Child Support

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Men and women have differing parental investments in their offspring and certainty of paternity plays a role in their parental investment (Trivers 1972). The sex with parental certainty is more likely to invest resources in their offspring than the sex with parental uncertainty. As a consequence of paternal uncertainty, men are more likely to leave their offspring and forego investment, shifting greater responsibility onto women to care for the offspring (Trivers 1972). Since it takes a considerable amount of resources to rear a child, women typically seek child support from men who do this. But, many men do not pay their child support. Consequently, child support enforcement policies were expanded and were more stringently enforced beginning in the twenty-first century in the hope of improving children’s lives (Pirog and Ziol-Guest 2006; Wilson 2002). This shift is important because the mental and physical health of a child is impaired when the child does not live with both biological parents (Daly and Wilson 1985, 1986, 1988). But, many men are still reluctant to pay child support.

The US Census Bureau in 2011 stated that $37.9 billion dollars in child support was owed during the year of 2011, and 53.4% of the individuals who were awarded child support were custodial single mothers (US Census Bureau 2013). Additionally, the percent of parents who reported receiving child support dropped from 52% in 2003 to 43.3% in 2011 (Grall 2013). This has continued with child support payment becoming less likely when a divorce occurs (Meyer et al. 2015). Evolutionary theory can provide an explanation or why this is occurring.

Researchers hypothesize eight evolutionary theory-based reasons why men refuse or reduce their child support payments (Shackelford et al. 2005, 2012). Men will refuse or reduce child support if (1) they are concerned that the custodial mother will use it to increase her attractiveness and fitness, decreasing the man’s fitness. If a woman does this, the money may not reach the offspring and instead may be used to increase the mother’s fitness, thus reducing the fitness of the male. A man will reduce child support (2) if the woman channels the resources to a new partner, if (3) he needs resources to obtain a new partner, and (4) if he needs resources to retain a new partner since women prefer men who can provide for them in the long-term (Buss 1989; Buss and Shackelford 2008). Therefore a male may reduce child support in order to show his new mate that he can provide for her. A man will also reduce child support (5) if he produces children with a new partner and this child lives with him (Manning and Smock 2000). Furthermore, reducing child support for noncustodial children could also be due to the child’s age, since the cost
of investing in an older child outweighs the benefits (Trivers 1974).

Furthermore, child support may be reduced (6) when confidence in paternity certainty is low or (7) when sexual access is terminated with the custodial mother. Finally, (8) men who engage in an affair or a short-term poach will refuse to pay child support when confidence in paternity of the offspring produced in the affair is low. This occurs because a man is at risk of investing in an offspring that is not his, and that decreases his fitness. Similarly, when a man does not resemble his offspring, he may be less likely to invest (Apicella and Marlowe 2004; Burch and Gallup Jr 2000; Gallup Jr et al. 2016) and consequently may be less likely to pay child support.

References


