



# The business of care: Marketization and the new geographies of childcare

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to outline a geographical research agenda for studying the marketization of childcare in Western neoliberal contexts. While childcare has been a key site of interrogation for feminist geographers, highlighting the profound inequities of marketized care for many who work in and use childcare, the contours of the childcare market as a situated and constructed economic entity has remained under-examined. I suggest that at a time when more families than ever rely on extra-familial childcare, an appreciation of how childcare markets function is urgently needed.

## Keywords

childcare, markets, neoliberalization, welfare reform, women's work

## 1 Introduction

The delivery of care,<sup>1</sup> as a key pillar of the welfare system, has undergone profound change in the last 20 years. Characterized in many contexts as the move towards neoliberal and third way approaches to welfare (Haylett, 2003; Milligan and Power, 2010; Mohan, 2003), there has been a significant restructuring in how, where and by whom care services are now delivered. While the means through which this restructuring occurs can vary, the objective in many cases is argued to be the same: to reduce the role and responsibility of the state in the delivery of care. Geographers have been intensely interested in the socio-spatial inequities being produced through the restructuring of care delivery. Within this work, childcare has long been an important site of analysis for highlighting the expression of gender inequality (Dyck, 1990; England, 1996; Halliday and Little, 2001;

Pinch, 1987; Pratt, 2003). A primary site of activism for second wave feminist movements, the initial provision of formalized childcare represented an important axis on which gender equity battles were waged. More recently childcare has gained renewed attention as a key part of the social infrastructure and increasingly as an educational resource in its own right (Gallagher, 2013b; Jupp, 2013; Jupp and Gallagher, 2013; Lister, 2003; Prentice, 2009).

The primary focus of this article is to consider the marketization of childcare provision in neoliberal contexts. Before doing so, there are a number of points of clarification to be made in

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order to situate the scope of the article. While there has been an increasing interest in the care of school-age children by geographers (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2016; Smith and Barker, 2001), in this article I refer to childcare specifically as the formalized extra-familial care of pre-school children, increasingly also known as early childhood care and education. Secondly, although there is significant variation in how childcare markets internationally are funded, structured and organized, this article is further limited to a consideration of neoliberal childcare markets in Western welfare states (see Lloyd and Penn, 2013, for other types of childcare markets). Thus the arguments put forward in this article relate specifically to welfare states which have adopted market mechanisms in the delivery of childcare, in lieu of developing childcare as a publically funded and provided service. This has been more prevalent in Anglophone contexts (notably Australia, Canada, the US, the UK and New Zealand), countries which have already been chosen for critical work by feminist geographers because of the impact of their trends towards large scale commodification in the organization and delivery of care (England, 1996; Fincher, 1996; Pratt, 2003).

There is a particular neoliberal imaginary of the childcare market which has gained currency in the policy communities of the countries outlined, and which has ultimately influenced debates over the last decade (Lloyd and Penn, 2013; White and Friendly, 2012). This representation of the childcare market is a significant departure from the notion of childcare as a public good (Daly, 2002). Instead, the market is purported to be the most 'efficient' means of meeting the changing needs of parents in dynamic working environments (see for example the OECD document *Babies and Bosses*, 2007). In this form of the market, the private sector takes on a more prominent role. Increasing its involvement allows for new investment, particularly with regards to the cost of

infrastructure, and is anticipated to offset reliance on a financially lean state. Under this arrangement parents are 'empowered' to exercise their consumer choice in seeking out the service that best fits their needs (Plantenga, 2012b). Moreover, strengthening the ability for parents to choose and move between services is thought to generate competitive pressures amongst providers, which will increase quality and reduce costs. Those services which are capable of meeting change in parental demand will succeed while those that do not will become obsolete, allowing for a more 'responsive' market environment.

However, the notion of a competitive childcare market is not without purview from the state. As Stephen Ball suggests with regard to education reform, 'changes [are] taking place at the nexus between regulation and midwifery, that is the role of the state in setting limits to the market while at the same time creating conditions within which the market can flourish and expand' (Ball, 2012: 17). While the state is a regulator of quality rather than a provider of services, it also has a significant hand in shaping the contours of the childcare market through market mechanisms. Although not all countries have introduced market mechanisms into childcare to the same extent (see Penn, 2014, for a discussion of this in the EU context), there has been some uniformity in the types of incentives introduced. Most notable of these has been demand-led subsidies to encourage the greater use of formalized services by parents. These incentives tend to take the form of childcare vouchers or subsidies, but can also operate as tax breaks for parents (Warner and Gradus, 2011). In most cases, funding has been made available to both for-profit and not-for-profit providers, with the intention to generate as much consumer 'choice' in the market as possible. That said, the injection of demand side investment has led to a sharp rise in the number of for-profit providers over existing forms of community and co-operative provision in the

last decade (Lloyd, 2012), as it is regarded as a state-funded business opportunity.<sup>2</sup> Illustrating the scale of this dramatic shift, Sumsion (2006) states, for example, that for-profit provision in Australia has increased by 400 per cent in the decade between 1991 and 2001. A recent trend within for-profit provision has been the growth of corporate childcare chains (Press and Woodrow, 2005).<sup>3</sup> As these organizations expand their share of the market, often through acquiring already established services, they have attracted the interest of domestic and international investors (White, 2013). Indeed, many of the largest international childcare chains, such as Bright Horizons or Busy Bees,<sup>4</sup> are currently trading on the stock market, which means that they are ultimately responsible to their shareholders and are charged with returning revenue for those investors.

Based on these identified trends within neoliberal childcare markets, the primary aim of this article is to outline a research agenda for studying the marketization of childcare. Childcare has not been immune to economic re-visioning (Prentice, 2009), and the prevalence of market mechanisms to deliver childcare to working households has been a cause of much concern (Brennan et al., 2012; Lloyd and Penn, 2013; Penn, 2011). As early childhood expert Helen Penn suggests, for the most part academics and advocates have tended to ignore the impacts of neoliberalization on childcare, labelling it the 'elephant in the room' which nobody wants to talk about because 'they believe that early childhood could or should be an exception to the trend towards privatization' (2007: 193). More broadly, this article speaks to recent calls in economic geography for the need to take the creation of markets as a central object of study (Berndt and Boeckler, 2009; Christophers, 2014; Peck, 2012). As Peck suggests, markets have until recently been 'hidden in plain sight' from geographers (2012: 114). Central to much of this work has been a concern about the power and reach of orthodox

economic representations of the market, not least because the idea of the market has been a key tenet to processes of neoliberalization. However, despite the extension and deepening of processes of marketization, we are no closer to seeing the wholesale realization of the 'perfect' market. Moreover, socio-spatial differences remain pertinent to how marketization processes materialize in practice. To bring these two aims together, in the latter half of this article I will explore the potential that engaging with a social studies of economization and marketization (SSEM) (Callon, 2007b; Mackenzie et al., 2007) perspective affords us as a means of studying childcare, and potentially other care markets, differently. In so doing I hope to offer avenues of research into the new political-economic alliances which are being put in place in order to meet the growing demand for childcare in an increasingly 'post-welfare' environment.

## **II Who cares? Women's work and problems with the childcare market**

The dramatic rise in women's employment over the last 30 years, most notably of mothers into the workforce, has been a key driver behind the increased demand for extra-familial childcare (OECD, 2001). However, the outsourcing of reproductive labour has not occurred evenly, leading many to raise concerns over who in society carries responsibility for the increasing burden of the 'second shift' (Hochschild and Machung, 2003). Geographers have been at the forefront of work which has looked at the daily implications of childcare provisioning for how families manage their work-life balance. Existing research has considered the disincentives for women re-entering the labour market when childcare options are either too scarce and/or expensive (Van Ham and Mulder, 2005). Others have considered the complex space-time patterns of mothers who try to manage their work

and care commitments, particularly where commuting between work and home is a factor (Jarvis, 2005; Schwanen et al., 2008). While the increased demand for childcare was initially met by informal childminders working in the home in many countries (such as the UK and Ireland; Gallagher, 2013a; Gregson and Lowe, 1995), there has been a change in the socio-spatial contexts within which much care is now being delivered (Boyer et al., 2012). Although home-based care remains an important part of the childcare market, there has been a more uniform shift towards formalized childcare, primarily in the form of centre-based care, a move which has been fuelled to a large extent by policy changes in the field around the role of early education for the long-term development of the child (Lister, 2003).

A key site of concern for many feminist geographers has been the growing inequities between women, in terms of who now does the majority of the outsourced care work in post-industrial economies (Lawson, 2007; McDowell, 2001; McDowell et al., 2005). As McDowell (2008) argues, while the gendered nature of the workforce in neoliberal childcare markets has gained attention, there is also an increasingly important class dimension, as it is a workforce which is largely fuelled by lower socio-economic and migrant labour groups (see also Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Pratt, 2003). The opening up of global labour markets, coupled with mass migration in search of work from 'developing' to 'developed' contexts, has fuelled a sub-sector of migrant women to provide childcare work in many Western economies. These women are doubly disadvantaged by being amongst the working poor, but also migrant workers with potentially precarious employment status. However, it is important to emphasize the role the state is also playing in shaping the dynamics of the childcare workforce. As Smith et al. (2008) have warned, strategies like the UK 'New Deal for Lone Parents' can channel single mothers (who such

programmes are addressing) into forms of low-paid employment, like that of childcare. The UK Department for Education and Skills, which conducted research into the childcare recruitment crisis, *advises* that a potential pool of childcare workers could be found in single mothers (see Osgood, 2006, for a discussion of class-based recruitments strategies for the Sure Start Unit, UK). As such, women are being retrained for employment in gendered sectors like childcare as it offers a relatively quick entry point into the workforce and signals a reduction in welfare 'dependency'. Although the majority of research by geographers into the politics of reproductive labour has emphasized the undervalued and underpaid nature of the work (by focusing on care work by nannies and childminders for example), a recent important paper by Boyer et al. (2012) has brought forth a different set of insights into the increasingly professionalized workforce of daycare in the UK which, as they suggest, is now the second most popular form of childcare.

The idea of the 'parent consumer' has become central to the regulation and governance of neoliberal childcare markets. It is interesting to note, however, that increasingly for parents (particularly working-class parents) the discourse of 'choice' which pervades policy and media discussions of childcare markets no longer relates to whether or not they choose to care for their children at home *or* place them into daycare, but rather it is choice of which service they will be placed in (Vincent et al., 2008). As Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2016) have recently argued, women's decision-making around productive and reproductive labour in the New Economy is increasingly shaped by the state through an extension of its role in childcare provisioning, notably afterschool care. Under neoliberal policy frameworks, for families in middle and lower socio-economic groups, the expectation across both economic and social policy is for the (re)entry of mothers to the workforce as the best means of mitigating the

potential long-term effects of social and economic disadvantage on children (Clarke, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). As Katz (2008) has argued, this reflects just one of the ways that parents are being made singularly responsible for prudent decision-making on behalf of their child(ren) and their future success, leading some to raise concerns over the dangers of ‘intensive parenting’ (Furedi, 2008; Shirani et al., 2012). However, the idea of parents as informed consumers is highly problematic, as many have argued that parents rarely have access to sufficient information to make the best decisions (Brennan, 2007; Plantenga, 2012a). Indeed, as Sarah Holloway (1998) has pointed out, parental decision-making around care takes place within situated childcare cultures (rather than through the notion of rational economic actors), such that what qualifies as ‘good’ care is often reproduced within place-based (and class-based) networks. Moreover, access to childcare plays a significant part in the constitution of class-based differences through the perpetuation of parenting cultures (Vincent et al., 2008). An important paper by Vincent and Ball (2001) delved further into how middle-class mothers engaged with the childcare market, considering their strategies and choices when it came to sourcing appropriate care for their child. Within this work, they refer to the way mothers attempt to personalize the transaction of care in the market (through sourcing care services via friendship networks or the ways parents seek to relate to their child’s carer). Parental ‘choice’ in these instances was driven as much by affect as it was by more objective measures like distance and cost.

A more recent political imperative motivating the growth of childcare has been the purported long-term benefits as an educational resource in its own right (OECD, 2001, 2006). The encouragement of children into pre-school environments is being justified as it speaks to the policy aim of combating the effects of educational disadvantage in later life, and has become a site of government investment and

subsidy, particularly for 3- to 5-year-olds (see, for example, the UK Sure Start Programme and the US Head Start Program). As Susan Prentice has illustrated, there has been an important change in the discourse of childcare in both Canada and the US such that it is increasingly positioned within an economic frame around that of the ‘investable child’ (Prentice, 2007, 2009). Moreover, this emergent ‘business case’ for spending in childcare in order to yield future gains has become a unifying narrative, seemingly speaking to diverse interests of corporate providers, feminist advocacy groups, and parents at the same time. The extension of this ‘business case’ for childcare in Canada and the US, but also in the policy debates of countries like New Zealand, the UK and Australia (Elizabeth and Lerner, 2009; Lister, 2003), is founded on a number of influential longitudinal studies<sup>5</sup> which have produced cost-benefit analyses to suggest that, from a policy perspective, investing in early education has the potential to reduce spending on social problems like crime and labour inactivity for the future (Schweinhart et al., 2005). To that extent, under a ‘social investment’ framework, spending on formalized childcare as early education has increasing political support as it is seen to potentially save on welfare spending on the child in later life, when the long-term effects of child poverty and marginalization are potentially more difficult to address (see Clarke, 2006, for a critical review of these outcomes).

Overall, much of this multidisciplinary work has sought to highlight the considerable disparities between the market ideal which has captured the imagination of policy-making communities, and the reality of marketized care as experienced by those who both use and work in childcare. On a more fundamental level, the use of markets to organize and deliver care as a social good has been contested (Green and Lawson, 2011; Lawson, 2007; Lloyd and Penn, 2010). Stemming from this work is a questioning of the viability of a childcare market at all, given the

deeply competing logics at work (Folbre and Nelson, 2000; McDowell et al., 2005). Critics have argued that the market ideal which has gained traction is fundamentally based around a set of assumptions derived from economics, assumptions which do not hold true when care and reproductive labour more generally are rendered into new forms of fictitious commodities (Fraser, 2014). Viewed through a capitalocentric lens, the market is criticized for equating value solely with economic value and, by extension, undermining the relational work at the heart of care labour (Folbre, 2001). This tension is understood to have become more pronounced, as processes of neoliberalization have extended the reach and penetration of markets into all aspects of life.

Despite the extent of criticism for the use of markets to organize and deliver childcare, attempts to redirect political debate from the policy acceptance of markets as the *only* viable solution have been met with little enthusiasm. However, I suggest that we need to move beyond a critique of the effects of the market on the delivery of care, as in so doing we leave untroubled the idea of the market itself and the neoliberal belief of the proliferation of markets to solve social problems. Furthermore, overlooking the constructed and situated nature of the market limits our ability to see beyond neoliberalism as a situated set of political and economic processes and to find new ways of understanding the profound changes which are occurring in the nature of the state in order to facilitate a market in care. In response, in the next section I will give a brief overview of some of the key aspects of an SSEM approach, and signal how it may be used by geographers to gain a deeper insight into the construction of childcare markets as situated and actually existing phenomena.

### III SSEM and the geographies of marketization

There is now a well-established interdisciplinary literature, inspired by actor-network theory,

which seeks to offer an empirically detailed understanding of how markets are made (Çalışkan and Callon, 2009; Callon, 2007b; Mackenzie et al., 2007; Muellerleile, 2013). Known collectively as the social studies of economization and marketization (SSEM), the work of Michel Callon has been central to this field of study (Callon, 1999, 2007a, 2007b). Born from a ‘pragmatic turn’ in the study of markets (Muniesa et al., 2007), this approach has sought to produce an anti-essentialist account of markets and the actors involved in their creation, and has been influenced by theories of performativity (Butler, 1990; Muniesa, 2014; Roelvink et al., 2015), and more generally by the post-structural vantage points afforded through the cultural turn which sought to overcome analytical essentialism. Building on this ontological perspective, seemingly stable concepts like ‘the economy’ and ‘the market’ are called into question, instead turning analysis to how such dominant ideas are actively constructed through interconnected webs of social relations and meaning. Taking nothing as having an a priori existence outside network relations, the SSEM approach seeks to ‘uncover the (often hidden) presuppositional arrangements that organise the world, including “economic life”’ (Ouma, 2015: 24).

Markets then are taken as a primary object of study, and are viewed as diverse ‘socio-technical agencements’ (STAs), comprised of actors, rules and regulations, texts, discourses and material devices (Berndt and Boeckler, 2011). As such, those working in this vein seek to avoid reducing markets to a singular object (‘the market’), acknowledging there are multiple ways of structuring and ordering markets (depending on whether it is a care market or a market for derivatives, for example). Influenced by actor network theory, agency in shaping the market STA can be exercised by both the human and non-human, through their networked position in the market assemblage. Agency is distributed through the network, exceeding the

embodied capacity of the individual. Scope is made in the analysis for the potential agency of material objects and technologies to shape the conditions of the market STA (such as the impact of the shopping trolley to present-day consumption practices (Cochoy, 2009). Agency can be understood then as the outcome of material elements, devices, discourses, and embodied skills which act in conjunction to position an actor within the network. Power to act within the market, and to influence its design, is determined by where different actors are situated in relational networks, producing a flattened view of market interaction.

In examining how markets are constituted as ‘practical accomplishments’ (Berndt and Boeckler, 2011: 567), significant attention is given to the often overlooked role of market devices in making markets. Indeed as Muniesa et al. (2007: 2) provocatively ask, ‘can a market exist without a set of market devices?’ A market device can include ‘banal’ aspects, such as pricing models, accounting methods or regulatory frameworks. However, these devices are crucial in order to allow for the extension of processes of marketization into new and uncharted fields, through setting the rules of markets in terms of the kinds of products and/or services deemed as having value (as nothing has value a priori in the market) and through setting the basis for their commodification and exchange (Müller, 2014). The work they do in shaping the market involves a highly selective ordering process, where certain connections are cut and others established (and to some extent made temporarily irreversible) in order to stabilize or ‘frame’ the market as an economic entity. In an increasingly dynamic environment, attempts to stabilize or frame the market STA are regularly tested. The actors enrolled are connected to different networks and worlds, through which other logics emerge to destabilize the market, leading to a process known as ‘overflowing’. As Callon (2007a) has suggested, it is the generation of overflows which leads to a ‘proliferation

of the social’, such that new and unanticipated concern groups (such as new consumer interest groups) may be generated. It is precisely because agents, whether human or non-human, have links to other worlds that overflows are a dialectical part of the process of framing markets. Indeed for a market to gain stability they need to be constantly (re)performed into being.

One of the most pertinent insights from this work, which has been adopted widely across the social sciences, has been the relationship between bodies of knowledge (particularly economic knowledge) and the proliferation of markets (Callon, 2007b; Mitchell, 2005). Rather than reinforce the claims of orthodox economics, that ideal markets do exist and that deviations from this are ‘market failures’, it is suggested that it is a misrepresentation to understand economic models as abstractions from the world (Callon, 2007b). Instead, economic knowledge has a direct role in creating the world which it seeks to describe. In other words, it is performative (Mitchell, 2005). Apart from the work of academic economists (referred to as *confined* economists) producing such knowledge, attention is also given to the work of the ‘economist in the wild’ in realizing the market STA (Callon, 2007a). Economists in the wild are those actors who practise and perform economic knowledge in the world through their work, including formal economists (acting as consultants, for example), but also the increasingly important work of accountants, marketers and other kinds of business school graduates (Hall, 2008). Indeed, these kinds of economic intermediaries have proliferated under neoliberalism, as markets are increasingly used as the means of both providing and regulating all sorts of resources, from housing to aged care.

Recent work in geography has illuminated points of productive engagement with this vein of economic sociology, through a call for a ‘geographies of marketization’ as a critical research agenda (Berndt and Boeckler, 2012; Birch and Siemiatycki, 2015; Ouma, 2015).

As Peck (2012) suggests, the purpose of such a project would not be to add to the accounts of ideal market ‘exceptionalism’ nor to report on markets behaving badly (and leave untroubled the normalization of markets under neoliberalism). Rather, it would be to substantiate heterodox claims regarding the workings of actual markets, along with their primary axes of socio-economic differentiation. While the SSEM approach can offer some novel avenues through which to study markets, it has not been without criticism (Christophers, 2014; Fine, 2003; Miller, 2002). For some, concerns have been raised about the move away from systematic and more generalizable analyses of markets under capitalism, instead producing fine-grained, descriptive ethnographies which some argue lack explanatory power (Christophers, 2014). Muellerleile and Akers (2015), while endorsing the approach, query the politics inherent in the kinds of research conducted through a SSEM lens, and suggest a greater emphasis is needed on answering the ‘why’ questions (for example, why do some markets get performed over others? [2015: 1785]). Lastly, some have considered how power inequities are captured through a relational and flattened view of market interaction endorsed via this approach. Questions of power and material distribution are certainly important, as markets are very seldom egalitarian in their outcomes (as discussed in the previous section with regard to childcare). A close reading of work in SSEM suggests that there is scope for a critical account of how inequality is (re)produced, with the strength of its contribution in its ability to produce a detailed examination of power relations as expressed in and through markets, taking account of the discourses and material devices involved in maintaining them (Berndt and Boeckler, 2011). Influenced by the growing literature in geography which seeks to engage with this work and open the conceptual and empirical ‘black box’ of markets to critical scrutiny, in the subsequent section of this paper

I will outline what this approach can offer to the study of neoliberal childcare markets (given that care markets have yet to feature in the SSEM literature to date). In so doing, I hope that the suggested research trajectories could also have relevance for the analysis of care markets more generally.

## **IV Studying the childcare market: Some avenues for geographical enquiry**

### *I A ‘flattened’ view of childcare markets*

In geography, existing research on childcare has tended to focus on the local and national level, where disparities between policy objectives and access to services are more visible (for example see edited collection by England, 1996). While it is not desirable to completely abandon the notion of hierarchical scalar relations in regard to care, as much policy and service delivery is created through these governance structures (see Mahon, 2006), I suggest that there is value in re-theorizing the scalar understandings we have been using to examine the childcare market. To that extent drawing on a networked approach to studying the market will offer different insights and allow for intersecting relations, which may cut across and through scalar hierarchies as articulated in policy, to become evident. One area this ‘flattened’ view of market interaction could fruitfully be used to study is the increase in foreign ownership of childcare through international investment funds. The growth of international education investment funds (such as G8 Education), who are actively seeking out opportunities in new care markets,<sup>6</sup> calls into question the way we examine the delivery of childcare as solely involving relationships between state, providers and parents and the policy/delivery interface. As with the example of the collapse of international childcare corporate ABC Learning Australia in 2008,<sup>7</sup> the flows of capital outwards from



locally-embedded services to overseas investors can create inherent instability in what is an increasingly crucial social service, not only for meeting the needs of working families but also for delivering on some important policy aims in relation to young children. There are also important lines of connection opening up between pension funds seeking out international investment opportunities and the domestic growth of childcare, such that we may be witnessing the leveraging of care of the young to furnish the retirement of the current working generation.<sup>8</sup> Thus I suggest that working with a SSEM approach, and a more topological understanding of market relations, can allow for a revived examination of how existing and new inequities are being (re)produced.

Using a flattened view of market relations can also be insightful for understanding some of the changes taking place in the daily practice of marketized childcare. An example from my current fieldwork which illustrates this relates to the wide-scale introduction of e-portfolios and other forms of online parent-child-teacher engagement which has 'gone viral' within many of the childcare markets identified.<sup>9</sup> These communication platforms, facilitated by the integration of computing devices like tablets into the care environment, allow for carers to capture and record key moments in the child's day. These stories are then shared online with whoever has been granted access to the child's portfolio (such as parents or grandparents, for example). Recipients of the story are then encouraged to respond, via the text or recorded message function, thus fuelling continuous engagement between parent, child and carer. The proliferation of this technology within childcare centres in New Zealand since 2012 has been dramatic, as it is seen by many as offering an innovative advantage in an increasingly competitive market.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, these technologies are opening up new topological relations, as (grand)parents, carers and children are drawn closer through the online

interaction. On the other, the data being captured via the online platform are generating new economic objects, in the form of pictures, stories, recordings and so forth. As such, this data is already taking on alternative and unexpected functions, as it has facilitated the production of graphs and other visual representations of levels of engagement between carer, parent and child (such as how many stories were created per child and if/when parents logged on to view them), and offers a new perspective into the daily work of childcare for managers of services using the technology. Moreover, the space of the care centre is being made visible in new ways for potentially distant owners, who are now able to render the care relationship between parents, child and carer quantifiable through the data being generated. There is scope for these new networked and topological relationships to be critically examined by geographers, as they are profoundly changing both the experience and practice of childcare for children, parents and carers in the emergent market.

## *2 Commodifying childcare: Market devices and the role of the non-human*

The commodification of childcare has been a source of ongoing concern for feminist geographers and theorists more generally over the past 20 years, with much work focusing on the negative impacts of the commodification of care, once it becomes a service for sale. I argue that the SSEM approach can extend in new ways existing insights into how care is commodified, most notably around how care is being redefined as a commodity through emergent socio-technical networks within the market. A focus on the work of market devices in rendering care into a service for sale can offer a more detailed and historically specific understanding of how care is commodified within specific markets. What kinds of market devices exist in each market STA would itself require empirical investigation, but for childcare they may include things

like consultancy reports (for example, the UK Childcare Market Report [Laing and Buisson, 2015]), government funding programmes, or planning regulations.

Secondly, the commodification of care through the market involves an increasingly diverse range of actors. Apart from the work of formal economists (through consultancy work or policy engagement), there has been a proliferation of what can be identified as ‘economists in the wild’ (such as specialized finance companies, software developers and childcare property sales specialists). In examining how care is being commodified, there is a need for a better understanding of the work of these actors as part of the emergent market and their role in shaping how the market is constituted. Rather than view such groups as opportunistic individuals trying to benefit from the new profit-making spaces made available through the neoliberalization of the sector, or indeed as fuelling a more ‘efficient’ childcare market through their work (as economists may view them), they can instead be understood as market-making actors in their own right. Furthermore, the work of these actors in shaping the market STA is being facilitated to a significant extent by the non-human. Another example from my current research in NZ suggests that there has been a wide-scale integration of cloud computing software<sup>11</sup> into the management of childcare facilities in the last decade. Demand for childcare during this time, coupled with the introduction of government subsidies into the sector, has led to a significant increase in enrolments in childcare (with participation at 96% of children under five by 2015 [Ministry of Education, 2015]). This has been further facilitated by changes to the licensing requirements in 2011 which allowed for a major growth in the average size and capacity of centres. At the same time, government regulation and reporting has increased exponentially in line with accountability structures around new funding systems. Indeed, the system is now such that

services are at a disadvantage by not having the software in place as a means of recording and communicating data back to the Ministry of Education. Rather than view the uptake of the management software as solely evidence of creeping managerialism in the sector characteristic of neoliberalization (Osgood, 2004), as a market *device*, the computing software can instead be seen as having agency in actually facilitating the growth of services by making the storage and management of huge amounts of data possible. To that extent the software has been instrumental in allowing the expansion of centres, changing the economies of scale of these services and thus inciting the interest of corporate investors who can now operate services at a much larger scale than before (see the prospectus of Evolve Education, 2016, for example). I suggest that studying these changes in relation to the commodification of childcare requires a more central consideration of the work of both human and non-human actors, and the SSEM approach can offer interesting avenues of research for those working in/on childcare and care more generally under neoliberalism.

### 3 Framing the childcare market

This article has been limited to a discussion of formalized, regulated childcare. However, a key concern for governments in the contexts discussed has been the continued reliance of families on paid ‘informal’ childcare (unregistered childminders and nannies for example) in lieu of the formalized sector. Indeed the very idea of a ‘formalized’ sector throws into sharp relief the highly constructed nature of childcare markets and reminds us of the broader economy of care of which it is a part (Gibson-Graham, 2006). There is considerable scope for a consideration of how the childcare market is being framed in relation to the changing work-life demands of parents in post-industrial economies. Despite the expansion of the formalized sector, for many

informal childcare remains a crucial element facilitating workforce participation, either through choice (such as trust in a friend to care for your child(ren), cultural reasons (many minority ethnic groups prefer to use informal childcare arrangements) or necessity (the options available in the formalized sector do not meet your needs) (Ball and Vincent, 2005; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Important questions can be asked as to what kind of childcare is deemed as a legitimate service, and what is marginalized or undermined in the market? Furthermore, who is disadvantaged through a reliance on childcare options which are not deemed to be within the formalized sector? In posing these questions, a consideration of the role of market devices is crucial to understanding how legitimization and valuation of particular forms of care occurs, as they are central to how the market is organized and how childcare as a particular kind of commodity is framed.

An example of what this could look like empirically relates to the growing demand for childcare outside traditional working hours, which is posing a significant problem in a number of neoliberal childcare markets. For the most part, families with atypical working hours are relying on informal childcare during their working day (such as relatives, nannies or baby sitters), in turn often making them exempt from crucial financial supports like childcare tax credits and subsidies which relate primarily to the formalized sector (Glendinning and Kemp, 2006; Skinner and Finch, 2006). A recent study by the Daycare Trust on atypical working hours estimated that only 35 per cent of employees work standard hours, with almost half of all single parents working atypical hours in the UK (Rutter and Evans, 2012). Given the move towards greater employment in the service sector (Perrons, 2003; Perrons et al., 2005), there is a growing need to recognize the demands for childcare outside the traditional working hours of 9 to 5. One consequence of this shift has been the recent emergence in the UK of co-operative

childcare and childminding services for parents with atypical working hours. In Australia the government has tackled the issue directly and commissioned research trials into the possibility of instigating 'flexible' childcare (Baxter and Hand, 2016), in the form of weekend centre-based care or home-based nannies. From a SSEM perspective, the demand for childcare outside what already exists and is legitimated in the market can be understood as the rise of a new 'concerned group' for care in line with the changing nature of post-industrial employment. At the very least it is calling into question the dominance of centre-based *daycare* provision within the current market STA and the devices, discourses, and texts used to stabilize and normalize its position within the market (such as the scope of the regulations and structure of government subsidies in favour of centre-based care). There is scope then for geographers working on the changing relationship between productive and reproductive labour in post-industrial societies to adopt the SSEM lens to consider how the childcare market is being stabilized and/or challenged in response to new employment patterns, and indeed how that differently affects particular parents and children as consumers of care (see recent work by Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2016). This research agenda could also be extended by taking seriously children's experiences of and their potential agency in shaping the care they receive (whether it is in the formal or informal sector), rather than view them as passive objects of study within the market (Smith and Barker, 2000).

## V Conclusion

Childcare provision poses a considerable problem for governments and their policy communities in neoliberal contexts. On the one hand, it is a key social infrastructure upon which many new social and economic policy outcomes for families are premised (Esping-Andersen, 2002;

Lister, 2003). On the other, it represents a burgeoning financial expectation, which ideologically and politically cannot be justified as a publically provided resource. This article has considered how demands for pre-school childcare are being met in neoliberal contexts, countries which have long adopted a mixed economy of care, involving family, private (for-profit and not-for-profit) and state-supported services (Mahon and Michel, 2002). However, the growing emphasis on market-based restructuring within these welfare states has resulted in the reliance on an expanded private for-profit sector within this mix to deliver care services, meet growing parental demand and help achieve new policy objectives, characteristic of what Peck and Tickell (2002) termed 'roll out' neoliberalism.

Contributing to existing work in geography, critical social policy and education on childcare, the primary aim of this article has been to outline a research agenda through which we can study the marketization of childcare. Specifically, it has aimed to shed light on how childcare markets are being constituted, and to consider how existing and new forms of inequality are being produced in and through the market. Issues of social justice remain pertinent to the expression of emergent childcare markets, not least because the initial questions of gender equality which motivated early work largely remain (De Meester et al., 2011). In advocating for this research agenda, this article also speaks to a burgeoning literature in economic geography which has called for markets to become a focus of study in their own right. In so doing we are encouraged to question the seemingly natural and taken-for-granted concept of 'the market', and to consider it as a geographically and historically situated phenomenon. Making use of an SSEM lens and a broader literature on the performativity of markets, I have sought to illustrate that childcare markets involve much more than the state, providers and parents. There are a wealth of other actors involved, such as advocacy groups,

software developers, finance companies and overseas investors, as well as the work of 'banal' market devices (like regulations, licensing requirements, or cloud computing software) which all serve to frame the market in a particular way. Thus, examining the provision of childcare through the market increasingly requires a detailed consideration of the broad range of actors (both human and non-human) drawn into the market and the materiality of the market itself.

The commodification of care has been a point of continuous concern for many who feel that the fundamental relational nature of care is compromised once it becomes a service for sale. Yet as Cox (2013: 494) asks in a special issue on commodified care, should we assume from the outset that the market is unsuitable or incompatible with the delivery of care? In posing this provocative question she invites us to re-engage with the spaces and practices of marketized care to consider what exactly is problematic in the expression of diverse paid care relationships. A similar argument has been made by Boyer et al. (2013) in their study of centre-based childcare, illustrating that centres have the potential to be deeply caring spaces even though they operate for profit. There are undoubtedly problems arising from the way care has been commodified within capitalist economies. Overall, this work and indeed the argument of this article, is not a defence of marketized care, but rather a call to re-visit the complex spaces and practices of commodified care anew within a diverse economy of childcare (Gibson-Graham, 2006). I suggest that to understand how care is being commodified, we must gain a better understanding of how particular childcare markets are being constructed. As I have suggested, through the use of an SSEM lens this would not only consider the relative position of different providers in the market but also the work of discourses, texts, funding systems, software packages, regulations and so on, in framing and performing a particular version of the market.

The ideal of rational actors making exchanges in perfect markets is anathema to the practice and ethics of care, but rarely does neoliberalism come close to producing that ideal (Mirowski, 2013). Nevertheless, it has important effects. A study of the relational nature of childcare markets can help us to better grasp what is changing in the sector, not only (as Penn, 2007, has called for) to understand the impact of processes of neoliberalization on the care of young children but also to see what possibilities for progressive change might be emerging.

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### Notes

1. In this article I am referring to care in the relatively narrow sense of health, elderly and childcare services, although I recognize that it can be used more broadly to incorporate services like social housing (Smith, 2005) and support shelters (Johnson et al., 2005).
2. 'This is a business subsidised by government – how can it be unprofitable?' (Chairperson, ABC Learning, 2008)
3. There has, however, been a slowdown in the expansion of childcare chains in the wake of the financial crisis (Blackburn, 2013).
4. Bright Horizons is US-based but operates 750 childcare centres across the US, the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, India and Canada. Busy Bees, the UK's biggest childcare chain, was purchased in 2013 by a Canadian Teachers' Pension Plan group for £220 million (Farrell, 2013).
5. Notably, the Perry Preschool Study conducted by the Highscope Foundation ([www.Highscope.org](http://www.Highscope.org)). One of the often-quoted measures of this investment has come from the Perry Preschool Project, which states that every \$1 invested by the state into a Highscope Programme will save society \$7 in terms of a reduction in future welfare spending on that child.
6. Policy interventions around early education, but also fertility incentives (such as Australia's 'Baby Bonus' and the drive to increase the fertility rate in Singapore) are described in the investor prospectus as indicators of significant growth in the childcare sector and are rationalized as the basis for investment in these countries (see, for example, *G8 Annual Report 2015*).
7. As Newbury and Brennan (2013) have identified, the pressure to operate as a viable business has led to some questionable business and accounting practices in the delivery of childcare. Drawing on analysis of the collapse of ABC Learning Australia, they explore the impact of its separation of childcare properties from its business operation (something they call the opco-propco model). ABC Learning in effect sold its properties and leased them back at a guaranteed rent, in order to release capital to expand its business and make the most of government subsidies into the sector. While the company held few tangible assets on its books by the end, its value was amassed through a high proportion of intangible assets, like its childcare licences, which allowed its balance sheet to grow from \$28 million in 2001 to a reported \$296 million in 2009. This complex financialization arrangement (of purchase, sale and rental back) even extended to toys and equipment used in the facilities. Rising property rentals put pressure on the cost of care for parents until eventually the model was unsustainable and the company collapsed in 2008.
8. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan bought up Busy Bees in the UK for \$400 million in 2014.
9. See, for example, Educa or Storypark in New Zealand. Both of these companies are building up significant traction in other childcare markets, like Australia, Singapore and Canada.
10. See, for example: <http://www.educationreview.co.nz/magazine/november-2013/making-learning-stories-come-alive-with-technology/#.WBqgJk27qpo>

11. See, for example, the Infocare software package ([http://www.info-care.biz/what\\_is\\_infocare.html](http://www.info-care.biz/what_is_infocare.html)).

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