

Matricentric Policy Research: Making Room for Mothers in an Inclusive Research Partnership

In this article, I argue inclusive policy research using “big data” that is informed by matricentric feminist values can yield analysis and recommendations that will be empowering for mothers. Drawing on my experience as a feminist legal scholar and my developing interest in social policy as a means to achieve justice for mothers and other carers, I contend that legal challenges to advance equality for mothers have not been as successful as early assessments might have predicted. Instead, I explore how an inclusive team approach to the kind of social problems that make life difficult for many mothers in Canada could yield better policy that brings them closer to equality. I describe a policy research partnership that includes public servants and community groups as well as academics, informed by an intersectional approach. The partnership will make use of administrative data in Manitoba to explore social policy challenges, including affected community members and public servants from all relevant departments from the outset, ensuring that the questions that are explored reflect the real needs of the people the policies are intended to serve. With two examples of previous research, I illustrate how mother-focused recommendations can flow from the kind of big data available in Manitoba.

In 2016, Andrea O’Reilly published *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism and Practice*. With this book, she firmly establishes the proposition that those who are mothering need a feminism of their own (1). She maintains that mothering matters and is central to the lives of women who are mothers (O’Reilly’s intends the word “mothers” to be inclusive of all people engaged in motherwork), without ever conceding ground to the essentialist notion that all women must mother. As she sees it, motherhood “is the unfinished business of feminism” (2). Canadian statistical research about women supports her position, showing that women’s wellbeing continues to be adversely affected by their caregiving responsibilities (Statistics Canada). An inclusive model of

policy research that uses “big data” to inform policy analysis can incorporate a matricentric focus and promote social justice. This article provides a brief summary of O’Reilly’s theory of empowered mothering; a sketch of an inclusive partnership approach to inclusive policy research; and a quick look at some policy questions that put mothers at the centre.

As a legal scholar, I have spent my career trying to figure out how the law, mainly through claims to equality rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, may help to create a space for mothering that was based on a substantive understanding of the needs of mothers. As I have become somewhat disillusioned with the power of constitutional challenges to get us to a place of equality for mothers, I have shifted my focus towards social policy development. Now I ask not “how do we challenge the status quo through the courts?” but rather “how do we create, promote and use research that is focused on mothers’ wellbeing?” Matricentric feminism can shape how we generate knowledge and insights that are relevant and useful for activists, service providers, policymakers, and even lawyers.

I have approached my own thinking about mothering through the theory, activism and practice that O’Reilly envisions in her work. My first approach to theory was grounded in the legal, doctrinal and critical approaches of a Canadian educated lawyer. I had just come of age when the Charter was being born in 1982, and I began my law studies the year after the equality guarantee in section 15 came into force in 1985. I believed that law, through the Charter, could guarantee women’s equality and in particular mothers’ equality. If law could do this, then mothers’ thriving, wellbeing, and equality in Canadian society would be assured. In part, my naïve belief was grounded in a decision of the Supreme Court of Canada that was released just as I finished law school in 1989. In *Brooks v Canada Safeway Ltd*, the Court recognized that a woman who was discriminated against because of pregnancy is discriminated against on the basis of sex and that such discrimination was contrary to both human rights legislation and the equality guarantee of the Charter (Turnbull, “The Promise”). Using broad language that acknowledged the burden of childbearing borne by women, the chief justice stated that it was “unfair to impose all of the costs of pregnancy upon one half of the population.” He also noted “that those who bear children and benefit society as a whole thereby should not be economically or socially disadvantaged” (*Brooks*).

Those were the early days of the equality provision, a time when, as with a new baby, we believed in its infinite potential. As my career matured, so did the Charter. I became less naïve and watched with dismay as the Charter passed through its turbulent teenage years to become a young adult that has yet to fulfil its potential, especially for mothers and other carers in Canada. Since the *Brooks* decision, numerous cases that brought claims by mothers for access to various social benefits have failed, as courts were unable to see

systemic discrimination or unwilling to make a finding of inequality lest it cost the government too much to remedy (Turnbull, “The Promise”).

Activism and practice also brought me to a new way of thinking about equality for mothers. By the time section 15 was entering its teen years, I was the mother of three small children, the birth of each awakening in me a new wonder at the fundamental equality and dignity of every human being. We raised our children in an inner city Toronto neighbourhood, setting up childcare co-ops and food boxes for local families and fighting against the oppressive impacts of Mike Harris’s austerity budgets on local women and their children. As the Charter approached adulthood, we moved to Manitoba, and I began my career as a legal academic. I was actively involved in various national organizations promoting equality through Charter challenges and legislative reform. I also worked with Manitoba organizations to advocate for gender budgeting and for basic income. At the same time, I walked with my children through their turbulent teen years. They too have become young adults, and I still see and believe in their potential, knowing that the young of today are the ones who are building our society of tomorrow. I haven’t given up on law and on the Charter; I still see the potential they have to shape our society of tomorrow, but I want to use my knowledge and advocacy with different approaches. Good matricentric social policy is part of how we can achieve this. With a new inclusive approach to policy we can get closer to the place where all mothers, no matter their social location, can thrive. When mothers thrive, their children and the rest of us will thrive with them. This is a key aspect of O’Reilly’s matricentric feminism: mothers who are thriving, who are empowered, who have adequate income and food security, and who are safe and have access to safe affordable childcare and other supports for their motherwork have children who do better and are themselves able to be the agents of change needed to develop better laws and policies (Crittenden 112; O’Reilly 70; Smith 240).

My point is that matricentric feminism needs to inform and shape everything from the way we mother in our daily lives to the kind of work we do on behalf of others who are mothering. In the privileged position of a legal academic who has always been concerned about the disadvantaged and often powerless position of mothers, the framework offered by matricentric feminism offers a useful tool to inform research. Along with colleagues who have deep experience using big data to advise policymakers in the health domain, we are creating a new partnership of academics, public servants, and community organizations to develop necessary laws and policies that can offer solutions that are inclusive of all Manitobans, no matter their social location.

1. Matricentric Feminism

O'Reilly suggests that mothering, more than gender, is the defining characteristic of women's inequality. She lays out seven principles that provide a partial and provisional definition of matricentric feminism (7): putting mothers first and taking seriously the work of mothering because motherwork is important and valuable to society. She proposes that a matricentric approach is a direct repudiation of patriarchal structures of motherhood as well as the contemporary child-centredness of intensive mothering. She argues strongly for scholars to accept that mothering in itself is worthy of serious scholarly inquiry and to establish motherhood studies as a legitimate scholarly discipline in order to allow the development of both research and activism from the experience and perspective of mothers. Perhaps most important for the research approach I outline here, she asserts that a matricentric approach is committed to social change and social justice, positioning mothering as a site of power, and that matricentric feminism understands mothering to be culturally determined, including diverse experiences related to race, class, ability, sexuality, gender identity, age, and geographical location.

O'Reilly positions matricentric feminist approaches in opposition to patriarchal motherhood and the ideology of the good mother, who is child focused and self-sacrificing, and inevitably white, heterosexual, cisgendered, married, and middle class with two children (Hays). According to Adrienne Rich, mothering is not natural, nor should it be the sole responsibility of biological mothers (33). She argues that mothers need powers equal to the responsibilities they carry on behalf of society, and O'Reilly also sees a connection between the neoliberal ethos of our times and intensive mothering, arguing that like neoliberalism itself, these ideologies and social expectations should be rejected (56). Neoliberalism and the fiction of choice operate as a backlash against women's progress (60). Under neoliberalism, women still face a pay gap when they engage in paid labour, especially if that labour is caring work, and they are still unpaid when they are caring for their own children (which they still do more than male parents). Social supports shrink (community programs and schools face cuts), and men remain relatively privileged (57).

O'Reilly also maintains that non-normative mothers are living and mothering in empowered ways (76). Although Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* suggests three fundamental tasks for mothering—to protect, nurture and train—for many mothers who are marginalized, protecting their children is an all-consuming dimension of their motherwork. As Patricia Hill Collins eloquently proclaims of African American mothers, physical survival is central to their mothering tasks, and the other two elements of mothering that Ruddick identifies are secondary to ensuring their child's survival (49). Mothers living in disadvantage do not have the privilege of devoting time

energy and money to nurturing and training, or to intensive mothering. I emphasize this point because I want to focus on the particularities of the geographic location I am from. Manitoba is in the centre of Canada. It is the Canadian province with the highest proportion of children in care, and nearly 90 percent of those children are Indigenous (Gilbert). Imagine how fiercely those mothers, as well as their families and communities, are trying to protect their children from various colonial intrusions (for example the practice of “birth alerts,” such as the one that went viral in 2019 [Lambert]). Indigenous women are not just marginalized, they may be targeted (sometimes with intention, more often through structures that disproportionately affect them). But as Kim Anderson argues, Indigenous women are also drawing on Indigenous cultural and collectivist norms, and building families as a site of resistance and renewal (762).

2. An Inclusive Partnership Approach to Policy Research

In 2016, I met a couple of the research scientists at the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) which produces research that speaks to a whole range of health and social issues, many of them relevant to mothers and children. Their work draws upon the Manitoba Population Research Data Repository (the Repository) housed at MCHP. The Repository is a comprehensive collection of population-based data developed and maintained by MCHP on behalf of the Province of Manitoba. All data are de-identified and contain a scrambled number, which allows for person-level, anonymous linkage across datasets and over time. It includes data for education, child and family services, income assistance, public housing, and justice, as well as a vast range of health data.

The use of administrative big data in social policy is extremely limited, yet they hold great promise (N. Roos et al., “Policymakers’ Understanding”). Developments in technology have resulted in the proliferation of big data repositories and renewed interest in the use of large administrative datasets for social science research (Martens; McGrail et al; Connelly). Administrative data are derived from the operation of administrative systems (such as the education or the justice system), often associated with service delivery (McGrail; Connelly). They have been described as “found” data (i.e., collected for purposes other than research) as opposed to “made” data (i.e., collected through experimental methods). Although this means researchers generally have no input into the structure or content of these datasets, they offer several advantages, including large sample sizes, longitudinal follow-up, routine collection, and whole-population participation (Martens et al.; McGrail et al.; Raghupathi and Raghupathi; L. Roos et al.). Administrative data are particularly powerful when they can be linked across sectors and services, providing

a breadth of information required for conducting research on complex social problems (Raghupathi and Raghupathi; L. Roos et al.). As such, they hold great potential for policy research and evaluation. Canada has been a leader when it comes to using these data for health policy research and evaluation; however we have lagged behind other countries, notably the U.S. (Jutte et al.; Aizer et al.; Bloom and Unterman; Robertson et al.; Chetty et al.) when it comes to using these linked data for social policy research and evaluation (Chetty et al.). The Repository has the most extensive collection of linkable social services datasets available for research in the country (Martens).

Justice data were just beginning to arrive in the Repository, and we quickly realized the power of using these data to consider the needs and wellbeing of different sectors of Manitoba's population. A group of us determined that we could use the data to look at complex social policy problems using a cross-disciplinary, collaborative approach that would be inclusive from problem definition through data analysis to policy evaluation and/or implementation. It was also our goal to recognize the differing impacts policies may have depending on individual and group identities as well as experiences of inequality. As a lawyer, I could see the power of this kind of research not only to promote data-informed policymaking but also to provide an additional kind of evidence for legal analysis, especially for systemic equality claims that rely heavily on the broader social context to make a finding of differential treatment.

We created a partnership to bring together scholars, public servants, and community organizations to study complex social and policy challenges. Some theorists have labelled these twenty-first-century policy challenges "wicked problems" with the intention of capturing their fluidity, intractability, and political nature (Conklin; Head and Alford; Turnbull, "Wicked Problems"). The federal government of Australia has used the wicked problems construct to address policymaking because it "is capable of grasping the big picture, including interrelationships among the full range of causal factors ... and broader, more collaborative and innovative approaches ... effectively engaging stakeholders and citizens" (Government of Australia). Traditional government structures are hierarchical and highly siloed, making it difficult for governments to effectively address wicked problems (Wellesley Institute; Barber). Collaborative approaches with multidisciplinary teams are what is really needed to tackle these complex issues (Ruhl and Salzman; Coffey). Partnerships are inherently about knowledge co-creation and mobilization and provide a strong foundation for iterative and reflective practice (Cavaghan; MacDonald and Levasseur).

As we think about social change and social justice, we are also guided by Leslie Pal's work on policy analysis, which emphasizes that it must be a multidisciplinary and iterative process. Pal acknowledges that the rationalist

origins of Western policy analysis have limited its ability to include complex social realities and local ways of knowing, and argues for a broader and more inclusive approach to policy development. Mechanisms for including a diversity of knowledge and expertise and taking account of how power is distributed among stakeholders (Brownell et al., “Class Half-empty”; N. Roos et al., “Complete Story”; Doberstein) are essential to improve the policy process for addressing wicked problems. Pal suggests a whole government process that provides “horizontality,” which, as opposed to “hierarchical” approaches, engages across levels of government, departments, and with partners outside of government (Pal; Bakvis and Juillet). Canadian society is diverse, and policies must serve citizens in all their social locations, recognizing that different policy impacts may arise out of the combination of various individual and group identities. Analysis that recognizes such intersectionality will explore how policies affect the inequalities experienced by various social groups (Scala and Paterson).

An intersectionality framework allows the partnership to be intentional about creating an inclusive and collaborative approach. Intersectionality is well established as an analytical tool for theorizing identity and oppression. Its use in policy is just beginning: “The goal of intersectionality policy analysis is to identify and address the way specific acts and policies address the inequalities experienced by various social groups ... taking into account ... multiple systems of power and oppression” (Hankivsky and Cormier 217). An intersectionality framework allows the linking of theory and practice as there is a “dialectical relationship ... where theories of intersectionality are informed by and informing of practice” (Dhamoon and Hankivsky 18). There is significant overlap between the approaches for wicked problems and those for intersectional policy analysis. Both agree that the methods cannot be pinned down, as they evolve based on the stakeholders and the problem (Hankivsky and Cormier). “Policies must reflect [the] uniqueness [of intersectional experiences] or remain largely ineffective in solving the problems of marginalized groups” (Wilkinson 33).

Wicked problems require broader ways of thinking about the variables, options, and linkages (Head and Alford), and meaningful attention to diversity will shape the policy questions that are asked, the kind of data that are collected, how the data are collected, and how the data are disaggregated (Bakvis and Juillet; Hankivsky and Cormier). Pal concludes that traditional policy tools are no longer adequate in a world of global integration, broad internet access to information, and a citizenry that understands that governments are elected to address public problems in the public interest. Inclusive partnerships may offer an ideal way to address some of the challenges in the policy process related to the wicked problems of the twenty-first century (Martens; N. Roos et al., “Complete Story”).

Two examples of research done by team members (prior to the creation of the partnership) demonstrate how powerful policy recommendations can be when attention is focused on mothers. Much research on child welfare systems focuses on outcomes for children, but a study that looked at over three thousand children born in Manitoba between 1998 and 2001 found that the rates of mental illness, addiction, residential mobility, and welfare use were significantly higher for the mothers whose children were taken into care, compared to mothers whose children had not been taken into care. The authors recommend implementing policies that provide supports for maternal health and social outcomes after a child is taken into care (Wall-Weiler et al.). A different study looked at the impact of an unconditional cash transfer to low income pregnant women. A benefit of \$81.41 per month was provided to women in the second and third trimesters of their pregnancy for those earning up to \$22,000 per annum, reducing to zero for incomes over \$32,000 per annum. A total of 14,600 pairs of mothers whose babies were born between 2003 and 2010 were included. Researchers found that the benefit resulted in the prevention of 21 percent of all low birthweight births and 17.5 percent of all preterm births for this vulnerable population (Brownell et al, “Prenatal Income”). An unconditional benefit recognizes the autonomy and agency of the mother, unlike many other similar benefits that the researchers reviewed, and was just as effective, or more so, in improving outcomes. These two examples, though not explicitly informed by a matricentric feminist perspective, show how a focus on the mother can yield results that can lead to policy developments that can improve the wellbeing of mothers, thereby benefiting their children and society as a whole.

3. Matricentric Social Policy Research

If we put mothers at the centre, what kinds of research questions may we ask, what policies should we evaluate? For example, we know that being taken into the care of the state leads to negative outcomes for children, especially for Indigenous children (Government of British Columbia). We now know that mothers have poorer health and social outcomes after their children have been taken into care (Wall-Wieler et al.). We also know that many complex and interacting social factors affect mothers’ ability to provide the care required by law, and the care they do provide is judged by colonial standards that may not be relevant to the circumstances of many families, particularly Indigenous families living in remote areas. At the same time, we know that Indigenous mothers and communities are reclaiming and renewing their own knowledge and pushing back against these forces (First Nations Family Advocate Office).

If we want to begin to look at the policies that are affecting mothers and their children in such circumstances, we must be guided by the OCAP

(ownership, control, access, and possession) principles (First Nations Information Governance Centre). We need to make sure that our partnership includes organizations that are already working in these areas (First Nations Family Advocate Office), and we must also ask ourselves which other mothers might be similarly affected, such as refugee, or farm, or disabled mothers. As we begin our work, and at every stage, we must include mothers in all their diversity and ask “what would “good” mothering look like in your community?” For as Marilyn Waring has said, “what we decide to measure now is what we will prioritise in the future ... Underneath the numbers, a philosophical judgement is always being made based on values, not facts.” (117, 15). Let us draw upon the values of matricentric feminism.

Author’s Note

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