Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

Social Work, Motherhood, and Mothering: Critical Feminist Perspectives

Spring / Summer 2022
Volume 13, Number 1

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Mother, Service User, and Social Worker

In this article, I share some of my parenting experiences and reflections on being a mother, child services user, and mental health service provider. I have two aims: to bring visibility to some of the issues that marginalized mothers, such as single immigrant mothers and Indigenous mothers, may experience when accessing support services; and to call on social workers to reflect on our attitudes in our work with racialized immigrant mothers and Indigenous mothers. This article is informed by decolonial and borderlands theories. In the first section, I focus on the marginalization of racialized mothers through my own mothering experiences as a racialized mother of two children and the expectations put on single mothers. In the second section, I discuss my experiences as a mother and service user attempting to access support services. I analyze the influences of white heteropatriarchal and neoliberal ideologies in shaping parenting support services and the surveillance in those practices. In the third section, I connect my experiences as a mother and service user with my conflicting role as a service provider. There were many complexities involved in my position as a racialized immigrant mental health worker. My experience as a social worker while being a service user and mother informs my argument that demands made of service users are often unrealistic and there is very little support offered to meet these demands. I suggest that service providers step out of their social worker role and, as individuals, question their demands of service users and how reasonable they are, based on the situation and the location of the service user.

The person on the line let me know that I was going to be a mom. The news came unexpectedly. I sat on my chair. I could not feel my hands. I was lost as to what to do next. I was going to be a single mom in a city that was unfamiliar to me, and I was clueless as to what being a mom meant. I was a knot of excitement, panic, and happiness.

I had moved from Toronto to Northern Ontario a year before. Originally, I am from Lima, Peru. I am Chola with Quechua and mixed European roots. The complex layers of my identity intersect with my mothering, but this is not the focus of my article. When I realized that I would be a mom for the first time, I went to many agencies asking for help with transitioning into parenting and accessing subsidized daycare. Unknowingly, I was entering a network of parenting support services, some of which included ludicrous power struggles and scrutiny and surveillance of my motherhood. Despite this, I recognize my privileged position for not having Child Protection Services (CPS) involved. Mothers involved in the child welfare system are faced with added surveillance along with service plans that they need to follow in order to parent their children (Vandenbeld Giles 132). In this article, I share some of my parenting experiences and reflections on being a mother, service user, and service provider as well as the intricate connections among these identities. In sharing these experiences and reflections, I have two aims: to bring visibility to some of the issues that marginalized mothers such as single immigrant mothers and Indigenous mothers may experience; and to call on social workers to reflect on our attitudes in our work with racialized immigrant mothers and Indigenous mothers. This article is informed by the insights of decolonial and borderlands theories.

In the first section, I focus on the marginalization of racialized mothers through a discussion of my own mothering experiences as the mother of two children and the expectations put on single mothers. I examine the complexities of mothering within interracial families and the trap of pursuing happiness for cisgender women in a heteropatriarchal system. In the second section, I discuss my experiences as a mother and service user attempting to access support services. I analyze the influences of white heteropatriarchal and neoliberal ideologies in shaping parenting support services and the role of surveillance in those practices. In the third section, I connect my experiences as a mother and service user with my conflicting role as a service provider. In the last section, I conclude by discussing approaches that centre on reflexivity to improve practices in the social work profession.

Decolonial and Borderlands Frameworks

I use a decolonial lens in my analysis because the issues of motherhood that I discuss are situated within societies—Peruvian and Canadian—that have been gendered and racialized through colonialism. The Peruvian state continues to be subject to the pressures of colonization despite the official end of colonization in the 1830s. The Mestizaje project (Spanish colonizers who mixed with Indigenous people in Latin America and created the Mestize race) and the stratified divisions that it brought continued after the independence of

Latin America.

In the contemporary Canadian settler state, colonialism has not ended officially or unofficially. It relies on the power of white heteropatriarchy to keep women subjugated and to support its ongoing project of domination (Morgensen 3). A decolonial lens interrogates the hegemonic structures of colonialism, and it would be impossible to understand how constructions of race and gender shape experiences of motherhood without such an examination. An important distinction to make considering my position as an immigrant is that although people of colour can be allies in the fight against the oppression of Indigenous peoples, the goals of these groups are not necessarily aligned. However, taking a decolonial approach seriously requires a recognition of colonialism as an ongoing process that has powerful effects on Indigenous people, and Indigenous women in particular (Arvin et al. 9-10).

My theoretical perspective also draws from a borderlands lens, which defines borders as involving more than geographical spaces to include ideological, emotional, and spiritual borders (Anzaldua qtd. in Aigner-Varoz 49). These socially constructed boundaries are used to separate less privileged groups and form the identity of the "different" (Anzaldua qtd. in Aigner-Varoz 49). Gloria Anzaldua talks about a metaphorical borderland as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldua qtd. in Aigner-Varoz 49). As a mother, I situate myself in such a borderland, a vague place where I feel little connection with dominant mothering practices. I feel some disconnection from mothering styles from my mixed Chola cultures because I am no longer living in Lima. At the same time, my cultural values are not aligned with those of mainstream Canada. I try to negotiate the different worlds that my mothering is connected to in order to raise my children, but this is a difficult task. As Anzaldua argues, the "prohibited and forbidden live in a state of discomfort as they negotiate between the conflicting forces in such margins" (Anzaldua qtd. in Aigner-Varoz 49). Personally, I connect my experiences of motherhood with the metaphor of the borderland, and this lens informs my experiences with motherhood. As a Chola immigrant, I am constantly living in between borders; my identity is othered differently depending on what geographic and social context I am currently in. This lens also helps me to make sense of my unsettling position as a racialized woman who is also a service provider complicit in colonial practices.

Using decolonial and borderland lenses, I attempt to understand and reflect on the marginalization of mothers, their access to services, and working in the social work profession.

Marginalization of Mothers

Experiences with Mothering

When I first became a mom, I did not know what being a mom really meant besides being strong. I had my mother and grandmother as my parents and closest role models of single motherhood. I saw my mother be the breadwinner for her children and close family members. I saw my grandmother devote herself to raising her grandchildren, having already raised her own children; I saw her being a grandmother while also still being a mother. I wished to follow their strength but didn't feel that I had it in me.

I constantly find myself caught in an internal conflict as I try to honour and model the strength of my mother and grandmother while I critique my own need to have strength. I am aware that the imposition of heterosexist mothering models that emphasize the strong caregiver identity have led to Latina women feeling overworked (Martinez 202). When I became a mother, I vacillated between trying to manage everything on my own—being the strong mother—with realizing that this level of responsibility and emphasis on independence was unhealthy. It was difficult to move away from this model that was presented as good mothering. In some ways, moving away from it felt as if I was invalidating or criticizing the lives of my grandmother and mother as they took great pride in being strong role models for their children. When my children were small, I had limited supports, and this really affected my emotional wellbeing and my mothering. I still thought it was what I was supposed to do. Since I had made the choice of becoming a mother, I had to live with the expectations of what being a mother entailed, which meant being strong and being able to parent more or less on your own if that was what was needed.

Similarly, in North America, the model of the good mother is one in which women are expected to be self-sacrificing and to have no "needs and interests" of their own (Bassin et al. qtd. in Arendell 1194). This intensive mothering is "exclusive, wholly child centered, emotionally involving, and time-consuming" (Hays qtd. in Arendell 1194). The mother portrayed is devoted to the care of others; she is self-sacrificing and "not a subject with her own needs and interests" (Arendell 1194). She is the "good mother" model that carries idealized notions of the family, "presuming the institution and image of the idealized White, middleclass heterosexual couple with its children in a self-contained family unit" (Arendell 1194). I have internalized this self-sacrificing role, as it is so encouraged by dominant societies. Yet these expectations of mothers are not realistic.

Taking on principles from a borderlands approach, I understand my position as lying in between ideological borders, influenced by and holding values that

adhere to dominant societies in Canada and in my homelands. I do not necessarily agree with heterosexist mothering models that idolize the strong caregiver identity in Latinx cultures because I see the roots that they have in colonialist patriarchy. At the same time, I do not agree with the self-sacrificing models of mothering that are dominant in mainstream Canadian society, which arose from values that prioritize Westernized settler perspectives and histories. Nevertheless, I am steeped in both cultures and have absorbed these values, even as I try to counteract them with principles of self-care, support seeking, and the need for respect and parental authority that I try to integrate into my mothering. As a result, I adhere to some elements of the Latin American and Canadian models of mothering even while I refuse others.

Hegemonic Conceptions of Motherhood

Yolanda Martinez discusses the general difficulties of mothering being heightened by how "motherhood as an institution has been named by the authoritative voice not of women but of patriarchal culture" (205). In the Latin American community, patriarchal culture around motherhood includes values such as familialism, which refers to a "way of inclusiveness and interdependence between family members" (206). Familialism may encourage unity and slows down the process of children branching out from the family because it holds the family needs above the needs of the individual; however, it is often based on patriarchal family structures (Petrone 21). Familialism upholds hetero-patriarchal values, as it constructs women as the caregivers of the family and in this way supports the strong woman myth of mothers caring for everyone in the family (Mendez-Luck 814-15). Anzaldua argues that although many Mexican women that have migrated to the US help pass on and preserve their culture, they hold a subordinate position and inequitable gender roles in their homelands and in their new place of residence (Anzaldua qtd. in Petrone 23).

It is not only men, however, who uphold heteropatriarchal ideologies of what motherhood should involve; women also subscribe to and reproduce these beliefs. Carolyn Mendez-Luck and Katherine Anthony claim that women are taught to subscribe to these sexist ideologies from a young age. For example, the concept of "marianismo" is used to describe the traditional role of the mother in the Mexican family. The socialization of the female marianismo role starts from an early age, and it is "influential in women's expected behaviors of femininity, submission, weakness, reservation, and virginity" (Mendez-Luck & Anthony 814). Latina women experience the social pressure to conform to these dominant notions and values of motherhood.

Personally, I felt the pressure to care for my two children more or less on my own as a single parent and also to assume the sole responsibility for caring for some of my family members. This pressure was imposed by male counterparts in my family, but I also imposed it on myself as I saw my mother and

grandmother assume these roles. Consciously or not, I have conformed to these heteropatriarchal models of mothering and caregiving.

These ideas of familialism, which are based on heteropatriarchal values that construct women as the caregivers of the family, are reproduced by various systems and institutions, such as the immigration and educational systems. Eleanor Petrone's study examined a Latinx group of students who supported familialism as a protective factor to help them navigate the school system, adapt to their new country of residence without getting themselves into trouble, and keep close to their roots when they migrate to the North (21-22, 28). The participants in the study argued that the pressures in immigration and the lack of support to adapt to a new school system and a new society in general result in students being pushed to acculturate to dominant society. Therefore, the students responded to pressures of a new society and school by encouraging familialism as a way to push back against the dominant society. However, there was little discussion of how in the process of following familialism, Latina young women had to adhere to patriarchal views of females as caregivers and submissive daughters (Petrone 29, 32).

Motherhood as the Ultimate Form of Happiness

Besides being conditioned by hegemonic parenting styles, women are socialized to believe that motherhood is one of the ultimate forms of happiness achievable (O'Reilly qtd. in Drury 5). This portrayal of mothering is further complicated by a Western culture that encourages the constant pursuit of happiness (Hefferman and Wilgus 2). This focus on the pursuit of happiness at any cost has led us to become deeply invested in it as a means to make our lives livable and in this way, happiness becomes a tool to make "certain forms of personhood valuable" (Ahmed 10). Women are taught to believe that motherhood will bring happiness, and there is an imperative for motherhood to be a responsibility that women enjoy and feel fulfilled by (Drury 7). Motherhood is made valuable because it is presented as a source of happiness. In dominant North American motherhood models, women are socialized to pursue motherhood because it will supposedly bring happiness. Although mothering can bring happiness, the level of happiness is linked to the material supports that mothers receive to raise their children ,such as "federally funded daycare, flextime work schedules, equal pay, etc.," which many do not obtain (Walters and Harrison 39). The imperative that women enjoy mothering is essentially a way for patriarchal society to pretend problems of material support, mental health stress, and so forth do not exist or need to be addressed (Walters and Harrison 39). And in this way, patriarchal systems continue to treat women's wellbeing as of secondary concern.

As a consequence, in Canada there are no legislation and policies that do not account for the experiences or needs of single mothers. For example, even

though childcare programs have proven to be helpful for both children and mothers, long waitlists and a lack of subsidized spaces limit their accessibility (Drury 7). In Ontario, families (single and two-parent families) of children zero to five years of age face great difficulties finding childcare in their community and finding child care that is affordable. More than 50 per cent could not find childcare within their communities. Similar statistics were found among families needing affordable childcare, with 54 per cent having difficulties finding it (Statistics Canada). All the challenges that came with mothering dampened the happiness I felt about it and made me feel isolated. Feelings of isolation are not accounted for in many Western contexts where mothering is considered "a private and individualized endeavor" (Fuentes 310). Isolation is an even more common experience for immigrant mothers, as many of them leave their families behind (Fuentes 310). Personally, having to manage childcare, expenses, schooling, health, and all matters concerning motherhood with limited support often felt unrealistic. For me, it was state institutions that I felt imposed the strong woman myth through their expectations that I could do this all on my own. I was pulled in all directions by the various responsibilities I had, and there was no break or way to push back. I also became more isolated as I struggled with finding a space for the different cultures within our family, as my children and I come from different cultures.

Interracial Families

Being a Chola mom of two girls with Anishinaabe roots, I look for ways we can exist in both of these cultures. When my family arrived in Toronto, I began to internalize the borders of the Canadian state while still also feeling bound to those of Peru. This is how I negotiated my identity in the Canadian state. However, after I moved to Thunder Bay, in Northern Ontario, where the Latin American/Pachamama community is small, I had a harder time connecting with my homeland. Now that I am back in Toronto with my children, I search for communities that my children and I can identify with.

In Toronto, we move between cultures: Latin American and Anishinaabe. In the Latin American community, I sometimes draw attention when I communicate with my daughters in English as opposed to Spanish. When judged about my choice of language by people in the Latin American community, I think about how they do not understand the challenges of trying to have your children listen to you while teaching them another language. They judge me for not practicing Spanish with my children and helping them preserve the language.

Our family lives in the borders between the South and the North depending on the context that we inhabit. I feel that I can live and celebrate my borderland existence in the comfort of our family. I can still engage in cultural practices

from my original heritage in a modified way, although I am no longer living in my homeland nor am I living with people that have experienced my mixed roots and cultures. I am able to engage in cultural practices of where I come from, which reinforces my Chola identity and allows me to teach my children about my roots that are also part of them. Being Anishinaabe has made my daughters interested in learning about Indigenous cultures in general. Therefore, there is a space at home to learn about both Indigenous heritages, and this is welcomed. There is also a Latin American community in Toronto, which despite its internal conflicts, its stereotypes of what it means to come from Latin America, and its rejection of its own Indigenous cultures, I still find comfort in being around.

As my daughters are Anishinaabe, I also reached out to First Nations communities for help with supporting their Indigenous interracial identities. As their mother, I try to engage in their cultural practices to support their cultural development. In my attempt to assist my daughters in connecting with their Indigenous heritage, I have faced many challenges as I am also an outsider to their Anishinaabe culture. Sometimes I am unsure if I am appropriating some of their cultural practices while also feeling that my daughters need to be exposed to these practices at home. As I attempt to protect my children from discrimination, I engage in parenting that involves their interracial identities while acknowledging that to reveal their interracial identities may make them a target for further racial discrimination. I incorporate mothering practices that I believe are worth holding on to from the west as well as my own homelands and personal upbringing in the south while attempting to involve Indigenous knowledge from the north as an outsider. This is complicated by living in a society that considers itself monocultural, Western, and European (Luke and Luke 729). Lying outside of these parameters of homogeneity, we are pressured by the dominant culture to assimilate into an assumed homogeneity, thereby silencing our identities (730).

Our family is often assumed to be homogenous by the outside world, depending on where we are. It is rare for my daughters to be assumed to be Anishinaabe unless we are partaking in an Indigenous event. Even then when people hear my Spanish accent, sometimes they assume my daughters are Latinas. In the school system, their Indigenous identity is made visible or invisible depending on the teachers that they have. Often the teachers, with a few exceptions, are not very knowledgeable of the histories of Indigenous peoples in Canada and dismiss these discussions. I have to constantly argue with teachers about involving Indigenous peoples when talking about the Canadian state and properly teaching this knowledge. Overall, I find that in school, as well as the healthcare systems and other institutions, there is an assumption of a homogeneous perspective of Canada that is composed of white settlers and racialized immigrants.

Service User

Surveillance and Risk

At the childcare subsidy office, my worker informed me that they were going to almost double my daughters' childcare fees to eight hundred dollars. I was going to start school soon, and my income was going to be reduced by more than half of my salary at that time. In the coming months, I was planning to save money for school. This worker was not going to reconsider my case outside of what the policy stated, even though workers had the power to do so. I was helpless against the power that social workers and social services had on my future plans.

As a service user of subsidized childcare, I have encountered workers who are constantly suspicious of my story when accessing services. I have wondered if these workers were aware of their power, and if they were, had they become desensitized to the power they wielded after years of working in that department. Strict regulations for accessing financial assistance contribute to ensuring racialized mothers are kept poor with limited access to resources or assistance to pursue career goals (Arendell 1195; Drury 2). As discussed below, through neoliberal politics, "poverty has been normalized" (Vandenbeld Giles 115), and in this way, the government does not have to take on the responsibility to address the poverty people live in. Under these politics, the government's priorities move away from supporting childrearing or addressing poverty. Yet poverty in families is still stigmatized by societal standards, and it is heavily punished. We have surveillance systems, such as CPS, that discriminate against and persecute marginalized mothers (Ontario Human Rights Commission 46-47; Bergen 43). There is evidence that the lack of resources available to racialized families is connected to their disproportional involvement with child welfare systems (Ontario Human Rights Commission 22).

Mothers are constantly experiencing surveillance in their mothering practices. The dominant narrative of motherhood prescribes who is considered the good mother—the mother who is compliant with dominant forms of parenting—and who is labelled as the bad mother—the mother who refuses these forms of parenting—either because she is unable to carry out her role in the prescribed manner or because she does not agree with it. The bad mothers are the ones society deems as needing more surveillance and regulation (Vandenbeld Giles 117) because they threaten the established order. They need to be surveilled in order to discipline them into adopting good behaviours and identities.

This surveillance is aimed especially at marginalized populations, as they are disproportionately the subject of surveillance (Bergen 38). For example, Black and Indigenous families are overrepresented in the child welfare system (Ontario Human Rights Commission 46-47). According to Ontario Human

Rights Commission, these overrepresentations amongst Black families are based on systemic discrimination, "including poverty and the risk factors associated with poverty" (Ontario Human Rights Commission 47). Black families are constantly deemed to need investigation by the child welfare system, and it is a similar case for Indigenous families (Ontario Human Rights Commission 47, 18). Often, the reasons families are designated to be at risk are deeply rooted in "racism, colonialism, xenophobia, classism, and sexism." (Bergen 38). There are marginalized families are categorized as at risk because they do not fit the dominant narrative of motherhood (Vandenbeld Giles 124-25). Being labelled at risk places marginalized groups under "higher state surveillance and intervention" (Bergen 38). At-risk mothers are judged through racist and classist lenses that lead them to be disproportionately labelled bad mothers (Bergen 38; Vandenbeld Giles 119; McKenzie et al. 10). In this way, under the guise of offering help, services, such as CPS, target at-risk mothers, who then are more at risk of having their child apprehended (Vandenbeld Giles 125). Residential schools and the sixties scoop also functioned under the premise that Indigenous children were at risk of being abused by their families and, therefore, needed protection from the state. At their most extreme, at-risk ideologies were used to justify cultural genocide through the mass forced removal of Indigenous children from their families.

Marginalized mothers are categorized as at risk precisely because they do not fit the dominant narrative of motherhood. Focusing primarily on risk is one way that social services contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of neoliberalism. In this shift towards neoliberal politics, it is no longer "about producing policies to address current need, but about speculating over what future needs may arise and how such needs can be identified" (Vandenbeld Giles 113). Based on models that aim to predict future risks, services to support mothers increasingly promote risk assessment to identify at-risk populations. The priority is to assess whether someone is a deviant mother and come up with ways to manage "future risks associated with these deviant mothers" (Vandenbeld Giles 119). This risk assessment surveillance has real and negative impacts especially on marginalized mothers, as it discourages their use of services and increases their isolation (Fauci and Goodman 251)

Among marginalized mothers, such as those in Indigenous families, feeling isolated and not reaching out for help have been identified as risk factors for negligence—one of the highest reasons of child welfare involvement within these communities (Ontario Human Rights Commission 18). In other cases, mothers fleeing intimate partner violence (IPV) who are living in shelters with their children and attend domestic violence programs have reported that the surveillance from workers at times can lead to "fears related to mandated reporting" (Fauci-Goodman 251). Marginalized families, such as those headed by women living in shelters, single racialized immigrant mothers, and

Indigenous mothers, raise their children under constant surveillance that furthers their marginalization (Drury 5).

My own experience with surveillance has negatively impacted the number of times I have reached out for parenting supports. However, in one instance, I did seek help through a parenting coaching program. A worker came to my home to coach me through completing chores while having my children assist me and teach me alternative ways to get my children to follow the routine. Although she was careful to not make me feel that my teaching was wrong, still she did not validate my mothering experiences or acknowledge what teaching approaches were working in my mothering. This coach would spend some time observing our routine and seeing how I asked my children to do a chore. She would then offer an alternative that was deemed the better one. I am unsure if the service provider was aware of the power that she had and that her observing my mothering skills made me feel surveilled. The lack of validation of what was working in my mothering, as well as the lack of consideration of my realities as a single parent, made me feel judged and disconnected from her. I did not learn about different approaches to mothering that considered our reality. My children were aware that the coach's role was to teach me skills that in turn could better prepare me to teach them to follow routines. However, the coach's role was not to teach them to listen better. They were thus given the message that I was doing something wrong, and this made it harder for them to understand that they had to listen to me.

Although hegemonic parenting styles are often in conflict with my own principles, my fear of surveillance has led me to reproduce hegemonic values. In the above experience, when I reached out for help from a parenting coach, I ended up reproducing values that are not necessarily my own, such as encouraging children to learn through play. Although in theory I find the concept of learning through play amazing, it also demands parents to have the time and energy to find creative ways to teach children through playful approaches. In these approaches, the focus is not on teaching children that our family needs to work as a team and that they have responsibilities as children in order to make this teamwork. They are not taught about the seriousness of their actions or the impact they have on the family as a whole. Rather, these approaches encourage values such as listening to and respecting children's opinions and teach children to express their wishes and help them find their own voice. Values, such as respect for their parents and listening without regularly challenging, are not the focus. However, the reality is that there is not much time for conversation on how to negotiate and modify a routine every time it needs to be performed. Because I feel surveilled, I contribute to the normalization of these values and practices that I agree with but which do not necessarily speak to my family values, structures, and realities. Ultimately, the surveillance on my finances and my mothering skills in the times when I

have asked for help has impacted my mothering and how I feel about it.

Along with my experiences of being a service user and mother though, I have also been a social worker. Being on the other side of the user-provider relationship has given me a lot of insight into the complexity of providing social support services. And embodying these roles simultaneously has shown me the contradictions and ethical conflicts that arise in my social work practice and the need to engage in ongoing reflexivity in response.

Working in the Social Work Profession

Some of the moms that I worked with in the mental health sector were mandated by child protection services to find a caregiver that would support their parenting throughout the week, days, and evenings. This was one of the conditions that the service user I worked with had to fulfill in order to live with her children. As a worker, I wondered how we were supposed to find someone trustworthy and with that availability in a short period of time so that the mother could keep her children.

I am a social worker trained in the Canadian state. I worked in the mental health sector for twelve years—seven of those were before I became a mother—and during that time, the majority of people I worked with were racialized and Indigenous. I had some service users that were mothers of children who had CPS called on them and who were Indigenous. Many Indigenous mothers I worked with were suffering the consequences of their families having gone through residential schools and/or the Sixties Scoop. They were encouraged by the CPS to meet with me in order to get the support they needed. For some, this meant avoiding the threat of having their children apprehended; for others, it meant having their children return home.

There were many complexities involved in my position as a racialized immigrant mental health worker who was not directly involved in the apprehension of children but was still mandated to follow the regulations of CPS. Adopting a decolonial lens allowed me to see how as a settler working in the mental health sector I was contributing to settler colonial social work practices. I acknowledged and reflected on these conflicting and complicit positions but still did not challenge the requests of CPS or their policies that served to further oppress Indigenous mothers. As a mother and service provider, it was also unsettling to realize that I was working with some single Indigenous mothers who had their children apprehended, whereas I was an immigrant woman living with and raising my two Indigenous daughters.

Perpetuating Oppression

I worked with service users who had little family support in the Canadian state and were experiencing severe mental health stressors. Often, my work involved assisting service users to secure and maintain affordable housing. However, the regulations in subsidized housing do not offer accommodations in a timely manner if a person is already housed, regardless of whether their housing situation is deemed unsafe. In one case, regulations did not allow for the service user to obtain an emergency housing transfer. Being homeless and a single mother drove some of the women I worked with to have a crisis. At these times, child protection services would get involved. They would sometimes deem the mother to be an unfit parent and apprehend the child if there was no next of kin that could support the woman.

As a service provider in mental health care, I thought I had managed to avoid working for CPS, which I have tried to do. I consider CPS an extremely challenging field to work in, as workers have a large case load. As a social worker, I also find the power they have on dictating the future of families to be overwhelming. Even if the workers have the best intentions to be fair and antioppressive when deciding on children's apprehensions and wellbeing, I do not see how this can be done when working for a system that has reportedly been found to be so unfair towards marginalized families. What I did not realize was that CPS is linked to adult mental health services and all other social work-related services. Mental health services often work with CPS workers to offer service users the support they need, and in the process, they end up surveilling the parenting of service users.

Beyond CPS, the surveillance of racialized mothers is also exercised by public institutions including healthcare, the police, the judicial system, and the legislature as well as within mothers' private lives. This widespread surveillance contributes to giving CPS the power to decide what does and does not constitute acceptable parenting practices, usually based on dominant Western patriarchal norms (Vandenbeld Giles 114). However, CPS and the norms it upholds are not the only problem families face; they may also struggle with homelessness, poverty, discrimination, and isolation. Part of the problem is that CPS disregards the different circumstances people face depending on who they are and applies laws and norms the same way across the board. CPS also fails to acknowledge the reality that their laws may favour families that fit the dominant models while harming minorities. In addition to the policies that drive CPS, factors such as race, gender, and economic status dictate how services workers treat mothers (Vandenbeld Giles 139). Under CPS, child welfare workers, social workers, educators, and other professionals working with children and/or their families are required by law to ensure as much as possible the safety of children. This is understandable, but in the process, they utilize a punitive approach particularly towards racialized and Indigenous

mothers that involves surveillance of their mothering skills and apprehensions of their children. Systems such as CPS are difficult to change, as they enact systemic discrimination (Bergen 35; Ontario Human Rights Commission 38). Furthermore, as Gary Dumbrill argues, child welfare services continue to undermine anti-oppressive practices and philosophies because they are rooted in "the efforts of society's privileged to control those they perceive as a threat to their dominance" (qtd in Gosine and Pon 137).

Child welfare agencies and their partners particularly scrutinize racialized single mothers' parenting styles. Yet these mothers are left on their own to manage the challenges that come with such mothering responsibilities (Vandenbeld Giles 115). Service providers, in collaboration with the child welfare system, assess the parenting of racialized mothers in isolation, without considering the intersections of single motherhood, racism, and poverty (Brady and Burroway 719; Reich 23-24). These acts of racism that single racialized mothers and Indigenous mothers experience contribute to their psychological stress (Odom and Vernon-Feagans 354). Although it is undeniable that service providers are often responding to real safety issues that children may be experiencing, their approach is retraumatizing for the families they are working with, including the children. In these situations of claimed unsafety, the Human Rights Commission has alleged that child protection services are not meeting the needs of the family or the children; instead, there are serious allegations of them being harmful and discriminatory (Human Rights Commission 6). As a mother, service user, and social worker, I can recognize the added stress that service providers, including myself, can bring to the lives of marginalized mothers. These injustices within the social work profession have been widely uncovered, yet social workers continue to be portrayed as the "kind charitable helper," which uplifts their "innocence and goodness" (Badwall 506).

Reflective Practices in Social Work

As a social worker, reflecting on my social work practice has not always prevented me from engaging in oppressive practices, but it has given me insight into the complexities that contribute to my complicity in oppression. For instance, in order to compensate for my vulnerable position at work, I would try not to raise any problems with the way programs were run at the workplace. These complexities need to be reflected upon and discussed in order to address the oppressive practices of female workers of colour (Gosine and Pon 135). Reflexive practices can refer to interrogating the "preconceived notions that emerge from the intersection of … intellectual assumptions, subject locations in relation to class, race, sexuality, gender and so on; and beliefs and emotions" (Nobel-Ghelani 415). This is also referred to as "conceptual baggage" (Nobel-Ghelani 415). In addition, self-reflexive processes

involve the analysis of power differentials in the context of my work (Nobel-Ghelani 414). Reflecting on my location as a mother and service user, and the vulnerabilities involved in holding these identities revealed to me the extent of the power that I as a worker hold and my responsibilities towards service users in my role as a service provider. I hope that engaging in an ongoing practice of reflexivity on my intersecting roles will help me to challenge my complicity in the injustices of the social work profession and force me to more frequently and openly oppose the systemic discrimination within it.

Through such reflection, I have learned the importance of applying an intersectional analysis and approach in social work. This step can help me to guide service users and offer them resources that will adequately assist them, as opposed to placing them in more vulnerable positions. Social workers need to acknowledge that service users are asking for assistance often because the government and broader society have failed them in some way by not accounting for how systemic discrimination and colonization impact people's lives.

Working with racialized and Indigenous mothers in the mental health sector involves practices such as the duty to report. This is not a straightforward or unproblematic policy however; there is some evidence, for example, that reporting intimate partner violence and addressing the harm caused to children who have witnessed it have led to the punishment of marginalized mothers without necessarily helping the children (Bergen and Abji 41). As a social worker, I could use my power to question policies and regulations involving the duty to report at the workplace and search for other alternatives (Bergen and Abji 41).

As social workers, we need to have more discussions on how to move away from or have alternative systems to the police force, the justice system, and child protection services. These systems work under a punitive model, which has led to the overrepresentation of racialized and Indigenous people in child protection services, incarceration, and the legal system. As a colleague pointed out to me, social workers operate in a system in which they have to remind mothers of the duty to report whenever they begin to share their experiences of partner violence in order to protect service users. It thus becomes more difficult for service users to fully address and gain help for the issues that they are really experiencing.

Social workers also need to respond directly to the systemic discrimination service users may face from state institutions by assisting service users in their interactions with them. Service workers could also be more aware of the power they hold and act accordingly. For instances in which service users are feeling intimidated by various service providers from agencies that hold power over them, such as the judicial system, police, or CPS, social workers could help prepare them for these encounters: ensure they have sufficient knowledge of

relevant polices or laws; coach them on ways to work effectively with providers; practice having conversations about difficult topics; or offer to mediate these conversations.

Service providers also need to be more aware of how invasive our work can be and take as many precautions as possible to lessen the trauma of these experiences. Acknowledging the power that social workers have over service users is crucial in order to not abuse it and to avoid making service users feel as if they do not know what they are doing; instead, service providers should interact with them in ways that validate their experiences and knowledge. As one way to address the power imbalance in the working relationships between service users and workers, we could have assigned meetings, as an agency or individually, to discuss with service users alternatives to our present practices. These sessions could be a regular component to strengthen the provider-user relationship.

Conclusion

In this article, I used decolonial and borderland lenses to reflect on my journey as a mother, service user, and social worker, and to analyze the themes that come from these experiences. My experiences with motherhood connect to social work practice in many ways. They help illustrate the need for social workers to become more aware of interracial and other family makeups that exist, and the complexities that such families experience. These complexities are important to acknowledge and support so that interracial single mothers and their children feel less isolated. As a mother, I feel it is critical to address the "strong mother" myth and other prevalent stereotypes that are reinforced in social work practices. Praising the strength of mothers can be useful, but it can also serve to dismiss their vulnerabilities.

As a service user, I attempt to bring attention to the power imbalances between service users and providers and how these imbalances work to dismiss the voices of service users. Racialized and Indigenous mothers experience marginalization in society because of their race along with other intersecting factors. It is crucial to consider their intersecting identities when offering services, particularly within child welfare systems that tend to harshly judge and punish marginalized mothers. My discussion also calls attention to the way service providers work within models that tend to elevate dominant mothering styles and underestimate alternatives. These practices can have a detrimental impact on marginalized mothers whose parenting knowledge is already likely to have been questioned and undervalued as a result of discrimination.

My experience as a social worker while being a service user and mother inform my argument that demands made of service users, particularly those in

child welfare, are often unrealistic and that there is very little support offered to meet these demands. I suggest that service providers step out of their social worker role and, as individuals, question their demands of service users and how reasonable they are based on the situation and the location of the service user. In their role as gatekeepers to services, it is particularly important for service providers to realize the significance that access to services may have in the lives of service users. Similarly, the conflicting positions of racialized settler service providers such as myself need to be reflected upon. It is critical to acknowledge that although we are part of a disenfranchised group, we are also complicit in settler colonialism. Settlers in the social work profession have responsibilities towards Indigenous peoples and their lands that need to be enacted in their practices as well.

Ongoing reflexivity in the social work profession can lead us to a more transparent conversation on all the uncomfortable ways we contribute to perpetuate oppression within our field. But reflexivity is only a first step; social workers must use the insights we gain to help service users in ways that subvert the effects of systemic marginalization as well as engage in advocacy work that reverses that marginalization. In this way, we can be better prepared to address these shortcomings in the social work profession.

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