 21 whose parents were engaged outside of school hours were left alone at home.

In my study too, a few children spent time alone at home while their parents worked or studied. Kumiko and Naomi were both already far exceeding the activity requirement when first required to sign an agreement. Both regularly left their children at home alone. Kumiko felt that this was good for her sons as it would help them develop independence and maturity and she praised the greater responsibility they took for household tasks now that she had less time for such work. Naomi had been working on weekends, but stopped when her son started high school because she felt he needed more of her attention and time. She was confident about his capacity to manage at home alone.

Nicole also left her children at home alone while she engaged in her Participation Agreement activity. She worried about it but felt she had no choice. Nicole had decided to enrol in a TAFE course when she accompanied Cheryl to her adviser

interview. The adviser, having waived Cheryl's activity requirement, provided Nicole with information on the types of courses available, enrolment procedures, assistance with fees and the times that the classes were on each week. Nicole explained that when the course started she discovered that the classes did not occur at the times she had been told they would. She continued with the course, but was very worried about leaving her children at home on their own.

I stress substantially, because there's three hours. Now I don't have a car. I have a panic, 'What if something happens? I can't get there.' It would be great if they could go somewhere, but there's nowhere that's really safe.

Not only was Nicole worried about the safety of her children at home, she was also worried about the implications for her status as a responsible mother. This was a sharp concern for her: her youngest child was removed from her custody when she was a toddler and now lives elsewhere. Nicole was very worried that if something happened to her children while she was not at home she could again be accused of being a neglectful parent. A limited ability to explore her family's care needs in detail with her adviser and a belief that the Participation Agreement could not be changed meant that Nicole felt locked into this arrangement.

Street-level bureaucrats

Interaction with Centrelink staff members was a central component of mothers' experience of Australians Working Together. Although some of them had heard of the policy beforehand and all had received a written notice of the requirement to meet with their adviser, it was during the time that they sat face to face, discussed their circumstances and drew up their Participation Agreement that the policy became visible. Furthermore, despite the longer term implications of the policy after the meeting, notably in the form of the six-month-long contract, it was the meeting itself that represented the policy in action for parents.

Earlier in this chapter I explored how parents were interpellated by policy in their adviser meetings through the mediation of the adviser. If Caroline's experience of

being encouraged to take up new study that both appealed to her and provides her greater employment security can be taken to be an example of a successful meeting, then it seems that a convergence between the adviser's and the parent's interpretation of the parent's circumstances, interests and needs provides the greatest chance of success. 'Success' which arises from an interaction that suits the parent, meets the adviser's requirements and the policy intentions. However, as we have seen, the meetings could not always be considered successful in those terms. This is perhaps not surprising given the constraints that advisers and parents faced.

The advisers were working in a context; the way they did their job was shaped by their local office culture, policy rules, quotas and targets, workloads and time pressures. The high caseloads of Centrelink staff are especially significant. In his ethnographic study of Centrelink offices, Cosmo Howard (2006:148-50) found individual staff members were commonly responsible for over 1000 clients, and this in a service delivery system that was intended to match each client with a particular staff member in order for the service to be more tailored to the individual.³⁰ Others estimated that personal advisers would have a caseload of around 700 people (Ziguras and Flowers 2003:41). Even if JET Advisers, the advisers who met with Parenting Payment recipients with teen children, had fewer clients due to the expectation that they were to engage more intensively with the people they met, it seems likely that they were nonetheless responsible for hundreds of claimants each. Only an extraordinary person would be able to remember and personally engage with such a large number of people, especially when they were unlikely to meet with most of them more than once or twice per year. A few of the staff in Howard's (2006:149) study said they felt that they were able to develop a rapport with some clients, but most felt the large caseloads and infrequency of meetings made such a relationship impossible.

The JET advisers who I interviewed were each solely responsible for parents from multiple Centrelink offices. James, for example, interviewed parents from four different office catchment areas. He rotated between three offices each week; parents from the fourth office, which did not have space to accommodate him, came

³⁰ C Howard observed three Centrelink offices in 2000 and 2001.

to whichever other office was nearest to where they lived. In the Social Research Centre (2005c:27) personal adviser study, which interviewed nearly all of the advisers working in Australia in June 2004, 100 people were JET Advisers, the remainder were personal advisers (Social Research Centre 2005c:3,27).³¹ There were 321 Centrelink offices serviced by those 100 JET advisers, so it seems James' situation in which he had responsibility for four offices would have been common (Centrelink 2005: 12).

The time pressures that advisers faced would have affected the way that they chose to interview clients. Howard (2006:150) found that staff tended to adhere to set procedures in order to complete required tasks in the time they had available. Sharon Wright (2002:239-241) in her study of front-line interactions in United Kingdom benefits administration found that time pressures led many staff to eliminate all but what they regarded as the most essential aspects of the jobs. An interaction which was intended to support job search as well as ensuring the continuation of payment for unemployed clients was reduced to the minimum needed to ensure benefit payment; job search was routinely overlooked. One staff member depicted the consequences of limited time, saying they had to concentrate on 'processing cases rather than assisting people' (Wright 2002:242). As a result, in implementation, 'active labour market policies, recreated by front-line staff, became much less 'active'' (Wright 2002: 249). Australian advisers meeting with Parenting Payment claimants would also tailor their meetings to accommodate the large number of clients and the limited time available by focusing on the aspects of the interaction which they saw as most essential: drawing up a Participation Agreement as was required in all meetings. Advisers might spend less time on subtler, less measurable aspects of their jobs which might lead to more meaningful and understanding engagement with parents.

Centrelink staff are obliged to act according to the rules of the organisation and the direction of their funding departments, Family and Community Services, and Employment and Workplace Relations. When Ana's medical certificate was dismissed with 'It doesn't mean anything', the Centrelink officer was reflecting a

³¹ 583 JET and Personal Advisers were interviewed out of a total of 649 employed by Centrelink.

trend in government policy. In 2004, the rate at which medical certificates were rejected had more than doubled since the previous year. The then Acting Minister for Family and Community Services explained:

This represents a deliberate government approach to ensure that, instead of where the old (system) just accepted a medical certificate as gospel and didn't take into account any other individual circumstances, under the new system an individual's case is looked at more closely (Andrews, cited in Karvelas, 2004: 1-2).

While it might have seemed that Andrews was arguing for a holistic approach to individuals' circumstances, it would not be necessary to reject a medical certificate in order to take other aspects of people's lives into account when determining whether or not they might be able to seek employment. Many people who engage in paid work have disabilities or illnesses, but this remains an element of their lives that should be considered. Instead, Andrews rejected the validity of medical certificates as a 'deliberate government approach'. Staff were working in an environment in which they were instructed to disbelieve claimants. Even a medical certificate was not taken as sufficient evidence that someone had a genuine health problem.

In addition, staff were required to meet performance targets. The targets shift and change over time and can affect the way that staff operate and the kind of service that claimants receive. James, a JET adviser, worked under performance targets which included the number of people he referred to particular types of service, such as language classes or the Job Network. He was aware that this target could potentially influence his interaction with parents, and led him to refer people to services which did not fully meet their needs or at a time which was not appropriate. He said he attempted to operate without consideration for the targets, believing that he would meet them in the long term.

Well I try not to let it [affect the way I work], because I don't want to be seen to be pushing a particular barrow. I would prefer to refer the clients to where they want to go, where they've mentioned that

they want to go ... for instance, I had a lady this morning [who used a] Mandarin interpreter. She can speak some English, so I mentioned the language program for her. Her problem at the moment is, her son is still very young, so she doesn't want to leave him alone over the school holidays while she does this. So we made arrangements that, come school going back, we've got another appointment and she wants to be referred to the language program because she wants to improve her English.

While James tried not to let his approach to his work be influenced by the system of targets, this is very much a decision made by the individual staff member. The targets were in place precisely because they were designed to influence staff's decisions about how they work. A stark example of how staff's service delivery, and therefore clients' experience of the service, can be affected by targets comes from patterns of breach penalty rates in the years just prior to the start of this study. The number of penalties given to claimants for failing to comply with requirements increased by 250 per cent in just a few years (NWRN and ACOSS 2000:3). Reviewing this trend, the Independent Review of Breaches and Penalties in the Social Security System observed that 'many Centrelink officers with responsibility for breach decisions felt under considerable pressure to increase breach rates' (Pearce et al. 2002: 16). The rate at which penalties were applied fell after policy changed and officers were instead urged to engage in a thorough investigation which took into account extenuating circumstances. When the measure of good performance changed from the number of penalties to the quality of the investigation, officers applied the penalties less often.

The mothers I interviewed nearly always had kind words to say about the advisers personally. At the very least most felt that the advisers were just doing their job. The Social Research Centre (2005a:11) survey of this group of Parenting Payment claimants also found high levels of positive reporting about the interviews. Nearly all agreed that the adviser had explained the purpose of the interview clearly and that they were treated as individuals. Most said the information they received was useful and that the adviser understood their situation. Advisers were also generally positive about the perceived effects of the interviews, especially with regard to

parents who attended under compulsion. The advisers considered this group of Parenting Payment claimants as the one which most benefited from their services, more so than parents who attended voluntarily or unemployed claimants (Social Research Centre 2005a:8). Primarily, this was because they felt parents benefited from the information advisers could provide, because they were seen as receptive to the advice offered and because they were regarded as responsive to the kind of encouragement and motivation which were proffered in the interview. At each appointment, regardless of their style and approach, the advisers were required to draw up a Participation Agreement with the parent.

The Participation Agreements

Parents walk away from their adviser meetings with a contract: a Participation Agreement which they have developed with the adviser and which they sign, committing themselves to engaging in a particular activity for six months. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, in the year to June 2004, 58,109 Parenting Payment Single claimants and 15,534 Partnered claimants entered into Participation Agreements (DEWR 2005a:30). Only a few exemptions were granted, 316 to Parenting Payment Single recipients and 122 to Partnered.

Among the women who participated in this study, education was the activity which was most often written into agreements. Nine mothers committed to study, five to employment and two to voluntary work. Four received exemptions due to health problems or because of significant care responsibilities for other family members and two were unsure of the nature of their agreement.

Many of the women I interviewed were already working or studying at the time of their adviser interview. They included those existing activities in their Participation Agreements (see table 5). Of the fifteen mothers, seven signed agreements in which they committed to continuing in an activity they were already undertaking; one of them, Margaret, was later exempt due to health problems. Another two mothers, Alia and Ana, both of whom were studying English, were so unsure about the nature of their Australians Working Together requirements that it was unclear whether this was a new activity or if they were already doing it at the time of their adviser

interviews. Two mothers started new activities: both Caroline and Pam entered part-time study as a result of the adviser interview. Pam had been exempt from activities at the time of her first adviser meeting, but was not at the time of her second meeting, despite believing that her health status had not changed. It seems that Centrelink had investigated her health in the meantime and had perhaps concluded that it did not warrant an activity exemption. Helen committed to a new activity that she had wanted to begin; she took her plan to the adviser meeting and asked the adviser to give her information to help her implement it. Nicole started a new activity, but as a result of attending a friend's adviser meeting, so she was already studying part time when she was called to attend her own meeting.

Table 5. Mothers' Participation Agreement requirements

Name	Activity	Nature of Agreement
Alia	Part-time study	Unsure
Ana	Part-time study	Unsure
Belle	Intermittent employment	Existing activity
Caroline	Part-time study	New activity
Nicole	Part-time study	New activity
Cheryl	Exempt due to care responsibilities	Exempt from activity
Erica	Voluntary work/part-time employment	Existing activity
Grace	Exempt due to ill-health	Exempt from activity
Helen	Study towards self-employment	New activity
Kumiko	Study/voluntary work	Existing activity
Margaret	Part-time employment/later exempt due to health	Existing activity, exempt from activity
Mary	Part-time study	Existing activity
Naomi	Part-time study/part-time self-employment	Existing activity
Pam	Exempt due to health/part-time study	Exempt from activity, a new activity
Tara	Full-time employment	Existing activity

Source: Interviews with 15 income support recipients with activity requirements.

It was to be expected that many Parenting Payment claimants would be able to fulfil their participation requirement with existing activities. Before the introduction of Australians Working Together, there was strong evidence of the high rates of employment, education and volunteering among Parenting Payment recipients in a number of studies (as shown in chapter two). The evaluation of the pilot program for expanding activity requirements also concluded that most parents would be able

to fulfil the activity requirements by continuing the activities they were already undertaking (Pearce 2000).

It is not surprising then that the two studies which examined Parenting Payment Participation Agreements in detail also found that most parents incorporated existing activities into their agreements. Both of these studies were funded under the Australian Government evaluation of Australians Working Together.³² At the time that parents first attended a personal adviser interview 74 per cent were already participating in some activity (Social Research Centre 2005a:8). For the majority this was economic participation: 64 per cent were employed, seeking employment or engaged in voluntary work or training for vocational reasons. A further 10 per cent were studying or working voluntarily for reasons which were not vocational. An additional four per cent had care responsibilities for family members or friends that limited their ability to take part in employment or education.

Many parents signed Participation Agreements that included those activities. Of those who remembered signing a Participation Agreement when interviewed by the Social Research Centre (2005a:17), 61 per cent said that they were already doing at least one of the activities in their agreement before their adviser meeting. Of their smaller sample of just 60 parents, Alexander et al. (2005:78) found that three-quarters of the parents had an existing activity in their agreements. More than half, 33 parents, signed agreements which contained only activities they were already doing and a further eleven had agreements which included new and existing activities.

³² The Social Research Centre (2005a and 2005c) surveyed income support claimants who had attended personal adviser meetings. Respondents were interviewed twice, once in May or June 2004, then again in November or December 2004. Of the 3,007 participants in wave 1, 629 were Parenting Payment claimants whose young child was aged 13 to 15 years (Social Research Centre 2005c:47-48). Eighty-two per cent of the sample participated again in wave 2. The Australian Institute of Family Studies was funded to research the impact of compulsory AWT participation on Parenting Payment claimants and their 13 to 15 year old children (Alexander et al. 2005). To contextualise the impact of the program, the authors presented an appendix which detailed examination of the nature of parents' Participation Agreements. Like the Social Research Centre study, this research was also undertaken over two waves, the first in June and July 2004 and the second in March and April 2005. Alexander et al. (2005:13) interviewed 60 parents and their children in wave 1 and 55 in wave 2.

Both research teams found that parents most often agreed to include education, voluntary work or employment in their Participation Agreements (see table 6 below). The Social Research Centre found nearly half of the agreements included education or training and a similar proportion included voluntary or community work. A quarter said they would undertake to search for a job and a sixth part-time employment (Social Research Centre 2005a:17). The activities of participants in the Alexander et al. (2005:80) research were also concentrated in the areas of education, voluntary work and employment, a greater proportion were employed and fewer were studying or engaged in voluntary work.

Table 6. Activities included in Participation Agreements

	Social Research Centre n=450 %	Alexander et al. ³³ n=55 %
Education or training	41	20
Voluntary work	38	29
Employment	16	22 ³⁴
Job search	25	4
Care for family member	na	11
Health maintenance	na	4
Gain drivers license	na	2

Source: Social Research Centre (2005a:17) and Alexander et al. (2005:80).

Of those who signed an agreement containing an existing activity, this activity was employment for nearly half and for most of the others this was voluntary work (Alexander et al. 2005:78). Those who combined an existing activity with a new one most often started to study in addition to the paid work they already had.

Not only were many parents already undertaking activities before they entered into a Participation Agreement, nearly all were spending far more time each week on those activities than was required. On average, Alexander et al. (2005:80) found that parents committed 21 hours per week to the activities in the Participation Agreement. Only two parents, out of the 55 at wave two of their research, were

³³ Detailed data about activities was collected at wave two of the survey. At that time, around nine months after wave one, 55 participants were aware that they had a Participation Agreement (Alexander et al. 2005:80).

³⁴ Two of the 12 employed parents were unpaid family workers.

doing six hours per week³⁵ and only 4 were not spending any time on their activities when interviewed (Alexander et al. 2005:80). The researchers asked respondents if they were committing more or less time than was required on their activities. Those who said they were doing more than they needed averaged 23 hours per week on their activities, those who said they were doing about what was required or less averaged 17-18 hours per week. This latter group had a substantially exaggerated sense of the extent of their participation requirements.

A minority of parents were not already employed or studying or doing voluntary work at the time of their adviser interviews and very few parents were exempt from compulsory requirements. Unfortunately, little is known about the new activities which parents agreed to undertake. Little attention was given to separately analysing the agreements or experiences of these parents by the Social Research Centre (2005a, 2005c) which tended to conflate the results for all parents with compulsory activities. With their smaller sample, Alexander et al. (2005) had limited capacity to separately analyse this group. Nevertheless, the Social Research Centre (2005b:44) provides data on all parents who started new activities, which includes both those who were already engaged in some activity but who chose to do something new instead or in addition, and those who were not engaged in any recognised activity at the time of their adviser appointment. Six months after signing a Participation Agreement, the most common new activities among both Parenting Payment Partnered and Single claimants was study or training, which was taken up by one fifth (see table 7). Employment was just as popular among parents receiving Parenting Payment Single.

³⁵ Six hours is close to the required number of hours if the 150 hours is averaged out over six months.

Table 7. Parenting Payment recipients' take up of new activities six months after attending an adviser meeting

Commenced...	Partnered %	Single %
Paid work	11	19
Looking for work	8	14
Study or training	21	19
Voluntary work	3	7

Source: Social Research Centre 2005b:44

Alexander et al. (2005:78) reported that parents who signed agreements which *only* contained new activities most often agreed to study or do voluntary work; employment was a less favoured option.

The frequency with which parents were already engaged in employment and the popularity of education as a new activity are supported by the Australian Government short evaluation report on Australians Working Together. There was no clear reduction in numbers receiving Parenting Payment; if anything these had risen from 2002 to 2003 (DEWR 2005a:6). A slightly larger proportion of all Parenting Payment recipients reported earnings at the end of the program compared to the beginning. The increased proportion was greatest among those with compulsory activity requirements, from 51 to 54 per cent among Single claimants and from 26 to 29 per cent among Partnered (DEWR 2005a:10). Twenty-three per cent of Parenting Payment Single recipients with high-school-aged children were studying and 16 per cent of Partnered recipients, up by 10 per cent and five per cent respectively (DEWR 2005a:12). The report does not document changes in voluntary work or other activities.

Research based on the pilot program of compulsory adviser meetings for parents showed that compulsory meetings increase the rate of attendance at meetings, and that responses to those meetings, in terms of intention to change plans, were very similar between parents who chose to attend voluntarily and those who were required to attend (Barrett and Cobb-Clark 2000). However, this analysis did not show if those who chose not to attend the meetings had decided to take up new activities also. Other research on this same pilot program found that when outcomes were measured in terms of proportion of parents with increased earnings

or leaving income support, that there was *no difference* between those who were required to attend the interview, those who did so voluntarily, and those who knew nothing of the program (Dockery and Strombeck 2004:436). Furthermore, the same study found that making a plan to enter employment was followed through only by some parents – those who did not report any barriers to employment (Dockery and Strombeck 2004:440). Only 6 per cent of parents who participated in the pilot had no barriers to employment. Among the rest, those who said that they did not have appropriate skills for paid work or that their health might impede their ability to work or who cited other barriers, the mere act of developing a plan at an adviser meeting had no effect on their entry into employment.

To date, no analysis has been undertaken which can demonstrate whether compulsory activity requirements for Australian parents result in improved employment or educational outcomes, as no study has simultaneously compared a group which has not been required to undertake activities with a group which has faced that requirement.

Conclusion

This chapter explored Australians Working Together in action: the meeting between a parent and an adviser at which compulsory activities were discussed and contracted. In chapter three, we saw that the policy sought to make a number of transformations, most notably from welfare claimant to employee and from full-time mother to part-time mother, but also from dependent to independent and from passive to active. The policy sought to make employment a component of good mothering. We heard from mothers that they were addressed as customers, as workers, as compliant claimant, and as beneficiaries who were dependent but potentially independent.

The alteration in mothers' identities was not, for many, a shift from welfare claimant to employee; they were already both welfare claimants and employees. Nor was it new for parents to be hailed as passive and dependent. When parents received the letters ordering their attendance at the adviser meetings, the interpellation of compliant claimant resonated because of their previous experience

and their understanding of the negative social meaning ascribed to welfare receipt. However, Australians Working Together did reassert this aspect of being a beneficiary. In order to ensure that parents would comply with the compulsory requirements of policy, they were reminded of their dependence on income support and threatened with the loss of this income if they did not obey. They were treated, in the sense of the liberal adult citizen, as children, who would not do the right thing if they were not threatened with punishment. Mothers recognised this and some resented it.

Being ascribed as a customer was new. Attempts to level relations between staff and customer in Centrelink officers and the creation of advisers with whom parents were to negotiate an agreement were part of the new customer service environment in which Australians Working Together was implemented. A customer identity was in direct conflict with a passive, dependent identity. While the former was created through office furnishings and alterations in language, the latter was sustained with the threat of a loss of livelihood. While the former was new, the latter was old and well-established.

In order to achieve its intention of creating independent adults, Australians Working Together imposed compulsory requirements on parents, most notably in the form of Participation Agreements. As a result, women who were already managing their family, employment and study lives were required to sign a contract in which they agreed to continue to do so. For these parents, the majority of Parenting Payment claimants, rather than fostering independence, the Participation Agreements placed them in a situation in which they were required to seek state approval if they wished to change the ordering of their daily lives. In order to achieve parents' compliance with this contractual arrangement, they were addressed with a well-known, easily recognised hail, as dependent. While an interpellation as dependent was not new, it was narrowed and redirected towards parents.

Australians Working Together did not dramatically change the daily lives of parents, as they were generally already engaged in the kinds of activities it encouraged. However, what did change dramatically was the environment in which they parented. No longer could mothers decide for themselves how best to organise

their employment, study and family. Under *Australians Working Together*, they risked breaching a contractual agreement if they stopped paid employment to prioritise their children's needs. Rather than making such decisions themselves, parents were instead required to notify Centrelink of any change and renegotiate their agreements. Failure to do so carried severe consequences, a loss of income support. While few if any penalties were applied to Parenting Payment claimants, the mothers in this study were well aware of this threat. In addition, Alexander et al. (2005) showed that parents tended to have an exaggerated sense of their obligations under their Participation Agreement and that many also did not understand that they could renegotiate their agreements if they needed to. As a result, parents might have continued with a heavier workload than necessary despite needing to change it for fear of losing their Parenting Payment. Under *Australians Working Together*, the state was transformed into a supervisor and disciplinarian in mothers' lives. Parenting was to occur around or alongside employment oriented activities. The state's focus was not supporting care, but rather enforcing a trajectory towards employment.

The policy neglect of care coupled with reduced autonomy served to mould parents' experience. Parents' interactions with personal advisers, which formed the heart of their welfare-to-work experience, were characterised by struggles for recognition. By requiring parents to sign a contractual agreement, which they could only amend in discussion with a personal adviser, *Australians Working Together* denied parents the autonomy to know their own needs. As Sennett (2003:262) writes,

... autonomy means accepting in others what one does not understand about them. In so doing, the fact of their autonomy is treated as equal to your own. The grant of autonomy dignifies the weak or the outsider.

Through *Australians Working Together*, the Australian government assumed that Parenting Payment claimants needed persuasion and threats in order to act in their best interests. The majority of claimants agreed with the policy position on what was in their best interests and were already acting in that way. Rather than limiting parents' freedom to make decisions for their families, the policy could instead have

supported parents in what they were doing; encouraging them and providing information, advice and assistance.

Chapter five

'It just didn't add up': Calculating welfare-to-work

Cause that's the other thing that I notice, having the experience now of being employed full time, is that there are costs that aren't factored into it when they're looking at getting off benefits and then moving into the workforce. Because the cost is - I am very isolated, so I don't have family I can just call upon - the cost for me then is emotional. Emotional. At the end of the day I am exhausted from work and then to turn around and then not only cook dinner for two children, but listen and try and sort them out and manage them, help them with homework. I got to a point where after three years I was exhausted. (Grace)

Introduction

When I spoke to mothers about employment, they explained how they weighed up the financial costs and benefits, as well as the non-financial. They were very aware of how wages affected their Parenting Payment and their access to associated benefits and concessions, but they were also closely attuned to the effect of employment on their families. Of those in a position to take paid work, some, like Grace, had given up their jobs because of the detrimental effect on their children and themselves, whereas others could not conceive of being without paid work, because of the important meaning it gave to their lives and the advantages it offered.

Margaret's employment is motivated by the social contribution she makes through teaching. She loves the job, wants to be independent but, most importantly, wants to set an example for her sons.

... because the boys' father didn't ever have a normal nine-to-five job that they saw, and because an awful lot of people where we live, not from any fault of their own, didn't have jobs, there where we were in the Housing Department. I, for one thing, thought, 'Gee, I am going to be the only example that my kids will see of people getting up and going off to work.' And I thought that is a really important thing for them to see ... I enjoy my work, I feel it's useful and I also would prefer to be as independent as possible.
(Margaret)

Like Margaret, Helen believes employment is important, but not if the financial returns are too low. Helen decided to turn down a full-time job because the additional money did not sufficiently compensate for the costs to her son. She explained how she arrived at this decision.

... I started thinking, 'Do I really want this job?' ... it would have been really stressful and really difficult. I was already having lots of complaints from the teacher about not making the child do the homework. By the time you get home at six o'clock and you get dinner and [clear up?] and do the washing – because you've got to keep up with that – forget homework ... And so I actually sat down and was thinking, you know, 'Is it worth me doing this job?'

... And I sat down and I wrote down – if I work full time, 8.30 to 5.30 five days a week and put my child in before- and after-school care every day, and he'd be fine for school hours, at the end of the day I would have been, after having paid for the after-school care ... I would have been \$80 a week better off. And that would be just ludicrous. To put myself and him through that. It's not like there

would have been any huge financial rewards to make that worthwhile. So I just scrapped it. (Helen)

Helen demonstrates how economic and non-economic elements of employment calculations interact. How much money is needed to make the effort of a full-time job worthwhile to her and her son? If she cannot support him doing his homework, how much is that worth? Like her, parents attempt to balance each with the other.

It was not my intention when starting this research to focus closely on the nature of mothers' employment decisions, but in the interviews, in response to my questions about how they made choices about employment, mothers like Margaret and Grace often explained in great detail how they weighed a range of economic concerns in concert with those of their own and their family's wellbeing. This chapter focuses on both the financial and non-financial dimensions of those calculations, examining two elements in particular: the financial returns of employment versus income support, and the employment entitlements which support parents in their attempts to balance work and family demands.

Financial 'incentives' to take employment have been central to welfare changes in liberal welfare states (Travers 2005). As seen in chapters one and three, Australia was no exception. Incentives were important elements of the recommendations made by the Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000), the government's response (Australian Government:2001), and the Australians Working Together package itself. The effectiveness of policies encouraging employment among welfare recipients through financial incentives has been subject to considerable economic modelling and some quantitative social research (Hulse and Randolph 2004, for example). This dimension of welfare-to-work has rarely been examined using qualitative research (Hulse et al. 2003:19). Yet qualitative studies offer valuable insight into how welfare recipients and low-wage workers incorporate economic factors into their calculations about the relative merits of employment and welfare receipt. Large surveys have examined the attitudes of welfare recipients to income support, employment and to parenting and to explore the effect of new policies. However, the intricacies of the interaction of economic concerns with parents' circumstances and their children's needs are such that they cannot be

captured in large-scale questionnaire research. Qualitative research is needed to ‘uncover the intersection between beliefs and economic practices ... to begin to provide a thorough evaluation of the assumptions that inform current welfare-to-work practices’ (McDowell 2005:374).

In Australian policy debates, the most prominent financial disincentives are effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs). EMTRs are a feature of means-tested benefits, whereby income support is reduced as earnings increase. After a certain earnings disregard, an amount of labour income which does not affect benefits, a taper rate is applied so that the value of income support payments gradually reduces as earnings increase. The EMTR is the proportion of each additional dollar earned which is paid in taxes and lost from income support payments. So for example, if a mother earns an additional dollar from which she pays 15 cents in tax and for which her Parenting Payment is reduced by 40 cents, she faces an EMTR of 55 per cent and keeps just 45 cents of her dollar’s earnings. For some this rate can be very high. As a result, concern has developed that if paid employment does not markedly increase beneficiaries’ total income, then they may elect instead to continue to receive welfare payments. This is the central ‘disincentive effect’ of the Australian welfare system to which government officials refer in chapter three.

To better understand mothers’ experience of financial incentives and disincentives, I turn first to mothers themselves. Examining their descriptions of the financial calculations they made when considering employment shows that they have a finely tuned understanding of EMTRs, even if they would not use that term. Orthodox economists’ depictions of these decisions, generally assumed to be decisions made by ‘rational economic man’, demonstrate a very narrow interpretation of highly complex calculations. Feminist economists, such as Sue Himmelweit (2002), locate such financial calculations within the gendered world in which mothers live and provide a better interpretation of mothers’ economic decisions, while also providing a link to literature on care.

Examining the non-financial elements in mothers’ descriptions of their employment decisions, it is clear that the goal of achieving ‘work/family balance’ is central. They strive to satisfactorily meet their commitments to their families as well as their

employers. Recognising this, I examine the kinds of ‘family-friendly benefits’ in employment which Parenting Payment claimants can access. I draw on the Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia survey to explore the kinds of jobs in which Parenting Payment recipients are employed. To provide a more sophisticated interpretation of the data, I developed a logistic regression model which shows that the most basic of in-work benefits, paid sick leave, is available to few part-time employees.

The concept of ‘social care’ encourages consideration of ‘the normative, economic and social frameworks within which [the activities and relations of care] are assigned and carried out’ (Daly and Lewis 2000:285) and so suggests a new way of conceiving of Parenting Payment. The low rates at which claimants can access paid sick leave, and the high rates at which parents combine earned income with social security payments, suggests that welfare payments act as a kind of back-up payment for people who do not receive paid leave from their jobs. This leads me to conclude that Parenting Payment could be regarded as more than a social security benefit: it could be understood as a work/family benefit, one which enables rather than inhibits employment.

Financial elements in employment decisions

There is no doubt that most Parenting Payment recipients have a strong economic imperative to increase their weekly income. As demonstrated in chapter two, the rates of poverty among households claiming social security benefits and among sole-parent households are high (Community Affairs References Committee 2004:247-248; Harding and Szukalskz 2000:4). All the mothers I interviewed were managing a very tight weekly budget, especially those with no employment income. They explained techniques for economising which they incorporated into all aspects of their lives, from day-to-day expenses like food and entertainment to bigger household expenses such as whitegoods or holidays.

Helen believed that having a larger weekly income would actually help her to spend less:

It's just a poverty cycle. If you don't have any money you can't spend the money to get the resources so that you don't need to spend the money later. You can't buy food in bulk because it's cheap, because you don't have the money. You know you can't get the credit to get the thing to pay it off later ... because you don't have the financial resources to do that. So you are always paying a lot more for things.

After Pam inherited her mum's house, her housing costs decreased. One of the things she particularly enjoyed about having extra money was the opportunity to go out with friends. She told me that previously:

... They didn't ask me out because they knew I couldn't go out, couldn't afford it. Sometimes a coffee, I couldn't even afford that, I'd think, 'Oh no, I need this money until I get paid again.' Or basically, 'I need it if I run out of milk, or I run out of bread or something.' That was more important for me than going out for a cup of coffee with friends.

Extraordinary expenses can be difficult to meet, as Nicole explained:

I've rung in tears before. Like bloody school photos have come in and I've got two kids living with me so that's nearly 60 dollars. But I've already shopped that week and paid my rent and where am I going to get the money from?

It is in this context that many mothers explained to me how they figured the financial gains and losses of employment. Naomi told me:

I was sort of self-employed for quite a long time. But it was like, I kept hitting a peak of how much I could earn and I couldn't get any further. I find that whole Parenting Payment system is not very – it doesn't stimulate the person to get out and get any further. I did the figures after doing the small business course ... there was a whole

lot of things [benefits associated with Parenting Payment] and if you go past a threshold on your income, you lose all of that. Anyway, it just didn't add up. It was six of one and [half-a-dozen of] the other. If you are going to work for the whole week and you come out with the same amount of money as you could if you were on a Parenting Payment, you just never get ahead because you are stuck in the cycle.

When Naomi talks about 'hitting a peak' she is referring to the EMTR aspect of means-tested benefits. The income disregard and earnings taper is different for single and partnered claimants of Parenting Payment. This is an effect of Parenting Payment Single being a pension and Parenting Payment Partnered an allowance. As a Parenting Payment Single recipient, Naomi could earn \$148.60 per fortnight without affecting her benefit level (refer table 8). Thereafter, for every additional dollar she earned her Parenting Payment was reduced by 40 cents. As a Parenting Payment Partnered claimant, Alia faced a higher taper at a lower level of earnings than Naomi. Alia could earn just \$62 before her Parenting Payment was reduced at a rate of 50 cents in the dollar. She would have lost Parenting Payment at 70 cents in the dollar for earnings above \$245.

Table 8. Earnings disregards and taper rates, 1 July – 19 September 2006

Benefit	Parenting Payment Single	Parenting Payment Partnered
Youngest child	aged less than 8	aged less than 6
Type of payment	Pension	Allowance
Base rate	\$499.70 plus \$17.80 supplement	\$370.50
Earnings disregard	\$152.60	\$62
Rate at which payments are reduced above earnings disregard	Above \$152.60, 40%	\$62 to \$250, 50% Above \$250, 60% (prior to 1 July, 70%)

Source: Centrelink 2006b. Notes: Rates for a principle carer with one child and partner, if applicable, in receipt of Newstart.

It is not only the loss of Parenting Payment dollars which mothers take into account. When Caroline was offered additional employment, she paused and calculated. How would it affect her household income and expenditure over the coming months? She had to weigh up the advantages of taking shifts with a new employer, shifts she was proud to have been offered, over the loss of benefits she would face if she ceased to be eligible for Parenting Payment.

I did work experience a few weeks back and they liked me that much they employed me, you know. I've done five shifts there and I haven't recorded [them with Centrelink], I will have to record it next fortnight and what I am going to be worried about is that I am going to lose the pension. I don't want to lose it just yet because I want to get the benefits because my car is due for rego next month and I still want to get the free registration. So, I am a bit worried about that. But I am going to have to tell them at the nursing home that, 'Okay, I am still on the pension, I will do so many shifts' work.'

Caroline determined that it was better to take fewer shifts and limit her income than to lose the waived fee for car registration granted to pensioners by the Roads and Traffic Authority (2005) in New South Wales. This decision in no way reduced her determination to increase her employment and eventually stop receiving benefits, but in the short term she needed the additional benefits that Parenting Payment provided.

Ancillary benefits associated with being a pension or allowance recipient are lost if parents earn enough to cease receiving cash assistance. Those available through Centrelink include Rent Assistance, the Telephone Allowance and support for education costs. Earnings over a certain level would also mean parents could no longer claim the Health Care Card which entitles holders to discounted pharmaceuticals and health services, but also to other concession discounts (some cinemas, for instance, offer reduced price tickets to Health Care Card holders). Many other organisations offer discounts or waive fees for pension or allowance recipients. For example, local governments might provide for reduced council rates

and state government transport authorities usually offer concessions on public transport. Child support payments from non-residential parents might be recalculated and reduced. Parents also face the loss of family benefits in the form of Family Tax Benefit Part A. Couple parents additionally lost access to Family Tax Benefit Part B if the 'secondary' earner increased her income, as, at the time of my fieldwork, the cut-off level was very low for her earnings (Cass and Brennan 2003).

Economic modelling demonstrates that many parents do face high effective tax rates when increasing their earnings. People with dependent children are more likely to experience high EMTRs than those without children; in fact under the 2002 tax/transfer system parents of children aged less than 16 years made up three-quarters of all those who faced high EMTRs (Beer 2003:S18). Lone parents confronted particularly high EMTRs, more than half of those who had earnings encountered EMTRs of over 60 per cent (Beer 2003:S18). This was the case for only 20 per cent of parents in couples.

Public and community housing tenants incorporate an additional element into their calculations because their rent is tied to their level of income. Cheryl worked part time when her children were in primary school. At one point she reflected on her weekly income:

I worked out with the rise in my rent – because it all goes on the percentage of your income – so the rise in my rent, the tax I was paying, I lost my pension benefits, my card and whatnot, and I was paying before- and after-school care: I was actually earning five dollars a week for all the drama of going to work three days a week.
(Cheryl)

For those, like Cheryl, who live in public or community housing, EMTRs can be especially high as their rent is calculated at a set a proportion of their income. Many public tenants are Parenting Payment recipients. The proportion of sole parents and of women in public housing is considerably higher than in the community as a whole. In 2000-01, 67 per cent of tenants were women and 27 per cent of tenants

were sole parents (Wood and Ong 2005:5).³⁶ Rental rates in Australian public and community housing are generally set at 25 per cent of a tenant's income. As tenants' income increases so does their rent.³⁷ Many Australian public tenants face high effective tax rates; 16 per cent face EMTRs of more than 60 per cent when working part time (Wood and Ong 2005:8,26). Women, especially those with partners who are not in the labour force, are the most affected.

Margaret told me that she felt forced to give up an offer of full-time employment she would have dearly loved to take, because her public housing rent would have increased so substantially.

Certainly when I got the full-time job, I would have gone off it [Parenting Payment] completely. With relish. 'Isn't this fantastic?' And then the Department [of Housing] were trying to work out the rent and this guy ... said, 'Oh look, I have just discovered this rule that once you gross \$1000 you have to pay full market rent. You are not eligible for any rebate.' And on the house I am in, it is \$500 a week rent. So I was earning I think it was \$1043 a week, I would have had to pay \$500 a week rent and we would have had less money than what I was getting [before], so I just had to cut back again. I was honestly suicidal. It was, and I am not normally a defeatist ... I thought, 'This is insane – one government department virtually preventing you from working to your full capacity.' I have the job, I was willing to work ... It was like, now this has floored me, I have done everything I can to get ahead as much as I can and be as independent as possible, it was just like the end ...

... The only thing I could do was reduce my pay to half again, it meant I was eligible for a tiny little bit of pension, but also a Health Care Card, you know, you are eligible for bulk billing, dental, hospital, all of them. And that \$1.10 fare ticket is the most useful

³⁶ In contrast lone parents comprise just 5 per cent of the whole population.

³⁷ There is typically also a lag, so that rent does not increase immediately when a tenant's income rises.

thing, particularly if you're a working, busy person, it is the most helpful. It is such a big saving, it's fantastic.

Margaret considered that it was important to be in receipt of a partial Parenting Payment as it entitled her to a range of other benefits. Most important was the fact that a lower income meant a lower rent, but combined with savings from using a concession card on health and transport, the advantages of claiming Parenting Payment meant that working full time was just not worth it. The operation of rules from the two departments combined to create a situation which Margaret described as 'insane'. She faced two conflicting institutional rationalities which arose due to the different jurisdictional responsibilities of the state and federal governments and the different intent of the two systems. The state government is responsible for public housing and the federal government for income support. One seeks to provide housing to those on the lowest incomes, the other to encourage employment.

Rational economic man ponders effective marginal tax rates

Considerable Australian economic analysis has examined the interaction between receipt of social security benefits and entry into employment (see for example, Beer 1998; Buddelmeyer et al. 2006; Creedy et al. 2003; Dockery et al. 2007; Ingles 1998; Keating and Lambert 1998). When EMTRs are high there is said to be little incentive to take employment, as the same or similar income could be derived from income support. Reducing EMTRs would, therefore, increase the movement of people into employment (Creedy and Dawkins 1999:71). Often, the reason why EMTRs would produce disincentive effects is not examined. For example, Keating and Lambert (1998:281) write that high EMTRs are 'problems of disincentives' and as a result 'many of the lowest paid people are not much better off when they are working'. They proceed to explore models for reducing EMTRs, without specifying why high EMTRs serve as disincentives. This is because the decision-maker they have in mind is *homo economicus*, rational economic man, the mainstay of orthodox economics (Meagher and Nelson 2004:104).

Orthodox economists view the rational economic man who makes a decision to take employment as a ‘utility-maximising, rational individual’. It is assumed he seeks maximum benefit for himself by weighing up his preference for leisure over his need for income (Flatau and Dockery 2001:7). For this reason rational economic man would not increase his hours of employment if the financial returns were not sufficient to compensate for his loss of leisure time (Flatau and Dockery 2001:8). To some extent, then, orthodox economists would view mothers’ decisions about employment, as I outlined them above, as rational economic decisions, in that they were trying to derive maximum benefit from earnings and income support. This is an important finding because there is very little evidence about the behavioural effects of EMTRs in Australia (Travers 2005:101). It means some mothers do make the types of calculated decisions about employment which economists predict.

However, there are important qualifications to make here. Firstly, mothers are not men. This point might seem obvious, but conventional economics remains highly androcentric (Meagher and Nelson 2004:102). This has implications for how economic agents are perceived and leads to male norms in economic modelling. Secondly, ‘rational’ decisions take account of more than dollars and utility. People are social beings who make decisions in an environment with which they interact (Himmelweit 2000:12; Meagher and Nelson 2004:105). So mothers make decisions informed by their notion of good mothering, which reflects social expectations. Thirdly, the mothers I interviewed were not making decisions to maximise individual utility, but rather *family* utility. This raises the relational element of mothers’ decisions (Himmelweit 2000:4). Their decisions were centred around care, and were not solely motivated by individual self-interest. As a result, mothers’ decisions, concerned with the wellbeing of the family, might sometimes appear to mainstream economists as irrational, because family wellbeing did not necessarily equate with increased income.

To better describe mothers’ decision-making, Duncan and Edwards (1999) coined the term ‘gendered moral rationalities’, as I noted elsewhere. In their large study in Britain, the USA, Germany and Sweden, they found that lone mothers primarily understood lone motherhood in terms of their responsibility for their children (Duncan and Edwards 1999:51). How mothers interpreted and discharged that

responsibility was shaped by their understanding of good motherhood. With regard to combining employment and motherhood, these moral imperatives are gendered, hence gendered moral rationalities. As a relation that is social, motherhood is situated in locality, race and class; so understandings of good mothering vary for women in the inner city to women in the suburbs, between white and black women and between working-class and middle-class women (Duncan and Edwards 1999:121-128).

Duncan and Edwards (1999:118) write:

This is not to say that economic calculations about benefit levels, wage rates, day care costs and so on, are not an important factor in lone mothers' decisions about entering the labour force or living on benefits. Rather this factor needs to be set within another model of rationality. It is socially negotiated, non-economic understandings about what is morally right and socially acceptable which are primary factors in determining what is seen as rational behaviour.

In making the decisions explored above, mothers appear to be rational actors, but their responsibility to their children is ever present. For example, Grace explained that she could earn slightly more by working full time than she received on Parenting Payment, but the loss of time created tension in her family and depleted her energy. Grace had to balance the benefits of more money against stress and exhaustion.

Because [when] I work, my rent goes up, I start losing family payment and then at the same time, Parenting Payment. So yeah, it just becomes a nightmare. And when you work out that, 'Hang on, I've worked 40 hours and I am only like \$30 better off,' you go, 'Hang on, \$30 financially, but look at all the stress that I've got and look at what I put my kids through, it's just not worth it.' At the end of the day, well that's how I sit down and work it out, you know, 'Is this worth it?' 'Hang on. What's the stress to my family and how exhausted am I?' It'd be different if, maybe, I don't know,

if I was getting an extra \$100 or \$200 a week, and I'd think, 'Oh I actually, yeah well I don't mind that amount of stress, because the compensation for that is [you're] \$100 better off.' But again that only takes into effect, I sat down and worked out I should be earning about 50 or 60 thousand for that to kick in and it's like, yeah, those jobs are just [sarcastically] a bit out of my reach at the moment.

We can see Grace attempting to put a monetary value on the strain her employment puts on her family; it is worth more than \$30, rather closer to \$100 or even \$200. She concludes that the kind of employment she would need to make a full-time job worthwhile is presently unattainable.

Mothers are aware of the effect their jobs can have on their children. In the quote above, we see Grace, like other mothers I spoke to, testing the possible impact of employment. Barrie Thorne (2001) shows how parents engage in a continual reading of signs in their children, they interpret them looking for larger meaning and develop an ever-changing series of responses. This frequently revolves around homework, grades and the child's behaviour (Thorne 2001:368). This scanning and looking for signs is central to the orchestration of care and is especially important when things change in the family due to new employment or new care arrangements (Thorne 2001:270-1). Depending on what they see and how they interpret it, parents may decide the costs of employment are too great or, as Margaret did, that employment is essential.

Time and energy are critical dimensions in mothers' assessments. It is apparent in all of their discussions of employment: they are concerned with how they will parent their children as they would wish, with time and energy to help with homework, to support their children emotionally, to just be together as a family, not to mention time and energy to cook, clean and wash.

In examining the calculations that parents make about employment, it is important to consider the family care practices they have developed. To suddenly substitute money for time might well seem a poor deal to some children. Grace's son

certainly let her know that he was not happy when she was not around. During her most recent, week-long period of employment, he was moody and he skipped school. For Grace, compared to how her son had reacted when she last tried employment, this was an improvement and evidence he would soon be ready for her to go back to work, but not ready yet. Hochschild (2001:209-211) observed some working parents 'Taylorizing' their home life, seeking to complete household chores efficiently, asking their children to make efficient use of time, and also creating time blocks within which to have 'quality time' with their children. Once again, children used to family time operating in a different, more meandering way may not readily accommodate a need to be efficient because of the time demands of their parent's job. Their resistance, like that of Grace's son, could be difficult.

In their research with young Australian people completing primary school and high school, Barbara Pocock and Jane Clarke (2005) found that around half of the young people they interviewed wished they could spend more time with their parents, even if it meant less money coming into the household. Around a fifth of them wished they could somehow have both. The young people said that they wanted their parents to be happy in what they do; that when their parents work the hours they would wish and enjoy their jobs it has positive effects at home. On the other hand, the young people wanted their parents not to be 'stressed' during the time they spent with them or to be otherwise negatively affected by their work. These criteria also applied to mothers who were at home full time, the young people wanted them to be happy in that work, not bored or wishing for something else. These children are active participants in their family lives and may choose to make their views known to their parents.

Tess Ridge (2007) found similar issues in her British study with children of lone mothers who had recently taken employment. The children were strongly aware of the importance of money in the family. If their mothers had found secure employment and the family income had increased many felt that they personally benefited, for example because they were able to attend social events which they had previously been unable to afford (Ridge 2007:404). Children also perceived that their mothers' employment raised their social status and they appreciated this both on their mothers' behalf as well as their own. Changes in the time available for

children were felt most acutely by those whose mothers worked outside of school hours: these children missed the time they had previously spent with their mothers. Some children worried that their mothers might be suffering while trying to manage both employment and their family lives due to tiredness, stress, or physical and emotional health (Ridge 2007:410). Children made significant contributions to support their mothers' employment. They assisted more with housework and the care of siblings, they supported their mothers emotionally and they tried not to cause their mothers to worry about money or illness (Ridge 2007:412). In this, Ridge demonstrates the importance of children as actors in maintaining mothers' employment.

So a decision to take or expand employment or to reduce or give up employment involved balancing financial advantage with the wellbeing of the family. Within each of these elements are complicated components that exert influence that may be complementary, but are often contradictory. All can be difficult to assess. The financial incentives of employment are not straightforward. Rather parents tell of detailed calculations which demonstrate knowledge of EMTRs in practice. Thinking about employment also involves considering the dignity, self-worth and identity that would be provided by the available jobs. Assessing family wellbeing includes examining one's own and one's children's health and emotional status, whether children would benefit more by the example of an employed parent, or of a parent who is at home when they are needed, and, of course, how to fit in the daily demand of all the housework.

Quantitative research by the Department of Family and Community Services found similar themes. A negative impact on the family was the primary disadvantage that parents cited with regard to employment, the extra money the primary advantage (A Gregory et al. 2003:6-7). Parents were worried about their children and the family's wellbeing; about being away from their children, providing care as they would wish and having enough time – particularly for the family and the household chores. Those working full time found time pressures especially difficult and, like some of the mothers I interviewed, told of their exhaustion as a result.

As research with mothers and children cited above demonstrates, the family manages best when parents are able to achieve the balance between their work and family lives that they want. Daly and Lewis' (2000) concept of social care encourages an analysis with a broad view, paying attention to the policy context in which employment and family care takes places. In the second half of this chapter I explore whether or not the kinds of jobs to which Parenting Payment claimants have access help support them in this struggle to balance employment and family needs.

Trying to find a balance between work and family

Australians Working Together encouraged Parenting Payment claimants to engage in part-time employment. This policy sits within a larger policy context in which part-time jobs have been promoted as an ideal means through which mothers might balance the competing demands of employment and family care. As seen in chapter three, the Australian Prime Minister described a typical working couple with children as a 'policeman and a part-time shop assistant' (Cass and Brennan 2003:52). Part-time employment offers particular advantages to mothers who, regardless of their employment status, commonly continue to shoulder the majority of unpaid work in the home (Craig 2007; Hochschild 1989). Part-time employment allows mothers time in which to complete household and care tasks. Research consistently finds mothers employed part time experience less work-life conflict than those who are full time (Crompton 2006:80, Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach 2001:128, Higgins et al. 2000:23, Hosking and Western 2005:8). They spend less time on the job so they can better arrange their family lives to fit around their working hours.

The 'crunch time' of sickness, as Barbara Pocock (2003) describes it, illustrates some of the key work/family balance issues. In order to accommodate family illness, mothers needed either highly flexible workplaces or very supportive families. Cheryl, for example, has found the former. Suitable employment and considerate employers enable her to care for her children at the same time as doing her job:

When they're sick, they can actually come with me, because I'm doing [cleaning] houses, they can actually come to the job with me. And, like I said, they don't get sickly sick, so it's not like people are going, 'Oh no, your child's got some potent virus or something that's contagious.' So I've been lucky in that respect.

Caroline is able to maintain paid employment because her parents, who live nearby, help her care for her sons.

If I do have a job late in the afternoon they will make sure that if I don't get home for dinner, they will feed the kids. Like last week, for instance, when I did the work at the nursing home I had two afternoon shifts which was 3 to 11 that night, well the boys went to Mum and Dad's and Mum gave them dinner ... They're good support for me.

A number of mothers said it was a challenge to find employment that would accommodate their care responsibilities. It often meant trading away some of the financial benefits offered by other jobs. Erica, for example, worked for a consultancy from home and could fit her job around her son and the housework. Erica believes that she may have earned more if she had worked in a different job, but the ability to work from home, as well as having 'incredibly understanding' employers, was more important, especially as she had secure employment. Erica has been able to keep the same job for more than ten years because, when she has needed time for her son, she has not had to stop work. Erica found a job which she could fit around her family life.

Tara has also found a way to balance the time she spends at work with time with her two sons. She maintains a patchwork of casual jobs, but explained that she has 'always taken work that fits in with the children'. She is currently working as a teacher's aide at their school and at the after-school care. During the school holidays she works at the races and at holiday care. While 'all the casual work is a bit of a juggle', it is mostly centred on the boys' school, so she can be available for them at the same time as earning an income.

Belle has taken a more long-term approach. When I interviewed her there were eighteen months remained until her eligibility for Parenting Payment would cease when her son turned 16. Knowing that she would then have less income support, Belle was trying to increase her employability in the meantime. In part, this involved taking short-term teaching jobs because they increased her work experience, even if they did not greatly improve her income. Grace made the opposite decision, choosing not to seek employment in the short term. She felt the financial returns were not enough to justify the difficulties her employment caused for her family.

One of the key differences between Belle and Grace is the kind of employment they can expect to find. Grace's jobs have been 'mostly office work, administration – from bookkeeping to managing an office' and her employers had not given her the flexibility or understanding she needed to care for her children. This form of work will still be available for her in the future, with some updating of her skills. Grace has no expectation that future employment will provide the family benefits she needs for her children, nor any career-driven desire to take a job as soon as possible. Belle, on the other hand, is working in an academic job. She feels that she must work steadily if she is going to secure a permanent position and that once she does so, she will have a good and reliable income. While this goal is difficult, she feels it is achievable. As shown in chapter two, many more parents on Parenting Payment are in circumstances like Grace than like Belle. Many also have little employment experience or none at all and little hope of finding good employment with family benefits (Butterworth 2003:26; Dockery and Strombeck 2004:438).

Support from others with fulfilling one's caring responsibilities can considerably reduce the stress that working parents face (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach 2001:131). It is not surprising then that lone mothers face particular difficulties in finding a work/family balance as they take most responsibility for their families' care needs. Sole mothers are more likely than mothers in couples, often substantially more likely, to report an unmet need for family benefits at work (Hughes and Gray 2005:21). This was the case for every measure on which mothers were surveyed by Hughes and Gray, including: flex time, rostered days off, working

from home, time off in lieu, informal arrangements, paid and unpaid leave. Lone mothers are also more likely to believe their use of these benefits is disapproved of by their coworkers and would be refused by their bosses.

Employment-based family benefits are unevenly distributed across the workforce, both within and between workplaces (Gray and Tudbull 2002:25). Those on low incomes, in casual and/or part-time positions, are less likely to be able to take advantage of flexible work hours or family leave (Brennan and Blaxland 2005). In contrast, those employees, usually professionals and para-professionals, who employers are most eager to retain, are most likely to be offered family-friendly provisions as a form of reward for their contribution (Thorntwaite and Buchanan 2001:20). Parenting Payment claimants are less well represented in these kinds of positions. The kinds of occupations which Parenting Payment claimants hold are much more likely to be lower-status positions: twice the proportion work as labourers (generally cleaners) compared to other mothers; and in the field of clerical, sales and service work, Parenting Payment claimants more often work in elementary and intermediate positions, than do other mothers (HILDA 4.1, my analysis. See appendix three). Only one-fifth of Parenting Payment claimants work as professionals, compared to one-third of other mothers.

Work/family benefits are more often and more homogenously provided in the public sector. The disparity in access to such benefits is greatest in the private sector, in which highly paid workers benefit substantially more than their low-paid counterparts (Thorntwaite 2004:176, Whitehouse and Zetlin 1999:230). But only one-fifth of Parenting Payment claimants worked in the public sector, compared to one-third of mothers overall (HILDA 4.1, my analysis. See appendix three). HILDA data also shows that Parenting Payment recipients are more likely than other employees to work in small firms which can be less able to implement generous employee benefits. As a result, Belle, highly educated and working for a very large organisation, has access to a great deal of flexibility in determining how and when she works, in contrast with Grace, who found neither flexible employment nor accommodating employers.

Paid sick leave, paid family leave and unpaid leave can help parents meet their family responsibilities (Bowes 2005:425). The most fundamental of these employment entitlements is paid sick leave. Both full- and part-time employees need family-friendly benefits. This is most evident in times of sickness. Illness is not predictable. When it occurs suddenly, the work/family balance is put to the test (Pocock 2003). Paid sick leave is intended precisely for such times. It allows workers to take time off in order to care for themselves without losing income. Parents also often use paid sick leave to care for sick children.

Paid sick leave and paid holiday leave are the most commonly available employment entitlements, each available to 71 per cent of the workforce in 2004 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005b:3). That the proportions were identical is to be expected given that both act as markers of permanent employment. In the following analysis, I focus on paid sick leave, because that is the benefit designed to help employees with an unexpected need to take time off from their job. Paid sick leave is uncommon in part-time employment. HILDA data shows that among employees who worked part time, just over a third (37 per cent) could use paid sick leave (HILDA 4.1, my analysis. See appendix three). Nearly all of those who had access to paid sick leave (96 per cent) were employed in permanent part-time positions. So the key to being able to use paid sick leave is finding a permanent position, especially when you work part time.

Parenting Payment recipients are encouraged to take part-time employment to reduce their need for income support. If they sought new part-time jobs, what is the probability that they would be able to access the most basic of in-work benefits, paid sick leave? Using 2004 data from the HILDA survey, I investigated which part-time workers could use paid sick leave and what facilitated the likelihood of being able to access it. I developed the following model, using logistic regression, to explore the factors which increase or reduce the probability of paid sick leave being available among part-time employees only.

Table 9. Availability of paid sick leave among part-time employees

	Odds ratio of paid sick leave
Hours per week	
<i>(control=long part-time hours 21-34 hrs)</i>	
1-14 hrs	0.1***
15-20 hrs	0.3***
Industry ANZSIC 2 digit	
<i>(control=mean probability across all industries)</i>	
Industries of 56% of women's employment	
Food retailing	0.9
Personal and household good retailing	1.0
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	0.3***
Business services	1.1
Education	1.7***
Health services	1.9***
Occupation	
<i>(control=mean probability across all occupations)</i>	
Professionals	1.1
Associate professionals	1.5*
Tradespersons	0.8
Advanced clerical & service workers	1.4
Intermediate clerical, sales & service workers	1.2
Intermediate production & transport workers	0.4**
Elementary clerical, sales & service workers	0.7
Labourers	0.6*
Organisation size – number of employees	
<i>(control=mean probability across all sizes)</i>	
Less than 20	0.6***
20-99	0.8
100-499	0.9
500 or more	1.5***
Job tenure – years	
<i>(control=less than 1 year)</i>	
1 to 2	1.2
2 to 5	2.3***
5 or more	2.6***
Dependent children aged 15 or less	
<i>(control=no children)</i>	
Youngest less than 6	2.2***
Youngest 6-12	1.5*
Youngest 13-15	1.0
Union membership	
<i>(control=non-member)</i>	
Member	2.0***
Gender	
<i>(control=female)</i>	
Male	0.6***

Sample: employees working less than 35 hours per week. HILDA 4.1.

Notes: McFadden's R2: 0.324. ***p<.001 **p<.01 *p<.05

The above model demonstrates that the longer one's part-time hours, the greater the probability of being able to use paid sick leave (see table 9). Compared to someone working long-part-time hours (between 21 and 34 per week), someone working 15 to 20 hours has odds of 0.3:1 – or just under one-third the odds – of being able to

use paid sick leave. An employee working a short week of less than 15 hours has one-tenth the odds of being able to use paid sick leave compared to their counterparts working long part-time hours. The likelihood of being able to access paid sick leave is extremely low for any but long-hours part-time workers; especially when remembering that this is a comparison between part-time workers, among whom only 37 per cent could use paid leave.

The advantage of statistical modelling is that by including variables in the model, you control for their effect. If examining cross-tabulations, it may seem that the underlying reason that employees with very short working hours have limited access to paid sick leave is because many work an industry that is less likely to offer paid sick leave, or in occupations where paid sick leave is less often available. The above model, however, shows that working short hours has a large negative effect on the probability of being able to use paid sick leave when the effect of industry, occupation, size of the firm and union membership is controlled. An employee working short hours has small odds of being able to access paid sick leave – and the shorter the hours, the smaller the odds.

In addition, the above model offers some guidance as to the kind of part-time employment which would maximise the probability of paid sick leave. Employees working in education or health services; in large organisations which employ more than 500 people; or in positions with long job tenure have the highest odds of access to paid sick leave. Therefore, to maximise Parenting Payment recipients' chances of finding part-time work with paid sick leave, they should be supported to find employment likely to provide long-term prospects, and to train for positions in health and education, which generally require post-secondary qualifications. In addition, to increase the likelihood that good part-time work is available requires labour market change, so that short hours part-time work offers paid sick leave, so that more retail and wholesale jobs offer permanent part-time positions, and so that it is not only professionals who have good chances of being offered permanent part-time jobs.

Parenting Payment supporting employment

Many mothers work part time, many of them in casual jobs (Pocock and Masterman-Smith 2005:127). Part-time workers usually earn less money than full-time workers and casual employment can be unpredictable. As a result, casual part-time jobs are easiest to manage for workers who are able to rely on another source of income (Pocock et al. 2004:39-40). Casual workers have no access to paid leave when they or their family members are sick so another source of income makes it possible to take time off when necessary. Otherwise they face the difficult choice between caring for their family's health and paying the bills. For mothers the additional income is commonly that of their partner. These families fit the 'policeman and the part-time shop assistant' type described by Howard. In these families, the mother working in a part-time job has a full-time income to supplement her own – she is not the *policeman*. This is a family employment model part way between the dual-earner and the male-breadwinner, a one-and-a-half earner model (Lewis 2001).

While they might at other times in their lives fit the one-and-a-half earner model family, when in receipt of Parenting Payment, parents do not. It is worth remembering that it is precisely because they do not fit this model that claimants are entitled to Parenting Payment. This is the case for both one-parent and two-parent families. In one-parent families, as constructed by income support rules, the sole earner, if employed, is earning less than the family needs; in two-parent families, the parent regarded as the primary earner is unemployed, sick, disabled or otherwise unable to earn, or they may be employed but earning a low wage. The primary carer may likewise be employed, but is also on a low income. Parenting Payment claimants, then, have little or no other family income on which to rely when managing casual and/or part-time employment.

In the meantime, mothers need to find strategies to manage the risks posed by casual, part-time positions. This is a particular concern for mothers in receipt of Parenting Payment. HILDA data shows that only half of all employed mothers claiming Parenting Payment were able to use paid sick leave, compared to 70 per cent of female and 80 per cent of male employees (see table 10).

Table 10. Access to paid sick leave among employees

	Access to paid sick leave (%)
Parenting Payment mothers in employment	50
All employed mothers	70
All female employees	70
All male employees	80

Source: HILDA 4.1, my analysis

Tara explained the importance of Parenting Payment to her in this regard:

I don't get Parenting Payment currently because I have too much income from nearly full-time work in casual jobs. But I do get Family Tax Benefits. And I have a health care card so the rates on the house are reduced ... and I get a concession on public transport. Also, it's good to be connected to Parenting Payment in case I get sick. I see it as a bit of a safety net.

Part-time and casual workers need family-friendly benefits, just as full-time earners do; for instance, when they or their children fall sick. A number of the mothers I spoke to used Parenting Payment in a way similar to Tara. They regarded Parenting Payment as something to fall back on; a second source of income when their employment did not offer paid leave.

More than that, Parenting Payment gave mothers a degree of flexibility in their employment arrangements, a safety net to fall back upon when there were problems with work, and so added an important dimension to their decisions about employment –the availability of Parenting Payment allowed them to stop work or reduce their hours, take intermittent jobs or casual jobs, 'be there' for their children, take time off when they or their children were sick, study in order to increase their earning potential, ease their way back into the labour market slowly, and test how they and their children would cope with employment and decide that the time was not yet right. Parenting Payment offered a source of stable income and as such gave parents a degree of security, regardless of whether or not they or their partners were

in employment. This is an important dimension underlying parents' calculations regarding family and employment. It meant they could afford to wait for a job limited to school hours or to stop work during the school holidays to care for their children. The availability of Parenting Payment gives parents the option to put their children first when they cannot find employment that will allow them to do so. It acts as a type of paid leave for parents in casual jobs, who would otherwise have no income if they failed to attend work because of illness in the family.

Conclusion

In calculating the advantages and disadvantages of employment, mothers focus strongly on the financial elements of the equation. They demonstrate a strong, clear awareness of the economic trade-offs associated with taking or increasing employment when receiving means-tested benefits. They know that the combined effect of lost income support and associated benefits plus taxes, especially when combined with increased rent for public tenants, can result in high EMTRs. They know that increasing earned income does not always greatly increase the total household income. In making these financial calculations, mothers are behaving as rational economic actors. However, mothers also focus strongly on non-financial elements and demonstrate gendered moral rationalities, rather than the rationalities of *homo economicus*.

The non-financial elements in mothers' evaluations include the importance of setting a good example for their children and the benefits for themselves in terms of their identity and self-esteem. They are also concerned with 'being there' for their children, which is more than just being there when they are sick or being there to help them with their homework or being there when they come home from school, although these are important, but rather providing their children with a sense of security that derives from knowing that their parent or parents are available to them and are caring for them. The stress of time pressures is ever present in these equations. Overall, mothers are concerned to be able to maintain a degree of balance between their employment and family lives.

Work/family benefits are designed to help parents to find this balance. Mothers are encouraged to take part-time employment to ensure they have time after paid work for the unpaid work of the family. However, if mothers work part time they are much less likely to be able to access the most fundamental employment entitlement, paid sick leave. Parenting Payment claimants, whether sole or partnered, do not fit the dual earner model of the policeman and the part-time shop assistant in which they could rely on another full-time income if they are unable to work due to sickness. Instead some use Parenting Payment in this way.

Examining Parenting Payment in terms of Daly and Lewis's (2000) concept of social care raises the question of how the state could increase the capacity of parents in part-time employment to care for their children. Tara's method of combining casual employment with income support as a 'safety net' suggests a different way in which to view income support for parents, that is, as a benefit for work/family reconciliation. Not a benefit which is negotiated with bosses, as many parents, working in low wage, casual jobs, are not in a position to bargain for good family-friendly conditions, but one which is provided outside of the labour market, by government, for parents who would struggle otherwise to balance the needs of their children with those of their jobs.

Interestingly, staff from the Department of Family and Community Services presented a paper in 2003 which examined work-family arrangements among Parenting Payment recipients and arrived at a similar conclusion: 'Parenting Payment provides a way of achieving workforce attachment, increased income from paid work and work family balance.' (A Gregory et al. 2003:12). Unfortunately, recognition of the importance of Parenting Payment for labour market attachment seems to have been lost in the introduction of Australians Working Together, a policy built on the opposite assumption: that income support inhibits claimants' commitment to employment. The next phase of Australian welfare change more starkly ignored this issue. In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I draw on my findings to examine the policy which replaced Australians Working Together in 2006 and 2007, Welfare to Work.

Conclusion

So I'm all for supporting parents, giving them retraining while they're happy with it. But I'd like the other side of it, too. 'Okay, we won't be able to support you as much when the child is this age. Would you like to see the social worker and discuss some of the avenues that will support your family?' Not just, 'Get a job, get money and everything will be all right'. (Erica)

Introduction

This thesis arose from a concern with how mothers experienced the implementation of Australians Working Together, a policy package which required them, for the first time, to undertake compulsory activities in order to retain their benefits. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the Australian social security system gave dedicated payments to mothers to support the work of caring for children. While the eligibility criteria expanded over time – for example, to include additional groups of mothers and to include fathers – the fundamental policy logic remained the same. If a parent, usually a mother, had no income or a limited income, the state would provide funds so that she could mother full time. Australians Working Together changed this policy position by making employment-oriented activity an essential part of parents' eligibility for income support.

I followed a sample group of women who were subject to Australians Working Together requirements to find out how they perceived the key policy issues at the juncture of family life, employment, education and welfare. I situated their

experiences within the available evidence about Australian parents in receipt of income support: their activities and aspirations and the assistance and constraints which they encountered. I compared mothers' description of the welfare policy problem with that of the officials who argued for policy change. Using feminist welfare regime analyses, I located official conceptions of social security policy within the policy logics of adult-worker model families and citizenship responsibilities. Next I tracked mothers as they entered the physical environment of the social security office to see how they experienced policy in practice, at the street-level of policy implementation. Here I considered the importance of the office space and the role of personal advisers in mediating policy within workplace, legislative and organisational contexts. Finally I scrutinised mothers' decisions about paid work: how they determined whether it was worthwhile to take or keep a job; the factors they took into account; and the significant contribution made by income support towards enabling low-income mothers' employment.

Starting with mothers' perspectives on the policy in their everyday lives, my analysis moved outwards to develop a social, economic and policy context for their experiences. This is a new approach, grounded in the everyday lives of welfare recipients both epistemologically and methodologically. The quotidian policy analysis drew on multiple research methods at several levels of analysis.

Basing the policy analysis in mothers' experience led me to two bodies of sociological theory: recognition and care. Theories of recognition and respect provided the framework I used to understand mothers' position within an income support system. I developed a synthesis, drawing on the work of Honneth (1995, 2003) and Fraser (2003), and augmenting it with Sennett's (2003) work on respect. These theories highlight aspects of the struggles for recognition of particular pertinence to mothers as providers of care and also as welfare recipients negotiating social security. In their engagement with the welfare system, mothers sought recognition of: their autonomy to determine for themselves how to manage their family lives; the contributions they make to Australian society; and the care-giving which fills their day-to-day lives. Investigating these theories further reveals the importance of redistribution operating in concert with recognition. Mothers' desire for the value of care to be acknowledged speaks to feminist theories of care: as care

givers, their understanding of care is multifaceted. They experience care as acts of love; as gendered responsibility; as a form of labour which requires skills, resources and time; and as relational, involving both the care recipient and the care-giver (Daly and Lewis 2000; Fisher and Tronto 1990; Ungerson 1983).

This final chapter is structured around the theoretical themes which have emerged in this thesis: recognition for mothers' social contributions in terms of care as well as employment, education and voluntary work; recognition of autonomy; and redistribution. I review some of the key findings of my analysis of *Australians Working Together* within this framework. In doing so, I reflect on the implications for a significant Australian social security policy development which occurred after the completion of my fieldwork, *Welfare to Work*. I conclude by drawing out possibilities for change for better recognition and better redistribution for low-income mothers.

From *Australians Working Together* to *Welfare to Work*

Australians Working Together marked a significant shift in Australian social security policy for parents. For the first time, compulsory employment-oriented activities were required of parents in receipt of income support. Prior to the introduction of this policy, low-income parents could claim income support on the basis of their full-time care responsibilities throughout most of their children's school years. Under *Australians Working Together*, Parenting Payment recipients whose youngest child was aged 13 to 15 were required to undertake compulsory activities in order to remain eligible for income support. *Australians Working Together* was the beginning of a process which narrowed the place of care in the Australian social security system.

Before the introduction of *Australians Working Together* in 2002 and 2003, low-income parents, whether sole or partnered, could be eligible for Parenting Payment if their youngest child was aged less than 16 years. There were no employment or training requirements. *Australians Working Together* made annual meetings with a personal adviser compulsory for claimants whose youngest child was of school age. Claimants with high-school-aged children were additionally required to participate

in an approved activity for 150 hours within a six month period. Australians Working Together compelled parents to enter into a contractual agreement with the state, committing themselves to a particular set of activities. Failure to enter into or adhere to this agreement could lead to serious penalties, which could escalate from a reduction of Parenting Payment by 18 per cent for six months, to a 24 per cent reduction for six months, and finally to the total withdrawal of benefits for eight weeks.

Australians Working Together was a first step in a new direction. Welfare to Work, in contrast, was a leap. Compulsory activity requirements are now imposed when a parent's youngest child is in the early years of primary school. Today, parents are compelled to undertake at least 15 hours of employment per week. Any parent not doing 15 hours of employment must seek such employment and also, in a period of six months, complete 150 hours of an additional activity: education, training or voluntary work. Penalties for failing to comply with this expanded obligation have changed so that any breach could lead to a total loss of payments for eight weeks. Employment has become an essential and unavoidable obligation of low-income parents. At the same time, the financial returns from combining income support with part-time employment have been reduced. There is limited recognition of care or the resources needed to provide care in this policy.

The findings of my research into mothers' experience of Australians Working Together have implications for Welfare to Work. While the Australians Working Together package of policies finished in 2006 and 2007, many of the policy mechanisms continued under Welfare to Work. Like Australians Working Together, Welfare to Work requires parents to make a contractual agreement with the state, and to undertake a set list of activities to remain eligible for benefits. A meeting between a personal adviser and a parent remains at the centre of the agreement-making process under the new policy. Many aspects of Australians Working Together were extended under Welfare to Work: the focus on employment, the amount of hours to be spent on activities and the group of parents targeted by the policy. For these reasons, policy analysis of Australians Working Together is highly relevant to Welfare to Work. In addition, as Welfare to Work is a relatively new policy, there is as yet little evidence about its operation and effects.

Research into Australians Working Together offers the only evidence of how compulsory employment-oriented programs for parents claiming income support, implemented through a personal adviser, work in an Australian setting. Australians Working Together should not be treated as a closed period in Australian social security history. The raft of policies it introduced changed the basis of income support for parents. As such, Australians Working Together has long-term relevance for Australian social security policy analysis.

Recognition and redistribution in everyday life

I developed an everyday life approach to policy analysis in order to research mothers' experience of Australians Working Together. I drew firstly upon Smith (1987, 1990) who encourages sociologists to treat the everyday life of women as a sociological problematic. Following Smith meant starting the analysis from the point of view of mothers who were targeted by the policy, thereby acknowledging their unique perspectives and insights, and then moving outward, developing an understanding of their lives by investigating the complex of social relations in which they live. I blended Smith's everyday life approach with the framework for welfare research designed by Williams and Popay (1999). Williams and Popay encourage welfare researchers to conduct welfare policy analysis on multiple levels. The four levels are: the welfare subject; the social environment in which subjects' choices are constrained or facilitated; the policies and policy language that affect their lives; and broader social and economic developments.

Everyday life methods are rare in policy analysis and particularly undeveloped in Australian welfare policy research. My study has demonstrated the benefits of such an approach. Focusing on Australians Working Together policy in operation from the perspectives of those whom it targets has helped me to highlight its complexities and inconsistencies and to identify outcomes perhaps unintended by policy makers. An everyday life approach demonstrates the meaning of policy for those it most directly affects.

Low-income mothers of teenagers were at the heart of this study. Internationally, research into welfare-to-work programs tends to focus on mothers of younger

children, often because employment obligations start earlier in a child's life than they have in Australia. Similarly, studies into negotiating work and family tend to be concerned with mothers of younger children. In focusing on mothers of teenagers, this study draws attention to the ongoing responsibilities of mothers, responsibilities which extend into their children's teen years. The provision of care changes as children's needs change, but care remains a significant part of mothers' lives. Therefore, complex negotiations of welfare-to-work and of work and family continue for mothers of teenagers.

Undertaking an everyday life approach to welfare policy analysis across the four levels set out by Williams and Popay required the use of multiple methods. I drew upon longitudinal, in-depth interviews with mothers of teenage children receiving Parenting Payment; interviews with Centrelink advisers who were responsible for implementing the policy; quantitative analysis using data from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia survey; analysis of how officials framed the welfare reform policy 'problem'; and extensive reviews of a wide range of literature. This range of methods allowed me to build a picture of Australians Working Together which started with the perspective of Parenting Payment recipients and worked outwards to construct a contextual understanding of the policy in action.

I argued in chapter three that policy which is developed without taking adequate account of the available evidence risks being ineffective, poorly targeted and even counterproductive. Throughout the thesis I have presented evidence of a disjuncture between the assumptions of Australians Working Together policy and the lives of mothers claiming Parenting Payment who were targeted by it. I now draw on my findings to examine Welfare to Work, seeking to determine if there is a similar disconnect between that set of policies and the everyday lives of mothers receiving income support. In exploring the points of friction and mismatch, I am interested in finding possibilities for change. I do so with a view to understanding how policy might be differently designed under a social justice agenda, as described by Ruth Lister (2001). Applying a social justice agenda to the issue of employment and income support among mothers would involve publicly acknowledging the importance of benefits in alleviating poverty among low-income and lone-mother

families, recognising the social contributions made by mothers through both unpaid and paid work, and better involving social security recipients in welfare-to-work policy debates.

The possibility for change lies in struggles for recognition. In the spheres of legal rights and solidarity, recognition has transformative potential (Honneth 1995:176). Since recognition in both spheres relies on socially accepted criteria, people experiencing disrespect draw on those generalised criteria to argue for extended entitlement to respect (Honneth 1995:162). Honneth's term, 'struggles for recognition', refers to the development of social movements which strive to extend the reach of recognition, to extend legal rights so that they are more universal and to extend social esteem so that additional activities are valued as social contributions. Struggles are possible because of the normative potential in both spheres. With regard to social security, the sphere of legal rights offers the potential for struggles to extend recognition of the right to and capacity for autonomy. With regard to care, the sphere of social solidarity offers the potential for greater recognition of the social contribution of care work.

The extension of recognition of autonomy and care has redistributive implications. In order to claim social rights and exert autonomy, one needs sufficient material resources (Honneth 2003:149). Poverty is increasingly understood to be a denial of rights (Lister 2002:105). If care were better valued, explicitly and publicly, as a social contribution, this might provide the basis for claims for better pay on the part of those whose employment revolves around care and also better recognition of the value of this work when it is unpaid. Honneth (2003: 151) argues that Fraser separates redistribution from a framework of recognition. He points out that it is the widespread acceptance of normative principles of recognition which provide the basis for redistribution. However, Fraser (2003:48,65) does not assert that redistribution is separate from recognition principles; rather she describes redistribution and recognition as intertwined: 'no redistribution without recognition'. Instead, Fraser argues that there are advantages in treating redistribution as a distinct analytic concept. Her concern is that redistribution might be overlooked in an analysis focusing on recognition. I believe her concern is justified. It would be possible to examine the struggles for recognition of autonomy

and care by the mothers in this study without reference to redistribution. It would be a limited argument, but nonetheless possible. The analysis could be confined to the struggles for the autonomy to determine for one's self and one's own family how to prioritise care, employment, study and other activities; and to struggles for recognition of the social contribution of unpaid care work. In this study, however, mothers' low level of income was a central and recurring concern of such strength that a separate analysis of the redistributive effects of policy is both justified and necessary. For this reason, in my conclusion, I follow Fraser in presenting my findings regarding redistribution separately to those relating to recognition of care and autonomy.

Recognition of care

Throughout this thesis I have highlighted policy misrecognition of the unpaid care work of mothers. My work has established that mothers place a very high value on care. Their understanding of what constitutes good mothering and of the care needs of their children informs the way they approach their daily lives. The need to provide care for their children in the way they think best is enmeshed with their thinking about family life, employment, education and voluntary work. In their discussions of care, mothers spoke of care as labour involving effort and time. For some, family care required a lot of energy and a lot of time because of their own and their children's health needs. They took their concern about the provision of family care with them to their adviser interviews at Centrelink. The need to preserve enough energy and time to provide care featured strongly as one of the key non-financial elements of their calculations about welfare and employment.

Australians Working Together allowed Parenting Payment recipients to continue to spend considerable amounts of time on unpaid family care. It was only recipients with children aged 13 to 15 years who faced compulsory activity requirements. Recipients with children under that age could provide full-time care. Those with 13- to 15-year-olds were only required to undertake 150 hours of activity every six months, or around six hours per week. This policy rule provided mothers with considerable flexibility to fit activities around care responsibilities. Mothers could either engage in their employment-oriented activities for a few hours each week or

choose to cluster their activities more intensively into shorter periods, leaving them free in school holidays, for example.

While the written rules of *Australians Working Together* allowed Parenting Payment recipients to prioritise care, such recognition was offered in only a limited manner in the official depiction of the policy and in the policy as it was implemented (Skevik 2005:56). As I demonstrated in chapter three, care was rarely mentioned by government representatives. They made little acknowledgement of the value of mothers' unpaid care work as a social contribution. Instead, paid employment was presented as the pre-eminent social contribution parents could make. The public representation of social citizenship changed so that paid employment was the moral responsibility of all adults, including mothers (Shaver 2002a:325,326). The new citizen as presented in *Australians Working Together* rhetoric was not gendered, rather a worker devoid of care responsibilities (Brennan and Cass 2005). Care was also largely overlooked by the policy in action. When mothers attended their adviser interviews in order to draw up a Participation Agreement, they had little opportunity to discuss the care needs of their families. The interview guidelines asked few questions about care and provided even less opportunity to discuss family care in detail.

Welfare to Work has further delegitimised unpaid care work. Parents claiming income support are now required to engage in employment-oriented activities from the time their youngest child is in primary school, not high school. As a result, many more mothers face a compulsory activity requirement. In addition, a mother must commit to undertake at least 15 hours of employment each week or to seek such employment. Nor do mothers have the flexibility offered under *Australians Working Together* to engage in employment more intensively during some weeks in order to leave other weeks free. The 15-hour employment obligation applies at all times. Furthermore, parents are required to accept any offer of 'suitable' employment, which includes paid work of up to 25 hours per week, considerably more than the minimum requirement and substantially reducing the time available to provide care (Guide to Social Security Law, 3.2.9.70, reviewed 7 July 2007). Low-income mothers of school children can no longer elect to mother full time.

The degree to which an individual mother's conception of care is misrecognised by Welfare to Work is demonstrated by the following two examples. According to the Guide to Social Security Law (section 3.2.8.30, 5 November 2007), a parent cannot be required to take employment if appropriate care or supervision for their child is not available. The guide states that it is solely the parent who can determine if informal care arrangements are appropriate. However, the guide provides Centrelink staff with an example of a situation in which a parent's contention that appropriate care is not available must be disregarded. If a child frequently fails to attend school, and so a mother believes that she cannot take employment during school hours because she needs to supervise the child, this is not considered an adequate reason and she can be required to accept an offer of employment. The appearance of allowing mothers to prioritise care swiftly dissolves.

The second example of this misrecognition is the government promotion of family day care as an employment option for low-income parents. At the introduction of Welfare to Work, one of the policy elements designed to support parents in meeting their activity requirements was the 'Family Day Care Start Up Payment'. The logic underpinning this policy points starkly to a lack of appreciation for unpaid care work. The payment, as its name suggests, provides one-off cash assistance to parents, supporting them in establishing a family day care business – formal child care that is provided in the home of the carer. The payment is intended to assist parents to fulfil Welfare to Work activity requirements (FACSIA nd:1). So the payments are designed to help a mother to establish herself in providing paid care for children from other families in her own home. Care provided by the same woman in the same location, if unpaid, is not treated as work. A mother could not fulfil her Welfare to Work obligations by providing unpaid care to her own children in her own home, because the policy regards only paid care as work, and therefore only paid care as an adequate social contribution.

Recognition of the social contributions of employment, education and voluntary work

Australians Working Together was designed to assist Parenting Payment recipients to enter employment, study or voluntary work. In chapter three, I demonstrated that

public officials constructed the policy problem as requiring a transition from welfare into employment. Welfare to Work, in its name, reinforces the notion that one is either claiming welfare or in work – not both – and the policy is designed to help parents transfer from one state to the other. Under *Australians Working Together*, employment was presented as a central moral responsibility of all adults, a contribution to the community which Parenting Payment recipients, by being beneficiaries, were assumed not to be making. However, evidence I presented in chapter two shows that prior to the introduction of *Australians Working Together*, Parenting Payment recipients were already employed at a very high rate. Many mothers combined receipt of Parenting Payment with employment (FACSIA 2006:53; HILDA 4.1 my analysis, see appendix three). There was also a large group of Parenting Payment recipients who were unemployed, actively looking for a job but without success, and relying on Parenting Payment in the meantime.

Often mothers drew upon Parenting Payment because the labour market did not provide the kind of employment they needed. Some were working in part-time jobs and dearly wanted work which offered longer hours but could not find it (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004:15; Gray et al. 2003:17). Working short part-time hours provided insufficient income to sustain their families, so mothers supplemented their earnings with income support. In chapter five, I showed that very few people working in part-time positions have access to paid sick leave, the most fundamental employment benefit. Parenting Payment provided a safety-net for those women, so that even if they were sick and had no earnings for the week, they could ensure the rent was paid. As they were unlikely even to access paid sick leave, it is probable that Parenting Payment recipients working in part-time jobs would not be able to take advantage of other family-friendly benefits at work. The possible exception is flexible hours. However, if a mother worked fewer hours in her casual job in order to be available for her children that week, she would also earn less income. Again, Parenting Payment went some way towards making up the shortfall in the weekly budget.

Chapter two provided evidence of high rates of participation in study and voluntary work among Parenting Payment recipients. Many mothers were enrolled in education and training courses in order to improve their employment prospects

(Saunders et al. 2003). Parenting Payment provided the family with some income while mothers worked towards this long-term goal. Eventually, as I demonstrated, many mothers hoped to attain qualifications which would enable them to find good-quality jobs, and thus be financially self-sufficient. Other mothers spent significant amounts of time volunteering, making important social contributions through unpaid community work. These contributions mothers valued for altruistic reasons; they felt they were helping in areas where they were needed.

The Australians Working Together evaluation report stated that very few Parenting Payment recipients had ceased to claim benefits as a result of the program and that there was only a small increase in the rate of employment among parents (DEWR 2005a). This finding is not surprising, when considered in the light of evidence on pre-existing high rates of employment participation. Furthermore, Australians Working Together did little to address the labour market issues which meant that parents found it necessary to combine employment with income support. There was no push by government to improve the quality of low-wage, part-time employment. Australians Working Together only allowed mothers to engage in voluntary work if it were deemed to be improving their employability. The voluntary work which mothers valued for its social contribution would not necessarily have been considered sufficiently employment-oriented to qualify as a Mutual Obligation activity.

Australians Working Together did make an important contribution towards mothers' capacity to be financially self-sufficient: mothers could enrol in study or training to improve their qualifications. The kind of courses which were supported under Australians Working Together included undergraduate degrees and trade qualifications. Mothers could study part or full time for many years in order to attain a level of qualification which might improve their earning potential. Chapter four showed that study was the most popular new activity for inclusion in a Participation Agreement. Parenting Payment recipients who committed to a new activity tended to agree to education.

Like Australians Working Together, Welfare to Work fails to recognise the diverse contributions already made by parents. Employment is prioritised over education

and voluntary work. Welfare to Work expanded the compulsory nature of Australians Working Together, requiring at least 15 hours of employment per week from parents. Yet as shown in chapter two, many mothers were already working close to this number of hours prior to the introduction of Australians Working Together and, as noted above, many wished for, but could not find, additional hours. Merely mandating that mothers spend longer each week in paid employment does not necessarily ensure that they will be able to find more hours. Welfare to Work requires parents working less than 15 hours a week to attend the Job Network for assistance in finding employment. It is possible that registration with a Job Network member will increase parents' employment options. Job Network members that offer well-run, high-quality employment programs and match their clients well with jobs may improve mothers' employment prospects. However, the quality of Job Network services is uneven, with some performing very badly (DEWR 2008).

Welfare to Work was accompanied by substantial industrial relations policy change, known as *WorkChoices*. The new industrial policy reduced employment entitlements, encouraged one-on-one negotiation of employment conditions between employees and employers and treated work-family benefits as being primarily the responsibility of individual workplaces. Policy analysts expected that low-income women workers would fare poorly under this new arrangement (Baird and Todd 2005, Pocock and Masterman-Smith 2005). Early evidence suggests that this is the case (Elton et al. 2007). Some women have had their pay levels fall, greater work intensification, less job security and less ability to negotiate hours of work. Women at the intersection of Welfare to Work and WorkChoices have faced particular difficulties due to the 15-hour employment requirement (Elton et al. 2007:89-90). Those working in casual jobs, in which the hours change from week to week, may be involved in ongoing negotiations with their employer in order to maintain sufficient hours.

Welfare to Work significantly reduced parents' ability to choose to engage in education, despite this being a popular option under Australians Working Together. Under Welfare to Work only short-term study of less than twelve months meets participation requirements (Guide to Social Security Law, 3.2.9.70, last review 7

July 2007). Mothers wishing to enrol in a longer course, such as for a trade qualification or undergraduate degree, are not eligible for Newstart Allowance and are instead asked to apply for Austudy. Austudy is only available to full-time students and provides less income than Newstart Allowance.³⁸

Australians Working Together and then Welfare to Work failed to recognise that most parents were already making the kinds of social contributions the policies mandated.

Recognition of autonomy

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Australians Working Together significantly reduced the autonomy of Parenting Payment recipients through compulsory activity requirements. As I observed in chapter three, this reduction of autonomy occurred as part of a broader trend towards greater emphasis on the responsibilities over the rights of welfare recipients. Government officials argued that Mutual Obligation, by articulating the obligations of welfare recipients, would ensure that they ‘gave something back’ to the community that supported them and took advantage of opportunities for employment and training when they arose. The community contribution to which government referred was narrowly focused on paid employment.

Australian Government ministers argued that parents of teenage children were not making a contribution and not taking advantage of opportunities. Their primary evidence for this was the rising number of Parenting Payment claimants, at a time of low unemployment across the population (Henman and Perry 2002). If parents were not taking the employment which was available to them, they were demonstrating that they were unable to make good decisions for themselves, and therefore they needed help and ‘encouragement’, in the form of an adviser, a Participation Agreement and penalties. The compulsory activities which parents were contractually obliged to undertake were designed to help mothers follow a ‘normal’ trajectory from full-time mothering in their children’s youngest years

³⁸ In April 2008, the rates for a single person with one child were: Austudy - \$465.60; Newstart Allowance - \$472.80; Parenting Payment - \$546.80 (Centrelink 2008).

towards part-time mothering and part-time employment during their children's school years. The program was compulsory because it was based on the assumption that the fact of being a Parenting Payment recipient was in itself evidence that mothers were not making the best decisions for themselves and their families (Shaver 2001:341; Yeatman 2000:163).

As a result, Australians Working Together reduced Parenting Payment recipients' autonomy to determine for themselves how to balance their commitment to employment and family. Whereas previously a mother could elect to change her pattern of employment and study to suit her understanding of her family's needs, under Australians Working Together, if it meant she would not meet her activity requirement, she would have to negotiate her decision with Centrelink. So, for example, if Alia decided to stop attending her English classes throughout summer because her asthma made walking to class in summer impossible, she needed to explain this decision to Centrelink. If she did not explain her decision and if she did not fulfil an agreement to undertake 150 hours of English classes in a six-month period, she could be penalised and her benefits reduced. If she explained her decision, but Centrelink found that the summer heat was not a sufficient reason to stop going to English classes, then Alia might be unable to renegotiate her contract. Then she would face a choice between protecting her health in the manner she felt was best and preserving her Parenting Payment by continuing to attend classes.

Clearly the nature of the Participation Agreement and its negotiation were very important. The agreement was developed in discussion with a personal adviser. The adviser was to take into account a mother's circumstances, aspirations and needs when drawing up the agreement with her. So if Alia explained her circumstances, perhaps her agreement might be drawn up differently. She could be exempt from any activity during summer, perhaps, or she could be referred to classes to which she could travel more easily. However, as demonstrated in chapter four, mothers did not approach their adviser interviews with the sense that they could control the negotiation process. Sitting down with the adviser, some felt unable to raise personal matters which might affect their ability to fulfil the agreement. The open-plan office space, although creating a physical setting which attempted to level the power relations between beneficiaries and advisers, worked

against mothers' disclosure of sensitive matters because it did not provide a private environment for their conversation. In addition, the adviser interview guide may have limited some parents' opportunities to raise issues which might affect their ability to undertake activities; it also provided few opportunities to discuss care responsibilities. As a result, some Parenting Payment recipients would have signed Participation Agreements which were not appropriately tailored to their circumstances. Although parents could renegotiate their agreement at any time, most did not understand this (Alexander et al. 2005:79). Some parents, unable to meet their agreement, might have felt their only options were either to stop the activity and incur a penalty, or continue with the activity even if they felt it was detrimental to the family.

Furthermore, Australians Working Together limited the autonomy of *all* Parenting Payment claimants whose youngest child was aged 13 to 15. This was the case regardless of whether or not they were fully meeting the activity requirement prior to it becoming compulsory. As demonstrated in chapter four, the majority of parents signed agreements in which they committed to continue to do an activity, usually employment, which they were already doing (Alexander et al.2005:78; Social Research Centre 2005a:17). Even though they already managed their lives in a way which accorded with the official depiction of welfare recipients' obligations, these parents were required nonetheless to sign a Participation Agreement. These parents demonstrated a capacity to make decisions for their family which also met government objectives, but their autonomy was constrained regardless.

Welfare to Work substantially further reduces parents' autonomy when compared to Australians Working Together. More low-income parents face compulsory requirements, as these now apply from when the youngest child is in primary school, and the requirements are greater, as noted above. Parents' choice of activities is more limited under Welfare to Work; long-term study and part-time study are no longer activities which fulfil requirements.

The Welfare to Work policy mechanism that most significantly reduces parents' autonomy is the requirement to report on their employment and job search to Centrelink every fortnight, compared to every six months under Australians

Working Together. Each fortnight, parents receiving Newstart Allowance visit a Centrelink office to submit a form which details the number of hours they have worked, the income they have earned and the jobs for which they have applied. Parents who do not meet their activity requirements are asked their reasons, to determine whether they have a 'reasonable excuse'. The level of reporting and explanation required can be demonstrated using the example of parents who generally meet their activity requirements through employment (Guide to Social Security Law, 3.2.8.40, reviewed 20 March 2008). The hours a mother is employed are averaged across the fortnight, so that if she is employed for 10 hours in one week and 20 hours the following week, the total of 30 hours means she has fulfilled the activity requirement. The hours are not averaged between fortnights, though, so a mother would not meet the activity requirement if she worked 35 hours in one fortnight and 25 hours in the following fortnight. If she usually works 30 hours per fortnight, but for some unexpected reason she does not work the full 30 hours, a reasonable excuse would be that she was sent home from her shift early because business was slow. If she is able to anticipate that she will not work her usual 30 hours – for example, because she is told in advance not to come in while the business conducts a one day stock-take – then she must search for employment during that fortnight. If it is likely that a mother will work less than her usual 30 hours for more than one fortnight, then she must search for employment while her hours are below 30. This highly detailed level of reporting significantly reduces a mother's autonomy to determine for herself when reduced hours are acceptable and what length of time being employed at reduced hours is too long. Any time a mother's hours drop below 30 in a fortnight, she needs to explain why, whether or not it was anticipated, how long she expects to be working fewer hours and, if unable to answer these questions appropriately, explain why she did not look for another job. This is just one example of the detail in which parents' lives are scrutinised under Welfare to Work.

Welfare to Work substantially limits the autonomy of parents, not only to determine the level of care appropriate for their children, but also to decide for themselves what employment or education would be best in their circumstances. Parents' autonomy is so limited that their activity is watched carefully and officially

observed non-compliance questioned every fortnight. The amplified surveillance places parents at a high risk of being penalised.

Redistributive dimensions

As demonstrated in chapter two, parents receiving income support are at high risk of poverty. Lone-parent families are overrepresented among families living in poverty, as are families which primarily rely on government benefits (Community Affairs References Committee 2004:247-248; Harding and Szukalskz 2000:4). The mothers who participated in this study were highly aware of their weekly budgets. They managed their small incomes by shopping for bargains, going without, walking rather than catching public transport, socialising at friends' houses instead of going out for a cup of coffee. For many, the additional income which employment provided was the primary motivating factor for seeking and keeping employment. Yet mothers also wanted to ensure that they had enough time and energy for their families. So, as I demonstrated in chapter five, when they weighed up the relative advantages and disadvantages of their current or potential jobs, they engaged in complex and detailed calculations, attempting to balance additional income against reduced income support, the loss of benefits associated with income support, less time and lower levels of energy.

When the Australian Government argued for the need to change the welfare system, one of its key concerns was 'incentives' to employment. It introduced the Working Credit to soften the immediate and high effective marginal tax rates experienced by beneficiaries who started paid work. Chapter three demonstrated that relieving the poverty of parents and other beneficiaries was an occasional feature in Government's promotion of employment among Parenting Payment recipients. Australians Working Together did not otherwise change the redistributive effects of income support for parents.

By the time the Australian Government was seeking to introduce Welfare to Work, the term 'poverty' had completely disappeared from its lexicon (Saunders 2006:6). In arguing for the benefits of employment, government officials instead promoted the moral advantages of employment and its long-term benefits. Although

government representatives did present employment as improving financial prospects, they did not mention poverty. The Department for Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR 2005b:30) argued that Welfare to Work would improve the financial returns for income support recipients in employment:

The *Welfare to Work* reforms will make employment more financially rewarding. From 1 July 2006 changes to income tests for most allowances and payments will allow people to keep more of their earnings.

The department was referring to the changes to income tapers which were implemented for allowances, including Newstart and Parenting Payment Partnered.

It is true that the Welfare to Work package did improve the taper rate for some benefit recipients. It lowered the taper rate which had previously applied to Parenting Payment Partnered (see appendix one). The upper earnings taper for Parenting Payment Partnered was reduced from 70 per cent to 60 per cent. This change applied to all allowances, including Newstart. However, it is manifestly untrue that Welfare to Work will improve the financial returns of employment for sole parents. New claimants who have children aged eight or over will not benefit from the more 'generous' pension earnings disregard and taper rates offered by Parenting Payment Single; instead they will face the far tougher rates of Newstart. Harding et al. (2005:3) estimated that in July 2006, a Parenting Payment Single recipient entering 15 hours of work under the previous system would keep \$144 of their \$195 earnings at the minimum wage (Harding et al. 2005:13-14). Under the new system, the same parent earning the same wages but claiming Newstart would keep just \$81.

Harding et al. (2005:18) conclude:

The effect of these income test and tax changes is thus to reduce the attractiveness of paid work to sole parents – and to reduce the amount of income that they have available to support themselves and their children after they undertake paid work.

Thus despite an ostensible concern about the financial returns of employment, the Welfare to Work reforms financially disadvantage sole-parent families – families who already experience higher rates of poverty than other families (CARC 2004:224).

Moreover, the penalties for failing to comply with requirements became harsher under Welfare to Work. Under the new rules, a breach of requirements could result in a total withdrawal of income support payments for eight weeks. Under *Australians Working Together*, an eight week suspension of payments was the toughest penalty, applied when the third breach of requirements occurred in a two-year period. Under Welfare to Work, the eight-week suspension applies to all breaches. For families already struggling from week to week, the total loss of payments for even one week would be difficult. Eight weeks without payments could be devastating. As noted above, the greater frequency at which parents are required to report their activities further increases the risk that they might receive a penalty. Many penalties are being applied. While data about penalties incurred by parents is not available, the number of penalties for all beneficiaries with activity requirements was 15,000 in the first year (2006-2007), increasing sharply to 32,000 in the following eight months (Karvelas 2008b). The Department for Employment, Education and Workplace Relations responded to this revelation by instructing Centrelink to issue a penalty only ‘when the jobseeker clearly has no reasonable excuse’, implying perhaps that reasonable excuses were not previously being adequately considered (Karvelas 2008a).

The expanded and more complex activity requirements under Welfare to Work increase the vulnerability to penalties of parents who might struggle to understand what is expected of them. Indigenous people, for example, are overrepresented in the recent flush of breach penalties (Karvelas 2008b). I demonstrated in chapter two that parents who are not proficient in English, or who have problems with literacy or their mental health can sometimes experience difficulty understanding social security requirements. One mother I interviewed did not even know the name of the benefit she received. The risk that these women might unwittingly breach activity requirements is very high.

Far from improving the redistributive impact of income support for parents of school-aged children, Welfare to Work exacerbates the risk of poverty for families which already experience poverty at a high rate. Welfare to Work increases the likelihood that these parents will be forced to try to survive without income support for two months at a time. In addition, Welfare to Work reduces the income of many sole-parent families, and in this respect, the policy definitively fails to be redistributive. As noted at the beginning of this conclusion, this failure has implications for recognition both in terms of social rights and social esteem.

Conclusion

Recognition is fundamental to our positive sense of self. Mutual recognition supports self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth 1995). Social security policy can be delivered in a manner which enhances or undermines mutual respect (Sennett 2003). Recent trends in Australian social security policy have misrecognised parents, most of whom are mothers. Australians Working Together and later Welfare to Work, delegitimised care; diminished public acknowledgement of the value of the unpaid care work of low-income mothers; failed to recognise the high levels of employment undertaken by low-income mothers; constructed those mothers as being in need of highly interventionist public policy to ensure they engage in employment; and imposed harsh penalties in a complex system, placing low-income families at greater risk of poverty. For some mothers in this study, the experience of Australians Working Together was painful and insulting, a consequence of disrespect.

Yet policy developed around the principle of Mutual Obligation, where this involves true mutuality and truly mutual respect, has the potential to enhance parents' self-respect and self-esteem. Caroline's experience of her adviser interview provides an insight into how programs designed to expand rates of maternal employment might be implemented respectfully. Caroline met with an adviser who listened to her when she explained her family circumstances, her employment aspirations and her desire for financial self-reliance. Caroline's adviser encouraged her to extend herself beyond what she had previously thought possible by enrolling

in vocational training to pursue a new career direction. Undertaking and completing this training not only increased Caroline's self-esteem, but also increased her earning potential, and thus expanded her capacity to financially support her family solely from her earnings, as was her wish. This meeting was an example of mutual respect operating in welfare policy. The adviser respected Caroline's interests, concerns and aspirations, and Caroline respected the quality of advice and commitment to her well being demonstrated by the adviser. This is the kind of mutual respect which Sennett (2003:262) seeks: respect for autonomy, which 'means accepting in others what one does not understand about them. In so doing, the fact of their autonomy is treated as equal to your own.'

If social security policy were designed and delivered with the goal of mutual respect, it would also aspire to Lister's (2001:69-70) social justice agenda. Such policy would publicly espouse the vital redistributive role of social security; acknowledge the significant public value of unpaid work, including the unpaid care work of low-income mothers; it would actively engage beneficiaries in policy debates, in recognition of their unique understanding of policy; and it would seek respectful relations between staff and beneficiaries at the micro-level of the front-line interactions of policy implementation. To best do this, policy would need to be based on evidence: on the considerable evidence of the value of care; the evidence of income support recipients' strong commitment to employment and to making social contributions, despite the disadvantage they experience; and the evidence of the benefits of including those with 'expertise born of experience' in policy debates (Lister 2001:70). This would be respectful policy.

The Australian policy environment has changed since I started this research. In November 2007, the Australian Labor Party was elected to federal government after eleven years of conservative Liberal/National Coalition rule. The new government has made a commitment to social inclusion and created a new unit within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to oversee policy in this area. The new Minister for Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin (2008), has publicly stated that she intends to implement policy based on a 'forensic analysis' of the evidence. It is not yet clear to what extent these

commitments will translate into respectful policy. Early signs are mixed.³⁹ However, in the beginning stages of the new government's assessment of social security policy, there is the potential for extending the reach of mothers' struggles for recognition of care and autonomy out from the everyday context in and around the Centrelink office into public debates about policy development.

³⁹ The Minister for Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin (2008), made an early policy announcement that the government would extend a policy implemented by the Howard Government under which half of the income support payments of Aboriginal families in the Northern Territory were withheld, only to be spent in approved shops. Macklin announced that some Western Australian Aboriginal communities would also have their payments 'quarantined'. The Minister provided no evidence as to why this was the best policy response to concern about neglected children.

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Appendix One: Comparing Australians Working Together and Welfare to Work

Table A1: Lone and partnered income support claimants, arrangements prior to and following the July 2006 Welfare to Work changes

Youngest child aged		Existing claimants ⁴⁰		New claimants		
		Single	Partnered	Single	Partnered	
Youngest child aged	Less than six years	Name	<i>Parenting Payment</i>	<i>Parenting Payment</i>	<i>Parenting Payment</i>	<i>Parenting Payment</i>
		Type of benefit	<i>Pension</i>	<i>Allowance</i>	<i>Pension</i>	<i>Allowance</i>
		Activity requirements	<i>x</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>x</i>
		Part-time study meets all activity requirements	<i>NA</i>	<i>NA</i>	<i>NA</i>	<i>NA</i>
	Six years	Name			<i>Parenting Payment</i>	<i>Newstart Allowance</i>
		Type of benefit			<i>Pension</i>	<i>Allowance</i>
		Activity requirements	<i>As above</i>	<i>As above</i>	<i>✓</i>	<i>✓</i>
		Part-time study meets all activity requirements			<i>✓</i>	<i>x</i>
	Seven years	Name	<i>Parenting Payment</i>	<i>Parenting Payment</i>		
		Type of benefit	<i>Pension</i>	<i>Allowance</i>		
		Activity requirements	<i>✓</i>	<i>✓</i>	<i>As above</i>	<i>As above</i>
		Part-time study meets all activity requirements	<i>✓</i>	<i>✓</i>		
Eight to fifteen years	Name			<i>Newstart Allowance</i>		
	Type of benefit			<i>Allowance</i>		
	Activity requirements	<i>As above</i>	<i>As above</i>	<i>✓</i>	<i>As above</i>	
	Part-time study meets all activity requirements			<i>x</i>		

⁴⁰ Parents in receipt of Parenting Payment on 1 July 2006 could remain on Parenting Payment until their youngest child turned 16 years. New claimants from 1 July 2006 would be diverted into the new system.

Table A2: Earnings disregards and taper rates, 1 July – 19 September 2006

Benefit	Sole parent ¹		Partnered parent ¹	
	<i>Parenting Payment Single to 2006</i>	<i>Newstart from 2006</i>	<i>Parenting Payment Partnered to 2006</i>	<i>Newstart from 2006</i>
Youngest child	aged less than 8	aged 8 or more	aged less than 6	aged 6 or more
Type of payment	Pension	Allowance	Allowance	Allowance
Base rate	\$499.70 plus \$17.80 supplement	\$444.20	\$370.50	\$370.50
Earnings disregard	\$152.60	\$62	\$62	\$62
Rate at which payments are reduced above earnings disregard	Above \$152.60, 40%	\$62 to \$250, 50% Above \$250, 60%	\$62 to \$250, 50% Above \$250, 60% (prior to 1 July, 70%)	\$62 to \$250, 50% Above \$250, 60%

1. Principle carer with one child, partner, if applicable, in receipt of Newstart. Source: Centrelink 2005; Centrelink 2006a; Centrelink 2006b.

Appendix Two: Timeline of events

Welfare reform under the Howard Government 1996-2006

Date	
March 1996	Election of Liberal/National Coalition under John Howard
October 1998	Re-election of Liberal/National Coalition Government for second term in office
1998	Parenting Payment established, combining payments for sole and partnered parents under one name (although in practice still different payments).
September 1999	Parenting Payment Intervention Pilot begins
October 1999	Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Jocelyn Newman commissions the Reference Group on Welfare Reform
July 2000	Reference Group on Welfare Reform, <i>Participation Support for a More Equitable Society Final Report</i> , 'McClure Report'
November 2001	Re-election of Liberal/National Coalition Government for third term in office
2001	Government response to the McClure Report, <i>Welfare Reform: A Stronger, Fairer Australia</i>
September 2002	Parenting Payment recipients required to attend annual interview
September 2003	Australians Working Together package implemented. Parenting Payment recipients with youngest child aged 13-15 face activity requirements, 150 hours every six months.
October 2004	Re-election of Liberal/National Coalition Government for fourth term in office
March 2005	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Workforce Participation, <i>Working for Australia's future: Increasing participation in the workforce</i> The Committee recommends that the Australian Government review strategies for encouraging increased participation for Parenting Payment recipients.
May 2005	2005-06 Budget statement outlines Welfare to Work reforms
November 2005	Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, <i>Report on the Employment and Workplace Relations Legislation Amendment (Welfare to Work and Other Measures) Bill 2005, and Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare to Work) Bill 2005</i> Recommends legislation be passed with minor amendments.

Date	
July 2006	Welfare to Work measures commence
November 2007	Election of Labor Party under Kevin Rudd.

Howard Government ministers active in social security policy

Tony Abbott, Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, January 2001 – October 2003.

Kevin Andrews, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, October 2003 – January 2007.

Larry Anthony, Minister for Community Services then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, July 1999 – October 2004.

Mal Brough, Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, January 2006 – November 2007.

Jocelyn Newman, Minister for Social Security, March 1996 – January 2001.

Kay Patterson, Minister for Family and Community Services, October 2003 – November 2007.

Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Family and Community Services, January 2001 – October 2002.

Appendix Three: Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia Survey, Wave 4, 2004

Table A3: Parenting Payment recipient employment

	Parenting Payment		Parents		Sex		All persons
	Mother recipients	All recipients	Mothers	Fathers	Female	Male	
Employment status							
Employed	33.9	33.5	61.8	90.3	55.5	71.0	63.1
unemployed	10.4	11.0	3.8	1.6	2.8	2.8	2.8
Not in labour force	55.7	55.4	34.3	8.1	41.7	26.3	34.1
<i>n</i>	307	321	1764	1333	5031	4848	9879
Employed for full or part of last financial year							
Yes	46.5	45.6	69.6	93.8	61.4	74.9	68.0
<i>n</i>	307	321	1764	1333	5031	4848	9879
Occupation in main job							
Managers	2.8	2.1	5.7	13.2	5.3	10.4	8.1
Professionals	12.9	13.9	25.3	18.6	23.9	17.4	20.3
Associate Professionals	15.5	15.5	13.2	16.7	14.0	14.0	14.0
Tradespersons	3.3	2.0	1.8	20.1	2.0	20.1	12.0
Advanced Clerical & Service Workers	6.6	7.2	11.0	0.7	8.6	0.8	4.3
Intermediate Clerical, Sales & Service Workers	32.5	35.1	25.5	7.4	26.5	8.8	16.7
Intermediate Production & Transport Workers	4.7	2.7	2.6	12.9	2.5	13.0	8.3
Elementary Clerical, Sales & Service Workers	12.7	13.7	10.3	3.8	11.0	6.0	8.3
Labourers	8.9	7.8	4.6	6.6	6.3	9.4	8.0
<i>n</i>	115	112	1121	1237	2783	3426	6209

Table A3, continued.

	Parenting Payment		Parents		Sex		All persons
	Mother recipients	All recipients	Mothers	Fathers	Female	Male	
Industry							
Agriculture	1.7	1.9	2.8	4.7	3.1	5.3	4.3
Mining & construction	3.4	2.3	3.9	15.1	2.5	13.7	8.7
Manufacturing	7.4	5.3	6.8	16.3	6.7	15.7	11.7
Infrastructure services	6.0	5.1	4.0	11.0	4.2	10.3	7.6
Wholesale & retail	17.7	17.9	15.4	13.3	16.6	15.5	16.0
Government	3.0	3.2	5.3	6.4	5.1	5.4	5.2
Finance, insurance, property & business services	10.3	11.1	15.1	14.5	16.4	13.7	14.9
Education, health & community services	28.6	30.8	36.5	10.2	33.7	8.9	20.0
Accommodation, cafes, culture, recreation & personal services	21.8	22.4	10.3	8.5	11.6	11.4	11.5
<i>n</i>	115	112	1121	1237	2783	3426	6209
Women's top industries (ANZIC 2 digit)							
Food Retailing	8.7	9.4	5.2	2.4	4.9	3.7	4.2
Personal and household good retailing	4.5	4.8	5.9	3.7	7.6	4.1	5.7
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	11.2	12.1	4.4	2.5	5.8	4.9	5.3
Business Services	5.7	6.1	10.0	8.1	9.9	9.3	9.5
Education	5.0	5.4	15.0	5.7	13.4	4.8	8.7
Health services	10.0	10.8	14.4	2.8	13.6	2.7	7.6
<i>n</i>	115	112	1121	1237	2783	3426	6209
Job tenure							
1 yr or less	45.5	45.2	29.9	24.5	29.1	28.1	28.5
1 less 2 yrs	16.0	17.2	10.8	9.3	11.6	10.6	11.0
2 to less 5 yrs	20.6	19.8	26.2	20.1	24.1	21.8	22.8
5 to less 10 yrs	12.2	13.1	17.7	19.5	15.9	15.5	15.7
10 yrs or more	5.8	4.7	15.5	26.7	19.3	24.0	21.9
<i>n</i>	115	112	1121	1237	2783	3422	6205

Table A3 cont.

	Parenting Payment		Parents		Sex		All persons
	Mother recipients	All recipients	Mothers	Fathers	Female	Male	
Contract of employment							
Permanent	49.5	49.3	65.8	86.6	66.1	76.3	71.5
Casual	44.1	44.1	25.7	7.0	25.9	16.0	20.6
Fixed-term	6.4	6.6	8.6	6.5	8.1	7.7	7.9
<i>n</i>	96	98	933	924	2366	2656	5022
Usual hours /wk							
0-14 hrs	25.4	27.3	18.0	1.4	14.9	4.4	9.1
15-20 hrs	22.0	21.2	19.8	2.2	14.3	4.7	9.0
21-34 hours	31.1	32.0	25.7	3.6	20.2	7.3	13.1
35 or more hrs	21.5	19.5	36.5	92.8	50.6	83.6	68.8
<i>n</i>	114	111.4	1117.1	1235.9	2778.3	3421.7	6200
Public sector							
Yes	12.1	13.1	23.3	13.2	20.2	11.4	15.3
<i>n</i>	115	112	1118	1237	2780	3424	6204
Firm size							
Less than 20 employees	37.0	34.2	33.0	36.8	32.1	38.4	35.6
20-99 employees	24.4	24.9	15.0	14.4	14.1	14.5	14.3
100-499 employees	8.3	8.1	8.3	9.8	9.4	9.8	9.6
500-999 employees	3.2	3.5	5.1	5.9	4.7	5.4	5.1
1000-4999 employees	4.6	5.0	8.8	10.9	9.3	10.0	9.7
5000 employees or more	17.6	19.0	24.0	19.9	23.5	17.8	20.3
Unknown	4.9	5.3	5.8	2.4	6.9	4.0	5.3
<i>n</i>	108	106	1097	1224	2729	3380	6109
Union member							
Yes	13.1	14.1	22.0	30.6	25.2	27.0	26.2
<i>n</i>	115	112	1121	1237	2782	3426	6208
Quintiles of hourly wages							
1st	22.2	21.6	14.1	8.1	17.5	15.2	16.2
2nd	42.3	44.7	24.1	12.8	24.0	18.0	20.8
3 rd	19.1	19.1	22.8	17.7	22.1	20.3	21.1
4th	8.9	9.4	22.3	26.9	21.4	21.0	21.1
5th	7.6	5.2	16.7	34.6	15.1	25.5	20.7
<i>n</i>	102	102	988	1069	2513	2959	5472

Note: Weighted using wave 4 longitudinal weights.

Appendix Four: Australians Working Together adviser interview schedule

Customer's Name: _____

CRN: _____

Question	Options Available			
<p>Activities Can you tell me about some of the activities you have been doing over the last few months? This question may include your activities at any time prior to today's date. This question is to find out more about any activities you are undertaking or have been undertaking that may assist you to be involved in your local community or help increase your ability to earn extra income. Note: Current Activities will appear on plan.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Caring <input type="checkbox"/> Community Work Initiative <input type="checkbox"/> Funded Programme <input type="checkbox"/> Helping Somebody Else <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Home Duties <input type="checkbox"/> Looking for Work <input type="checkbox"/> School Involvement <input type="checkbox"/> Sporting Activities	<input type="checkbox"/> Studying <input type="checkbox"/> Voluntary Work <input type="checkbox"/> Working	
<p>Interests What are your interests? The question I am about to ask you is to find out more about any skills or experience you may have or might like to get that may assist you to be involved in your local community or help increase your ability to earn extra income.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Caring for my children <input type="checkbox"/> Caring for family or others <input type="checkbox"/> Coaching or mentoring <input type="checkbox"/> Non vocational course <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Environment <input type="checkbox"/> School involvement <input type="checkbox"/> Self employment <input type="checkbox"/> Sporting activities	<input type="checkbox"/> Studying <input type="checkbox"/> Voluntary work <input type="checkbox"/> Working	
<p>Education Can you tell me about any education and training you might have had?</p>	<p>School Level:</p> <p>Post School Qualifications:</p> <p>Post Secondary Qualifications:</p> <p>Free Text:</p>			
<p>Literacy How would you describe your English Speaking Skills? How would you describe your English Reading Skills? How would you describe your English Writing Skills? Impact of LLN skills on participation</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Limited <input type="checkbox"/> Limited <input type="checkbox"/> Limited	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Limited <input type="checkbox"/> Very Limited <input type="checkbox"/> Very Limited	<p>Free Text Response:</p>

<p>Work Skills Can you tell me about any work skills and/or experience you have?</p>	<p>Do you have any work skills?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please identify these skills:</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Accounting</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Engineering</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Mining</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Book Keeping</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Factory hand</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Mother vehicle repairs</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Child care</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Farm hand</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Nursing</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Cleaning</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Hair and beauty</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Office work</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Computing</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Horticulture</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Sales and marketing</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Cooking</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Station hand</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Customer service</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Labouring</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Store work</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Data entry</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Landscape gardening</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Telemarketing</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Driving</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Machine operation</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Electrical and electronics</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			<input type="checkbox"/> Accounting	<input type="checkbox"/> Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Mining	<input type="checkbox"/> Book Keeping	<input type="checkbox"/> Factory hand	<input type="checkbox"/> Mother vehicle repairs	<input type="checkbox"/> Child care	<input type="checkbox"/> Farm hand	<input type="checkbox"/> Nursing	<input type="checkbox"/> Cleaning	<input type="checkbox"/> Hair and beauty	<input type="checkbox"/> Office work	<input type="checkbox"/> Computing	<input type="checkbox"/> Horticulture	<input type="checkbox"/> Sales and marketing	<input type="checkbox"/> Cooking	<input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality	<input type="checkbox"/> Station hand	<input type="checkbox"/> Customer service	<input type="checkbox"/> Labouring	<input type="checkbox"/> Store work	<input type="checkbox"/> Data entry	<input type="checkbox"/> Landscape gardening	<input type="checkbox"/> Telemarketing	<input type="checkbox"/> Driving	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine operation	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Electrical and electronics	<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Driving	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine operation	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)																															
<input type="checkbox"/> Electrical and electronics	<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical																																
<p>Last Employment Can you tell me the main reason you stopped working in the last job you had?</p>	<table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Dismissed</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To get married</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Voluntary redundancy</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To care for children</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Have never worked</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Moved to Australia</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To care for family</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Made redundant</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Currently working</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To care for someone else</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Self employed</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To have children</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Return to study</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of work</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Temporary or casual job</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			<input type="checkbox"/> Dismissed	<input type="checkbox"/> To get married	<input type="checkbox"/> Voluntary redundancy	<input type="checkbox"/> To care for children	<input type="checkbox"/> Have never worked	<input type="checkbox"/> Moved to Australia	<input type="checkbox"/> To care for family	<input type="checkbox"/> Made redundant	<input type="checkbox"/> Currently working	<input type="checkbox"/> To care for someone else	<input type="checkbox"/> Self employed	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> To have children	<input type="checkbox"/> Return to study		<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of work	<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary or casual job													
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<input type="checkbox"/> To care for family	<input type="checkbox"/> Made redundant	<input type="checkbox"/> Currently working																															
<input type="checkbox"/> To care for someone else	<input type="checkbox"/> Self employed	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)																															
<input type="checkbox"/> To have children	<input type="checkbox"/> Return to study																																
<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of work	<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary or casual job																																
<p>Health How would you describe your overall health?</p> <p>How does your health affect your everyday activities?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Very good <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor</p> <p>Free Text Response:</p>																																
<p>Transport In terms of transport, how do you get where you need to go?</p>	<table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Own (car)</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other private</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> None available</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Own (motor bike)</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Public transport</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3"><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)</td> </tr> </table>			<input type="checkbox"/> Own (car)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other private	<input type="checkbox"/> None available	<input type="checkbox"/> Own (motor bike)	<input type="checkbox"/> Public transport		<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)																							
<input type="checkbox"/> Own (car)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other private	<input type="checkbox"/> None available																															
<input type="checkbox"/> Own (motor bike)	<input type="checkbox"/> Public transport																																
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)																																	

Typical Week
 The next question is asked to help me find out a little more about you in order to understand what options may be suitable to form part of your plan.
What happens in a typical week for you?

Free Text Response:

Family Situation

The next question is asked to help me find out a little bit more about you in order to understand what options may be suitable to form part of your plan.
Can you tell me something about your family situation?

Free Text Response:

Interaction

What contact do you have with others?

Free Text Response:

Children's Carer

Who is most responsible for the care of your children?

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No children | <input type="checkbox"/> Partner | <input type="checkbox"/> Grandparents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No dependant children | <input type="checkbox"/> Equal share | <input type="checkbox"/> Other family member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Customer | <input type="checkbox"/> In supported / foster care | <input type="checkbox"/> Ex-partner |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) | | |

Goals

What are your goals either now or in the future?

Goal 1

Goal 2

Goal 3

Things that might be relevant to reaching my goals include:

How will I reach my goals?

Note: Goals and How will I reach my goals will appear on the plan

<p>Work Skills</p> <p>Can you tell me about any work skills and/or experience you have?</p>	<p>Do you have any work skills?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please identify these skills:</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Accounting</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Engineering</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Mining</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Book keeping</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Factory hand</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Mother vehicle repairs</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Child care</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Farm hand</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Nursing</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Cleaning</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Hair and beauty</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Office work</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Computing</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Horticulture</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Sales and marketing</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Cooking</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Station hand</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Customer service</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Labouring</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Store work</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Data entry</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Landscape gardening</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Telemarketing</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Driving</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Machine operation</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Electrical and electronics</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			<input type="checkbox"/> Accounting	<input type="checkbox"/> Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Mining	<input type="checkbox"/> Book keeping	<input type="checkbox"/> Factory hand	<input type="checkbox"/> Mother vehicle repairs	<input type="checkbox"/> Child care	<input type="checkbox"/> Farm hand	<input type="checkbox"/> Nursing	<input type="checkbox"/> Cleaning	<input type="checkbox"/> Hair and beauty	<input type="checkbox"/> Office work	<input type="checkbox"/> Computing	<input type="checkbox"/> Horticulture	<input type="checkbox"/> Sales and marketing	<input type="checkbox"/> Cooking	<input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality	<input type="checkbox"/> Station hand	<input type="checkbox"/> Customer service	<input type="checkbox"/> Labouring	<input type="checkbox"/> Store work	<input type="checkbox"/> Data entry	<input type="checkbox"/> Landscape gardening	<input type="checkbox"/> Telemarketing	<input type="checkbox"/> Driving	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine operation	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Electrical and electronics	<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Driving	<input type="checkbox"/> Machine operation	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)																															
<input type="checkbox"/> Electrical and electronics	<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical																																
<p>Last Employment</p> <p>Can you tell me the main reason you stopped working in the last job you had?</p>	<table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Dismissed</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To get married</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Voluntary redundancy</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To care for children</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Have never worked</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Moved to Australia</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To care for family</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Made redundant</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Currently working</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To care for someone else</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Self employed</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> To have children</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Return to study</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Lack of work</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Temporary or casual job</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			<input type="checkbox"/> Dismissed	<input type="checkbox"/> To get married	<input type="checkbox"/> Voluntary redundancy	<input type="checkbox"/> To care for children	<input type="checkbox"/> Have never worked	<input type="checkbox"/> Moved to Australia	<input type="checkbox"/> To care for family	<input type="checkbox"/> Made redundant	<input type="checkbox"/> Currently working	<input type="checkbox"/> To care for someone else	<input type="checkbox"/> Self employed	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> To have children	<input type="checkbox"/> Return to study		<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of work	<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary or casual job													
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<input type="checkbox"/> To have children	<input type="checkbox"/> Return to study																																
<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of work	<input type="checkbox"/> Temporary or casual job																																
<p>Health</p> <p>How would you describe your overall health?</p> <p>How does your health affect your everyday activities?</p>	<table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent</td> <td colspan="2"></td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Very good</td> <td colspan="2"></td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Good</td> <td colspan="2"></td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Fair</td> <td colspan="2"></td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Poor</td> <td colspan="2"></td> </tr> </table> <p>Free Text Response:</p>			<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent			<input type="checkbox"/> Very good			<input type="checkbox"/> Good			<input type="checkbox"/> Fair			<input type="checkbox"/> Poor																	
<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent																																	
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<input type="checkbox"/> Fair																																	
<input type="checkbox"/> Poor																																	
<p>Transport</p> <p>In terms of transport, how do you get where you need to go?</p>	<table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Own (car)</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other private</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> None available</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Own (motor bike)</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Public transport</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3"><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)</td> </tr> </table>			<input type="checkbox"/> Own (car)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other private	<input type="checkbox"/> None available	<input type="checkbox"/> Own (motor bike)	<input type="checkbox"/> Public transport		<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)																							
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