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# **Making Mothers Visible**

## ***Implications for Social Work Practice and Education in Child Welfare***

Social work is a profession largely about women. Most front-line social workers are women, and the clients with whom they work tend to be poor women in marginalized families. This gendered nature of social work is particularly apparent in the field of child welfare practice. Here, the primary activity of ensuring the best interests of children, or more recently their protection from harm, is more aptly described as scrutinizing maternal care. Despite this emphasis, mothering has and continues to be largely invisible as a focus in its own right in social work theory, teaching, and practice in general and in the context of child welfare specifically.

The invisibility of gender in social work—especially mothering—has serious implications for practice. The day-to-day experiences of mothers are not taken into account within standard child welfare assessment and intervention practices, nor are mothers' viewpoints represented. As a result, mothers who are clients of child welfare systems may not receive the help that they need as they care for their children. Instead, mothers in contact with social services may see the relationship as controlling and unhelpful. The combination of diminishing opportunities for clinical training and the current emphasis on forensic agency procedures aimed at detecting children at risk undermines the development of positive worker-client relationships.

In this paper, we make explicit the relationship between mothering and social work practice in the arena of child welfare. We take the position that social work educators ought to consider mothering as a legitimate area of critical inquiry. The paper is divided into four sections. We begin with an examination of recent feminist theorizing around mothering, followed by an analysis of mothering in social work practice in the arena of child welfare. Drawing on our research with mothers in sexual abuse cases in the third section, we examine

how mothers are simultaneously central and invisible in child welfare practice. In the final section, we describe a graduate course on “Social Work Practice with Women as Mothers” that is offered at McGill University in order to illustrate how bringing mothering into the social work curriculum might be a useful addition to child welfare training.

### **Feminist theorizing around motherhood**

Motherhood has been the focus of extensive feminist analysis over the last two decades (Chodorow, 1978; Glenn, 1994; Rich, 1977; Ruddick, 1989; Snitow, 1992). Feminists have taken issue with the romanticized portrait of good mothers as intuitive nurturers, naturally equipped and readily available to care for their children (Contratto, 1986). In this portrait, mothers are expected to anticipate and respond to all their children’s needs and desires (Hays, 1996). Theorists challenged the claim that individual maternal responsibility for children is the ideal parenting arrangement and the one best suiting children’s psychosocial needs. They pointed out the negative consequences for mothers who try to live up to the impossible ideal of the all-giving and selfless nurturer. These unrealistic expectations of mothers reinforce the persistence of mother-blame and its internalization by women when their children experience problems.

Feminist theorists argued that when mothering is seen only as an expression of caring and love, the actual labour involved in mothering and the necessary resources to care for children can go largely unacknowledged. Because mothering tasks are not socially visible, normal mothers are always expected to cope (Graham, 1982), regardless of their circumstances or resources. In contrast, feminist analysts coined the term “mother-work” to counteract the invisibility of mothering labour (Griffith and Smith, 1987; Levine, 1985; Rosenberg, 1988). The concept of “mother-work” locates mothering as an occupation and a job of perpetual shift work, where mother is always on call (Rosenberg, 1988).

Feminist theorists have also suggested that the tendency to either denigrate or idealize mothers, which is characteristic of so much popular discourse, stems from an inability to recognize ambivalence in the mother-child relationship. The romanticization of motherhood provides little space for acknowledging children’s ambivalence about their mothers or, more controversially, mothers’ ambivalence about their children (Featherstone, 1997). In this regard, the contributions of feminist psychoanalytic theorists are particularly promising for clinical practice with mothers. While ambivalence had previously been recognized as a normal phase of child development, some feminist analysts have begun to explore its significance in other relationships, specifically mother-child relationships. Rozsika Parker describes maternal ambivalence as an emotional position constituting a “complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side” (Parker, 1997: 17). Ambivalence is central to mother-child

relationships according to Parker, and yet it is “curiously hard to believe in” and very painful to experience. The narrow cultural construction of the good mother exacerbates the impact of these not uncommon, yet culturally taboo feelings. In the grip of these turbulent emotions, some mothers feel that their emotions are unnatural: “It is the denial of the feelings of fury, boredom or even dislike towards children, all of which are part of motherhood, that makes the burden hard for women to bear, and can so often result in these negative feelings being expressed in secret and perverse ways” (Maynes and Best, 1997: 26). The conspiracy of silence around such negative feelings leaves mothers with no place to turn to diffuse or process their feelings of ambivalence and guilt. This ambivalence can become intolerable when mothers face such compounding difficulties as a lack of support from partners, poor physical health, economic pressure, a lack of emotional support, and a child whose behaviours are difficult to manage (Featherstone, 1997). As such, these women may feel as though they are failing as mothers.

Featherstone (1995) points out how these feelings may also resonate in the relationships between social workers and mothers: “Mothers may speak the unspeakable, do the undoable—social workers may not be able to tolerate a mother asking that her child be placed, such assertions may mobilize furious anger towards a woman, anger which may arise from a multiplicity of sources, identification with the vulnerable child, as well as the chords that may be struck for those struggling with motherhood themselves” (25). In child welfare practice, the complex feelings and experiences of mothering and ambivalence are all too often eclipsed by social workers’ emphasis on the protection of children from harm or maltreatment and the inability to critically examine women’s experiences of mothering.

The feminist literature on mothering has grown extensively over the past thirty years. Recently, feminists influenced by postmodern theory have focussed on women’s divergent and specific experiences. Rather than seeing women as united against patriarchal power, post-modern feminists reconceptualized power as a set of relations in which we are all implicated both individually and institutionally (Featherstone and Fawcett, 1995). They disputed feminist theories that position women uncritically as victims in all circumstances (Featherstone and Trinder, 1997) and they questioned the traditional feminist assumption that the interests and needs of women and children are inevitably the same—a key concern in child welfare practice. Feminists continue to rethink motherhood, with a focus on women’s varying experiences in differing contexts. They emphasize the construction of maternal identity as mediated by experiences of “race,” class, ethnicity, sexuality, age and ability (Collins, 1994; Luxton, 1997; McMahon, 1995).

### **Feminism, mothering and child welfare**

The literature on mothering is particularly pertinent to the field of social work. Influenced by developments in feminist theorizing, analysts have criti-

cally examined theory and practice in child welfare, with particular attention to its gendered construction. The child welfare workforce, client population, and the assumptions about mothering and women that underlie child welfare interventions have been of particular concern to feminist social work theorists. They argue that the state mandate to protect children is far from neutral and that, in reality, it is a process of evaluating maternal capacity (Davies, Krane, McKinnon, Rains and Mastronardi, 2002; Krane and Davies, 2000). Feminist writings about child welfare have drawn attention to the disparagement of mothers who become clients of child welfare agencies, and documented how mother blame is endemic in the “helping professions” (Caplan and Hall-McCorquodale, 1985; Carter, 1999; Featherstone, 1999; Krane forthcoming, 2003; Swift, 1995). When children are harmed or neglected, mothers are the primary focus for intervention, and thus they tend to unilaterally carry the responsibility for their children’s protection. This mode of practice likely emphasizes the detection of “risky” mothering rather than support of mothers in need. As a result, distrust is fostered between social workers and their clients, and mothers are further alienated from the child welfare system.

Feminists have argued that the discourse of maternal sacrifice and the accompanying invisibility of mothers’ labour shape the normative expectations that social workers in child welfare bring to their investigations and assessments (Carter, 1999). As noted earlier, a growing feminist literature on mothering has challenged the unrealistic expectations placed on women to silently carry on with care taking and to nurture their children despite inadequate material and emotional resources. The overwhelming majority of child welfare clients live in poverty; women of colour and their children are over-represented on caseloads; and single mother households are extremely common. Nevertheless, client mothers are generally assessed according to standardized notions of parental capacity, which ignore the resources and support required. The assumption seems to be that “good” mothers ought to cope.

This assumption is typically left unchallenged by the lived experience of most child welfare workers. In Canada, recent university graduates often find their first employment in the field of child welfare; they tend to be young, childless, and disproportionately from white and middle-class backgrounds. Discrepant social locations and experiences between clients and workers surely have an impact on the social workers’ assessments of risk and safety of children (McMahon, 1995; Pelton, 1989; Swift, 1995; Wharf, 1993). Eurocentric ideas about children’s needs and parenting techniques are reflected in child welfare assessment tools, thus inscribing all mothers who are clients of the child welfare system with universal and often unworkable expectations.

Research in the area of sexual abuse intervention provides a striking illustration of how constructions of mothering play out in an arena of social work practice that centres on the protection of vulnerable children and that produces strong emotions for all.

### **Mothering and child sexual abuse**

In the field of child sexual abuse, mother blame has a long-standing history. Indeed, explanations of child sexual abuse have always been gendered. As can be recalled, Freud's theory of sexual abuse introduced the notion of the "seductive" daughter and the "colluding" mother. These two concepts displaced blame and scrutiny away from the offending father. More recently, family systems analysis of child sexual abuse has gained popularity in practice. Though claimed by its adherents to describe—versus explain—typical relationships that surround and maintain incestuous abuse, the family systems perspective frequently implicitly or explicitly attributes blame to mothers for causing or maintaining the sexual abuse of their children (Hooper, 1992, 7).

Feminist theorists challenged mainstream conceptions of mother's complicity in the forms of her collusion, her helpless dependency or victim status, and her failure to satisfy or control her mate (Elbow and Mayfield, 1991; Faller, 1988; Holten, 1990; Hooper, 1992; Jacobs, 1990; Johnson, 1992; Krane, 1994). In contrast to stereotyped presentations of mothers as either having colluded or failed to protect their children, feminist investigations demonstrated considerable variation in women's awareness of and responses to the sexual abuse of their children. Research conducted by Carter (1999) and Krane (forthcoming 2003) found that mothers' reactions to and actions in the face of child sexual abuse disclosure varied, with a significant number of women offering their children belief, comfort, and reassurance. Citing Deblinger, Hathaway, Lippman and Steer (1993), Krane argues that social workers should expect that the discovery of the sexual abuse of one's child is rife with distress for the mother herself. In stark contrast, the distress of the mother is almost ignored. As a good mother, she is expected to instantly forego her own needs and ignore her own state of emotional trauma in order to support her child calmly and effectively. This is keeping with the mythical expectations we hold of women as mothers and underlines the invisibility of the tasks associated with mothering, especially during a crisis. Social workers in their efforts to ensure the protection of children collude by assuming mothers are, or should be, ready, willing and able to protect their children.

In instances of child sexual abuse, the child's parent or legal guardian (read "mother") is expected to know or should have known that the sexual abuse took place as ensconced in provincial child welfare legislation (i.e., Ontario, 1984, *Child and Family Services Act*). As a mother, she is open to scrutiny and characteristically found wanting for having failed to detect warning signs of abuse. This sentiment is aptly summed up in the words of a social worker participant in Krane's (1994) study:

Mrs. Coles left her husband alone with the child on a regular basis and he encouraged her to do that. He gave her money to go out and play bingo and it was too good to be true. He gave her money to go out and play bingo! Well, did she not stop to ask what's going on?

Absent from this example is any critical examination of the husband's conduct. Though he perpetrated the offence, his behaviour is overlooked. He is held responsible and possibly punished. Nevertheless, the minimal expectations we hold of men is confirmed. On the other hand, inflated expectations of mothers hold her to a much higher standard and her responses are carefully scrutinized. In the above instance, the mother left her child with the husband and she failed to question his motives. While it is not so incredible that a husband might encourage a wife to enjoy herself, it is remarkable how "mother" is held responsible for the abuse. Even more incredible is that mother is expected to have translated his actions (i.e., "encouragement" to "go out and play bingo") into a warning sign for possible sexual abuse. These retrospective constructions ensure that the onus for the protection resides with "mother" and a good mother should have known (Krane, forthcoming, 2003).

Social workers' assumptions about mothers mirror larger cultural expectations of motherhood. As Krane argues (1994; forthcoming 2003), practice with mothers seems to be based on the supposition that good mothers naturally and intuitively meet the demands and needs of their children, can predict abuse, and thus can protect their children from harm. Not only does this idealization of women as mothers reinforce women's responsibility for achieving and maintaining the stability and functioning of the family, it also converts the problem of child sexual abuse into a mother's failure to protect or perform her proper maternal role. While mother-blame is most evident in child welfare practice with mothers of sexually abused children, it might be argued that the effects of unexamined constructions of mothering pervade all areas of social work practice. In order to transform constructions of mothering in social work practice, these beliefs need to be rendered visible and open to reflection and debate. An opportunity to render mothering central in social work practice has been created through a graduate seminar entitled "Social Work Practice with Women as Mothers."

### **Mothering and work education**

In schools of social work across North America, the substantive area of the construction of mothering is invisible. This statement is not to suggest that issues of mothering and motherhood are not taken up. Implicit ideological messages about children's needs and family life are conveyed through courses and texts about child welfare, family assessment, family therapy, and couple counselling. Given that "mothering" as a socially constructed institution is not confronted, the notion of the good mother remains a powerful but unspoken subtext to most social work training.

In contrast, a course entitled "Social Work Practice with Women as Mothers" has been offered by Linda Davies at McGill University in the School of Social Work since the early 1990s. The course aims to question specific constructions of mothering through an examination of discourses on mothering including historical and cross-cultural mothering perspectives. Readings

address both the subjective experience of mothering and the objective material conditions for parenting which different groups of women experience. Students examine how historical and contemporary social work theories and practices reproduce dominant attitudes towards mothers and mothering, and they consider the practice implications of these unexamined constructions.

Learning about mothering cannot be undertaken as simply an academic and intellectual exercise. An experiential component to the course challenges students to question what good mothering means to them, as well as the sources of these notions. The fundamental purpose of the course is to begin a process of reflection and critique of our received ideas about mothering. In turn, social work students are encouraged to take these reflections into their daily practice with mothers who are involved with the child welfare system. This objective is addressed through both the course content and its process.

### *Course content*

Course materials emanate largely from feminist literature on mothering and feminist critiques of social work practice. In seminar format, students explore such themes as the simultaneous idealization and denigration of mothers in western contexts, the silencing of maternal ambivalence, the invisibility of mother-work, and divergent maternal subjectivities that are produced through “race,” class, ethnicity, sexuality, age and ability. This literature draws students’ attention to the day-to-day stress experienced by poor and single mothers, the majority of whom are or will be their clients. Students also read accounts of the lived experience of particular groups of mothers, such as lesbian mothers, mothers with disabilities, teen mothers, and foster mothers. Other course topics include the participation of men in child-care and domestic work, and the implication for child welfare practice. While the content may vary from year to year depending on student interests, the quality of the class process is key for engaging students in a process of critical deconstruction of mothers and mothering.

### *Process*

This course engages students in narratives of mothering that bring them closer to understanding how their own social locations shape their beliefs, feelings, and experiences of mothering as daughters and mothers. Class exercises and discussions ask students to draw on their personal experiences and feelings about mothering in order to connect both intellectually and emotionally to the theoretical material. Students with children speak of the sometimes overwhelming frustrations that they encounter as mothers (or fathers) and seem to enjoy a certain sense of liberation as they describe these often silenced experiences. Other students are encouraged to explore their feelings about becoming future parents in light of the romanticized myths that prevail in popular and professional culture. In this way, students are expected to interact not only as developing social workers, but also as people enmeshed in relation-

ships with their own mothers or children. These different perspectives enhance students' understandings of their practice with clients—particularly as these insights may support a sense of empathy and connection with mothers. Such a process of critical reflection runs counter to a child welfare system that encourages a detached professionalism.

The topic that is perhaps the most destabilizing for students to examine is that of maternal subjectivity from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective (Hollway and Featherstone, 1997; Parker, 1997). The concept of maternal ambivalence directly engages students, some of who are mothers themselves, in reflecting on their own individual biographies and normative yet perhaps unexamined ideas about mothering. Students are encouraged to consider notions of both manageable and unmanageable ambivalence experienced by mother clients of the child welfare system and their own emotional reactions to this ambivalence. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists suggest that a tolerance for normal ambivalent feelings among both mothers and social workers themselves would create more potential for therapeutic outcomes and a more accepting and supportive working environment of interaction between social workers and mother clients.

The focus on maternal ambivalence provides students with a supportive framework to examine their own feelings of anger and guilt that may be produced in their encounters with mothers who are not coping. As noted earlier child welfare workers directly encounter women whose mothering practice can deviate sharply from the normative construction of the good mother, and these encounters can provoke a range of uncomfortable emotions for them. Students are asked to critically explore these feelings and courageous students sometimes offer examples of their own ambivalent feelings as mothers. Moreover, by exploring the range of emotions that mothers experience, students begin to challenge the romantic fantasy of the essential harmony between mothers and children (Featherstone, 1997). While these discussions can be disconcerting, they guard against an overly intellectual approach to the course material. Integration at an emotional level is essential for social workers to engage therapeutically with mothers. In the contemporary child welfare climate, which is increasingly characterized by discourses of accountability, risk, and surveillance, we want to disrupt emotional detachment associated with a professional persona (Davies and Collings, 2001).

As with all themes in the course, an examination of maternal ambivalence requires students to connect personally and intellectually to the material. This connection is promoted through written journals that allow students to explore individually their reactions to the weekly class readings and discussion. This component requires that students move beyond a passive reading of the material and facilitates direct conversation with the class instructor. Journals complement a class process that is interactive rather than didactic without minimizing the importance of covering some highly complex theoretical material.

## **Conclusion**

The opportunity to rethink mothering as a (western) social construction holds major implications for social work practitioners, particularly those practicing on the front lines of child welfare. Given that child welfare workers have both the mandate to protect children and the power to remove them, a judicious exercise of this mandate is called for. Social workers in child welfare have always had to manage the balance between “care and control.” The critical examination of mothering, as we have described above, may prove fruitful in negotiating this tension.

We can speculate on how a critical consciousness around mothering might translate into practice with mothers in child welfare. For instance, deconstructive conversations about mothers and mothering among social workers and mother-clients might offer possibilities for more creative and insightful child welfare interventions. Such a critical discourse on mothering might avoid both the romanticization and denigration of mothers that can characterize child welfare practice with women. Elsewhere we have introduced the idea of incorporating “a mothering narrative” in social work practice (Krane and Davies, 2000) in which women tell their own stories as mothers. This narrative would give voice to the day-to-day realities of physical and emotional caregiving and provide workers and mothers with a forum to discuss these experiences. A narrative approach with mothers allows both workers and their mother-clients to reflect on and acknowledge the subjective experiences of mothering, its cultural specificity, its stresses, its emotional intensity (including the contradictory feelings of love and hate for children), and its challenges and pleasures. These discussions might support the development of a relationship with workers and clients that moves beyond blame. With trust developed, the narrative might be deconstructed. This process might involve a critical rethinking of unrealistic expectations deriving from the idealized construct of the good mother, a critical assessment of mothering capacity and an acknowledgement of the resources and supports necessary to support that capacity, and recognition of the sometimes divided interests between mothers and children.

In short, we are arguing for a more theoretically complex and contextualized approach to child welfare practice based on a respectful and sensitive relationship with mother-clients. Present-day conditions in child welfare bureaucracies do not easily accommodate this vision given the cutbacks, high caseloads, and the disappearance of supportive supervision (Davies and Collings, 2001, De Montigny, 1995; McMahan, 1995). Nevertheless, practitioners still have face-to-face encounters with mothers where there is room for creative and reflective relationships. While it is difficult to make extensive claims for one course’s potential to radically change child welfare practice, the classroom does provide a space in which students can begin to critically reflect on received ideas that underlie the construction of child welfare and to consider how practice might be changed.

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