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Diana Strassmann
Editor

CULTURE AND GENDER IN HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIES: THE CASE OF JAMAICAN CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS

Brenda Wyss

ABSTRACT

This essay uses the example of child support theory and Jamaican child support practices to argue that greater attention to local contexts and meaning systems can improve the explanatory and predictive power of economic models and their usefulness to policy-makers. The essay summarizes how neoclassical economists have (and have not) incorporated cultural differences into models of child support behavior. It then sketches two alternative approaches to taking cultural differences more seriously. The first approach maintains the logic and basic assumptions of the neoclassical model but accounts for specifically Jamaican constraints on child support behavior. The second approach considers how Jamaicans themselves might model their own child support practices. The essay identifies strengths of these two culturally sensitive child support models but also argues that both models disadvantage women and children by obscuring the opportunity costs of rearing children and helping to rationalize paternal child support default.

KEYWORDS

Jamaican households, culture, gender, child support

INTRODUCTION

Economists have much to gain by taking culture seriously. By culture, I mean socially constructed meaning systems made up of ideas and processes that represent the world, that create cultural entities (like "family," or "marriage," or "church"), that direct individuals to do certain things, and that evoke certain feelings (Roy D'Andrade 1984: 96). By attending to cultural differences economists could increase the predictive and explanatory power of their models and enhance the effectiveness of economic policy. But the benefits of taking culture seriously go even further. By recognizing how culture shapes economic theory and how theory in turn shapes culture, economists could formulate new models that help shape ideologically informed economic practices in socially desirable ways.

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There are more and less ambitious ways to "culturally sensitize" economic models. Most neoclassical economists who account for cultural differences (whether within a single economy or among economies) tend to take the least ambitious approach. They leave the basic components and mechanics of their models unchanged. One group of tools (such as utility functions and budget or institutional constraints) is employed to analyze economic behaviors and outcomes of every cultural group, and the logic of the model (that individuals maximize personal utility subject to constraints) is invariant regardless of cultural context. Culture itself appears only as systematic differences in the shapes of utility functions that result in culturally diverse responses to similar sets of current economic constraints, and in the way historical differences in utility functions generate group differences in current constraints.

A more ambitious approach involves interrogating how the organizing concepts and the logic of a model are themselves culturally biased. The very concepts selected for analysis ("utility," "constraints") and the way in which the concepts are linked together in the theory may be better suited to explain the activities of some groups than of others. For instance, a number of scholars argue that individualism, self-interestedness, and rational calculation are specifically Western, capitalist norms of behavior (or idealized norms of behavior), rather than universal human traits (Dorinne Kondo 1990; Jennifer Olmsted 1997; Stuart Plattner 1989). While the utility-maximization framework of neoclassical economics may be well suited to explaining behavior in the United States – and even this claim is questionable (see, for example, Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson 1993) – it may fail adequately to explain behaviors elsewhere.

Further, even if practices in a cultural context appear to conform to a particular economic model, a people's own understanding of their economies may differ quite dramatically from that model. Stephen Gudeman (1986) dubs a people's own model (their understanding or explanation of a phenomenon) a "local model." Neoclassical economic models are themselves local models, being shaped by and in turn shaping a particular cultural meaning system (in this case, the "locals" are mostly Western-educated economists). Non-neoclassical local models uncover insights into economic practices not visible through a neoclassical lens.

In this paper, I illustrate the value of taking culture seriously by discussing neoclassical child support models and the case of Jamaican child support relations. After summarizing the standard neoclassical economic approach to child support behavior, I consider how neoclassical economists have (and have not) accounted for culture. Then I consider two approaches to accounting for Jamaican culture: first, altering the neoclassical economic model to fit the Jamaican context and, second, adopting a local Jamaican model of child support. I argue that even the least ambitious approach (what I call "add Jamaican culture and stir"[1]) could significantly improve

the explanatory and predictive power of Jamaican child support models. On the other hand, I argue that both the neoclassical model (even when culturally enriched) and the Jamaican local model disadvantage women and children by obscuring the opportunity costs of childrearing and justifying male default on parental responsibilities. In Jamaica, as in the United States and some Western European countries (Irwin Garfinkel and Patrick Wong 1990), many absent fathers pay no child support (only about one-fourth of Jamaican households with nonresident parents receive cash child support – see Brenda Wyss 1995) and paternal default contributes to high poverty rates for children and single mothers.

THE NEOCLASSICAL ECONOMIC APPROACH AND CHILD SUPPORT BEHAVIOR

The general model

Neoclassical economists explore U.S. child support behavior in great detail, with most employing a fairly consistent theoretical approach. Neoclassical models aim to predict or explain the amount of child support money a noncustodial parent transfers to a custodial parent. Yoram Weiss and Robert Willis (1985, 1993) model child support behavior following the divorce (and physical separation) of once legally married parents. Andrea Beller and John Graham (1993) use the same general framework but broaden their analysis to include never-married and legally separated parents, including those who have never shared a household.

Proponents of the neoclassical approach claim it is gender-neutral (it should have equal explanatory power for male and female noncustodial parents). Nonetheless, ostensibly to simplify presentation, most neoclassical economists explain their models in terms of custodial mothers and noncustodial fathers. They further justify this approach by noting that the vast majority of absent parents in the U.S. are fathers. Almost all empirical analyses of child support payments in the U.S. examine payment behavior of noncustodial fathers only (an exception is Weiss and Willis 1989). In my discussion of the neoclassical model, I adopt the common convention of referring to the absent parent as "he" and to the custodial parent as "she."

Family courts are central to neoclassical child support models. The courts make child support awards, grant visitation privileges, and attempt to enforce compliance with awards and other orders. Beller and Graham model child support behavior as they believe it would occur in the absence of government intervention, then introduce the effects of various types of intervention. Since the Jamaican government plays a limited role in regulating child support behavior, I discuss the model without government intervention.

Individual utility-maximization drives the neoclassical child support model. Children are characterized as "consumer durables" from which parents expect to enjoy a future stream of satisfaction.[2] A noncustodial father contributes the amount of child support money that maximizes his utility (a positive function of his own consumption and his children's consumption) subject to a budget constraint that reflects the father's ability to change his own consumption and his children's consumption. The value a father places on his children's consumption is closely related to the custodial family's financial need and to the father's attitude toward (or degree of caring for) his children.

As a rational economic planner, a noncustodial dad aims to divide his income between child support payments and his own consumption so that the last dollar he spends increases his well-being equally whether it is distributed to his children or to himself (Beller and Graham 1993: 60–1). But the problem for the noncustodial father is that the custodial mother spends only a fraction of each additional dollar of income (from any source) on their children, and the remainder on herself. This confounds the father's attempt to raise his children's consumption level.

Weiss and Willis (1985, 1993) elaborate on this model. They view children as collective consumption goods (or public goods) for the father and mother. Because children are public goods, supporting them presents the traditional free-rider problem: one parent can benefit from the children without contributing to their support. But as long as the father and mother share a household (whether married or not), proximity and altruism overcome the free-rider problem and the parents allocate a Pareto optimal amount of resources to their children.[3] After a divorce or separation, however, things change. The noncustodial parent loses influence over the allocative decisions of the custodial parent. He cannot control whether money he contributes to the family will be spent on the children or on his ex-wife. As Kurt Beron (1990: 652) writes, "The father as principal is unable to monitor the agent's (mother's) behavior."

In Weiss and Willis's model, with a father's loss of influence, family resources are allocated suboptimally. A custodial mother misallocates resources because she no longer accounts for the benefit to the husband of spending on children; she spends on children as if they were rival or private goods, not public goods.[4] Because of this tendency, the mother spends too much on her own personal consumption and too little on the children. And the father often responds by withdrawing his support. As Weiss and Willis (1993: 631) put it, "since the wife, in effect, taxes every dollar that the husband transfers to her with the intention of raising the welfare of his children, his incentive to transfer declines, and underpayment by the husband is generated."

Weiss and Willis argue that fathers withdraw support for a second reason as well: because they no longer spend much time with their children. In this

view, fathers' utility is derived not only from children's consumption (and presumably well-being) but also from spending time with these children; providing support gives fathers access to "child services." When these services are withdrawn, fathers are less motived to contribute. Weiss and Willis further note that maintaining contact is costly – in terms of the father's time and resources – and that these costs tend to increase with time. Therefore, they argue, the incidence of fathers' noncompliance with child support settlements also increases with time.[5]

Culture and the neoclassical approach

Neoclassical economists have little to say about culture, presumably because culture is "noneconomic." For neoclassical economists, the realm of economics includes all outcomes that can be understood as the result of individual utility-maximizing behavior. Since "the economic" is a broad, almost infinitely expandable category, culture often turns up only residually in neoclassical analysis as whatever cannot be, or has not been, measured by researchers. For instance, in their econometric analyses of racial and ethnic wage differentials, some human capital theorists attribute any unexplained variation in wages to unobservable cultural differences (Barry Chiswick 1983; Stephen Woodbury 1993). Similarly Naila Kabeer (1994: 133) writes of household economic analysis: "'Culture' is generally used within this literature to refer to all those norms, customs and practices that prevent full and certain prediction of people's behavior by principles of economic maximization alone."

When culture appears as more than just a residual in their analyses, neoclassical economists tend to locate it in utility functions. Cordelia Reimers (1985) differentiates culture (that which systematically shapes utility functions) from current economic conditions (represented in models as constraints or opportunity sets). Reimers posits that cultural differences give rise to "systematic differences in utility functions that lead to systematic differences in behavior by women in different ethnic or nativity groups who face the same constraints or opportunity set" (Reimers 1985: 251).[6] Similarly, "culture of poverty" literature characterizes cultural differences as preferences (or values, beliefs, and attitudes) which, although they might have structural origins, persist in the face of changing constraints (Michael Foster 1993).

Introducing culture into economic analysis via preference orderings reinforces economists' tendency to give culture short shrift. Neoclassical economists often employ the assumption that utility functions are exogenous and constant over time, meaning that tastes and preferences are determined outside the economy – they do not change in response to changes in economic conditions. Holding preferences constant (i.e., assuming they have no explanatory power) permits economists to explain behaviors in

terms of changes in "economic" factors, like prices and incomes. If culture is located in preferences, and if changes in preferences do not help explain economic outcomes, then close attention to culture by economists is not warranted.[7]

But not all neoclassical economists treat culturally shaped preferences as fixed or impervious to economic conditions. Reimers argues that cultural differences are not static, but change slowly over time in response to both economic and noneconomic circumstances. For Reimers, historical differences in groups' economic conditions result in group differences in distributions of current preferences, which in turn help explain group differences in responses to current economic conditions. For example, Reimers writes, "It seems that black wives' higher labor force participation is in large part a cultural difference, rooted in the historical experience of blacks in America, and not explainable by current conditions alone" (Reimers 1985: 251).

Viewed this way, culture (as distinctive group preferences) becomes a rather empty category. Looking back in time, different group preferences can be attributed to different historical conditions (constraints), and different group constraints can be traced to different historical distributions of preferences.[8] In fact, as Michael Hannan (1982) notes, group boundaries *themselves* (Hannan writes about racial and ethnic boundaries) are shaped by historical conditions (including product, labor, and marriage market conditions). Since even group boundaries are endogenous to economic processes, it makes little sense to characterize cultural differences in preference distributions as exogenously given.

Economists who study child support, like other neoclassical economists, pay scant attention to culture. Beller and Graham note striking racial and ethnic differences in U.S. child support outcomes, and they attribute these differences in part to "cultural factors."[9] But Beller and Graham do not explicitly define culture, nor do they draw a clear line between what is cultural and what is not cultural (e.g., they do not explicitly situate culture in preference orderings as opposed to constraints). Applying the arguments of Reimers and others, the following correlates of child support payments that Beller and Graham identify could be considered "cultural": different black and white preferences for marital, residential, and childbearing arrangements; and racial differences in attitudes about male and female roles and responsibilities, about reliance on extended family, about formalizing support relationships, about applying for and accepting social assistance, and about using the court system.

Beller and Graham acknowledge systematic differences in constraints facing members of different racial and ethnic groups (including lower black than white male income levels and differing legal system experiences for members of different racial and ethnic groups) in addition to possible systematic differences in preferences. But presumably the differences in

constraints are noncultural differences, while the differences in preferences are cultural.

TAKING JAMAICAN CULTURE SERIOUSLY

I explore two approaches to taking Jamaican culture seriously in child support models. First, I consider a straightforward enrichment of the neoclassical economic approach, maintaining the general framework and logic, but accounting for some distinctive Jamaican constraints. Second, I outline a more ambitious reformulation of child support theory. Here I use two recent ethnographies (Lisa Douglass 1992 and Elisa Sobo 1993) to suggest some ways a local Jamaican model of child support would differ from the neoclassical model.

Add Jamaican "culture" and stir

Neoclassical child support models assume stylized family, household, economic, and juridical arrangements and patterns of behavior that are not widespread in Jamaica. In fact, many of these assumptions are increasingly inappropriate even in the U.S. context where neoclassical models were initially developed. Below I summarize how Jamaican family and household forms, and economic and juridical contexts, diverge from the forms assumed to be dominant in the United States.[10]

While neoclassical economists consign cultural differences to preference orderings, I introduce Jamaican culture into the neoclassical model via what typically would be considered constraints rather than preferences. In this case, to argue that Jamaicans have distinctive preferences suggests that Jamaican parents would make different child support decisions than U.S. parents who face identical choice sets. I avoid speculating about cross-cultural variations in preferences for two reasons. First, preferences cannot be observed or their strength measured in any straightforward manner, whereas institutional constraints are easier to identify and describe. And second, as I note above, distinguishing constraints from preferences is problematic. For instance, the institutional context constraining Jamaican child support decisions is characterized by a low incidence of marriage and the tendency for many parents to reside separately from their children and from each other. But these Jamaican institutional constraints arguably could represent distinctive Jamaican preferences regarding marriage and living arrangements. And the preferences themselves could in turn be seen as having developed out of prior institutional constraints (e.g., legal prohibition of marriage for enslaved Jamaicans).[11]

Neoclassical models are grounded in the implicit assumption that marriage and coresidence (or at least coresidence) mark most relationships that produce children, but this is not the case in Jamaica. A majority of

Jamaican parents are not legally married when children are born, and many never marry. In 1983, out-of-wedlock births totalled 84 percent of all Jamaican births. (The comparable U.S. rate was 25 percent in the same year.) Out-of-wedlock births have been greater than 70 percent of Jamaican births for as long as records have been kept (Douglass 1992: 187). Jamaicans refer to the unmarried parents of such children as "babymothers" and "babyfathers."

Douglass (1992: 126) puts it simply, "the majority of Jamaicans create families without resorting to marriage." Marriage is less than half as common in Jamaica as it is in the U.S. (Sobo 1993), and the average age at first marriage in Jamaica is relatively high. Divorce is very uncommon. This is partly because so few Jamaicans ever marry, but divorce rates among once-married Jamaicans are low as well.

Marital and childbearing practices differ by class, however. Regardless of the specific definition of class they employ, social scientists tend to speak of three Jamaican classes: a very small upper class, a small but growing middle class, and a lower class that includes most Jamaicans. These categories at least loosely reflect occupational categories. For example, Jack Alexander's (1977) "upper class" consists of large-scale property owners, while members of his "middle class" are white-collar workers. M. G. Smith (1989) includes among the "lower class" Jamaican workers who are neither skilled workers nor professionals. In Sobo's words, these lower-class Jamaicans "remain unemployed or find menial and often seasonal jobs as hotel maids, banana packers, sugarcane cutters, and sweatshop seamstresses" (Sobo 1993: 16–17).

Douglass (1992) argues that marriage is at the *center* of family life for middle- and upper-class Jamaicans, both as an ideal and in practice. And Alexander (1973) goes so far as to claim that marriage patterns fundamentally distinguish the middle class from the lower class. While the middle- and upper-class ideal is for couples to have children within marriage (and for those children to be the biological offspring of both spouses), even upper-class Jamaicans have children outside of marriage (Douglass 1992). But women's responses to a nonmarital pregnancy vary by class. Marriage tends to follow pregnancy for middle- and upper-class women, but not for lower-class women (Douglass 1992).

Parents' relationships affect child support behavior in Jamaica. But U.S.-based relationship categories cannot account for the great variation in relationship patterns in Jamaica. Researchers in Jamaica commonly identify the following types of relationships: casual, visiting, common-law marriage, legal marriage, separated (but married – either common-law or legally), widowed, and divorced. To fully understand variations in Jamaican child support behaviors, we would need to disaggregate these categories even further according to whether or not couples are sexually or romantically involved.

Jamaican residential patterns also differ dramatically from the U.S.-assumed norm. In Jamaica, more than half of mother–father–child triads are spread across more than one household. (And living apart does not necessarily signify that parents are no longer romantically involved.) In 1989, more than half of Jamaican children lived separately from their biological fathers and about one-fourth lived apart from their biological mothers; about one-fifth of children lived apart from both biological parents (Wyss 1995).

Intricate webs of interdependence make deriving Jamaican budget constraints and utility functions tricky. Resource constraints and utility functions used to predict child support outcomes must incorporate relevant information for a wide variety of family and household members. Many Jamaicans have children with more than one partner (Eugene Brody 1981). As a result, a noncustodial parent may have children living in more than one household (this is true for women as well as men). And a group of children living with a mother (or father) do not necessarily all share the same absent father (mother). To complicate matters further, many households with children are extended family households. One common arrangement includes a grandmother, some of her adult children, a variety of her grandchildren (usually the children of her daughters), and perhaps other relatives or fictive kin (biologically unrelated individuals considered part of the family).

Complicated residential patterns beget complicated income and resource-pooling patterns. In neoclassical models, resources are pooled to some degree between two households (those of the custodial and noncustodial parent) and are perfectly pooled (shared nonproblematically) among the members of the custodial household. In Jamaica, however, resources are often shared to some degree among more than two households, and are pooled only imperfectly within any one household. For instance, all adults in the household may contribute to food or rent payments, while children's biological parents pay for child-specific items out of their own pockets. Resource pooling among extended kin networks is often viewed as a survival strategy for low-income households (see, for example, Carol Stack 1974). But Douglass notes that elite Jamaican families also "share goods, services, and people across the premises of several households" (1992: 241).

Jamaican parents make child support decisions in a different economic environment than do U.S. parents. Jamaican parents are very likely to be seriously cash-constrained – either unemployed, underemployed, self-employed (probably in the informal economy), or subsistence producers. Further, emigration is an important Jamaican strategy for economic survival or advancement, and this strategy cuts across class boundaries. The absence of a parent from a child's household may therefore mark a situation in which the parent supports the child quite well, rather than a situation in which incentives to support that child are attenuated.

Because most Jamaican parents have limited access to cash, gifts in kind (food, clothing, school supplies) are often easier to contribute to children than money. Giving noncash child support might also eliminate the principal–agent problem identified by Weiss and Willis, creating an incentive for parents of any income level to give support in kind rather than in cash. By contributing child-specific items (children's clothing and shoes, school books and fees, etc.), absent parents can express their desire for child services and well-being without worrying that the custodial parent will consume these items.

While some Jamaican fathers believe custodial mothers divert resources from children to themselves (Wyss 1995), this notion does not bear up well empirically. Weiss and Willis's most extreme claim – that mothers decrease spending on children following a father's departure from the household (controlling for available income) – is questionable in Jamaica. Jamaican studies (Sudhanshu Handa 1994; Frederic Louat, Margaret Grosh, and Jacques van der Gaag 1992) find that children living in female-headed households (usually defined as households with no adult male present) have better health and welfare outcomes than those living in male-headed households with similar per capita incomes.

Economic constraints limit levels of cash child support in Jamaica, and so do juridical constraints. Jamaican family law clearly delegates economic responsibility for children to biological parents regardless of their marital status, and a family court system is charged to enforce this responsibility. But the court is not widely used. Brody (1981) suggests that Jamaican mothers do not use the courts because awards are small and because women hesitate to sue fathers out of fear of retaliation or abandonment.

A final difference between the U.S. context and the Jamaican context is the dearth of social welfare programs in Jamaica. Most Jamaicans receive no state or private retirement income, and most have no health or disability insurance.[12] Partly because of the limited social safety net, the consumer durable metaphor for children does not fit Jamaica well. Jamaican adults do place a high value on the pleasure they derive from being parents and from interacting with children. But children benefit their parents in many other ways as well. Children help around their households from an early age and parents hope to enjoy their children's support in old age. In Jamaica, spending on children must be seen partly as a human capital investment expected to yield returns in the form of children's future earnings and household services.

Revising the neoclassical child support model to accommodate distinctive Jamaican institutions and practices would entail the following:

1 accounting for the complexity of Jamaican relationship statuses;
2 accounting for income pooling across several households and for incomplete pooling within any household;

3 accounting for how key extended family members influence child support decisions and the allocation of household resources (e.g., grandmothers with whom children live; babyfathers' mothers and new partners);
4 accounting for the wide variation in causes of parental absence (e.g., emigration versus alienation from custodial parent);
5 accounting for noncash forms of support; and
6 including expected future contributions from children as variables in parents' cost–benefit analyses.

But even with these extensive revisions, the standard neoclassical approach falls short of adequately explaining or predicting Jamaican child support behavior. No matter how much Jamaican "culture" we stir in, our stirring does not transform the basic U.S. culture-laden conceptual framework of the neoclassical approach. The shortcomings of the enriched neoclassical model for studying Jamaican child support include its methodological individualism, its narrow views of human motivation and rationality, and its claim to gender-neutrality. (Some feminist economists claim these aspects of neoclassical theory limit its usefulness everywhere, including the United States. Again, see Ferber and Nelson 1993.) My sketch of a local model of Jamaican child support highlights each of these shortcomings and provides some additional insights into Jamaican child support practices.

A local model of Jamaican child support

There is no singular or uniform local child support model shared by all Jamaicans. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1996) argues, all cultures (and black cultures in particular) are hybrids, formed in the confluence of more than one cultural tradition. And culture (as meaning systems and related practices) varies within any national context across divisions of class, ethnicity, gender, region, etc. In the discussion that follows, I take some first steps toward disaggregating claims about Jamaican culture to reflect its heterogeneity. In particular, I use the work of anthropologists Lisa Douglass and Elisa Sobo to highlight how local meanings and practices vary across class boundaries. Douglass's ethnography examines the lives of elite Jamaicans. Sobo describes relatively poor rural villagers.[13]

In Jamaica, child support by absent parents is one part of the overall circulation of resources, regulated by gender roles and kinship relations. Sobo argues that for rural Jamaicans, the human body is a metaphor for social relations writ large. The circulation of resources among individuals and households serves to maintain the health of the community in the same way that the circulation of blood and other bodily fluids maintains the health of the individual. Sobo writes, "For Jamaicans, social problems involve

disruptions in the flow of resources and aid, while sickness ultimately stems from disrupted internal flow" (Sobo 1993: 85).

Because the circulation of resources is essential to social well-being, Jamaicans value generosity and denigrate selfishness. "People give because they want to – giving feels good, and people who do not give feel bad as well as guilty" (Sobo 1993: 82). On the flip side, "hoarding bespeaks an anti-social nature" (Sobo 1993: 93) and "Everyone hates a person who is 'near' or 'exact', such as someone who never cooks extra dinner – someone stingy with food and so with his or her sociability" (Sobo 1993: 96).

Kinship ties in part determine with whom a Jamaican shares (or should share) resources. Ideally, individuals share resources altruistically with their kin (Sobo 1993). Blood ties are thought to compel altruism (e.g., compelling children to share with parents). Further, kinship ties may be created due to the need to share resources or may actually be created *by* sharing resources. Many scholars have noted the fluidity of family and kinship in Jamaica. Douglass argues: "The apparent fixity of family as based in blood or marriage belies its actual fluidity. Family is not given in nature or even fixed by tradition, but is actually open to a wide range of choice" (Douglass 1992: 231). Family members may not share a blood line but may be fictive kin or nurture kin. In the former case, nonkin are called by kin names ("Auntie," "Brother") and the "idiom of kinship implies an altruistic basis for exchanges" (Sobo 1993: 76). In the case of nurture kinship, kinship is altered by postnatal acts. A woman who feeds a child or a man who spends money buying food for that child may become the child's kin. Sobo writes, "food taken into and made part of a child's body works like incorporated blood to create and maintain kin ties" (Sobo 1993: 78).

Family fluidity operates somewhat differently for elites than for poorer Jamaicans. Like poor Jamaicans, elite Jamaicans add names to the family roster as described above. But elites also subtract names. Douglass explains that elite Jamaicans do not automatically consider all blood relations to be "family," nor do they automatically include blood kin in their circle of intimates. Children born out of wedlock are particularly likely to be excluded, especially when these children have lower social status than the family. Family has clear class parameters for Jamaican elites. Douglass writes, "Whereas family/friends usually share the same social background and class habitus as the family elite, kin of relatively lower class and status often remain strangers to the family" (1992: 22).

The neoclassical notion that people are calculating beings who weigh personal costs and personal benefits before making choices both resonates and fails to resonate with ethnographic evidence on how Jamaicans view their own behavior. Kinship ties are thought to compel giving to some degree, but Jamaicans clearly allow for individual agency in resource exchange. Jamaicans value independent decision-making. As Sobo puts it,

"'bending minds' is strictly wrong for Jamaicans" (Sobo 1993: 103). But Jamaicans would likely reject an economic model of decision-making based solely on rational calculation. Sobo argues that Jamaicans distinguish the "mind" from the "brain." "The 'mind' is the seat of volition, agency, and intention. A person often says s/he will go somewhere and do a thing 'if my mind tell me.' The brain or 'marrow,' located in the head is simply a computational tool and a storage space for facts" (Sobo 1993: 39).

Sobo elaborates contradictions in Jamaican views about human nature. She writes, "One of the most troubling inconsistencies for Jamaicans is the tension between the ideal of altruistically motivated interdependent relationships and the understood reality and dangers of manipulative, deceitful, self-centered social actors." Further, she writes, "Jamaicans pretend that relations are fully altruistic (and many truly are) but a well known, subversive cultural tradition holds that most relations are exploitative" (Sobo 1993: 298).

Reciprocity governs much of the resource sharing among Jamaicans. Accepting a gift obligates the recipient. A truly generous Jamaican must receive as well as give gifts. "A 'selfish' person cuts others off, denying them the chance to engender obligations, and so denying them the chance to call in debts" (Sobo 1993: 97). Some women avoid becoming obliged to men by refusing their gifts. But women's limited resources and responsibility for family survival may drive them to accept gifts, creating debt.

The Jamaican model of sharing with children is gender-differentiated. Douglass (1992: 141) writes, "parental responsibility is allocated according to gender. This occurs both inside and outside of marriage and crosses class lines. In Jamaica, a child's mother is expected to be its primary caretaker, and its father is expected to provide financial support." But both fathers and mothers in Jamaica are governed by sets of contradictory expectations (with the possible exception of the elite fathers and mothers described by Douglass). Fathers are simultaneously supposed to support children financially and expected not to. Sobo (1993: 228) writes, "Cultural ideals make men providers and women the dependent receivers of men's support. In reality . . . many men have problems providing and many remain dependent on women."

Mothers also face conflicting role expectations. Jamaicans of all class backgrounds agree it is best for a child to be raised by its biological mother. They consider it unhealthy or unnatural for a child to live separately from its mother (Douglass 1992: 193). At the same time, a mother may delegate responsibility for raising her child to others for a variety of reasons: because she is too young, sick or poor to provide well for the child; or so she may dedicate herself to income-generating activities – sometimes after migrating to Kingston or abroad. Erna Brodber (1974) argues that the Jamaican tradition of "passing on" children to others who can better care for them is not limited to lower-class families. Middle- and upper-class families also

"board out" children in an effort to expand their social and educational opportunities.

The way Victoria Durant-Gonzalez (1982) sees it, a Jamaican woman's self-image is incomplete if she is not responsible for a child, but the actual nurturing of the child may be done by others or even in another household. And while nurturing a child is privileged in Jamaican conceptions of motherhood, most mothers (even those living with the fathers of their children) contribute financially to the child's well-being as well as physically.

Despite ideals of altruism and sociability, many Jamaican men and women see members of the opposite sex as self-interested and instrumentally motivated. While social pressure exists for men to provide financially for their children, men are widely perceived as irresponsible (Lynn Bolles 1996). Women, on the other hand, are thought to be "always looking for something" from men, even to the point of bearing children to access male support. Douglass notes that these stereotypes "probably underestimate the amount of money and attention men actually do give women and their children as well as ignore the financial support women often give to men" (Douglass 1992: 128). Negative attitudes toward the opposite sex appear weakest among elite Jamaicans (Douglass 1992: 138), but Alexander (1977) documents their force among the middle class.

Rural Jamaicans believe certain practices increase the likelihood a father will support his children. Mothers can "bind" fathers to a child by giving the child the father's name. Sobo writes, "Names . . . bind fathers to children, publicly announcing that relationships exist and reminding men of their obligations. . . . Not all fathers fulfill the expectations for child support that naming exposes, but social pressure is there to do so" (Sobo 1993: 147).

Further, "women can 'tie' men to them and thus secure their love and money by collecting their own menstrual blood for use in preparing food" (Sobo 1993: 230). Rural Jamaicans believe blood ties a man to his babymother in the same way that blood creates a kinship bond between babies and mothers. When tied in this way, a babyfather loses his volition, and the gifts he makes to his babymother and children are not really given freely, but are compelled. This loss of free will violates the Jamaican commitment to independent decision-making and is particularly insulting to a man. "When 'tied' by a woman, a man's autonomy is stolen so that his resources and devotion can be secured. His sense of obligation toward this 'wife' is then not really his own, and his 'willingness' is taken advantage of" (Sobo 1993: 229).[14]

Jamaican gender roles and perceptions shape parental giving in yet another way. What U.S. theorists call child support is perceived by Jamaicans as at least in part a transfer of resources from babyfathers to babymothers, rather than a transfer from fathers to children. In Jamaica, women expect male lovers to give them money and material goods, while female

lovers provide men services (Brody 1981; Edith Clarke 1957; Olive Senior 1991). Sobo explains, "A male lover should bring gifts, like panties and other such presents, to his women 'friends.' Women expect this" (Sobo 1993: 132–3). Sobo continues, "Money is properly and respectably exchanged, with a time lag. It serves not to compensate but to attract – to 'keep the women them coming back.' It becomes part of the expression of kinshiplike altruism that traditionally overlays sexual relations" (Sobo 1993: 185).

Because giving to babymothers and children has two distinct motives, default by absent fathers must be interpreted with care. An absent father's contributions are often both gifts to the mother and support for the children. Default may signal attenuation of the father's commitment to children or changes in the economic well-being of either the father or the custodial household. But it may also signal a change in the sexual relationship of the babyfather and the babymother. A man's desire to cease contributing money to his babymother when she has a new lover may conflict with his desire to give to his children who live with her. And babyfathers are quite likely to stop giving support whenever a babymother legally marries, because the new husband is legally responsible for children's support (Joan French 1990).

To more fully flesh out a local model of child support for Jamaica, we must consider what types of gifts or contributions Jamaicans consider to be appropriate. First, the child her/himself is a gift parents give society. Sobo notes that women who neither bear nor rear children are widely perceived to be selfish and asocial. Further, a Jamaican father may consider the child to be a valuable gift he gives his babymother. After all, a woman gains status (social womanhood) from bearing a child, an extra pair of hands around the house, insurance in case of illness, and likely support in old age.[15] Patterns of speech reflect this view. Jamaicans of all classes say a man "gives a woman a child" (Douglass 1992: 128). They also say a woman has a baby "for a man," suggesting that the child is a gift from babymother to babyfather as well as from babyfather to babymother.

Second, fathers contribute to the work of conceiving and "growing a child" in the womb and this gift may seem as significant as subsidizing the child after birth. As rural Jamaicans see it, for nine months, a pregnant woman feeds her growing fetus with her blood and with food passed through the "belly." A father's sperm (or that of any other sexual partner) is incorporated into the fetus after every act of intercourse (Sobo 1996: 499). This initial "work" may motivate men to continue to support children after they are born. Sobo writes, "They [men] do not want to waste the 'nine months of hard labor' which they put in, sexually and otherwise, to help their 'babymothers' 'grow' their offspring" (Sobo 1993: 147).

Sobo argues that rural Jamaicans associate the costs of children more with childbearing than with childrearing. She writes:

> One sixteen-year-old, just after giving birth, was told by her grandaunt that the "hard part" was over; raising children is easier than giving birth. Although mothers must "take an interest" in their children lest the pain they endured [in pregnancy and childbirth] go to waste, childrearing is thought of as needing no special techniques. Caretakers say that their charges learn to do things like walk, control their bowels, and eat real food "when they ready."
>
> (Sobo 1993: 146)

In some cases Jamaican parents may consider cash an inappropriate or unattractive form of child support. Douglass (1992: 193) argues that money lacks emotional weight and does not carry the meaning of family. For elite Jamaicans this often means that outside children (children born out of wedlock) inherit only money while children born within a marriage inherit objects of symbolic family value, such as shares of estates or businesses. For lower-class Jamaicans, food carries family meaning. Sobo notes that "solidarity is signaled by eating from the same pot . . . sharing food symbolizes relatedness" (Sobo 1993: 182).

To summarize, from a local standpoint the health of Jamaican communities depends on an unobstructed flow of resources motivated by altruism, reciprocity, and the pursuit of both collective and private interests. Child support payments are part of the flow of resources needed to promote well-being, but money is neither the most prevalent nor most valued gift that noncustodial parents give children. Unfortunately, as many Jamaicans see it, individual selfishness almost inevitably blocks the flow of resources in Jamaica, creating dis-ease on personal and social levels. Both women and men exhibit selfish behavior, but the typically female form of selfishness differs from the typically male form. Women are perceived as gold-diggers, while men are thought to be irresponsible, keeping money and other resources to themselves.

While parents consider costs and benefits when making support decisions, the "rational economic man" of neoclassical theory does not appear in the Jamaican model. Jamaicans value and promote individual decision-making, but decisions are not seen as the outcome of systematic calculation by individuals. Jamaicans view their own behavior as governed by their "minds," which cannot be reduced to the calculational functions of the brain. This vision of the decision-making process suggests a randomness of outcomes that would disconcert many economists. But Jamaicans do not see around them the regular patterns of child support envisioned by neoclassical economists. Jamaican women I interviewed (in 1989 and 1990) suggested that a babyfather's support is quite unpredictable and not necessarily related to his income level, upbringing, religion, etc. A sexual relationship between babyfather and babymother was the factor women mentioned most as a requirement for support.

CONCLUSIONS

Ethnographers can help economists do better work. A first step towards improving economic analysis of Jamaican child support would be to design survey instruments fully informed by the rich body of Jamaican ethnography. This step would permit economists of any theoretical bent to sharpen and deepen their empirical work. The most comprehensive data available for researching late 1980s child support in Jamaica are from the Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions (SLC) and the linked Jamaican Labour Force Survey (LFS).[16] But the SLC/LFS data reflect assumptions that are untenable in the Jamaican context: that households are the appropriate units of economic analysis; that households are fairly self-sufficient nuclear family income-pooling units; and that the only significant contributions absent parents make to their children are pecuniary ones.[17] Ethnographic evidence summarized in this paper suggests that a superior survey instrument for Jamaica would be child-centered, rather than household-centered; would elicit more information than the SLC/LFS about support networks extending beyond children's households; would pose questions about patterns of resource sharing within households (rather than assuming them); and would account for nonmonetary contributions to children (including both gifts in kind and time contributions).

If we really want to know who supports Jamaican children, we need to ask that question for each child individually rather than for households with children. The household-centered SLC reports child support for each household as a unit, making it impossible to determine which absent parent contributed how much money to which child. Because Jamaican reproductive and residential patterns are complex, Jamaican children often have webs of support and affection that are uniquely their own (i.e., not shared with siblings). And Jamaican households often include more than one parent (each with his or her own set of missing partners) and groups of children having different missing parents.[18]

Next, the child-centered survey should elicit information about all persons in a child's support network regardless of where they live, including comprehensive information about her/his biological parents. The SLC/LFS include limited educational information and nothing more about absent parents. A Jamaican child's biological parents may or may not be her/his social or economic parents. But we need to better understand the conditions under which biological parents assume social parentage. And biological parents are key links in chains of family connection; for example, kin of a child's biological parent may contribute to the child even when her/his parent cannot.[19]

Third, rather than assuming that household members pool all their personal resources, we need to ask specific questions about resource sharing among household members. The SLC/LFS data permit only limited

disaggregation of household consumption. For instance, respondents to the SLC estimate how much money their households spend on children's shoes, children's clothing, and school fees. These data tell us something about how households divide resources between adults and children, but they say nothing about how households divide resources among the children who live there. Most other types of consumption spending (e.g., on consumer durables, food, and entertainment) are not disaggregated at all within the SLC, but are reported for entire household units.

And finally, to permit a fuller picture of who supports Jamaican children, the child-centered survey must account for gifts in kind from parents and others, as well as for time spent in childrearing activities. Pecuniary contributions may pale beside other types of support Jamaican parents give their children. Since the SLC/LFS measures only cash contributed by absent parents, it clearly underestimates the degree of support these parents provide their children.

Economists committed to a neoclassical approach would benefit from the innovations in survey design described above by having more complete information about the sets of individual preferences and constraints that they believe determine a child's access to resources. But stepping outside the neoclassical framework to consider how Jamaicans might model their own child support practices (even to the limited degree that I do so here) offers insights otherwise unavailable. For example, the Jamaican view that child support is actually babymother support has interesting implications for our understanding of the principal–agent problem. At first glance, Weiss and Willis's contention that a principal–agent problem motivates paternal default seems appropriate in Jamaica. Some Jamaican men view women as unscrupulously greedy and so may suspect that mothers spend cash on themselves and not on children. The prevalence of extended family households in Jamaica may also exacerbate the principal–agent problem, since other adults living in the custodial household (and not just the biological parent) might divert resources intended for specific children. But Jamaican fathers who intend cash support to be at least partly for their babymothers should not object to babymothers spending money on themselves (and so should not withdraw child support on these grounds).

The knowledge that many Jamaicans understand cash support as a gift from a father to his child's mother also underscores the tenuous nature of economic connections between fathers and children. For while a blood bond between father and child lasts a lifetime, many adult sexual relationships are short-lived. So contributions based on the bond between father and mother are more unstable than those based on a bond between father and child. In this context, policy-makers concerned with child welfare might consider social forms of support for children (e.g., child allowances or educational subsidies), rather than seeking to bolster problematic private forms (e.g., encouraging greater use of the family court). Taxing all

citizens to finance child welfare programs would find ideological grounding in Jamaican notions of children as gifts to society and of the importance of generosity to community health and well-being.

Attending to cultural contexts and meaning systems can improve the explanatory and predictive power of economic models as well as their usefulness to policy-makers. But economists also must consider how our models *shape* ideas and ideologically influenced practices. Any economic model is part of a cultural meaning system that constrains what people see, how people interpret what they see, and what kinds of behavior they deem appropriate. This is true of both the neoclassical and the local Jamaican child support models discussed in this paper.

Unfortunately, both the neoclassical and the local model disadvantage women and children by justifying and perhaps reinforcing paternal default on obligations to children. Both models obscure (or minimize) the time and labor costs of rearing children, opening the ideological space for the principal–agent problem described by Weiss and Willis. Absent parents who object to custodial parents using child support money for their own personal consumption (rather than exclusively for children's consumption) must deny that rearing children involves work. Because if raising children really involves work, then contributing to the total costs of childrearing means defraying labor (or time) costs as well as out-of-pocket costs. Absent parents who value childrearing labor could view some fraction of child support money as remuneration for a custodial parent's time. In this case, the custodial parent who spends child support money on herself is not diverting funds from her children. Rather, her personal consumption makes possible her expenditure of labor, an essential input into child welfare.

Childrearing may involve less parental time and labor in Jamaica than in the United States. Older siblings and assorted kin and community members help care for small Jamaican children, reducing the labor costs borne by parents. Jamaican children also take a great deal of responsibility for themselves from a relatively young age. Beyond this, Jamaican children often start school at age 3, further limiting the amount of time parents spend directly caring for children.

But even in Jamaica custodial parents spend time and energy caring for children. Time-use data from a Jamaican child-centered survey could provide a reality check for both economists and Jamaicans about the degree to which raising children involves work or related opportunity costs. And economists could use this knowledge to develop new models that promote paternal contributions to children rather than rationalize paternal default.

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NOTES

[1] I am indebted to feminist scholars for this phrase. "Add women and stir" has been used to describe an approach to gender-balancing scholarship that involves including previously overlooked women or "women's issues" as objects of study without making changes in basic androcentric theoretical structures or research methods.

[2] Beller and Graham (1993) describe children as one type of capital accumulated during a marriage, suggesting a human capital approach to spending on children (i.e., children as producer durables rather than consumer durables). But Beller and Graham's formal model does not account for the producer durable aspect of children. In the formal model, children's expected future earnings do not enter into parents' allocational calculations.

[3] The "optimal" allocation in Weiss and Willis's analysis "maximizes expected utility for the husband, given a prespecified expected utility for the wife" (1985: 273).

[4] According to Paul Samuelson's rule for public goods, while parents are married spending on children is determined by equating the marginal social utility from spending (the sum of the father's and mother's marginal utilities) with the marginal cost. After a divorce, the mother chooses to spend on children the amount that equates only her own marginal utility from spending with the marginal cost. The marginal cost of spending another dollar on children is one. When she lives alone, a mother keeps spending on her children until the last dollar spent gives her one additional unit of utility. But when living with her husband, the mother spends additional dollars on her children *beyond* the point where her own marginal utility equals one (e.g., she spends a dollar on the children even when it nets her only eight-tenths of a unit of added utility, as long as her husband enjoys at least two-tenths of a unit of additional utility from the same dollar of spending).

[5] Weiss and Willis argue that the U.S. legal environment reinforces the tendency for noncompliance. Courts in the U.S. generally make visitation rights and child support separate issues. The father has the legal right to visit even if he fails to pay child support. And even if she denies their father visits, the mother has the legal right to support for the children. Weiss and Willis argue that this arrangement (in the absence of strong enforcement mechanisms by the state) results in "mutual withdrawal." The mother withdraws visits; the father withdraws payment (Weiss and Willis 1985: 288).

[6] Reimers identifies the following cultural differences: "views about male and female roles in the family and about wives and mothers working outside the home, as well as . . . the value placed on children, family size, household composition, and the education of women" (Reimers 1985: 251).

[7] My thanks to Nancy Folbre for suggesting this argument.

[8] See S. Charusheela (1997) for a lucid discussion of the problem of distinguishing choice from constraints on choice.

[9] For the most part, Beller and Graham discuss the experiences of only two U.S. groups: whites and blacks. Summarizing racial differences, Beller and Graham write, "Blacks are less likely to have a child support award, have awards of much smaller value, are less likely to receive any of the support due them, and receive a smaller portion of what they are due" (Beller and Graham 1993: 154).

[10] In several respects, the Jamaican context mirrors the context for lower-income African-American parents. It is interesting to note that Weiss and Willis (1993) exclude black Americans from the sample they use in their empirical analysis. They justify this exclusion by noting that many black Americans have children prior to marriage and that many black Americans are separated from rather than divorced from their partners.

[11] I shy away from the discussion of group preferences for a third, political, reason. Arguments about group differences in preferences or values have played a key historical role in justifying inequality, even in the absence of reliable proof that these differences exist. For instance, some economists argue that women value children more highly than men do, and that this presumed difference in preferences explains (and justifies) women's labor market inequality (e.g., Victor Fuchs 1988). And human capital theorists have argued that racial/ethnic differences in preferences account for portions of the racial/ethnic wage gap unexplained by human capital variables (see William Darity and Rhonda Williams 1985). The human capital argument has been used to dismiss claims that race-based discrimination persists in U.S. labor markets.

[12] In 1991, only about 17 percent of Jamaicans age 60 and older received old-age pensions through the National Insurance Scheme, and benefit levels were very low (Planning Institute of Jamaica 1993). In 1992, less than 10 percent of Jamaicans had health insurance (Statistical Institute of Jamaica 1994).

[13] Sobo argues that her findings reflect the attitudes of a majority of Jamaicans (1993: 303). She proffers M. G. Smith's (1989) estimate that 85 percent of Jamaicans are poor (or lower-class). And while only about half of Jamaicans reside in rural areas, many urban dwellers are migrants from the countryside (Sobo 1993: 303). Douglass's elite families are part of a tiny minority of mostly white Jamaicans (less than 0.5 percent of the population) that own the major Jamaican manufacturing, financial, import/export, and tourism enterprises (Douglass 1992: 1). Douglass argues that these elites exhibit distinctive kinship patterns and sentiments, but that their ideas and behaviors "fully conform to the cultural principles that characterize Jamaican kinship and society generally" (Douglass 1992: 16).

[14] Sobo argues that the notion of "tying" deflects attention from male exploitation of women to women's perceived control of men. She writes, "Men know that they often undercompensate or take advantage of women, and many do feel badly. Through talk of the female practice of 'tying,' men can deny their shortcomings as breadwinners and can project their exploitative tendencies back onto women" (Sobo 1993: 228).

[15] Class differences in conceptions of "adulthood" (and in the meaning attached to marriage and to procreation) illustrate the heterogeneity of local Jamaican models. Douglass (1992: 139) argues that social adulthood is marked by marriage for elite Jamaicans rather than by becoming parents as it is for lower-class Jamaicans.

[16] Margaret Grosh (1991) describes these data sources.

[17] Survey designers may not have intended the survey to reflect these assumptions. Some decisions about SLC design were taken to make it compatible with, and to minimize its overlap with the LFS. Other aspects of the design were intended to minimize survey costs (Grosh 1991).

[18] One approach to a child-centered survey would be to collect what Raymond Smith (1988) calls a "spontaneous kin list" for each child. This would involve asking a parent to provide a list of all the child's relatives. Further, parents could explain who helps to support the child and in what ways. Spontaneous kin lists would reveal who Jamaicans themselves consider to be the parents and other relatives of a child, rather than assuming that Jamaican notions of kinship match those of the survey's designers.

[19] The survey should elicit information about the relationship of a child's biological parent to a variety of other persons, including: the parent's past and current relationship with her/his co-parent; the parent's other romantic or sexual relationships, if any; the parent's relationship with all his/her biological children; the parent's relationship with other family members, particularly those that involve economic interdependence.

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