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Social Work, Motherhood, and Mothering: Critical Feminist Perspectives

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Hee-Jeong Yoo, Laura Lewis, Deepy Sur, Dawn Thurman, Erin Kuri, Janis Favel, Christine Walsh, and many more

ERIN KURI AND DIANNE FIERHELLER

Social Work and Mothering: Mapping the Intersections of Social Work and Matricentric Feminism

The social construction of motherhood informs and permeates the field of social work through practice, research, and education, yet mothering experiences are often silenced in course curriculums, practice settings, and research agendas. We bring together both our voices and unique experiences as mothers, social work PhD candidates, as well as social worker and art therapist that have worked alongside mothers for many years in our professional landscapes situated in community-based and healthcare settings. Throughout this article, we argue that although the gendered nature of social work has been acknowledged by many scholars over the years—across liberal, Marxist, radical, and socialist feminist perspectives—a critical feminist analysis of mothering that incorporates maternal theory and matricentric feminism is largely absent from social work theory, research, education, and practice. We offer a historical chronological review of literature in which to contextualize current tensions and possibilities at the intersection between the profession of social work, conceptualizations of mothering within social work, and maternal feminist theory within a North American context. We aim to demonstrate how awareness of this history is a vital component of critical practice with mothers and as mothers.

Introduction

Across continents, cultures, and spaces, mothers have always played a central role in our social world. The societal definitions and expectations of "mother" change, however, based on the social, historical, geographic, political, and cultural contexts of particular moments in time (Collins 311; Ruddick 97). This special issue of the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* was created at a time and place when conceptualizations of "mother" continue to be defined in multiple, complex, and competing

ways. Stories of mothering in the context of social work reveal connection, advocacy, resiliency, discrimination, and troubling dilemmas that highlight both stre-ngths and challenges yet to be recognized in the field. Although the gendered nature of social work has been acknowledged by many scholars over the years —across liberal, Marxist, radical, and socialist feminist perspectives (Carniol 7; Davies et al. 158; Wearing 37-53)—we argue that a critical feminist analysis of mothering that incorporates maternal theory and matricentric feminism is largely absent from social work theory, research, education, and practice.

Throughout this article, we aim to engage a broad audience including policymakers, educators, social workers, service users, and mothers while recognizing that these groups can and do overlap. As authors, our ways of knowing bring together social work practice, theory, education, and research with critical feminist scholarship and lived experiences as mothers. Our writing process has involved continuous reflexive praxis that acknowledges and recognizes our positionalities, unique experiences, and how our identities and subjectivities influence our own mothering and social work stories. We encourage self-reflection and wonderings as you read and engage with this overview of literature. We ask the following questions. How are mothering stories in the context of social work shared, interrogated, judged, celebrated, assessed, silenced, and retold. What are the consequences or benefits of sharing mothering stories within social work spaces? What hidden stories still need to be uncovered and passed on? How do these stories connect to you and your own personal stories of mothers and mothering?

Critical Feminist Analysis of Mothering and Motherhood

We use the term "critical feminism" to describe the contemporary (post-1970s) body of intersectional[1] and interdisciplinary[2] theory that critically examines themes of social power and oppression while attending to gender equity as it intersects with other aspects of identity, such as class, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, body size, age, immigration status, geographic location, and more. The body of scholarship known as feminist maternal theory is conceptualized as a subset of critical feminist theory. Feminist maternal theory gives special consideration to the gendered social identity of mother, as it intersects with other aspects of identity. Maternal theory aims to critique the patriarchal institution of motherhood while creating space to explore the lived experiences of mothers. This body of scholarship has been coined by Andrea O'Reilly as "matricentric feminism"—a model of feminism that centres the experiences and distinct forms of oppression experienced by mothers in societal contexts that value patriarchal, white supremacist, and neoliberal-capitalist policies and practices (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 1).

It is salient to note that we distinguish contemporary feminist maternal theory from an earlier model of feminism called "maternal feminism." Maternal feminism emerged between 1900 and the 1930s in North America in response to a combination of social influences, including British imperialism, the eugenics movement, and the rise of scientific motherhood (Green 48). At the turn of the twentieth century both radical and maternal feminists fought for the right to vote and to be involved in political decision making (Green 49). These two groups, primarily white and middle class, were in conflict, as radical feminism viewed childbearing and mothering as a form of patriarchal oppression. Maternal feminists strategically used their social identity as mothers to advocate for political power at a time when white, middle-class women were being called on to populate British colonized states (Green 52, 56).

In 1976, Adrienne Rich established a clear delineation between "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and her children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that potential-and all women- shall remain under male control" (13). This watershed moment in second-wave feminist literature helped to destigmatize the choice to mother and centred mothering experiences as worthy of attention within the context of feminist theory (Johnson 66). Yet O'Reilly points out that to this day, due to historical tensions in how the relationship between patriarchy and mothering has been understood, attention to motherhood continues to be excluded from mainstream feminism. While at the same time, attention is being given to other aspects of identity and sources of oppression in the lives of women as well as in trans and nonbinary communities (O'Reilly, "Keynote Address"). We argue that an inclusive critical matricentric feminist perspective is vital to the analysis of how the social identity of mother and mothering experiences are understood at the intersection of social work and mothering.

Who Is Mother?

We offer critical matricentric feminist analysis and synthesis surrounding experiences of fulfillment, connection, disconnection, crisis, and oppression entwined at the intersection of social work and mothering. We integrate an inclusive definition of mothering not solely based on gender and understand that motherhood is gendered by the patriarchal forces that oppress women, particularly women who are caregivers. Furthermore, we understand the concept of "mother" as a socially constructed identity that is fluid and continuously changing across time and space. We want to recognize the many individuals and groups who engage in the labour of "motherwork" (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 1) and who identify as mothers, regardless of gender identity or sex assigned at birth. Within this understanding, the practice of mothering is not exclusive to biological mothers or legal guardians. We also acknowledge that

although mothering is often carried out by and within communities, sociocultural expectations that exist in twenty-first-century contemporary industrialized societies tend to hold mothers individually responsible for the wellbeing of their children (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 57). It is pertinent to understand the identity category of mother as distinct from women in general if we are to appreciate the various ways that mothers experience oppression in patriarchal societies that devalue both women and the work of caregiving (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 2; O'Reilly et al., *Motherhood* 1-8).

We also seek to present mothering through a critical feminist intersectional lens that recognizes the nuanced complexity and various combinations of intersecting forms of oppression experienced by mothers due to white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, transphobia, xenophobia, healthism, and fatphobia. Our views expressed in this article may be viewed as subversive or controversial and may evoke feelings of tension and conflict among some social work educators and those practicing in the field. We invite readers to lean in and explore these feelings of discomfort and tension through critical reflection, respectful dialogue, and a willingness to engage with a spirit of appreciation, curiosity, and care. We invite you to consider the diverse voices of mothers, social workers, service users and knowledge holders, in particular those that have been marginalized, absent, or underrepresented in the literature on social work and mothering. We acknowledge that oppression experienced in connection with these aspects of identity are often rendered invisible in a heteropatriarchal society that rewards a particular concept of motherhood, which is aligned with socially constructed ideals of the heteronormative nuclear family. The various aspects of identity, family composition, and global caregiving settings present in this volume require us to recognize and appreciate the uniqueness of every mother and their caregiving story. We hope that this article will contribute to new ways of thinking about motherhood and social work and that future scholarship will continue to centre diverse, equitable, and inclusive stories.

Social Work, Mothering, and Feminist Maternal Theory: A Review of the Literature

Similar to definitions of mothering, knowledge and understanding of social work theory and practice are complex and diverse, have developed across time and space, and are based on social, cultural, political, and historical contexts (Johnson et al. 20). In describing this history, Ben Carniol explains that traditionally social work professionals have primarily been women and their clients have been the poor and dispossessed: "Aboriginal people, the unemployed or underemployed, or the unemployable, people suffering from depression and other debilitating conditions, the young and displaced, the

elderly, the disabled " (7). Most of these people are women as well. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly's conceptualization of narrative inquiry show us that institutions and professions hold their own stories (24-28). Multiple stories exist across professional landscapes of social work and within personal landscapes of mothering. Although we appreciate that social workers are well positioned to provide support and advocacy to mothers in many spaces, we also recognize that the profession, influenced by colonialism, has a long and complex history of social control and violence against many mothers, which has created systemic discrimination through inequitable policies and practices that define who a mother should be (Blackstock 289; Canada 2, 13). We also recognize that social workers may have and continue to experience silencing themselves when advocating for mothers, an act that can threaten their employment and safety in some cases (Reisch 9). Although these factors do not excuse the lack of critical feminist analysis of mothering in social work, they may provide context to the profession's past and encourage new ways of thinking and practicing in the future.

Within this review of literature, we offer a historical overview focusing on the intersection between the profession of social work, conceptualizations of mothering within social work, and maternal feminist theory within a North American context. This overview is structured chronologically, allowing the reader to gain an appreciation for the multiple influences that have shaped the boundaries and areas of overlap between these topics of interest. Acknowledging the complex histories and experiences at the intersection of mothering and social work, we offer several questions to the reader as you engage in the literature in this area. How has a critical feminist analysis of mothering and motherhood influenced social work theory, education, practice, and research? How might the act of bridging social work and feminist maternal theory foster a more complex understanding of tensions and possibilities for growth between social workers and the communities they support?

We conducted a search of the literature from a critical feminist perspective attending to themes of power, oppression, intersectionality, cultural and political contexts, and social justice. We sought out scholarly journal articles within databases across the social sciences, health sciences, and humanities to include diverse forms of research. We reviewed seminal and historical texts across interdisciplinary fields, such as social work, motherhood studies, gender studies, critical race studies, sociology, history, and critical disabilities studies. In alignment with critical feminist values, we specifically sought to include literature that centred narrative accounts of lived experience to illuminate the stories of mothers and social workers that might otherwise be rendered invisible within dominant forms of research design.

The Emergence of Critical Feminist Theory

Although a complete history is beyond the scope of this introductory article, we hope to provide an overview of how the social construction of mothering and analysis of motherhood have informed and intersected with social work theory, policy, research, and practice since the 1970s. We chose this time period to focus on the emergence of critical feminist theory, which began to examine, critique, and question historical conceptualizations of mothers and mothering. The civil and disability rights movements, antiwar protests, the women's liberation movement, and labour rights activism leading up to this era created awareness and changes in law and policy across North America relating to equality and human rights, which in turn impacted mothers and social workers (Gyant 631; Reisch 9). Many mothers who were sole parents and living in poverty fought for welfare to support their children and to assert that caregiving was dignified labour (Ladd-Taylor 26). Many Black women leaders in the American civil rights movement were also mothers and participated in activism efforts while continuing to care for their families (Gyant 633). The literature clearly demonstrates that mothers from diverse backgrounds engaged in social justice movements both professionally in roles as social workers and as active citizens (Jennissen and Lundy 118).

While human rights movements grew across North America, colonial assimilation strategies accelerated across Canada, intersecting with social work institutions and practices, Indigenous mothers, and their communities (Alston-O'Connor 53). Indigenous residential schools were gradually closing but children were being increasingly apprehended by social workers in child welfare agencies. Indigenous infants and children were systematically removed from reserves and most often placed with white, middle-class, and non-Indigenous families (Sinclair 67). White social workers judged Indigenous mothering against nuclear family and middle-class ideals and deemed these mothers as unfit parents that challenged normalized ideologies of parenting. At the same time, the child welfare system decontextualized the impacts of the residential school system (Alston-O'Connor 55). Canadian social worker Raven Sinclair reports that "By the 1970s, one in three Aboriginal children were separated from their families by adoption or fostering" (66). The removal of Indigenous children and placement for adoption with non-Indigenous families continued into the mid-1980s and was later coined by Patrick Johnston as "the Sixties Scoop" (23). The term was based on the words of a long-time ministry employee in British Columbia, whom Johnston interviewed in his scathing report published in 1983 titled *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. The interviewee shared that "provincial social workers would, quite literally, scoop children from reserves on the slightest pretext" (Johnston 23). This era of child welfare practice caused irreparable (and ongoing) cultural

and psychological devastation to Indigenous communities in North America, which has perpetuated the cycle of child welfare apprehensions of Indigenous children (Blackstock 289). This aspect of Indigenous history in North America is important to highlight because we believe the profession of social work can learn from past tragedy and work towards healing with Indigenous communities through both collaborative learning about mothering differently and an intersectional matricentric feminist lens that honours diverse caregiving practices.

The 1970s

The second wave of the women's movement that started in the 1960s began to influence the profession of social work practice, as well as social work theory and education, in North America into the early 1970s (Levy Simon 60). Although many women who identified as working class and racialized had already been working outside the home, during this decade, women and mothers who identified as white, middle-class, and married were increasingly accessing permanent positions of employment in the public sphere (often lower paid, part time, and in female-dominated sectors). Labour laws were passed that supported flexibility for mothers to continue to carry out the bulk of domestic responsibilities at home (Jones et al. 66; Stoller 97; Walsh 568). Feminism began to influence social work practice, research, and theory, challenging and reshaping the way the profession was teaching about, and practicing with, women, mothers, and families (Carniol 43; Kilpatrick and Holland 43). Feminist social workers recognized how seemingly personal circumstances provided insights to unveil broader political mechanisms and that personal and political could no longer be thought of as separate (Johnson et al. 31; Jones et al. 66). The second wave of the women's movement brought awareness to the wide scale problem of violence against women and children, which was upheld by patriarchal societies. Grassroots feminist activists created women's shelters and rape crisis centres where women and their children could receive information, support, and housing (Jones et al. 66). Social workers were influenced by and involved within these movements, advocating for increased governmental funding and service development (Levy Simon 64-65). Despite these changes, like the patriarchal family home, men tended to hold positions of power within the female-dominated profession of social work, as they were actively recruited in order to increase prestige and professional status (Carniol 39; Jones et al. 65). "Male theory," the male supremacy and power within theoretical and ideological perspectives and scholarship, also continued to dominate social work education, practice, and research producing and reproducing gender assumptions within the field (Marchant and Wearing 13).

During this time, feminist scholars were advocating for women and gender studies programs within university settings, and for this knowledge to be integrated within schools of social work (Jones et al. 66; Schilling Meisel and Perkins Friedman 67). With the aim of achieving social equality for all women, feminist perspectives at the time were challenging, questioning, and destabilizing social systems and institutions of control that were reproducing patriarchy and male supremacy. Early work critiqued and challenged gender role assumptions that associated a women's central purpose in life with the roles of "wife" and "mother," arguing that all women should have control over their own bodies. Bodily autonomy encompassed control over reproduction, motherhood, marriage, family, and employment. Feminist maternal research and theory emerged within these spaces and aimed to explore and challenge the ways in which patriarchy shaped the identity and practice of mothering (O'Reilly, *Introduction* 1). Ann Snitow's timeline of feminism and motherhood, originally published in a 1992 paper titled "Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading," reviews important contributions of influential feminist authors (293-310). It is unclear, however, in our review of the literature where, if, or how maternal theory was being integrated into social work education, policy, or practice. Two decades later, in 1998, Emma Gross, editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, attributed the silence of mothering experiences by feminist social workers to earlier feminist critiques of the choices of women to become mothers and the notion that motherhood was to blame for women's oppression (269). Under the umbrella term of feminism, there were multiple and complex ways of understanding motherhood, which continues to create tensions within and across scholarly disciplines.

In the 1970s, Ann Oakley, a feminist sociologist, began writing about the myths and oppressive assumptions associated with motherhood (Glenn 9). As a feminist social scientist, Oakley's research continued to explore mothering experiences and received recognition from feminist scholars for questioning traditional qualitative interviewing methodologies that assume "a predominantly masculine model of sociology and society" (Oakley 31) while failing to acknowledge women's subjective experiences or the relationship that exists between researcher and participant (Oakley 30-58). Oakley's work challenged the absence of women's experiences within social science research, including social work and the traditional masculine research methods primarily used within these academic fields; in her own research, she focused on the experiences of mothers (Smith and Noble-Spruell 135-36).

In 1976, Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born*. This influential work offered two ways of conceptualizing motherhood: "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that potential-and all women-shall remain

under male control" (13). With a shared understanding that these two meanings could coexist and indeed, overlap, maternal theorists began analyzing the complexity of both the lived experiences of mothers and the institutional forms of oppression that bind them. In 1975, radical social work perspectives, primarily focused on class, began to emerge within the United Kingdom and Australia, challenging conventional social work theory and practice that reinforced inequality (Merchant 25-30; Mullaly X). Although gender inequality was starting to be discussed within social work theory and practice (Merchant 25), within the social sciences at this time, racialized mothers continued to be positioned as problematic and at risk (Merchant 30; Snitow 294).

The 1980s

With the continued growth of women's and gender studies programs into the 1980s, social work scholars embarked on analyzing gender equality and social work practice through a feminist lens. The 1986 text *Gender Reclaimed: Women in Social Work*, edited by Helen Marchant and Betsy Wearing, brought together a collection of feminist social work scholars that recognized significant gaps within the field of Social Work education, theory, and practice. Examples of chapters that were included in the collection are Jan Fook's "Feminist Contributions to Casework Practice"; Brenda Smith and Carolyn Noble-Spruell's, "An Overview of Feminist Research Perspectives"; and Brenda Smith's "The Case for Women's Studies in Social Work Education." Each author speaks to the importance of bringing feminist perspectives into social work spaces. Although themes of gender and caregiving can be traced throughout the collection, Marie Wilkinson's chapter, "Good Mothers-Bad Mothers: State Substitute Care of Children in the 1960's," specifically explores the social construction of mothering by examining the child welfare practice of removing a child from the family home. Wilkinson argues that child welfare practices are influenced by and reinforce patriarchal assumptions that assess and judge the quality of mothering. A few years later, in 1989, Lena Dominelli and Eileen Mcleod published *Feminist Social Work*, which incorporated feminist theory in social work, a trend that would continue in the following decades. In 2019, Miriam Jones et al. found that "a survey of the journal *Australian Social Work* reveals an increase in writing on feminism, women's studies, and gender inequality, much with an activist motive and a radical perspective" (66). The authors did not specifically mention the ways in which, if at all, the patriarchal institution of motherhood or mothering experiences were being analyzed by social workers through a feminist lens. We too were puzzled by the ongoing lack of feminist analysis of motherhood in social work literature at this time.

Social Work, Mothering, and Neoliberalism

Feminist scholarship continued to expand, calling attention to how the social construction of "women" was increasingly entwined with dominant values of capitalism and emerging neoliberal economic philosophy that insidiously infiltrated all forms of political and social life (Vandenbeld Giles 113; O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 46). Neoliberalism can be understood as a hegemonic ideology that expands free-market economic philosophy, values, and practices to the governance of welfare states. The needs of global capitalism are prioritized over state accountability towards support systems of health, education, housing, and human welfare (Finkel 334; Pollack and Rossiter 156). Janine Brodie observes that "While the neoliberal project has stimulated economic growth and flows of trade, finance, and peoples across borders, it also has rapidly deepened the gulf between the rich and the poor both within countries and across the North-South divide" (93). Scholars across multiple disciplines, including social work and gender studies, have documented how neoliberal values and practices expanded from the 1980s, eventually infiltrating all aspects of global society. Neoliberalism has been identified as a significant influence shaping how individuals conceptualize their identity; it promotes the regulation of self and others in alignment with market logic values of self-sufficiency, individualism, and growth of capital (Bayraktar 223; Brodie 101; Pollack and Rossiter 156). The significant influence of neoliberalism has been strongly identified in the literature across both social work and maternal theory as impacting social service practice, policy, and expectations of both social workers and service users.

In our search across the literature, we found examples of attention to neoliberalism from both social work and motherhood studies disciplines. Gita Mehrotra and colleagues identify how neoliberalism "braids" together with criminalization and professionalism movements, which compromise the efforts of social workers to provide effective services to survivors of gender-based violence (154). Melinda Vandenbeld Giles edited a collection of maternal theory in her book titled *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism*. Although Mehrotra et al. discuss the contexts in which mothers access services, the authors do not specifically address the social construction of mothering in connection with the forces that they perceive bind them as social workers who work with mothers. And although the authors in the Vandenbeld Giles collection attend to the ways that neoliberalism shapes the social construction of motherhood and the social contexts that caregivers engage with, no chapters specifically focus on the social work profession or social work practice. These two bodies of literature seem to be addressing the same spaces however from different perspectives. We argue that by placing these two bodies of literature into conversation with one another, both social workers and service users may

gain appreciation for the common constraints they face and perhaps may be able to work towards collaborative solutions that address the needs of mothers within a neoliberal context.

1990s

As the third wave of the women's movement emerged in the 1990s, scholarly literature in the areas of social work, feminism, and maternal theory continued to expand with increased representation of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Critical social work scholars, including those who identified as white males, sought to interrogate social work education, theory, and practice that reinforced and centred the voice of white, male, middle-class values and to make visible how these areas lacked equity, diversity, and inclusivity (Carniol 38-52; Mullaly X). For example, Bob Mullaly's *Structural Social Work* aims to challenge "all forms of oppressive dominant-subordinate relations"(X). At the same time, diverse feminist perspectives continued to make meaning of the different ways women experienced mothering and oppression, examining how the institution of motherhood shaped mothering practices through socially constructed rules and regulations that would define the ever-shifting identity and behaviour of a so-called good mother (Diquinzio 549; Glenn 1-26; Green 198; Lewin 371). In the early 1990s, Linda Davies, a feminist social work academic at McGill University in Montreal, began teaching the course Social Work Practice with Women as Mothers (Davies et al. 163). The aim of the course was to examine the social construction of mothering, and to explore how Social Work theory and practice contributes to the reproduction of normative mothering ideologies (163-64). It would seem that space for critical feminist theory and analysis of the experiences of mothers was emerging in the profession of social work.

Acknowledging identity differences across mothering also emerged within maternal theory as an important area of focus for scholars during this time. In 1994, Evelyn Nakano Glenn et al. edited a book titled *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency.* This collection brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars sharing diverse stories of mothering knowledge and experiences. In addition, feminist scholars, such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, were bringing attention to ways in which Black and working-class mothers experienced motherhood and oppression differently—shaped by racism, class, as well as limited opportunities for education and well-paid employment (Collins 311, hooks, *Homeplace* 267-272). In her works *Revolutionary Parenting* (145-56) and *Homeplace: A Site of Resistance* (266-73), hooks remarks that racist and colonialist practices, such as slavery, forced Black mothers to work outside of their "homeplace" (266). hooks further explains that many mothers who identified as Black yearned for more time

with their families where they could experience feelings of affirmation, appreciation, and resiliency (hooks, *Revolutionary* 145-46; hooks *Homeplace* 267). We wonder here how or where Black feminist theory focused on mothering was integrated into social work education and practice at this time. Julia Krane and Linda Davies for example cite authors, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Adrienne Rich, in their journal article published in *Affilia* in 2002, titled "Sisterhood Is Not Enough: The Invisibility of Mothering in Battered Women's Shelters." Krane and Davies later published on similar subjects bridging social work practice and mothering in other journals within the realm of social work, such as *Family in Society, Critical Social Policy,* and *Social Work Practice*.

A controversial facet of maternal theory that emerged at this time related to intragroup difference with respect to positive conceptualizations of motherhood. Cameron Macdonald described the concept of "the motherhood mystique" (a play on Betty Freidan's ground-breaking book titled *The Feminine Mystique*) as a romantic and idealized portrayal of motherhood that emerged as a backlash to the cold shoulder that motherhood received at a time when women were seeking liberation from their imposed stay-at-home status (15). Early feminist attacks on motherhood as the root of women's experiences of oppression were critiqued for neglecting the enjoyment and fulfillment within mothering experiences (hooks, *Revolutionary* 146). Some viewed this portrayal of motherhood to be unrealistic and unattainable, whereas others saw it as more inclusive of mothers who chose to parent outside of heteronormative relationships as well as mothers who chose to stay home raising their children over full-time careers. Various theorists pointed to the dangers of sexist language and assumptions that essentialize women as inherently nurturing and therefore best suited for the task of child rearing (hooks, *Revolutionary* 146-47). They argued that such assumptions give the impression that men are not as well suited for the task of childrearing and women would then risk widening the gender gap further from the goal of equal, gender-neutral caregiving. We are curious as to how this division in thinking impacted the field of social work (still predominantly gendered) with respect to mothering roles of professional social workers as well as social worker's perceptions of the mothers they supported in practice. Maternal scholars go on explore the notion of community childrearing, "othermothering" (Collins 277), or "kinship systems" (Anderson 764), in which children are treated lovingly and respectfully by a variety of trusted adults of various gender identities. hooks (*Revolutionary* 151) added that it is only through such exposure to equal gender parenting that children of all gender identities will be raised to assume that caregiving is not gender specific, and therefore they too will learn how to carry out the responsibility of childcare in their adult years.[3]

United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child

Social policies can have significant impact on social work practice and mothering. One important example is the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (Convention, 1990). Article 18, section 1 states the following:

> States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

Article 18, section 2, meanwhile, declares that "States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services of care of children." Critique of this global policy by feminist motherhood scholars centre on the document's gender neutrality and the assumption of a nuclear family that is declared responsible for the wellbeing of an autonomous child (Breton 319). Child-centred policies, such as this convention, fail to acknowledge socially defined gender expectations or structural barriers relating to parenting roles. Pat Breton identifies that in the growing neoliberal context of the 1990s in Canada, that low-income single mothers and their families were most disadvantaged by the combination of cuts to social welfare services and policies that prioritized only the child's best interest (323). Breton illuminates that when social policies separate the rights of the child from the family that as a society, we lose sight of the support that a family or community may need as a whole as well as the social challenges (such as gender, class, and racial discrimination) that may be driving those needs (323). Examining policies like these through a matricentric feminist lens may offer new insights to social workers. We encourage readers to consider how such policies that emerged within the 1990s continue to shape social work practice and understanding regarding notions of accountability, responsibility, and what it means to be a good mother and in turn how this understanding impacts the everyday experiences of mothers from diverse social locations.

Intensive Mothering

In the mid-1990s, an ideological shift was observed by feminist scholar Sharon Hays, who coined the term "intensive mothering" to describe a pattern of normative discourses within motherhood. Hays explained that this ideology demanded not only that a mother be the sole caregiver but also that she be

expected to devote "copious amounts of time, energy and material resources on the child," placing the value of her child and her mothering role above all else (8). In 1998, Gross contributed a piece to *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, titled "Motherhood and Feminist Theory". In this work, Gross brings awareness to feminist maternal theory and discusses the implications of intensive mothering ideology for the field of social work (270). Gross calls upon social workers to examine the experiences of mothers "given the importance of motherhood to assessment and intervention in family practice" (269). Intensive mothering is understood to be driven by the capitalist values of individualism and competitiveness. Through performing intensive mothering, parents hope to increase social and economic capital for their child, securing future middle-class status in a political era marked by government funding cuts to social welfare programs and increasing expectations to care for oneself and one's family (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 56). Intensive mothering ideology is understood within maternal theory to impact all mothers regardless of how they self-identify their social location or caregiving situation (Green 199). Gross acknowledges the material and psychological costs to mothers that result from this oppressive ideology (271). Maternal theory offers feminist analysis of ways that neoliberal values perpetuate the ideals of intensive mothering. Mothers who do not have the financial or social resources to perform intensive mothering or who do not fit this socially constructed ideology tend to be labelled as "bad mothers." In a neoliberal era that prioritizes the speculation of risk over attending to material needs that contribute to risks, mothers who are unable to perform intensive mothering are also understood to be "risky mothers" (Boyer 281; Vandenbeld Giles 113). These mothers are then more likely to experience surveillance, judgmental attitudes, and harsh punishments through experiencing social exclusion, being declined access to social services, and even having their children removed from the home (Green 198; Vandenbeld Giles 113). Gross identifies the strength of maternal theory in how this body of thought focuses on the complex structural layers that mothers must navigate (271). She implores social workers to engage with maternal theory as a means of reflexive practice and to expand insights on ways social work could support mothers, such as through creating and improving childcare policies (271). Through the 1990s, feminist scholars sought to reimagine what more empowered forms of mothering could look like through theories of matricentric feminism, transfeminism, societal restructuring of universal childcare services and long-established traditions of community-based, as well as gender-neutral childrearing found in Black, immigrant, and Indigenous communities (Brant; 36; Green 202, 205; O'Reilly *Matricentric Feminism* 2).

2000s

At the turn of the century, feminist theorists and critical social workers continued to question traditional social work theory and practice. Throughout their 2000 book *Practice and Research in Social Work: Postmodern Feminist Perspectives*, editors Barbara Fawcett, Brid Featherstone, Jan Fook, and Amy Rossiter challenge and question the position of power and patriarchy within social work knowledge production. Meanwhile, antidiscriminatory and anti-oppressive social work approaches continued to develop with a focus on social justice, reducing marginalization, and overall social inequality (Carniol 38-52; Mullaly 105; Payne 246). One can extrapolate that critical social work education offered a foundation in which social workers were better prepared to recognize and address power imbalances in their work with families in the communities they served.

As the body of literature in maternal theory was growing in the 1990s and 2000s, interest in feminism appeared to be losing momentum, which was apparent through government cuts to feminist social service organizations and academic spaces (Barnoff et al. 19; Pollack and Rossiter 158). Neoliberalism remained on the rise, gradually corroding social services and contributing to a new ideology of motherhood that would place extreme expectations on the shoulders of mothers from that point forwards (Boyer 281). Both social service users and service providers would continue to experience heightened pressure to do more with less from this point on (Bay 201). Cuts to welfare services and long-standing service inequities would continue to impact Indigenous families in Canada. Tensions heightened between social workers who held roles as child welfare workers and social workers who advocated for the rights of Indigenous families. In 2007, Cindy Blackstock, Indigenous professor of social work, filed a human rights complaint against the government of Canada as the executive director of Caring for First Nations Children Society, along with the Assembly of First Nations, accusing the government of discrimination against Indigenous children and families (Blackstock 285). Blackstock highlighted that between 1995 and 2001, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada data found that "the number of First Nations children placed in child welfare care on reserve increased by a staggering 71.5 per cent" (293). Critical and Indigenous social workers attended to how influences of colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and state violence against families shaped the high prevalence rates of child apprehension into state care. Advocates revealed how the government withheld funding and resources that would support the health and wellness of Indigenous children and families (Blackstock 291). In 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal agreed with these findings and ordered the federal government of Canada to make amends to the discriminatory actions resulting in health and social service inequities to Indigenous children and families (Blackstock 285). Although the literature surrounding this

advocacy work did not specifically name feminist or maternal theory, we observe that the underlying motivation to reveal power imbalances and promote social justice in connection with the oppression of marginalized mothers was central in this work.

As authors, we observed that tensions surrounding the ongoing spread of neoliberalism continued to be a significant theme within the literature. Sadly, neoliberal values would continue to creep into all social and political spheres across the globe, changing the way we think about every aspect of life (Brodie 100; Vandenbeld Giles 113). Ongoing financial cutbacks within the state welfare system have created increased precarity within working conditions for both social service users and social workers (Bay 201). Expectations within academia continue to rise, demanding that social work students and faculty produce more and compete for less, with diminished resources (Barnoff et al.). These authors offer context in which to appreciate how such demands can disproportionately impact mothers who are tasked by society with full responsibility to care for their children and others, while being expected to balance an ever-increasing workload in their place of employment. In 2020, voices of women and mothers emerged louder than ever in the fight for social justice. In unprecedented numbers, armed with the power of social media, multigenerations of women and mothers collectively reacted to police brutality against the Black Community in the United States (Black Lives Matter, #SayHerName). They also fought against the scaling back of hard-won reproductive rights (Women's March on Washington), against environmental injustice in connection with Indigenous lands and bodies (Dakota Access Pipeline, Global Climate Strike), against ongoing colonialism and sexual violence against girls and women (MMIWG2S and the #MeToo Movement), and against the growing gender inequality within care economies in the context of a global pandemic (Green; O'Reilly and Joy Green 1; Orr 21; Spencer and Perlow 175; Women's Earth Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network 20). Mothers who identify as social workers and service users are involved in these ongoing battles and inevitably continue to be complicit in these acts of violence. As we continue to move forwards into unprecedented times of global pandemics and political divisiveness, knowledge of the histories of social work, mothering, and maternal theory will be crucial to hold in our awareness. The act of bridging feminist social work and maternal theory has the potential to create a shared space for both critical meaning making and social justice advocacy. Such collaborative synergy may offer innovative ways of understanding and supporting the needs of mothers within our communities, workplaces, and academic settings, both as mothers and with mothers.

Feminist social work and maternal scholars continue to offer important dialogue about unique mothering experiences and how non-normative maternal identities are affected by racism, colonization, eugenics, ableism,

ageism, and weight bias, which often position them as "risky" mothers. They point out that women (including mothers) who become identified as risky and vulnerable are often connected with social work services and child welfare services (Carniol 7; Chaze 145; Davies et al. 161; Friedman 14-27). Examples of important contributions during the 2000s include *Motherhood: Power & Oppression* (2005), edited by Andrea O'Reilly et al., and *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly (2007). Social work academics continue to publish works that highlight diverse mothering experiences such as *"We Don't Feel Like Foster Parents": Foster Parents' Experience of the Death of a Foster Child with Special Needs* (2004) by Ann Fudge Schormans; *Mother Blame, Fat Shame and Moral Panic: "Obesity" and Child Welfare* (2014) by May Friedman; *How HIV-Positive Aboriginal Women (PAW) Talk about Their Mothering Experiences With Child and Family Services in Ontario (2014)* by Saara Greene et al.; *Protesting Against Mothers' Surveillance: Salvadorian Mothers and Their Daughters Negotiating Adolescence in a Foreign Context* (2015) by Mirna E. Carranza; and *The Social Organization of South Asian Immigrant Women's Mothering Work* (2017) by Ferzana Chaze. Although the integration of matricentric feminism continues to grow within social work theory, education, and practice, there is a continued need to make mothering voices and experiences visible.

Conclusion

Within this introductory article, we offered a historical chronological review of literature in which to contextualize current tensions and possibilities at the intersection of social work and feminist maternal theory. We assert that awareness of this history, with attention to themes of power and oppression, is crucial for social workers and is a vital component of critical practice with mothers and as mothers. Painful historical legacies continue to shape the lives of mothers and the social work profession, transforming themselves in nefarious ways that are often obscured in contemporary white-supremacist and neoliberal sociopolitical contexts. With a commitment to social justice, we encourage readers to consider how feminist maternal theory and the history we have presented here may support transformation of social work education, research, policy and practice in collaboration with mothers. We acknowledge that the review of literature we have presented is not exhaustive but hopefully provides a foundation to build on towards future social change.

We hope that this article has introduced the reader to current thinking and knowledge within the field of social work and social services, across the diverse fields and spaces where mothers work, practice, and live. In the spirit of critical social work, we are committed to addressing all forms of oppression that intersect to disempower mothers, challenging our own assumptions about

what it means to be a good mother in a society that makes it so very difficult to parent effectively, particularly for poor, racialized, disabled, Indigenous, queer, trans, fat, and young mothers. Within communities of care, social workers need to keep thinking about mothering and social work. As social workers, mothers, and maternal scholars, we need to keep writing about social work and reimaging relational possibilities and mothering futures in order to create space for mothering stories, experiences, and knowledge to be considered, valued, honoured, and shared.

Endnotes

1. "Intersectionality" is a term coined by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to describe instances where individuals or groups face unique forms of jeopardy in relation to identity-based discrimination. Crenshaw shares an analogy in which racism and sexism are compared to traffic coming from different directions, combining unique forms of discrimination that shape particular experiences of Black women situated at the middle of the intersection (Crenshaw 149). She argues that such experiences cannot be made intelligible through a legal system that privileges a single categorical axis framework to make meaning of discrimination (Crenshaw 140). Intersectionality theory has since grown to encompass a broad understanding of ways in which many aspects of embodied identity co-constitute one another in complex ways and influence experiences of social oppression (Collins and Bilge 2).
2. Examples of interdisciplinary theory that shape feminism include poststructural, postmodern, critical disability, fat studies, critical race, womanism, affect, embodiment, transfeminism, new materialisms, posthumanism, ethics of care, critical vulnerability, ecofeminism, and Indigenous feminism. These areas of theory are practiced across disciplines such as education, social justice, art, sociology, anthropology, geography, health, science, technology, religion, and gender studies (Leavy and Harris 15).
3. In the following decades in Canada, legislation would be introduced and expanded in partnership with First Nations communities, valuing community care arrangements with an aim to decolonize the child welfare system (Ministry of Child and Youth Services 15, 43).

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