

Neoliberal Pedagogies of Motherhood at an Ontario Early Years Centre

This article examines how the neoliberal turn is shaping the realm of motherhood in Canada by focusing on the activities of government-funded Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYC)s. New mothers are often targets for expert interventions that aim to fulfill particular political, economic, or social objectives. In the province of Ontario, many state-sanctioned messages about raising children are disseminated through OEYC)s. I argue that OEYC activities are shaped by, and in turn reproduce, neoliberal values, techniques, and philosophies. Through their activities, OEYC)s promote the values of responsibility, reliance on experts, risk management, and a commitment to self-improvement, thus inculcating in the participant mothers a subjectivity that is consistent with neoliberal objectives. This secures the optimal social reproduction of the future generation for the knowledge economy, while placing the entire responsibility for this on the shoulders of mothers. The case of the OEYC)s illustrates the way in which the contemporary Canadian state acts on the most intimate areas of life to forge subjectivities that align people with neoliberal agendas.

In parts of the world including Canada, the United States and Britain, the experience of raising children has been subject to state intervention since at least the nineteenth century, although the nature of this intervention has changed over time (Hulbert, Donzelot). Concomitantly, changing values and ideas about mothering have been linked to major political, economic, and social changes in history (Hays). Over the past few decades, countries comprising the so-called Global North have been undergoing a series of political, economic, and social processes often referred to by the catch-all phrase “neoliberalism.” These processes have deep-reaching implications for all aspects of social life and social reproduction, including mothering and motherhood. As Melinda

Vandenbeld Giles put it, mothers are “the primary producers, consumers, and reproducers of the neoliberal world” (1). Neoliberally oriented reforms and policies shape mothers’ economic possibilities and the kinds of resources available to mothers and their children (Braedley and Luxton). For example, reforms that seek to curb public spending often target areas such as childcare, education, or healthcare, in effect disproportionately affecting children and their mothers. In turn, mothers perform much of the unpaid work of raising future citizens and workers (Braedley and Luxton). Neoliberal processes also influence values and ideas about what it means to be a good mother and what kinds of things children need to develop (Hays; Vandenbeld Giles). These values and ideas are produced, disseminated, and potentially negotiated in a multitude of sites and by numerous agents, including the media, schools, doctors’ offices, advice literature, and charity organizations. This article examines how the neoliberal turn is shaping the context of Canadian motherhood by focusing on one particular institution: the Ontario Early Years Centre (OEYC). OEYCs are government-funded umbrella spaces that offer an array of services for caregivers (mostly mothers) and children under the age of five. For many Canadian mothers, they are an important point of contact with state-sanctioned ideologies about what it means to be a mother. In what follows, I examine the messages about motherhood that are disseminated through the OEYCs. I argue that these centres serve as umbrella spaces that bring together particular discourses about raising children. These discourses, in turn, create a particular image of what it means to be a good mother, in effect instilling in the participant mothers a subjectivity consistent with the values promoted by neoliberal political and economic arrangements. Thus, the case of the OEYCs illustrates the way in which state power acts on the gendered sphere of childrearing to promote ways of acting, feeling, and being that are consistent with prevailing political, economic and social objectives.

Ontario Early Years Centres

Early years centres are funded and ran through a partnership between provincial governments and non-for-profit community organizations such as YMCAs, service clubs, or church groups (Vosko). In the province of Ontario, where this research was conducted, the Ministry of Education contributes to funding approximately two hundred Ontario Early Years Centres (OEYCs). OEYCs were created in the year 2001 by Ontario’s then-conservative government as the cornerstone of this government’s Early Years Plan. Broadly speaking, this plan sought to reconstitute early childhood development as a private affair and thus shift the responsibility for it back to the family sphere (Vosko). The mandate of OEYCs is to “support families,” and in what follows, I argue that

they do this in a particular way that is grounded in neoliberal philosophy about personhood and childrearing.

In the town of St. Catharines (population just over 130,000) where I conducted this research, most public health initiatives directed at mothers with young children are offered through and/or housed in, OEYCs. The programs that OEYCs offer include breastfeeding classes, prenatal classes, baby massage classes, and workshops on topics such as early literacy, sleep training, or toddler tantrums. The classes are usually run by an OEYC employee (most of whom come from either a counseling or an early childhood education background), sometimes jointly with a public health nurse, infant development specialist, or literacy consultant. Many OEYCs have a resource centre where one can borrow books on topics, such as breastfeeding or infant sleep, and they offer drop-in sessions where caregivers can talk with a public health nurse or infant development specialist. They also offer child-oriented craft workshops where children can make their own playdough or a holiday keepsake. And last, they are also well equipped with toys and serve as spaces where caregivers can bring their children simply to play.

Not all the OEYC programs target mothers explicitly; however, mothers are clearly their principal target population and constitute the bulk of the attendees. Interestingly, in the prenatal and even breastfeeding classes that I attended, I saw both mothers and fathers. In classes on baby massage or infant brain development, however, I saw a father accompanying the mother only occasionally, and no father ever attended alone. This phenomenon is in line with other studies that show that mothers are more likely than fathers to attend workshops on children's development, read advice literature, and seek advice from experts (Wall).

This research is based on four years of ongoing participant observation at three early years centres in St. Catharines. I first began attending OEYC activities when I was pregnant with my first child. In the course of these workshops, I noticed that they conveyed particular ideas about motherhood, and I began to think about them anthropologically. At the time, I had just wrapped up a research project that looked at the consequences of twenty years of neoliberal reforms in postsocialist Poland. The Polish scenario taught me that implementing a new political and economic arrangement required the creation of new subjectivities and ideas about personhood (Dunn). What struck me is that the values being trumpeted in Poland as the hallmark of the new postsocialist order were also being taught to Canadian mothers in baby classes. This triggered my interest in looking at how particular subjectivities are consciously promoted and constructed through various hegemonic discourses to serve particular political, economic, and social ends. To pursue this thread, I attended prenatal classes, breastfeeding classes, baby massage classes, workshops on positive relationships

and attachment, a support group for new mothers called “Baby Talk,” and a support group for mothers of premature babies called “Early Beginnings.” I also took my children to OEYCs simply to play as I chatted with other mothers and OEYC employees. As I participated in these activities, I paid attention to the values and ideas about mothering that were conveyed through them, and I attempted to situate these ideas in the larger political and economic context that frames the lives of contemporary Canadian mothers.

Neoliberal Subjectivity

This article approaches neoliberalism as both a political-economic project (Harvey) and as an ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities, the latter drawing in particular on Foucauldian-inspired approaches to governmentality (Rose; Miller and Rose). Neoliberalism is not a homogeneous “thing”; rather, it is a process that is articulated differently in different places and changes over time (Connell; Peck and Tickell). Nonetheless, there are certain common patterns frequently associated with neoliberal arrangements, ways of governing, and rationalities. These arrangements are based on market principles, including individualism, efficiency, flexibility, competition, private property and mobility of capital (Connell; Harvey; Ortner). In the sphere of politics and economics, these values translate into actions such as removing government regulations or business, or privatizing and reducing public goods and institutions (for example, education or childcare). As governments and corporations implement such political and economic programs, they deploy a variety of technologies to legitimize them in popular opinion and mobilize people’s participation in them. In effect, people begin to “govern themselves” in accordance with neoliberal principles. This means that these principles are intended to quite literally “get inside us” in order to engender certain personhoods and subjectivities. In short, neoliberalism is not just about governing economies or states; it is about “governing the soul” (Rose).

So what kind of subjectivity is being forged through these governing practices? Since neoliberalism is not a homogeneous “thing,” there can be no such thing as a single neoliberal subjectivity. However, existing literature points to a number of values, behaviours, beliefs, and feelings that are promoted and produced by neoliberal-oriented political, economic, and social arrangements. In broad terms, a neoliberal perspective views people as individuals who manage themselves according to the logic of the market (Miller and Rose; Ong). These individuals are independent, responsible for their own wellbeing, and do not rely on the state for support (Miller and Rose). They are free to make choices and take risks; however, they also assume ultimate responsibility for their choices and failures (Gershon 540; Eagleton-Pierce 23). Neoliberal subjects

are guided through the decision-making process by experts, whose job it is to steer or guide people to make particular choices aligned with larger societal objectives. Through adherence to expert knowledge, people are engaged in a constant project of self-improvement, always trying to become a better version of themselves.

These behaviours, beliefs, and feelings are constructed, implemented, and negotiated at a variety of scales and by different actors (see for example Li; Ho; Dunk; Dunn; Matza). I now turn to examine how these subjectivities are constructed, disseminated, and potentially negotiated at Ontario Early Years Centres.

Neoliberal Subjectivities at Ontario Early Years Centres

1. The Mother Assumes Personal Responsibility for Herself and Her Children

The notion that people are independent agents responsible for their own fate is one of the linchpins of neoliberal philosophy (Miller and Rose 28). In contemporary North American society, it is the parents (and most often, the mother) who is deemed responsible for all aspects of children's wellbeing. Indeed, OEYC activities are premised on the idea that mothers will educate themselves on how to raise children and then implement this knowledge in their lives, largely on their own. OEYCs provide resources in the form of information, but they do not help with the implementation. For example, they do not provide childcare (except under certain limited circumstances for mothers who are attending certain workshops). In fact, they actually create more work for mothers, since their primary activity consists of providing workshops that instruct mothers in all the things they should be doing with their babies, such as baby massage techniques or various sensory activities to stimulate babies' brains. Even when mothers bring their children to OEYCs for drop-in play, the onus is on them to supervise their children's play—and of course to clean up after them.

2. The Mother Listens to Expert Advice

Expert intervention into the raising of children (and hence, the conduct of mothers) has a long history in countries such as Canada, United States, Britain and France, dating to at least the mid-nineteenth century (Rose; Hulbert; Smeyers; Donzelot). However, the nature of this intervention evolved over time, in response to changing political, economic, and social conditions, and also varied from place to place (Daly; Hulbert). Although the subjection of parenting to expert gaze is not in itself new, scholars argue that contemporary field of expertise differs from that of the past in certain important ways. First, the degree to which contemporary parenting is colonized by experts

is unprecedented (Furedi; Lee). One phenomenon that illustrates this is the explosion of parent education programs (Gillies). Whereas in the past reliance on experts co-existed with recognition of parents' instincts, nowadays parenting is seen as an acquired skillset that can only be learned from experts (Lee 65). Furthermore, the focus of expertise shifted from describing childhood development to prescribing what parents should be doing (Lee 66-67). The way in which this is carried out, however, reflects the particular role that expertise plays in the neoliberal arrangement. Although experts are charged with the responsibility of teaching people how to manage themselves successfully, they do it through subtle guidance, steering and empowering, rather than through coercion, since people are assumed to be independent individuals capable of making their own decisions (Miller and Rose 35).

The fact that the bulk of OEYC activities consist of providing workshops illustrates that mothers are presumed to need expert guidance to properly raise their children. In fact, expert gaze extends to every minute detail of parenting. For example, mothers are instructed to make eye contact with their babies in order to properly "bond" with them or to imitate any sound their baby makes to encourage speech development. Workshop facilitators present themselves as working with the participants; for example, I often heard them describe their role as "we're not here to tell you what to do; we're here to reinforce the great job that you're already doing." However, the information that follows such disclaimers suggests that mothers are indeed presumed to be in need of being instructed to do things like make eye contact with their babies or smile at them.

3. The Mother Works Hard to Optimize Her Children's Development

Raising a child is no longer seen as something that happens organically; rather, it becomes broken down into a myriad of skills that must be perfected in order to achieve optimal development (Faircloth 22). Thus, many OEYC activities are geared toward teaching mothers about children's cognitive and emotional development, along with activities intended to promote it. For example, one of the first developmental milestones that a baby is supposed to achieve is following an object with their eyes, a phenomenon known as "tracking." In a support group for new mothers, the facilitator, a public health nurse, recommended buying popsicle sticks, painting them black and white (because newborns' vision is not yet fully developed and black-and-white objects stand out the most), and moving them in front of babies' eyes to get them to track.

This focus on fostering and enhancing development reflects the values that characterize the contemporary economy (Nadesan). In her analysis of children's developmental toys, Maija Nadesan argues that these toys purport to develop the same skills that are in demand in North American "knowledge economy,"

such as literacy and communication. Given the profound insecurity that characterizes the contemporary workplace, parents turn to developmental toys in an effort to give their children a “leg up” and prepare them for an uncertain future. If we extend Nadesan’s argument to developmental activities more generally, we can see that they serve the same goal: to prepare the next generation of “knowledge workers” for tomorrow’s uncertain economy.

4. The Mother Is Always Trying to Be A Better Mother

In a neoliberal society, a person is treated as “a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed” (Martin 582). People are expected to be always trying to improve themselves to become better version of themselves. This entails cultivating appropriate skills, behaviours and even feelings—a phenomenon that Michel Foucault has termed “technologies of the self” (18). And indeed, the very motive behind OEYC workshops is to teach women how to be better mothers by teaching them specific skills and behaviours, such as age-appropriate developmental activities to engage their babies or the correct way to respond to a toddler tantrum. Mothers are also taught to adopt certain affective dispositions, such as frequently smiling at their baby in order to foster bonding and positive attachment. Thus, mothers are simultaneously engaging in two development projects: they are optimizing their children’s development, and they are also working on themselves so that they can be better mothers. Indeed, one of the messages that women receive is that babies model their caregivers, so in order to optimize her baby’s development, a mother has to work on herself. This includes not only learning new skills (such as baby massage) but also working on her personality. For example, in a workshop dealing with separation anxiety, the facilitator explained that since children pick up on their parents’ emotions, they may cry during separation because they sense the mother’s own anxiety. This argument renders the mother both the cause of, and the solution to, the child’s problem, and charges her with the responsibility of managing her own feelings for the sake of being a good role model for her child.

5. The Mother Is Responsible for Her Own (and Her Child’s) Failures

As the above example shows, the mother is held responsible for both her own, and her child’s failures. In a world where people are seen as independent actors in charge of their destinies, they are also “responsible for their failures... regardless of their disadvantages and the unequal playing field” (Gershon 540). Through all OEYC activities, it is emphasized that the first five years of a child’s life are a critical time of development, and if a mother fails to properly act during this window, she will never get this time back. For example, in a workshop titled “Healthy Baby Healthy Brain,” the facilitator, a public health

nurse, explained: “In the first years of life, the baby’s brain makes millions of new connections... but if you don’t give your baby the proper stimulation, then these connections will die.” This type of assertion places an enormous sense of responsibility on the shoulders of mothers, as it suggests that if a mother does not properly and sufficiently stimulate her baby, this will adversely affect the baby’s brain development.

6. *The Mother Manages Risk*

We live in a “risk society” (Beck), characterized by an obsession with creating and managing so-called risks in virtually all domains of life. At the same time, labelling something a “risk” opens up space for developing techniques for measurement and intervention. In this manner, risk becomes a strategy to govern populations (Power 21). The domain of motherhood and childcare is particularly prone to being saturated with risk discourse (Furedi; Faircloth; Wolf), and this phenomenon intensified particularly in the last generation. For example, Rosalind Edwards and Val Gillies note that what would have been considered standard parenting practice a few decades ago (for example, leaving children unsupervised to play) is now considered to be neglect.

The theme of risk permeates many OEYC activities. Prenatal classes emphasize the importance of correctly installing car seats, childproofing one’s house, and creating a safe sleeping environment for the baby. At one support group for new mothers, a public health nurse passed around a collection of common household objects, such as paperclips, and asked participant mothers to explain how these objects could pose hazards to their babies. This is not to say that such warnings are not legitimate, and new mothers can certainly benefit from being able to anticipate certain dangers rather than learn them the hard way. However, the risk discourse spills into all areas of life. For example, at one of the workshops, a speech pathologist warned parents about the danger that using a sippy cup for too long can pose to language development. In effect, mothers are seen simultaneously as solely responsible for their child’s wellbeing and as being in need of constant expert intervention.

7. *And Yet... the Mother ENJOYS Mothering!*

Notwithstanding all the difficult emotional, mental, and physical work that a mother is supposed to perform to optimize her child’s development, she is supposed to enjoy it (Thornton 409). Mothers are frequently reminded to “enjoy your baby” because “time flies by so fast” and “they won’t be this little for long.” Many workshops contain more or less direct messages to that effect. For example, by way of icebreakers at various workshops, mothers were asked to share “what do you like the most about being a mother” or “what are you most looking forward to about having a baby.” At the same time, OEYC

workers also discuss with new mothers the phenomena of “baby blues” and postpartum depression, and encourage mothers to seek help if they need it. As we can see, maternal happiness is something that mothers are responsible for managing and cultivating in themselves. This concern with happiness illustrates more broadly the types of affective dispositions that are valued by neoliberal arrangements, where “cheerfulness” and “positive attitude” are both a “coping mechanism for dealing with the precariousness of the economy” and a “vital part of the project of enterprising oneself” (Thornton 417; see also Ehrenreich; Ferguson; Kingfisher).

Beyond the Message: The Messengers

Although my focus in this article is on the messages directed at mothers, it is worth remembering that these messages are always disseminated, mediated, and perhaps negotiated by “experts”—that is, the people charged with implementing particular projects and philosophies. And these experts themselves are agents with their own opinions and agendas. All of the experts I have ever met at OEYCs were women, and most of them have at one point or another shared that they were mothers themselves. This put them in an interesting position: on the one hand, these women understand the reality of mothers’ lives and quite often empathize with the challenges that frame them. For example, one OEYC employee frequently spoke about her own experiences with postpartum depression and commented on the pressures faced by mothers of young children. Yet the advice these experts have to offer draws from the same repertoire of discourses, in effect reproducing the same values and notions of subjectivity. For example, I frequently heard facilitators advise new mothers to “make time for yourself” and “get help.” This suggests that they recognize that the neoliberal philosophies of motherhood place excessive demands on mothers. However well-intentioned their advice may be, it also reproduces the same neoliberal subjectivity that creates a burden on mothers in the first place. This is because being told to “go get yourself help” is actually not very helpful at all; in fact, it places the onus on the mother to work out “help” arrangements for herself, and if for whatever reason the mother is unable to do so, then she herself is to blame.

At times, the experts challenge certain elements of the hegemonic advice to mothers. For example, one public health nurse carefully expressed skepticism about the Canadian Paediatric Association’s recommendation that parents should not co-sleep with their babies. On another occasion, another OEYC employee gently critiqued her organization’s promotion of breastfeeding, pointing out that it does not work for all mothers. However, although experts may challenge some of the details of the advice given to mothers, I have never

seen any of them challenge the ideologies that underpin this advice.

Navigating Neoliberal Subjectivity

Having looked at the content of the messages disseminated through OEYCs, I now turn to the intended recipients. Do mothers internalize or resist these notions of subjectivity? Can these neoliberal projects or techniques work to serve alternate goals? (Reich). For the most part, it appears that the organization of OEYC spaces precludes alternative interpretations or activities that are not in line with the subjectivities advocated. The workshops do not teach these neoliberal subjectivities explicitly; rather, these lessons are “between the lines,” which makes them all the more difficult to even pinpoint, let alone challenge. Although at times certain mothers disagreed with the content of some of the advice (for example, on the issue of co-sleeping or sleep training), I have never heard any of them challenge the principles on which this advice is founded, such as the idea that mothers bear sole responsibility for their children or that it is the mother’s job to manage risks. In fact, I noticed the opposite. Mothers reported “feeling bad” for relying on relatives for childcare, which suggests that they internalized the notion that a mother bears sole responsibility for her children. Mothers also adhered to the tenets of attachment parenting prescribed by the OEYCs. They frequently addressed their babies, responded promptly and cheerfully when the babies fussed, and closely attended to their babies’ actions, often narrating them. Mothers also expressed subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) critiques of “other parents” who do not adhere to these principles. For example, Brenda, a pregnant mother of a three-year-old boy, once told me about her experience at an indoor playground. As she related it, despite being pregnant, she crawled through tunnels and went down slides with her son only to watch other parents sit at their table drinking coffee. Brenda is one of my close mom-friends, and although I know that she dedicates immense amounts of time and energy to her son, I can also recall instances where she could be accused of the same behaviour that she criticized in other parents. This scenario suggests that mothers internalize the tenets of intensive mothering and use them to judge other mothers (and perhaps themselves), even if these tenets are impossible to live up to at all times. Mothers also make choices that are context dependent and thus not always consistent. At times, they may actively engage with their children, whereas at other times, they may let them play independently while they chat with a friend.

It is also likely that mothers who reject the tenets of mothering prescribed by the OEYCs simply stop visiting. For example, a mother who does not think that she needs experts to teach her how to raise her child will likely not attend workshops. Furthermore, it is also possible that many mothers use

OEYC resources pragmatically, without taking to heart the messages that are disseminated there. OEYCs are stocked with children's toys, and many mothers use them as free indoor playgrounds, bringing their kids to play and using them as a meeting space for playdates with other mothers. However, there is also evidence that OEYC employees attempt to shape these interactions so as to enforce behaviours that are consistent with their ideologies. For example, signs on the walls urge parents to "Be an Unplugged Parent: Turn off Your Cellphone." This suggests that at least some parents must try to use OEYCs as an opportunity to "unplug" from their children, and these signs are a reminder to parents that they are responsible for their children and expected to be engaging with them at all times.

A related, potentially liberating function of OEYCs is that they provide a space for mothers to meet and form a community. This point, however, should not be overstated. On the one hand many mothers certainly benefit from having a network of other mothers at the same life-stage with whom they can share their experiences. In fact, many mothers I know stayed in touch with members of their Baby Talk group (the support group for new mothers) sometimes for years. On the other hand, the emotional support that mothers derive from each other's company does not substitute for tangible hands-on help (for example with childcare or housework) that they also need and that other mothers in the same life-stage as them are usually not equipped to provide.

Problematizing the Good Mother

In this article, I argued that OEYCs are umbrella spaces that bring together, and give legitimacy to, particular discourses relating to parenting and early childhood development. These discourses in turn construct a particular image of what it means to be a good mother. A good mother assumes personal responsibility for herself and her children, uses expert knowledge to manage risk and optimize her children's development, and constantly strives to better herself. Many of these qualities have been discussed in the scholarly literature on motherhood with the term "intensive mothering" (Hays; Vandenberg Giles). Intensive mothering is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays 414). Although scholars note that not all mothers adopt all of these principles in their mothering practices, it nonetheless remains an important "cultural script" (Faircloth 31) that informs mothering choices.

The above-listed characteristics of the good mother have been critiqued for their socioeconomic and racial/ethnic bias. Specifically, they reflect white, Anglo-Saxon and middle-class values (Lareau; Dow; Nadesan; Fox; Vincent and Ball). For example, Carol Vincent and Stephen Ball found that middle-class

parents were most likely to pursue “enrichment’ activities, extracurricular sports and creative classes” for their children (1062). Along similar lines, Majia Holmer Nadesan has argued that the skills promoted by developmental activities and toys (such as literacy and communication) reflect middle-class values and stigmatize others. And perhaps most importantly, intensive mothering of the kind promoted by OEYC’s requires middle-class resources, including relative financial security, ability to take significant time away from paid labour, and good support networks in the form of partners and/or other help (Fox).

Since OEYC’s do not collect demographic data on their clients, it is difficult to accurately report the socioeconomic and ethnic background of the participant mothers. Most of the mothers that I met were between the ages of twenty-five to thirty-five, predominantly white and Canadian born (reflecting the demographic composition of St. Catharines), although I also met some mothers who were newcomers to Canada. Most mothers had been employed prior to having children and had worked in occupations ranging from veterinary technicians to administrative workers and teachers. This finding supports the above claim that the principal consumers of good mothering discourses are relatively well-off mothers. This in turn brings up the question of whether OEYC’s appeal to a relatively narrow segment of the population and whether mothers from other walks of life (for example teenage mothers or mothers on welfare) either lack the resources to participate in OEYC activities (for example time or transportation), or else these activities simply do not meet their needs.

Problematic as they are, the childrearing discourses disseminated through OEYC’s can also serve liberating ends. For example, the idea that all children have unlimited potential that just needs to be properly tapped suggests that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic, ethnic, or religious background, have the potential to succeed as long as they are given the right opportunities. OEYC employees repeatedly emphasize that one does not need to spend a lot of money on children’s toys in order to provide one’s child with appropriate stimulation, and OEYC’s offer workshops on low-cost enrichment activities, such as creating one’s own sensory toys. However, this also makes it seem as though all mothers can choose to provide their children with all the tools they need for future success in life, in effect obfuscating the structural inequalities that prevent some mothers from making what are seen as the “correct” choices.

The case of the OEYC’s also illustrates the role that states play in implementing technologies that align subjects with desired political, economic, and social objectives, and the fact that these technologies often target the most intimate areas of life, including bearing and raising children. OEYC’s do support families, but this support is shaped by neoliberal philosophies and values. For example, the bulk of their activities consists of providing information rather than concrete assistance (for example with childcare). Furthermore, the information

they provide draws on particular scientific discourses (notably from neuroscience and psychology) that emphasize individual agency and responsibility for one's wellbeing. This suggests that mainstream government-sanctioned discourses tend to support and reproduce those discourses that align with neoliberal policy objectives and focus on individual solutions rather than on the larger social, economic, and political context in which social reproduction takes place (Paterson et al.). The subjectivity that is forged in the participant mothers secures the optimal social reproduction of the future generation of citizen-workers for the knowledge economy, while placing all responsibility for this on the shoulders of the mothers themselves.

The qualities that mothers are supposed to embody—for example, independence and risk management—are associated with a subjectivity that accords with neoliberal values and political-economic arrangements. That is not to say that these traits are inherently “neoliberal.” In fact, scholars note that many of the concepts popularly associated with neoliberalism (for example, independence) in fact have a history that goes back for centuries, and can be found in societies with very different forms of government from Western-style neoliberalism (Eagleton-Pierce; Kipnis). What is novel, then, is the way in which these traits are packaged together and put to work to construct the subjectivities that are desirable in the present political, economic, and social climate.

Finally, it is also important to note that the state is not a monolith, but rather is made up of a myriad of institutions, networks, and people, who operate at different scales and may pursue different agendas. Thus, the case of OEYCs needs to be situated alongside studies that look at how various other state institutions, policies, and discourses engage with mothers and affect their lives (Bezanson and Luxton). What this literature reveals is that the case of the OEYCs is part and parcel of a larger process of state outsourcing of social reproduction back to the family and to the private market (Bezanson and Luxton). In areas such as fertility treatments, breastfeeding promotion, or childcare, policies employ the rhetoric of individual autonomy, responsibility, and choice, while obfuscating the fact that women's experiences and choices in these areas are mediated by factors including social class, race, sexual orientation, disability, as well as geographical location (Paterson et al. 359).

The fact that I did not find resistance to the neoliberal ideologies disseminated through the OEYCs suggests that the language and values of neoliberalism have become hegemonic (Harvey; Luxton). By this I mean that they are seen as “common sense,” and thus provide the material from which we construct our understandings of the world (Williams). Indeed, studies show that even people who are on the losing side of neoliberal policies—such as laid off industrial workers—often make sense of their experiences using the terms provided by the hegemonic neoliberal discourse (Dunk; Shever). Contemporary mothers

of young children were likely themselves raised in the climate of neoliberal values of independence and self-sufficiency, so it is not surprising that they extend these same values to their experience of motherhood and view it as their personal choice and therefore their personal responsibility. However, we should recall that hegemony is never complete. It is a process that always has to be renewed and defended, and thus may be resisted and changed—although we may have to look for that change outside of the framework of the OEYCs.

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