Poverty and 'family troubles': Mothers, children, and neoliberal 'anti-poverty' initiatives

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Abstract: Conditions of impoverishment underlie many family 'troubles' and the family is often a site of anti-poverty interventions. Feminist scholars have provided a series of trenchant critiques of neoliberal initiatives which purport to tackle familial poverty but have the effect of re-traditionalising gendered divisions of labour, as well as side-lining demands for social and economic justice for women. Taking one paper as an in-depth case study, this paper considers what happens to 'the child' in such feminist critiques. I suggest there is a tendency to posit neoliberal anti-poverty initiatives as benign for or even of benefit to children. The unintended consequences are to position impoverished women against impoverished children and to naturalise childhood at the same time as contesting motherhood. In troubling the family in this way, I argue for the productivity of complementing feminist critiques with critically-oriented childhood scholarship to better understand the operations and impacts of neoliberal anti-poverty initiatives.

Keywords: childhood, feminism, neoliberalism, poverty, woman-child relations

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The terrain on which impoverished families live their lives is being significantly reshaped in the face of profound and enduring changes as a result of the economic crisis, ensuing "global slump" (McNally, 2010), and accompanying politics of austerity over the past decade. Governments in many countries have been withdrawing from social reproduction, the tasks of provisioning and maintaining human lives, at the same time as opening them up to marketisation and capitalist accumulation (Dowling & Harvie, 2014). Massive job losses immediately following the 2008 economic collapse, high unemployment, and depressed wages and pensions have become common place even in the wealthiest countries. While extreme poverty continues to decline, relative poverty persists, and wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few (Hardoon, 2017).

The unequal distribution of wealth and conditions of impoverishment underlie many family 'troubles', those "unexpected disruptions and/or… disruptive changes, and/or… chronic failure of life to live up to expectations" (Ribbens McCarthy, Hooper, & Gillies, 2013, p. 14), in more ways than one. Impoverishment brings about its own troubles as families may be compelled to make impossible choices between food and heat or to endure long periods of transnational separations resulting from pressures to migrate in search of work (Rosen, Baustad, & Edwards, 2017). Personal debt has reached unprecedented levels, often taken up to finance food, care, and education in the face of state retrenchment or marketisation (Federici, 2014). Impoverishment also significantly impacts people's ability to cope with and mediate the 'troubles' which might otherwise be viewed as part and parcel of every lives. Further, impoverished families are often constituted in highly discriminatory terms *as* 'trouble': "feral" (Benedictis, 2012), lazy, or undeserving. A significant feature of

neoliberal capitalism is that families are increasing held personally responsible for their 'troubles' (Gillies, 2014).

Linking poverty to family practices is not a new phenomenon; however, attributing causal primacy for alleviating poverty, and indeed a myriad of social problems, to "good parenting" is increasingly pervasive (Dermott, 2012). As such, the family has become a key site for neoliberal anti-poverty interventions (Gillies, 2014). Neoliberalism posits human capital development as *the* route out of individual and national poverty, and the practices of parents/carers, and mothers in particular, are held to be central to social mobility, through stimulating the cognitive and moral development of their children. It is hardly surprising then that "investing in children" has assumed a central place in such interventions (Prentice, 2009). These are often justified rhetorically through recourse to the cultural practices of impoverished families, evident in discourses of breaking "cycles of poverty", "cultures of dependency" or "intergenerational cultures of worklessness" (Macdonald, Shildrick, & Furlong, 2014).

In the wake of widening disparities in the distribution of wealth at global and national levels, and multi-dimensional shifts in State responses to impoverishment in a time of global slump, it seems both timely and important to revisit feminist critiques of neoliberal anti-poverty initiatives of "investing in children". My motivation for revisiting these earlier critiques is not so much to consider whether they still hold in an "age of austerity" (Clarke, 2013), although there is ample evidence to suggest that they do (Crossley, 2016; Gillies, 2014; Griffin, 2015). Instead, my primary focus in this paper is on the political and intellectual consequences of the way these critiques are formulated. I contend that such critiques provide a trenchant condemnation of the spuriously gendered constitution of such initiatives. My concern, however, is that there is a tendency to posit neoliberal anti-poverty interventions as benign for, or even of benefit to, children. The unintended consequences are

to position impoverished women against impoverished children and to naturalise childhood at the same time as contesting motherhood.

In troubling the family and family troubles in this way, I argue that neoliberal anti-poverty initiatives are not neutral for either impoverished women *or* children and can serve to further entrench generational, as well as gender and class inequities, within and beyond families. This is not a dismissal of important feminist critiques, but an argument for the productivity of reinvigorating them with critically-oriented childhood scholarship, in order to better understand the operations of austerity-driven anti-poverty initiatives targeting families and their 'troubles', and ultimately to offer more nuanced conceptual resources for contesting neoliberalism's inequitable impacts.

Situating the discussion

Although the notion of "putting children first" has a long history (Gordon, 2008), this has assumed a particular historical specificity in the last three decades, captured in the popular phrases "child-centred policy" and "investing in children". James Heckman, an economist from the Chicago School, has been extremely influential in this regard, with his vocal support for investment in early childhood promoted globally by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (Mahon, 2013). Heckman's prognosis and prescription represents the shift from free market neoliberalism to what has been termed "social investment" approaches.

No longer pure Keynesianism or pure neoliberal retrenchment, social investment states engage in active spending, but that which is calculated and rationalised in the marketized terms of cost-benefit analysis (Jenson, 2010). Expenditure is driven by strategic goals intent on improving nations' long-term productivity and global standing, rather than a primary commitment to human rights or public good. While social investment approaches do

not promote an untrammelled market as in ‘pure’ neoliberalism, they are premised on economic competitiveness and facilitating the conditions for capital to enter arenas previously been provided by the state. Mahon (2013) differentiates between social investment approaches, arguing that more social democratic varieties may challenge neo-liberal doxa. In contrast, Gillies, Edwards, and Horsley (2017, p. 71) argue that “rather than undermining neoliberal philosophy, social investment approaches sustained and intensified it”. For the purposes of this article, whether social investment marks a clear break with neoliberalism is less relevant; as such, I will treat neoliberalism and social investment as relatively synonymous. Instead, my emphasis is on the centrality of the child, a relatively uncontested characterisation of social investment discourses in the neoliberal period.

Jenson (2010) argues this focus on the child is crystallised via three underpinning principles. The first is an emphasis on human capital as the foundation of national success. According to Anthony Giddens (1998, p. 117), one of the highly influential architects of the “social investment state”, spending should be directed towards “investment in *human capital* wherever possible, rather than direct provision of economic maintenance” which is seen to propagate dependency. Children are viewed as central to the social investment state because they are construed as *the* decisive future outcome: albeit as adult citizen-consumers and citizen-workers, rather than the “citizen-child” (Lister, 2003). Second is a focus on future rather than present conditions. This has led to an emphasis on ending the “intergenerational transmission of poverty” through investment in yet-to-be citizens (e.g. children), a focus across Western Europe and many Latin American countries since the mid-1990s (Jenson, 2010). Third is the notion that investment in successful individuals is of benefit to all. This manifests in dire predictions about what will happen if investment opportunities in early childhood are missed and ebullient claims to the profits that can be accumulated through such investment. For instance, the “Invest in Kids Coalition enthuses about ‘estimated rates of

return that would make a venture capitalist envious' (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids 2003, 2)" (Prentice, 2009, p. 692).

The elevation of 'the child' as the privileged subject of social policy, in rhetoric at least, has been the critical target of a substantial body of feminist scholarship. Tackling domains as far reaching as childcare (Borda Carulla, 2018; Newberry, 2014; Prentice, 2009), citizenship (Dobrowolsky & Jenson, 2004), migration (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018) and welfare policy (Lister, 2006) in various (trans)national contexts, this literature presents a remarkably consistent set of arguments. It highlights the new 'troubles' created for parents through the global focus on child-centred policy. It notes that mothers particularly – given the gendered nature of the family – are subject to increasing surveillance and regulation, while their own interests and well-being are obscured, or even denigrated, through attention to children. Women are "out" and children "in", to quote Dobrowolsky and Jenson's (2004) characterisation of social investment policy regimes, with "women's needs … subordinated to the needs of their children" (Prentice, 2009, p. 703). This body of critical scholarship provides insight into both the culture of responsibilization and harsh material impacts of such programmes where women's low- and un-waged labour absorbs the vagaries of "flexible accumulation" (Newberry, 2014).

The trend toward "investing in children" has also provided rich soil for feminist and queer social theory, which has generated influential arguments about the problematic centring of the child and the resultant reduction of politics to "infantile citizenship". Berlant (1997) coined this term to describe the neoliberal context of the United States, one with notably global impact given its imperial dominance. She argues that the focus on "a nation made of and for children" (p. 261), such as that promoted by via child-centred policy, has meant that citizens become "like children, infantilized, passive, and overdependent" (p. 4). According to Berlant, the outcome of this infantalisation is that critiques of neoliberal capitalism, and the

inequities it breeds, are silenced, with the infantile citizen providing "an alibi or an inspiration for the moralized political rhetorics of the present and for reactionary legislative and juridical practice" (p. 6). In a similar vein, Edelman (2004, p. 11) – a prominent queer theorist – argues that the "the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and [has] come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust." The problem here, according to Edelman, is not just the valorisation of a future made through reproduction, and thus a heteronormative claim, but a diminution of politics to the quest for a future which is self-identical to the present (e.g. a sense that, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, "there is no alternative" and certainly not one that we might even desire to imagine).

This empirical and theoretical scholarship brings a much-needed critical eye to the seeming incontestability of child-centred policy (Edelman, 2004), particularly in terms of its impact on other marginalised groups and on political debate about neoliberalism more broadly. However, as I go on to discuss, the arguments in much of this work rely on a naturalisation of childhood. Taking the child as a biological fact threatens their otherwise more progressive and critical stance. For this work does not simply a reference a child figure, but here citizenship or politics are grafted on the supposed characteristics of real children who are depicted as easy to influence and not able to contest inequities.

In order to substantiate these claims, I focus on a Maxine Molyneux's (2006) compelling feminist analyses of a neoliberal anti-poverty initiative in Mexico. I use Molyneux's paper as a case study both because it provides a rigorous and trenchant critique of gender inequality, and because of it allows me to ground and exemplify – in some detail – my concerns with the representation of children and childhood in this line of argumentation. I do so within the spirit of this article which is to both support, and complicate, a feminist critique of neoliberalism.

In her article “Mothers at the service of the new poverty agenda”, Maxine Molyneux (2006) considers changes and continuities in social policy in Latin America, focusing on Mexico’s Progresa/Oportunidades programme. This was part of what has been called the “new poverty agenda”, following the World Bank’s 1990 launch of its programme under the same name, which purports to “co-responsibility” between the state, civil society, and families as a way to address “cultures of dependency” (Molyneux, 2006). Launched in 2002, Progresa/Oportunidades was targeted at the 20% of the population living in extreme poverty and by 2005 covered 5 million households and had 25 million beneficiaries. In keeping with more general trends in social investment states, Oportunidades made its anti-poverty interventions at the level of the child. As Molyneux (2006, p. 433) points out, the approach was “based on the assumption that poor households do not invest enough in their human capital, and are thus caught in a vicious cycle of intergenerational transmission of poverty, with children dropping out of school and destined to suffer the long-term effects of deprivation”. Here, impoverished families are treated as both the cause of, and potential solution for, their troubles.

One element of Oportunidades was conditional cash transfers (CCTs), which have been widely used across Latin America (e.g. see Llobet & Milanich, 2018). CCTs do precisely what their name implies: they provide monthly payments to targeted families who comply with certain State requirements. In the case of Mexico, these included a set of ongoing obligations including participating in mother and child health checks, ensuring children’s attendance at school, attending parenting and health workshops, and contributing an average of 29 hours per month of ‘voluntary’ labour, typically cleaning at Oportunidades sites. CCTs are premised on the idea that providing necessary resources for impoverished families can help to diminish the need for children to participate in paid labour or

reproductive labour for their families, instead focusing attention on developing their human capital within schools.

Evaluated against its own objectives, Oportunidades was largely successful, achieving higher school attendance rates and ensuring better levels of health and nutrition for children. Its gender implications, however, are far more open to critique, and this is the central thrust of Molyneux's arguments. Mothers were the primary "conduits of [the] policy" (Molyneux, 2006, p. 439), and central to securing its objectives. Indeed, CCTs explicitly flowed to *mothers*, provided they met the required conditionalities. This was claimed as evidence of the programme's commitment to women's empowerment.

The neoliberal model of "co-responsibility" between mothers and the state continued earlier maternalist traditions of altruism and self-sacrifice where women were expected to fulfil such roles because of "normatively ascribed maternal responsibilities" (Molyneux, 2006, p. 438). The conditionality of transfers resulted in greater state regulation of caring labour and, in many cases, mothers' social reproductive labour increased because of the programme: both through work involved in meeting programme requirements and in increased responsibilities as children had less time for domestic labour. Ultimately, Molyneux argues that neoliberal anti-poverty strategies based on "investing in the child" do little in practice to address the structural causes of poverty and, as exemplified by Oportunidades, the state is complicit in re-traditionalising a gendered division of labour by feminizing responsibility for managing poverty and household survival.

Unpacking 'the child' in feminist critiques

While concurring with Molyneux's critical commentary about women's subjugation through such programmes, next I move on to consider what happens to children in such critiques. Although I focus primarily on one case in detail here, the issues it raises have wider resonance both because of the spread of models of "investing in children" at a global scale (Gillies, 2014; Penn, 2011; Prentice, 2009) and because the line of argument taken up in this paper resonates across domains and contexts, as I have argued above.

Contesting womanhood/motherhood, naturalising childhood

Underpinning Molyneux's work, and indeed that of similar feminist critiques, is an important contestation of normative ideas about motherhood and, more broadly, a "troubling" of idealised views of the family (Ribbens McCarthy & Gillies, 2017). Molyneux (2006), for example, argues that ideas about self-sacrifice for child and family in the name of good motherhood pervade the design and implementation of Oportunidades. She contests assumptions that reproductive labour is "women's work" and the maternalist discourses which suggest that not only is this a reflection of a natural division of labour but it is one that women should, and do, desire to provide.

At the same time, however, globally hegemonic ideas about childhood lie at the heart of, and are reproduced by, these accounts. For instance, Molyneux (2006, p. 440) suggests that the programme "has enabled low-income households to cope financially with the demands of school-age children" and "can help to tackle children's educational deprivation". Implicit in the use of the term "school-age children" is the idea that school is the site where certain human beings not just could, but *should* as a matter of essence, spend their time. This statement also takes for granted that such humans are determined, quite unproblematically, by chronological age. The chain of signifiers reproduces the familiar bundling of the triad child-education-school in a way that takes for granted that schools are the place where education

for the young occurs, as opposed to in families, communities or places of work and that children are primarily objects of socialisation and teaching, as opposed to contributors to their social worlds or learners alongside others in their communities. Similar assumptions about childhood populate Molyneux's (2006, p. 438) discussion of care: "Men are not incorporated in any serious way, and no effort is made to promote the principle that men and women might share responsibility for meeting project goals, let alone for taking an equal share in caring for their children." Her salient critique of the gendered nature of the way the programme distributes responsibility, perhaps inadvertently, positions children as a homogenous group – "school-age children" – essentially in need of care.

My point here is not that children do not require care or that care is somehow undifferentiated across the life course, just as it is also differentiated in terms of abilities, unanticipated family troubles and structural vulnerabilities (Rosen & Newberry, 2018). Certainly, many children globally spend many of their waking hours in schools, and may find great satisfaction in schooling (Balagopalan, 2014). However, hegemonic discourses of the schooled child are just that: socially constituted ideologies and practices about childhood which, in this case, have their foundation in Euro-American capitalist projects. Just as women are not naturally caregivers, with their place in the private space of the home, children are not pre- or anti-social beings in childcare or schools by any natural necessity.

As scholars of childhood point out, the mass scholarisation of childhood, where learning is separated from labour and the family into specialised institutions, is a modern invention (Hendrick, 1997). The prevalence of age as a mechanism for categorising and segregating populations is also a relatively recent phenomenon, albeit one that has achieved a fetichised status in both legal and popular discourse (Vitterbo, 2012). Shifting expectations as to the spaces in which children live their lives relate to the changing moral status of children, as Zelizer (1994) points out. Examining the United States in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth century, she argues that children have been increasingly sacralised, moving from being valued for their contribution to family incomes and social reproductive labour to being viewed as "economically worthless but emotionally priceless". Changes in the cultural status, and related normative assumptions about the 'proper' place of childhood, are also deeply connected to the changing interests of industrialists, corporations, and state actors. These include political concerns for social order and "civilization", with deep roots in colonial and middle-class anxieties (Gagen, 2007; Hendrick, 1997), and demands for workers with literacy and numeracy skills (Qvortrup, 1995). But they can also be linked to the production of subjectivities governed and disciplined by the punch card and routinized flows of abstract capitalist time or others grounded in the flexibilised nature of contemporary patterns of accumulation. This is not to suggest a straightforward economic determinism and progress narrative. Historical shifts in advanced capitalist countries cannot simply be mapped on to neo/post-colonies, a point Balagopalan (2014) makes forcibly when grappling with the global spread of the schooled child. There are competing and contradictory interests across sectors, and a dynamism and vernacular to capitalist projects, and schooling is certainly linked to the production of differentiated labouring bodies. The overarching point here is that we can't, with Molyneux, take the schooled child as an empirical or normative given, nor the neoliberal school as an unproblematic moral and political good.

Similarly, a large body of empirical data contradicts the notion that children are simply dependents, or the passive recipients of care, an idea which also pervades Berlant's more philosophical exploration of the "investing in childhood" paradigm. This literature highlights the active role that children play in caring for siblings, peers, and adults (e.g. Abebe, 2007; Robson, 2004), not just as a result of economic necessity in conditions of impoverishment or because of the ways that crisis such as AIDS/HIV, war, and migration may reshape family's lives. In many cases, children's participation in caring relations is

viewed as an appropriate and desirable activity, bringing increased intimacy, status, and benefits to the family as well as fulfilling children's relational responsibilities (e.g. see Bartos, 2012; Magazine & Sánchez, 2007). Care here is viewed as a set of interdependent exchanges between generations, and an existential and social requirement of all.

In pointing to these cases, my purpose is not to valorise caring labour or children's role within in, given that caring relationships can simultaneously be sites of control, exploitation, or justification for familisation of reproductive labour. Balagopalan (forthcoming) is again instructive here. She makes the point that we must attend to the afterlife of colonialism in understanding spatially specific constructions of childhood. Care for the "dependent" child took on a more "extractive logic" in the colonies, with health and education services linked to the production of labouring bodies rather than protecting the innocents. Crucially, in contrast to Molyneux's implicit assumptions, children are far more than simply dependents and infants' caring needs are often over-extended to all those positioned as children (Rosen & Newberry, 2018).

Making these points is partially a matter of setting the record straight, so to speak, but it is also to indicate the intellectual and political ramifications of doing otherwise. Children who are not in schools, or who are recognised as providing caring labour, can be treated as deficit, deviant, or with a problematic liberal tolerance (Balagopalan, forthcoming), a deeply classed and neo-colonial imposition of idealisations of childhood masked as a universal norm. Indeed, "description" quickly shifts into "prescription" given the moral-laden status of childhood (Burman, 2017). The lack of recognition of children's caring labour, or labour within schools, has implications for the status of children, much in the way that feminist scholars have pointed to in relation to the gendered nature of care. Children are rendered as costs, albeit precious ones, or burdens rather than contributors to the social worlds they live in (Qvortrup, 1995). It can provoke new troubles as families struggle to cope with changing

contexts for reproductive labour. These troubles which may appear as a conflict between mothers and children, and indeed they do seem to in Molyneux's account; this misattribution is a point which I take up further below.

Neoliberal policies benefit children?

Running parallel to the important critique of the neoliberal turn to "child-centred policy" from the perspective of gender equality, there is a tendency in this critical literature to posit such initiatives as benign for, or even of benefit to, children: a neutral acceptance of the discourses of neoliberal social investment states. In describing Oportunidades, Molyneux (2006, p. 440) argues that the programme is fundamentally "child-centred", helping to improve "children's health and life chances" and ensuring that "young people from poor households can access some of their social rights such as education and health" while "there are reasons to doubt how far the programme has succeeded in 'empowering women'' and getting women out of poverty".

These are important points about the consequences for gender justice of state policies and programmes implemented in the name of the child – including those which purport to promote gender equality, such as Oportunidades. However, childhood research demonstrates that children's interests, especially for those in impoverished communities, are not one and the same as those of the neoliberal state or supranational bodies. Indeed, neoliberal policies – even under the auspices of "investing in children" – have insidious impacts on many children's lives. Providing an assessment of the specific Mexican policies on children's lives is beyond the scope of this paper and indeed the data I have available. Here I present a general set of challenges to a view of a benign neoliberalism. In so doing, I gesture towards to some lines of inquiry which are foreclosed by accepting that models of investing in children are straightforwardly good for impoverished children.

Neoliberal approaches do not simply promote investment in human capital but they essentially turn children into human capital, goods into which adult efforts and financial contributions are invested in a calculated effort at individual and national self-aggrandisement on a competitive playing field (Rosen & Newberry, 2018). Success in maximizing human capital is closely tied to prescriptive developmental norms which assume that particular interventions, such as the use of the exaggerated speech sometimes called "baby talk" or "motherease" and caregivers stimulating children in dyadic interactions through singing and reading, will achieve not only 'normal' development but ensure that investment in children achieves its anticipated rewards (Penn, 2011). Such teleological views of development also inhabit Edelman's (2004) child figure, leaving little room to consider the how and why children have come to be viewed in such a way and what the implications are for real children's lives. Indeed, it is noteworthy that interventions formulated as investing in children are typically those based on assumptions about childrearing and idealised childhoods in the Minority World (Ribbens McCarthy & Gillies, 2017), which are then imposed onto children and their families globally and expected to work, regardless of context, quality of the programme, and the unequal terrain on which families live their lives (Penn, 2011).

Other research points to the ways that neoliberal projects often target local knowledges for replacement or denigration, affecting children's cultural rights, alienating children from older generations in their communities or even increasing the risk of impoverishment. In the case of Western Ethiopia, for instance, Kjørholt (2013) describes the ways that school knowledge has supplanted children's knowledge of wild plants which have long served as a buffer for hunger and starvation in times of economic crisis. Here, formal early years and schooling provision is promoted as a panacea for family troubles. But, as Unterhalter (2014, p. 120) points out, this "occlude[s] discussions of what is taught, to whom, the socio-economic relations of schooling, work and livelihoods, the messy and difficult

relationships associated with learning and teaching…, and the politics of who presents what to whom." Countries with high attendance rates demonstrate that school does not guarantee poverty alleviation, as it cannot resolve the absence of decent paying jobs or the destruction of livelihoods. Instead, economic inequality within countries is key to understanding health and social outcomes (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), suggesting that larger structural problems are crucial to understanding family troubles caused by impoverishment.

Childhood scholars have provided profound critiques of "investing in children" approaches on these empirical grounds, challenging their recourse to decontextualized notions of linear causality in unequal global contexts, but they have also done so on moral/political grounds. The treatment of children as futures projects, an impossible fiction of insulation against uncertainties, is an instrumentalisation. Children are constituted as 'becomings', "not the *current* generation but the *next* one", to use Qvortrup's (2009, p. 632) evocative formulations. This undercuts efforts to envision children as complex persons in the here and now, co-citizens and full human beings. By setting up personhood as a state of rational autonomy and age of maturity, which children will reach only once they leave their childhood behind, their practices are typically "interpreted as reflections of their limitations rather than expressions of their own intentions, desires, or opinions" (N. Lee, 2001, p. 44). This tautology is then used to justify the marginalisation of children from decision-making about their lives and the lives of their communities (Liebel, 2014), only able to be spoken about rather than with. So, while we might stipulate Molyneux's argument that the focus on alleviating child poverty through CCTs has increased children's social rights, for instance to health and formal educational provision, this is a rather thin version of rights at best.

Children are also not immune from the rewriting of personhood under neoliberalism. With the profound financialisation of subjectivities, relationships, and everyday practices, people are often equated, and come to know who they are, simply as what they can accrue on

themselves (Skeggs, 2011): *homo economicus*. People are measured by their abilities (or lack therefore) "to provide for our own needs and service our own ambitions", and held responsible when they fail regardless of the constraints that they may face (Brown, 2005, p. 52). Although, with Skeggs (2011), it is important to note that such interpellations are never total and market-based logics do not exhaust our value systems.

In the explicit model of "co-responsibility" embedded in social investment approaches, children – along with mothers – are increasing responsibilised for their own success and failures, with potentially devastating consequences. Kjørholt (2013), for example, argues that the increasing dropout rates in Norwegian schools are a result of the cognitive skills testing and pressures of educational performance management. And, while highly lauded on international educational ranking measures (e.g. PISA), countries like South Korea have high rates of depression amongst young people which have been linked to the performative neoliberal educational culture and competitive university examinations (M. Lee & Larson, 2000). In this sense, although responsibilisation may differ in its form and location, where women are held primarily responsible for reproductive labour in the family, children too are rendered "co-responsible" for the work of social reproduction, in this case on themselves, via the "new poverty agenda" and neoliberal forms of early childhood education and schooling (Rosen & Newberry, 2018). Children's unrecognised and unremunerated labour in schools costs little for capital or the neoliberal state, yet the "quality enhancement" of labour power is a central strategy for increasing relative surplus value (Rikowski, 2003).

The specificities of these critiques, and the extent of their applicability in the Mexican social investment state, is an empirical question. The point here is that by positing "investing in children" as neutral, or even beneficial, for children feminist critiques about gender inequity miss important questions about how such policies play out in real children's lives.

Producing antagonisms between women and children

As I have already alluded, this body of empirical and theoretical literature presents a stark division, even antagonism, between women and children in their accounts. Molyneux, for instance, comments that Oportunidades included "a combination of equality measures (for the girls) and maternalist measures (for their mothers)" (p. 436) or a "selective" (p. 439) commitment to gender equality, for girls but not their mothers. The structure of the arguments in this scholarship suggests that the demands of one group (e.g. children) can only be recognised through the exclusion of the other's (e.g. women). In their discussion of Canadian citizenship regimes and anti-poverty initiatives, Dobrowolsky and Jenson (2004, p. 174), for instance, argue that: "One clear result of representations focused on the child is that claims for women's equality rights have become more difficult to make."

To be sure, there are tensions in women-child relations, and the ways these are experienced. In part, this is a result of the deep entanglements of women's and children's everyday lives, given the "durable binding of the lives and fates of women and of children in public imaginaries" (Rosen & Twamley, 2018, p. 1) and the ways this shapes social practices and subjectivities. For instance, increasing state retrenchment from the tasks of social reproduction whether through shrinking welfarism or demands of structural adjustment programmes, in combination with an explosion in compulsory schooling and early years education globally, can position women and children in conflict over household labour which they may have previously carried out together (Rosen & Newberry, 2018). This new form of family troubles is arguably the case with CCTs. Likewise, the tenacity of maternalism means the children's interactions in broader social spheres are often mediated and controlled, at least on the surface, by mothers, whose own interests and concerns may not coincide with those of their children (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018; Rosen et al., 2017).

As I have demonstrated, however, while there are certainly tensions in woman-child relations, children are not clear beneficiaries of neoliberal anti-poverty initiatives aimed at "investing in children", just as impoverished women are not. Perhaps even more crucially, arguments which paint children as winners and women as losers in the social investment state only work if we accept that well-being, citizenship, and social and economic justice are limited pots to which impoverished women and impoverished children make competing claims. A competitive framing of women's interests and children's interests falters in at least three ways.

My first point here has to do with the relational constitution of subject formation. The social positions of 'adult/woman' and 'child/girl/boy' are constituted and interpellate subjects relationally. 'Adult' is nonsensical without 'child' and, as with masculinity and femininity, the two are often marked and defined by their opposition in a gendered and "generational" social order (Alanen, 2001). What this suggests is that one is not born but becomes a child or adult, to borrow from Simone de Beauvoir, through processes of generationing: "the material, social and cultural processes through which individuals acquire the social quality of 'childness' and the status of the 'child'" (Alanen, 2001, p. 163). Adults are those who are typically depicted as rational, mature, and competent, in comparison to children's fundamental dependence, irrationality, and mutability. The precise formulation of adulthood and childhood is time and place specific, however, and is mediated by the intersections of generation with gender, 'race', class, and ability. As such, there are parallels in the way women and children are constituted, for instance both are seen to embody powerlessness and vulnerability: the quintessential victims. Despite the clear emphasis on the constructed nature of gender, a consequence of the naturalisation of childhood discussed previously is that Molyneux (and others) seem to take distinctions between women as a social group and children as a social group as though they are natural, rather than socially constituted. In other

words, they present children as a group which is essentially different and distinguishable from the group of adults/women.

Nowhere is the limit of this assumption more evident, or more troubling, than in the figure of the girl child. Girls have assumed a central place in recent development and "poverty alleviation" campaigns, spearheaded by a mixed consortium of the World Bank, corporations such as Nike and its *Girl Effect* project, and local and international charities (Koffman & Gill, 2013). Deemed "smart economics" by the World Bank, girls are viewed as a particularly good investment: hard working, efficient, more likely to contribute to their communities than boys. The go-getting, entrepreneurial girl child is simultaneously depicted as vulnerable, needing to be "reached" and "helped" before " 'the ticking clock' has seen her married and pregnant" so that she can "go on to transform her life chances and those of her community and nation" (Koffman & Gill, 2013, p. 88). Leaving to one side the problematic assumption that incorporation into a global capitalist economy is the solution to poverty, and the reproduction of colonial narratives of "saving brown women [and girls] from brown men" (Spivak, 1988), the primary point for my purposes is that here girls occupy an ambiguous position. Girls are distinguished as both more vulnerable and more productive than women (Koffman & Gill, 2013). Paradoxically, however, they are also positioned and targeted as "incipient women", future mothers and not really children at all (Burman, 2008, p. 211), given that the emphasis on hard work and 'feminine' altruism contradict hegemonic notions of childhood. My point, then, is that drawing a sharp distinction between children as winners, and women as losers misses out these sorts of complexities in the intersections of gender and generation, *and* that reproduction of gendered power relations effect both women and children, who are simultaneously gendered and made generationally.

Women and children are not just linked at the more abstract level of social positioning, but their conditions of life are highly intertwined given that children are

positioned as primarily dependent and women are positioned as natural caregivers (Rosen & Twamley, 2018). They are bound up in each other in so far as people are not isolated monads, autonomous and independent from others as liberalism would have it (Ruddick, 2007). Given such relationality, it is not difficult to agree to the point that Dobrowolsky and Jenson (2004) raise: the impoverishment of children does not exist in a vacuum and it is necessary to address women's impoverishment in order to address children's. Indeed, an historical case can be made that addressing poverty under the mantle of "putting children first" has actually exacerbated children's impoverishment (Gordon, 2008). Given the constitution of children as dependant, their welfare is largely protected and achieved through adults; however, efforts dedicated towards children are often punitive in nature for adults, or at least reduce the resources dedicated towards adults, who are then rendered less able to support children. Molyneux's discussion of the conditionality of cash transfer programmes is a case in point.

Here, I want to take this a step further to suggest that the reverse is also true: children's impoverishment and status affects women. This is at once an affective claim, highlighting the stress and concern that many mothers face in seeing their children struggle and a more material claim. Given the increasingly hegemonic attribution of sacred moral value to children, and the pressures of neoliberal responsibilisation, mothers may feel compelled to support their children at any and all costs: skipping meals so that children are able to eat, migrating globally in order to be able to provide remittances, or remaining in highly exploitative jobs in order to ensure their child's survival (Rosen et al., 2017). Similarly, the rendering of impoverished children in singularities, often derogatory or demeaning in nature – feral and wild, vulnerable victim, trapped dependent, lost generation – affects women, both because of the ideological linkages in representations of women and children and because of the gendered nature of neoliberal responsibilisation.

Finally, in unpacking the limits of such antagonistic formulations of woman-child relations, it is worth dwelling for a moment on what this occludes, namely potential affinities and reciprocities. As Llobet and Milanich (2018) discuss in their exposition of CCTs, what has often been framed as conflicts between women and children is experienced in quite a different way by women in an Argentine barrio. Here, children contribute to the 'voluntary' labour required by CCT conditionalities or continue to participate in reproductive labour. Mothers can access resources and support from the state through their children and motherhood is mobilised strategically to enhance a women's status. Now certainly this can be viewed as a form of "bargaining with patriarchy", as Kandiyoti (1988) puts it, strategically mobilising maternalism to improve individual or collective circumstances. Regardless, the point here is that in emphasising conflict and competition neither Molyneux, nor many other feminist critics, leave space to consider if and how a more positive valence in these relations and relationships might be (co)present.

What's more, this ends up portraying generation as the only, or at least the most salient divide, minimizing other social divisions such as 'race' and class and the ways these are simultaneously at work. To return to Llobet and Milanich (2018), they contend that more prominent conflicts were stratifications between women, reflective of class-inflected divisions in the barrio. Those with middle-class aspirations, and the resources to make these possible, looked down upon those who were more impoverished, imposing class-laden values of mothering that were impossible to achieve and which positioned local practices as deficit in comparison to globally hegemonic, Euro-American norms of motherhood and childhood.

Finally, the depiction of women-child relations as fundamentally conflictual forecloses the possibility of attending to the reciprocity and even solidarity between women and children who struggle to make lives worth living in conditions of destitution and marginalisation, or even to transform the conditions of their subordination. This is not a naïve

claim intent on denying the very real conflicts, tensions, and power relations between women and children, simply a recognition that this relation is far more nuanced than an antagonistic account allows. This requires a complicating of apparent oppositions while keeping in mind the powerful point made by Marxist and post-colonial feminists that emancipation for one group that comes at the cost of another is no emancipation at all.

Moving forward

To summarise my argument thus far: in critiquing the ways in which the social investment state, supra-national organisations like the World Bank, and as well as capital are tied up with, and benefit from, gender inequities, we need to be wary of analyses which – purposefully or not – position impoverished women against impoverished children or which naturalise childhood at the same time as contesting motherhood. In seeking to move beyond critique, I offer some concluding points directed at efforts to understand gender, generation, neoliberalism, and impoverishment, which requires both a troubling of idealisations of families and attention to the troubles of families.

This paper has been an attempt to show how critically-oriented theorising about childhood can provoke different questions or ways of looking at neoliberal anti-poverty initiatives than those which feminist approaches have taken. The point has not been to repudiate or replace the important insights feminism offers around gender and the trend towards "investing in children", but to complicate them. A key conclusion then is that there is great productivity in bringing critical feminist and childhood scholarship into dialogue to better understand the operations of neoliberalism, gender *and* generation, as they play out in the troubles of families. This is particularly relevant given the ideological elision and everyday entanglements of women and children, childhood and motherhood. Such a claim may seem self-evident, but these two fields have a fractious, even conflictual history, which has often precluded such interactions (Rosen & Twamley, 2018), albeit that I have presented

them as more opposed than may be the case and certainly there are many, myself included, who seek to work across these fields. This suggestion is neither a claim to equivalence between the fields, nor to minimize tensions between their subjects or formulations. To be clear: to insist on studying women and children together risks reifying the social relations between them and to suggest that there are *necessarily* affinities risks sentimentalising relations. Instead, I am suggesting that the theoretical resources of both fields can lend insights to the other and dialogue between then can productively jar taken-for-granted assumptions and provoke consideration of the implications of accepting claims of social investment states as to their beneficiaries.

To be sure, there are strands of childhood theorising which downplay gender or which parallel neoliberalism. For instance, the valorisation of individual notions of agency, framing of empowerment and choice in consumptive or entrepreneurial terms, and insisting on the autonomy of children, approaches which animate a significant strand of childhood scholarship, have much in common with neoliberal philosophy. These take global capitalism as an uncontested terrain and the limit of social action, and wind up uncritically reproduce the idea that children's well-being and emancipation can be attained through the social investment state. In this, childhood scholarship can be understood to have an "uncanny double" (Fraser, 2009), just like feminism: a version of its own claims which is co-opted by or even legitimatises neoliberalism. The point here is that we need to be "canny" (Fraser, 2009) about which versions of feminist and childhood scholarship we work with, vigorously interrogating the ways that claims which may have once been emancipatory may no longer be so in new social circumstances. The claim to recognise children's autonomy or to ensure that resources were directed at children, for instance, were important moves in attempting to disaggregate seemingly homogenous family units, or the 'womanandchild' (Enloe, 1991) unit, and address the asymmetrical power relations between adults and children: a troubling

of the family. At this stage, however, we may need new ways to conceptualise and address the subordination of children, given the affinity of such arguments to neoliberalism. As with feminist analyses, this is not a rejection, but a call to historicise, complicate and reinvigorate childhood scholarship. Engaging in a fruitful and reflexive dialogue between critically-oriented feminist and childhood scholarship is one way to do so.

One of the insights that childhood studies can offer is a conceptual and empirical elaboration of distinctions between 'the child', children, and childhood. As a "trans-individual sociocultural reality" (Honig, 2011, p. 63), childhood shapes the conditions of possibility for real flesh and blood people we call 'children' (and adults, given their interrelation). The points I have raised above about scholarisation as a historical and geographical process present a counterpoint to analyses which universalise childhood, and can help to better understand the meanings, impacts, and beneficiaries of neoliberal projects on the specific grounds they play out.

Perhaps even more pertinent for this paper is the distinction between children and 'the child', that figuration which inhabits (adult) imaginaries. It is this symbolic child who appears in discourses of "investing in children", as well as their critiques, an abstraction easily filled with significations, given children's purported incompleteness and malleability (Castañeda, 2003). Using the trope of the developing child, the future citizen, as a metaphor for the continuation of the neoliberal order (Edelman, 2004) or as an example of the non-citizen and therefore the de-politicisation of responses to the vagaries of neoliberalism and the family troubles it produces (Berlant, 1997) mean that the child figure easily slips into normative assumptions about historical children. Indeed, gestures to the real – particularly using 'authentic' mediums such as photographs of happy early years students and data about school attendance and child health indicators (Molyneux, 2006) – can make it particularly difficult to distinguish real children from the trope of the child, but this is precisely the work

that needs to be done. The rhetoric of neoliberal anti-poverty initiatives is that children are its primary beneficiaries; here the trope of the child is empowered, educated, and provided innumerable pathways to social mobility for self and nation. How are such initiatives experienced by children in the short or the long run? What other ways might there be to understand and assess well-being, empowerment and emancipation? How do these initiatives interact with local and global patterns of hierarchy and injustice? Attending to such questions require careful and ongoing interrogation of the *trope of the child* portrayed in these initiatives in counter-distinction to the classed, raced, and gendered *experiences of those positioned as children*. Troubling gendered assumptions about motherhood, as Molyneux does so artfully in her critique of *Oportunidades*, likewise requires troubling assumptions about childhood.

This is important in that it can provide more nuanced understandings of the sorts of family troubles produced under the guise of "investing in children". And, at the heart of my argument, I have suggested that to do otherwise runs the risk of creating false dichotomies between beneficiaries (e.g. children) and conduits, or even losers (e.g. women), locating the causes of continued impoverishment or conditions of subordination in generational relations within families. While there are certainly issues of inequality and power asymmetries between different generational groups, this is an insistence on attending to the global and structural features which produce family troubles to avoid inadvertently reproducing the social investment discourse which locates family troubles *within* the family. In taking up Molyneux's own call, I am gesturing to the importance of developing critiques which address the conditions which cause impoverishment, and the family troubles it entails, including deepening inequality, unemployment, shrinking rural livelihoods, state retrenchment, and flexible accumulation. In troubling the family and contextualising family troubles, it behoves us to continue to probe at why neoliberalism has turned to the trope of the child in times of

crisis, what this means for real women and children, and how current economic restructuring in an age of austerity are affecting the institutions of childhood, motherhood, and their inter-relationship.

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