

Staying Afloat on Social Assistance: Parents' Strategies of Balancing Employability Expectations and Caregiving Demands¹

Amber Gazso York University

Résumé

Dans une optique d'économie politique féministe, le présent article étudie l'équilibre vie-famille pour des parents bénéficiant de l'assistance sociale en Colombie-Britannique, en Alberta et en Saskatchewan. Dans ces trois provinces, la restructuration des politiques fait que l'admissibilité à l'assistance sociale dépend de plus en plus des efforts d'employabilité de ces parents (recherches de travail obligatoires ou participation à des programmes de réintégration des assistés sociaux au monde du travail). Ce rapport d'admissibilité découle de processus simultanés et contradictoires inhérents à la restructuration néolibérale – intégration des rapports entre les sexes et familisation – qui ont des répercussions problématiques sur la capacité des parents à maintenir un équilibre entre les attentes d'employabilité potentielle ou avérée et les impératifs des soins à la famille. À partir des données qualitatives de 46 entrevues, l'article cerne les stratégies utilisées par les parents pour gérer ces exigences conflictuelles, afin d'assurer la survie de leur famille, de se débrouiller, en vivant de l'assistance sociale. Citons, parmi les thèmes tous intimement liés de ces stratégies pour faire face : l'apprentissage du système; l'exploitation du système; le soutien social; la mise en gage. L'article explore les ramifications de ces constatations pour une remise en question féministe du néolibéralisme et pour l'atteinte des buts de justice sociale (la sécurité économique et l'égalité).

Abstract

Using a feminist political economy lens, this paper explores the balancing of work and family by parents on social assistance in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan. In all three provinces, restructuring of policy has made parents' entitlement to assistance increasingly contingent on their employability efforts (e.g. mandatory job searches,

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participation in welfare-to-work programs). This entitlement relationship is implicated by simultaneous and contradictory processes embedded in neo-liberal restructuring – gendering and familization – that problematically affect parents' ability to balance their actual or potential employability expectations with family caregiving demands. Drawing on qualitative data from 46 interviews, this paper reveals the strategies that parents then utilize to manage these competing demands so that they can maintain their family's survival– or “stay afloat” – while living on social assistance. In terms of thematic areas, these intricately inter-related coping strategies include: learn the system; play the system; social support; pawning. The significance of these findings for feminist challenges of neo-liberalism and for meeting social justice goals (i.e. economic security; equality) is discussed.

Introduction

In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent to feminist researchers that family lives are dramatically affected by reforms made to social assistance programs (Albelda, 2001; McMullin, Davies, and Cassidy, 2002). The popularity of restructuring social assistance policy to re-connect parents back to the labour market as soon as possible through a variety of regulations, including mandatory engagement in welfare-to-work programming and punitive practices (i.e. time limits in British Columbia), has both positive and negative implications for family lives. Ideally, so-called ‘active’ welfare-to-work programming produces the ministry's intended consequence of connecting parents to the Canadian labour market, thereby reducing ‘dependency’ (or caseloads) and suggesting the success of such initiatives. However, what starkly contrasts with these desired restructuring outcomes are the everyday realities of many parents on social assistance. The poverty parents experience while living on assistance exacerbates their meeting of basic social reproduction needs, such as providing food, clothing, and housing. In addition, especially in the case of lone mothers, the denial of family care responsibilities for very young children as a basis of entitlement to income support occurs at the same time that day care is costly and scarce.

Indeed, one less understood everyday reality of parents on social assistance is their balancing and managing of work and family. Of course, it is understood that parents on social assistance are not always engaged in paid work *per se*. Only some parents on assistance are engaged in welfare-to-work programs that are designed to support their paid work and enable them to transition off of assistance. And yet, the emphasis placed upon parents' potential employability certainly suggests that they are conceptualized in social assistance policy as workers first and parents and caregivers second. Increasingly punitive policies have ratcheted downward the age of a parent's youngest child at which they are expected to connect to the labour force. At the same time, expectations surrounding their labour market attachment have been ratcheted upward. For example, once their youngest child reaches three years of age in British Columbia (BC) or six months of age in Alberta, parents are expected to seek work. In Saskatchewan, the age of the youngest child at which

a parent is expected to seek work is at the discretion of their caseworker.

Using a feminist political economy lens, the objective of this paper is to explore the strategies parents use to cope with and manage their competing work and family demands by incorporating qualitative data from interviews with parents on assistance in BC, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. The central argument advanced in this paper is that parents' adoption of these coping strategies stems from their need to 'stay afloat' on social assistance, a survival goal that is exacerbated by the simultaneous and contradictory processes of gendering and familization embedded in neo-liberal restructuring of policy. In order to fulfill this objective, this paper is organized as follows. First, a general overview of social assistance reform is provided for each province over the period 1993-2004. In the second section, a feminist political economy lens is introduced as a means by which to explore and understand the contradictory implications of neo-liberal social assistance policy reforms for family lives. Following a review of the qualitative interview methodology, parents' strategies for coping with conflicting employability expectations and caregiving demands are revealed and critically analysed. In the final section, the significance of these findings for feminist challenges of neo-liberalism and for the meeting of social justice goals (i.e. economic security; equality) is discussed.

Neo-Liberal Western Welfare Reform, 1993-2004

Neo-liberal discourse has played an important role in the shaping of the perceived need for reform at all levels of the welfare state (i.e. Old Age Security, child benefits policy, (un)employment insurance) (Hartman, 2005). As a discourse, neo-liberalism stresses free market democracy, international competition, individualism, small government and minimal state support (Bezanson, 2006; Brodie, 1996). Within this discourse, then, Hartman (2005) maintains that neo-liberalism exists both as an economic doctrine and a political ideology. As an economic doctrine, it upholds the primacy of handling economic affairs within nation-states through the principle of free markets (Bakker, 1996; Broad and Antony, 1999; Hartman, 2005); instead of states, markets are the managers of the economy (Bezanson, 2006). As a political ideology, the primary guiding principle it provides is that the role of the state should be limited. As viewed through this discourse, restructuring of the welfare state is seen to be an appropriate response to the increasing need to compete in globalized markets and to reduce national and provincial deficits and/or debts purportedly incurred by spending on social programs. In the case of social assistance, neo-liberal restructuring efforts were and are perceived by government ministries to correct the over-reliance or dependency of citizens on social programs and maximize the potential for healthy economies.

The 1994 Social Security Review supplementary paper, *Reforming the Canada Assistance Plan* (Canada, 1994), set out several neo-liberal reasons for the need to reform the existing federal and provincial arrangements for spending on income support. These reasons

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included the need to remove disincentives to work among recipients of social assistance, growing caseloads, the child care needs of lone mothers, and concern over provincial provision of basic income support rather than employment training.² In 1995, the *Canada Assistance Plan* (CAP) was replaced with the *Canada Health and Social Transfer* (CHST), which introduced block funding for provincial spending on post-secondary education, health, and social services.³ Removing constraints on spending, the CHST allowed for province's considerable experimentation with policy provision and funding.

Under CAP, provinces were expected to uphold five clearly defined rights of citizens in exchange for federal funding: the right to an adequate income; the right to assistance when in need; the right to appeal decisions made about their assistance; the right to claim assistance whatever one's province of origin; and the right to assistance without forced participation in work and training programs (Klein and Montgomery, 2001; Pulkingham and Ternowetsky, 1999). The CHST, however, eliminated all rights except the provision that provinces cannot impose minimum residency requirements (Battle and Torjman, 1995). Although experimentation with work incentives had existed in some provinces under CAP (Evans, 1995; Riches and Ternowetsky, 1989), the CHST opened the door for further implementation of welfare-to-work programming (Breitkreuz, 2005; Gorlick and Brethour, 1998). Indeed, the elimination of several rights previously understood to be shared by citizens in economic need was to correct for the problems with the perceived 'passive' provision of income support. Thus, the introduction of the CHST contributed to a reframing of individuals' citizenship and entitlement relationships with social assistance policy across the provinces, away from past Keynesian notions of collective responsibility and shared risk, and toward neo-liberal values of competition, flexibility, individual responsibility and risk. Social assistance policy, informed by neo-liberalism, replaces individuals' previous social citizenship-informed entitlement relationships with newer market-informed entitlement relationships. Specifically, parents' receipt of benefits is increasingly contingent on their employability efforts (i.e. participation in welfare-to-work programming). This condition is perceived by ministries to encourage individuals' attachment to the labour market and reduce their over-reliance on the state for income support.⁴

2 Before the review, the cost-sharing of the provision of social assistance (50% funding by both federal and provincial governments) was a source of tension surrounding inter-governmental relations on spending. This tension is evident by the Conservative federal government's introduction of a "5 percent ceiling on annual increases in federal cost-sharing under the Canada Assistance Plan for welfare and social services" (Battle, 1998: 412) in the wealthiest provinces (Ontario, BC, and Alberta) between 1990 and 1995.

3 In the 2005 Federal Budget, funding for income support was further restructured when the CHST was divided into the Canada Social Transfer, which encompasses funding arrangements for social services and education, and the Canada Health Transfer, which encompasses funding arrangements for health (Department of Finance Canada, 2006). Since this paper is concerned with restructuring over the period 1993-2004, it is beyond its scope to consider the implications of this change.

4 Various characteristics of parents' home-life situations, including the age of a parent's children

The restructuring of social assistance in the western provinces epitomizes neo-liberal concerns, albeit with some distinct similarities and differences in the scope and trajectory of reforms (see also Gazso, 2006a). Over the period 1993-2004, reforms occurred in two waves in BC and Alberta and involved restriction of benefit amounts and access as a core restructuring strategy. First in 1995 under the NDP government, and later in 2002 under the Liberal government, restructuring strategies in BC included the introduction of welfare-to-work initiatives,⁵ reductions of benefit levels and elimination of earnings exemptions, the cutting of some programs, and the tightening of eligibility requirements, all to stress individuals' usage of the program as a last resort (Klein and Montgomery 2001).⁶ Individuals' cycling on and off assistance, as well as the expected increase in caseloads due to population growth and aging, were cited as the reasons driving the second wave of reform in 2002 (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2002a; British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2003).

In Alberta, restructuring occurred two years earlier than in BC but for similar reasons. In 1993, *Supports for Independence* (SFI) was largely reformed in response to the Conservative government's alarm over growing caseloads (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1994; Cooper and Mebs, 2000). Expectations of employable parents were increased, standard allowances and shelter payments were reduced, restrictions were placed upon assets, and some benefits were eliminated entirely (i.e. telephone connections and deposits, damage deposits for housing, transportation deposits) (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1993).⁷ Benefits were reduced by 19% for single individuals, by 13% for single parents with one child and by 12% for couples with two children (Boessenkool, 1997; Freiler and Cerny, 1998; Klein and Montgomery, 2001). Restructuring in Alberta was then dormant throughout the remainder of the 1990s but resurfaced in 2001 as an outcome of a five-member MLA committee review of low-income programs. This review

and whether or not they have medical conditions (i.e. addictions, mental health issues, disability), are used to classify them as employable or not employable under social assistance policy in the three provinces.

5 Under the 1995 BC Benefits Act, welfare-to-work programming was introduced in the form of Welfare to Work and Youth Works. The eligibility criterion for ongoing income support for persons aged 19 to 24 was mandatory participation in Youth Works. For adults over the age of 25, participants were entitled to available training spaces and required to seek participation in the labour market in order to be eligible for benefits under the Welfare to Work program (Gorlick and Brethour, 1998).

6 In 2002, the BC Employment and Assistance Act replaced BC Benefits (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2002b) and cut benefits by \$43 for lone mothers with one child and \$90 for parents with two children. Employable couples with one child, aged 18-54, experienced a \$47 reduction whereas parents with two children experienced a \$45 reduction (compared to 2001 benefit rates). Other specific 2002 changes included the reduction of shelter allowances for families with three or more people and the capping of crisis grants for food and clothing. With the elimination of earnings exemptions, parents' earned wages are deducted dollar-for-dollar from their benefit amounts (Klein and Long, 2003: 20).

7 Damage deposit coverage is still provided for persons leaving abusive relationships.

found, among other things, that benefit recipients experienced difficulty in engaging in paid work and/or welfare-to-work programs because of several factors, including low benefits, unaffordable housing, and limited health benefits (MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs, 2001). In 2004, the *Income and Employment Supports Act* replaced SFI with *Alberta Works*, a program that cemented the relationship between income support and employment skills training.⁸ In a minor reversal of the harsh reforms of the 1990s, however, *Alberta Works* introduced additional supports for parents (i.e. child support, the Alberta Adult Health Benefit, and increased earnings exemptions) in order that they meet their employability potential. In contrast to BC and Alberta, the province of Saskatchewan has not restricted benefit amounts or access to the same extent over the period of interest. According to Warnock (2004), benefit rates have simply stagnated, with only modest increases occurring. Only one wave of reform occurred in 1998 with the NDP's introduction of the *Building Independence Initiative*, which introduced welfare-to-work and health initiatives alongside the *Saskatchewan Assistance Plan* (SAP).⁹

Although reforms did not occur with as much frequency in Saskatchewan, the ratcheting upward of employability expectations of benefit recipients has steadily increased in all three provinces and is manifest in the current, punitive quality of social assistance policy. Individuals who now apply to *BC Employment and Income Assistance* must be over the age of 19 and financially independent for two years in order to qualify for assistance (Klein and Long, 2003). Although persons can be exempt from this test, all potential recipients must undergo a three week waiting period in which they are required to search for work before being informed if they are eligible for benefits (British Columbia Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, 2005). In Alberta and Saskatchewan, there is no mandatory job search imposed of first time applicants to assistance. However, across the provinces, once parents are granted income support, and if they are deemed an employable recipient, they must then develop a legally binding 'employment plan' (BC), a 'client investment plan' (AB) or a 'transition plan' (SK) with caseworkers.

Legally binding plans ensure that recipients take advantage of the numerous welfare-to-work initiatives available. In BC, employment plans are linked to such programs as *Jobs Start* and the *Job Placement Program* (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2004a). Under *Alberta Works*, employable Alberta parents are expected to

8 The Widow's Pension and the Skills Development Program living allowances, originally under SFI, were replaced; Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped continued as a separate program (Government of Alberta, 2004b). *Alberta Works* consists of: Employment and Training Services, Income Support, Health Benefits, and Child Support Services.

9 In fact, major social assistance reforms occurred in two waves in the 1980s. At present, eight programs exist alongside SAP. Aside from Family Health Benefits, Saskatchewan Child Benefit, Child Care Subsidies and Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities, welfare-to-work programs include the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement, Provincial Training Allowance, Jobs First, and Transitional Employment Allowance.

move back into the workforce as soon as possible (Government of Alberta, 2004a) through 'training for work programs' or 'work foundations programs.' Employable recipients of SAP are expected to seek work or engage in work through participation in *Jobs First* or the *Transitional Employment Allowance* program, or any one of the other *Building Independence* welfare-to-work programs. Compared to BC and Saskatchewan, the interest in programming that connects Alberta parents to the labour market as quickly as possible is evident by the sheer growth of employment-related programs available throughout the early 1990s (i.e. *Employment Skills Program, Alberta Community Employment, Northern Alberta Job Corps*).¹⁰

Across all three provinces, enforcement measures have also been strengthened with restructuring (see also Gazso, 2006a). Recipients are subject to eligibility audits, fraud inspections, and surveillance mechanisms. Entitlement to assistance, whether a recipient is deemed employable or not, is enforced through their completion of mandatory monthly reports of income earned, changes in assets, gains/losses in employment, attendance in training or educational programs, and any changes in their family structure or residence location. In all three provinces, if employable recipients do not comply with their employment plan, they risk negative sanctions, such as benefit reductions or outright expulsion from the caseload.

Compared to policy in Alberta and Saskatchewan, policy in BC must be ranked highest in terms of its overall punitive character. The province of BC has the only social assistance program in Canada that limits employable individuals to two out of five years of income support. Whereas single, employable recipients face potential expulsion from the caseload after two years (Reitsma-Street, 2002), parents with very young children are subject to different regulations. Once their youngest child turns three, parents have two years to find employment. If they have not found employment nor have been actively seeking by the time their youngest child reaches the age of five, they may have their benefits suspended, cancelled or reduced (by \$100 for lone parent families and up to \$200 for two parent families) for failing to meet the conditions of benefit receipt (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2004b).

In summary, social assistance policy in all three provinces has been restructured according to neo-liberal principles and goals, such as individualism, prioritizing benefit recipients' labour market flexibility and attachment, and reducing caseload dependency, with the intent of minimizing state support and spending and increasing potential for market competition. Although restructuring involved restriction of benefit amounts and access in BC and Alberta more so than in Saskatchewan, all three provinces have employed enforcement and have re-conceptualized recipients' entitlement relationships by invoking conditionality and contingency, prioritizing individuals' obligations over their rights in the process.

¹⁰ See Alberta Family and Social Services Annual Reports (1992/93-1998/99).

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In all three provinces, caseload statistics are referred to in annual reports to argue that restructuring has reduced dependency and, thus, government spending over the period of interest.¹¹ And yet, parents who exit assistance usually do so for low-wage jobs, thereby contesting the success of welfare-to-work programs and their ability to lift people out of poverty (Michalopoulos, Tattrie et.al., 2002; Shillington, 1998). Moreover, those parents who remain on assistance, experiencing tightening eligibility and the downward/upward ratcheting of employability expectations, are impoverished. In all three provinces, total welfare incomes were not enough to pull parents (lone and two parent families) above the poverty line, as measured using Statistics Canada's LICOs in 2004 (National Council of Welfare, 2005). This suggests fractures within the outcomes of neo-liberal reforms. Indeed, expecting impoverished parents on social assistance to conduct mandatory and successful job searches and participate in programming seems coercive and punitive let alone contradictory when these same parents are provided few ancillary supports (i.e. transportation fare and quality child care) to make their searches and participation possible. And, as revealed by the MLA Review in Alberta, pushing people into the workforce makes little sense if they have greater concerns, such as a stable and safe place to live. In contrast, considering parents initially applying for assistance in BC, it is alarming that they must undergo a three week job search before being informed if they are eligible – most parents often do turn to social assistance as a last resort. In BC, however, when a family is in need, they are legislated to wait, despite immediate demands surrounding basic subsistence needs. Still other problems with neo-liberal restructuring efforts for family lives are evident from a feminist political economy perspective.

A Feminist Political Economy Lens on Western Reforms

Scholarship in feminist political economy has a rich history of examining how gender interacts and connects with: processes of production and exchange (Bakker, 1996) and social reproduction (Bezanson and Luxton, 2006); contradictory state practices (Armstrong and Connelly, 1999); the distribution of power, resources, and rights among citizens and states (Bezanson, 2006); and race/ethnicity and class (Vosko, 2002) to create, sustain and structure inequalities (primarily women's) in capitalist societies. One particular branch of this scholarship is suitable for highlighting the problems of neo-liberal social assistance reform. This branch explores the connections and contradictions surrounding women, the welfare state and social policy (Vosko, 2002), such as how the state constructs women in public policy (Andrew, 2003) and how neo-liberal restructuring produces contradictions for women's lives (Bakker, 1996). For the purposes of this paper, the lens of feminist political economy reveals two inter-related, simultaneous, and contradictory processes embedded in the neo-liberal restructuring of social assistance, and subsequent transformation of individuals' citizenship entitlement relationships in the western provinces— gendering and familization. Such a lens therefore allows for an understanding of how these very

11 In the 2004 and 2005 annual reports, each ministry observes that restructuring over the period of interest has produced these desired outcomes. See Alberta Human Resources and Employment (2005), British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources (2005), and Saskatchewan Community Resources and Employment (2005).

processes affect mothers' and fathers' efforts to balance and manage work and family when living on social assistance. Indeed, as Bezanson (2006) reveals in her study of the neo-liberal restructuring of welfare policy in Ontario, processes such as gendering and familization exacerbate low-income parents' attempts to manage social reproduction and increase the paid and unpaid work of families and households.

*Gendering and Familization Processes: Implications for Parents' Balancing of
'Employability' Expectations and Caregiving Demands*

Neo-liberalism is configuring a new gender order through social policy (Bakker, 1996; Bezanson, 2006; Brodie, 1996) and subsequently transforms the work/family nexus experienced by families. The new gender order brought about by restructuring is evident in the re-conceptualized entitlement relationship individuals have with social assistance policy and the ways this relationship is gendered (Bakker, 1996; Brodie, 1996). The making of benefit receipt contingent on individuals' employability efforts corresponds with an attenuation of their (especially women's) caregiving as a basis to claim support. Before the 1990s reforms, lone mothers in the western provinces were entitled to income support for their children until they reached the age at which they attended school for full days (Evans, 1996; Scott, 1999). Despite the general encouragement of labour market attachment under CAP, lone mothers were perceived as entitled to income support on the basis of their need to provide care for young children.

With the emerging popularity of neo-liberal principles and goals, and the replacement of CAP with the CHST, women's entitlement to social assistance has been re-conceptualized on the basis of their employability efforts, comparable to men's entitlement relationships. According to some scholars¹², a new model has infiltrated social assistance policy, what Scott (1999) terms the "gender-neutral worker-citizen" model. While upon first glance, it may appear to correspond with liberal feminist desires for women's equal opportunity and pay in paid labour, feminists argue that there are negative effects of this new 'one size fits all' model, such as reductions in entitlement (Andrew, 2003), that are borne more so by women than men. As Brodie (1995) argues, it is particularly lone mothers that are de-gendered and re-cast as employable when entitlement is contingent on their employability efforts. The problem with this de-gendering process is that it is contradicted by mothers' caring and labour market patterns, which show that they have a long history of socially reproducing family lives by the meeting of economic and care needs on a daily and generational basis (Laslett and Brenner, 1989). In the neo-liberal conceptualization of citizen entitlement, then, women's work and family lives in general are made invisible and devalued. When women are viewed as de-gendered autonomous workers, unencumbered by family care responsibilities, this contributes to the de-familization of care work (Bezanson, 2006).

¹² See Brodie (1996), Evans (1996) and Scott (1999).

Simultaneously and paradoxically, the imposition of a gender-neutral worker-citizen model in social assistance policy re-exposes women workers to structurally entrenched gender inequalities through punitive policy expectations and restrictions that enforce their employability and push them into labour force attachment on the presumption that "any job is a good job" (Elton, Sieppert et al., 1997: 20); women's experiences of gender inequality in the workplace are therefore re-gendered. Additionally, neo-liberal policy re-genders mothers as welfare dependents requiring intervention in order to ensure they develop an appropriate work ethic that allows them to become economically responsible for their children, or risk losing them (Brodie, 1996). And, as it will become apparent later in the paper, lone fathers on social assistance also experience forms of re-gendering.

And, again paradoxically, the imposition of a gender-neutral worker-citizen model in social assistance policy also creates the re-familization of care work, a process experienced by both mothers and fathers. Although parents on exiting assistance are assumed to access subsidized child care, the demands are often greater than the availability. Indeed, for many mothers on social assistance, their participation in welfare-to-work programming is restricted by their caregiving responsibilities simply because there is an absence of affordable, quality child care. So, while the de-familization of the care work of mothers on social assistance seems to be suggested by the gender neutral work citizen model, the re-familization of care in parents' lives is highly likely because of lack of community supports. Regardless of whether it is mothers or fathers who become part of the increasing pool of (often cheap) labourers who require care, it is likely they will turn to other forms of caregiving support. Thus, since policy that is based on a gender-neutral citizen worker model rarely contains additional arrangements for assisting social reproduction (Bezanson and Luxton, 2006), it appears to be predicated on assumed private arrangements for meeting caregiving demands (McDaniel, 2002). However, as research has documented for mothers exiting assistance through paid work in the United States, there are problems with these assumptions centering on whether available care is suitable and appropriate. Mothers often have to adjust their caregiving demands in undesirable ways, such as placing their children within the questionable care of family members.¹³ When women are assumed responsible for social reproduction and are assumed capable of managing and negotiating caregiving support privately, their reproductive work is then re-familized (Bezanson, 2006).

Other barriers, aside from care demands, that interfere with low-income parents' participation in welfare-to-work programming or eventual exit into paid work suggest still other problems with the 'one size fits all' gender neutral worker citizen model. The most consistently cited barriers include, in varying degrees of impact: lack of sufficient income support; lack of other supports such as housing and transportation; low education levels and limited employment skills or histories; mental and physical health and substance abuse problems; domestic violence; and inability to move for employment (re: rural/urban

13 See Weigt (2006).

migration) (Albelda, 2001; Corcoran, Danzinger et.al., 2000; Danzinger, Heflin et.al., 2002; Gazso, 2006a; Heymann and Earle, 1998; Lichter and Jayakody, 2002; McMullin, Davies et.al., 2002). For example, assuming that welfare-to-work programs on resume building and interview skills will create workers capable of getting 'good jobs' does not seem fitting if many parents on social assistance will still lack post-secondary education and employable skill sets when they complete them.

As Bakker (1998) explains, the gender paradox of the neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state is that gender is both eroded and intensified. Other scholars show how family relations surrounding responsibility for caregiving are also attenuated and strengthened. Parents on social assistance are therefore faced with a policy created juxtaposition of their employability versus their caregiving that they must balance and manage. The employability of low-income parents may appear worthy since it is a policy prescription that implicitly invokes ideals of gender equality that seem to underpin the desired economic self-sufficiency for families. Paradoxically, however, expectations of parents' employability without recognition of their family demands, invites the re-gendering and re-familization of caregiving. Indeed, the dearth of community supports to facilitate the caregiving of employable parents when they are attending welfare-to-work programs means that care work often becomes women's work. The remainder of this paper is devoted to revealing how parents in the western provinces manage actual or potential employability expectations and socially reproductive work, in light of neo-liberal policy embedded with these simultaneous and contradictory processes.

Methodology

The qualitative data referred to in this paper is the product of a comparative study of how social assistance reform has involved a transformation of parents' entitlement relationships in the provinces of BC, Alberta, and Saskatchewan from 1993-2004.¹⁴ One of the major research interests of this study was: How do parents balance and manage their actual or potential employability expectations, as outlined in their entitlement relationship with policy, with their family caregiving demands?

Parents were approached for interviews through a method of purposive sampling at a major food bank in each province. In total, 46 parents who self-identified as being on social assistance volunteered to participate in interviews, including 41 mothers (13 mothers from common law families and 28 lone mothers) and 5 lone fathers. The method of purposive sampling did preclude randomness of the selection of parents to be interviewed; the sample is biased towards a particular sub-group of low-income parents: parents who were on assistance and not able to meet food security needs. Although this sampling strategy does not allow for optimal generalizability of these findings to other low-income parents

¹⁴ See also Gazso (2006b) for an analysis of how BC parents on social assistance experience social exclusion as an outcome of their entitlement relationships, which draws upon other findings from this larger comparative study.

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in each province and other provinces, the explanation of the methodology of this study does allow for others to judge the transferability of the findings presented in this paper to other contexts¹⁵. The characteristics of the total parents interviewed per province are illustrated below in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Qualitative Sample (N=46)			
Average	BC (n=18)	AB (n=13)	SK (n=15)
Age (women and men)	33.83	29.54	32.67
Number of children	2.72	2.77	3.13
Number of children in residence	1.56	1.85	2.47
Time on social assistance (months) ^a	5.83	6.50	7.00
Time on social assistance (years)	4.83	4.57	8.09
Frequency counts			
Gender			
Women	15	13	13
Men	3	- ^b	2
Social Assistance			
Temporary/basic	13	12	15
Continuous (i.e. disability)	2	1	-
E.I. And social assistance	1	-	-
Recent exit from social assistance	2	-	-
Family Structure			
Lone mother family	13	9	6
Lone father family	3	-	2
Two parent family	2	4	7
Level of education			
Less than high school	1	2	-

¹⁵ See Morse, Barrett et.al. (2002).

Some high school	6	4	8
Graduated from high school ^c	4	2	3
Some post-secondary	4	5	3
Post secondary complete	3	-	1
Race/Ethnicity			
Aboriginal/Métis	-	3	9
Asian	1	-	-
White	17	9	9
a. Of all parents, 12 BC, 7 AB, and 11 SK parents reported being on assistance for one or more year; all others reported being on assistance for less than one year.			
b. Not applicable to parents interviewed in the province.			
c. Grade 12 or G.E.D. equivalency.			

The use of a semi-structured interview guide focused the conversational and collaborative interviews on parents' understandings of changes to social assistance (i.e. changes in entitlement and eligibility), their thoughts about the policy emphasis on employability, and their balancing of their family care responsibilities with their potential or actual participation in welfare-to-work programming. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 ½ hours and were audio-recorded. The qualitative software program NVivo was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. This thematic analysis involved topic coding as a first-step procedure to create categories or codes to allow reflection on material gathered in answer to specific questions. Analytic coding of the interviews required moving beyond simply assigning codes to the data and actually theoretically interpreting them as themes, and then comparing and contrasting these themes across the provinces (Morse and Richards, 2002).

The findings reported are categorized according to themes that capture the coping strategies used by parents to balance policy expectations of their employability with their caregiving demands. Quotes provided to illustrate each theme are followed by a statement of the pseudonym for each parent, the number of children they have, and their employability status on social assistance. In terms of this status, each parent was asked about their current situation on social assistance (i.e. expected to work or exempt from seeking work due to their child's age or other reasons). See Appendix A for a legend of these codes for employability status.

Coping Strategies for Balancing Competing Demands

The thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews reveals that the competing demands created by neo-liberal restructuring of social assistance policy, as it is embedded with processes of gendering and familization, are managed and balanced by parents in four major ways: learn the system; play the system; social supports; pawning.¹⁶ These coping strategies are intricately inter-related and are shared by parents in all three provinces.

Some parents with young children and not expected to work, maintain that it is necessary to 'learn the system' in order to access available but sometimes hidden government and community resources that can help them balance and manage their actual or potential participation in work and education programming and their other socially reproductive work. This theme captures parents who have, more or less, accepted the constraints imposed by policy, such as low benefit levels and greater prioritization of workforce attachment, but have then chosen to learn and master the idiosyncrasies of policies in order that they may somehow improve their family's situations. In many cases, mothers who discuss the need to learn the system point to how restructuring of social assistance policy has affected caseworkers' relationships with benefit recipients. Recall that a key feminist critique of the gender-neutral worker-citizen model underpinning social assistance policy is that it can obscure awareness of parents' unpaid work and family needs (re. gendering, familization). The quotes from Paula and Kara suggest that when lone mothers' relationships with caseworkers centre on their employability over and above their caregiving needs, their exposure to other resources to support care work, within or outside of social assistance policy will only arise from their own initiative.

Um, if you, if you do research... like there's a big list right in the welfare office about four or five pages long of, of like food and clothing and shelter and, um, like legal and all kinds of things where you can go and you can get help with this and it's not going to cost you, or it's going to cost you minimal because of your situation... There's lots of stuff, you just have to look for it. And, but you don't know, that's another problem. They don't tell you about anything (Paula, lone mother, 6 year old son (E-MC) (BC)).

So, you know, you have to really know the legislation to be able to benefit at all. If you don't know anything about the legislation, then you're going to get your straight cheque once a month, that's it, there you go. Come back, give us your stub, you'll get another cheque next month. But if you know the legislation, you can get those extra things, which we are all entitled to. But they do not let legislation be known, publicly known (Kara, lone mother, 3 children (E-AC) (BC)).

¹⁶ For the themes of 'learn the system' and 'play the system', the 'system' is defined as including provincial social assistance policy and its specific connections with municipal policy (e.g. child care subsidies) and federal policy (i.e. child benefits policy).

When Georgia, a lone Aboriginal mother of four children from Saskatchewan, was interviewed, she maintained that: "There's so many resources out there. But at the same time there's so many people out there that don't take the time to educate themselves, to find out, to ask questions." Her experience of learning the system demonstrates that some parents are acutely aware that restructuring of social assistance policy has also involved the devolution of many forms of income and social support. Indeed, the provision of welfare-to-work programming is often through ministry contracts with local service agencies or provided through relationships with other ministries (i.e. Health, Education) in all three provinces. Moreover, the increasing importance of food banks, as well as other non-profit agencies concerned with low-income, clearly illustrate the attenuation of the social safety net and the institutionalization of alternative non-government systems of income security (Riches, 2002).

As a result of their learning of rules and regulations, five lone parents reported their efforts to then fight policy expectations and constraints. Specifically, these parents discussed how they resist what they perceive are unfair expectations or regulations, and how they advocate for all of the supports to which they learn they are entitled. When Debra was interviewed, she was the legal guardian of a child designated as having fetal alcohol affect (FEA); the child was removed from his biological mother's home due to her drug addiction. Debra had already raised two children to adulthood and was on assistance due to her own health problems. However, through a relationship she developed with the child and his mother over time, she felt compelled to raise him. The following quote illustrates how Debra was able to use what she learned about disability assistance and a particular program to demand that she be considered eligible for disability and not be forced to work.

Right now I'm going to be doing battle with the system. Um, I'm going to try to go on a temporary um, disability, which means that I can still educate... I'm very limited in what I can do. Um, anyway, so this will be my next battle with them is to try to say, you know, it's not that I want to lay down and do nothing. I just need that extra support should anything happen, right? And, from there they have a program apparently called Achieve that is just opening up. And it will be for people with disabilities and help us find a direction that we can go... So, this will be my next battle and that actually starts this afternoon when I go to the doctor and get the form filled out (Debra, lone mother (guardian), 5 year old son (ERT) (BC)).

In one unique and unusual case, Tracy Lynn, a lone Métis mother in Alberta, chose to rely upon her knowledge of existing policy to voice her discontent about a new policy change and to advocate for still further improvements of policy. In 2003, the Alberta Human Resources and Employment Ministry announced that it would improve parents' experiences of *Alberta Works* by increasing the benefits of families with children by \$20,

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regardless of whether their parents were classified as expected to work or not expected to work.¹⁷

When Ralph Klein gave us that \$20, I phoned Ralph Klein and I told him thank you so much for the kick in the ass you know...I phoned his woman, well his secretary, eh, and I talked. I ripped her ear off for about half an hour. I said you know it's nice that he's trying to help us out by giving us a little bit more but I mean basically that, that's nothing. That's nothing with the price of uh, food, soccer, bills you know. Your kids want to do other things, extracurricular activities. You can't. They're growing, you need to constantly buy clothes and bikes. You know linens, food... my boys eat like grown men, and they will not stop. You know I have to stop them: "No, that's enough. You got to be full now." So, it's tough (Tracy Lynn, lone mother, 3 children (E-MC) (AB)).*

The experiences of parents who learn, and sometimes fight, the system demonstrate two problems with policy: 1) benefit amounts do not allow for meeting the daily subsistence and care needs of family members, prompting parents to actively seek out other resources; and 2) the 'one size fits all' approach of the gender-neutral worker-citizen model does not always fit their personal, health, and social realities. For many parents, their awareness of these two problems prompted them to then develop ways of making policy rules and regulations work for them.

Parents who 'play the system' do not go out of their way to learn about other hidden resources that may benefit their families but do react to their knowledge of policy by manipulating rules and regulations in ways that can improve their meeting of employability expectations and caregiving demands. The framing of parents' responses by this theme does not discount how parents have to learn the system to play it; as noted, strategies parents use to manage work and family conflict are intricately inter-related. The more important focus here, however, is how parents make agentic choices that counter policy expectations of their willingness to succumb to the structural determination of their lives (ie. by 1) presenting themselves as following rules and regulations when in fact they are not; 2) by not following rules and regulations; and 3) by following them to the extent that they make a difference in their situations). Over half of the parents interviewed specifically discussed how they play the system.

For employable parents subject to mandatory job searches, playing the system can be as simple as reporting false job searches. As explained by Brandon and Michelle, parents can refer to employers listed in the phone book and list them as places where they dropped off resumes.

¹⁷ Approximately 12,000 families also benefited from the ministry's decision to no longer deduct child benefit payments from social assistance benefits (Alberta Human Resources and Employment, 2003).

Brandon: I do probably half of it, and fake the other half... Phone book for about 50% of it.

Interviewer: And is it because it's too much, what they're asking of you? Or what do you think?

Brandon: It's probably not too much but, uh, sometimes, sometimes I have no problem putting in 30 applications a month. Other times I don't know it seems like I get nothing done, so... But you got to do it every month or you're cut off so you got to...it's better to keep your mouth shut, do what you can and then fake the rest of it (Brandon, lone father, 5 year old daughter (ERT) (SK)).

Michelle, a young Aboriginal woman in a common law relationship, further explains that the success of these false searches depends on how caseworkers have little time to confirm the accuracy of job search forms, another example of how reforms have also shaped caseworkers' behaviour.

Michelle: That's why you look, you can look through the phone book and pick anything out. Like where you have experience in...

Interviewer: They never follow up?

*Michelle: No, they don't phone because how many people have to send these in? And they had to phone all these places? It would be too much, too much trouble (Michelle, common law, 3 children (ERT) (SK)).**

Brandon's experience playing the system particularly highlights the 'one-size fits all' approach of policy and can also be interpreted in light of the gendering and familization processes embedded in neo-liberal policy. Brandon used to be employed as an auto mechanic but lost this position when his heroin addiction was discovered by his employer. Through union dissolution, Brandon has full custody of his five year old daughter. When interviewed, he was clean for three months. While he believed in the importance of seeking work for his family's economic security, he had difficulty becoming fully motivated in his job search, largely because of his newfound responsibility for full-time care of his daughter and his ongoing recovery issues. Despite Brandon's responsibility for full-time care as a lone parent and health problems, he spoke of how his breadwinning capability was systematically enforced by caseworkers, or how his potential earning power was re-gendered in accordance with dominant assumptions surrounding men's appropriate family roles. Brandon resorted to augmenting his list of job searches to match these gendered assumptions and to avoid experiencing sanctions, such as being cut off of assistance. In order to provide care for his daughter and himself, he coped with policy expectations by manipulating them.

Neglecting to report outside monetary support from other family members, ex-spouses,

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or friends as income in monthly report cards is an example of how some parents play the system by not following policy rules and regulations. Many parents, whether they are employable or not, use this extra monetary support to better meet their social reproduction needs. If they were to report this income, it would be partially or fully deducted from their monthly benefit amounts – amounts which already do not lift them out of poverty in each province. When interviewed, Rebecca, a middle-aged Aboriginal woman, was raising her teenage grandson, having already raised four sons into adulthood. She was on social assistance due to a heart condition that prevented her workforce attachment. In speaking about raising her grandson, she discussed how difficult it was to not just provide food but also provide clothing so that he may appear to 'fit in' with his peers. As quote below indicates, she plays the system by not reporting income from any of her adult sons to improve her grandson's social and economic well-being.

*They [adult sons] would give me cash whenever they can... But if I was to report every income that I got to social assistance... they would cut off everything. Even if I, like even if my friend gives me \$50, if I report that... That comes off. Any kind of income you get and you report, it comes off... So when my kids give me cash, I'm not going to tell them (Rebecca, lone mother (guardian), son (E-MC) (SK)).**

According to Candace, because her ex-spouse's maintenance payments will be deducted from her benefits, she asked him to continue to pay more than what the court will require once custody is settled. She will not declare this income and instead will use it to support her daughter.

Like probably a \$150 a month. That's what they [the court] will ask. So I told him: "I think to compensate for her and I, you should still be paying the three hundred so that I at least get something to put towards her." Cause I said: "You and I both know the government will take that money. They're not going to put it into her healthcare, they're not going to put it into nothing. They're going to take the money so that they don't have to pay me to live essentially." Like... the money you pay in maintenance they deduct dollar for dollar cause they don't want to fork out that extra money (Candace, lone mother, 6 year old daughter (E-MC) (AB)).

Candace's relationship with her ex-partner was unusual when compared to the majority of lone parents in the study. Instead of her ex-spouse defaulting in maintenance payments, he supported her playing of the system in the best interest of his child.

Parents' receipt of outside monetary support and playing of the system by not reporting it as income further suggests deep-set problems with income support that does not provide the resources parents need to manage and balance their basic subsistence needs and

caregiving demands. Dominant rhetoric surrounding dependency would have the general public believe that social assistance recipients who play the system are abusing it. Indeed, neo-liberal discourse surrounding the need for policy restructuring in all three provinces drew attention to dependency discourses by emphasizing growing caseloads, often conjuring up images of “lazy, welfare bums” in the process. Stephen, a lone father of a four year old son, was on disability assistance in BC when interviewed. He maintains that: “It’s not unreasonable for the government to want to address that [abuse of the system]. However, you can’t just blast at the whole crowd and hope that you get the right people.” Aside from critiquing the one-size fits all approach of social assistance policy, Stephen’s statement resonates with those of other parents who attempt to explain, often articulately and thoughtfully, how it is difficult to view playing the system as clear-cut abuse when parents are not necessarily benefiting economically or socially by being on assistance. Doreen defines herself as a “third generation SFI, welfare child.” Having been on and off of assistance for years, she maintains that not all families, like her own, can learn the system to better balance competing policy expectations and everyday responsibilities. According to Doreen, others play the system because this is the way they know they can better provide for their families.

We deal as honestly as we can. But there’s other people that just can’t make it... she’ll go on welfare and he’ll go up north and work. And there’s so much of that here. Or you know, whatever. And that’s just so that they can provide a good life for their kids. It’s not so that they can get rich. Nobody goes on welfare to get rich. I don’t care what scam they’re running. Nobody goes on welfare to get rich. You know, they go on it to get by (Doreen, common law, 6 children (E-MC) (AB)).

Aside from, or in conjunction with playing the system, reliance on support networks is a third major strategy parents rely upon to cope with meeting actual or potential employability expectations and social reproduction needs. Other than relying on community support through food banks and other non-profit agencies, almost all parents reported that they can rely on family, friends, peers, or neighbours to help them out when they need additional support.¹⁸ These support networks include any form of caregiving that is non-monetary, such as physical support (i.e. child care and food) and emotional support. Most often, parents’ support networks contained other biological family members and involved the exchange of caregiving and emotional support. Tamara explains that, as a lone mother, the demands created by several children of varying ages often means that she and her sister go out in public together.

My sister, and she has four kids, so like when we cruise together we have nine kids altogether. So I’m helping her with hers so she can get out and about because she has the little tiny ones. That really ties her home cause she doesn’t want to venture

18 Only 15 parents reported that they did not have any outside family members, friends or neighbours they could reply on for support.

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*out. And I always tell her I've been through this (Tamara, lone mother, 5 children (ERT) (SK)).**

Some parents relied on multiple forms of support. When interviewed, Nadine had just begun working while her partner retained care of their children; her family was receiving a social assistance top-up of her income. Reflecting on her experiences of being on assistance and not working, she observed:

My mom's helped me out too you know with food and stuff like that... I have been using the Food Bank a lot, but she helps with uh, she'll help with food when she can and, um, just even friends you know. Like we'll help each other out you know. This month I'm having a bad month or whatever so they'll help me out. And then I'll help them out another time or whatever (Nadine, common law, 2 children (ERT-E) (AB)).

Stephen held informal monthly meetings with other lone fathers in his community at his home to share strategies for parenting. Debra developed a network of care among other parents in preparation for unexpected and immediate caregiving needs.

What I have done is I have put a system in place that pretty much, um, not always but pretty much at any given moment should something arise, I have a place to put my little one. To meet that need, right? Through friends.... And so I'm pretty blessed that way, that I have been able to line that up (Debra, lone mother (guardian), 5 year old son (ERT) (BC)).

What is interesting about the support networks used by some parents is how they illustrate increasingly diverse and, thus, non-conventional family relationships. Tracy Lynn shared a rented home with another lone mother on assistance so that between the two of them, they could care for a total of five children. Brandon relied upon an elderly neighbour, whom he said acted in many ways as a replacement grandfather for his daughter. Miranda's support network includes her adoptive parents, biological parents, and roommates. Her family-type relationship with her roommates developed over time. She explained that she rents the ground-floor suite in a home whereas two male friends rent the bottom suite. Her roommates have become important to the caring of her children, voluntarily participating in processes of social reproduction, when necessary.

So, I have, like I have a pretty good support system for family. Like a huge extended family, my birth family as well. We're all in touch with them... My one roommate mostly cause he only works weekends, so he helps me a lot. Like weekends and holidays mostly. So, during the week he usually watches the kids for me if I've got

running around to do or, so it helps (Miranda, lone mother, 3 children (ERT) (AB)).

Parents' satisfaction with their support networks was mixed. Some like Miranda who attended welfare-to-work programs were pleased with having a fairly flexible network. Others, like Brandon, worried about the demands their children were placing on caregivers and the quality of care children were receiving. The existence of support networks, and the roles they play in assisting parents' management of employability and caregiving demands, suggests that without them, families would be significantly worse off. The fact that so many parents have a social support network they can turn to is a positive aspect of their daily lives on assistance. On the other hand, this finding of the importance of support networks supports the feminist argument that social assistance policy that views women (and men) as autonomous workers transfers the work of social reproduction largely onto other intimate relations through processes of re-familization. According to these parents' experiences, governments and policy makers do increasingly assume that family or friends can act as an ever-ready replacement for the traditional, state provided safety net.

The final strategy that some parents use to cope with balancing and managing actual or potential employability expectations and meeting subsistence and caregiving needs is pawning. While it may allow parents to cope, their reports of using this strategy seem to also suggest that it can harm their family situations more than improve them. Pawning involves the exchange of goods for temporary monetary benefit at local shops, with the option of buying back these same goods at a later date. Across the provinces, parents resorted to pawning regardless of their employability status and family structure and most often in response to the demands of social reproduction, including the provision of food and/or entertainment, outweighed what parents' receive in benefit amounts.¹⁹

When interviewed, Courtney and her partner were struggling to care for their six month old child at the same time that both were recovering from a cocaine addiction and were participating in a government funded methadone treatment program. Neither parent was expected to seek work because of their health. Courtney explained her pawning in this way: "I've pawned, well, our VCR and our movies in the pawn shop. Because we're short on diapers, now. You know, food." Similarly, Theresa explains pawning stems from a need for food but also mentions its importance in securing her children some recreational entertainment:

Mm, mostly it would be for food. Yeah. And some things, it would be mostly for the kids wanting to do things, do stuff. And I never had any money on hand to do anything. So we would pawn stuff... pawning it back and taking it out (Theresa, lone

¹⁹ It is likely that more parents engaged in this activity than the 14 parents who reported using this strategy in the interviews. The semi-structured interview guide did not contain any specific questions about pawning. However, the act of pawning arose in an interview with Reanne, a lone mother on assistance in Alberta. From the point of her interview onward, parents were asked whether or not they engage in pawning in order to better balance competing demands.

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*mother, 6 children (E-RT) (SK).**

For Joseph, a lone father on assistance in Saskatchewan, pawning "... wasn't for making ends meet." Instead, it enabled him and his eight year old son "to go do something." Like Joseph, Michelle maintains her pawning was not for food but rather for entertainment, especially when her partner was incarcerated.

Dean, he was, now he had gone to jail again. And I always pawned because I was so tired of being stuck at home. It wasn't the food issue because I always bought my food... So I used to pawn like my VCR or my TV, like things like that, just so I could drop off of the kids at my mom's, give her some money for babysitting. Then I'd go to Bingo or I used to go out with my friends, you know. So it would just be for entertainment (Michelle, common law, 3 children (E-RT) (SK)).

Aside from pawning to improve total income levels, engaging in the activity can also relate to the meeting of employability expectations. When interviewed, Nadine had found work. Although she received transportation benefits for her first week of work, she did not receive them thereafter. Since she would not receive her first pay cheque until the end of that month, she pawned her television in order to pay for the transportation she needed to go to work.

Interviewer: Have things ever been so bad that you've pawned anything or used pawnshops in any way?

R: Yeah. That's where my TV is.

Interviewer: Oh, that's where your TV is right now. And was that while you were on assistance?

R: Yeah, so I could get a bus pass to go to work... We only do it when we're broke, so like if there's something we absolutely need (Nadine, common law, 2 children (E-RT-E) (AB)).

For Reanne, pawning was linked to her receipt of provincial and federal benefits. As the following quote illustrates, Reanne pawned goods simply to make ends meet, juggling her receipt of her maintenance payment from her ex-spouse (which was deducted from her benefit allowance), her cost of rent, and her receipt of child benefits in the process.

Reanne: My rent right now is \$260 and I get \$255 or something like that. I don't even get enough to pay my rent cause of my child support [maintenance] payment.

Interviewer: So how do you make it ends meet?

Reanne: Constantly picking in this and pawning that and getting it out there and...I try to buy groceries for the whole month. It's hard. Half way through the month I got

to take my pawn in and then I got to take that out because I won't leave my pawn. And, it's constantly, we do food banks...

Interviewer: What do you mean by when you take your pawn in and then you take it back? How does that work?

Reanne: I take all my videos in, they give me a buck a video, and then at the month when I get my child tax, I buy it back. And that's for \$20 more...And I've been in and out of this cycle since I've been on my own. This pawn cycle. It's just horrible (Reanne, lone mother, 2 children (E-MC) (AB)).

The harmful effects of pawning on low-income parents' lives are made evident by the pawn cycle that Reanne articulates. Pawning involves a cycle of selling and buying back items that is very difficult to escape. In some cases, while pawning entertainment items (i.e. videos) may meet the demand of daily meals, it decreases already economically limited opportunities for entertainment. Pawning can also potentially exacerbate parents' experiences of low-income and debt over the long-term, despite their use of pawning for short-term gains. Janice's experience highlights how two coping strategies, pawning and the receipt of monetary support from others, can be used in conjunction with one another to ease immediate economic constraint but can have the effect of perpetuating economic difficulties, especially if parents rely on other family members to help pay pawn shops until they can fully afford items.

Janice: I have a stereo in the pawn shop and my DVD/VCR combo.

Interviewer: And why did you put them there?

*Janice: Because we were running low on some groceries. Like on fruit and milk and stuff like that...Well I feel bad because like, you know, my kids like watching their movies and stuff like that. And plus at times it kind of gets hard to try and get them all. I, actually I thought I was going to lose my VCR/DVD combo but I ended up borrowing money from my mom to pay the interest on it for another three months. Because it gets hard to pay things, you know, to keep up with bills and trying to get things out of the pawn (Janice, lone mother, 2 children (E-FR)(SK)).**

In the words of Brandon, pawning is "...a rough way to make ends meet cause it always costs you more in the end." In Jessica's case, however, the costs were not just monetary but personal too. Jessica admitted that she initially deceived herself into thinking that pawning goods to support her drug habit was permissible because she was a responsible parent with regard to buying food and paying bills. However, she soon realized that the cycle of pawning for her habit was depriving her children of the entertainment associated with watching television and playing video games, as well as her meeting of their daily emotional needs.

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My pawning came, in fact I did pawn when I was using. A lot. A lot. Um, I always, I never thought I had a problem because I was responsible. So when I got money, I would buy groceries, I'd pay the bills, blah, blah, blah. But then I'd pawn the TV, I'd pawn the video games, I'd pawn everything else so I could buy my drugs (Jessica, lone mother, 3 children (E-MC) (SK)).

When benefit levels are not enough to make ends meet or when dollar-for-dollar cuts of maintenance payments are made, parents resort to pawning to meet social reproduction needs. Parents also resort to pawning when their meeting of employability expectations is rarely facilitated with other necessary supports, such as transportation fare back and forth to a new job. Of all strategies adopted by parents, the strategy of pawning perhaps best illustrates the harmful and punitive effects of neo-liberal policy reforms on parents' lives. However, it is the contention of this paper that viewing all strategies as intricately inter-related more powerfully reveals the problematic work/family nexus that is created by neo-liberal social assistance policy embedded with simultaneous and contradictory processes of gendering and familization.

Challenging the Neo-Liberal Realities of Living on Social Assistance

Parents on social assistance in the western provinces adopt one or more coping strategies to balance and manage competing employability expectations and family caregiving demands.²⁰ Applying a feminist political economy lens to these coping strategies reveals that they are in response to parents' increasingly precarious entitlement relationships with social assistance policy. A feminist political economy lens also highlights how parents' coping strategies are not just linked to this precarious entitlement relationship but are also implicated by the corresponding simultaneous and contradictory gendering and familization processes embedded in neo-liberal restructuring.

Interviews with parents confirm their awareness that their actual or potential employability is prioritized above all else in their entitlement relationship with social assistance policy. To attempt to alleviate the tensions created by this structural determination of their lives and to meet their family's total social reproduction needs, parents respond with agentic choices. Here, these choices are viewed as necessitated by the inherent structural problems with a 'one size fits all' gender neutral worker citizen model that is embedded with gendering and familization processes. For example, to gain the adequate resources they need for meeting social reproduction needs, some parents (i.e. Paula) choose to learn the system, or

20 As Bezanson's (2006) study of the effects of neo-liberal restructuring on Ontario families reveals, some of the same coping strategies are shared by low-income and non low-income parents in the east (i.e. doing without, pawning, and/or relying on other family and friends for support). Moreover, her work reminds us that parents do not experience policy changes as discrete categories but rather in simultaneous and interactive ways. Although this paper only focuses on parents' use of coping strategies in conjunction with social assistance restructuring, these strategies are understood as created and linked to other forms of restructuring that have occurred in other policy realms (i.e. health care, education) in the western provinces.

as Debra did, may advocate for better recognition of their own unique situations. Mothers like Nadine and Miranda choose to rely upon support networks when their assumed autonomous worker status mandates them to attend welfare-to-work programming but overlooks the caregiving support that they require. Still other parents choose to play the system. For fathers like Brandon, this was in direct response to the apparent policy assumption that men should engage in breadwinning in ways dictated by tradition and history. Indeed, lone fathers' caregiving has rarely been adequately recognized in social assistance policy; fathers' citizenship entitlement to income support has always been on the basis of their working status. Manipulating policy expectations of employability can therefore preserve a mother's or father's right to care for a young child when policy appears to de-familize this care work. At the same time, parents who do attempt to meet employability expectations often turn to other family and friends for support, a strategy that assists them but can problematically re-familize care work, especially when this re-familization is an outcome of an attenuated safety net. Finally, other parents rely upon pawning of goods to alleviate the tensions surrounding the gendering and familization of their employability status and care work. Parents' coping strategies are therefore an outcome of attempting to balance and manage work and family demands, negotiations that are undermined by these processes.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that parents' entitlement relationships with social assistance policy are impacted by simultaneous and contradictory processes embedded in neo-liberal policy – gendering and familization – that problematically affect their ability to balance and manage their work and family demands. Together, all of the coping strategies parents use must be viewed as coalescing into a major goal parents share in the western provinces – to maintain their family's survival or 'stay afloat.' To use an analogy, living on assistance in neo-liberal times is analogous to trying to stay afloat in a leaking life raft that keeps changing course and, at times, appears more or less buoyant.

Given the argument presented in this paper, it would be remiss to conclude without drawing theoretical linkages to general feminist concerns with equality and social justice. As Kittay argues, restructuring challenges poor women's rights to bear children, inhibits women's opportunities to exit violence and abusive relationships through provision of inadequate benefits, and exacerbates women's demands for fulfilling and well-paying non-familial labour. Building on her argument, this paper also shows that "welfare reform threatens *feminist gains*" (1998: 124, italics in original). Political and policy recognition of the public nature of care, specifically the recognition of women's continuous responsibility and parents' rights to care for young children, are challenged when processes of gendering and familization entrench it as a private matter. Caregiving can appear to stand outside or behind neo-liberal debates surrounding states, markets, and families, despite scholarly

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calls for recognizing it as a core activity that lies at this intersection of institutions.²¹ Indeed, pointing to women's experiences of welfare restructuring, Kittay (1998: 124) argues: "To be compelled to leave your child in a stranger's care, or with no care at all, and to accept whatever work is offered is another form of subordination, not a liberation. It devalues the work women have traditionally done." Moreover, welfare reform threatens general social justice goals for mothers and fathers. For example, expecting parents to believe 'any job is a good job' challenges the social justice goal of eradicating the growing gap between the rich and the poor in Canadian society.

Contrary to what some readers may expect, this paper will not conclude with calls to restructure social assistance policy on the basis of a gender-*specific* worker-citizen model or advance an argument that social assistance policy is informed by a newer model, although Bezanson's (2006: 165) argument that neo-liberal policy is increasingly informed by a "dual earner female caregiver model" is recognized. Nor will this conclusion endeavour to bridge the feminist debates over whether entitlement to social assistance should continue to be on the basis of similarity or recognize difference. For example, while liberal feminists may agree with that the state should treat women's and men's basis to claim social assistance the same, radical and postmodern feminists may emphasize difference and demand social citizenship rights based on group claims and particular identities. Instead, this paper will conclude with an invitation to other scholars to continue to explore contradictory state practices (Armstrong and Connelly, 1999) linked to social assistance policy through the lens of feminist political economy, such as how the simultaneous and contradictory processes of gendering and familization revealed here, continue to affect family lives. With more research devoted to revealing the implications of these processes in academic and policy circles and, thus, more support for the recognition of the reality of living on assistance, we will build the body of knowledge necessary to recommend that the following social justice policy goals be put into practice: to devote restructuring efforts at developing ways to fully recognize, support and value mothers' and fathers' employability efforts and caregiving; to provide adequate financial resources for parents to live on assistance and successfully enter the labour market; and, given the meeting of the first two goals, to lessen parents' need to adopt a variety of coping strategies simply to 'stay afloat' on social assistance but not get much further ahead.

21 See for example, Daly and Lewis (2000).

Appendix A
E-AC: exempt from seeking work due to youngest child's age
E-FR: exempt from seeking work due to family changes (e.g. leaving an abusive relationship; child with disability)
E-MC: exempt from seeking work due to medical condition (e.g. anxiety; depression; heart condition; drug addiction)
E-RT: employable parent who is expected to work
ERT-E: employable parent who is in the process of exiting or has recently exited assistance due to finding employment
* : Denotes self-report of Aboriginal or Métis race/ethnicity

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