



THE CENTER ON LAW, EQUALITY AND RACE & THE CENTER IN LAW, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Present:



*"I Do for My Kids: Negotiating Race,
Class and Gender in Child Support
Enforcement Proceedings"*

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Abstract:

This qualitative study examines how attorney representation and other more limited forms of legal assistance affect civil court proceedings for low-income litigants. In each of our two field sites, we are conducting a focused ethnography of child support enforcement cases at a county courthouse. Each research site comprises a busy child support docket in an economically depressed community. The child support obligors in these cases are predominately low-income noncustodial fathers, racially diverse, and include a critical mass of historically marginalized groups. Our findings examine how legal professionals and obligors negotiate the court hearings, interact with each other, and make meaning from the court process. In this context, we interrogate the race, gender and class dimensions of the court process for low-income litigants. In particular, our findings show how government attorneys construct multiple (and sometimes conflicting) narratives to justify the legal positions they take in enforcement actions against very low-income obligors. We also examine the counter-narratives presented by obligors in their defense, and under what circumstances (and how) the parties struggle over their competing narratives.

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