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Can't Buy Me Love?

**Young Australians' views on parental work, time,
guilt and their own consumption**

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Avoiding ‘mother-blame’ or parental blame: A note on the research approach

During our study one mother contacted us when she received our request to participate. She asked whether our study would lead to blame of single mothers like herself if it found that their children were more negatively affected by parental work than others. She felt that context is important; she had neither sought to be a sole parent nor to experience the ill-health that now prevents her from working in her professional occupation for the hours she prefers.

She is right to be concerned. There is a very sizeable international and Australian literature that attributes children’s characteristics – whether schizophrenia, emotional breakdown, homosexuality, rebelliousness, drug use, sexual activity or delinquency – to mothers’ failures or characteristics, especially those of sole parents who are mostly mothers (Garey and Arendell, 2001; McDonnell, 1998; Terry, 1998; Thurer, 1993). These criticisms often find fertile ground as many parents look to themselves when things go wrong for their children. However, parental preferences about health, hours and jobs do not determine labour market outcomes any more than children’s preferences for certain Christmas presents can assure their delivery.

No parent is omnipotent in relation to outcomes for their child, and families face diverse situations shaped by income and wealth, ethnicity and race, geography, family size, access to social, economic and human resources, relationship and marital outcomes and health. Each of these influences young people’s situation and perspectives. While parental work choices certainly affect children’s experience, they are far from the only determinant. In many cases parents have only limited degrees of real freedom, especially in relation to labour market outcomes such as employment, hours, and earnings.

By and large, children do not blame their parents for things they find hard about the work, care, money and time outcomes in their households (Lewis, Tudball and Hand, 2001). The perspectives of young people are very alert to the context of their parents’ lives and they are remarkably forgiving; this discussion should, we think, follow their example.

There are those who see such research as inevitably contributing to mother blame and feeding the epidemic of parental, especially maternal, guilt. A retreat from research on this basis, however, is also a mistake. Parents, among others, need accurate information to inform their choices. Without relevant, reliable research they may act on assumptions that are wrong. This seems to be the case in relation to several issues in the paper that follows.

Summary

This discussion paper examines the perspectives of young people about their parents' paid and unpaid work, its implications for their lives and the links between work and consumption. It analyses qualitative empirical data collected in Australia in late 2003.

Twenty-one focus groups amongst Year 6 and Year 11 males and females were conducted in urban and rural locations in two Australian states in both high and low socio-economic locations. In total, 93 young people were consulted for the study. They came from nine schools; one in the country and eight in cities. Four city schools were in lower socio-economic areas and four in higher socio-economic areas.

The paper falls into five sections. The first discusses previous studies of parental work, children and consumption. The subsequent four sections consider results as follows:

1. young people's preferences about time and the trade-off between work and money;
2. work 'spillover' and how parental work affects children;
3. the nexus between money and parental guilt; and
4. children's own consumption and its links to work, identity and self.

In Australia the links between changing patterns of paid work and consumption are complex. More paid work potentially drives more parent-replacing consumption of services and more guilt-salving expenditure. At the same time, changing cultures of parenting, intensified advertising to children, and new youth cultures also drive new levels of consumption. While several previous studies have explored how parental work affects young people, this study takes the analysis further by linking it to consumption.

Time versus money: Young people's preferences

It is clear from this study that the majority of young people want more time with their parents rather than more money through more parental work. This is true of boys and girls from dual earner and single earner couple households as well as single parent earner households. There are signs of a 'hyper-breadwinner' phenomenon in couple households where the single earner (usually the father) has a demanding job and works long hours to generate income. In these households, children's preference for time with their absent parent is especially strong. This finding may explain the counter-intuitive observation that a preference for more time appears just as strong in households with a mother at home as in dual earner households.

A preference for time with parents in place of money is less pronounced in Sydney than in Adelaide and the country. However, in households where parents are working long or unsocial hours, the preference is very consistently in favour of more time over more money. Not all parental time is seen in the same way. 'Hanging time' with an unstressed parent is especially prized by children, including older males and females in Year 11. Young people particularly want parents present for special school events,

celebrations, sporting achievements, and when problems arise. They show signs of ‘parent-specific’ time hunger; a parent at home, for instance a mother, does not substitute easily for an absent parent, such as a father working long hours. A significant number of children miss their absent fathers in particular, even when their mother is at home outside school hours. Many children with a long hours parent or one who is away on weekends are keen to avoid falling into the same pattern when they become parents themselves.

Job spillover

Parents’ jobs can have strong effects on their children. However, the key question is not whether parents go to work but the state in which they come home. This state is influenced by certain objective characteristics of jobs such as hours and work intensity, as well as the extent to which parents’ work preferences match their jobs.

For many children, their parents’ jobs have positive spillover effects. Kids value the money and security that parents’ jobs bring. Beyond this, they can see that many parents enjoy their jobs, or aspects of them. But negative spillover is also widespread. Bad jobs affect families badly. They contaminate family relations in a number of ways although their effects differ in lower and higher income groups. Children from lower income areas tend to notice physical injuries as a result of parental jobs while children in higher income areas more often mention moods, tiredness and emotional spillover. While the work and family debate is dominated by the issue of whether mothers should work or not, a more important question for young people is how jobs affect their mothers *and* fathers. These results suggest that a new emphasis on the work patterns and circumstances of fathers is important to a properly focussed work and family debate.

Negative spillovers are especially associated with disappointed parental desires such as occur when a parent who doesn’t want to work must, or when a parent is unable to work the shifts they want. It is also associated with some specific job characteristics including risk of physical harm, job insecurity, work overload, and long or unsocial hours. These often send a parent home from work unhappy or bad-tempered. Their moods are obvious to young people and have a marked effect on the household. As a result, job spillover is not confined only to the parent; both good and bad job effects are transmitted directly to children.

The fit between job-preferences and job-reality is critical to the level and nature of spillover. For example, a mother who is happy working at home caring for the household has much less spillover from her work to her children than a mother who is unhappy doing domestic work. A father who loves his job and works long hours may bring home less negative spillover than one who works part-time but hates his job. Long or unsocial hours are consistently associated with negative spillover and the majority of parents who work them appear to their children to be sometimes grumpy, tired and stressed.

By and large, young people cannot prevent these spillovers, although some try. Most commonly they protect themselves by physically withdrawing. In the longer term, they may turn to the other parent and distance themselves from the absent or overworked and bad-tempered parent.

Parental guilt

Many young people say that their parents feel guilty about their work and absence from the home. On the other hand, where parental work does not intrude excessively on to family relationships, young people do not notice guilt. Nor is it obvious in those parents who seem reconciled to the necessity of their work patterns. However, in many households, guilt is seen as especially afflicting parents who work long or unsocial hours or who spend extended periods of time away from their children. Both mothers and fathers are affected.

The signs of guilt which arise from a mismatch between the way parents *are as workers* and the way they *want to be as parents* are obvious to the children in this study who identify several common responses. Some parents simply talk about how they feel and young people appreciate the discussion. Others spend extra time with their children and this is valued by young people. More common are ‘time and stuff’ strategies; parents attempt to make up for their absence by spending extra time and money on kids. Young people like this ‘two for the price of one’ approach; but if they have to choose they prefer more time to more stuff. The substitution of stuff for time does not work.

Most young people are not on the lookout for material compensation; they prefer more time. ‘Contribution through spending’ appears to work better for the market than for young people. It therefore seems sensible for parents to avoid compensatory spending, not least because earning more money to buy more stuff means sacrificing more time. The ‘cure’ becomes the disease.

Consumption

This study suggests that many young people share a well-developed critique of materialism. While they enjoy having material goods, they are sharply critical of those with ‘too much’ and see them as greedy, spendthrift, socially inauthentic, irresponsible and poorly equipped for later life. However, young people live within a powerful force field of competitive consumption. They consistently name these pressures and can easily describe the items that matter. They clearly articulate their reasons for ‘keeping up’ – belonging, power and identity. This force field is active in higher and lower income areas, and amongst boys, girls and primary and high school children. It is less powerful in the country where consumption must sometimes be deferred until a city visit.

The costs of falling behind are seen to be high – teasing, not fitting in, feeling bad, failing socially. There are some who define themselves against the prevailing fashions of clothing, phones or cars. They find identity by being different and being in groups that are different, that adopt anti-market and anti-fashion attitudes. However, they are a minority and some actively pursue less fashionable forms of consumption.

This youthful competitive consumption drives paid work patterns in two obvious ways; through child pressure on parents to buy stuff and through young people’s own paid work to generate spending money. There is no doubt that working parents feel the pressure of this acquisitive race. Nagging is a common tactic and ‘pester power’ is actively encouraged by advertisers. Time-pressed working parents find it difficult to resist.

This study confirms key links between changing work patterns and consumption. Increased parental work drives increasing commodification of care, including through guilt-induced consumption. Most of the young people in this study are planning to have jobs and a family and many want to do it in ways that are different from their own parents. In many cases, young men want an active role in parenting and to be there for their children more than their own fathers have been. Young women want to share the tasks of earning and caring with their partners. Very substantial institutional changes will be necessary if workplaces and labour markets are to accommodate these preferences and give these parents of the future the kind of flexibilities they seek. This study shows that disappointed preferences contribute significantly to the negative job spillover that children perceive. A good match between preferences and work realities is critical to maximise positive job spillover and minimise negative effects on family relationships.

