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Child Placement and Mothering ideologies: Images of Mothers in Child Welfare

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Partnerships for Children and Families Project

**Child Placement and Mothering Ideologies:
Images of Mothers in Child Welfare**

N. Freymond

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Introduction

Most societies have accepted practices for caring for dependent children in situations where biological mothers cannot provide appropriate care. In Anglo-American countries, the placement of dependent children with alternative families predates the formation of organized systems of child welfare. As child welfare services developed, child placement services became an integral aspect of these systems. Child placement practices continue to be a central feature of Ontario's child welfare system. This paper is about child placement in the context of child welfare.

In Anglo-American countries much of the work of caring for children falls to mothers. Mothering work, and the importance that we attach to it in our society, has undergone significant changes in the past century. The evaluation of mothering is an integral aspect of child welfare involvement with families whose children may be in need of protection. Child placement may be the outcome of situations where mothers are found to be unable or unwilling to provide appropriate care for their children. When child placements occur, mothers are affected. This paper is also about mothering, and about mothers who experience the placement of a child into a substitute care arrangement.

In reflecting on the purpose of this paper, I am drawn to the time in my career when I worked as a front line child welfare worker. These memories come with mixed emotions. In the late 1980s, my child welfare colleagues and I spoke about the best interests of the child, and about the least intrusive methods of intervening with families. Periodically we were confronted with decisions about placing children in substitute care arrangements. As I believe is typical for most protection workers, our involvements with families centered on mothers. Most were poor; most experienced few of the privileges of middle class. One of our goals was to compel mothers to respond to the needs of their children. Despite

involvements that centered on mothers, their everyday realities and experiences were not known to us. From within the context of child welfare, I understood biological mothers in specific ways. I was not troubled by my lack of understanding of their everyday realities. Several years later, as I recall the mothers whose children I removed, sometimes permanently, I am appalled by how little I understood of their lives or their experiences. I ask myself, how is it that I could know enough about these mothers to remove their children, and yet so little about their daily living realities?

My broad research interests are in comprehending the everyday experiences of individual mothers who have a child placed and how their lives are impacted by the placement experience. This paper is a precursor to an empirical investigation of the subjective experiences of biological mothers. However, it is not about mothers' experience, but rather about how mothers who have a child placed are viewed and understood.

My personal experiences in child welfare lead me to believe that our ability to respond to biological mothers in ways that make sense in their lives is hampered by the gaps in understanding of their everyday lives. Child placement is the most intrusive child welfare intervention. It disrupts relationships between children and their families. It may have life long effects for children, for mothers and for their families. In Ontario, there has been a recent unprecedented 40.2 percent increase in the substitute care population, which represents over 13,000 children.¹ Systems of child welfare are relying increasingly on the use of short-term placements when there are risks of child maltreatment. Given the serious implications of the child placement intervention, and the increased reliance on child placement as a means of responding to situations of child risk, expanding our options for intervening with biological mothers whose children might be placed in substitute care is indicated. As long as

¹ This percentage increase in the substitute care population occurred between March 31, 1997 and March 31, 2001. As of April 1, 1999 there were 13,343 children in substitute care arrangements in Ontario (Secretariat to the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Child and Family Services Information, 2002).

mothers' everyday realities and their experience of service involvements are unknown, the options for meaningful intervention will remain limited.

This paper is divided into three major discussions. In the first discussion, child placement ideology is explored by examining the indentured placement of British immigrant children into Canadian homes during the historical period of industrialization. It relies on considerable historical detail to uncover the various beliefs, values, and practices associated with these placements, and how these informed the practices and policies of the early system of child welfare. There is a constellation of beliefs, values, and images stemming from our original conceptualizations of substitute placement practices that, when combined, constitute a dominant child placement ideology. This ideology functions to maintain child placement as a central feature of systems of child welfare. The centrality of child placement has many implications for understanding mothers' experience of child placement.

In the second discussion, the dominant ideology of motherhood, and its accompanying deviant discourse of 'bad' mothering is explored. Views of mothering practices are understood and evaluated in relation to this ideology. The dominant ideology of motherhood positions the ideal mother within a nuclear, middle class family. Child welfare mothers, who may be different from this ideal, are often constructed as bad mothers.

Feminist theorizing, which places the doctrine of separate spheres at the center of its analysis of mothering, distorts the mothering experiences of women whose children might be placed in substitute care. The separate spheres doctrine, which sees women in the private sphere and in a mothering role, and men in the public sphere and earning income for the family, has seldom been a reality for mothers whose children might be placed in substitute care. Issues of class, culture, and race are the central realities of these women's lives and, therefore, must be central to an analysis that aims to understand their mothering experiences.

This discussion also explores how feminist theorizing functions to obscure fundamental aspects of mothers' everyday realities.

The third discussion examines how child placement and mothering ideologies are reproduced in empirical child welfare research. This research, as reflected in mainstream child welfare literature, informs professional perceptions. The result is a deeply negative stereotype of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. This discussion provides an overview of the main themes in child welfare literature that pertain to mothers whose children may be eligible for placement. It is not intended to be a comprehensive literature review. These themes color how professionals think about, and react to, mothers whose children might be placed in substitute care. Also, they deepen the distorted and partialized understanding of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care.

The dominant child placement and motherhood ideologies, and their various reflections in child welfare research, shed light on how mothers who experience child placement are viewed and understood. From my position as a white, middle class woman situated in an academic setting, I am unable to bridge the gap between my own realities and the realities of women whose experiences differ in fundamental ways from my own. Any attempt to articulate their realities will be subject to its own distortions and misunderstandings. A precise and comprehensive picture of their lives will remain elusive. It is, nonetheless, important to be aware of how ideologies construct mothers. These ideologies and their various reflections in child welfare literature draw attention to how our thinking about mothers whose children are placed in substitute care is mediated and constrained. More importantly, they draw attention to the various exclusions in our understanding. As the effects of these ideologies are exposed, opportunities for increased understanding emerge, as do increased possibilities for meaningful intervention.

The Perspective of Critical Social Theory

The perspective of critical social theory informs the analyses in this paper. This perspective is composed of critique of various aspects of social life. It assumes that societal conditions are historically created and heavily influenced by the “asymmetries of power and special interests” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p.110). It further assumes that privileged groups are interested in supporting the status quo to preserve their advantages. The task of critical social theory is to focus on that which is socially changeable.

This perspective is useful in exposing ideology and how ideology functions in social control. Ideologies are developed over long periods of time and are firmly entrenched in the history and culture of a society. Ideology is a composition of constructions of experience. Ideology refers to “the cultural forms, the meanings, the rituals, and the representations that produce consent to the status quo and individuals’ particular places within it” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 283). Ideologies act as lenses that filter our views of others. Ideology is understood as ideas that serve the interests and sustain the power of a given class. Class is not necessarily understood in Marxist terms but also, according to Althusser (1969), along more complex paradigms involving ethnicity, gender, sexuality, occupation and so on. Ideologies may operate beyond our conscious awareness. One need not be able to articulate an ideology, or even be fully aware of its program, in order to act in accordance with its dictates.

Critical theorists are interested in language, recognizing it as an unstable social practice where meanings vary depending on their social context. “Linguistic descriptions are not simply about the world but serve to construct it” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 284). Language in the form of discourse both regulates and dominates. Foucault’s work focused on the analysis of discourses to uncover the mechanisms of social regulation and of power (Ritzer, 2000). Fineman (1995) describes discourse as a “stylized appeal to ideology”

(p.217). She sees ideology as functioning to both define and confine the contours of discourses. Discourses are ways of speaking, which are characteristic of a specific institution and its practices. Discourses are the means by which ideological positions are transmitted to individuals. Foucault's argument is that discourses are the means through which power is exercised (Ritzer, 2000).

I am interested in the perspectives of critical social theory in this attempt to understand how mothers are viewed and understood within the system of child welfare. I want to understand more about how ideology operates in matters of child placement. Critical theory has considerable power in making conscious the constellation of ideas, beliefs, and constructions of experience that allowed me to place children in substitute care without knowledge of mothers' everyday realities.

In this paper, I argue that how mothers are viewed and understood within the system of child welfare is filtered through the lenses of child placement ideology and mothering ideology. Although mothering ideology is a well-established idea within feminist literature, child placement has not, to my knowledge, been articulated as an ideology. In keeping with the claims of critical theorists that social phenomena must always be viewed in their historical contexts, the history of indentured child placement in Canada is extensively reviewed in the first discussion. This historical context establishes a setting in which child placement ideology can become visible. The construction of mothering during the period of Canadian industrialization is reviewed in the second discussion.

The third section of the paper examines empirical research regarding mothers whose children might be placed in substitute care. Critical theory is concerned with the tendency of empirical research to provide seeming neutral descriptions, and in so doing reproduce institutionalized relationships of domination (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). This third

discussion draws attention to the interface between empirical research and child placement and mothering ideologies.

Canadian Child Placement History: Uncovering Ideology and its Effects on the Perceptions of Mothers whose Children are Placed in Substitute Care

The ideology surrounding the placement of children in homes or institutions separate from their biological parents is informed by history. Because child placement ideology is firmly entrenched in history, the policies and practices that shape the approaches to child placement tend not to undergo radical changes. Despite tremendous growth in our knowledge of the needs of children and families over the past century, approaches to child placement have tended to vary only within narrow parameters. Child placement ideology colours our views of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. How child placement ideology operates is relevant for the purposes of understanding how mothers who have a child placed are viewed and understood.

The 60-year period between 1869 and 1939 is a distinct and important period in the history of Canadian child placement. During this period, more than 100,000 pauper children from Britain were placed in Canadian homes.² The practices associated with the placement of the immigrant children, albeit by current standards informal in nature, mark the beginning of an organized system of Canadian child placement services. These indentured placement practices influenced the developing system of child welfare. Additionally, the placements occur during a period of rapid societal growth and change. The effects of industrialization were transforming Canadian society. Views about the needs of children were also changing.

This discussion describes in considerable historical detail how political interests, economic concerns, as well as conceptualisations of childhood and family, shaped the practices associated with these indentured child placements. It draws upon literature

² By 1939 it was estimated that at least three out of every two hundred Canadians were Barnardo Boys or girls (the largest of the placement organizations) and their descendants (Corbett, 2002).

primarily from Canadian history and sociology. This discussion also explores the transformation in attitudes toward child placement as the interests and concerns associated with industrialization emerged.

Although, there is not a distinct separation between the values that informed placement practices before and after industrialization, it is clear that industrialization altered relationships within families and between the family and the State. The process of industrialization and the transformations that emanate from this process are uneven. In some areas changes happened rapidly. In others, changes occurred gradually and over time.

Comacchio (1999) writes:

Both artisan shops and some degree of domestic production continued alongside the expanding factories. Some traditional, rural, and pre-industrial ways became outmoded, while others were retained, even as they were modified to meet new conditions (p. 26).

The family unit gradually reorganized to accommodate changes in the means of production, and, in turn, family-State relationships also changed. Some ideas about child placement became outmoded, others remained the same, and some new ideas were embraced.

The purpose of the detailed historical description is to uncover child placement ideology. This journey into the past concludes with a description of child placement ideology. Analysis of these indentured child placement strategies reveals a dominant ideology that underpins our current approaches to child placement. Within our current child welfare system, child placement continues to be a central construct. Implications of the centrality of child placement in relation to mothers' experiences within systems of child welfare are explored.

The Rationale for Indentured Child Placement

The nineteenth century industrial revolution transformed the British way of life. Some rural communities became urban centres. Factory work and the waged labour market largely replaced the family farm. The darker sides of these social developments caused public concern about visible poverty in urban centres. The British State relied on institutions both to house and to train its impoverished citizens. A contingent of middle class reformers, who felt compelled by religious conviction to save children, became active around the issues related to child poverty (Dahl, 1985). Reformers saw the State as a dreadful parent of pauper children and became focussed on saving children from entering State institutions. But the need for assistance far exceeded available charitable resources of well-intentioned reformers.

The fear of increasing crime rates in relation to the overwhelming numbers of children with 'idle hands' threatened the sense of safety of English Society (Parr, 1994). In 1866, an epidemic of cholera spread through London claiming many lives. The very real fear of the rampant spread of disease was a continuous threat to the safety of English citizens. British politicians sought a solution to address the fears of the electorate.

The Political Solution for Public Fears

One solution for managing the growing population of pauper children in orphanages was to relocate them to the colonies. This proposed political solution was tailored to respond to public fears. Parr (1994) writes:

The foremost argument for child emigration in these years was its value as a 'safety-valve to tide over the troubles at home'. The policy was commonly described as 'not a matter of humanity alone, but of public safety', a way to make 'starving and desperate men into contented and loyal subjects', 'neglected female children' into 'happy, honest mothers' of a stalwart colonial race (p.33).

Meanwhile, in Canada, the regulation of immigration practices to ensure British dominance in the new country was a political goal. There was widespread support for building a nation of English speaking citizens. In 1883, Dr. Barnardo (as cited by Corbett, 2002) writes:

Well-planned and wisely conducted child emigration especially to Canada, contains within its bosom the truest solution...it supplies what the colonies are in want of, an increase of English speaking population (p.26).

These selective, and by today's standards racist immigration preferences, were largely uncontested at this point in history. The interface between political agenda, immigration policy, and child placement practices exposes how child placement becomes an instrument of social control.

The Economic Solution for Farm Labour Needs

Child placement has a substantial history that predates the late 19th century wave of child immigrants to Canada. During the middle ages, apprenticeship was widely practiced in England as a means for middle class children to learn a trade (Peikoff & Brickey, 1991) and as a means of addressing issues of poverty, particularly in situations where one or both parents were deceased. Apprentices were sent to householders or to factories where labor was required. In pre-industrial Upper Canada, the Orphans Act of 1799 provided for children without family support to be indentured as apprentices to master workmen (Peikoff & Brickey, 1991). Although humanitarian interests likely motivated some Victorian families in both Britain and Canada to accept child placements, the relationship between the child and the placement family was understood to be primarily economic in nature. The family offered

food, shelter, skill development, and sometimes wages, in exchange for the child's hard work. This reciprocal arrangement was central to early child placement practices.

The economic interests associated with the placement arrangements for the British immigrant children were understood and widely accepted. By the 1830s, the scope of work available to British children had become limited by legislative changes to the Factory Act and by advances in technology (Parr, 1994). In Canada, because of the dominance of the farming industry, indentured work was plentiful.

In Canadian farming communities, the household was the basic unit of production in which the contribution of children's labor was essential (Peikoff & Brickey, 1991). North American culture was infused with an agriculturalist idealism depicting farm life as wholesome and moral (Gish, 1999; Parr, 1994). Non-mechanized farm operations, nonetheless, required considerable labor. The labor needs of farmers consistently exceeded the supply of available children (Bagnell, 2001; Jones & Rutman, 1981). The Canadian government encouraged the child immigration program by providing subsidies for transportation costs.

In 1874, Andrew Doyle was commissioned by England's Local Government Board to investigate the care of the British immigrant children. In Doyle's final report he comments that Canadians put their 'children to work at a very early age' (as cited in Sutherland, 2000, p.10). Whether Doyle was referring to all children or only to immigrant children is somewhat unclear. Children in a pioneering and agriculturalist context are believed to have worked hard from a very early age. Childhood ideology of the time linked the ability to be productive with human value. Regardless of social status, children were considered less valuable than adults because they were less productive.

Sutherland (2000) writes: there was, indeed, probably much truth in the remark made by a young girl to Doyle that "doption, sir, is when folks gets a girl to work without wages"

(p.10). Children under the age of nine years could be “adopted” although the precise meaning of this type of placement is unclear (Sutherland, 2000). Some families who accepted placement of younger children (ages three to eight) were paid by the placing agency until the child was old enough to earn his keep (Peikoff & Brickey, 1991). Because of their need for care and inability to work, young children and infants were the least valued for placement. Younger children often immigrated with an older sibling, although placement in the same home upon arrival to Canada was only by chance. Children from the ages of 14 to 18 were considered capable of adult labor and were paid a wage by the family. Because of their ability for physical work, adolescents were the most highly valued children for placement. Families exercised the option of returning or exchanging children in accordance with their economic needs (Bullen, 1992; Peikoff & Brickey, 1991).

The importance of the capacity of immigrant children to be productive is underscored in relation to the plight of Canada’s illegitimate infants born during this same period. Mortality rates were shockingly high among illegitimate infants placed in orphan homes for adoption. Splane (as cited in Peikoff and Bickey, 1991) reports that in 1883 the Bethlehem Home for the Friendless in Ottawa recorded 224 admissions and 199 deaths. The stigma associated with illegitimacy, combined with the inability to be productive, rendered illegitimate infants the least valued of all children in Canadian society during this time period. It is important to note, however, that British immigrant children were commonly believed to be from illegitimate origins, which lends support for the argument that their ability to work was a highly valued feature of immigrant children. Doyle speculated that 90 percent of the placement choices were motivated by the prospect of future service (Sutherland, 2000). Not only was hard work a central characteristic of Canadian childhoods, but also the child’s capacity for productivity was a key factor in child placement.

The Moral Solution for Children in Need

The Victorian conceptualization of childhood differed from our current understanding. A person in the Victorian era was defined as an adult; by implicit definition a child was defined as a partially formed adult (Sutherland, 2000). The Victorians conceptualized childhood through a lens of Christian morality. The unformed parts of children required moulding. The goal was for children to become moral, hard-working,³ and productive citizen, submissive to parents will, and to God's will (Sutherland, 2000). The concept of a child in need of molding is firmly entrenched in the Christian doctrine of original sin.⁴

The role of the middle class Victorian family was to instill morality in children. The Victorians endowed the family with spiritual, moral, and social importance. Childhood was understood to be a season of dependence and a time of moulding in preparation for the future. In a pious Victorian family, providing for the physical needs of children was secondary to proper moral instruction. Children without families were outside the proper civilising influences, thus family placement rather than institutional workhouses or orphanages was

³During the period of the Reformation, moral discipline and the dignity of work became linked to the Calvinist belief in predestination. Predestination, according to Reformed theology, involves God's choosing of those who will believe. Evidence of God's choosing could be found in the willingness to perform disciplined work and resist frivolous spending. The resulting Protestant work ethic played a major role in the development of the middle class and the rise of capitalism (see Tarnas, 1991).

⁴This doctrine is commonly regarded as one of the most difficult parts of Christian theology. The form and terminology of the traditional doctrine are not found in scripture. It is generally agreed that Augustine formulated the doctrine in response to Peagius who taught that humans are born with the same nature as Adam before the fall. Based on interpretation of Romans 5:12, Augustine asserted that all humans inherit a corrupt nature because of Adam's original sin. The doctrine of original sin provides a theoretical explanation for the existence of the universality of sin and is integrally related to such doctrine as grace, salvation and atonement. See Parker (1997) for a review of the major evangelical schools of interpretation. The Victorian notion of molding prepared a child to live a Godly life, which because of original sin was not a natural inclination.

favoured (Parr, 1994). Corporal punishment, moral regulation through admonition, and the reliance on Bible lessons were strategies to instill morality in children (Comacchio, 1999).

Fathers were considered to be of superior intelligence and therefore the proper tutors of their children. They were also expected to be the disciplinarians and rulers of their families (Hays, 1996). There was no notable central role for mothers in the provision of care to children. Childcare was children's work, generally falling to the oldest daughter who between the ages of six and 12, assumed responsibility for her siblings, thereby freeing the mothers' attentions for other household duties (Parr, 1994; Pollack, 2002; Purvey, 1991).

The pauper Victorian family, however, was not seen as equipped for instilling moral duty and responsibility in children. Immorality was understood by the middle and upper class English society to be the cause of poverty. In their Christian framework, prosperity was clear evidence of God's blessing. It was the immoral who were unable to secure blessing and therefore destined to poverty. Paupers were understood to have the capacity to transmit immoral ideas to their children, leading to the cultivation rather than the suppression of inherent immoral instincts on which their children might act later in life (Dahl, 1985). Therefore, it was the transmission of the parents' bad moral influence to the children, as evidenced by their poverty, which was the cause for concern (Piper, 1999). Again, during this historical period, child placement is used as a means of social control, separating parents and children as a means of protecting both children and the broader society from the harmful influences of immorality.

British institutional models sought to provide a haven for children from immoral influences. Under the British Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, poor families were separated upon entering workhouses and children were treated as equally culpable for the families' poverty, and considered better off without the hindrance of their impoverished parents (Colton et al., 1999). Parental visits were stringently regulated so that children might

grow increasingly dependent on the institution and the values it espoused (Rooke & Schnell, 1982). Critics of the workhouse system advocated a fresh start for children to escape the stigma of pauperism. They were supportive of the practices associated with the separation of family members. The permanent separation of child and parent, which was a probable consequence of the British-Canadian child immigration and placement plan, was an appealing solution to the concerns about parental immorality.

In the United States, the Children's Aid Society of New York under the leadership of Charles Loring Brace relocated thousands of children from urban New York to farming communities in the Midwest in his tenure as director from 1853 to 1890. Although Brace readily acknowledged the economic benefits of child placement for Western foster families, he was primarily motivated by the prospect of placement as a means of moral reform. He believed that foster families played an important role in "breaking a chain of hereditary pauperism" by rescuing children from "the temptations of the city and from villainous parents" (Gish, 1999, p. 122). The agents who placed children in Canadian homes were favorably impressed by Brace's approaches (Parr, 1994). Dr. Thomas Barnardo sent trainloads of child immigrants to farms in the Western provinces.

The historical uses of child placement in social control appear evident. It is important to consider child placement within its appropriate historical and social context. Child placement was an active means of moral policing. But such policing was seen as important for the well being of children, families, and society in general. By today's standards, the child placement practices of this historical period seem harsh. In accordance with the standards of this period, such practices represented a compassionate response to child need.

Canadian Industrialization: Shifting Values and Child Placement Controversies

By 1870, Ontario was facing the social consequences of industrialization. Concerns about the growing visibility of poverty in urban centers were unfolding, just as they had in London a half-century earlier. Palmer (as cited in Piekoff & Brickey, 1991) notes that in Toronto, between 1881 and 1991, the number of industrial firms tripled, the number of workers doubled and the amount of capital investment increased by two and a half times. Sixty percent of the labor force was now non-agricultural (Comacchio, 1999). Land exhaustion in farming communities prompted the migration of rural family members to urban areas in search of employment opportunities (Bullen, 1992). Unemployment was recognized as an emerging problem among the industrial working class (Sager & Baskerville, 1997).

The agriculturalists of rural Canada expressed concerns about the erosion of their lifestyle and the political and economic privileges it encompassed. Historical evidence confirms that in the 1860's, over half of Ontario's farm families occupied modestly secure or quite large farms that produced marketable surpluses. However, the transformation in the urban centers did have a direct impact on farmers. As the waged labor market grew, farms focused on the sale of produce, rather than on home consumption (Wilson, 1996).

These rapid changes produced a climate of uncertainty. In uncertain times fear is commonplace. Darroch (2000) writes that this broad, highly irregular movement toward reliance on wage labor threatened the widely held aspiration for and quite substantial achievement of "an independence" among Ontario's families, understood in terms of their control over labor, product and life routines (p. 429). As in England, philanthropists became concerned about the appearance of poverty and the harmful effects of its companion immorality.

In light of these fears, the optimism with which Canadian families welcomed immigrant children seemed to give way to concerns about the potential harmful influences of

these children on Canadian society. The concerns included fears that immigrant children, who allegedly carried disease and were rumored to be mentally inferior as well as prone to criminal activity, might have negative effects on the settled populations. Economic concerns about the impact on the wage labor market also emerged, as did a marked concern about the influence of child immigration on the stability of the family unit. These issues were brought to public attention by various interest groups, collectively known as the Canadian social reform movement. This movement was largely comprised of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle class citizens (Sutherland, 2000). It consisted of diverse groups with a range of interests.⁵ Valverde (1991) notes that, in the absence of government bureaucracies and associations of professionals, these interest groups commanded considerable respect and were treated as experts.

Political Controversy and Public Fears

Physicians represented one professional group whose opinions commanded public attention. The syphilis virus, reported by doctors in rural Canada to be a health concern among immigrant children, ignited fears among the populace about the potential for the spread of disease. In actuality, syphilis was not at all common among child immigrants (Parr, 1994).⁶ The syphilis scare alarmed Canadians because of its association with sexual immorality. Additionally, illegitimacy was widely believed to be hereditary and, although only a small percentage of immigrant children were born out of wedlock, many were believed to be prone to immorality based on alleged illegitimate beginnings (Parr, 1994).

⁵ Such groups included The Trades and Labour Council, The National Council of Women, The United Grain Growers and The Women's Christian Temperance Union.

⁶ Because of the deprivation immigrant children experienced in institutions they tended to be physically smaller and more susceptible to pneumonia, pleurisy, chronic bronchitis, eye infections and skin disease (Parr, 1994). The focus on syphilis underscores the distinctiveness of the fears associated with immorality.

The alleged mental deficiency of the immigrant population was identified as a threat to Canadians. In a 1924 speech, Charlotte Whitton⁷ suggested that a huge portion of the mental defectives of Canada were child immigrants or their offspring (Bagnell, 2001). She argued, in accordance with the eugenics movement, that the young immigrants from Britain were undermining Canadian stock, which would lead to a destabilizing of Canadian mental abilities in a few generations (Jordan, 1987).

The county sheriffs identified the alleged criminal tendencies of the immigrant population as a threat. The underlying fear was that the immorality of the British slums was being transmitted through the immigrant children to the rural communities, manifesting itself in criminal acts. In 1891, the sheriffs of Wellington, Huron Bruce, Middlesex and Peel counties publicly blamed drunkenness and prostitution, which were perceived to be manifestations of immorality, on the child immigrants (Parr, 1994).

The associations between child immigration, disease, mental deficiency, drunkenness and prostitution were largely uncontested. The influences of immigrant children were now considered by many to be a menace to the well-being of their communities and to properly reared children.

Economic Controversy and Protecting the Breadwinner

The continuation of immigrant child placement programs amidst the growing controversy underscores the strength of the relationship between economic interests and child placement. The Doyle report of 1870 was critical of the lack of supervision of placed children. He expressed concerns about conditions of overwork, ill treatment, and the physical abuse of children (Peikoff & Brickey, 1991). Politicians and Canadian public opinion

⁷ Charlotte Whitton (1895-1975) was the founding executive director of The Canadian Council on Child and Family Welfare. She was a life-long activist for child welfare and disadvantaged women.

soundly dismissed Doyle's findings (Jones & Rutman, 1981; Bagnell, 2001). The Ottawa Free Press referred to Doyle as "an itinerant deadbeat and a professional leech" (as cited in Bagnell, 2001, p. 51). Some interpreted his findings as a British plot to secure the workhouse system in Canada, while others saw it as an insult to Canadian agriculturalists. It would appear that the contents of the Doyle report many have been compatible with the agendas of various members of the social reform movement; however, Canadians clearly had strong economic motivations in supporting indentured child placement practices.

Regardless of the controversy generated by specific interest groups in relation to immigrant child placement, industrialization actually increased the demand for immigrant children in urban areas. Children, particularly girls, were often indentured for domestic responsibilities, as well as labor in residential sweatshops and family boarding houses.⁸ Opposition to indentured placements came from labor parties, particularly the Toronto Trades and Labour Council, who viewed child immigrants as a threat to settled, wage earning families (Jones & Rutman, 1981; Parr, 1994). Labor unions supported the sexual division of labor and sought to protect jobs for the male breadwinner. They encouraged laws that restricted reliance on children in the work place. In 1884, Ontario adopted legislation that prohibited girls under 14 and boys under 12 from factory work (Comacchio, 1999). To buttress their arguments against indentured child placement, labor parties grouped Ontario farmers with the British landowners, accusing them of treating indentured children no better than slaves.

Immigrant child placement practices underscore the highly sensitive, value-laden nature of child placement practices. Various interest groups adopted arguments in relation to child placement to further their specific causes. Trade unions saw child immigrants as a

⁸ The average starting salary for an indentured girl was \$2.00 per month, well below the wages of a regular domestic servant (Bullen, 1992).

threat to waged labor and sought to protect the jobs of the male breadwinner by opposing child immigration programs. Meanwhile, agricultural groups and business owners, who relied on child labor for economic gain, argued for continued child immigration programs. What seems apparent is that concern for the well being of immigrant children was clearly subordinate to the economic interests of middle and upper class Canadians.

Moral Controversy and Fears about Destabilizing the Family Unit

During the period of Canadian industrialization, childhood was constructed as a stage of innocence that must be cultivated and nurtured. Some historians describe the late 19th century as an era where childhood was discovered (Peikoff & Brickey, 1991). Sutherland (2000) suggests that the notion of the discovery of childhood is somewhat misleading. He writes:

There was no late nineteenth century ‘discovery’ of the child per se.... prodded by the need to solve newly emerged, perceived, or discovered practical problems, Canadians gradually sorted out various groups of children who needed particular kinds of care. As they did so, they set more and more precise and increasingly high standards for various phases of a ‘proper’ childhood and proposed remedies for those who did not meet them. It was a very ad hoc process (p.20).

The development of the wage labor system and the emergence of a new middle class altered the character of family life: “the central institution of civilization, the family, was felt to be in jeopardy” (Snell, 1992, p. 396). Canadians feared the destabilization of the family unit and sought to protect the family from potential threats. Whereas, at the outset of the indentured child placement program, Canadians believed that the children were still teachable

and that their destiny of evil could be thwarted with proper family influence, they now feared that immigrant children were permanently tainted with immorality and disease (Parr, 1994).

Despite the diversity of various interest groups in the social reform movement, they united in their conviction to stabilize and strengthen the institution of the nuclear family (Morrison, 1971; Snell, 1992).⁹ The wage labor system forced families to develop new ways of organizing themselves in relation to work. Hierarchical relations within these new family configurations located women inside the family, and men in the labor force. A properly run home assumed the presence of a full time wife and mother (Sutherland, 2000). The middle class nuclear family model was constructed and widely espoused as the cornerstone of a moral nation. Its protection was deemed vital for the future well-being of the nation. The nuclear middle class family functioned to represent and reproduce the newly emerged middle class. “To protect their society and the families at its base, reformers asserted rules for proper family relations, and encouraged public surveillance of families to see that these were followed” (Comacchio, 1999, p.49).

Reformers perceived the crisis as hinging on the difference between acceptable middle class values and the unacceptable, immoral values of other families, as evidenced by their impoverished living conditions. Reformers did not view the unequal distribution of wealth as the source of the problem of poverty; rather they continued to hold the impoverished responsible, on moral grounds, for their own economic plight (Bullen, 1992). Canadian attitudes dictated that, in this land of plenty, those who could not fend for themselves were lazy and/or immoral (Jones & Rutman, 1981). Therefore, regulation of the poor was gradually seen as a political necessity. Child labor, once considered crucial for the

⁹Ursel (1990) in her comprehensive analysis of family-State dynamics argues that the purpose of the reform movement was to push the State into an interventionist role within families. She argues that by the time of the Great War the social reform movement was no longer required as it had achieved its primary goal of increased State involvement in the Canadian family.

moral upbringing of a child, now paradoxically became a symptom of poverty and therefore subject to regulation.

Despite the controversies concerning indentured child placement, it was ultimately the dominant economic interests of the middle and upper classes that drew child immigration and indentured placement practices to a close. In the 1930's, the Canadian economy was gripped by the Great Depression. Unemployment rates soared and the demand for cheap labor plummeted. There was no work available for indentured children. On July 8, 1939 the last Barnardo delegation arrived to Canada (Corbett, 2002).

Child Placement Ideology

The indentured placement of British immigrant children into Canadian homes reveals beliefs, attitudes, and values about the uses of child placement in the provision of care to children. Child placement ideology shapes the practices associated with child placement. The practices involved in the indentured placement of immigrant children are reproduced in current approaches to child placement. Although our understanding of the needs of children and families has shifted significantly over the past century, and although child placement practices have been subject to considerable controversy during this same period, the approaches to child placement have remained relatively consistent. This lack of evolution suggests the persistence of child placement ideology. Moreover, the function of child placement in social control demonstrates how this ideology has historically reflected the interests of the dominant, white, protestant, middle and upper class populations.

The following discussion examines the system of beliefs and ideas that constitute child placement ideology. Child placement ideology captures ideas about the relationship between the State and the family. Child placement ideology is concerned with responding to poor children. It encompasses ideas about the proper motivations by families for providing

care to children. Its practices include separation, whereby mothers are separated from their children. Its practices also include substitution, whereby foster mothers become the substitute for biological mothers. Public views about mothers whose children are placed in substitute care are fashioned under the influence of this traditional child placement ideology.

The State, the Family and Child Placement

Inherent in child placement ideology are beliefs and values about the nature of the relationship between the State and the family. State involvement in matters of child placement is informed by individualism. The ideals of individualism are based on the 18th century writings of Adam Smith (1723-1790) who argued that individuals pursuing their own interests will ultimately produce the highest level of good for the most people. This ideal is also rooted in the writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). A century earlier, Hobbes had asserted that the State should only become involved to prevent wrongdoing arising from unchecked individual self-assertion. He believed that the State's role in relation to the rest of society was one of a provider and a regulator of a social and moral framework (Hetherington, Cooper, Smith, & Wilford, 1997).

In many European countries where collectivist rather than individualistic ideological parameters underlie the relationship between the State and the family, a sense of community as well as mutual and reciprocal obligations in their governance is valued. In contrast, the British State, within individualistic ideological parameters, values self-reliance and assumes the beneficence of the market in its governance. In its proper role, the State must not usurp individual social responsibility (i.e. supply money without enabling the individual to earn it) as such actions might lead to moral laxity (Morrison, 1971). Once the capacity of the individual to participate in the market place has been restored, it is assumed that the market

will take care of the individual. Barnardo captures the relationship between individualism and the child immigration and placement program (as cited in Corbett, 2002) when he writes:

It confers upon the children themselves unspeakable blessings. The change at the young and formative period of their lives gives to each child whose character is good, and who is successfully absorbed into the colonial population, such an immediate prospect of an independent existence upon a higher plain as hardly could have been imagined as within its reach (p. 26).

To protect families from the harmful effects of industrialization, the Canadian State expanded its moral framework, and the rules pertaining to child placement. Prior to 1884, one law, The Apprentices and Minor Act, permitted a child without a legal guardian (the only condition) to be apprenticed (the only solution). As of 1913, there were 12 different conditions under which the State might assume custody of a child in addition to the original condition of a child without guardianship.

The State required the establishment of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. Kelso directed their establishment and played a role in the development of similar societies in other English-speaking provinces. A network of private local agencies, with statutory authority to act on behalf of the State, developed. Their work focussed on the inspection of the home environments of children, the apprehension of children when necessary, and the placement of children into institutions or foster homes.¹⁰ Between 1893 and 1900, 1318 children had been placed in foster care (Jones & Rutman, 1981). By 1900, 32 Children's Aid Societies had been established in Ontario.

¹⁰For a complete discussion on the factors leading to the enactment of child protection legislation in the period of industrialization, the creation of the Children's Aid Societies and their relationship to the State see Cluett (1994).

The fundamental relationship between the State and the family informs child placement ideology. As is illustrated by the rationale for the placement of child immigrants into Canadian homes, child placement ideology posits a State concern for the well-being of children, in that a child's improper upbringing might compromise potential for eventual competitiveness in the market place. In carrying out its regulatory function, the State may enforce parents' moral responsibility and/or assume parental authority in situations where parents remain irresponsible. Child placement is, therefore, a consequence of parent's unwillingness or inability to be morally responsible in the provision of care to children.

The interface between the State and the family is a complex area that is subject to considerable debate. The intensity of State regulation of families varies in response to factors such as the political agenda of elected governments and prevailing public attitudes in relation to families. Public opinion is often underscored during child welfare controversies as the State often responds by adjusting the degree and nature of its involvement with families in response to public criticism. When State regulatory functions increase, the number of child placements increases, while parental discretion decreases. Recent child welfare reforms in Ontario, in response to public concerns about the deaths of children known to child welfare agencies, have prompted an increase of State regulation into family matters and an accompanying substantial increase in child placements.

The Poor and Child Placement

Inherent in child placement ideology are the interests of the dominant, white, protestant, Anglo-Saxon, middle and upper class populations. Comacchio (1992) writes: "by the outbreak of the Great War, the ideal family – in the minds of social reformers, many of them professionals employed in expanding education, health, and welfare fields- was clearly

a projection of their own middle-class experiences and ambitions”(p. 49). This nuclear family model which linked women to mothering roles and responsibility for all facets of childcare became the standard against which impoverished families would be evaluated.¹¹

Child welfare law, which reflects the values of the nuclear middle class family, functions to maintain the ties between immoral behavior and poverty. In 1888, the law codified the ties between immorality and poverty by constructing immoral parents (mothers) in relation to their distance from the ideal family. The law centered on situations that were likely to be affiliated with economic conditions among the poor. Parents who committed the following acts could have their children placed in care:

1. commitment of the child or children to a government regulated institution. Note that impoverished families frequently left children in orphanages during family crises.
2. abandonment
3. neglect
4. immoral conduct. Given the direct linkages between poverty and immoral conduct, this condition is broad in scope, capturing all conditions of poverty.
5. ill treatment or abuse of child
6. permitting or encouraging child to violate curfew, begging, vagrancy, and the violation of labor laws. This condition is directly related to situations of child labor.

Child labor became subject to regulation in relation to the construction of the middle class nuclear family model. Bullen (1992) in his description of the actual work

¹¹ Although it is accepted among historians that farm families continued to depend on the labor of all their members for economic survival, social historians have uncovered patterns of urban existence that suggest that many working class families also relied on the labor of all their members for survival (Bullen, 1992). The gendered separation between the domestic and the public spheres was not a reality for many urban families, particularly poor families. During the latter part of the 19th century it was quite common for urban women to be employed in the labor market. In 1871, women and children made up 34 percent of the industrial work force in Toronto (Kealey, 1980). In an analysis of the 1901 Census of Canada, Sager & Baskerville (1997) found that family income peaked when children could enter the labor force. At the turn of the century the odds were very high that a family sheltering under-employed persons, including women and children, would find itself in the lowest income quintile (Sager & Baskerville, 1997).

performed by children during this time period emphasizes the participation of working class children in a variety of street trades. Most notably newsboys worked long hours, frequently violating curfew.

Children who had committed the following acts could become State wards:

1. begging or vagrancy
2. petty crime
3. children reported by parents or guardians as uncontrollable
4. any child under 14 years whose actions result in their being brought before the court
5. institutionalized immigrant children
6. children expelled from school for vicious or immoral acts

Although immorality is no longer an accepted explanation for poverty, child welfare law continues to construct mothers in relation to their distance from the ideal nuclear family. Descriptions of neglectful mothers in child welfare discourse frequently emphasize their conditions of poverty (see Swift, 1995). The focus on poverty was re-emphasized in the 2000 amendments to Ontario's Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) with the addition of a "pattern of neglect" to the possible grounds for child protection (section 37, 2 a). Associations between poverty and neglect are legitimated and normalized in child welfare legal discourse. The legal discourse reinforces the dominance of child placement ideology in preserving the focus of child placement practices on the poor.

The Practices of Separation and Substitution

Christian morality is central to child placement ideology. Historically, human behavior was seen as a response to moral precepts in the surrounding environment. Inherent in child placement practices is concern with locating the child in a moral environment. The

practices of separation and substitution are important to the processes associated with the provision of a moral environment.

Separation involves the severing of relationships between children and their biological families. According to Parr (1994) many child immigrants were from cohesive families. Placements occurred generally because of a family crisis. Many British families placed children in institutions as a temporary measure, expecting that their children would return to them once the crisis had subsided. British immigrant and child placement agencies measured the success of their placements in accordance with the number of children permanently separated from biological families (Parr, 1994).

The reliance on child institutions to help right the imbalances in family economies is also noted in American and Canadian child welfare histories. Bellington (1984), in his study of the New York Children's Aid Society, notes that in the mid 1800's, children were regularly surrendered to the custody of the agency for crisis fostering, and they were likely returned home when parental circumstances improved. Purvey (1991) in her review of the Alexandra Orphanage in Vancouver notes that families were permitted, during periods of crisis, to leave their children in the orphanage. Visitation was encouraged and families regularly retrieved their children once their family situation stabilized. Some of the earliest objections to the practices of the Children's Aid Society centered around parents' discovery that their children, whom they believed had been placed temporarily were, in their absence and without their consent, placed for adoption (see Ursel, 1991).

Within an organized system of child welfare, the separation of parents from their children had become connected to the task of enforcing parents' moral responsibility. According to Kelso, enforcing parents' moral responsibility "could often be accomplished by parents being threatened with the removal of their children...just the threat of that consequence is usually enough to bring those parents to their senses" (Dixon, 1998, p. 4).

Although Kelso favored the permanent separation of parents from their children, he did acknowledge that “it may be necessary to take the children away for a short while, just to show that the [child welfare authority] means business. Then they can be given back to reformed parents” (Dixon, 1998, p. 4). To ensure the separation of parents and children, Kelso established rules within the Children’s Aid Societies forbidding parents to know the address of placement homes. He believed that biological parents were not “as a rule the sort of people who could be trusted with the address” (Jones & Rutman, 1981, p. 82). He advocated full guardianship be secured by Children’s Aid Societies for all children placed in foster care.

Child placement ideology also encompasses the practices of substituting the moral (foster) parent for the immoral (biological) parent. In Canadian child welfare history, the most extreme examples of substitution occurred when child placement practices sought to assimilate First Nations children through placement in residential schools, and into non-native foster and adoptive homes. As our nation’s multicultural heritage is celebrated, the proper response to cultural difference by child welfare authorities, and more recently particular religious groups, remains a persistent controversy. There have been longstanding tensions about the appropriate relationships between placed children and biological parents.

The Importance of Family and “Proper Motivations” for Providing Care to Children

Child placement ideology places a high value on the importance of a stable family unit in responding to child maltreatment. Inherent in child placement ideology are beliefs and values about the necessary motivations for providing care to children and about the ability of the ‘proper’ family to ameliorate the effects of child maltreatment. During industrialization, child welfare workers actively sought to establish a new sentimental approach to child placement. They emphasized Christian motives, where a child was to be sheltered for

reasons of love, rather than economic need. Kelso (as cited in Jones and Rutman, 1981) states in an 1893 brochure:

Experience conclusively proves that to give a homeless child to a Christian couple who have no little ones of their own is to confer a positive blessing upon them. The home is made so much brighter and happier that they never regret the day they threw open their heart's door to the forlorn child in need of love and protection. Therefore we earnestly and confidently appeal for homes for these children. We would like every Christian man and woman to see in the person of each homeless child the blessed Master pleading with them for active personal service. You may not be wealthy, but are you so poor that you cannot give affection to a trusting and loving little heart? God will surely bless those who from pure motives seek to serve Him through these children (p.82).

Child placement ideology encompasses "pure" motivations that center on Christian duty. Child placement ideology posits that families are compensated primarily by the emotional benefits derived from the provision of care to a child in need.

Discussion and Conclusion

Child placement ideology may be summarized as follows: Child placement is the method by which the State assumes responsibility for children who require rescue from conditions that compromise their future participation in the market place. Parental failure is the cause of these conditions. The frequency of child placement is dependent on the intensity of State regulation in families. This level of intensity is gauged in relation to expressions of public concern and child welfare controversy. Child placement focuses on the poor. The child's separation from the damaging parental influences is inherent in child placement

practices. This includes separation from, and sometimes substitution for, the biological mothers. Benevolent motivations for providing substitute care to a child are necessary. The ability of a stable family unit (middle or upper class and nuclear) to ameliorate the effects of child maltreatment is recognized and highly valued. Families who provide placement services receive compensation primarily through the benefits of emotional connection to the child.

Evidence of the dominance of child placement ideology is confirmed by its consistency over time. Similarities to indentured child placement practices are found in current approaches to child placement. Child placement remains a means of rescuing children from conditions of maltreatment that are understood to compromise their well-being and future potential. It continues to be an intervention primarily for the poor. It continues to rely on the practices of separation and substitution and also relies on the stability of the family unit to ameliorate the effects of the conditions of maltreatment.

Evidence of the dominance of child placement ideology is also found in its ability to withstand considerable controversy without fundamental changes. Over the past century, child placement tragedies have occurred. The suicide of foster children has periodically received media attention, as has the abuse of children in foster homes and in residential care facilities. The infamous “sixties scoop”, where placement in non-native foster homes replaced residential schools, was highly controversial and has since given way to an approach to child placement that places a high priority on the maintenance of First Nations children within their communities. Despite the tragedies associated with these controversies, child placement practices persist, while approaches vary only within narrow parameters. Its consistency, in part, is reinforced by the overlapping dominant ideologies of individualism and the family.

During the 1970s and the 1980s, child welfare discourse centered on family preservation where interventions focused on maintaining children in their homes rather than on substitute placement. By the latter part of the 1990s, the emphasis in Ontario's system of child welfare shifted toward reliance on the use of substitute placement. Despite the various emphases of the family preservation movement, the centrality of child placement services within systems of child welfare remained unchallenged. The inability of the system of child welfare to sustain an emphasis on family preservation suggests the power of child placement ideology in defining and shaping child welfare practices.

Child placement ideology has implications for how mothers whose children might be placed in substitute care. Historically, child placement was a remedy for immorality and its accompanying poverty. Although it is no longer appropriate to assume linkages between immorality, poverty, and child placement, child placement practices continue to be focused on the poor. Child placement ideology obscures this focus as the language of child welfare directs our attention away from the central issue of poverty and toward the discourse of child abuse and maltreatment.

Child placement ideology, in sustaining the focus on the poor, maintains the interests of middle and upper classes. Mothers are held accountable for failing to provide middle class environments for their children. Rather than receiving assistance to improve their standard of living, they are subject to the disciplining actions of separation and substitution. These practices are the taken for granted praxis mechanisms by which child placement ideology asserts its influence. The effects of these practices on mothers have been given only minimal research attention.

The effects of the disciplining practices of separation and substitution on children have received more research attention. A recent comprehensive report on the status of children in the Canadian foster care system reveals that among developmental dimensions

including: education, identity, family and social relationships, emotional and behavioral development, and self care foster children exhibit many difficulties when compared with youth in the general population. Although some of the findings point to difficulties that originate in pre-care experiences, many negative outcomes are also attributed to the experiences of children within systems of foster care (Kufeldt, 2000). Despite the influence of individualism on child placement ideology that emphasizes the preparation of children in substitute care for participation in the market place, it would appear that graduates of the foster care system are less than prepared for full engagement in the market place.

Child placement ideology obscures the everyday realities of economic deprivation that make it difficult for poor mothers to raise children. The discourse of child maltreatment directs attention toward the effects of maternal behavior on child development and away from the effects of poverty on parenting and child development. Our approach to child “welfare” is constrained by child placement ideology and child maltreatment discourse, obscuring determinants of child welfare that are located in contexts such as the community and the environment, as well as systems of health and education.

Child placement ideology shapes the relationship between mothers and systems of child welfare. Child placement, or the threat of child placement, as a mechanism of enforcing parental responsibility normalizes and reinforces power imbalances between mothers and systems of child welfare. The possibility of child apprehension underlies all exchanges between child welfare workers and mothers. It relegates systems of child welfare to functions of social control. Child placement ideology conditions our understanding of biological mothers and, in doing so, obscures alternate views of mothers and alternate possibilities for systems of child welfare in responding to mothers.

The Dominant Ideology of Motherhood: Its Effects on the Perceptions of Mothers whose Children are placed in Substitute Care

Ideas about mothering, and in particular what constitutes a good mother, are widely exchanged within our culture. Everyone was born of a mother; many are engaged in mothering work. Forcey (1994) identifies it as “the main vehicle through which people first form their identities and learn their place in society” (p. 357). Mothers who are identified as exposing their children to emotional, physical or sexual abuse or neglect are the primary focus of child welfare interventions (Baines, 2000; Miller, 1991; Callahan, 1993; Swift, 1995, 1998; Roberts, 1999). How the behaviors that constitute acceptable and unacceptable mothering practices are determined and reinforced is important to the discussion of how mothers whose children are placed in substitute care are understood.

In Western capitalist societies, there is a constellation of beliefs, images, representations, and evaluations that constitute good mothering. These combine to form a dominant ideology of motherhood. This ideology is the backdrop against which mothers can be evaluated. Mothers whose children are placed in substitute care occupy a position that is the most ideologically distant from the ideal. The question that underlies this discussion is: How does the social construction of mothering frame our understanding of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care as well as obscure alternative explanations and possibilities for these mothers?

This discussion divides into three sections. The first section explores the historical specificity in the construction of mothering. The industrial revolution prompted significant changes in the approaches to, and understanding of mothering and motherhood (Hays, 1996; Strong-Boag, 1988). My primary interest is in the formation of the middle class mothering ideal. The middle class mothering ideal remains relevant to current theorizing.

The current dominant ideology of motherhood extends from this historical framework and is identified by Hays (1996) as intensive mothering. Intensive mothering ideology demands that mothers direct significant time, energy and resources toward children. Many mothers are subject to the impossibilities of performing mothering work in a manner consistent with the dictates of the ideals encompassed by this ideology. Its power in disciplining mothers who are most distant from the ideals of intensive mothering is experienced by mothers whose children are placed in substitute care.

The second section of this discussion explores the construction of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care as 'bad' mothers, which is mediated by the dominant ideology of motherhood. Mothers whose children are placed in substitute care are collectively defined by ideas and images that are the opposite of those that constitute the current ideology of motherhood. The deviancy discourse of 'bad' mothering and its association with the dominant ideology of motherhood distorts our understanding of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care.

The third section of this discussion examines the implications of the doctrine of separate spheres, where the male is constructed as the breadwinner and the female is constructed as the homemaker, as a framework for theorizing about child welfare mothers. This framework excludes the experiences of poor mothers for whom the blending rather than the separation of spheres has been a persistent reality. Patricia Collins (1994) develops this position in her work about the mothering experiences of women of color. For mothers who live in poverty, many of whom are women of color, the middle class separation of work and home has never been a reality. Given the historical persistence of the linkages between child placement and poverty, the separate spheres phenomenon is likewise a non-reality for mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. Theorizing about these mothers based on the doctrine of separate spheres is likely to lead to distortions. The reality of mothering

and of mothers' oppression varies according to race, culture, and social class.¹² This section explores how the separate spheres doctrine as a basis for analysis may distort or obscure the realities of mothers whose children are placed in foster care.

Feminist constructionism dominates contemporary theory development on mothering (Arendell, 1999b). Feminist analysis emphasizes the importance of sensitivity to gender. Mothering is viewed as a dynamic social interaction, located in a societal context that is organized by gender. Mothering is constructed according to the actions of men and women within specific historical contexts. From within a feminist framework, definitions of mothering are understood to be historically and socially variable, rather than biologically determined (Glenn, 1994).

The earliest theorizing about mothering and motherhood accepted the mothers' natural propensity for child rearing and emphasized the centrality of the mother to the development of the child.¹³ The attachment theories of Bowlby (1969, 1973), and later work by Ainsworth et al. (1978) and Main, Kaplan & Cassidy (1985) which stress the importance of the 'child's tie to his mother' have been particularly influential in the arena of child welfare.¹⁴ Other theorists such as Winnicott (1957), who coined the phrase 'the good enough'

¹² The meaning of race and culture are frequently confused. I intend a broad definition of race covering color, descent or national or ethnic origin. Culture may be defined as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. Race is frequently a variable in how culture is perceived and experienced.

¹³ As developed in Part III of this paper, most of the literature concerning mothers whose children are placed in substitute care continues to emphasize the effect of mothering on the development of the child.

¹⁴ In child welfare in the 1970s, attachment theory was used to support principles of least intrusive measures where child welfare practices sought to maintain the relationship between the biological mother and child whenever possible. In the 1980s, attachment theory was used to support the argument that children require uninterrupted nurturance of a psychological parent, not necessarily the biological mother, leading to an emphasis on permanency planning (see Goldstein, Freud & Solnit, 1979). Currently, attachment theory underlies the caregiver influence section of the risk assessment model, which is widely touted for its "scientific" basis for assessment and for its usefulness in predicting future behavior.

mother, emphasized the rearing of children in proper and consistent environments, which included the continual presence of the mother.

Feminist theorizing shifted the emphasis toward the patriarchal roots of motherhood and directed considerable attention toward dismantling motherhood ideology (see for example Bernard, 1974; Firestone, 1971; Rich, 1976; Wearing, 1984). The pioneering work of Betty Friedan (1963) saw motherhood and the attending confinement to the private sphere as enslaving. Early theorizing examined mothering ideology in relation to its function of legitimizing patriarchal society. Arguments led feminists to positions of ambivalence about mothering and some to the conclusion that women's equality and motherhood were incompatible. Other theorists were more optimistic about mothering, recognizing it as a uniquely feminine experience and a vehicle for exploration of previously unspoken female experiences (see for example the writings of French theorist Kristeva, 1981).

The present focus of feminist theorizing about mothering is on the subjective experiences of mothers. According to Arendell (1999b), current theorizing about mothering is developing along two broad tracks. The first track explores a more universal understanding of mothering by focusing on the activities of mothering and the closely associated concept of care (see for example Baines, Evans, & Neysmith, 1998; Neysmith, 2000). The second track explores a particularistic understanding of mothering by focusing on various marginalized groups and thereby exposing the issues of diversity and difference in mothering (see for example Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1994; Hanigsberg & Ruddick, 1999). As the voices of marginalized women are acknowledged, including women of color, lesbians, and women living in poverty, alternative constructions of motherhood are coming into focus. Literature from the latter track is of particular interest for this discussion. Mothers whose children are placed in foster care comprise a marginalized group where issues of race, class, and culture

intersect. Literature from both tracks is relevant, particularly as they converge around the commonly accepted view that mothering is ideologically laden (Arendell, 1999a).

Industrialization and Motherhood Ideology

Prior to industrialization, when work and family belonged in the same sphere, women were involved in many domestic operations such as the extensive training of girls (daughters, servants, apprentices) for productive work (Chodorow, 1978). Mothers cared for infants until older daughters were able to assume these responsibilities. The father's role was dominant in the lives of wives and children, and overshadowed the mother's responsibilities in the provision of child care (Rotundo, 1985).

Industrialization converted the family from a production unit to a consumption unit. With the change in production, a growing separation between home (private) and work (public) spheres developed. A natural division of labor was posited. The central function for women became mothering in the home; the central function for men became earning money in the labor market. Mothering was no longer embedded in other activities and human relations. Mothers became "specialized" in motherhood.

A number of factors contributed to the location of women in a mothering role in the domestic sphere. In accordance with Victorian family ideology, women were constructed as gentle and moral. These attributes were understood as important for the work of cloistering the home from the evils of industrialization and for motherhood (Bernard, 1974; Cook & Mitchinson, 1976). Women were therefore understood to be naturally suited for the domestic sphere.

Commachio (1999) emphasizes how changes in industrial production contributed to the location of women in a mothering role and in the domestic sphere. As the economic contribution of children lessened, the need for a prolonged parenting period arose. Many

historians discuss issues related to declining marital fertility during the period of industrialization¹⁵ (Collins, 1985; Comacchio, 1999; Darroch, 2000; Snell, 1992; Ursel, 1990; Wilson, 1996). Declining birth rates among the middle and upper classes in conjunction with the increasing number of immigrants prompted fears about the erosion of the dominance of the white middle and upper classes. The rhetoric of the day constructed the bearing of children by women of the dominant class as a patriotic duty, thereby locating women in the domestic sphere and in a mothering role.

An important factor that contributed to the location of women in a mothering role was the increased recognition of a more “distinct” and “protected” period of childhood (Sutherland, 2000, p.30). According to Sutherland (2000) the theories of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) significantly influenced Canadian perceptions of childhood. Froebel captured the changing ideas toward the upbringing of children in his 1885 writing:

We grant space and time to young plants and animals because we know that, in accordance with; the laws that live in them, they will develop properly and grow well; young animals and plants are given rest, and arbitrary interference with their growth is avoided, because it is known that the opposite practice would disturb their pure unfolding and sound development; but the young human being is looked upon as a piece of wax, a lump of clay which man can mold into what he pleases (p. 8).

In addition to Froebel’s writings that delineated childhood as a period for nurturance, women were inundated with advice from many sources, including magazine columns and medical professionals (Strong-Boag, 1988). Central to mothering was a concern with personal relations and psychological stability. Psychology was a new discipline; its earliest ideas

¹⁵ Comacchio (1999) reports that between 1851 and 1891 a dramatic decrease in the birth rate was reflected in the official census. The fertility rate decreased from 200 per 1000 live births to approximately 145. In 1861, the average English-Canadian family had six children; by 1900 the number of children per family was four. There were class differences in fertility rates with rates declining first among the urban middle class (Wilson, 1996).

centered around consistent interaction between mothers and children in order to enhance child well-being (Wilson, 1996), as well as regimented care to children that guarded against overindulgence. Paradoxically, a new scientific approach to mothering supplanted the natural instincts that once qualified mothers for their work in the domestic sphere. The untrained mother gradually became the focus of reform.

During industrialization, an ideology of motherhood emerged as a middle class ideal. The beliefs and images associated with this ideal located women in the home, caring for children and husbands, and protecting this sphere from immoral influences. The ideology of motherhood was deeply rooted in an understanding of mothering as natural for all women. This ideal became associated with a measure of respectability. Mothers who had to work, or unmarried women, were to be pitied or criticized (Cook & Mitchinson, 1976). Furthermore, motherhood ideology embedded in the white middle class ideal, led to the development standards against which mothering might be evaluated. Marginalized groups of women, particularly non-white, impoverished women, have been subject to inordinate censure based on their social position in relation to this ideal.

Contemporary Motherhood Ideology

The ideological impetus of the mother in the home seems incongruent with current living and working arrangements of mothers, regardless of socio-economic status. Many middle class women experience guilt and ambivalence about working outside the home; some mothers attempt to traverse both worlds through creative self-employment strategies or by operating private home day care arrangements. Segura (1994) notes that the attempts of women to traverse the worlds of motherhood and employment, despite the lack of supportive structures in either environment, speak to the strength and resilience of motherhood ideology.

Wolf (2003) writes of the mothering expectations for women who have struggled to be independent and self-reliant:

It was one thing to experience a loss of self in a pre-feminist culture that at least assigned a positive status to motherhood itself; it is [now] very different to lose a part of one's very self to motherhood in a world that often seems to have little time, patience, or appreciation for motherhood or parenting (p.8).

Hays (1996) refers to the current dominant ideology of mothering as intensive mothering. This ideology of motherhood imposes expectations that mothers will be consistently available to their children. Good mothers are child centered. Their time, energy, and resources are devoted to their children. This ideology of mothering reinforces and reproduces the traditional gender-based division of labor. Arendell (1999a) writes that the good mother is heterosexual, married, and monogamous. She is white and native born. She is economically self-sufficient which means, given the persistent gender gap in earnings, largely economically dependent on her income-earning husband" (p.5). West (2002) notes that the dominant ideology of motherhood accommodates women's participation in the labor force, but, requires mothers to transform into "super moms" who meet the demands of the workplace while responding to the needs of children with the same attentiveness of a fulltime homemaker (p.5).

In popular culture, successful businesswomen who relinquish their careers to remain at home to rear children have been praised (Forna, 1998).¹⁶ The most ideal mother remains in the home, committed to the full time care of children. Arendell (1999a) argues that this enduring construction of motherhood suggests that these representations have evolved into a

¹⁶ Forna (1998) recounts how in 1994 Penny Hughes, the thirty-five year old head of Coca-Cola in Britain and rumored to earn in excess of 250,000 pounds annually, was publicly praised for her willingness to exchange the trappings of success for a full time maternal role.

state of hegemonic motherhood. The willingness of career women to exchange their job for full-time motherhood has been termed 'maternal correctness' (Forna, 1998), a powerful message to all classes of women about preserving the status quo of the separation of the private sphere of motherhood from the public sphere of work.

Antonio Gramsci elucidated hegemony as the process by which the dominant classes maintain their power through shaping the subordinate classes' social perception so that they support the status quo (Forgacs, 1989). Arendell (1999a) identifies hegemonic motherhood as a patriarchal construction in that ties women to the role of nurturer of children. Its powers of subordination are evident in that conforming to the ideological dictates of motherhood will not elevate women's social or economic status to that experienced by men.

Kline (1995), in her examination of the ideology of motherhood, child welfare law and First Nation women, describes the ideology of motherhood as having considerable power in disciplining women. She identifies motherhood ideology as encompassing the categories of 'fit' and 'unfit' on the basis of social location. She argues that social location determines mothers' categorization. Various marginalized groups of women (e.g. disabled women, Black women, First Nation women, immigrant women, Jewish women, lesbian women, sole-support women, poor women, unmarried women, young women) have been discouraged from having children. Kline asserts that motherhood ideology not only is powerful in disciplining individual women, but also in disciplining various categories of women. Substitute placement practices as a mechanism of discipline have been disproportionately applied to poor women (Pelton, 1989, 2000; Rutman, Strega, Callahan, & Dominelli, 2001) and First Nation women (Hepworth, 1980; Johnston, 1983; Mandell, Clouston Carlson, Fine, & Blackstock, 2003; Rutman et al., 2001; Swift & Callahan, 2002). Young women have been encouraged to place infants for adoption (Kline, 1995, citing Solinger).

The Deviancy Discourse of the ‘Bad’ Mother

One of the consequences of pervasiveness of dominant mothering ideology is that alternatives are rendered marginal and deviant. Negative discourses about child welfare mothers are sufficiently pervasive to constitute a “discursive formation” (Foucault 1980), where many pronouncements fit together to construct child welfare mothers as deviant. Unsympathetic characterizations, popularized through the media, allow this discourse to take on the appearance of objective reality. The placement of a child into substitute care renders these mothers the most deviant of those who might be categorized as “bad”.

The construction and operation of deviancy discourses serves as a means of social control (Arendell, 1999a). Forna (1998) argues that guilt and fear have become strongly associated with motherhood. The emotion of guilt in the realm of mothering has become naturalized. Rather than risk being labeled as “bad”, mothers diligently conform to the dictates of “good” mothering. Thus, these “tools of enforcement” (p.12) serve to reinforce and reproduce the dominant ideology of mothering.

In situations where mothers are distant from the ideal, they become the subjects of regulation by child welfare authorities. The discursive claims about mothers whose children are placed in substitute care are not consistent over time. As new concerns in the arena of family and child well-being are discovered, the construction of the “bad” mother shifts to accommodate these concerns.¹⁷ The deviancy discourse of ‘bad’ mother is anchored in relationship to the dominant ideology of motherhood. It is shaped in relation to the dominant ideology of motherhood, and therefore directs our attention toward the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” mothering. The deviancy discourse is not static.

¹⁷ See Cameron, Freymond, Cornfield & Palmer (2001) for an historical overview of the various problems that prompted child saving efforts of the Canadian child welfare system.

Motherhood ideology and its accompanying deviancy discourse of 'bad' mothering are reinforced by the overlap with family ideology. Any deviation from the prescribed mothering role is perceived as an attack on the family, and on society as a whole, where the family is constructed as its fundamentally stabilizing unit. Dominant family ideology is institutionalized in marriage and family arrangements, as well as practices and laws (Fineman, 1995).

One of the consequences of the deviancy discourse of "bad" mothering is that it maintains the focus on mothers when child outcomes are unfavorable. Mother blame is persistently applied to situations where outcomes for children are less than desirable, and it extends to explanations for family instability, and the destabilization of society as a whole. Forna (1998) writes:

mothers are told that every failure...will be seared upon their child's psyche, will mar his or her future, and damage not only the mother-child relationship but every subsequent relationship in the child's life...a culture of mother-blaming, by everyone including children, has become so deeply entrenched in our society that bad mothering is considered to be a contributory cause in an astonishing array of contemporary problems (p.12).

Broader explanations that might account for children's behavior are overshadowed by the persistent focus on mothering.

Another consequence of the deviancy discourse of 'bad' mothering is that it colors the perception of all mothers who do not measure up to the ideal, precluding individual assessments of their unique circumstances. It diverts attention away from mothers' actual circumstances including their disproportionate responsibility for childcare, and issues related

to social and economic vulnerability (Arendell, 1999a). It also diverts attention away from the context in which mothering occurs, precluding issues related to race, culture and class.

Re-contextualizing Mothering for Women whose Children are placed in Substitute Care

The doctrine of separate spheres remains widely influential and is the foundation for much feminist theorizing about motherhood. Feminist analysis of mothering is concerned with the oppression that stems from mothering work that prepares boys for participation in the work place and girls for supportive domestic work. Analysis based on separate spheres directs attention toward the effects on women of the separation in roles. Critique of the inordinate pressure placed on women to assume the role of primary psychological caregiver and nurturer belongs in the realm of feminist analysis, as does concern with the isolation of mothering in the private sphere. The middle class underpinnings of the separate spheres suggest opportunity, resources, and time availability for the refinement of best mothering practices. Critique centers on the compromises to mother's individual autonomy which includes the relegation to economic dependency. More recently, the social institutions which control mothering practices have been the target of feminist critique.¹⁸

The weakness of the feminist model of theorizing according to Collins (1994) is that it has attempted to build a universal theory of mothering and in doing so has failed to recognize diversity in mothering. She argues that this analytical framework is not relevant to mothers for whom the separation of spheres is not historically relevant. It discounts the experience of mothers who are actively engaged in the daily realities of struggling to survive. Collins (1994) asserts that mothering is embedded in the socio-cultural concerns of racial ethnic communities. The locus of conflict, rather than being located between the private and the public spheres, "lies outside the household, as women and their families engage in collective

¹⁸ See (Everingham, 1994, pp. 1-19) for an overview of the trends in mothering and feminist theory.

effort to create and maintain family life in the face of forces that undermine family integrity” (p.47). For women of color, the conflict is rooted in a struggle to maintain recognition as a subordinated group within the broader culture. This type of mothering acknowledges the linkages between the individual and the group with respect to survival, empowerment, and identity.

Full-time motherhood is actually an historical anomaly both across the globe (Bernard, 1974; Hays, 1996; West, 2002) and in Canada (Cook & Mitchinson, 1976). During the period of industrialization, Canadian working class and immigrant families were not in an economic position to organize their families in accordance with the gendered separations of the middle class (Wilson, 1996). Death, desertion, divorce, and disability of the male breadwinner would often leave women with no option but wage work (Ursel, 1990). Bullen, (1992) reports that poor married women supplemented their husband’s wage with home-centered industries and sweatshops where women often worked under contract to produce clothing for retailers. Additionally, for most middle class women the separation of private and public spheres existed only for a brief period of Canadian history. Ursel (1990), in her review of the census data, determined that between 1941 and 1971 there was a dramatic 490 per cent increase in the number of married women in the labor force.

Historically, mothers whose children are placed in substitute care have not organized their families according to the gendered separations of the private and public. From the outset, populations coming into contact with child welfare services have been poor; many are lone female parents where poverty is likely. Recent data confirmed that just over one third of Canadian families who were investigated by child welfare authorities received social assistance (Swift & Callahan, 2002). Families surviving on social assistance live well below

the poverty line.¹⁹ The Canadian social safety net offers the illusion that there is “enough” to maintain a minimum standard of living, thus minimizing the centrality of “survival” and its various corollaries in the context of poor women’s mothering. Ontario’s recent dramatic reductions in welfare assistance and compulsory workfare programs deepen the risks of poverty for women and children (Baines, 2000), thus intensifying their struggle for survival. Many mothers whose children are placed in substitute care belong to the working class poor where reliance on minimum wage earnings ensures a meager existence. A framework for the analysis of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care, where the doctrine of separate spheres has obstructed analyses related to social class and poverty, is problematic. The effects of issues related to class, race, and culture are important to understanding mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. Outside this context, our understanding of mothers will be limited and distorted.

So what questions might be asked if the broader issues of class, race, and culture became central to the analysis of mothers, mothering, and their associations with systems of child welfare? Mothers whose children are placed in substitute care do not live privileged lives. Yet their struggle for survival has been discounted. How is mothering under such circumstances altered as poor children experience the disentanglements consistent with the absence of financial resources? How do the tasks associated with economic provision interweave with mothering work?

Race and culture are central dimensions of mothering identity. When race and culture are centred in the analysis many questions about mothering identity in relation to the dominant culture come to the fore. What type of mothering equips children with the skills and

¹⁹ Swift and Birmingham (2000) report that Canada is among the three highest Western countries in its poverty rate for single mothers, along with Australia and the United States. According to a March 2000 report from the Canadian Council on Social Development 45.4 percent of families characterized as have a female lone parent who is a wage earner, live in poverty. Almost 97 percent of female lone-parent families with no earners live in poverty (Lochhead & Scott, 2000).

the necessary identity to cope with oppression, and perhaps to challenge oppressive structures? What type of mothering instills the identity of a marginalized group, yet teaches children to be in relationship with the dominant culture?

Because poor, non-white mothers are particularly vulnerable to child placement, the fear of the statutory removal of their children is a persistent reality. The removal of children from First Nations communities by child welfare authorities has been appropriately labeled “cultural genocide” (Mandell et al., 2003). Within the dominant culture, poor mothers also fear child removal. Many poor mothers who have not experienced child removal are associated with friends and other family members whose children have been removed (Freymond, 2003). How does a legacy of child removal impact mothering work? What is the source of power for mothers whose class or culture has been subject to the practices of child removal? How is their own ideology of motherhood understood and expressed?

The above questions do not represent an exhaustive list of possibilities for analysis. They do, however, illustrate the possibilities that can emerge when issues of class, culture, and race are made central to the analysis. When the focus shifts away from the historical associations with separate spheres in feminist analysis, possibilities emerge for new understanding of the daily living realities of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care.

Discussion and Conclusion

What can professionals claim to know about mothers whose children are placed in substitute care? The formation of mothering ideology that relies on white middle class ideals, its accompanying deviancy discourse of “bad” mothering, and theorizing based on the

separation of the public and private spheres, when combined, cast considerable suspicion on professional claims to knowledge.

To date, our understanding of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care is mediated by the dominant ideology of mothering and the accompanying deviancy discourse of 'bad' mothering. When our understanding hinges on the discrepancy between the ideal and the deviant, it is limited and distorted. This focus perpetuates the deviant discourse of 'bad' mothering and reinforces the middle class mothering ideal. Child welfare, in its practice of removing children from "bad" mothers, supports and emphasizes these perspectives of mothers.

When class, culture, and race are not central to the analysis of mothering, everyday mothering for women from marginalized groups is concealed or distorted. The realities of economic deprivation, the effects of racism, and the importance of culture in framing the mothering realities for women whose children are placed in substitute care are fundamental. Poverty, racism, and culture are consistently named in relation to mothers whose children are placed in foster care. The acknowledgment of difference is important for First Nations mothers, for racial ethnic mothers, and for all mothers who find themselves excluded from the privileges of the middle class. Failure to acknowledge difference limits child welfare responses and reinforces oppressive child placement practices.

However, the impetus is to move beyond acknowledgement and toward an understanding of, and respect for, the differences in mothering realities that is reinforced in child welfare discourse and practice. The experiences of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care cannot be known in separation from the context in which their mothering is performed. Such decontextualization produces distorted images and understandings. The mothering work of women who do not belong to the dominant white middle class culture is, at best, only partially known. There are life-altering consequences for mothers and children

who experience painful, and perhaps unnecessary, separations through the course of their child welfare involvements when their mothering is unrecognized or misunderstood.

Analyses of motherhood that seek to represent the voices of mothers who belong to marginalized groups, and to analyze their words from within a framework that centers race, culture and class is in its infancy. Acknowledgement of the experiences of First Nations mothers has begun. To date, there has been no comprehensive analysis of the voices and experiences of other marginalized mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. This points to the need for research and analysis from multiple perspectives that consciously shifts our focus away from the constraints of dominant mothering ideology and its accompanying deviancy discourse.

Empirical Child Welfare Research: Images of Mothers who Experience Child Placement

The previous two sections have focused on the dominant ideologies of child placement and motherhood and how these inform our views of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. This section is concerned with mainstream empirical research in relation to mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. Professional beliefs and ideas about mothers who experience child placement are informed by mainstream empirical research. Child placement and motherhood ideologies are reinforced and reproduced in this research. Mainstream empirical child welfare research portrays predominately negative images of biological mothers who experience child placement, suggesting the active construction of a deeply negative stereotype. This construction informs the particular responses of systems of child welfare to mothers who experience child placement.

Decisions about placing a child in substitute care are largely dependent on the attributes of the parents, particularly those of the mother (Shapira, 1993). Maluccio (1981) describes biological parents of children in placement as “burdened by a variety of complex reality problems, psychological conflicts, and inter-personal difficulties” (p. 16). Maluccio (1981) indicates that child welfare workers label parents as “untreatable, multi-problem, inaccessible, unresponsive, or hard-to-reach” (p. 16). Fernandez (1996) indicates that child welfare workers use labels such as “inadequate, dangerous, unwilling or unable to provide care for their children” (p. 7). The fifteen-year span between these very similar observations suggests that worker perceptions of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care have remained consistent. These labels have a profound effect on how child welfare workers understand mothers, which, in turn, impacts how they will respond to mothers in situations of suspected child maltreatment.

This discussion assumes that there is a relationship between mothers who abuse or neglect their children and the probability that they will experience child placement. It is, in fact, reasonable to assume that their acts of abuse or neglect represent more serious forms of child maltreatment, given that children have been removed from their care.²⁰ Child maltreatment is understood to be the result of a number of factors that, when present, increase the probability that a mother will abuse or neglect. These factors combine to produce a profile of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care that consists primarily of individual symptom clusters and patterns (Ratiner, 2000; Woodward & Fergusson, 2002). There is an extensive focus in the literature on the characteristics of mothers who abuse children.

There is some attention in the literature to biological parents of children who are already in substitute placements. Some authors have examined the features of biological mothers in relation to child welfare decisions to remove children from their homes. Regardless of the particular focus of the research, the descriptions of mothers across the literature are consistent. One exception is found in the body of literature that examines the impact on parents when children are in foster care. Jenkins and Norman (1972, 1975) used the term filial deprivation to describe the emotional reaction of parents to the placement event. However, these authors reported that there was little research in this area. Fernandez (1996), over twenty years later, identifies that there continues to be an absence of attention in the literature to the emotional reaction of parents to the placement of their children.

The themes for this discussion are organized under three broad categories.²¹ The first category is living environment, which includes factors in child maltreatment such as poverty,

²⁰ Note that many children are placed in substitute care because mothers are unable to manage particular behaviors exhibited by the child. Often times these children receive mental health diagnoses that help to explain unmanageable behaviors. Although maltreatment by the mother may be seen to be an issue, often there are other factors that account for the child's behavior. Mothers' whose children are placed in substitute care because of unmanageable child behaviors are not a focus in this discussion.

²¹ The ecological approach was useful in organizing the salient themes from the child welfare literature concerning mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. An ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner,

social isolation, and single motherhood. The second category is relationships, which includes factors such as domestic violence, faulty mother-child attachment, and mother's childhood experiences of abuse. The third category is psychological functioning, which includes factors such as maternal depression, and addiction. This discussion is not intended to be a comprehensive literature review, but rather an overview of the main themes. The conclusion explores the relationship between these themes and the ideologies of child placement and motherhood.

Living Environment

Mothers and Poverty

Not surprisingly, the most distinctive characteristic of these mothers in child welfare literature is that they live in poverty (Baines, 2000; Bala, 1991; Callahan, 1993; Crosson - Tower, 1998; Fernandez, 1996; Lindsey, 1994; Pelton, 1978, 1989, 1997, 2000; Rutman, Strega, Callahan, & Dominelli, 2001; Swift, 1995, 1998). There are strong correlations between a mother's poverty and the possibility that her children may be placed in substitute care (Fernandez, 1996; Pelton, 1997; Rutman, Strega, Callahan, & Dominelli, 2001). There have also been correlations noted between low-income groups and an increased incidence of physical abuse and neglect (Baumrind, 1992; Pelton, 1978), and between low-income groups and an increased incidence in the severity of the injuries to children.

In the United States, significantly higher rates of neglect were found among welfare recipients (a proxy for poverty) and furthermore, families labelled as neglectful were likely to be in a position of greater poverty than other recipients (National Centre on Child Abuse and

1979) to understanding child maltreatment acknowledges that there is a mutual accommodation between the broader contexts which contain the day to day settings in which people live, the circumstances within these settings including the quality of relationships with family members and others, and the individual psychological factors where personality characteristics and mental health issues are considered.

Neglect, 1988). A recent analysis of child welfare cases involving neglect in Quebec concluded that 60 percent of substantiated cases of maltreatment involved neglect of children; the vast majority of these children live in single parent families headed by a mother. The authors conclude that these families represent the poorest of all family types with close to 90 percent having no employment income (Mayer, Dufour, Lavergne, Girard, & Trocme, 2003).

Material disadvantage is not the sole factor in neglect or other forms of child maltreatment. Other factors have been examined that also contribute to the increased likelihood of child maltreatment. A significant relationship between child maltreatment, poverty, and maternal age has been found (Carpenter, 1999; Lee & Goerge, 1999). Lee & Goerge (1999) suggest that both poverty and mother's youth are strong correlates with child maltreatment, however, when combined there is a "substantially higher risk of a substantiated report of child maltreatment than a child who possesses only one of the two risk factors" (p. 775).

Some authors suggest that poverty is associated with a greater likelihood of despair and depression, which, in turn, is associated with neglect. Other authors suggest that poor parents are, overall, more vulnerable to subjective decision-making, labelling and inordinate supervision by social workers and other government personnel (Roberts, 1999). Minty & Pattinson (1994) suggest that poor parents are not necessarily more likely to be neglectful, but that they are vulnerable to being labelled as neglectful.

The neighbourhoods in which mothers whose children are placed in foster care live largely reflect their impoverished conditions. In child welfare literature, neighbourhood conditions have been correlated with an increased risk of child maltreatment. Child maltreatment and other forms of victimization are more prevalent in low-income communities. Mothers who live in these neighbourhoods are more likely to become victims of violence, racism, and other forms of oppression (Thoburn, Brandon, & Lewis, 1997).

Single Mothers

Child welfare literature indicates that single mothers are more likely to be targeted for intervention than partnered mothers (Gelles, 1992; Mayer et al., 2003; Thorpe, 1997), and are more likely to have their children placed in foster care (Arad, 2001). In a British study of 2069 children, children of lone parents were more likely to be placed on the child abuse register than children whose parents were married or living together (Egan-Sage & Carpenter, 1999). Single mothers are also believed to be more vulnerable to the ill effects of social isolation than partnered mothers (Arad, 2001).

Social Isolation

Social isolation, or a lack of social support, although not necessarily a function of poverty, is thought to be a variable in child maltreatment (Mayer et al., 2003). A study of predominately poor young, single women showed that mothers with higher levels of social support and lower numbers of negative life events are at a lesser risk for child maltreatment (Kotch et al., 1995). The physical abuse of children has been widely associated with the absence of supportive services and networks (Pecora, Whittaker, & Maluccio, 1992; Wiehe, 1996). There is, however, evidence that programs designed to increase support to families at risk of child maltreatment are effective in preventing child abuse. Cameron and Vanderwoerd (1997) found that programs with high-risk families that offer a variety of supports, maintain frequent contact and respond rapidly in crises with high levels of support demonstrated the capacity to prevent child abuse.

Mothers' participation in the neighbourhood is linked to the level of social support that a mother may experience. Garbarino and Sherman (1980) identify the use of resources as an important consideration for determining risk levels in a neighbourhood. Low-income

communities where residents engage in the exchange and sharing of resources and are positive about their neighbourhoods tend to have lower rates of child maltreatment. In higher risk neighbourhoods, resources are sought in response to crises and parents tend not to be involved in community activities and events.

Relationships

Instability and Domestic Violence

The quality of mother-partner interactions is seen as a potential factor in child maltreatment. Kline and Overstreet (1972) report that parents with children in foster care “are either divorced or separated, or, if not, the marriage is characterized by strife and intermittent separations. Often they [implying mothers] have made several unsuccessful marriages...” (p. 159).

When the mother’s partner is sexually abusive of the child, the mother may be seen as unresponsive to the needs of the victimized child (Frost, 1989). When a stepfather or a boyfriend perpetrates the abuse, mothers are seen as particularly unwilling to believe the child’s disclosure of sexual abuse (Sirles & Franke, 1989). When father-daughter incest occurs over a long period of time, the mother may be powerless to offer her daughter any protection (Russell, 1986). Finkelhor (1984) found that child welfare agencies frequently reported mothers as ‘co-perpetrators’ in the sexual abuse of their children for failing to take action to stop the abuse. The lack of maternal support at the point of disclosure has been correlated with the failure of women to make mental health gains when, as adults, they seek treatment for the childhood abuse (Bagley & Young, 1999).

Similarly, mothers are often unable or unwilling to protect their children from exposure to domestic violence. Over the past two decades, exposure to domestic violence has

been increasingly recognized as a risk factor in child maltreatment. In Ontario, between 1993 and 1998 there was a nine-fold increase in the number of substantiated cases of emotional maltreatment. Reasons for this dramatic increase point to the increased investigations involving exposure to domestic violence (Trocme, Siddiqi, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Sullivan, 2002).

In situations of sexual abuse and of domestic violence, maternal unresponsiveness is identified as a major problem, where the end result is that children are at risk of continued maltreatment and mothers are blamed for failing to protect them. Maternal unresponsiveness has been correlated with unresolved trauma in relation to the mother's experience of abuse in her own childhood. Maternal unresponsiveness may be understood as a product of the powerless position that many women hold in families, rather than the outcome of her unwillingness to respond (Callahan, 1993; Courtois, 1988; Herman, 1981; Roberts, 1999). Itzin (2000) argues that the use of gender neutral terms, such as "intrafamilial", in relation to sexual abuse shifts attention away from men, who are largely the abusers, and implicates women in a causal way in the abuse having occurred.

Mother-Child Attachment

Mother-infant relationships are understood as having a profound effect on the emotional and the cognitive development of children and on subsequent child behaviour. Child welfare mothers are frequently assessed as lacking in the capacity to bond with their children, or alternately, as having insecure attachments with their children (Karen, 1990). Mothers of secure infants have been found to be more sensitive, responsive, accessible and cooperative than mothers of insecure infants (Goldberg, 1991). Physical and emotional abuse is linked causally with failures in mother-infant attachment (Fernandez, 1996).

Kline and Overstreet (1972) found that the parenting roles of mothers who experience the out-of-home placement of a child have been characterized by the excessive use of the children to meet their own psychological needs (Kline & Overstreet, 1972). Additionally, biological mothers who are less willing to communicate with their children have children with lower cognitive scores than the children of mothers who are communicative (Hall, Hanagriff, Hensley, & Fuqua, 1997).

The research that explores mother-child attachment has had a profound impact on our understanding of mothers whose children may be placed in foster care. Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1979) proposed that children require the uninterrupted nurturance of a psychological parent, prompting systems of child welfare to favour approaches where children are permanently placed in substitute care. However, attachment theory has been extensively criticized on the basis of methodological errors in the earlier studies, and on the basis of evidence that suggests that infants are capable of forming bonded relationships with a number of caregivers (Davis, 1999). Furthermore, linkages between attachment theory and socio-environmental conditions have been identified. Goldberg (1991) cites a finding from a Minnesota longitudinal study where changes in the quality of a mother's life impact on attachment. When the quality of life improves for the mother, the infant-mother relationship is likely to become more secure. Conversely, when the quality of life for the mother deteriorates, the infant-mother relationship is likely to become less secure. Despite the controversies surrounding attachment theory, it continues to have a substantial influence on how biological mothers are viewed in child welfare.

Mothers' Childhood Experience of Abuse

Child welfare literature supports ideas related to the intergenerational transmission of abuse. The mother's own child-rearing history is thought to be a factor in the quality of care

that she provides to her own children. There is an increased likelihood that mothers who have experienced child abuse in their families of origin will experience child placement. Maternal childhood physical abuse has been found to predict child physical abuse, while maternal childhood psychological abuse has been found to predict psychological abuse (Haapasalo & Aaltonen, 1999). These researchers also found maternal childhood psychological abuse was to be the strongest predictor of punitiveness. In New Zealand, an 18-year, longitudinal study of 1025 children reveals that mothers who perceived their relationship with their own mother to have been unsatisfactory and were subject to strict parental discipline, were perceived by their own offspring to be more punitive than mothers who report satisfactory relationships with their own mothers (Woodward & Fergusson, 2002).

Additionally, the ongoing post-traumatic stress associated with a mother's own experiences of abuse is seen as a risk factor in child maltreatment. The re-experiencing of childhood trauma in adulthood has been linked with aggressive behaviour towards others (Haapasalo & Aaltonen, 1999). Furthermore, this study indicates that parents who were abused in childhood, but do not understand the treatment that they received as abusive, are at an increased risk of identifying with their abuser by replicating the same abuse against their own children.

Psychological Functioning

The child welfare literature cites various maladaptive psychological processes found in mothers who may maltreat their children. These processes are often identified using a medical framework (Biller & Solomon, 1986), where particular personality traits and mental illnesses are correlated with child maltreatment. Early researchers describe the personalities of mothers as childish (Young, 1964) and infantile, as evidenced by their self-centeredness and minimal capacity to "care about another for his own sake" (Polansky, 1972, p. 17). They

are also described as lacking in impulse control (Katz, 1971; Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962; Pallone & Malkemes, 1984). Issues concerning poor impulse control are thought to be a result of problems of over-identification with violent adult models, such as an abusive parent (Green, Gaines, & Sandgrund, 1974).

Maternal Depression and Other Forms of Mental Illness

The relationship between mental illness and the capacity to parent has been a long-standing concern of child welfare workers. Despite a mother's wish to parent well, difficulties that result from major mental illnesses may interfere with her capacity to respond to her child's needs, as well as manage the limitations imposed by the particular mental illness.

There is a current focus on maternal depression and its effects on the capacity to care for children (Sheppard, 1997; Williams & Carmichael, 1991). Neglectful mothers may be understood as suffering from a reactive depression or thought and mood disorders (Polansky, DeSaix & Sharlin, 1972; Vondra, 1990). Maternal depression has also been linked to the child's increased risk of exposure to physical punishment (Woodward & Fergusson, 2002). Oyserman, Mowbray, Meares & Firminger (2000) identify maternal depression as the most common diagnosis in research on parents with mental illness. In their review of what is known about the parenting of mothers with mental illnesses they conclude:

“detrimental effects of maternal depression emerge by the time the infant is one year of age, and...a diagnosis of depression may be useful in making predictions about some aspects of parenting behavior and about mothers' parenting style. Depressed mothers are less likely to develop the synchronized interactions with their infants that aid the child's emerging sense of competence. They are more likely to have

anxiously attached toddlers, even though they maintain extensive physical contact with their children. When their children are school-aged and adolescent, mothers with depression are at risk of continued negative interactional styles. They are also more prone to hold parenting attitudes that do not result in responsive and effective parenting.” (p. 310)

In the past, the presence of a mental illness was considered adequate grounds for apprehension, as it was thought that such disorders more or less directly caused child abuse (Steele BF as cited in Drach & Devoe, 2000). There is now an emphasis on determining the capacity of the mother to provide parenting, and the degree to which this capacity is hampered by the illness. Studies show that a mother’s insight into the nature of her mental illness ameliorates the risk of child maltreatment. Better insight is associated with more sensitive mothering behavior (Mullick, Miller, & Jacobsen, 2001).

Addiction

“Bad” mothers are frequently depicted as drug and/or alcohol addicted both in popular culture and in child welfare literature. Maternal abuse of drugs and alcohol is presently receiving considerable attention in child welfare literature. Studies show that there is an increased likelihood that mothers who abuse substances will, in turn, abuse or neglect their children (Crosson - Tower, 1998; Famularo, Kinscherff, & Fenton, 1992; Pecora, Whittaker & Maluccio, 1992; Woodward & Fergusson, 2002). In the United States a survey of public child welfare agencies by The National Committee to Prevent Child Abuses, reported that 80% of child maltreatment cases involve alcohol and other drug problems (Daro & McCurdy, 1994).

Emotional and physical neglect of children among mothers who use drugs is a concern. Some children are deprived of necessities because the household finances are

depleted by the expenses involved in supporting drug habits (Harden, 1998). Activities become focussed around the substance use, so that little time or energy remains for parenting. Feig (1998) found that mothers who use substances are more likely to be reported to child welfare authorities for neglect than for physical abuse. One study found that 30% of parents with children in foster care have a history of substance abuse, a number that rose to 51% when neglect as the reason for placement was taken into consideration (Coulter, Takayama, Wolfe, 1998). Feig (1998) also reports “an addicted mother’s unavailability (whether physical, emotional, or both) and inconsistent reactions to her child may disrupt the attachment between mother and child.” (p. 67)

Mothers who expose their children to substances pre-natally may compromise the physical, cognitive and socio-emotional functioning of their children (Chasnoff, 1986; Harden, 1998). In the late 1980s and into the 1990s media attention focussed on the stories about ‘crack babies’ and the devastation caused for children when their mothers abuse drugs. The social and economic cost of treating infants born to addicted mothers has received national attention as babies are often born prematurely, and have ongoing health and developmental problems which require long-term assistance (Melton, 2002). Some mothers of babies that have tested positive for cocaine, heroin, or alcohol have been charged with a category of child abuse called “fetal” abuse, and with various other criminal offences including the delivery of drugs to a minor, and homicide, if the baby died subsequent to delivery (Paltrow, 1999).

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary focus of empirical child welfare research in the area of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care centres on mothers who “maltreat” their children. The language of this literature suggests a preoccupation with the relationship between the “risk of maltreatment” and its correlations with mothers and mothering. Such an emphasis is

narrowly focused on mothers. The language of “risk” reinforces a negative stereotype of mothers as dangerous to their children. These seemingly neutral descriptions are couched in a language that actively blames mothers. The established child placement and mothering ideologies condition our views of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. These ideologies also inform research and are reproduced in research. This circularity leads to the reproduction of a taken for granted approach to understanding mothers where mothers are blamed and held responsible for parenting failures.

Fortunately, this is not the only research perspective vis-a-vis mothers and systems of child welfare. Researchers and authors such as: Callahan (1993); Davies & Krane (1996); Gordon (1985); Kline (1995); Roberts (1999); Rutman, Strega, Callahan & Dominelli (2001) and Swift (1995, 1998) point to the oppression of women within systems of child welfare. Particularly in the past decade, feminist scholars have started to focus on mothers’ subjectivities in an effort to undermine the pervasive practices of mother blaming (Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 1998; Glenn, Chang & Forcey, 1994). In the area of child welfare research, a focus on the subjective experiences of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care is beginning. Examples of Canadian initiatives include research by McCullum (1995) who focused on the experiences of ten parents who received child protection services. She developed a “safe families” model of intervention involving worker-parent collaboration and focusing on parental voice and wisdom. Dumbrill and Maiter (1997) conducted exploratory research on a pilot basis to explore parental child welfare experiences and to explore the viability of a co-researching strategy where parents helped conduct the research themselves. Their findings emphasize parents’ experiences of powerlessness and bewilderment by the absence of logic they feel in relation to child welfare intervention. Anderson (1998) studied the views of six Native parents who had been involved with child welfare services. These parents expressed considerable anger toward and mistrust of child

welfare authorities. Dumbrill (1998) in his comprehensive review of the research into parents' experiences of child welfare services in Britain, U.S.A., and Canada notes that Canadian researchers have shown less interest in the perspective of parents than researchers in the U.S.A. and Britain.

Despite these efforts to break free of traditional approaches child welfare research, the mainstream approach continues to actively construct a negative stereotype of mothers. The particular aspects of their lives that are emphasized are conditioned by the dominant ideologies of motherhood and child placement. Alternate emphases such as the effects of race, culture, class on mothering or the psychological development of mothers are excluded. Mothers are portrayed as having difficulties of such magnitude that the likelihood of any substantial change is remote. This mainstream empirical child welfare research holds the deviant discourse of "bad" mothering firmly in place.

This research informs the views that workers hold and the types of responses and interventions that mothers might expect from systems of child welfare. Despite the research that points to the oppression of mothers within systems of child welfare, there is an overall absence of images that might serve as a counterweight to the negative stereotypes found in the mainstream research. The absence of competing images suggests that not only is this discourse strongly institutionalised but that professionals view and respond to these mothers in ways that reflect a narrow and limited understanding of their realities. That these mothers might display strength, resilience or courage in midst of tremendous barriers is obscured in the context of child welfare.

Conclusions

My research interests are in developing an understanding of the everyday mothering realities of women whose children are placed in substitute care and how their lives are impacted by this experience. Underlying this study is a belief that mothers' presentation of their own realities will differ from the understanding that is mediated by ideology. To broaden the construction of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care we must analyse what has been said about these mothers in light of what they might say about themselves if given the opportunity.

Theorizing about child placement that makes central the experience of mothers in its analysis represents an opportunity to develop new ideas and alternative visions about the uses of child placement. In Ontario child welfare has, in recent years, moved decisively away from preserving families, relying increasingly on child placement as the remedy in situations where children are determined to be at risk. Regardless of whether the objective of "preserving families" or "protecting children" is at the fore, child placement remains a central and organizing construct in child welfare practice. The centrality of child placement in systems of child welfare speaks to the power of ideology in maintaining the status quo.

The concept of ideology is particularly useful in explaining how individuals maintain and reproduce oppressive institutions. Uncovering the effects of ideology has, however, been less helpful in stimulating institutional changes. Canadians such as Swift (1995, 1998) and Kline (1995), using the perspective of critical social theory, make convincing arguments for child welfare reform, yet child welfare and child placement has varied only within very narrow parameters since its inception over a century ago.

One of the signs of the dominance of ideology is its ability to absorb contradiction without fundamental change to its organizing schema. Research that examines the everyday

realities of mothers and their experience of placement is likely to reveal problematic aspects of the system of child welfare and specifically the uses of child placement. I expect that mothers who experience child placement will report oppressive experiences within systems of child welfare. Although this research will broaden our understanding of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care, I am concerned about its limitations in prompting institutional change.

It is an error to assume that child welfare personnel, when provided with information about oppressive practices, will modify their responses to mothers. Child placement is a normalized pattern of practice in the protection of children. In his criticism of the concept of ideology in producing institutional change, Heath (2001) writes:

It usually takes a lot of negotiation and a certain length of time before people begin to settle into a new pattern – before a new pattern becomes “normalized”. In cases where there is less than universal agreement about what this new pattern should be...it can be a long time before a new set of rules becomes entrenched...As a result, people often resent those who challenge the rules...the benefit they receive stems from the mere *existence* of an established institutional arrangement (p.180).

Attention to the stability and centrality of the institutional arrangement concerning child placement practices may be useful. Heath (2001) identifies the problem for social critics in assuming that social practices reflect people’s values and beliefs. If this, in fact, were true, the key to changing social institutions would be to change people’s beliefs. Clearly many child welfare practitioners are concerned about the negative effects of child placement (Freymond, 2001). Many would agree that its viability in protecting children is limited, but such agreement does not modify institutional arrangements.

The question I am left with is how might my research not only appropriately represent the voices and experiences of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care, but also generate information that might contribute to changing the institution of child welfare. Despite the criticisms of theorists such as Heath (2001), many are optimistic about the ability of critical social theory to stimulate institutional change. They would contend that despite the relative stability of child placement and motherhood ideologies over time, they can change in response to repeated tensions and conflicts that call into question their power in framing our knowledge of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care. There are two steps in creating such tension. The first step involves a thorough understanding of the appeal of child placement and mothering ideologies and their links to power in framing our knowledge. This paper represents a beginning effort to sort through these complex linkages and to articulate how and why we understand mothers whose children are placed in substitute care in the ways that we do.

The second step is to identify spaces within the prevailing ideological framework where new ideas, alternate visions, and oppositional discourses might emerge. Theorizing about mothering that makes central issues of class, culture, and race in its analysis is one example of a space where our understanding of these mothers might be challenged. A new literature that considers the impact of class, culture, and race on mothering experience may serve not only to elucidate strengths but to frame problems in ways that are consistent with mothers' everyday realities. Such an oppositional discourse may be useful in broadening institutional and professional perceptions of mothers whose children are placed in substitute care.

It may also be useful to direct attention to the practical mechanisms within child welfare that maintain established child placement practices. If new patterns of child welfare

interventions are to emerge, then attention must be directed toward practical alternatives that make sense to all stakeholders within the current child welfare system.

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