"Just Don't Call Her a Single Mother": Shifting Identities of Women Raising Children Alone

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ABSTRACT

This study focusses on the shifts in the identity of single mothers through the development of social welfare in Canada. The emphasis is on recent changes. The article examines discourses of non-profit social services in Toronto, identifies trends they suggest regarding how this identity is being recast and discusses their effects.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude se concentre sur les changements de l'identité des mères seules à travers le développement du bien-être social au Canada. L'accent est sur les changements récents. L'article étudie les discours des services sociaux à but non- lucratif à Toronto, identifie les tendances qu'elles suggèrent en regardant comment cette identité est remaniée et discute leurs effets.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent heated exchange, Jean Pelletier, a prominent Canadian public official with Via Rail, described well-known sports personality and Olympian Myriam Bédard as a "pitiable single mother" (LeBlanc, *Globe and Mail* 2004). This provoked a wealth of commentaries about single motherhood in the local and national press. Among them, Margo Varadi in the *Toronto Star* (2004), from whom I borrow the first part of the title, quotes a woman described as single and a mother: "You don't want to be stereotyped in that role because it seems like a victim role. The term single mother says you're poor, can't get a guy and that you must have gone wrong somewhere."

This concise characterization of single mothers calls for reflection on the remarkable changes single motherhood has undergone since early in the last century, when investing in poor mothers became one of the founding programs of the social welfare systems in Canada (Christie 2000; Little 1998; Strong-Boag 1979). Struthers (1994), for example, highlights how mothers' allowances constituted a central influence on the welfare state during the past century. Mothers' allowance support meant that public programs provided meagre but nevertheless secure financial help to certain mothers in recognition of society's responsibility towards a group of its citizens. Well documented (Little 1998; Struthers 1994), this support reflected an acknowledgement of the important work towards the healthy development of future citizens done by these mothers. But it also reflected a fear of discouraging industriousness, and the mothers were expected to supplement it with approved work. The implications for poor mothers were that self sacrifices were required on their part and that social expectations were enforced with a mixture of encouragement and intrusive control. The widows and deserted mothers benefiting from the program

were, thus, cast through this initiative as deserving victims of circumstance but also as weak and untrustworthy women in need of control in order to perform their mothering duties.

First categorized as a group at this time, single mothers have continued to play a central role in social welfare today. While the various public programs were consistently marked by demeaning and exclusionary practices and carried in themselves assumptions that, paradoxically, made unviable their own uplifting aims, the position of single mothers has assumed centrality in discussions concerning social welfare. For example, Myles & Quadagno (2002) argue that increasingly, the budgetary viability of the welfare state depends on women's labour force participation and individual families' survival requires dual income households. These structural changes in the workforce and the family, as well as expanded requirements of caring functions and preoccupations with the quality of childhood, result in urgent calls for a new social contract focussed on motherhood and a flexible workforce. The realities of women raising children alone materialize and expose these broad and abstract analyses and draw attention to the significant role single mothers play in contemporary debates (Lister 1997; Mink 1998; Orloff 2002).

Single mothers, however, are not a unified group and encompass a wide variety of realities for mothers. It is nevertheless, as the initial quote points out, poor women raising children alone who are constituted under this identity when they are in need of financial support. Much has been said about the mother/worker dual identity of single mothers in specific places and times (Duncan and Edwards 1997). In Canada, this argument has been central to the work of Evans (1992), who documented the gradual emphasis on the identity of "worker" enforced by different programs. Yet issues of single mothers' identity are still to be fully explored, particularly as they relate to

contemporary processes. This paper expands this discussion with guidance from the governmentality literature. As summarized by Rose (1996, 328), governmentality focuses on "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" (see also contributions in Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991; Rose and Miller 1992). These practices of power function as systems of codification (Dean 1994, 157), assembling features and classifications which are formative of identities rather than reactive to different groups' needs and circumstances. Therefore, the formative aspects of governmental practices are important in the relationship between single mothers and social welfare. In particular, considering the substantial changes to social welfare programs implemented since the 1990s, a central question is the effects of these changes on the identity of single mothers.

This study centres on the mutually formative relationship between the identity single mother and social welfare changes in Canada and draws attention to recent trends in Toronto social services in order to suggest how the social welfare changes of the 1990s have affected the identity single mother in this location. The first section reviews literature that points to key changes in social welfare in Canada and highlights the effects of these changes for single mothers. Subsequently, an exploratory analysis of contemporary discourses of social services programs addressing single mothers in Toronto is presented. Here, the starting position is that these discourses capture the ensemble of governmental practices that constructs various realms of subjects. The aim is to show, through the examination of discourses, processes that appear to be transforming the identity of single mothers in certain directions and to discuss their effects. The final section suggests some interpretations of the previous discussions for both single mothers and social welfare and a perspective on the importance of understanding processes of identity transformation.

SOCIAL POLICY AND IDENTITY FORMATION

This section draws on the body of work that speaks to the relationship between Canadian social welfare and the identity of single mothers, and brings to the foreground its central arguments around the formation of this identity. Here, rather than providing a review of this literature (Lessa 2003), I will be drawing from arguments that bear a consequence for the formation of the identity "single mother."

Christie (2000) has detailed the complexities that guided, during the first half of the last century, the gradual consolidation of a clear focus on wage earning men in the Canadian social welfare policy. This yielded the forsaking of a maternalist orientation for a national system of welfare that was contingent on the male employable-unemployable

dichotomy (Hum 1987; Struthers 1994). With that, programs supporting poor women raising children alone, rather than being rationalized with reference to the importance of motherhood for the nation, began to be articulated primarily in relation to the labour market (Brandt 1982; Little 1995). Thus the incorporation of mothers' allowance programs into the postwar welfare system implied that motherhood duties were re-interpreted as an obstruction to entering the labour force rather than a necessary job for the nation. Support for single motherhood came to be seen as primarily a program of transformation of poor families into self-supporting units. The resulting effect was that in the post-World War Two period, poor mothers raising children alone were re-cast as a group of workers temporarily unemployed and the work of raising children was devalued when performed by these women.

This important transformation in the definition of single motherhood was ingrained within the social welfare system with the introduction of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) in the mid-1960s. CAP consolidated a number of federal and provincial programs into a single 50/50 cost sharing arrangement and established benefits in terms of human rights with a needs-based calculation. Under the different provincial programs of support, legal rights and entitlements of single mothers were granted under their temporary absence from the labour market (Armitage 1988; Banting 1987; Dyck 1995; Scott 1995; Struthers 1994). This reflected a more universal formulation of basic needs than the previous categorical allowances, but single mothers' new entitlements, despite appeal mechanisms, carried only a rhetorical weight. Implementation of the programs continued to enforce eligibility under categorical groups, standardized definition of needs, and maintenance of low levels of benefits that were constantly eroded by inflation and increasingly intrusive practices and regulations, not only of home life but also of the type and hours of work (Little 1994; Struthers 1994). Their rights-bearing identity was further undermined through the failure to establish the promised mechanisms of appeal on a consistent and independent basis (Jennisen 1997, 226).

The emphasis on employability embedded in CAP had substantial effects on the identity "single mother." The provinces experimented with a variety of different training and support programs (Evans 1996 and 1992; Little 1995; Low 1996), but women raising children alone in poverty encountered sizable structural and systemic barriers to finding employment (Little 1998; Struthers 1994). The lack of success of the employment and training programs (Evans 1988) associated single mothers with stereotypes such as that of the unskilled, uneducated failure who, despite of incentives and efforts of these programs, could not get a job (Scott 1996, 18-19). They occupied temporary and low paid jobs, were in and out of social assistance programs and represented a large proportion of the poor in Canada (Evans 1984; McDaniel 1993). Their children became the face of poverty in Canada (McKeen

2001) and their families the visible subject of the poverty discourses.

A further effect of CAP with consequences for single motherhood was the expansion of the private non-profit sector. Little (1995, 101) argues that charitable and social organizations specifically used arguments around a moral crisis in the Canadian family - in which women raising children alone figured prominently - as a tool for carving a place for themselves in the modern welfare state. The federal-provincial cost sharing of social services included in CAP (Bella 1979, 446-7), encouraged the development of a range of new non-profit, private social services and expanded existing ones (Lynn 2002). It also had a marked bearing on their development through a rationale of preventing family decay and poverty (Hum 1983; Irving 1987). Private non-profit services such as emotional support and counselling to remedy personal problems, child welfare, family skills, and encourage rehabilitation and training, became essential elements of CAP's anti-poverty strategy with single mothers as its focus (McKeen 1999). A variety of services complemented and enlarged single mothers' claims to entitlements to public income support including services such as rehabilitation, casework, referrals and assessment, family and child services, peer support groups, toy lending libraries, and community kitchens and gardens among others. In addition, newly articulated feminist demands were materialized into a variety of programs and initiatives addressing issues of domestic violence (Profitt 2000) and specifically targeted single mothers re-starting their lives. Shelters, transitional houses, counselling, and employment training were developed (Walker 1990).

The result was a public income support program which, while not giving the mothers sufficient allowance and curtailing their employment possibilities, relied on an underfunded non-profit sector to address the personal and social effects of a life of destitution (Lessa 2003). The exploration of this diverse set of needs, interpreted as personal, contributed to the development of a new single mother subject: one who is complex, with compounded and interlocked personal ailments, and yet at the same time deficient, in need of a variety of personal supports - rather than one whose survival is made untenable by structural issues. In this sense, for example, community kitchens became an important element of single mothers' entitlements not because these women could not afford their basic needs but because they lack the skills to produce nutritious meals. By the 1990s these mothers, with their compounded needs and subjected to structural contradictions, were the symbolic face of inclusive citizenship struggles.

In 1996 CAP was replaced with the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) (Lightman 2003). This new funding framework came in the form of block funds for health, post-secondary education and social assistance, while continuing the trend of reducing federal contributions to social programs. The CHST allowed the provinces to establish conditions for entitlements to social benefits and discarded the formal rights of appeal prescribed by CAP. *The Ontario Works Act* (OWA), which in 1997 replaced Family Benefits among other *Acts*, provides temporary financial assistance to those most in need while they satisfy obligations to become and stay employed (S.1). While words such as "temporary" and "most in need" signal reduction and restriction, the obligation of employment denotes the absolute break with previous practices. In most provinces (Jensen 2003), benefits to single mothers became conditional upon compulsory work participation, job training or volunteering and eligibility for financial assistance restricted by the age and schooling of the youngest child. The result was a foreclosure of the discourse of entitlements based on needs and in particular, the further grafting of single motherhood within the punitive and rash measures many provinces had been experimenting with (Lightman 1997; McKeen 2001, 25; Scott 1998).

The reforms introduced by the CHST reduced not only the income support benefits but also allowed for elimination of, or increase in eligibility requirement for, a variety of supplementary supports such as, in Ontario, the pregnancy allowance.[1] With a focus on eliminating abuse, dependence and laziness through stringent financial restraints, the new funding scheme institutionalized and normalized a discourse of vilification and criminalization of single motherhood. The single mother was no longer seen as a special worker who, entitled on the grounds of need, required supports to re-enter the job market but as an absentee from the workforce trying to cheat society's goodwill and the universal requirement of work: an identity which invokes mistrust, inability and a need for social disciplining. As such, single mothers' claim to an autonomous household (Lister 1997; Orloff 1993) was significantly challenged. As they continue to face bleak employment prospects (Schellenberg and Ross 1997) and dramatic schedule contradictions, staying married or entering into a marital relationship rather than social transfers or programs, became their best chance of lifting their children out of poverty (Lochhead and Scott 2000).

These developments make single mothers not only further disentitled to the restricted public financial and material help, but also increasingly seeking support from the voluntary non-profit sector. They find themselves, as they did at the turn of the century, ostensibly relying on families and the charities for support and survival. The latter have gradually assumed, with the demise of CAP, a central position in the provision of services and supports for women raising children alone. Reliance on the voluntary non-profit private sector is not a novelty for poor single mothers but, while the public social services in Canada developed in a close symbiosis with the charitable, philanthropic social services sector (Rekart 1993; Valverde 1995) in the late 1990s this sector became predominantly

dependent on public funds and government contracts for service delivery. Understanding the effects of these changes as well as the boundaries and possibilities inherent in the relationship between the non-profit or charitable services sector and single motherhood becomes an important task because, in the context of shrinking public supports to women raising children alone, the non-profit voluntary sector has become a central service provider for single mothers.

RECENT TRENDS

This section examines how current discourses of non-profit social support services reflect the building blocks of a new identity for poor women raising children alone. Rather than causal agents, the discourses of social services agencies are seen in the context of the funding sources, the specific organizational mandates and constituencies, the professionals delivering the services and, as well, general social contexts. The constitutive powers of discourses have been discussed by Foucault (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982), who emphasizes their role in processes of legitimation and power. Grounded in Potter and Wetherel's approach to discourse analysis (1995), I explore the effects of the descriptions of the target population and services provided by voluntary non-profit services. The intention here is to begin to understand how the content of these discourses is organized and what purposes it achieves.

Since the private non-profit social support services sector is diverse, fragmented and complex it is difficult to have an encompassing overview of its discourses. This sector also exhibits a great geographical variation. I chose to concentrate on the City of Toronto because of the large size of this sector and the diversity of services and funding sources in the City. This choice does not imply a will to generalize the findings to other geographical locations, but rather to call attention to the trends and developments in this particular site. In examining the discourses of social support services in Toronto I used three sources: the Directory of Community Services in Toronto known as *The Blue Book*; the annual report of the City of Toronto Community Services Grants Program (CSGP); and the United Way of Metropolitan Toronto's description of member agencies. These sources provide a partial yet instructive picture of the private non-profit services in the City of Toronto.

The Blue Book is a comprehensive directory of services produced by Community Information Toronto, a clearing house of information on human services. It is updated yearly and lists agencies and their services according to pre-defined categories (1330 organizations in 2002). The City of Toronto CSGP provides "ongoing funding to community-based not-for-profit organizations to support programs that improve social outcomes for their communities" (Acting Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services, 2001,1). Its report summarizes the applications of organizations that have requested municipal support from the program (261 organizations recommended for funding in 2001), also in a standardized format. The United Way of Metropolitan Toronto funds member agencies (140 organizations in 2001), "providing a foundation of social services for a healthy community" (United Way 2001). In the Directory of Services, the United Way compiles a description of its member agencies and the programs delivered. Of these three sources only the United Way Directory of Services follows a non-standardized format for reporting the information. All of them exclude small or informal services which do not have their own operation sites and are delivered under other agencies. These sources, nevertheless, encompass a large number of services, are well established, and provide accessible, public and reasonably consistent documentation. They can arguably be seen as providing a coherent indication of some of the trends or issues around services in Toronto and are used here as such. The trends discussed here, then, are necessarily limited to this particular location, and sampling. Therefore they are exploratory and illustrative.

A further consideration is that these three sources are primarily used by social services professionals and community workers in the social services sector. Thus, using these sources, I examine the ways in which services addressing single motherhood are textually expressed in expert discourses and institutional practices. The analysis examines extracts from agency profiles in which notions of single motherhood were applied in the context of describing the services. This strategy assumes that texts provide discursive insights into power relations and, thus, through textual analysis, the different constructions of social identity and their effects can be studied (Burman and Parker 1993). However, rather than conducting a linguistic exercise I examine the ways in which ideas expressed associated these services with women raising children alone and their needs. This refers to a use of discourses as a social practice grounded or situated in a certain context (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984).

IDENTITIES MOBILIZED BY EXPERT DISCOURSES

The texts under study showed two ways in which the idea of single mothers was being summoned into the descriptions: a direct and an indirect mention. The direct mention referred to single mothers explicitly using the key words as "lone," "single," "sole support parent" or "mother." There is a real paucity of direct reference in the professional discourse of the sources examined. Considering the prevalence of the image of single mothers in the academic, research and poverty advocacy discourses, this absence is noteworthy.

Further reading of the descriptions pointed to a

series of indirect descriptive references to single mothers. These references invoke various images suggesting a diversity of situations which, in popular and scientific discourses, have been associated with single motherhood. They include, for example, the following identifications of target population:[2] "families at risk," "low income families," "women with children and victims of abuse," "low income women facing numerous barriers," "socially isolated women with children," "women and their children living in poverty or on social assistance," "poor or high risk mothers," and "isolated marginalized parents." The indirect and descriptive references are substantially more prevalent than the direct reference. Their use may reflect the agencies' survival strategies and attempts to protect their programs by moving away from an association with a category of service user whose general blaming has been prevalent in the media and political discourses as of the 1990s. This sector's heavy dependence on government funding may explain the use of general broad categories of the marginalized rather than the targeted and blamed single mother identity.

The absence of a direct reference to single mothers marks an erasure of a highly politicized identity which in previous periods had gained not only popular recognition and sympathy but also a symbolic stature in the demands for an inclusive social welfare. This erasure from the social services discourses of the non-profit agencies parallels the shift in the post-CAP income support programs. The variety of descriptors has the effect of diffusing the group and categorical status of single motherhood consolidated throughout the twentieth century. It moves social welfare away from the rationales of special treatment that the categorical program discourses established. The indirect references address marginalized subjects with no readily recognizable claims to a categorical entitlement status in the social system of support.

SERVICES FOR A VILIFIED MOTHERHOOD

These two ways of invoking women raising children alone reflect two distinct constructions of single mothers. These constructions are not competing but, rather, differently used as illustrated by the nature of the services proposed by each of them. A direct reference to single mothers, expressed as specified above, is predominantly found in relation to services addressing particular groups of mothers raising children alone, such as teen mothers and immigrant, racialized or minoritized mothers. This association can be made through a clear ethnic reference in the name of the agency - e.g., "Spanish...," "African...," "Jamaicans...," "Jewish..." - or through the reference to a segregated spatial identification in the city - e.g., references to certain neighbourhoods well known for immigrant composition, such as Jane & Finch, Regent Park or St. James Town. Most of the services offered address the needs of these groups through the implementation of outreach, education and referrals, focussing on violence prevention,

parenting programs, and individual and group counselling. Some examples are: "...African... support single parents through outreach services regarding education and social issues and provide home visits"; "...Jamaican...support workshops for single mothers..."; and "Outreach, information, referral, food relief, networking and leadership development for young families, lone parents and children primarily from the West Indies, Africa, Latin America, India and Cambodia."

Another group which is associated with direct references to single motherhood are teen mothers. Since the 1980s, teenage motherhood has been constituted as a particularly acute social problem (Davies, Mckinnon, and Rains 2001), and youth understood as such have been specially denigrated and moralized through the CHST changes to income support programs and regulations (Mayson 1999). In the sources examined, the needs of young single mothers have been interpreted predominantly through programs such as outreach and support, information and referrals, and drop-in. Their foci are pregnancy support, preparation for motherhood, parenting skills, budget counselling and housing or residential services. With few exceptions, these foci seem to assume motherhood inadequacy and they have grown to characterize the needs of teenage mothers to constitute a category of "programs for teenage parents" as a generic description of services aims and content: "Serves young women 14-21 years; health and personal problems...affordable housing for single mothers 16-21 years with one child...education independent living skills, outreach worker for young single mothers, counselling..."; and "...provides housing and resources for pregnant teens, young single mothers and their babies."

These examples show an association of single motherhood in the discourses of non-profit social services with specific groups of women which have been particularly vilified in current popular discourses. This association signals a movement away from referring to the broad group of mothers - linked by the absence of a man helping them raise their children - which was gradually granted claims to a categorical, and to a large extent rhetorical, entitlement to services during the past century. Associating the language of single mothers with certain specific groups only further divides and distances single mothers from claims to entitlement advocated through the poverty discourses of the 1980s and the inclusive citizenship discussions of the 1990s. These uses of the identity "single mother" begin to construct a racialized dimension as well as a non-sanctioned motherhood component that reconfigure an established social welfare subject. The new identity becomes, then, associated through the discourses of service provision with fragmented, particular groups rather than representing a situation that can happen to mothers in general. And, in Toronto, the services provided became marked as services required by specific, minority groups rather than services made

necessary by structural changes in the family and labour force.

CLAIMS TO ENTITLEMENT

While the description of target groups has been combined with a discourse of vilification of particular groups, a new rationale for claims is emerging in the sector's attempts at developing services for women raising children alone. It makes claims for service to single mothers through a discourse that medicalizes the lives and circumstances of these women. This trend performs, in effect, a medicalization of social needs through arguments that draw attention to health issues as a requirement before single mothers can cope with employment or job training. Use of language such as "children at risk, diagnosis, low birth weight, healthy family, healthy start for kids, healthy life style, prevention (of abuse and neglect)" subordinates social support to health discourses through expert calculations of risk (O'Malley 1992) and multiplication of the aspects that require intervention (Rose 1996). These appeal to the caring duties of single mothers, subordinating the contradictions and complexities ingrained in the categorical approach to a fragmented concern for the well-being of children (Brodie 1996; McKeen 2001). While this medicalized language has secured needed services and supports for mothers, it has called attention to and reinforced an emphasis on personal aspects and individualized intervention. It suggests a need for treatment with an individual clinical focus rather than material support, social change or advocacy.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined changes in the identity of single mothers in Canada by linking them with social policy events and has also explored trends that may suggest current shifts in this identity in Toronto. Since the early twentieth century, poor women raising children alone have experienced various transformations in the way they were seen and had their needs addressed by social programs. They have been intrinsically linked to rationales of entitlement and have marked the categorical approach. As central subjects of social welfare, single mothers were a key target for the reforms of the 1990s when they were consolidated as problem workers with a myriad of individual personal deficiencies. As such, single mothers and their children saw their needs multiplied and placed, as personal problems, on the doorsteps of the non-profit social services sector.

Using the social services discourses of agency profiles in Toronto, I suggest that in this location, a variety of identity shifts are currently taking place. These discourses seem to disassociate the programs from a direct mention of single mothers, thus obscuring the claims to entitlements this large group of women had attained. To serve women raising children alone, non-profit programs refer to various characteristics which describe their conditions and, hence, create a diversity of specific groups of service users. This has the effect of fragmenting and dispersing this identity. A direct mention of this identity in these discourses is associated with groups that are marginalized and vilified and represent a contested group of mothers with individualized needs.

In emphasizing these shifts, the purpose here is not a lament of the lost features or a glorification of past accomplishments of the welfare state, nor it is intended as a blaming of current activities that consolidate the identified trends. Rather, the intent is to clarify assumptions and effects to allow for inclusive possibilities to take shape. Studying the services discourses allows us insight into how these mothers are being reconstituted and suggests certain effects of current discourses. The further shrinking of claims to entitlements for poor single mothers to care for their children has important consequences for the materialization of social rights and social citizenship. As the identity "single mother" becomes further fragmented, motherhood is consolidated as a privilege guaranteed through the labour market either in the form of high family earnings or employment rights (Orloff 2002, 99-100). The fragmentation through which contemporary social welfare enables marginalized motherhoods in Toronto underscores the abandonment of categories with claims to entitlement.

ENDNOTES

1. Thanks to an anonymous *Atlantis* reviewer for this point.

2. In providing examples, I avoided calling attention to particular agencies in order to emphasise the sector's discourse.

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