

“They Look at You Like You’re Nothing.”
Shame and Stigma in the Child Support System*

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In the United States, nearly 16 million children and their parents are involved in the child support system (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2016). According to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), child support payments make up approximately half of the income of impoverished custodial parents and these payments are responsible for bringing more than 1 million low-income parents above the poverty line (primarily mothers as they account for more than 80% of custodial parents and an even higher proportion of low-income custodial parents) (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2016). The OCSE lauds the program as “one of the top cost-effective government programs,” recouping \$5.33 for every \$1 spent (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2017). The marketing around the program focuses heavily on financial achievements, with much less focus on the experiences of the individuals involved in the system.

Despite the OCSE’s focus on monetary dimensions, lived experiences and other social issues related to child support have been more prevalent in news media, policy discourse, and academic literature in the last two decades. Much of the media coverage is related to sensationalized stories of parents who owe in the tens of thousands of dollars in back child support or includes reports of police raids to put child support debtors behind bars. Scholars have explored what policies and sanctions are most effective for compliance from non-custodial parents (Huang and Pouncy 2005, Lin 2000), what effects child support system involvement has on relationships between custodial and non-custodial parents and between non-custodial parents and their children (Nepomnyaschy, Magnuson, and Berger 2012; Seltzer, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998), and what collateral consequences occur, including financial and criminal justice related outcomes (Lerman 2010; Holzer, Offner, and Sorensen 2005; Waller and Plotnick 2001). But one collateral consequence, emotional processes and outcomes within the system has gone

largely understudied. Some scholars, in their interview projects with non-custodial parents, have hinted at the significance of emotions related to child support system involvement (Mincy 2015, Edin and Nelson 2013); however, exploring the actual processes by which emotions have a central role in the system has been absent from the literature on the sociology of emotion as well as the child support literature. While the literature on welfare is rife with studies examining the ways that recipients are shamed and stigmatized, the literature on child support does not include this important aspect, despite being the third largest program used to address poverty in the United States and the undeniably important links between policies related to poverty and stigmatization of their recipients. In addition, there is a great deal of literature on the uses of shame as a form of social control in the criminal justice system; however, again, this literature ignores the important criminal justice site of the child support system.

In this paper, I examine shaming and stigmatizing experiences for custodial and non-custodial parents, primarily non-custodial fathers, involved in the child support system. This site provides insight into the processes and mechanisms through which shame and stigma manifest in legislative and judicial arenas more broadly. Using data from a qualitative study of the child support system, I explore the experiences of shame and stigma in three thematic areas: 1) shame in social interactions, 2) shame as a tool of social control, and 3) the social consequences of shame.

THE SOCIAL NATURE OF SHAME

Although feelings of shame are largely internal, the genesis and experience of these internal sentiments are often strongly related to and impacted by external forces, making the social nature of this emotion an important site of sociological study. Several scholars have explored the ways that shaming manifests in social contexts. Hayes (2000) examines the

relationship between shame and labeling theory in exploring how a typically invisible behavior—indebtedness—invokes stigma and social definitions of deviance in part through social interactions and gender dynamics. Pettigrove and Parsons (2012) demonstrate the collective nature of shame and its relevance to conflict dynamics in the case of Palestine. These studies highlight important characteristics that are also important to the shaming processes in the child support system—debt and conflict. Both Hayes (2000) and Pettigrove and Parsons (2012) ultimately underscore that social processes are central to experiences of shame. Nevertheless, while the importance of external influences on the experience of shame has been demonstrated, its examination in social contexts has been somewhat lacking (Scheff 2000, 2003).

As an emotion, shame is fundamentally social in nature because it is one of the only emotions that requires an external stimulus. Shame represents a threat to social bonds (Scheff 2003) and is tied to how an individual perceives he appears to others (Retzinger 1995). Since shame is the “premier social emotion” (Scheff 2003), examining the manifestations and effects of shame in diverse social settings is valuable. The child support system is a worthwhile site to examine shame as it represents the intersection of family and finances, two central dimensions of social interaction, emotion, and conflict. The intersection of these dimensions allows for exploration of the social processes contributing to the experience of shame and stigma in an interesting social context.

The manifestations of shame and stigma are diverse in their form and context. Elias (2000) uncovers shame in self-help books advising mothers on how to speak with their daughters about sex, while Lewis (1971) explores how shame is enacted in psychotherapy sessions, and Cooley (1922) develops the concept of the “looking glass self” to explain how shame results from self-monitoring behavior. Ultimately, many of these manifestations are directly tied to

controlling the individual's behavior. Because of its function as a "self-conscious" emotion requiring some social interaction, and unlike basic emotions such as anger or fear which can occur entirely without any social stimulation, shame has the unique ability to be used as a tool of social control (Scheff 2000). As a strategy of social control, the anticipation of shame (Goffman 1963) is important because it is this anticipation that creates the *sense of shame* (Scheff 2003) critical for individuals' self-monitoring. Shame is typically co-constructed in a combination of "an internal judgement [sic] of one's own inabilities; an anticipated assessment of how one will be judged by others; and the actual verbal or symbolic gestures of others who would consider, or are deemed to consider, themselves to be socially and/or morally superior to the person sensing shame" (Chase and Walker 2012, 740). I suggest that through these mechanisms, social policy, its enforcement, and responses to this enforcement produce shame. Specifically, the child support enforcement apparatus utilizes shame and stigma as tools of control to force non-custodial parents to meet their support obligations.

The child support system is the third largest government program addressing the needs of low-income children in the U.S., with federal and state funding falling just below \$6 billion in 2016, making the system a hugely important site of social policy (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2016). To enforce support orders, state and municipal courts and Divisions of Child Support Enforcement utilize diverse criminal justice related agencies and sanctions, including having the Probation unit in some states manage child support payments and incarcerating non-custodial parents for non-payment of support. In essence, the child support system represents the intersection of the welfare system and the criminal justice system. Because of this connection, the welfare system is important for understanding the ways in which shame is constructed through the dynamics of social policy. It is widely documented that recipients of welfare face

stigma and discrimination from the general public, as well as welfare system staff (Seccombe 1999). This stigma is often directly associated with the perceptions of immorality associated with single parenthood and unemployment (Jarrett 1996), statuses shared by many involved in the child support system. The shame connected to the receipt of welfare is so prevalent that even welfare recipients themselves attempt to distinguish between their own status and that of other recipients deemed “welfare queens” (Gustafson 2011). Ideas about the morality of certain groups of individuals receiving welfare benefits influence whether or not these individuals are deemed worthy of support and assistance or conversely are blamed and shamed for their poverty (Battle Forthcoming). A number of factors have been suggested to be important in reinforcing this relationship between poverty and shame, including dominant social discourses, cultural institutions, and social policy institutions (Jo 2012). These mechanisms frequently serve as the social sites at which the co-construction of shame occurs. The internal feelings and external projections of shame create social distance between those who conform to social norms and those who do not.

The criminal justice system is another important case for the examination of the functions and consequences of shame in policy related sites. Braithwaite’s (1989) definition of shaming in the criminal justice system encompasses “all societal processes of expressing social disapproval which have the intention or effect of invoking remorse in the person being shamed and/or condemnation by others who become aware of the shaming” (100). Shame in regulatory settings, such as the criminal justice system, has been conceptualized in two main ways – as a social threat and as personal failure (Harris 2017). As a social threat, shame is the perception of current or future rejection or disapproval, and as personal failure, shame is an individual’s belief they have not met an ideal or standard (Harris 2017). Ultimately, while it has been widely

demonstrated that shame and stigma are central in social policy contexts, their role in the child support system is missing nearly entirely from the literature.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this paper are drawn from an ethnographic study of the child support system conducted between January 2015 and November 2016. Specifically, I conducted observations in five Juvenile and Domestic Relations courts and an alternative-to-incarceration program in Central Virginia and interviews with custodial and non-custodial fathers and mothers and child support system staff in Central Virginia and Southern New Jersey. I also analyze cultural objects related to the child support system such as Division of Child Support Enforcement advertisements and informational materials, the language of child support related legislation, and the rhetoric of politicians around child support enforcement. The population in the Central Virginia site was approximately 24% minority (22% Black and 2% Hispanic). The median family income was \$42,913 and 12% of families were below the poverty line. Seven percent of households were female-headed (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). In this site, I had access to five Juvenile and Domestic Relations (JDR) courts in which I conducted observations during child support hearings, as well as meetings of the alternative-to-incarceration and reentry programs. The Southern New Jersey site has a similar demographic make-up as the Central Virginia site. Approximately 24% of the population is minority, with 11% Black and 13% Hispanic. The median income is higher at \$55,365, slightly fewer families were below the poverty line (9%), and the same percentage of households was female-headed (7%) (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). In this site, I interviewed non-custodial fathers with child support cases in two neighboring jurisdictions.

During the study, I observed more than 300 child support hearings and more than 75

hours in other sites related to the child support program, including alternative-to-incarceration programs for non-custodial parents behind on their payments, Division of Child Support Enforcement offices, and reentry programs.¹ I took detailed field notes during my observations, including descriptions of the settings, interactions, behaviors, and demographic information. I also conducted 10 formal and more than 20 informal interviews with non-custodial parents and 3 formal and more than 10 informal interviews with child support system staff. The formal interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours and were audio recorded and transcribed. The informal interviews consisted of brief to 2 hour long conversations which took place during my observations in child support related sites. During and after these conversations, I took detailed notes on the participants' statements.² I use pseudonyms for all names to protect the identity of participants. I used an inductive process to identify themes in both the field notes and transcripts through a close reading and line-by-line coding (Saldaña 2016). After identifying shaming and stigmatization as a major theme in the data, I categorized the data into the subthemes of social interactions, social control, and social consequences.

SHAMING AND STIGMATIZATION IN THE CHILD SUPPORT SYSTEM

Shame and stigma had several important functions in the bureaucratic processes and procedures that regulate the ways non-custodial and custodial parents are mandated to financially support their minor children. In the sections that follow, I describe the manifestations of shame as a social emotion in social interactions, the use of shame as a tool of social control, and the social consequences of shame.

¹ To my knowledge, this is the first project in the U.S. which incorporates courtroom observations to study the child support system

² To stay true to the limitations of ethnographic research, I use quotation marks only when the interview was audio recorded. While I made every effort to note the exact phrasing used by participants during informal interviews, when I am reporting a quote that was not audio recorded, I use single quotation marks.

“They Look at You Like You’re Nothing:” Shame in Social Interactions

Shame and stigma were prevalent in the interactions (or lack thereof) between child support system staff and parents. As Scheff (2000, 2003) argues, shame acts not only as an internal emotional force, but can be externally influenced vis-à-vis the social interactions that an individual has with those in a position of authority or power. One way that these interactions might take place is in status degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel 1965) described as “any communicative work between persons, whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types,” which ultimately degrades the “total identity” of the individual (420). In the child support system, interactions between court staff and parents, both custodial and non-custodial, frequently took the form of status degradation ceremonies. For example, after not addressing the parents throughout a hearing, a judge looks up and notices the arm tattoos of an approximately 25-35 year-old³ non-custodial father. The judge says, ‘I see you have several tattoos. How much did you spend on those? That looks like at least \$100 in tattoos. Probably should have spent that on your child.’ Incidences such as these were frequent, with judges asking the price of cell phones parents had or whether they smoke cigarettes. The shame placed on the perceived irresponsibility of maintaining the expense of a cigarette habit might also be related to the idea that smoking overall is viewed as an immoral and stigmatized behavior of fathers (Greaves et al. 2010). Ultimately, these interactions were undeniable external forces of shame for the non-custodial parents.

Because of the prevalence of the shaming and stigmatization of the proverbial “welfare queen,” when interviewed on the fairness of the welfare system, poor women receiving welfare benefits, “whom many would describe as welfare queens,” separated themselves from the

³ I estimated the ages of individuals in the courtroom by their physical appearance and clothing. While this is an imprecise measure, I do feel comfortable with the accuracy of the age estimates that I provide.

deviant “welfare queens” abusing the system “by asserting their positive roles as mothers” (Gustafson 2011: 152). These cognitive distinctions represent a widespread buy-in to ideas about the deservingness of some for respect and sympathy and of other deviants for contempt and blame (Battle Forthcoming). Parents involved in the child support system also express their acceptance of cognitive distinctions related to deservingness, specifically between a “good dad” and a “deadbeat dad.” They describe being treated as “deadbeat dads,” although they view themselves as “good fathers.” These sentiments demonstrate the significance in the use of moral indignation in strengthening boundaries between those considered “deadbeat dads” and those considered “good fathers” in the child support system. While both of these groups of dads may in fact participate actively in the lives of their children, even by contributing financially through in-kind or informal types of support, and be similar in many other characteristics, the failure to comply with a court order serves as the criteria by which some are marked “deadbeats” and others are marked “responsible.” Importantly, this boundary between “deadbeat” and “responsible” dads is endorsed by those often considered by others as “deadbeats,” just as the women often considered “welfare queens” often endorse the boundary between “welfare queens” and “good” mothers. For example, Derrick, a 38 year-old non-custodial father of two and custodial father of one, says, “I’m not like one of the deadbeat dads that’s not doing anything, or not even trying to see the kid, or none of that. I’m doing what I’m supposed to do to stay out of the trouble that I would be in if I wasn’t doing what I was supposed to do.” While Derrick’s cognitive boundary between “good” dads and “deadbeat” dads falls along the lines of whether fathers see their children and remain active in their lives, his endorsement of the distinction between “good” and “deadbeat” dads provides an important example of the ways in which individuals, including non-custodial parents themselves, create morality-based divides that rest

heavily on social interactions and judgmental perceptions of behavior.

The ideas about the distinctions between “good” or “responsible” parents and “deadbeats” are reinforced in many ways in the child support system. For example, during a session on anger management in an alternative-to-incarceration program for non-custodial parents facing jail time for non-payment of support, the instructor for the session openly shames a participant for cursing at the mother of his children. The instructor asks the class to raise their hands if they have ever used obscenities with their girlfriends, looking around and waiting for participants to put their hands up. When one father tentatively raises his hand, the instructor said, ‘See, that’s what you can’t do. I have never cursed at my wife or called her out of her name.’ The instructor then continues on with class, with most participants visibly uncomfortable and no longer engaging in discussion, without actually offering any alternative ways to handle the anger that would contribute to someone cursing, even though the session was on anger *management*. This interaction is one of many that I observed in which even those who were tasked with supporting non-custodial parents having difficulty meeting their support obligations participated in the shaming and stigmatization of these parents.

During my interviews with parents, many non-custodial fathers in particular described their interpretations of interactions with child support system staff as explicitly disrespectful. Non-custodial parents’ interactions with judges were particularly shaming because of the extremely unequal power dynamics. Brandon, a 25 year-old non-custodial father of two, describes his experience of shaming in the child support system as a lack of respect, saying,

They disrespect you. They look at you like you’re nothing. Like you’re less than nothing. And then, at the same time, you have to look at them like, “Dude, I’m here for child support. I didn’t shoot nobody. I didn’t rob nobody. I’m not knocking folks over. I’m not

a drug dealer. I'm not a child molester. I'm here for child support." And yet, they're looking at you like you were. Like you have horns on your head and you're out here killing babies. That's how judges look at you.

Brandon describes the sentiment that judges look at fathers defaulting on child support payments with the same contempt given to violent criminals. He expresses the feeling that judges think these fathers are "less than nothing."

Gary, a 31 year-old non-custodial father of 1 and custodial father of 2, describes a similar sense of a lack of respect. He says, "I honestly don't feel as though these judges respect us unless we go in there with a lawyer. Because everything I was trying to say to him, he was just shootin' it down. I was tryin' to get more time with my child, and he was like, 'Nope. Nope. Nope. You can't do this. You can't do that.'" Participants' descriptions of interactions with child support staff as disrespectful strengthen the previously demonstrated relationship between shame and a perceived lack of respect (Retzinger 1995).

Gary's description of the shaming he feels at the hands of child support system judges also points to the legitimacy some non-custodial parents might be afforded through the presence of an attorney. Without the presence of legal representation, their status is devalued, often resulting in very negative legal outcomes in their hearings. The importance of legal representation is noteworthy for several reasons. First, as a large proportion of non-custodial fathers in arrears are in extremely unstable financial situations (70% make less than \$10,000 per year [Sorensen, Sousa, and Schaner 2007]), it is highly unlikely that they would be able to afford to hire an attorney and thus access the legitimacy and respect from judges that comes with legal representation. In addition, in Virginia, custodial parents who have open cases with the Division of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE) are granted the representation of an attorney and the

services of a paralegal during all hearings related to child support. This means that during hearings, custodial parents are spoken for by their attorneys and thus receive the legitimacy and respect afforded to legal professionals. In many instances during my observations, judges do not address parents at all during the hearing, both custodial and non-custodial and whether or not they are represented by legal counsel. Judges often simply use “mom” or “dad” to refer to parents, and not their names. Judges also often pass over the parents in requesting information about the child, such as names and birthdates and addresses, asking the DCSE staff and not the parents, thereby downgrading the parents’ status to one of merely an observer in the hearing. On many occasions, both custodial and non-custodial parents are not granted the opportunity to speak at all during the hearings, as if they are not in the courtroom at all. This feeling of invisibility or alienation has also been previously linked to experiences of shame (Retzinger 1995).

At times, judges and child support system staff did interact directly with parents; however, these interactions often prove difficult because of differences in communication styles, language or education barriers, or characteristics of the non-custodial parent that the judge deems inappropriate, ill-mannered, or unseemly, like tattoos, as the example above affirms. These communication barriers are sometimes classed and/or racialized as explained by Kenny, a 50 year-old reentry practitioner who says, “I have to look at the make-up of the courtroom, the judges, the prosecuting attorneys, and even the defenders [defense attorneys]. Often they don’t look like us [Black males]. And what I’ve seen over the years is an inability to relate to the human aspect of relation.... And I think we have that and it’s called implicit biases.” Kenny’s explanation highlights the intersectional importance of race and gender, and implicitly socioeconomic status, in the interactions between non-custodial parents and child support system

staff. While Kenny is clear in his perceptions about the impact of implicit bias, in my observations I did not detect any patterns of especially shaming or stigmatizing behaviors for non-custodial parents of color. While the non-custodial parents in the urban jurisdiction were predominantly Black, the non-custodial parents in the rural jurisdictions were predominantly white. And in both places, they were shamed and stigmatized frequently. Ultimately, the shameful status was just being perceived as a “deadbeat.” Nevertheless, because of racial, gender, and class disparities in child support system involvement—mothers account for more than 80% of custodial parents; more than 50% of these mothers are women of color and their poverty rate is more than 30% (Grall 2016)—these shaming and stigmatizing interactions in the system are disproportionately experienced by this particular demographic.

“Child Support Still Owns You:” Shame as a Tool of Social Control

Through its presence in the social interactions between individuals of unequal power (as discussed in the previous section), shame emerges as a tool of social control in the child support system by being used as a direct method of punishment. These methods of punishment also play an important role in defining and reinforcing boundaries of deservingness through shaming and stigmatization. In the child support system, several acts (outside of non-payment of support) are explicitly criminalized, including missing court appearances and refusing to appear for a paternity test. The informational pamphlet in one jurisdiction provides a telling example of this criminalization, as well as the court’s position on the value of the litigants’ time. One passage titled “When Called to Court” reads:

All persons required to appear before the juvenile and domestic relations district court should arrive at the time and place stated on the petition, summons, bail form, or subpoena. It is important that everyone involved in a case be ready when the case is

called into the courtroom. Though the wait may seem long, everyone must remain until the case is called; to do otherwise is a *criminal offense* [emphasis added]. The court does not have child care services; therefore, the only children who should be brought to court are those children involved in the case or whose presence has been requested or required by the court, an attorney or a probation officer.

The passage highlights the criminalization present in restricting litigants' autonomy over their time. In other words, no matter the length of the wait, work or other obligations, or the inability to secure childcare, those who have been called to court must be standing by to appear whenever the case is called and if not, they are committing a criminal offense. The use of the phrasing "the wait may *seem* long" also demonstrates the overall lack of respect for the individuals involved in the child support system, and implies that those individuals are not able to decipher what actually constitutes a "long" wait. In fact, in many instances, parents face wait times of several hours. In one jurisdiction, summonses state either 9am or 1pm arrival times. Morning sessions last from 9am to 12pm and afternoon sessions last from 1pm to 4pm—litigants can be called at any point during that time period. Under most circumstances, a wait of three hours or more would be considered "long;" however, under the description of the court, this wait time only "may *seem* long." In these instances, parents who are often in unstable financial positions and have precarious employment situations, must decide between losing valuable wages, or in some instances risking their jobs altogether because of missed work time, and committing a criminal offense. This impacts non-custodial parents, as well as custodial parents who often appear for several hearings at which the non-custodial parent fails to appear. Criminalizing lateness or absence from a court appearance represents a form of "temporal domination" (Reid 2013) in which groups with less power and autonomy are made to wait to

access services. Reid (2013) describes this as a central element of patterns of “sociotemporal marginalization of the poor.” These examples of criminalization represent the stigma and status devaluation associated with involvement in the child support system, as the time and authority of the court overrides any idea of autonomy over one’s time that an individual might have.

Shame and stigma are also evident in the ways that non-payment of support is punished. Not only is not supporting one’s children a criminal offense, it is also perceived as a highly immoral act that can partly cause for the child poverty and a host of other social ills. For decades, politicians have commented on the immorality of “deadbeat” dads and the consequences that their (in)actions supposedly have on the well-being of children and moms. This sociopolitical position is connected to an increasingly punitive approach in policy and law that addresses the non-payment of child support (Battle 2018). One such piece of legislation is the Deadbeat Parents Punishment Act passed in 1998 which made it a federal criminal offense to evade an order in another state for more than one year or in excess of \$5,000 and punishable by a substantial fine or imprisonment in a federal prison. In his remarks at the signing of the Act, President Clinton (1998) says:

One of the main reasons single mothers go on welfare is that fathers have failed to meet their responsibilities to the children. Even when a family manages to stay out of poverty, a father’s failure to pay child support puts mothers who are raising children by themselves under terrible pressure. A lot of women are forced to work two jobs, to work at night, or simply to worry sick about their children either because they’re away from them all the time or because they’re with them but they don’t have enough to support them. When fathers neglect support of their children, it aggravates all the other problems a family faces.

These comments and related efforts of punitive enforcement, such as in the name of this piece of legislation itself, can certainly be read as an effort to shame and stigmatize what is perceived as an extremely immoral act—not following one’s court order for child support and thus not fulfilling highly gendered parenting expectations. Focusing on the exacerbation of the ills of society and juxtaposing the health and well-being of “hard-working” single mothers with the actions of “irresponsible” fathers strongly contributes to a stigma around non-custodial fathers’ child support system involvement. This approach depends heavily upon heteronormative constructions of familial gender roles which call for a male breadwinner to financially support not only his children, but also their mother, who should be able to spend the majority of her time at home caring for them.

There is a myriad of other examples that demonstrate the extent to which the courts and law enforcement will go to harshly punish and shame those perceived as “deadbeat” parents. Take for instance a video of a November 2014 news broadcast from ABC’s Action News (Philadelphia, PA area local broadcast) which depicts a police raid rounding up individuals accused of non-payment of support (WPVI-TV 2014). This raid, and others similar to it, involve armed law enforcement and sometimes members of SWAT, surrounding the home of an accused child support delinquent, arresting him on the spot with handcuffs (and sometimes ankle chains), and taking him to jail, often while being recorded by local media. This video along with countless other examples of newspaper articles and coverage of police raids, which even include billboards of “most wanted” ads for child support delinquents, show the pervasiveness of shaming and stigmatizing these Family Court debtors. Importantly, many of those obligors owe little more than \$1,000. This sum would never be cause for a burglar or any other petty criminal to have his “perp walk” run on the news or for an overnight raid of his home. It is unlikely that

an individual who owes \$1,000 in a civil case would ever be arrested. However, non-custodial fathers face public shaming in the same ways that we might see for violators of much more serious offenses involving violence, such as robbery, a point also described earlier by Brandon. Despite Family Court being a court of civil, and not criminal, adjudication, the sanctions attached to non-payment have criminal justice consequences resulting in a renewal of the “Debtor’s Prison,” historically used to stigmatize the poor who are unable to meet their financial obligations.

The punitive and criminal justice oriented approach to regulating the child support system puts many individuals otherwise with no criminal justice history in direct contact with the system. For example, child support payments are overseen by the Division of Probation in New Jersey. This means that this criminal justice agency is in essence surveilling the housing, employment, and payment histories of the non-custodial parents in their stead. Mail is sent with the return address of the Division of Probation and non-custodial parents must notify the office of any changes in their home addresses or employment status. In addition, when non-custodial parents do not make their child support payments for more than two months, they become eligible for incarceration for non-payment and can have a bench warrant issued for their arrest. Brandon explains the shame of interactions with law enforcement in this context, saying,

My son's grandmother... called the state police...and had them pick me up at semi-pro football practice. It embarrassed me, it humiliated me, it angered me. It had me ready to, to - I just didn't know how to deal. I wanted to die. I just wanted to die. 'Cause there's no way gettin' around child support even if you pay child support. Even if you are good with your child support payments but you owe arrears, child support still owns you.

Noting the embarrassment, humiliation, and anger felt at this public encounter with law enforcement, Brandon articulates the psychological and emotional significance of this form of punishment. Brandon and others also discuss being forced to hide from law enforcement and sometimes even the mothers of their children to avoid incarceration which they knew would mean a continued cycle of being unable to meet their support obligations.

Another example of the shaming and stigmatization attached to support is found in the use of alternative-to-incarceration programs for individuals behind on their child support payments. In one such program, parents in arrears on their support orders must attend weekly sessions for 8-10 weeks. During meetings, topics such as alcohol and substance abuse, tobacco use, domestic violence, anger management, and discipline are discussed despite the fact that none of these parents has been convicted of any drug, alcohol, or domestic violence related offenses nor has demonstrated himself to be inept at parenting; the only thing these fathers are “guilty” of is not paying their child support. While the program does include some instruction on job searches and resumes, the program is primarily focused on the quality of parenting. In this way, this group, mostly made up of non-custodial fathers, is stigmatized as being incompetent parents, or worse, addicts or abusers in need of guidance and paternalistic support. Rather than focusing more specifically on the actual issues most of these men face, like under- and unemployment or an unfamiliarity with the Family Court system (which can prevent them from successfully filing to have their payments reduced or stopped when their employment status changes), these programs treat their members as though they have fundamental flaws in their abilities as parents. Subjected to sessions that individuals charged with criminal offenses such as domestic violence or assault might face, these fathers are essentially given messages that their situations are a result of their own deficits and not the deficits of a slow economy or an

overzealous court system. Even under the guise of offering support for these fathers, the approach of this program is rooted in the idea that these men are not “good” dads and therefore must be taught how to fill this role. These types of programs are similar to ones in the welfare system that have likewise been shown to be unfairly and punitively shaming of recipients. For example, welfare recipients are required to attend work-oriented courses that do little to actually help attendees secure employment but rather are perceived as a “waste of time” (Chase and Walker 2012).

The use of shame and stigma in the child support system serves as an important form of social control to get non-custodial parents to comply with the orders of the court. Not only do these forms of punishment and control reinforce the symbolic boundaries between “deadbeat” and “responsible” fathers based in large part on heteronormative gender stereotypes, they are also perceived by parents as punishment for having a child. Gary describes this sentiment, saying,

I feel like the system is geared towards men that run out, that don't want to be a father.... And I think it's us men who actually wanna be there, actually wanna be fathers, are the ones that suffer.... I'm not the type of guy to run away from my responsibilities. I'm diving in head first. But I feel like I'm getting punished. How do you get punished for having a child? ... They're used to deadbeat dads walking up in there tryin' to get a break. And deadbeat dads don't deserve no breaks. But good fathers do.

Gary's comments illustrate the belief that the child support system is casting an unfairly wide net to punish all non-custodial fathers through shaming and stigmatizing as “deadbeats” regardless of their actual efforts at being a father.

“With Child Support, That Dream Becomes Less and Less Possible:” The Social Consequences of Shame

The use of shame and stigma in social interactions and as a tool of social control in the child support system results in many social consequences for the parents involved in the system. The destructive potential of shame, mainly because of the threat to an individual’s sense of self, has been extensively documented, particularly in regulatory settings (Harris 2017). And unacknowledged shame, which many experience due to the taboo nature of this emotion, can result in a host of defensive affects including “hiding behaviors,” “negation of other,” repression, resentment, anger, and violence (Retzinger 1995). In the child support system, shaming and stigmatization does have a number of destructive consequences, including many fathers’ loss of hope spurred by the threat to their identity both as fathers and as men. Non-custodial fathers frequently express that their involvement with the child support system makes them feel inadequate and, in some cases, their inability to make their child support payments, makes them feel hopeless. Brandon describes this feeling, saying,

It's just a flesh eating disease.... I plan on getting back to where I was when I was twenty-two, twenty-one, having my own car, having my own place where all my kids can come and go as they please, or whatever the case may be. And, with child support, that dream becomes less and less possible. With these kind of numbers hanging over my head, it doesn't look like it's any time in the near future.

While on the surface the loss of hope is an individual and internal response, this sentiment has important consequences for the ways that non-custodial parents plan for their futures with their children.

James, a non-custodial father of 2 in his late 20s, describes a similar sentiment, saying, ‘I might as well skip town to North Carolina. There’s no way I can make it here working a job and paying all that in child support. I’m here [alternative-to-incarceration program] now because I want to better myself and my kids. That’s the only reason. Because the way I’m feeling, I coulda got in my car and drove to North Carolina.’ James’ feelings of defeat and the inability to “make it” navigating the stigmas associated with involvement in the child support system, such as mandatory participation in the program, offers a temptation to leave the state. Such a move would no doubt have a major impact on the lives of James’ children who he reports seeing frequently. Gary expresses a similar feeling of helplessness, saying

I could barely pay my own bills. I was messed up. I could barely pay my own rent.... I couldn’t afford to live. My rent was late every month.... I had to call and beg the bill collectors not to cut this off, not to cut that off, and pay everything late.... I couldn’t get the kids everything that I wanted to get them.... A couple birthdays came and went where I couldn’t get them a gift or anything like that.

Gary’s difficulty at making ends meet requires him to beg bill collectors to keep his utilities on and prevents him from buying birthday gifts for his children. He goes on to describe how he has to explain to his children why he cannot get them gifts, an explanation that is rife with shame and sadness, similar to that expressed by fathers in other studies of fatherhood and child support at being unable to fulfill the role of “provider” (Mincy 2015, Nelson and Edin 2013). In many ways, fatherhood manifested through financial support represents a man’s ability to meet expectations for masculinity and intense shame occurs when he is unable to maintain this dimension of masculinity.

The stigma of involvement with the criminal justice system also impacts the ways that

non-custodial parents spend time with their children. Brandon describes the fear he has of being arrested while with his children, saying

I'm nervous. I'm scared. I have very particular things about me. I have a red jacket and I have an orange bicycle with my son's bike on the back that I call the "Daddy Mobile." Anybody that knows me knows that that is me and my son's livelihood to our survival in [our hometown], to get to and from daycare, to school, or work, or the grocery store. That is how me and my son get around.... So all I'm waiting for them to do is to come to my house one day when I'm not there, to see this orange bicycle locked up outside, and to see me riding it one day and place my face on my bicycle and jump out on me. God forbid, I pray that I do not have my [child] with me if it happens.

Shame is traditionally understood as a response to a threat to the social bond (Scheff 2003); I propose that shame might also be a threat to social bonds. For many parents, the shame and stigma that comes with their involvement with the child support system discourages them from maintaining important relationships, including with their children and the custodial parents of their children. These processes of shaming and stigmatization contribute to what are already very tense relationships, impacting the non-custodial parents' desire and motivation to continue and grow these relationships. These relationships are also made more hostile by the stigmatizing procedures of the system. In many courtrooms, the physical lay-out creates an adversarial dynamic between the parties. The custodial parent sits at one table flanked by a lawyer and paralegal from the Division of Child Support Enforcement, while the non-custodial parent sits across from them in most instances without any representation. This set-up creates the impression that the hearing is a situation in which one party is going to "win" and the other is

going to “lose.” The feeling that they are being stigmatized and treated unfairly on account of being labeled “deadbeats” causes a number of men to contemplate the extent to which they participate in the lives of their children or whether they want to continue an amiable co-parenting relationship with the custodial parent. Gary describes his feelings about his relationships with his child and his child’s mother, saying

I think it jacks that [relationship with children] up, man. I think it jacks up the relationship with the mother and the father, man. Sometimes it literally makes a man not wanna be a father, man. For real. It can drive men away, man. Fuck this, fuck her, fuck both of them. Y'know what I'm saying? It makes us angry. It makes us mad.

Gary explicitly expresses his anger and hostility, affects that have been linked to unacknowledged shame (Scheff and Retzinger 1991).

In some instances, fathers describe the ways that the mothers of their children use the threat of the child support system as leverage to make demands on their time and money. Brandon recounts having to negotiate a great deal with the mother of one of his children who reinforces the stigma and stereotypes associated with non-custodial fathers in the child support system and feels she has the upper-hand. He describes the experience, saying

It's embarrassing. And then at the same time it pisses me off. And then it frustrates me. And then, at the same time, it's almost like, like I wanna wash my hands of the situation. 'Cause I have so much love to give, and like wisdom and guidance that I want to give to my son, that I give to my other son on a daily basis and that my other son's just being deprived of. That it, you know, it almost forces me to wanna quit dealing with the situation.

Not only does Brandon indicate his own frustration at the effects of his stigmatizing involvement with the child support system, he also indicates the negative implications for his child who he feels is missing out on his love, wisdom, and guidance.

The shame and stigma experienced as a result of child support system involvement, specifically when non-custodial parents are unable to make their payments, encourages some to engage in semi-legal and illegal activity. The child support system utilizes a system of “purges” in many municipalities. Purges are set to secure release from incarceration or avoid incarceration for non-custodial parents in arrears. The purge is a portion of the arrears owed determined by the judge in a case and can typically range up to \$1,500 and must be paid within two weeks. If the amount is not paid, then non-custodial parent will remain in jail or will report to jail to begin serving a sentence ranging from 30 days to 1 year, depending on the number of offenses. For many parents who are unemployed or underemployed, setting a large purge amount encourages illegal activity in an attempt to avoid incarceration and also save “face” (Goffman 1963). Kenny describes this dilemma succinctly, saying “And to a lot of guys, what’s worse? To be called a deadbeat dad or a drug dealer?” For many non-custodial parents, particularly fathers, who face precarious financial circumstances, the availability of illegal work makes it tempting, especially when the alternative is receiving the shameful and stigmatizing label of a “deadbeat.” Not only does this label diminish their identity as fathers triggering shame as a result of their devalued self image (Lister 2004), it also impacts perceptions of their manhood and masculinity which are largely tied to being able to support a family (Connell 1995).

CONCLUSION

As the findings presented herein demonstrate, shame and stigma have diverse manifestations and important implications in social contexts. The child support system provides

an interesting social context to examine these manifestations and implications, as it is situated at the intersection of matters of the family, finance, and conflict. Moreover, as an area of social policy, child support brings together the welfare and criminal justice systems, two sites where shame and stigma are common. Exploring the ways that shaming and stigmatization occur in the child support system allows for a fuller understanding of the social nature of shame.

The three themes examined in this article—shame in social interactions, shame as a tool of social control, and the social consequences of shame—bring together important dimensions of this emotion. Building on other studies of shame and calls for further exploration of shame in social contexts, this article provides insight into a number of important dimensions. I elaborate the relationship between morality, responsibility, deservingness, and poverty identified in other studies (see Schneider and Ingram 2005) by demonstrating its significance in a previously understudied site of social policy. While there is a great deal of literature discussing the role of shame in the welfare and criminal justice systems, the role of this emotion has been essentially missing from studies of the child support system. Despite the size and scope of the child support system as an area of social policy, its significance for understanding how policy enforcement is relevant in sociological studies of emotion and interaction has not been appreciated. Furthermore, I expand the discourse around how shame is enacted, rather than focusing more heavily on descriptions of or responses to the emotion. This examination of process is central to a complete picture of the social nature of shame.

In addition, I elaborate on the potential social consequences of shame. The findings provide support for the significant threats to identity (Lister 2004) associated with feelings of shame. This identity threat impacts a number of other important social dimensions. In addition to providing support for the previously established concept of shame as a response to a threat to the

social bond (Scheff 2000), the findings demonstrate the significant ways that the experience of shame can threaten important social bonds as well by elaborating on the ways that shame associated with the enforcement of social policy impacts relationships. Respondents in this study express that the shame and stigma they face has a direct impact on their relationships with their children and the mothers of their children. In addition, other studies have focused on shame that is connected to individual's behavior (e.g. accumulating large debt), while in this study I explore how shame and stigma that is not necessarily connected to an individual's behavior can be just as significant as the former type of shame. In other words, examining the dynamics of shame and stigma connected to labels that are ascribed not as a direct result of an individual's behavior highlights another dimension of the manifestations and implications of shame. In addition, I highlight the significance of heteronormative norms of the family in the shaming and stigmatizing which takes place in the child support system. By primarily focusing on the financial support provided by non-custodial fathers in determinations of their deservingness of the label of "deadbeat" or otherwise stigmatizing treatment, the system reinforces the father-breadwinner/mother-caregiver ideal.

These findings have important implications for the child support system and takes up Scheff's (2003) call to explore the effects of shame on social systems. First, the use of shame and stigma is arguably counterintuitive for order adherence. Arguments around procedural justice suggest that individuals are more likely to follow court orders when they perceive their experience in court to be fair, measured by whether or not they have a voice, feel respected, trust the decision maker, and believe they are neutral (Tyler 2007). In many of the examples described in this article, parents do not have a voice, nor do they feel respected; it is therefore unlikely that they perceive their experiences to be fair. Moreover, interview respondents report that they

perceive their interactions with child support staff to be disrespectful and punitive, which results in several of them explicitly questioning whether to continue complying with their orders and even maintaining relationships with their children. In this way, the use of shame and stigma stands in direct conflict with encouraging compliance with orders for support, one of the main goals of the Office of Child Support Enforcement. In addition, the shaming and stigmatization present in the child support system contribute to sociocognitive boundaries around deservingness. Ideas about who is deserving of support and compassion and conversely who is deserving of disdain and blame have important implications for approaches to poverty and family. Understanding how these boundaries are created is an important area of sociological study.

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