3/30/09

Dear LAPA Seminar Participants:

As you will see, this is an early draft. It attempts to develop and knit together a number of arguments that I have broached elsewhere. This represents the core of an eventual book. I am still sorting through questions of emphasis and framing, in addition to the substance. I’ve also got more work to do situating this within several literatures, acknowledging my many intellectual debts, and so forth. This makes it a great time for me to get feedback, I hope without imposing too much of a burden on the reader.

To lighten your load a bit, you could skip the sections addressing two-parent families.

Thanks for bearing with all that, and I am eager to hear what you think and discuss these ideas next Monday. This draft has only trivial differences from the one distributed before the originally scheduled March 2 seminar.

Sincerely,
Noah Zatz

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Accounting for Care in the Age of Work

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Child care is invisible when the U.S. welfare state looks for poverty and need (Folbre, 2008). Note its omission from a federal regulation characterizing welfare payments as “designed to meet a family’s ongoing basic needs (i.e., for food, clothing, shelter, utilities, household goods, personal care items, and general incidental expenses)” (45 C.F.R. § 260.31(a)(1)). This paper traces how child care’s invisibility distorts contemporary means-tested transfer policies’ approach to the child-care expenses of employed parents, caretaking performed by parents outside the labor market, and to differences between one- and two-parent households. This critique of child-care invisibility points toward reforms based on accounting for care.
Child care’s invisibility reflects the ongoing influence of a family wage model of the relations among households, the labor market, and the welfare state (Orloff, 1993). The architects of our systems of poverty measurement and means-testing assumed that households with children would not spend money on child care because they would include an adult caretaker (presumably a mother). Absent a complementary wage-earner (presumably a father), public assistance would provide cash for the purchase of consumer goods (Gordon, 1994). Within this system, child care is not a need that cash assistance must meet.

The core reform I propose is to incorporate child-care costs into all families’ “standard of need” that specifies the minimum income level guaranteed by cash assistance. Doing so puts child care on par with food, clothing, and shelter. These child-care costs vary with the number, age, and special needs of a household’s children. Existing child-care assistance programs for low-income parents already incorporate these varying costs, as do a variety of existing proposals for reforms to poverty measures (National Research Council, 1995; Pearce, 2001; Renwick and Bergmann, 1993). I build on these approaches. Particularly important is the relatively strong consensus, reflected in child-care assistance programs, that child care costs are not a “luxury” that parents should bear on their own, either because of their agency in becoming and remaining parents or because of the pleasures of parenthood.

Where I part ways with most existing approaches is by rejecting the notion that child-care needs are unique to parents who hold paying jobs or otherwise require hiring someone to provide care. Child-care needs do not vanish simply because they are met through parental caretaking instead of consumer contracting. The standard conceptualization of child care as a “work expense” is a contortion produced by attempting to characterize the household economy exclusively in terms of market transactions (Folbre, 2008).

Rejecting a sharp market/nonmarket distinction with respect to household needs leads to rejecting the analogous distinction with respect to household resources. Balancing the books requires attributing “income” to nonmarket caretaking based on its ability to satisfy child-care needs. Such techniques have been developed extensively in the context of income taxation (Staudt, 1996) and measures of aggregate economic activity such as national income accounts (Abraham and Mackie, 2005; Folbre, 2008), but they have not been integrated into poverty measurement and means-testing devices. The latter context is a particularly appropriate place for these techniques. Specifying a set of basic needs provides a way to bound the potentially limitless concept of nonmarket production (Zatz, 2006b).
Once we see nonmarket caretaking as an economic resource (though not just that) that meets household needs, the way is clear to revisit its status as “work” within the system of work requirements tied to means-tested transfer eligibility. No longer can caretaking be figured as “doing nothing” for the household budget, as it is when child care is invisible as a need. Insofar as the principle underlying work requirements is an obligation of self-support, nonmarket caretaking is not in relevant respects different from a low-wage job. Both go some distance toward meeting household needs but still fall short; means-tested transfers make up the difference.

Again, many long have argued that nonmarket caretaking is in some sense “work” and that work-tested transfers wrongly privilege market employment (Fineman, 1995; Folbre, 1994b; Law, 1983). However, such arguments typically are not well-integrated with a more general account of how to specify “work” for specific policy purposes or with a transfer program’s structure more generally. They have tended to rely either on a very broad account of work as “social contribution” that specifically rejects the normative force of notions of self-support or self-sufficiency (Fineman, 2004; Young, 2003) or to gravitate toward care-specific programs that include high-income parents and have no general connection to low-income workers (cf. Alstott, 2004a; Mink, 1998). This paper develops an alternative that relies on relatively conventional justifications for existing institutions, but it reworks their implications by thoroughly incorporating the basic insight that intimate relations of care have economic significance notwithstanding their differences from market transactions (Folbre, 2008; Zelizer, 2005b).

In addition to tying together an analysis of poverty relief, employed parents’ child-care needs, and caretakers’ work, my approach also yields changes at the intersection of means-testing, work requirements, and household structure. Child-care invisibility advantages breadwinner/caretaker households in two ways. Relative to dual-earner couples, they fare better under means testing because family caretaking does not increase their measured income. Relative to single parents, however, having a family caretaker typically does not violate work requirements because these require only one of two parents to “work” (Zatz, 2009b). When applied to two-parent families, the proposed accounts of need, income, and work yield a system that expects both parents to work, treats nonmarket caretaking as one form of work, but also offers child-care assistance if both parents work in the market.

The paper’s ambition is to knit together a coherent account touching on several controversial topics in social policy—poverty measurement, child-care assistance, work requirements, and household structure. Of necessity, this sometimes means skimming the surface of topics that bear deep analysis and have received it elsewhere. My focus
instead is on the connections across these domains. These connections are the heart of the contribution I hope to make, because my account of each topic relies on the others; they are not additive. It is precisely by thinking about means-testing that we can get traction on work requirements, by thinking about the child care needs of employed parents that we gain insights into nonmarket caretaking, and so on.

**From the Family Wage System to Child-Care Invisibility**

Traditional forms of poverty measurement provide no explicit account of child care. When they calculate a household’s economic needs, child care is not among them. Nor does labor devoted to family caretaking appear when tallying a household’s economic resources.

Child care’s invisibility arises at the intersection of two broader phenomena. First, it reflects a conception of household economic well-being grounded in cash purchases in consumer markets. Households are poor when they lack the money to buy things. This understanding of poverty reflects broader tendencies to identify economic activity with markets and to identify social citizenship with participation in a “consumer’s republic” (Cohen, 2003; Kornbluh, 2007; Zelizer, 1997). Second, it reflects a social policy regime designed to support a family wage system (Gordon, 1994; Kessler-Harris, 2001; Skocpol, 1992). Within that system, the normative household consists of a man who earns wages in the labor market and who is married to a woman who keeps house and cares for the couple’s children. The man is figured as the “breadwinner” whose market production brings resources into the household where they are consumed by his “dependents” (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Zelizer, 2005a).

Within a family wage system, child care is provided within the family by the mother, not by purchasing it as a consumer service. Because there is no need to purchase it with cash, it does not add to a cash measure of household needs. And because caretaking (and housework generally) produces no cash for use in consumer markets, it adds nothing to a cash measure of household resources available to meet its needs.

This structure dovetails with a system of social welfare programs that historically has taken the loss of the male wage as the central problem. Payments in classic social insurance programs like workers compensation, social security, and unemployment insurance all are triggered by loss of employment under defined circumstances of injury, disability, death, old age, or lack of work. When persons other than the former wage-earner receive payments, these are figured as insurance purchased by the wage-earner to provide for his dependents. For instance, Social Security spousal and child benefits are triggered by the wage-earner’s disability, retirement, or death and are a function of his earnings.
Means-tested programs address the residual cases in which the breadwinner’s wage, even as magnified by social insurance and labor or employment law, is inadequate or nonexistent. Even here, however, the payments have been figured as substitutes for the absent wage, with the government essentially taking on the husband’s role. Thus, Aid to Dependent Children (later Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)) was explicitly designed to enable mothers to provide care and remain outside the labor market, thereby fulfilling their role within the family wage system. Federal eligibility requirements focused on the absence of a male wage-earner and the mother’s maintenance of a “suitable home.”

The absence of child care from the official U.S. poverty measure is most apparent when examining how the measure depends on whether a household member is an adult or a child. It simply doesn’t The U.S. “poverty guidelines” published by the Department of Health and Human Services are widely used as the “federal poverty level” for programs targeted at low-income households. This poverty level is entirely a function of household size: a household of three adults has the same poverty line as a household of one adult and two children: $18,310 in 2009. Obviously this would not be the case if the poverty line captured the costs of providing child care (Folbre, 2008).

This failure to account for child-care costs partly reflects the relative unimportance of such costs at the time the poverty measure was designed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. To calculate poverty thresholds, officials assumed that a household purchased food that would satisfy the Department of Agriculture’s “economy food plan” at its cost in 1963, and further that total expenditures were three times food expenditures (Fisher, 1992; Orshansky, 1965). The 3:1 ratio itself reflected a rough generalization based on surveys of actual expenditure patterns in 1955. In this sense, child care was no more left out of the poverty measure than housing or clothing: none was measured separately. In 1955, about one in six married women with a child under six was in the labor force at all (one in three with older children), and in the vast majority of cases care was provided by a relative (Michel, 1999). Since these early measurements, annual changes to the official poverty measures reflect only adjustments for inflation, not recalculation of basic food expenses nor the proportion of income spent on food. In this way, the work/family patterns of the 1950s literally remain built in to contemporary poverty measurement.

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1 In early practice, it was primarily white widows who had access to this position, reflecting both the emphasis on marriage within the family wage system and its implicit racialization of both sexual morality and gendered labor market participation (Gordon 1994; Roberts 1994).

2 [http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/09poverty.shtml](http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/09poverty.shtml). The same point applies to the finer-grained “poverty thresholds” used for statistical purposes by the Census Bureau; these do distinguish between children and adults, but only to the extent of capturing children’s lower food consumption.

Child care’s invisibility, however, was not simply a function of its rarity as a cash expense. The poverty measure’s architects and custodians were strikingly, and selectively, oblivious to the issue. Mollie Orshansky’s original research generated poverty thresholds for 248 sub-units of the population divided by household size, senior status, sex, number of children, and farm residence, and she checked for consistency in the food:income ratio across rural/urban difference (Orshansky, 1965). Never was there any mention of child care, nor of differences in spending patterns between breadwinner/caretaker and dual-earner couples.

This silence is all the more remarkable given the central place occupied by the farm/nonfarm distinction. Orshansky and others at the Social Security Administration recognized that farm families produced significant amounts of their own food. In the initial 1955 survey, farm families spent 40% less on food, though this figure was dropping rapidly in the post-World War II era (Fisher, 1992). As a result, farm families had lower official poverty thresholds than nonfarm families, reflecting their lower reliance on cash purchasing. Notably, even here farm production was figured as reducing the need to spend rather than as a source of income from nonmarket production.

The farm/nonfarm distinction was a central feature of reviews of poverty measurement from its inception until the distinction’s abolition in 1981, and it was part of a larger discussion of non-cash resources that included both government-, employer-, and charity-provided health care and owner-occupied housing (Carlin et al., 1979). Despite all this, and despite the fact that Orshansky’s own statistics showed that married couples with wives in the labor force were four times more common than farm families (Orshansky, 1965: 12), child care remains entirely absent from leading analyses even as late as the early 1990s (Fisher, 1992).

Instead, these discussions of poverty measurement consistently revolved around the family wage model. With regard to income, “it is mainly the earning capacity of the husband that sets the scale at which the family must live” (Orshansky, 1965: 24-25). Consumption was the wife’s domain, the budgets assuming that “the homemaker is a good manager and has the time and skill to shop wisely” (10). In order to keep to “her budget” “any food extras, such as milk at school for the children, or the coffee her husband might buy to supplement the lunch he carries to work, have to come out of the same food money or compete with the limited funds available for rent, clothing, medical care, and all other expenses” (10). Here again, child care is notably absence.

Although originally designed as a demographic measure, there obviously is a close connection between identifying who is “poor” and identifying who should participate in antipoverty programs (National Research Council, 1995), especially when both face
problems of large-scale administration. Federal poverty levels sometimes are incorporated directly into eligibility determinations for means-tested transfers governed by federal law, including by using some percentage variant (e.g., 125% of the federal poverty line). In others, they provide benchmarks for assessing formally independent measures, as when the size and eligibility structure of the EITC is evaluated in terms of whether it leaves a full-time, minimum wage worker’s household above or below the poverty line. Furthermore, states often choose to use federal poverty guidelines as the basis for calculating benefit eligibility. More generally, the basic structure of the federal approach—excluding child-care costs from measures of need and excluding nonmarket caretaking from measures of resources—is ubiquitous.

Under both the old AFDC and its successor Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), federal law authorized states to set financial eligibility standards that determine benefit eligibility and amount. The details are quite byzantine, and the source of the precise figures used often entirely obscure. Nonetheless, the overarching concept is relatively consistent. These “standards of need” are meant to specify the level of income that allows “reasonable subsistence compatible with decency and health,”4 “sufficient income to meet their most basic needs” (22 Maine Rev. Stat. § 3769-C), or the like.

When states spell out the content of “basic needs,” child care never is among them. California provides a typical accounting of what its “[m]inimum basic standards of adequate care” aim to provide:

(A) Safe, healthful housing.
(B) Minimum clothing for health and decency.
(C) Low-cost adequate food budget meeting recommended dietary allowances of the National Research Council.
(D) Utilities.
(E) Other items including household operation, education and incidentals, recreation, personal needs, and insurance.
(F) Allowance for essential medical, dental, or other remedial care to the extent not otherwise provided at public expense.


I reviewed the statutory and regulatory bases of financial eligibility for TANF in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and in no case did any list of basic needs include child care.

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Thus, child care remains invisible in the core means-testing apparatus of TANF. This despite the fact that this program aims primarily at single mothers and was thoroughly revamped in the mid-1990s so that the paradigmatic recipient would work full-time, or nearly so, in some activity other than caring for her own children.

**From Child-Care Invisibility to the Family Wage System**

Among the many criticisms of means-tested assistance to households with children, three important ones target ways that such programs regenerate the family wage system: (1) by limiting access to employment by those with caretaking responsibilities; (2) by failing to attach economic entitlements to nonmarket caretaking as productive work; and (3) by privileging households structured around marriage and a breadwinner/caretaker division of labor. This section traces how child care’s invisibility within means-testing procedures contributes to these phenomena.

**Withdrawing Support When Caretakers Enter the Labor Market**

To begin simply, I will focus on single parents, who are predominantly women. When child care is invisible, a wage-earning parent is disadvantaged relative to a nonearer with regard to financial eligibility under a means test. Both parents need to ensure that their children are appropriately supervised, and both need cash to provide for the household in other ways (food, clothing, etc.). But a traditional means test sharply distinguishes them.

Consider a stylized transfer system with the following parameters. The standard of need for a household of one adult and two children is $10,000 per year (more than twice the average TANF benefit, incidentally). Full-time/full-year employment yields $10,000 per year. Child care costs $5000 per year per child.

In such a system, a full-time caretaker receives $10,000, and her children are cared for. If she switches to full-time/full-year employment, she earns $10,000 in wages and receives no transfer payment because her income equals the standard of need. Nonetheless, she still needs to find a way to provide care while she is at her paid job. If she had to pay for child care at market rates, it would use up all her cash income. As long as she pays anything for it, she ends up with less than $10,000 to spend on her other needs.

This scenario can be made more nuanced and realistic in a variety of ways, but these will not change the basic point. For instance, most cash benefit programs now do not reduce benefits dollar-for-dollar as earnings increase. The “benefit reduction rate” (BRR) or the implicit tax rate on earnings, is reduced well below 100% through the technique of an “earned income disregard”: some percentage of earnings are disregarded when measuring income for the purposes of transfer eligibility and amount. The purpose of
doing so is to provide a financial incentive to earn, essentially allowing transfer recipients to split earnings between themselves and the state. Applying a more typical 50% BRR to my hypothetical would mean that the parent earning $10,000 would remain eligible for a $5,000 cash transfer ($10,000 – 50% * $10,000). Even so, after market child-care expenses she would have $5,000 left in cash, unlike $10,000 for the full-time caretaker. Relative to the goal that earning $10,000 should leave her $5,000 better off in combined earnings and transfers than if she earns nothing, the deficit remains $10,000 ($15,000 - $5,000) (Figure 1). That gap remains constant if further earnings gains do not increase child care costs (for instance, because they reflect higher wage rates rather than longer hours).

At root, conventional means-testing systems treat employed and nonemployed parents as having the same needs but different incomes. So long as alternatives to parental care are not free (either by costing money or by bearing other disadvantages, such as reduced quality, reliability, and so on), the employed parent will be worse off.

**Figure 1: Means-tested Benefit With No Allowance for Child Care (1 Parent)**

![Graph showing means-tested benefit with no allowance for child care](image)

**Notes:**
- Standard of Need: $10,000
- Benefit reduction rate: 50%
- Full-time/full-year minimum wage work = $10,000 wages
- Child-care costs: 2 children * $5,000 for full-time, full-year care

_Not Recognizing Family Caretaking as Valued Work_

Since the late 1960s, federal welfare policy has steadily increased its promotion of employment for low-income single mothers, abandoning the position that any should be encouraged or even permitted to stay out of the labor market in order to care for their children. In one sense this represents a departure from a family wage model that assumed
a mother’s place was in the home. For this reason, many feminists have applauded this shift in goals (if not necessarily the specific means), and major women’s advocacy organizations generally did not resist it (Orloff, 2002). However, prioritizing employment is quite consistent with another aspect of the family wage model. Under the rubric of “work,” cash earnings become ever more central to claims of social citizenship, and nonmarket carework and housework become ever more marginal as the basis for claiming economic resources or social standing.

Exactly what counts as work, and just how this connects to an underlying theory of welfare work requirements, is quite a bit messier than often assumed (Zatz, 2006a, b). Paid employment clearly provides the paradigm, both as work requirements are formalized in policy and in the surrounding scholarship and debate. So many virtues are attributed to employment, however, that it remains ambiguous which ones, or which combination, we should really care about. At the other pole, however, it is equally clear that a central point of invoking “work” is to oppose it to family caretaking. With only the narrowest and most tenuous of exceptions, caring for a member of one’s own household never counts as work in contemporary welfare policy.

In its raw form, the charge against transfer recipients who do not “work” is that they are sitting at home doing “nothing.” Nothing in what sense? Two elaborations dominate: nothing to make the household more “self-sufficient,” or nothing “productive” that “contributes to society.” I will distinguish them below, but either way, child care’s economic invisibility in the machinery of means-testing and poverty measurement underpins this portrayal of family caretaking as “nothing.” Within a cash accounting system, the family caretaker occupies the $0 position when measuring resources generated to meet household needs. She is no different than the proverbial Malibu surfer who looms large in philosophical debates over linking redistribution to work (Stark, 2005; Van Parijs, 1995).

Child care’s invisibility as income-generating work is closely linked to its invisibility as a necessary expense. What links the two is the phenomenon of nonmarket/market substitution (Zatz, 2009a). If a parent pays someone else to provide child care, there is no doubt that the parent is using an economic resource (money) to pay for valuable work. If instead the parent provides care herself, she produces the same service (or a close substitute)—care for the child—as the activity deemed “work” by the hired caregiver (Folbre, 2008). Once child care enters the household budget on one side as an economic need, it is difficult to exclude it on the other side as economically valuable work.

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6 Many see this shift as driven in large part by massive increases in women’s labor market participation, others by changes in actual and perceived racial composition of welfare receipt in conjunction with racism generally and specifically the longstanding racial-specificity of the family wage ideal (Gilens 1999; Orloff 2002; Quadagno 1994; Roberts 1996; Zatz 2009b).
Privileging Breadwinner/Caretaker Households

Broadening our view to include two-parent households reveals additional interactions among child-care invisibility, parental employment, and the status of nonmarket caretaking. In the main, these combine to produce a “sweet spot” for breadwinner/caretaker couples, relative both to dual-earner couples and to single parents in or out of the labor market. This reproduces the family wage system’s general pattern of allowing caretakers access to economic support through a tie to a wage-earner, though not through their independent caretaking nor through labor market access (Orloff, 1993).

Relative to dual-earner couples and employed single parents, breadwinner/caretaker couples reap the benefits of neither having to pay for child care nor having nonmarket care count toward their income. Returning to my earlier hypothetical, if one partner earns $10,000 and the other provides nonmarket care, they will receive $5,000 in benefits (Figure 2). In terms of cash income, that is the same result as the employed single parent. However, only the single parent faces $10,000 in additional child care expenses. This advantage for the breadwinner/caretaker couple is not simply a function of having an extra pair of hands. At $20,000 in earnings, a couple with two $10,000 earners will receive $5000 less in transfer payments ($0) than with one $10,000 earner, but the dual-earner couple will have to spend $10,000 more for child care. In essence, the relationship between the dual-earner and breadwinner/caretaker couple over the $10,000-$30,000 earnings range (Figure 2) is like the single parent employed vs. caretaking over the $0-$20,000 range (Figure 1). Once child care expenses are netted out, what remains to cover “basic needs” is $15,000 for the breadwinner/caretaker couple, $10,000 for the dual-earner couple, and $5,000 for the single employed parent.

Unlike in the single parent case, work requirements do not counteract two-parent households’ ability to shelter nonmarket care from measurements of income. TANF and the EITC—the two most prominent federal transfer programs that are child-tested, means-tested, and work-tested—both utilize what I have labeled a “breadwinner priority” structure: full eligibility requires at least one wage-earner in every household, but additional adults need not “work” (Zatz, 2009b).7

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7 This predominates in state TANF rules, too, but some states require both adults to work.
Although this structure may be financially beneficial for breadwinner/caretaker couples as units, it may be bad for the caretakers as individuals (Zatz, 2009b). Holding caretaking constant, access to means-tested transfers is conditioned on remaining coupled to the wage-earner, much as is the case with social security benefits conditioned on marriage (Herd, 2005; Liu, 1999). Holding the couple constant (and the breadwinner’s employment), transfers are conditioned on remaining out of the labor market, for the same reasons that joint income tax filing discourages caretakers’ employment in the absence of taxation of “imputed income” from caretaking (Staudt, 1996). For related reasons illustrated by the child-care assistance programs discussed below, a caretaker coupled with a breadwinner also is likely to have reduced access to “work support” programs that complement work requirements on single parents by facilitating their employment.

**Integrating Work-Testing and Means-Testing**

The preceding discussion illustrates how means tests and work requirements necessarily interact as a practical matter. They interact because income is an input to the means test and an output of work, or at least of employment (Zatz, 2006a). To lay the foundation for my subsequent analysis of how best to account for care, this section argues that this dual role for income provides the basis for the most compelling normative theory of attaching work requirements to means-tested transfers. That theory, moreover, provides a
contextually-specific basis for defining “work,” that is, for specifying what counts as work for the purpose of satisfying work requirements on means-tested transfers.

The core idea is the perfectly familiar one that transfers are owed to people who otherwise cannot satisfy their basic needs through no fault of their own. Faultlessness includes having made reasonable efforts to meet those needs through one’s own work (Wax, 2003a, b). There are a variety of ways one might justify a policy with an argument of this sort, but it captures well both the basic structure of actual means-tested programs and a kind of common-sense view about their appropriateness.

Here, I simply take this general framework for granted and focus on making explicit how a principle of self-support integrates means-testing and work-testing at both theoretical and practical levels. The argument deliberately is not specific to care in order to identify general principles on which an analysis of care can rest. Doing so enables me then to apply these to care in a way that integrates its treatment with many other issues in designing means tests and work tests.

Promoting “self-sufficiency” is the most commonly invoked justification for work requirements (Zatz, 2006b). Work allows one to rely less on resources provided by others and more on those provided oneself. The particular concern is with resources transferred from others through the coercive apparatus of the state. On this view, economic dependence on transactions with a nonstate actor (an employer, a parent, a spouse, etc.) is a fundamentally different matter (Fraser and Gordon, 1994). Moreover, self-sufficiency is not an absolute demand (Wax, 2003b). That would be tantamount to simply not having transfer programs. Instead, the point is that work contributes toward self-sufficiency, and that work requirements specify when and to what extent self-sufficiency is appropriately expected. There is nothing wrong with not being self-sufficient and claiming transfer payments, so long as appropriate efforts were made; this framework justifies transfers to low-wage workers and the involuntarily unemployed, including those unemployed by reason of disability (Wax, 2003a). For these reasons, it avoids confusion to use the concept of “self-support” rather than “self-sufficiency,” and to define self-support in terms of an activity’s contribution to transfer reduction.

An expectation of reasonable self-support follows from a fairly standard conception of how transfers operate and when they are justified. Means-tested transfers disrupt, through taxation, an otherwise just baseline distribution of resources. The transfer justifiably disrupts this baseline in order to remedy the recipient’s deprivation relative to some standard of economic well-being. The means test captures this basic structure: transfer eligibility requires falling below some threshold of resources, and the transfer’s magnitude increases with the depth of the shortfall.
The relevant concept of “need” incorporates some level of responsibility. There is a world of difference between providing shelter to someone who is homeless and to someone who refuses to sleep in his own home (though the two will converge if we find compelling reasons behind that refusal). This basic point is reflected in asset tests on means-tested transfers. It will not do to plead poverty if, despite a lack of any current income, one could simply go to the bank and withdraw oodles of cash.

Lying behind demands for responsibility is the point that transfers come out of someone’s pocket. If the differences between transferee and transferor arise from different choices for which they can and should take responsibility, then the case for a coerced transfer weakens considerably. If, however, what separates them is simply good fortune or, more generally, morally arbitrary differences, then liberal egalitarian theories of distributive justice provide a strong rationale for transfers. Means-tested transfers can be understood as a form of collective insurance against the risk of finding oneself in economic need (cf. Dworkin, 1981).

Work requirements capture the idea that individuals can “spend” their time engaged in activities that help meet their economic needs, much as they can spend money already in the bank. This basic idea can and must be cabined and refined in various ways: how much time will be devoted to work, what personal circumstances or forms of work make it too onerous or harmful, and so on. Important as they are, these considerations leave intact the core idea of requiring individuals to make reasonable efforts at self-support before, on account of inability to meet their economic needs, invoking state power to transfer resources legitimately acquired by others. ⁸

Thus, work requirements are best understood as an elaboration of the means test itself, rather than as a separate scheme of conditionality. Someone who could work but does not is someone who has the means to satisfy his basic needs, notwithstanding low income. This explains why work tests do not attach willy-nilly to all forms of social cooperation. The point is not to determine in some general sense whether an individual is

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⁸ To be clear, my aim here is not to just justify the imposition of work requirements on means-tested transfers in the United States, nor the absence of other kinds of transfer programs such as a universal basic income (Van Parijs 1995) or caretakers’ allowances (Alstott 2004a). Arguably we are so far from the relevant baseline—because of radical inequalities in education and inter-generational transfers based on parental wealth, pervasive discrimination in labor markets, and so on—that work-testing (and possibly means-testing, too) on balance exacerbates these injustices (White 2003a). Moreover, unavoidable problems of administrability might outweigh the risks of free-riding (Barry 2003; Wispelaere and Stirto 2007). Instead, my goal is to take seriously the best arguments for a work-testing/means-testing regime and elaborate their implications. If we are to have such a regime at all, as we currently do, what should it look like? Additionally, I think it likely that even a far more robust and just welfare state than the one we have now would nonetheless retain a significant role for “residual” means-tested programs, and so an enterprise of this sort also can contribute to ideal theory.
deserving of participation in the community’s cooperative life. We do not place work tests on voting, on access to the courts, on police protection, on sending children to public school, on social security benefits, and so on. And with regard to means-tested benefits, work occupies a special place relative to other kinds of behavioral requirements. Were the rationale for work requirements simply the public analogue of a charity’s discretion to give to whomever it finds worthy (Lehman and Malamud, 2000), then work would be on par with other things widely believed to constitute civic virtue. No doubt there is a sorry, ongoing history of such broader forms of conditionality, especially with regard to sexual and reproductive morality (Abramovitz, 1996; Smith, 2007). Nonetheless, these command lower levels of political support and institutionalization (Haskins, 2001; Mead, 2005) and are peripheral to the lively political theoretic debate that treats work as _sui generis_.

If work matters because it reduces the need for transfers, then transfer reduction provides our criterion for the relevant definition of “work.” And if transfers themselves are keyed to a method of specifying unmet needs, then what makes something work is its ability to satisfy these recognized needs, thereby substituting for transfers.

This connection between work and need is straightforward, and transparent, within a system of cash accounting. When need is reduced to cash purchasing, then work can be reduced to cash income. On the one hand, the only way to meet needs is to generate cash to be spent. On the other, anything that generates cash can be used to meet the relevant needs. If someone gets the cash but squanders it on luxuries, so much the worse for him (if he claims he needs more cash). Or so much the better for a cash system that allows transfer recipients some control over their consumption and opens up a space between their actual spending and how the state would spend for them (Coven, 2002; Zelizer, 1997).

Cash, however, is not the whole story. Systems of means-testing long have characterized receipt of certain in-kind goods and services as “income” when calculating the gap between resources and needs. Because such goods and services may not easily be convertible into cash, distinctions are drawn between in-kind receipts that substitute for cash purchases of designated needs, and those that do not (Zatz, 2006b). A $200 gift certificate to a grocery store would be counted as “income” because it is substitutable for $200 in food purchases, and food is among the basic needs transfers are meant to meet. A $200 gift certificate to the theater, however, would be excluded because entertainment (at least at that scale) is not among the basic needs attributed to the family budget.

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9 This gives rise to some tension between calculating a level of cash transfers based on a basket of “needs” and leaving it to the recipient to decide what she really needs, and in what form.
The same analysis applies to in-kind earnings from employment. If an employee is paid in the form of discounted rent rather than a cash wage, this discount should in principle be counted as income. Indeed, at one point Congress amended the Food Stamps statute specifically to count employer-provided housing as income, thereby “equalizing the food stamp benefits of a person who receives his earnings entirely in the form of wages and a person who actually has the same income but receives part of it in kind rather than in cash” (Anderson v. Butz, 428 F. Supp. 245 (D.C. Cal. 1975)). In some contexts certain in-kind receipts are excluded from income calculations because of administrative difficulties in valuation (Maisonet v. New Jersey Dep’t of Human Servs, 643 A.2d 1038 (N.J. Super.A.D. 1994)), but these administrative exceptions illustrate the underlying rule.

Under a theory of self-support, an activity should count as work if it yields in-kind income that reduces transfers, such as being paid in the form of groceries or reduced rent. The issue rarely arises because U.S. employment law generally requires that at least part of a worker’s wage be paid in cash. Vermont law, however, explicitly provides that self-employment activity satisfies TANF work requirements insofar as the participant is “earning in-kind income” (13-170-003 Vt. Code R. § 2364.43 (2005)). Moreover, this time counts as work only if “the in-kind income reduces the family’s . . . financial assistance grant,” precisely as a self-support theory recommends.

Finally, a self-support criterion would designate an activity as work if it produces goods or services that directly substitute for those otherwise obtained through means-tested transfers. Obvious examples include hunting, farming, and knitting or sewing clothes. Along these lines, Alaska, another rural state, includes “subsistence activities” as TANF work (Alaska Admin. Code tit. 7, § 45.260(i)(1), (j)(2)), as do several Native American TANF programs (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002). As previously noted, official U.S. poverty measures long took account of farm families’ production of food for their own consumption. Although they did so by decreasing recognized needs rather than increasing recognized income, commentators and government officials analyzing income measurement for means-tested transfers recognized that in theory income measures should reflect such nonmarket production (Tobin et al., 1967; Zatz, 2006b). In practice, though, the administrative costs were too high in light of the relative insignificance of home production in most cases.

This method of accounting for nonmarket work and nonmarket income is related to but also narrower than those addressed to national income accounting schemes like the Gross Domestic Product (Abraham and Mackie, 2005; Folbre, 2008). Those, too, attribute income based on the cost of substituting market for nonmarket production. The difference is that they need not account for who receives this income, unlike the means-
testing context where the point is not simply aggregate income but income to the worker’s household. So, for instance, a volunteer firefighter substitutes for a paid firefighter and thus arguably contributes a similar amount to GDP. But the firefighter and her household do not receive (much of) the benefit of that work, and it is difficult to see how it substitutes for income that she might otherwise have earned and spent.

Indeed, my approach to nonmarket work and income is even narrower still, focused not only on the worker’s household but on its basic needs. Someone who walks the family dog arguably substitutes for a paid dogwalker and contributes to GDP. Moreover, the household captures that benefit. And yet the case is weak for treating the dog-walking as contributing to household income with respect to a means test’s assessment of resources relative to needs. Unless the transfer system aims to assure that households can maintain their pets, as it aims to assure that they can feed and clothe themselves, resources devoted to dogwalking seem beside the point. In this way, the analysis I propose can avoid the serious problem of boundlessness that stalks proposals for imputing income to nonmarket activities for purposes like a general income tax (Zatz, 2006b).

**Accounting for Care, Step One: Child Care as a Basic Need, Not a Work Expense**

There is broad consensus that lack of child care provides a legitimate reason for transfer recipients not to work. That leaves ample room to argue over what circumstances trigger this concern (Mead, 1992)—what counts as inappropriate care, what lengths parents should go to obtain care, and so on—but even the Heritage Foundation concedes that "If low-skilled single mothers are moved into the labor force, child care assistance must be provided" (Riedl, 2003). Funding for child-care assistance to low-income households has expanded massively in tandem with the growing emphasis on work. This section argues that the only way to make this commitment to child care consistent with the role of work within means-tested transfer systems is to conceive of child care as a basic household need. Doing so, moreover, holds the most promise for fully supporting low-income employed parents.

**The Standard Model: Child Care as a Work Expense**

Within the context of poverty measurement and means-tested transfers, employed parents’ child care expenses typically are conceptualized as a work expense. Like transportation from home to work, or like adding professional clothes to the wardrobe, they are expenses that would not be incurred but for being employed and that enable employment. The work-expense analysis remains within the cash-and-markets framework that, when applied to a paradigm of nonmarket care provision, generated child care invisibility. Care becomes visible only when it enters the market.

The work-expense framework yields two types of institutional response, both of which modify only policies applicable to employed parents. Both treat the need for child care as
reducing the amount of employment income available to meet basic needs. The
definition of basic needs, however, remains unchanged.

The first approach deducts some or all child-care expenses from gross earnings and then
uses the resulting net income as the basis for comparison with the standard of need.
Variants on this approach have been endorsed by leading proposals for reforming poverty
measurement (National Research Council, 1995). Many means-tested benefit programs
incorporate it through the technique of “child care disregards”: when measuring income
for the purposes of benefit eligibility and amount, the calculation disregards an amount of
earnings equal to some portion of child-care expenses.

The second approach creates a separate child-care benefit available, more or less, to
households who would qualify for cash benefits (or larger ones) were child-care expenses
to be deducted as per the first response. Most state TANF programs provide child-care
subsidies to recipients during the time they participate in mandatory work activities.
Moreover, they often provide a year or two of “transitional child care” to former
recipients of cash assistance who become income ineligible due to increased earnings.
Finally, through participation in the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)
and other programs, states offer child-care assistance to low-income workers regardless
of any connection to TANF. These programs are structured as means-tested transfers,
though they differ from cash assistance in their particulars. They use higher income
thresholds, provide only in-kind child-care assistance (either vouchers or reduced-rate
placements), and reduce benefits by increasing co-payments as parents’ cash income
rises.

Both these responses shift child-care costs from employed parents to the state. The
rationale for doing so generally is understood to be some variant on “supporting work.”
That seems entirely consonant with a general emphasis on work. But it risks losing track
of why work is to be promoted within a means-testing system and instead to substitute
employment as an end in itself. In short, “work supports” appear to fetishize
employment.

The simple problem is that child-care assistance is enormously expensive. TANF and
CCDF subsidies routinely cost $5,000 or more per child per year, or $10,000 annually for
a parent of two children. Providing them cuts directly against the transfer reduction
rationale for work requirements. Seeing employment as transfer-reducing makes sense so
long as child care is invisible, but once parental employment forces child care into the
market, a contradiction emerges. Earning enough to cover the previously recognized
needs leaves a hole in the budget for the “new” cost of child care. But filling that hole
with state-provided child-care assistance means costly new outlays.
We can now revisit my earlier hypothetical and incorporate child-care assistance of $5,000 per child (Figure 3). This assistance is means tested, and modeled here with a 50% BRR applied to earnings over $10,000. The first point is that child-care assistance prevents the problem identified earlier in Figure 1: now, the cash available to meet “basic needs” (net of child care) no longer declines as a single parent transitions from caretaking to full-time employment. Moreover, the intended financial incentive to employment from a 50% BRR is maintained: cash net of child care grows as earnings increase from $0 to $10,000. In the $10,000-$20,000 earnings range, cash net of child care expenses stays flat because cash transfers and child-care assistance both phase out at 50%, summing to 100%.¹⁰

![Figure 3: Means-tested Benefit Plus Child-Care Assistance (1 Parent)](image)

Using child-care assistance to “make work pay” comes at a substantial cost. Although the transition to full-time employment lowers cash transfers, it raises spending on child-care assistance. At $10,000 of earnings, total outlays are 50% higher than at zero.

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¹⁰ For an analysis of how actual benefit phase-outs and taxes can combine to yield effective marginal tax rates of approximately 100% beginning at earnings levels approximately equal to full-time, minimum wage work, see Cauthen (2006).
earnings, and only above $15,000 in earnings do they drop below transfers to the full-time caretaker. This break-even point would move even higher if the child care BRR was reduced further so that net earnings continued to rise above the $10,000 point.

What is the point of these expenses? To support work. And why is work important? Because it reduces transfers. Except that it doesn’t once work itself becomes the basis for new transfers. This contradiction is masked by keeping a separate set of books for cash assistance (which employment reduces) and child-care assistance (which it increases).

Of course, the contradiction can be dissolved by switching horses when it comes to arguing the importance of work. Perhaps nonworkers should be stripped of cash transfers not because they are unreasonably burdening other taxpayers but because it will be good for them, given all the noneconomic benefits of employment that they have failed to appreciate adequately on their own. Even if an argument of this sort could be sustained over the usual objections to paternalism and perfectionism, it faces a serious problem of internal coherence: it has nothing to do with poverty. One can imagine a world in which we impose a $10,000 head tax on everyone (or every parent) who lacks employment (or is not pursuing it) in order to push them in the right direction, or a $10,000 enticement to do the same. And indeed something like the latter forms part of a plausible feminist agenda that would use child care to subsidize employment by mothers at all incomes and in all household structures. Nonetheless, there remains a basic disconnect between generic arguments for parental employment and means-tested policies that target only the work habits of the poor.

This contradiction between work as self-support and the cost of child-care subsidies also helps explain some of the powerful pressures against more robust child-care assistance for low-income parents. Even if we focus only on households receiving cash transfers at any one time, transitioning from caretaking to employment may be a fiscal wash or a net loss for the state, if child care or other work supports protect recipients from a declining standard of living. Research on actual welfare-to-work programs bears this out (Michalopoulos, 2005). The real problem though is that the total population of households eligible for means-tested child-care assistance is vastly larger than a cross-sectional slice of cash transfer recipients; the former is on the order of 12 million, compared to 5 million households receiving AFDC at its peak. Nationally, only about 15% of households eligible for child-care subsidies receive them (Herbst, 2008). Full participation by eligible households would require substantial new expenditures.

11 Another possibility is to hold out the hope that low-wage workers experience sufficiently rapid earnings gains that, viewed over a longer time horizon, increased up-front spending on child-care assistance will pay off in future transfer reductions. Unfortunately, the available evidence runs contrary to this update of the Horatio Alger story (Zatz 2006b).
12 Author’s calculation based on the eligibility simulations in Herbst (2008).
Underlying these very low participation rates are an array of institutional limitations connected to the work expense framing. Child-care assistance programs are burdened by reams of paperwork, delayed payments, and erroneous denials that discourage participation by parents and providers and that destabilize care arrangements (Chaudry, 2004; Zasloff, 1998). These arise in part out of the monitoring and reduced discretion that accompany in-kind delivery of a benefit justified specifically by a connection to work. Additional, the “work support” framing separates child-care assistance institutionally and fiscally from subsistence transfers. Because parents who are ineligible for cash assistance are deemed to have met their basic needs, child care assistance appears as a kind of policy luxury. For instance, many states, including very large ones like California, Florida, New York, and Texas, do not fund their programs at levels adequate to provide assistance to all applicants who meet their eligibility standards.13

By focusing on enabling or incentivizing employment, the work-support framework sharply limits when child care assistance is appropriate. Absent any effect on a parent’s ability to maintain employment, it is superfluous, a “windfall.” For this reason, debates over child-care funding are dominated by disagreements over whether it is necessary to enable parents to satisfy work requirements or remain employed. Conservatives typically argue that in the absence of child-care assistance most parents can and will make do rather than curtail employment (Mead, 1992; Riedl, 2003).

Indeed, rather than altering employment behavior, child-care assistance often allows parents to spend more on care, find higher quality care, free up funds to spend on other things, or make their lives easier in other ways. Arguably, all of these things are desirable, but if so, it is because the work-support rationale is too narrow. We do not necessarily consider it a windfall if transfers enable an adult to live in better housing, or allow a parent to reallocate rent money to food or to clothing, even if these things make no difference to her employment. That is because housing is considered a basic need and transfers aim to allow people to consume at least a certain amount of it, and to do so without having to skimp on other basic needs, like food or clothing.

**Child Care as a Basic Need**

I would jettison the work-support/work-expense analysis of child care assistance. Instead, we should see in the depth and breadth of support for child-care assistance to low-income parents an implicit acceptance of child care as a basic household need, at least for employed parents. Note straightaway that by “basic household need” I mean only to place child care on par with housing, clothing, food, and so on. The implication

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is not that the costs of care necessarily should be socialized. In contrast to basic education, current policy is not to provide free, universal food, housing, and shelter. Instead, there is an intermediate position that treats these goods as ones to be provided for oneself and one’s family in the first instance, yet made available through transfers when the requisite resources are unavailable without fault. That position is consistent with providing child-care assistance subject to a means test rather than universally, which is roughly the model toward which U.S. policy appears to be converging.

At the opposite pole from fully socializing child-care costs is treating them as purely discretionary spending. That view often is characterized as the “children as pets” position (Folbre, 2008), the basis of which is the argument that the costs of parental responsibilities, while real, are taken on voluntarily by adults who choose to become and remain parents. Parenthood, from this perspective, is a “private project” (Alstott, 2004b), quite unlike a necessity such as food. I do not propose to adjudicate between those who find this argument obviously right and those who find it preposterous. Instead, I will rest on the observation that support for child-care assistance implies rejecting the private project objection. Employment imposes a variety of opportunity costs, but most people see a vast difference between protecting low-income parents from having to trade off child-care costs against food expenses and protecting them against having to trade off pet-care costs (or having to get rid of a pet). For a dissenter from this rough consensus, the remainder of my argument has no traction.

If we think of child care as a basic household need, rather than as a way to coax nonworkers out of dependency, then the basic structure of Figure 3 makes sense at $10,000 earnings and above. Aside from some wrinkles concerning coordination of the cash and child-care phase-outs, it is roughly equivalent to a means-tested transfer premised on a $20,000 standard of need (now inclusive of child care) that phases out between $0 and $30,000 in earnings (or a $15,000 standard of need that begins to phase out only at $10,000 in earnings).

A number of proposals incorporate employed parents’ child-care expenses into calculations of how much income a household needs to meet its basic needs (Pearce, 2001; Renwick and Bergmann, 1993). Although typically the goal is to offer an alternative to existing poverty measurements, they easily could be used to set standards of need for means-tested transfer programs. These proposals elaborate on the basic concept discussed above by developing detailed schedules for child-care costs as they vary by the number, age, and health status of children in a household.

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14 For a discussion and critique of economists’ widespread endorsement of a form of this argument, see Bojer and Nelson (1999).
These proposals, however, incorporate child care into their metric of needs only for households where all adults are in the labor market or otherwise systematically unavailable to provide care. Once there is a nonmarket caretaker, child care again disappears from the analysis of household needs. In this way, they remain anchored in the cash economy of market earnings and market spending. Even though the rationale for including child-care costs is that they are a basic household need, they remain beholden to a work-expense model by treating this basic need as something triggered by employment and extinguished in its absence.

**Accounting for Care, Step Two: Child Care as Self-Support, Not a Public Good**

This section extends the idea of child care as a basic need to households that contain a nonmarket caretaker and do not purchase child care as consumers. Doing so also requires treating nonmarket care as producing income that meets this need, just as employment produces income that can meet the need for market care. This, in turn, provides a theoretical basis for analyzing nonmarket caretaking as work within a self-support framework. This approach differs in several important respects from existing arguments that accept characterizations of nonmarket caretaking as non-income generating but go on to treat it as unpaid work that contributes to society at large, though not the household budget.

*Caretaking as Income-Generating Work*

An account of basic needs goes awry when it incorporates child care only if parents are employed (Folbre, 2008). Child care is necessary regardless of whether an adult works in paid employment. It is the parent’s absence from the home (or, more precisely, separation from the child) that triggers a need to find another adult to provide care, not anything intrinsic to what she is doing while away. And when the parent is with the child, the need for care continues – the child must be cared for rather than neglected.

Rather than triggering a new need for care, a shift from caretaking into employment simply shifts care provision from nonmarket to market form (Zatz, 2006b). Reconsider the farm families that bedeviled early poverty measurement. If a subsistence farmer gives up growing food and enters the labor market, she now must begin to purchase her food. Food, in other words, is a “cost of working.” How ridiculous. The farmer needs to eat regardless of whether she spends her time growing food or earning the money to pay for it. So too with child care.

This confusion matters because it is deeply bound up with the question of whether the caretaker “works.” My discussion of Figures 1 and 3 thus far has focused exclusively on applying means-testing to questions of financial eligibility for benefits. But at the $0 earnings position, a family caretaker typically would be disqualified from transfers.
because she failed the work test even if the means test alone would authorize a substantial transfer.

Applying a principle of self-support, however, there is a perfectly straightforward argument that the caretaker “works.” By providing nonmarket care, she reduces transfers. Her caretaking displaces the need for the state to spend $10,000 on child-care assistance. She meets her household’s need for child care by doing it herself, by “spending” her time on it, just like a farmer who meets her household’s need for food by growing it herself. True, relative to wage-earning, caretaking also increases the need for other transfers: cash to purchase food and so on that might otherwise be bought with earnings. But that is no different than the low-wage earner: by earning she increases the need for transfers to cover the costs of child care that she could provide herself were she a caretaker instead. In both cases, the parent’s work enables her to meet some but not all of her household’s needs, and the government steps in to make up the difference.

Conceiving of child-care needs as invariant across market versus nonmarket uses of time immediately presents a challenge to the cash accounting system. By simply adding together the hypothetical $10,000 standard of need for everything but child care plus the $10,000 standard of need for child-care expenses, we can recharacterize the means-testing system for employed parents as one based on a $20,000 standard of need. And if we accept the proposition that household needs do not vary across full-time caretaking versus employment, then we should apply the same $20,000 standard of need consistently at all earnings levels. Figure 4 applies this approach to the earlier hypothetical. 15

By incorporating child care as a need regardless of earnings, Figure 4 combines elements of Figure 1 (in which child care was ignored altogether) and Figure 3 (in which it was incorporated to the extent the parent was employed). As in Figure 3, a parent employed full-time enjoys cash net of child-care expenses of $15,000 to $20,000 over the earnings range $10,000 to $30,000. 16 But when looking at the entire earnings spectrum, Figure 1’s V-shaped pattern in post-child care cash resources has returned: they fall with the transition to employment, even though cash income rises steadily, and then rise again as wages increase.

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15 A technical modification now applies a consistent 67% BRR, rather than the shifting 50%-100%-50% BRR produced by the combination of cash and child-care assistance in Figure 3. Both structures yield phase-out of all transfers by $30,000 earnings.

16 Here, the variation is continuous because child care assistance and cash have been integrated into a single cash benefit with a consistent 67% BRR, avoiding the “elbow” at $15,000 in Figure 3 where the BRR shifts from 100% to 50%.
When the cash standard of need was designed around a caretaker’s cash budget, it left the employee squeezed. But when the cash standard of need is designed around the employee’s budget, it leaves the caretaker enjoying a windfall. The standard of need is designed to allow someone to spend $10,000 on child care and have $10,000 left over for other expenses. Keep in mind that the exact numbers do not matter here. We could stipulate that there should be $30,000 left over. No matter what, the caretaker ends up with extra cash in the amount designated for child care but without having to spend it on child care because she can provide it herself because her time is not allocated to employment.

This windfall is equivalent to having $10,000 in unreported income. It goes unreported because it does not take the form of cash, nor of any resources that enters the household in a transaction with an outside party. Instead, it is the economic value produced by the time devoted to family caretaking, to nonmarket carework.

The valuation of nonmarket production is a notoriously tricky affair (Abraham and Mackie, 2005; Folbre, 2008), but means-tested transfer systems have some specific tools that help tackle the problem (Zatz, 2006b). In this context, “income” means resources that can be used to meet the household’s basic needs and thereby substitute for transfers otherwise made available to meet those needs. Recall the distinction drawn earlier between in-kind receipts of food and in-kind receipts of theater tickets. Family
caretaking generates $10,000 worth of income because the basic family budget includes $10,000 devoted to child care.

Attributing “imputed income” from nonmarket production solves the problem of equalizing how the means test treats a caretaker and an employed parent. Just as the latter devotes time to employment that generates income used to meet (some of) her basic needs, the former devotes time to caretaking that generates income used to meet (some of) her basic needs. Both have child care needs. Both work. Both generate income by doing so.

Figure 5 uses the same parameters as Figure 4 but incorporates imputed earnings from carework. At zero cash earnings, $10,000 is imputed from full-time caretaking. Therefore, for the purpose of the means test, we start with the $20,000 standard of need (inclusive of child-care), but rather than subtracting $0 in income, we subtract $10,000 subject to the 67% BRR, yielding $13,333 in cash transfers. Total income remains constant as cash earnings increase to $10,000, gradually replacing in-kind income from caretaking. Consequently, cash transfers remain constant over this period. Out-of-pocket child-care expenses are increasing from $0 to $10,000, but so too are cash earnings; the two cancel out, so cash net of child-care expenses remains constant.
In this scenario, cash transfers and cash net of child-care expenses remain flat over the transition from full-time caretaking to employment only because I stipulated that the cost of full-time child care equaled the earnings from minimum-wage employment. Whether that is so obviously depends in large part on the age, number, and needs of children. I originally posited two children requiring $5,000 annually for care and full-time employment earning $10,000.

The transition from caretaking to employment changes when out-of-pocket child-care costs and earnings are not evenly matched. If we vary the scenario to suppose that one child is 16 years old and has no special needs, then extant child-care assistance programs would not provide any funds to pay for care (13 is the usual age cutoff). This reflects a judgment that paid care is not a basic household need in those circumstances. Consistent with that judgment, the standard of need for this household would be $15,000 ($10,000 + $5,000 for child care), and a full-time caretaker would be credited with only $5,000 in income for care of the younger sibling (Figure 6).
For the employed parent, this change makes no difference to the bottom line until after transfers phase out completely. In Figures 5 and 6, cash net of child care expenses is identical over the $10,000 to $20,000 earnings range because child-care expenses and cash transfers are lower by the same amount ($5,000).\(^\text{17}\)

![Figure 6: Accounting for Care When Earnings Always Exceed Child Care Costs (1 Parent)](image)

For the caretaker, however, the change has significant implications for the work-sensitive aspects of the means-testing/work-testing system. The reason is simple: full-time caretaking now saves $5,000 in child-care expenses but forfeits $10,000 in earnings. Therefore, the means-testing/work-testing system would treat caretaking as work that produces $5,000 in income. Because the means test is structured to encourage work and let workers keep some of their earnings, the caretaker’s cash transfer and cash net of child-care expenses both drop from $13,333 in Figure 5 to $11,667 in Figure 6. And now she is worse off financially than the employed parent, whose post-child-care cash-in-hand is $13,333, whereas in Figure 5 they came out the same.

More important than the work incentives built into the means test, however, is the question of how this $5,000 worth of caretaking fits into work requirements. *How much*

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\(^{17}\) With a $15,000 standard of need and 67% BRR, transfers reach zero at about $22,500 in earnings, so above that point, the employed parent is keeping 100% of additional earnings; with a $20,000 standard of need, that does not begin to happen until $30,000 in earnings.
work is the caretaker doing, and is it enough? Analyzing this issue requires a brief excursion into measuring work requirement compliance more generally.

In TANF, work requirements are stated in units of time. A single parent with a child under six years old must work at least 20 hours per week, though states may require more and most do. Using a temporal measure raises a worry about people just killing time to satisfy work requirements, or relabeling as “work” what they might have been doing anyway. Not surprisingly, with regard to the unpaid activities that TANF permits, this concern manifests in a variety of time- and performance-monitoring measures designed to ensure that participants are working hard enough at whatever validates the activity as work. Minimum credit and GPA requirements for education are examples. With regard to paid employment, it is easier to rely on the employer’s own monitoring and assume that continued employment indicates adequate diligence. Moreover, because of the minimum wage, there is no need to worry greatly about the pseudo-job in which the employer expects very little and pays very little. Such a job would present a problem from a self-support perspective, but in practice policymakers have been satisfied with at least minimum wage work. They have not worried much about the theoretical possibility of minimum wage slackers who would be perfectly capable of earning twice that if only they would buck up.

The gap in this system of monitoring hours and performance is self-employment. Self-employment universally satisfies the work tests on means-tested transfers (Zatz, 2006a). This makes perfect sense from a self-support perspective, even though self-employment lacks many of the institutional features often invoked to support work requirements (Zatz, 2006b). Chief among those is time discipline and strict separation of working time from “personal” time (Osnowitz, 2005). This creates a serious problem for measuring work using time. To overcome this, the federal government has approved a procedure that imputes time from income for TANF purposes. It attributes to the self-employed hours of work equal to their business income divided by the minimum wage. This method makes it unnecessary to disentangle various uses of time, so long as the transfer recipient gets the job done. The job in question is offsetting transfers to the same degree as minimum wage work for the requisite hours. Inversely, working very hard as a matter of time and effort is unavailing if the end result comes up short. Someone who spent 60

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18 If anything, the focus has been the opposite: insisting that transfer recipients “work first” and take any legal job, rather than holding out for the proverbial “good job.” Lowering the BRR is the primary method of providing an incentive to increase earnings further.

19 The EITC takes a similar approach, although without any formal conversion between earnings and time. The EITC is widely understood to be designed to providing increasing support as workers move toward full-time, but it implements this concept by tying increasing transfers to increasing earnings. The maximum transfer range is roughly tied to full-time, minimum wage earnings. This structure applies to both self-employment and wage earnings.
hours a week on a business that earned $5,000 a year would receive credit for only 20 hours per week of work.

The obvious way to integrate nonmarket carework into an hours-based work test is to apply these methods developed in the self-employment context. Relative to minimum wage employment, how far does the activity go to displace transfer payments? When caretaking substitutes for $10,000 in transfers to cover child-care expenses, it is equivalent to full-time work. But when it substitutes only for $5,000, the caretaker would receive credit only for half-time work (based on a $10,000 full-time/full-year standard).

By the same token, caretaking may substitute for child-care expenses that exceed earnings from minimum wage. In our hypothetical, this would occur if there are three children below age 13; more highly elaborated schemes would account for high-cost infant care, care for children with special needs, and so forth. This can be done simply by extending to all households the schedules currently used to determine allowable expenses for child-care assistance programs.

A Comparison to Caretaking as Social Contribution

At a certain level of abstraction, there is nothing at all new in calls to treat nonmarket caretaking as “work,” nor in accounting for it as generating “income.” I gratefully draw on this literature, produced primarily by feminist scholars across a range of disciplines. Particularly well established are points made by sociologists and economists that caretaking is economically productive (Abraham and Mackie, 2005; Becker, 1991; Beneria, 1988; Folbre, 2008; Zelizer, 2005b) and extensively time consuming (Bianchi et al., 2007; Folbre and Bittman, 2004). Historians have taught us how the contrary conflation of “work” and labor markets emerged in conjunction with the gendered split between work and home (Boris, 1994; Boydston, 1990) and the abolition of slavery and other forms of bound labor (Stanley, 1998; Tomlins, 1995).

With these lessons in hand, it has become commonplace to speak of “market work” on the one hand and “nonmarket work,” “family work,” or “care work” on the other (Folbre, 2008; Williams, 2001). This division of work into two forms, however, raises a serious problem for public policies organized around “work” and “workers.” As with social scientific conceptions of “work,” social policy about “work” has been social policy about market work. Consequently, attaching social rights to work has meant not attaching them to nonmarket activities disproportionately performed by women, in particular caretaking work.

The theoretical problem is that expanding our social scientific understanding of “work” does not tell us how to interpret “work” as a legal or social policy category. Instead, work becomes fundamentally ambiguous (Zatz, 2006b, 2009a). One possibility is that
the reason for giving work policy significance is its economic productivity. If so, then “work” was the right concept, and the error was to institutionalize it in a way that arbitrary excluded nonmarket production. A second possibility, however, is that productivity alone is not what matters, but instead something about productivity organized through market relationships. If so, then there was no error in excluding nonmarket work from work-based institutions; the only error was misleading terminology. Finally, a third possibility is that what matters about work is neither productivity alone nor the entire package of features that identify “market work.” Instead, what matters is productivity plus something found systematically in market work but not found exclusively there. If so, then the error lies both in using “work” rather than some more specific concept and in excluding some forms of nonmarket work – not all of them, but only those that share the relevant quality in common with market work. Distinguishing among these possibilities requires having a clear theory of why work matters. The answer to that question easily might vary across policy contexts.

Feminist critics of employment-based social policies most often have invoked the first possibility. Martha Fineman, for instance, argues that “[t]aking care of someone such as a child while they are young, until they ’become their own person,’ is work, represents a major contribution to the society, and should be explicitly recognized as such” (Fineman, 1995: 9). Similar formulations in terms of “social contribution” and the like are legion (Folbre, 2008; Liu, 1999; White, 2003b; Young, 2003), including variations that conceptualize childrearing as producing a “public good” that economically benefits others (Folbre, 1994a) or as satisfying what ultimately are collective responsibilities for children’s well-being and development (Alstott, 2004a; Kittay, 1999).

Social contribution, however, has serious weaknesses as a criterion for what satisfies work requirements attached to means-tested transfers. These problems can be seen by comparing caretaking to volunteer work, as frequently is done in the literature on nonmarket work (Abbott, 2005; White, 2003b; Young, 2003). If social contribution is what matters, then work tests should be indifferent as between someone who quits a paying job in order to work without pay and someone who ceases volunteering in order to take paid work. If one takes seriously the arguments marshaled in favor of welfare work requirements, one might well expect just such indifference, given the frequency with which they invoke concepts of “making a contribution,” “giving back to society,” and economic “reciprocity.” And indeed “community service” does appear on the list of authorized work activities in the TANF statute. Nonetheless, unpaid volunteering clearly is treated as at most a second-best alternative to the primary goal of employment. The obvious basis for distinction is that the former adds nothing to the household’s ability to meet its basic needs while the latter brings in income.
At this point, advocates of linking caretaking to economic entitlements typically turn away from a means-tested framework altogether. That is, they accept the idea that, like volunteering, caretaking does not contribute to the household’s self-support, and instead what they reject is the idea that self-support is the relevant criterion. In some cases this leads toward variations on a universal basic income that would eschew means tests in addition to work tests (or construes the latter very broadly) (Pateman, 2005; White, 2003b; Young, 2003). In others, it leads toward programs that would attach new economic claims to nonmarket caretaking (or to being a parent more generally) on the theory that caretaking ought to be made more like employment and less like volunteering: those who benefit (“society”) do not get “something for nothing” but instead share the economic benefits they receive from productive work (or, in what amounts to roughly the same thing, its economic burdens on the worker) (Alstott, 2004a; Folbre, 2008). Without such payments, caretakers “subsidize” the rest of society (Fineman, 2004). Here, too, any connection to means-tested transfers is severed: the implication is that all caretakers should receive economic entitlements based on their caretaking, and for reasons entirely different from any claims that a low-income worker might make by virtue of having a low income despite working (Alstott, 2004a).

In my view, arguments of these sorts have great merit on their own terms but generally provide little help analyzing the status of caretaking in a work-tested/means-tested system. Of course, if particularly strong versions of them are correct, the latter issue would be mooted: perhaps means-tested transfers themselves would be eliminated, or perhaps a robust system of paying caretakers either would prevent any of them from being poor or would allow them to claim “worker” status based on these cash or in-kind payments. But we are a long way from either of those worlds, both as a matter of current institutions and as a matter of ideal theory.

Although social contribution theories of caretaking can be quite radical on matters of institutional design, they also show some tendency to remain stuck within a choice between what Zelizer labels “separate spheres” and “nothing but” views of economic action (2005b). When the only thing that matters about an activity is that it is productive work—regardless of how it is embedded in specific types of relationships and institutions—we face one kind of reductionism (Zatz, 2008, 2009a). Or when the argument becomes more specific, it divides nonmarket caretaking sharply from market work (Kittay, 1999), often by emphasizing its unpaid nature, the particular kinds of moral commitments that surround it (often taken to differ fundamentally from market work), and the specific kind of work produced (care). Care for children thus either demands its own analysis or is understood in tandem with other forms of nonmarket work, such as elder care, volunteering, political activism, or sometimes education. Yet when the time comes to argue for economic entitlements, the distinctiveness of caretaking drops away,
and we are left to judge its “economic” aspects in isolation. One of the concluding passages to Folbre’s wonderful book is this one: “Commitments to raising the next generation may be intrinsically satisfying. Economically, however, they go largely unrewarded” (2008: 191). To my mind this merely begs the big question. Once we embrace the existence of myriad “substantive varieties” of economic relationship (Bandelj, 2008), why should we assume that their fairness can be evaluated by tallying up “economic” gains and losses in isolation from other aspects?

Analyzing caretaking as a form of self-support takes a different approach, though without prejudice to others that are more ambitious in the breadth of their institutional implications or the normative underpinnings of transfer payments. My argument is not that caretakers should get paid “in exchange” for their caretaking work, nor that they should receive their fair share of the social benefits it produces. Indeed, it does not depend on the existence of any social benefit whatsoever, if that is taken to mean an economic benefit external to the household. Instead, the rationale is one of poverty relief. It is the same reason that payments are made to a low-wage worker who remains poor despite getting paid or to a low-income person who is unable to work. The recipient lacks the resources to meet her basic needs despite doing all that can reasonably be expected to provide for herself. The low-wage worker is not being paid to have a low-wage job; the person with a severe disability is not being paid to be disabled; and the caretaker is not being paid to provide care. To insist otherwise is to make either the normative error of requiring all economic transactions to take bargain form (erroneous, but hardly unprecedented (Stanley, 1998)) or the descriptive error of reducing all economic transactions to “nothing but” implicit bargains (Zelizer, 2005b).

This approach I’ve taken comes with significant limits. In particular, it provides no basis for contemporaneous transfers to nonmarket caretakers who are not poor on any account, just as treating child care as a basic need provides no basis for child-care assistance to higher income parents. Those things may well be justified, but if they are, it is for different reasons. On the other hand, to the extent that other economic entitlements are linked to “work” because of its properties of self-support, then an analogous argument may well apply. Social insurance programs that protect against loss of earnings capacity are the obvious example, though analyzing them in these terms will have to await another day.

These limits also bring certain strengths. Most arguments against universal support for parents or caretakers (Case, 2001; Franke, 2001; Rakowski, 1991: 153-55) are not applicable here. Because the argument does not rely on creating public goods, it is not vulnerable to concerns about “quality control” or population control (or at least not more so than all childbearing and childrearing). Because it does not rely on an imbalance
between social benefit and private gain, it is not vulnerable to the argument that the various benefits and satisfactions parents receive make it all “worth it” in a sense that defeats claims to economic entitlements. For similar reasons, it is not vulnerable to important arguments grounded in parental choice, namely those concerned with “foisting” benefits on others (by reproducing) or with “donating” them as gifts (by voluntarily retaining custody). All these arguments face rebuttals, to be sure (Alstott, 2004b), but my argument has no stake in the outcome. Just as providing food to the hungry does not imply providing free food to everyone, so too does treating child care as a basic need not imply socializing its costs generally.

Finally, at a more general level, my argument tries to analyze a form of nonmarket activity as work without either dissolving it into an undifferentiated mass of productive work or organizing the analysis around a market/nonmarket distinction. Instead, economic self-support represents a similarity to conventional employment and a difference from volunteer work. What matters is not the distinction between cash income and no cash income, between paid and unpaid work, but rather how work is woven into the household economy more generally; and that household economy itself is irreducible to cash transactions in consumer markets. For this reason, I submit, with delight in its gendered incongruity, that in the context of a means-tested/work-tested transfer, the caretaker is best compared not to the selfless volunteer but to the yeoman farmer.

Accounting for Care, Step Three: The Dual-Worker Couple [could skip this]

The framework developed above can be extended from single-parent to two-parent households. First, child care would be incorporated into the standard of need for all households according to the same schedule as for single parents, that is, with the same variation by the number, age, and special needs of children. These needs would be included regardless of adults’ employment status. Second, the income measurement would include the value of caretaking by either parent to the extent that it satisfied these recognized child care needs.

These two changes would fundamentally alter the relative treatment of dual-earner and breadwinner/caretaker divisions of labor. Recall that, as illustrated by Figure 2, under the currently predominant breadwinner priority model, once one parent works full-time, the household experiences a decline in cash net of child-care if the other parent switches from caretaking to employment. Figure 7 revisits the scenario by positing a $20,000 standard of need (adding $10,000 for child care) and attributing $10,000 in imputed earnings to full-time caretaking. As before, I make the simplifying assumption that the first $10,000 of earnings represent full-time work by one parent (or half-time by both) and that the second $10,000 represent full-time work by the other parent (or the transition to full-time by both).
As in the single-parent case, accounting for care has two effects on the outcome of means-testing. First, like the employed single parent, the dual-earner couple ends up better off because its child-care expenses are accounted for. At $20,000 in wage earnings, the cash available net of child-care expenses is $16,667 in Figure 7 versus $10,000 in Figure 2. Second, again like the employed single parent relative to the single caretaker, the dual-earner couple comes out on par with the breadwinner/caretaker couple, rather than worse off. In Figure 7, both have post-child care cash of $16,667 in Figure 7, whereas in Figure 2 the former has $10,000 and the latter $15,000. The reason for this equalization is that benefits from nonmarket caretaking now are incorporated into the income measure. As before, this relies on caretaking producing the same income as minimum wage employment; that in turn arises if allowable child-care expenses for a full-time wageworker equal full-time minimum wage earnings. If the child-care component of the standard of need is lower, then the dual-earner couple will be better off financially than the breadwinner/caretaker couple.

As in the single-parent case, these changes also pave the way for a different application of work tests. Now that the economic benefits of caretaking are incorporated into the means test, it can be counted as work according to the same analysis applied before. In the shift from $15,000 to $16,667 is an artifact of the switch to a 67% BRR and is unrelated to the larger questions of household structure.
the minority of programs and jurisdictions that require both parents in two-parent households to work more or less full-time (Zatz, 2009b), doing so has the same basic impact as counting caretaking as work in the single parent context: in households previously disqualified based on insufficient work, caretaking would now go some distance toward satisfying work requirements.

The situation is more complicated in programs and jurisdictions that apply a breadwinner priority model. There, work requirements already allow one full-time caretaker so long as there is one full-time wageworker, though they usually permit two parents to split wagework and carework between them (Zatz, 2009b). This structure is difficult to justify within a self-support framework, at least so long as caretaking does not count as work. Whether one thinks of the adults individually or the household collectively, there is wasted capacity to bring in resources that would reduce transfers, assuming that the work effort that reasonably can be expected of each parent in a two-parent household is at least as great as that of a single parent.

This breadwinner priority structure can be integrated into a self-support framework if we reinterpret caretaking as satisfying work requirements rather than as an exception to them. Functionally, current law does that selectively, and surreptitiously, for one adult in a two-parent household even while denying that possibility to single parents. Although shifting from a work exception to a form of work makes no direct difference to transfer eligibility, it is significant in other ways. First, subjection to work requirements is closely connected to eligibility for work supports. Currently, potential “secondary earners” in two parent families risk being cut off from such supports when there is no expectation that they work at all.\footnote{The availability of caretaking as a means to satisfy work requirements arguably undermines the case for some work supports, along the lines of my critique of justifying child-care assistance as a work support. My intuition is that considerations of long-term mobility and occupational choice (that is, not being locked into caretaking) may justify such supports, even if they do not justify excluding caretaking as a form of work.} Second, it would institutionalize parity for employment/caretaking tradeoffs by single parents and parents in couples. Currently it is possible to demonize caretaking by single parents while favoring it in two-parent households in part through the sleight of hand of setting hours requirements on a per household rather than per adult basis.

The two-parent context brings to the fore difficulties associated with attributing carework to individual parents, aside from the question of valuing it (Alstott, 2004a; Liu, 1999; Staudt, 1996).\footnote{The analogous issue for single parent concerns accounting for nonmarket care provided by a nonparent.} Means-tested transfer programs, however, have an important feature that greatly mitigates these difficulties. Because the transfers are calculated and paid on a household rather than individual basis, it is not strictly necessary to individualize the

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21 The availability of caretaking as a means to satisfy work requirements arguably undermines the case for some work supports, along the lines of my critique of justifying child-care assistance as a work support. My intuition is that considerations of long-term mobility and occupational choice (that is, not being locked into caretaking) may justify such supports, even if they do not justify excluding caretaking as a form of work.

22 The analogous issue for single parent concerns accounting for nonmarket care provided by a nonparent.
work test. Instead, the household may be used as the unit of work compliance. Thus, even if the underlying theory is that both parents should work the equivalent of a 40-hour full-time workweek, there would be no need to allocate hours between them. In simplest form, we would just require 80 hours of work in aggregate, not 40 by each parent. Similarly, we would attribute hours of care (and its imputed income) based on 80 hours minus the sum of both parents’ time in wagework. If there are 60 hours of wagework, we impute 20 hours of carework. It does not matter for eligibility purposes how these are divided between the parents. There are further complications that would need to be worked out, but these fundamentally are tractable problems of implementation.

Conclusion
Child care is central to transformations in the welfare state that are still very much a work in progress. The robust maternalist position that Nancy Fraser labels “caregiver parity” (1997: Ch. 2) has collapsed, and for good reason. Its conceptual foundations and institutional manifestations (however stingily and partially implemented) in programs like mothers’ pensions and AFDC tie support for care to labor market withdrawal and compete with child-care assistance to employed parents (Michel, 1999). They thereby contribute to women’s labor market disadvantage against the backdrop of gendered responsibility for care. The big question is whether that leaves any alternative other than what Fraser calls a “universal breadwinner” model, of which robust child-care assistance is a central element. In particular, does it leave any room for a post-maternalist position that attaches social rights to caretaking without embracing the family wage system’s gendered division of labor and its accompanying exclusion of mothers from employment?

This paper attempts to develop the theoretical underpinnings and sketch the institutional implications of such an alternative to the caregiver/breadwinner dyad. The key is to see that both child-care assistance to employed parents and an analysis of caretaking as valuable work can rest on a common foundation, namely integration of child care into our conception of basic household needs. Doing so, however, requires a clean break with analyses of the household economy that privilege market transactions. Within the context of means-tested/work-tested programs, making that break actually strengthens

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23 In contrast, were caretaking to be used as a basis for individual Social Security eligibility (Liu 1999) or for individual caretaker resource accounts (Alstott 2004a), individual allocations are necessary.

24 This assumes that the standard of need incorporates the costs of providing child care during a full-time workweek, and these costs are equivalent to at least full-time wage work. These are the assumptions I used in the scenarios involving 2 children at $5,000 in child care expenses.

25 Most seriously, if there are 20 hours of wagework, arguably one should impute 40 hours of carework, not 60. That analysis would be consistent with including 40 hours of child care expenses in the standard of need. A full treatment requires an account of how much child-care is treated as a basic need, and of the extent to which co-parents are entitled or expected to coordinate employment schedules in order to minimize child-care needs.
that case for child-care assistance, which otherwise lies on a collision course with notions of self-support. Vice versa, the distinctive institutional move toward labor market integration—child-care assistance—opens doors to recognizing the economic value of caretaking. These connections arise because of the particular imperatives of self-support, not despite them.

Although not my main topic here, the implications for the development of political constituencies deserve some mention and certainly further thought. Most obviously, the institutional and analytical framework I suggest would tie together the interests of low-income parents who at any one point in time differ in their relative reliance on nonmarket and market work to make ends meet. For the same reason, it also tends to produce continuity in an individual’s interests over time, once we focus on the ways that parents shift between various degrees of caretaking and employment at different moments in their own and their children’s lives (Zatz, 2009b). Indeed, by applying to care general principles underlying means-tested/work-tested transfers, this continuity potentially extends to low-income workers who do not (at the moment) have minor children and to people not expected to work due to age or disability. In this way, I hold out some hope that embracing the cause of the “working poor” need not require what it recently has tended toward, namely the relative abandonment of those who do not work in conventional labor markets.

Thus, by grounding my accounting of care in the specific context of means-tested transfer programs for low-income families, I also hope to contribute something to broader conversations about gender, work, and care. In practice, those conversations often revolve around the particular form these issues take in relatively high income (or potentially high income) households (Roberts, 2004; Selmi and Cahn, 2006). At least in the context I address here, my argument suggests that it can be helpful to eschew the ubiquitous concept of “work/family balance.” That framework immediately invokes the “hostile worlds” notion of conflicting yet incommensurable spheres of economics and intimacy (Zelizer, 2005b) and thus invites bitter disputes over striking the appropriate balance. Instead, a fuller accounting of care might help synthesize three feminist projects, all of which seek to undo different aspects of the family wage system but which nonetheless often appear to work at cross-purposes: ensuring women’s full access to paid employment, recognizing the value of nonmarket household labor, and counteracting pressures toward the breadwinner/caretaker household form.

26 Or more precisely, those who experience some tension between parental and labor market roles. The conventional male breadwinner may end up worse off.

27 It may be useful to know that the median household income in the United States is about $50,000, and that 80% of households have incomes below $100,000. http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p60-235.pdf
Fraser’s solution to these problems is what she labels a “universal caregiver” approach. Its institutional framework is, understandably, not fully worked out, but the basic vision is: “The trick is to imagine a social world in which citizens' lives integrate wage earning, caregiving, community activism, political participation, and involvement in the associational life of civil society -- while also leaving time for some fun” (1997: 62).

There is much to admire in Fraser’s vision, but I find it creepy in one respect. Fraser appears to imagine welfare state institutions structured around lives that incorporate roughly the same temporal division between wage-earning, caregiving, and the rest of “life,” and therefore roughly the same division among market and nonmarket activities that contribute to the household (and social) economy. In other words, we continue to balance breadwinning and caretaking, not by allocating it to different people but by allocating it to different components of everyone’s standard life. Even if the seemingly repronormative implications (Franke, 2001) can be overcome with a sufficiently capacious understanding of caretaking (Case, 2001), the market/nonmarket divide remains a fundamentally structuring element. Part of what I find appealing, in the most conventional liberal way, about the approach explored in this paper, is that it suggests the possibility of a welfare state that supports wide variation in the ways that people integrate economic production into the fabric of their lives and that facilitates mobility among them over time.

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