

Young Single Mothers

The Work of Proving Fitness For Parenting

The relationship between “work” and young single mothers involved with social service agencies has primarily been delineated in two ways: through conservative and feminist discourses. I argue in this paper that a third way to conceptualize labour circulates in the field of social services but is primarily unacknowledged by practitioners and policy pundits. This conceptualization revolves around the crucial and risky work of young single mothers needing to prove fitness in order to be permitted to parent their children.

As part of a qualitative study on young single mothering and social services, I interviewed five white, front-line social service practitioners. I approached directors of the umbrella organization of agencies whose mandate is work with young single mothers and gained their permission to send letters to their casework staff, soliciting volunteers. Ensuring anonymity, four participants came forward. The fifth was suggested by a practitioner in the field. The workers were employed in both urban and rural voluntary settings devoted to providing help to young single pregnant and parenting women.

After introducing the existing articulated feminist and conservative discourses of work, I will use data from the interviews with these participants to describe a third way to understand the required labour of this population. An explanation for why women must fulfill the work of proving fitness and the silence surrounding this discourse of work are also proffered.

Acknowledged discourses about young single mothers and work

There is ambivalence about whether motherhood should be valorized and women encouraged to stay home with their children, or whether they should be citizen-workers, who contribute to the market through their labour. A

feminist perspective on young women parenting has been that mothering *is* work but unpaid and rendered invisible. Feminists have noted that women have been largely responsible for the work of caring. This discourse suggests that mothering should be credited as labour and compensated accordingly. At times, workers in social service agencies give voice to this perspective. In responding to a client who feared that a family member would perceive that the only reason she became pregnant was to obtain more social assistance money, Patricia, one of the practitioners in my study replied, “If I went on maternity leave for year, I’d be getting government money. You’re getting paid to be a mom and it’s a really important job.” Another worker, Frieda, suggested that parenting was a “job in itself ... a full-time job.” This discourse emphasizes structural components and tends to factor racial and class elements into the analysis. For example, Merrick (1995: 288) refers to adolescent childbearing for African-American young women as a normative “career choice” and an alternate pathway for womanhood.

A more conservative discourse also circulates. This trope is that young single mothers are the undeserving poor who must be regulated through either the requirement of waged work or schooling in order to interrupt cycles of dependency (Fraser and Gordon, 1994: 327). It emphasizes negative dependency through reliance on the state for financial assistance. An example of an attempt to ameliorate this “dependency” is the Learning, Earning and Parenting Programme, a mandatory programme for 16 and 17-year-old parents on Ontario Works, the social assistance programme in Ontario. In this programme, youth must either be in school or working to be eligible for welfare. Their entitlement to social assistance is “subject to implicit and explicit expectations of employment” (Evans, 1995: 157) with this perspective increasing over the last decade. Patricia complained that a welfare worker was pressuring her client by asking this young mother “what her plan [was] for going back to work or going back to school,” despite her client’s prerogative to take a year off from work to mother a three-month old baby.

The unacknowledged work of proving fitness

While these discourses of work has been framed either as waged employment, school, or the tasks of mothering themselves, in fact, for the recipients of social services, the most pressing and often perilous work in which they engage is the fight to demonstrate their capability to mother. A third participant, Jannie, talked about clients needing to “put in the work” to establish their competence. Only through the work of proving fitness to mother will these young single mothers involved with the social service system be given the fundamental right that others take for granted.

According to Nikolas Rose (1996), Foucault utilizes the concept of “governmentality,” the “deliberations, strategies, tactics and devices employed by authorities for making up and acting upon a population and its constituents to ensure good and avert ill” (328). These tactics operate through “regulated

choices made by discrete and autonomous actors” (328) to make the populace productive and effective. While governmentality has constructive and helpful components (for example, in the protection of vulnerable groups such as children) it also can be punitive. The focus of this paper is on the disciplinary aspects, to depict the extensive and, at times, brutal regulatory practices enacted upon young single mothers by social service workers, often despite those employees’ best intentions. The rationale for my emphasis is to expose the difficulty and pain that accompanies the lives of these young women because their suffering is often neither recognized nor seen. It is also to identify another form of work that, while unnamed, has real material implications for these young single mothers.

Who is being governed?

The young single mothers who end up on the doorsteps of social service agencies are often the more “discouraged of the disadvantaged” (Luker, 1996: 115). These clients are at the nexus of a number of marginalized categories: they are young, living outside the institution of marriage as mothers, impoverished, and of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds. Many of these young women enter agencies with few resources or supports, rendering them vulnerable and open to intense scrutiny. The young women are often voluntary clients in name only. Jannie identified this predicament. She stated, “They really weren’t voluntary.” A fourth worker, Charlotte queried, “How many choices do they really have?”

These young women are perceived of as procreating without the resources to adequately care for their progeny because they have nothing to lose by waiting to bear children. This perspective defines young single mothers, “as girls from flawed backgrounds making tragic mistakes” (Kelly, 1996: 429) which will both be repeated in the next generation and impact negatively on the state through increased financial dependency. Jannie explained that her clients came from “families of young teenage moms ... [The] pattern [was] replicating itself.”

Viewed as children having children (Pearce, 1993: 46) they are thought to be engaging in “out of time,” negligent acts suggests Nancy Lesko (2001: 135). These young women defy the “good girl” life script of the young woman who finishes school, secures employment and marries prior to having children (Addleson, 1994: 115). It is feared that this immoderate and immature sexuality may indicate other excessive or impulse-ridden behaviours in the areas of aggression, substance use, profligate spending etc. or in inattention to their children because the focus will be on their own “selfish” needs. Lack of willpower and impulsivity are linked to assumptions about a willingness to live off the avails of the state as well. The problem of the high percentage of young single mothers living in poverty is privatized as personal irresponsibility, rather than seen as the outcome of structural disadvantage, gendered inequality, racial discrimination and/or public policy.

At the same time, there is an assumption that dependency on men as breadwinners is acceptable.

Young women are expected to preserve their sexuality to be bargained in exchange for a man's social protection and economic support... The sexually unorthodox girl threatens not just her own future, but an entire system of social and economic relationships based on the assumption that each individual woman and her children will be supported by an individual man. (Nathanson, 1991: 208)

Single mothering is a renunciation of the need for male support and dependence. By engaging in sex outside of the bounds of conventional marriages and by mothering without the benefit of partners, they are judged as deteriorating the social fabric of society and particularly the traditional notion of the family.

How is governmentality achieved?

Expectations of what constitutes good mothering extend far beyond the absence of abuse and neglect into multiple areas of functioning for the mothers and their children. With these young single mothers, the techniques employed to govern and form the self are extensive, running the gamut from the management of limited resources to cognitive and pedagogical strategies.

Management of the body

Governmentality works on the physical body of these young women. Even before the birth of their babies, there is intense scrutiny and regulation. It has been theorized by Rosalyn Diprose and Tamsin Wilton that even in a

normal pregnancy, what the mother does with her body—what she eats, where she goes, how and when—is open to public scrutiny. She, the mother, is a “legitimate target of moral concern” (Diprose, 1994: 26) and thus “subject to very direct state control” (Wilton, 1995: 183). (qtd. in Pillow, 2000: 202)

Programmes, such as Kick Butt for Two, a smoking cessation programme, are common fare for young single mothers, working on the notion of not just the regulation of the mother but also the unborn child as well. One of Patricia's clients, due to a history of drug usage, was required to do drug screens, urine screens, blood samples and hair analysis to provide evidence that she was not using drugs. Despite all these tests coming back negative, the hospital staff still did not allow her to breast-feed.

Limitation and management of physical resources

Another aspect of the work of demonstrating fitness includes the ability

to manage on inadequate resources. The history of social welfare in Canada is based on the principle of “less eligibility.” This principle is that the assistance provided should be at a poorer standard than that of the lowest paid labourer (Swift, 1995: 47). Yet clients are expected to cope under these conditions and found wanting when they cannot. Patricia had a client who was receiving \$495 a month on welfare. Despite knowing what financial assistance she was receiving, her CAS worker repeatedly questioned her as to why she could not find a two-bedroom apartment for her and her daughter. Ultimately the young mother had to give her daughter up to the Children’s Aid Society. Patricia averred, “The whole reason why her child was in care was because she lost her apartment because they raised her rent again and she couldn’t afford it.” In the urban centres of Central and Eastern Ontario, waiting lists for public housing are between two and five years. In the interim, young women are often placed in the hotel system. Patricia referred to this system as “no tell, motel” because of how inadequate (without refrigerators or telephones) and often dangerous and frightening (rife with drugs and violence) these settings were.

Professionals who represent the child welfare system may judge, as evidence of abuse or neglect, childrearing patterns that are normative for others of different cultural perspectives or at lower-socioeconomic brackets (such as allowing an older sibling to watch the younger children). Frieda described that residents of a maternity home were required to accumulate a layette in preparation for the birth of their babies. The delineation of what was to be included extended to change tables and \$40 first aid kits. Frieda commented that she believed adequate resources were a mat on the floor and having a few bandages and peroxide. She felt that agency personnel were “imposing their beliefs on young women” and that these beliefs were culturally middle-class and disproportionate to the means available to these clients, increasing the likelihood that the young women would fail in their ability to prove their competence.

Pedagogy

Because these young women are seen as the unworthy poor, the emphasis is on personal failure and altering deficiencies to improve character through training, rather than providing material resources. Social services assume that education with its emphasis on rational thinking is one of the most effective means of changing the individual and consequently the society (Enns, 1997: 37). This emphasis emerges from a liberal enlightenment tradition that values rational judgment, believing it is critical to human dignity. The emphasis is on the individual as the unit for change. Pedagogy acts by indoctrinating clients as to what is perceived of as responsible behaviour on the part of a mother. These strategies are extensive, at the same time that they operate on micro-levels. In describing the programmes provided for a residential setting, Charlotte said,

We have a school programme running *all* morning and then we have independent living, we have addictions. We have parenting.... They're [the clients] up in the morning, they're moving all of the time and they just sometimes go "No More...."

Details at the level of how to change a diaper to the specifications of professionals or the correct pot in which to sterilize a bottle are all part of the training. This training acts on the governmentality of both the generation of the mothers and of their children. For example, Frieda described the technique of "hand over hand" in which mothers are taught to demonstrate appropriate touch by placing their hand over the child's and showing their child how to be gentle. This training regulates both mother and child.

Lesko (1990) states that these pedagogical strategies include "rites of redemption" (125). Kristine, the fifth social service worker in my sample, described one such rite. At a community outreach programme of a Catholic agency, young mothers who were clients went into the community to talk to other youth "about making decisions around sex ... peer pressure ... and the realities of being a teen parent—,what differences it [had] made in their life." Kristine's disagreement with the programme focus was that the mothers needed "to present to the students that this [having a child as a single mother] was a big mistake and that they [did not] regret having their kids but they regret[ed] having had sex at such an early age." She elaborated "they're also supposed to be presenting kind of the pathetic side of life like I [the client] don't have enough money and dad doesn't give me money for diapers." The mothers were coached not to answer the question "are you still having sex?" If they became pregnant again, regardless of how effective they were as speakers in the programme, they were "fired." Kristine felt it was "medieval" propaganda to insist that the young women present themselves as if they had "made a *terrible* mistake, got pregnant, had a baby and now they [were] going to live their lives in repentance for their big sin."

Psychological management

One feature in the imposition of expectations of fitness to mother is demonstration of "appropriate" feelings and attitudes. The expectation of controlled and contained emotion is a part of the work of "good" mothering. But being in a subordinate position evokes anger. Hostility and resentment are often the justifiable outcomes of oppression, racism and marginalization, not simply paranoid or dysfunctional reactions. Audre Lorde (1984) states, "Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation" (124). But self-governing subjects are expected to monitor and contain their own aggressive impulses. This is especially true for women in a society that is intolerant of women's assertion or aggression. Teresa Bernardez (1987) suggests that often

there is confusion and censure from practitioners for behaviours that do not conform to traditional role prescriptions of women, particularly in areas of anger or rebellion and this condemnation is “sometimes in moralistic terms” (29). Consequently anger must be suppressed and when it does leak out (for example in yelling or threatening behaviour), it is often seen as pathological. As well, non-compliance, a hostile attitude, or rage can result in the construction of the “problematic” client. Mind-set remains an important test for the provision of resources and the avoidance of punishments such as the apprehension of children.

Managing emotions extends beyond that of anger. Enduring prejudice, lack of credibility, and emotional pain, to name just a few, are part of the work these young women must accomplish. Even when one of Patricia’s client’s children was apprehended, the client could not wail in anguish. Her explanation, according to Patricia, was that out-of-control behaviour “would go in [her] file.” Thus the discipline becomes internalized and the client, a self-regulating subject. However these young mothers are placed in a paradoxical position in dealing with psychological and emotional struggles. The “good” client is one who is self-analytical, articulate and self-disclosing. However, the more a young mother divulges to someone who is authorized to punish, the more likely she will reveal information that puts her at risk for disciplinary practices. At the same time, a woman who demonstrates openness is more apt to be judged as making progress and being seen as fit, than one who refuses to disclose. This conundrum puts clients in an untenable position from which they cannot escape.

Surveillance by social service workers

Surveillance is far-reaching. Charlotte was aware that young single mothers perceived her as “always around” and that she could “see their every move” just like “tiny” guppies in a “little tiny fish tank.” Her image of them being so small and enclosed in a tank represents their powerlessness and the possibility of constant scrutiny. From the tracking of attendance in school programmes, to the regulation of clients’ social assistance funds through a trusteeship programme where workers are responsible for the distribution of cheques and how clients spend money, observation operates on micro-levels. For example, according to Patricia, one client referring to her child as “my sexy boy,” was “written up ad nauseum” in the clinical records and Patricia had to warn her client that she had to “really think about [her] choice of language when [she was] talking to the baby because everybody [was] watching” her.

Surveillance is frequently accompanied by conflicting expectations, making governance according to desired “standards” of mothering difficult, if not impossible. Frieda gave the illustration of training around the need to sterilize bottles for infants. She stated that within the staff group at the agency expectations of sterilizing timing were different. “So you have certain people that feel you [the young mothers] need to sterilize for ten minutes and then you

have people that feel you only need to sterilize for five minutes,” suggested Frieda.

Not only different workers, but diverse agencies can take very conflicting stances about what constitutes appropriate mothering practices for any one client. Charlotte described a case in which a boyfriend with a history of violence was being verbally threatening and abusive. The Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Probation Department, the Children’s Aid Society (CAS), and three levels of staff at the maternity home all had divergent requirements on how the young mother should behave in response to the threat to herself and her baby. These expectations were contradictory and consequently impossible to implement, even if the client had wished to comply.

Apprehension of children

The most lethal tool in governmentality is the threat of apprehension. Apprehension refers to the mandated responsibility of child welfare authorities to remove a child from his/her parents when that child is evaluated as being at high risk for neglect or abuse. Patricia described the pain and suffering of having one’s child apprehended: “I have never heard anybody cry like that. It’s like what you think a wounded animal would sound . . .” The Oxford Dictionary provides several definitions of the word “apprehension” (1996: 64). The meaning intended by the CAS is “to seize or arrest.” The connotation of criminality that is ascribed to the young women whose babies are removed comes through in this use of the word. But equally significant is another meaning: to anticipate with uneasiness or fear, the constant state for clients under the eye of social service workers and the CAS.

Why the work of proving fitness?

The most overt aim is to ensure that children are parented adequately, thereby protecting those who are weak and vulnerable. A civil society should provide protection for those who are unable to look after themselves. There are young mothers whose own resources, both emotional and material, are insufficient to meet the challenges of successful and healthy living, thereby endangering themselves and their progeny.

Another reason for the work of proving adequacy is that in a world of limited resources, some means must be found to determine who receives and under what circumstances. With insufficient resources to give indiscriminately, strategies are necessary to separate out those eligible to receive and at what level, from others. These practices are, in part, aimed at redistributive justice; to tip the balance of resources towards the have-nots. However the pool from which this determination is made, tends to be between those with very little and those with even less, and comes at the cost of significant scrutiny. Nor is the redistribution adequate, perhaps maintaining rather than eliminating insufficiency.

Additionally the extent, depth and brutality of the “work” these young

women must fulfill suggest that more subterranean and complex forces may also be operating. An underlying assumption about the young women's potential inadequacy is that they have engaged in irresponsible sexual behaviour, too early and without an appropriate partner and consequently are at high risk of being rash in other areas as well, most significantly, their mothering ability. These young women are thought to dilute the moral strength of the civilization, both perpetuating earlier cycles of disadvantage and setting examples of such behaviour for the next generation. Consequently, one deemed as weakening the next generation is constituted as a "burden on the state, as an inadequate mother to her children and as damaging to the moral fibre of society" (Smart, 1996: 54). Through strategies of governmentality, responsibility to the social body as a whole is emphasized. Surveillance and punishment are not just directed at the "unruly" lone mothers. These tactics also act as a threat and reminder to others of the consequences of stepping out of line.

Furthermore, Edelman (1988) argues that "a problem to some is a benefit to others; it augments the latter group's influence.... The term 'problem' only thinly veils the sense in which deplored conditions create opportunities" (14). The "problem" of adequacy of mothering obscures the benefits to those with the authority to define what is appropriate mothering and what not. Furthermore, a profession must "build, control, and legitimize an occupational terrain" in order to ensure its own existence (Abramovitz, 1998: 518). Defining the "problem" of young single mothers' adequacy augments social service providers' influence and power (Edelman, 1988: 20). Additionally, one construction of problems diverts attention from other, more threatening issues such as poverty, racism and social inequity (Edelman, 1988: 27). In this way the threat of redistributing resources and up-ending privilege can also be avoided (Swadener and Lubeck, 1995: 11).

The silence surrounding the fitness discourse

For social service workers to confront the extent and severity of the disciplinary regimes of "putting in the work" to prove adequacy would require recognition of their own complicity. But practitioners view their mandate as advancing human welfare. This help is perceived of as a principled activity that claims moral goodness of the providers. Professionals are caught between an ethic that informs the work as a vehicle of social justice, and a bureaucratic regime where practitioners are responsible for social regulation and the discipline of others. For example, the primary principles of non-judgmentalism and empowerment in the counseling relationship run counter to ensuring the safety of a child, requiring the necessity to act as judges on the adequacy of a woman's mothering. Leonard (1994: 22), a social work educator, suggests that "social work is almost invariably seen as benign in its effects, or at least in its intentions and possibilities: it could hardly be otherwise, for how would we justify ourselves morally unless we believed that we were engage in an enlight-

ened, progressive, emancipatory enterprise?”

Only when professionals understand that they are not “neutral” players but have vested interests with the power to contribute to the determination of what is taken as truth, is the work of proving fitness to mother acknowledged, exposed and thus potentially altered.

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