In Australia, an estimated 85% of separated parents share the costs of raising their children under the Child Support Scheme (CSS), with some interaction with the Department of Human Services—Child Support (DHS-CS) (previously the Child Support Agency [CSA]) (Fehlberg, Kaspiew, Millbank, Kelly, & Behrens, 2014). Yet despite its impact on the finances of separated parents and their children, there is no recent research that directly and systematically investigates clients’ interactions with DHS-CS. In a first step to addressing this empirical gap, this paper summarises findings from a qualitative study of payee mothers’ descriptions of their interactions with DHS-CS.

Much of the research on child support in Australia has addressed patterns of compliance. Wave 3 data from the Longitudinal Study of Separated Parents (LSSP) show that 41% of payee mothers (c.f. 73% of payer fathers) report payments being made in full and on time; conversely, 25% of payee mothers (c.f. 5% of payer fathers) report payments being neither in full nor on time (Qu, Weston, Moloney, Kaspiew, & Dunstan, 2014; see Smyth, Chisholm, Rodgers, & Son (2014) for a discussion of gender differences in reporting). Australian researchers have analysed the policy (Smyth et al., 2014) and knowledge (Smyth & Rodgers, 2011; Smyth, Rodgers, Son, Allen, & Vnuk, 2012) dimensions of the calculation and payment of child support. This paper draws on an alternative approach that analyses how child support is shaped by the relationships between parents as well as financial considerations (Cook, McKenzie, & Natalier, 2015; Natalier, 2012a; Natalier & Hewitt, 2010). In so doing, the paper extends beyond the payer–payee dyad typically addressed in Australian research, and positions DHS-CS in payee mothers’ experiences of child support.

This paper describes the key institutional and interactional processes that create barriers to participants’ regular receipt of expected and useful amounts of child support: the way the costs of children are calculated; DHS-CS approaches to enforcing payers’ compliance; and the communication practices.
of the DHS-CS and its workers. Participants' concerns about these issues increased when participants described their relationship with their former partner as highly conflictual or fearful. In such instances participants hoped that DHS-CS processes and workers would recognise and respond to child support as an issue of finances and relationships. When this did not occur, participants reported intensified financial disadvantage and personal and socio-economic disempowerment. For participants, these outcomes undermined the value and legitimacy of the DHS-CS as an institution that assists separated parents to manage child support.

Background

The DHS-CS has been an important component of the Child Support Scheme (CSS) since the introduction of the Child Support Agency (CSA) in 1988–89 (for a full account of the relationship between CSS, DHS-CS and family law, see Fehlberg et al., 2014, Chapter 11). The CSS introduced the process of administrative assessment by a federal government agency, the CSA. Prior to the CSS, child maintenance was awarded through Family Court of Australia orders. The limitations of the court process, high rates of child poverty among children of single mothers along with the costs of mitigating this poverty through welfare payments and a shift away from state responsibility for children's financial wellbeing informed the introduction of the CSS (Fehlberg & Maclean, 2009). The CSA was expected to depersonalise the transfer of child support liabilities and neutralise the emotional tenor of the relationship between former partners (Carberry, 1992)—registering a child support liability with the CSA translated “a personal obligation into a debt owed to the Commonwealth” (Harrison, 1994, p. 178). It was also expected that when combined with a formula that standardised calculations of child support liabilities, the timing and amount of payments would become more predictable (Smyth & Weston, 2005).

The DHS-CS remains an important part of the CSS although its place has altered to reflect new policy approaches (for detailed accounts of relevant legislative and policy changes, see Fehlberg et al., 2014, pp. 424–428). An emergent emphasis on parent autonomy has seen a shift to direct payments between parents (Private Collect) and away from DHS-CS collecting and transferring payments (Child Support Collect). Within DHS-CS, 46% of cases are Child Support Collect and 54% of cases are Private Collect, with between 60–70% of new cases beginning as Private Collect arrangements (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014). Data from Wave 3 of the LSSP, which uses a sample of DHS-CS parents, suggest that over time, many parents move from Private Collect to Child Support Collect (Qu et al., 2014).

The Australian community has shown a high level of agreement with the propositions that supporting children is primarily the responsibility of parents and child support should always be paid (Smyth & Weston, 2005). However, there is less consistent support of the implementation of child support responsibilities through DHS-CS. DHS-CS is consistently placed in the “top five” most complained about statutory schemes (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2012). The DHS sponsored Transactional survey, Relationship survey, and Customer experience of complaints handling survey reported varying levels of client satisfaction, with satisfaction ratings of 84%, 44% and 15%, respectively (Department of Human Services, 2014).

Payee mothers' concerns have centred on assessment and compliance issues. In a 2005 survey study, payees (most of whom were women) were primarily concerned about payers’ under-reporting of income, non-payment and arrears (Smyth & Weston, 2005), which have been ongoing challenges since the implementation of the CSS (Harrison, Snider, Merlo, & Lucchesi, 1991). Recent qualitative work touching on interactions with the CSA/DHS-CS, indicates the amounts and reliability of child support payments continue to be a concern for payee mothers (Cook et al., 2015; Fehlberg, Millward, Campo, & Carson, 2013; Natalier, 2012b). Additionally, payee mothers have highlighted DHS-CS's limited investigatory powers and perceived inaction on debt collection (Patrick, Cook, & Taket, 2007), unavailable or unsupportive workers.
Methods

The data for this paper were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 37 single mothers, conducted between October 2014 and January 2015. The interviews were guided by a schedule of topics that focused discussion while enabling mothers to raise additional, relevant issues. Participants discussed: past and current relationships with their former partners; formal and informal child support and post-separation care arrangements; their financial circumstances and the place of child support in those circumstances; the relationships between child support and the welfare payments; interactions with DHS-CS staff and experiences of DHS-CS processes; the financial, relational and emotional outcomes of these interactions and experiences; what elements of DHS-CS and the CSS worked for them and what elements did not; and recommendations for change.

Interviews were conducted by telephone. Telephone interviews facilitated the involvement of women who lived too far away to interview face-to-face, and offered a sense of anonymity for participants, some of whom were discussing sensitive topics. There are concerns telephone conversation can limit the rapport and natural conversation dynamics that help participants feel comfortable in an interview (Shuy, 2002). However, the length of interviews (ranging from approximately 40 minutes to almost 2 hours), the detailed and often sensitive information shared by participants and participants’ comfort in raising issues and not simply responding to questions, suggest that this was not the case in the current study.

Thirty-one participants were recruited through the Council for Single Mothers and their Children (Victoria), and the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children. An additional six participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Mothers who expected to be paid child support (but who may not have received child support or did not receive the full amount) and who had interactions with DHS-CS were eligible to participate. After the initial coding of 20 interviews highlighted the challenges faced by women with fearful or high-conflict relationships with their former partners, we applied purposive sampling to recruit more women with challenging relationships and relatedly, complex child support cases. This approach allowed us to explore in more detail what helps and what hinders a client group who have a particularly great need for effective assistance from the DHS-CS.

Participants were offered a $50 supermarket voucher as thanks for sharing their time and experiences. Interviews were transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis. The research was approved by human research ethics committees at Flinders University, the University of Tasmania and RMIT University. All names presented in this paper are pseudonyms.

Table 1 summarises the sample characteristics. The majority of participants used Child Support Collect. Participants were entitled to receive between $0 and $560 per week, with an average amount of $86. This average reflected some very high assessed or agreed amounts of child support but one third of the participants reported amounts of $25 or less per week. Most participants did not receive the assessed or agreed amount in full and on time. Most participants had one or two children, and most had primary or more than primary care of their children. A little over half of the participants were employed, and the average income from work and/or welfare payments was $42,400. None of the participants were cohabiting with a partner at the time of the interview.

Twenty-five participants described high-conflict and/or fearful relationships with their former partners (Patrick et al., 2007) and the complexity of information required by DHS-CS (Fehlberg & Millward, 2013; Patrick et al., 2007).
partner. Such relationships were dominated by ongoing conflict over child support and post-separation parenting, expressed directly between parents and/or through multiple child support and family law processes. The 12 participants describing neutral or civil relationships shared with their former partners a focus on negotiating or implementing child support and other post-separation issues without any intense and sustained “negative” emotions.

The sample is not representative and generalisable, and does not aim to map the prevalence of the experiences and concerns described. However, it includes women from a range of socio-economic positions, child support arrangements and post-separation experiences, and so provides an account of the types of difficulties that can happen across different contexts. Recruiting through support and advocacy organisations likely led to an over-sampling of women with particularly challenging experiences with DHS-CS and their former partner; as a result, our findings emphasise what does not work well for payee mothers.

We focused on the experiences of payee mothers because single mothers are a group at particularly high risk of poverty (de Vaus, Gray, Qu, & Stanton, 2014), and regular and substantial child support payments can make a meaningful contribution to the costs of raising children (Cook, Davis, & Davies, 2008; Natalier & Hewitt, 2014; Natalier, Walter, Wulff, Reynolds, & Hewitt, 2008). The gendered financial positions and care responsibilities mean that interviewing mothers paying child support, fathers paying child support and fathers receiving child support would highlight different points of satisfaction and concern (Millward, Campo, & Fehlberg, 2011; Natalier, 2012a; Vnuk, 2010).

Key findings

Participants’ accounts of their interactions with DHS-CS reflected their perception of a disjuncture between the formal articulation of child support in legislation and regulations and its implementation. Participants discussed the gap between the child support formula and the actual costs of children; the seemingly ineffective enforcement of child support obligations by DHS-CS; and the absence of accessible and supportive communication from DHS-CS staff. In the instances of compliance and communication, participants interpreted these gaps as indicative of DHS-CS failure to recognise and respond to child support as reflecting and contributing to financial and relationship challenges for payee mothers.

Costs of children

Participants consistently raised the problem of the formula under-estimating the amount of money they spent on raising their children. They specifically noted school, medical and

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<th>Table 1: Sample characteristics of study participants</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Child support arrangement:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private Collect</td>
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<td>Child Support Collect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>Missing data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amount of child support expected (range: $0/wk–$560/wk; mean = $86)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Could not/did not say</td>
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<td>Patterns of receipt</td>
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<td>In full and on time</td>
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<td>Partial and irregular</td>
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<tr>
<td>Care arrangements [DHS-CS definitions]*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regular care [14%–34% of time]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared care [35%–65% of time]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary (&gt;65%–86% of time)/more than primary care (&gt;86% of time)</td>
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<td>Fluctuates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 or more</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annual income (excluding child support) (range: $11,000–$110,000; mean = $42,400)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current relationship status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partnered (married or de facto)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenor of relationship with former partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fearful/high conflict</td>
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<td>Neutral or civil</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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*adds up to more than 37 because two participants had different care arrangements for different children
Participating women were also concerned that calculating child support with reference to what might be termed “routine” or “basic” costs of children ignored the importance and the expenses of social inclusion. Additional costs may be partially met through a change of assessment process. However, many participants were not aware of this option. Others found significant medical and dental costs and costs for training children with music or sports ability did not fit definitions of “special circumstances”, despite the need, value and, in the context of low income, proportionately high costs of these things.

When participants had a high-conflict or fearful relationship with their former partner, requests for a change of assessment required them to manage the intersection of finances and relationships. For example, Xena requested a change of assessment when her former partner altered care arrangements. She saw this decision as risky, given that “you lose a lot of power being a single mum. You lose a lot of power in your life and yourself.” Because of her decision, “I copped verbal abuse, text message-wise, and got called things. I was just after extra money, blah, blah.” When the assessed amount was increased, the change was not backdated. Xena then experienced an extended period of stress as her former partner twice appealed the outcome. Ultimately, the process required Xena to disrupt the tentative civility that had existed between her former partner and herself, with emotional and personal ramifications throughout a protracted appeals process.

For participants, an appropriate formula was important because they wanted child support paid by their former partner to make a real contribution to the costs of raising their children. Some participants reported that child support payments could make a difference to their household budgets—this was more common among those who received over $100 of child support per week. For participants on low incomes and receiving small amounts of child support, child support did not meaningfully contribute to costs. Catherine and the two children living with her at the time of the interview had been homeless on several occasions, and went without fruit and vegetables, new clothes and entertainment. Her former partner regularly paid the assessed amount of $14.99 each fortnight. This amount was simultaneously essential and insufficient to ease the financial pressures she faced. When asked if child support made a difference she responded:

No, I don’t even notice $14.99. I was actually desperate for milk and bread when it come through last Monday, and it went into the bank, and I said “I’ll take out $15.00”. She [the bank teller] goes “No, you can’t, there’s only $14.99 in there”. I said “Well we don’t have one cent pieces, so how does that work?” So I can’t even get an even $15 out; I’ve got to get $14.95 out.

For low income participants in this study, the receipt of small amounts of child support could not materially mitigate the effects of poverty.

Compliance

The CSS and DHS-CS were designed to facilitate the transfer of child support between parents. The growing numbers of parents choosing Private Collect indicates the value for many parents of autonomy in child support. However, for women whose former partners are aggressive, abusive or non-cooperative, DHS-CS has the potential to neutralise the emotional and personal dimensions of child support and encourage its payment.
For low-income participants in this study, the receipt of small amounts of child support could not materially mitigate the effects of poverty.

The Child Support Agency took my details, took my ex-partner’s details, and explained to me and explained to him, you know, how it’s calculated and he just said, “Yeah, fine”, that he’ll pay. … It’s actually a really good system. It’s less likely to cause friction if it’s imposed, I think, and also if the calculation’s done by a third party, the government … I think it’s been a really good way of preventing a lot of conflict.

Participants compared the authority of DHS-CS to demand and pursue payment with their own lack of power. Mardi’s former partner was physically violent when they lived together, and at the time of separation she was afraid to speak to him about financial issues. She had approached DHS-CS to calculate child support ($50 per week), and had subsequently used Private Collect, which her former partner had complied with.

I know there are parents—I have a very close friend, she actually sorted all the support and all the agreements just between herself and her ex-partner, and they’ve done really well. And I will never be—you know, we can never do that. If Child Support was not there he would never have paid me anything.

However, many participants were concerned by DHS-CS failing to enforce former partners’ compliance with assessment processes. They described former partners who: did not lodge tax returns; reported unrealistically low incomes; hid money through trusts; and did not report cash in hand earnings. These are recognised policy challenges for which no effective policy responses have been developed (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2012; Cook, 2013).

Over three quarters of participants reported that assessed or agreed child support payments were unpaid, paid only in part, or were irregular or late. In these circumstances DHS-CS compliance processes were largely ineffective. For example, Ida was assessed to receive $31 per week through Child Support Collect but rarely received payments.

So that then started years and years of non-payment, partial payment, debt accumulation, and me still having to support our child by myself, pretty much. And from Child Support’s perspective, it wasn’t really, they didn’t really follow up very much, they didn’t really chase up payments, I had to be constantly asking them what was going on and when they were going to collect it.

In the absence of effective DHS-CS activity, the onus for reporting and pursuing assessment and payment issues was placed on participants. For example, DHS-CS workers advised one participant to hire a private investigator; many participants surreptitiously collected and passed on information on their former partner’s cash-in-hand employment on the understanding this would facilitate compliance processes. But the inadmissibility of information collected in these ways, and the lack of DHS-CS human resources and forensic investigation capabilities meant that the information was rarely used—although participants were often unsure about this point, as DHS-CS workers would not provide information about compliance activities.

Many participants felt that they had little option other than to accept substantially reduced child support. In instances where participants believed their former partner under-reported their income, a change of assessment based on the father’s capacity to pay was formally available. However, the onus for pursuing this lay with participants, and it can be a lengthy, administratively burdensome and emotionally costly exercise with the potential to increase hostilities between parents. Isobel, who was assessed to receive close to the minimum child support payment through Child Support Collect (she did not want the amount published) but...
Many participants felt that they had little option other than to accept substantially reduced child support.

I have got myself out of that relationship, we don’t share a roof but he still has that financial power over me … There is a lot of fear involved—especially when there’s been violence and other abuses within the relationship. I think I would like to highlight that as one of the areas that really needs to be addressed and something needs to be—what I don’t know—but something needs to be done so women don’t have to put themselves in that position of being fearful about what they put on a form. [Later in the interview] It was too risky … I was completely exposing myself and making myself completely vulnerable. And you know, it was like walking on a plank and CSA was kind of standing at the other end on the ship just kind of jumping on it. With no lifeline.

Isobel’s comments highlight that for some participants, problems of compliance were part of their former partner’s coercive control and financial abuse, which deepened their fear and distress when raising the non-payment or irregular payment of child support. Exemptions from the Maintenance Action Test are available to those who can show their safety and the safety of their children will be jeopardised as a result of seeking child support, but past research has indicated that many women are not aware of the exemption (Patrick et al., 2007). In this instance, Isobel knew of the option of an exemption but believed her circumstances would not warrant an exemption because the physical violence (although not the emotional abuse) had stopped when the relationship ended.

When participants felt compelled to seek child support, DHS-CS workers did not recognise withholding child support as a form of control, nor recognise its connection to other forms of abuse. Sarah (assessed to receive $25 per week but not receiving any money at the time of the interview) was afraid of her former partner, who had abused her when they lived together. In contrast to DHS’ 2011 implementation of Family Violence Risk Identification and Referral procedures, she was not asked about the violence she suffered in her former relationship and was told the issue was irrelevant when she described her experiences.

No, they weren’t interested at all, no … I wasn’t asked anything about it or when I told them they said, “Oh, we don’t really need to know that information. It’s got nothing to do with collecting money.” It’s part of the abuse that he won’t pay.

Participants described high levels of anxiety when they sought child support from an abusive former partner, and feared they could not be economically independent and safe in the present and into their future.

Compliance issues had financial effects. Centrelink payments and state housing rents are calculated on the assumption that child support is received in full and on time, unless reported otherwise. For participants who received child support via DHS-CS, the amount received could be reconciled with the expected amount, and other payments adjusted accordingly, albeit with some time delay (five participants described this process). These payments can compensate payees for unpaid child support and may protect payees from the personal costs of pursuing compliance, although the time lag can create financial strain.

While underpayment of child support can be reported and compensated for, in part, within the Centrelink system, this is not well known by, or advertised to, recipients (Cook, 2013), and most in this situation did not benefit from these processes. Those participants who already received the maximum Family Tax Benefit A and rent assistance were not compensated for their former partner’s non-payment of child support.

When it is effective, DHS-CS is an important resource for payees who are seeking child
Participants generally were sensitive about the negative stereotypes of single mothers and valued interactions that did not reflect such judgments. For example, Hannah had “fractious” relationships with former partners she believed under-reported their incomes and did not regularly pay child support. Her interactions with DHS-CS workers varied but, overall, her experiences were positive.

By and large I’ve felt like they’re on my side, if you want to put it that way. That’s, it’s not quite an accurate way to put it I suppose, but I feel like, oh phew, at least they’re trying to assist … Well as I said, the Child Support Agency at times when I’ve spoken with them, I have felt supported. And by that perhaps all I mean is that I haven’t felt set upon and denigrated. That’s all it takes, really.

Hannah compared her interactions with DHS-CS to those with Centrelink and the Family Court of Australia, where she felt “set upon” and “denigrated”. For Hannah and the eight other women who compared DHS-CS favourably to Centrelink and family law sites, supportive—even civil—responses from DHS-CS workers could be a relief from the often confrontational and unhelpful interactions that were a repeating element of their post-separation lives.

More commonly, participants discussed the shortcomings of DHS-CS communications. A key concern was the difficulty in contacting the specific workers assigned to their case. Only one of the eight participants with assigned caseworkers was consistently able to contact their worker. Beatrice had been assigned a case manager because of her former partner’s ongoing non-payment of child support (he was assessed to pay $150 per week), but it was a role that was practically meaningless.

Beatrice: The process is incredibly long. It takes weeks of it all being settled, weeks of paperwork, to-ing and fro-ing, phone calls where you’re, you know, scrabbling support from uncooperative or abusive former partners. But compliance remains a problem. The federal government funding of post-reform compliance initiatives did not meaningfully improve compliance (National Audit Office, 2009), and the 2011–12 and 2012–13 DHS annual reports showed almost one quarter of active paying parents had a child support debt; those with debt were less likely to have a payment arrangement in place compared to the previous two years (Fehlberg et al., 2014). Compliance is particularly an issue for parents experiencing violence or abuse, who were less likely than those who had not to report not receiving child support in full and on time (Qu et al., 2014).

While there are formal processes to identify and address (some) issues of non-compliance and abuse, participants’ experiences indicate that these are not widely available or effectively implemented in actuality. Participants found it difficult or risky to navigate “the system” to seek a change of assessments, report irregular payment and non-payment, and raise and “prove” abuse. The emotional and administrative labour required by these processes could outweigh the financial benefits that may—or may not—eventually be received (Cook et al., 2015).

**Communication**

The challenges of compliance and the effects of under-estimating the costs of children can be exacerbated or mitigated through interactions with DHS-CS workers. Many participants in this study described workers as unavailable and unsupportive, though there were also women who had received moral support and useful advice about DHS-CS processes.

For participants with challenging relationships with former partners, interactions with DHS-CS workers were particularly important. A minority found the technical advice provided by workers useful, even when it did not translate into improved child support outcomes. Teresa, who did not consistently receive an assessed amount of $125 per week through Child Support Collect, commented:

I’ve pretty well always got the answer that I needed, whether I liked it or not, and I didn’t mean to put it that way but I’ve always got some result from that phone call, which has been helpful.

Interactions with workers who offered moral or emotional support were also important. These responses could give participants the sense that workers acknowledged the difficulties they faced, which was particularly important for participants who were dealing with uncooperative or abusive former partners. However, participants generally were sensitive about the negative stereotypes of single mothers and valued interactions that did not reflect such judgments. For example, Hannah had ‘fractious’ relationships with former partners she believed under-reported their incomes and did not regularly pay child support. Her interactions with DHS-CS workers varied but, overall, her experiences were positive.

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Beatrice: The process is incredibly long. It takes weeks of it all being settled, weeks of paperwork, to-ing and fro-ing, phone calls where you’re, you know, scrabbling...
When women were living with financial insecurity and high-conflict or abusive relationships with their former partners, the tenor of DHS-CS worker responses became particularly important.

For the majority of the participants we spoke to, information about their child support cases was difficult to follow. A very few offered extensive and detailed knowledge of their own child support cases, and the CSS generally, but most struggled to understand terminology, assessments and why money was not paid—or why it was. The complexity of information was not particularly concerning for participants who were financially secure and had no conflict with their former partners—they did not feel it was necessary to monitor child support payments. But when child support was a necessary component of the budget, or when former partners did not reliably pay child support, participants expressed greater concerns over the clarity of the information.

Hannah, who did not reliably receive child support from either of her former partners, had a Bachelor degree but found it difficult to understand DHS-CS information.

Well, what happened is you get all these letters from the Child Support Agency or whatever they’re called now, and they’re very complicated to me. And I’m fairly well educated, and all the rest of it, but I’m not an accountant, and they’re very hard to understand, I think. And the system for how they work it out is, to me, quite arcane.

Accurate and appropriate information provided by impartial practitioners is a key strategy for supporting parents to manage child support (Moloney, Smyth, & Fraser, 2010). Ideally, this support would be continuous, accessible, free, or inexpensive, and personalised (Fehlberg et al., 2013). Supports would be provided by one practitioner and not fragmented across services and practitioners (Kaspiew et al., 2009). This ideal was not the experience for the majority of participants.

Participants’ accounts suggest communication issues were important for two reasons. First, they failed to meet participants’ information needs, thus limiting their ability to judge the appropriateness of the processes and decisions applied to their situation. Second, many participants interpreted the lack of access to workers, the lack of compassion from workers and the unintelligibility of DHS-CS information as an indication of the low priority DHS-CS placed on acknowledging their claims and needs. Thus, participants’ sense of being unsupported by DHS-CS was reinforced.

Conclusion

Interactions between payee mothers and DHS-CS will remain an important part of the
workings of the CSS, even in light of policy moves encouraging parents’ autonomy in managing child support. This study suggests that for those payee mothers and their former partners who have a neutral or positive relationship, DHS-CS is a resource that can protect parents’ relationships and payee mothers’ financial stability by defining payments as an expected and habitual element of post-separation parenting. But for payee mothers in fearful or high-conflict relationships with their former partners, the role of DHS-CS was more complicated.

The original vision of DHS-CS as a means of neutralising the emotions that can be part of child support negotiations continues to be relevant—but for many women in this study, it was largely unfulfilled. When DHS-CS processes fail to respond to the financial and relationship complexities of child support, the effects on payee mothers and their families are not only material; they also contribute to mothers’ sense of disempowerment and vulnerability, and the stresses of managing difficult relationships with former partners.

From the perspective of this study’s participants, assessment and compliance issues created major barriers to their receipt of a child support that can make a meaningful and reliable contribution to the costs of raising children. In policy terms, the needs described by the women in this study can sit in tension with the financial constraints faced by low-income fathers, in particular, who may struggle to consistently meet their assessed obligations (Natalier, 2012a).

The women we spoke to also highlighted the relevance and effect of interactions between clients and the DHS-CS. Given our research focused on one group of clients, rather than DHS-CS workers and the resources and organisational logic that shape their actions, the possibility for and parameters of change to communication practices are beyond the scope of this study. However, we suggest that in future considerations of the CSS and the workings of the DHS-CS, the relational and interactional, as well as the technical and compliance dimensions of child support, be given serious policy attention.

References


From the perspective of this study’s participants, assessment and compliance issues created major barriers to their receipt of a child support that can make a meaningful and reliable contribution to the costs of raising children. In policy terms, the needs described by the women in this study can sit in tension with the financial constraints faced by low-income fathers, in particular, who may struggle to consistently meet their assessed obligations (Natalier, 2012a).

The women we spoke to also highlighted the relevance and effect of interactions between clients and the DHS-CS. Given our research focused on one group of clients, rather than DHS-CS workers and the resources and organisational logic that shape their actions, the possibility for and parameters of change to communication practices are beyond the scope of this study. However, we suggest that in future considerations of the CSS and the workings of the DHS-CS, the relational and interactional, as well as the technical and compliance dimensions of child support, be given serious policy attention.

References


From the perspective of this study’s participants, assessment and compliance issues created major barriers to their receipt of a child support that can make a meaningful and reliable contribution to the costs of raising children.


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Kristin Natalier is Associate Professor at the School of Social and Policy Studies, Flinders University. Dr Kay Cook works at Global, Urban and Social Studies at RMIT University, and Dr Torna Pitman is a Senior Practitioner at Relationships Australia and an Adjunct Researcher at the School of Social Sciences, The University of Tasmania.

Acknowledgements. This research was supported by funding extended to Associate Professor Kristin Natalier through the University of Tasmania Research Enhancement Grant Scheme. Kristin also received funds from Flinders University to complete this project. We thank the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, Victoria and the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children for helping us to recruit women into this study.