
Single Parenthood: Policy Apartheid in Canada

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What is known about single parent families in Canada? A great deal as is evident from the other chapters in this volume. The overwhelming majority of single parents (82.0% in the 1986 Census) are women, so it is single mothers that are important to policy. Single parents, both male and female, are known to be at greater financial risk than two-parent families, with single parents averaging an annual income of \$21,321 in 1985, compared to \$40,222 for two-parent families (Statistics Canada, 1989: 15). The risks of poverty are much higher for woman headed single parent families (57% in poverty in 1987) (National Council of Welfare, 1990:58) whose incomes average only \$19,117, compared to \$31,252 for man headed single parent families (Statistics Canada, 1989: 15). Single parenthood is increasing; from 1951 to 1986, the number of man headed single parent families increased 103%, woman headed, 180% (Statistics Canada, 1990:53). Many single mothers face economic and other struggles; some of the consequences are known for children (Dooley, 1991; Fuchs and Rechlis, 1992; United Nations Children's Fund, 1991), for women (Dooley, 1989; Grindstaff, 1988; National Council of Welfare, 1990; Status of Women Canada, 1985), and for society (Bassuk, 1991; McDaniel, 1990; Dooley, 1989 and 1991; Fuchs and Rechlis, 1992; United Nations Children's Fund, 1991; Grindstaff, 1988; National Council of Welfare, 1990; Status of Women Canada, 1985). A theoretical understanding is developing of the ways in which social policy and societal assumptions work through patriarchy and capitalism to shape the single mother family's experience, structure, opportunities, and disadvantages (Eichler, 1988; Fraser, 1987; Jones, Marsden and Tepperman, 1990; Pupo, 1988; Ursel, 1986).

But much remains to be known. The relation, for example, between the individual and the collective category of single mothers has not been much explored, with diversity and heterogeneity often hidden under the presumption of similarity. The actual experiences of single mothers, and notably their own voices and insights, are only beginning to be examined, in research like that of Clark (1992), McNaughton (1993), and Gorlick and Pomfret

(1993). Little is known about the current crisis in welfare state capitalism and how it affects single mothers as a group and shapes families and their experiences. There has been no exploration thus far of the consequences of population aging, and the greater embeddedness of women in generations, on single mothers. The remarkable recent growth in non-marital childbearing among women ages 30–39 (Statistics Canada, 1990) has not been adequately studied either theoretically or empirically.

Policy discussions regarding single parents often move to income maintenance issues. While the risk of poverty for single mothers with dependent children is high, attention devoted largely to the policy challenges of income maintenance for single mothers may have two unfortunate consequences. First, policy-makers and the public may become oblivious or impatient with the neediness of single mothers. Second, preoccupation with income maintenance might preclude attention to the many other policy considerations that impinge, directly and indirectly, on single mothers. This chapter provides a thematic look at the conundrum of social policies, broadly defined, that relate to single parents in Canada. The focus is on links, interconnections, and problems that might otherwise be invisible.

Single Mothers: The Fiscal Issue

Cost is the policy issue in Canada in the 1990s, cost to the society, to the public purse, and to future generations through the image of accumulating deficits. These images have come to form the guiding paradigm of public social policy since the mid-1980s. Although real and getting larger all the time, why the deficit has come to be seen as the ultimate evil, the threat to destroy us, the issue beside which all other problems shrink, is a political rather than an economic story. The deficit paradigm works for business and neo-conservative governments in bolstering public awareness of issues of costs. It convinces the public that spending in the public sector must be controlled and curtailed, not for any socially justifiable reason, but because of affordability. At first glance, affordability and debt are ideas to which the mythical everyperson can relate — we are taught that overspending for individuals is untenable in the long run. But what about indebtedness for mortgages, for Registered Retirement Savings Plans, for our children's educations? This sort of indebtedness is not perceived as bad. On the contrary, debt for some future gain is an indicator of postponed rewards and rational financial planning. Debt and interest on debt drive the economy. And why is deficit the problem, as opposed to poverty, homelessness, inadequate education for our children, or growing unemployment rates in Canada? The deficit has been sold to us as the number one public problem of the 1990s largely for ideological reasons.

What are the implications for single parents? The concepts of deficit and affordability, as ideological constructs, are used to justify cutbacks in income

maintenance payments to single mothers with dependent children or to alter the eligibility requirements for social programs, including essential unemployment insurance benefits. The ideology of deficit, in conjunction with strongly held beliefs about public spending, have revealed some implicit aspects of policies on single parents. Three are immediately apparent. First, the family is essentially private and self-sufficient, i.e. not really entitled to state support, even in crisis. Second, gender differentials in the market economy are of little consequence to public policy on income maintenance. If these differences were accounted for, the enormous income gap between male headed and female headed single parent families would be smaller. Third, social policies on single parent families contain a large measure of moral reification, i.e. some kinds of families are really dispensable and not worthy of public support.

Research Focus and Remaining Questions

The intention here is to step behind research to look at the underlying conceptual frameworks that shape and guide the research questions and how they are asked. This will reveal some of what remains unanswered. Policy issues have a way of becoming policy problems because any policy discussion tends to be problem-oriented. The concept is of policy as ameliorative or as redistributive of some social resource (money, power, skills, etc.). Without a problem, there is no need for amelioration, no need for redistribution, and some might argue, no need for social policy. The difficulty with a problem approach to social policy is one of perspective. What is the problem of poverty to the rich may be the problem of riches to the poor.

Single parenthood, even without images of deficit, has been seen as a problem to society for some time. Single parenthood at the individual level is something to be avoided. It is seen as punishment for sin, a sign of moral character weakness, an indication of women's independence (seen as a negative attribute in this instance), or perhaps insufficient willingness to try to make marriages and relationships work. At the societal level, single parenthood is taken as an indicator of society in trouble, possibly dangerous for children (lack of male role models arguments), a reflection of gender roles changing (not necessarily for the better), and a drain on the public purse.

Single parenthood, viewed as a problem, is treated by social policy as solvable. Thus, social policy on single parents tends to be reinforcing of the incorrigible propositions of gender and family; the nuclear family is sacrosanct (despite mounting evidence to the contrary) and gender differentiation and heterosexuality are natural as well as essential to society. Social policy on single parents then is morally imperative, bolstering the privacy and supposed self-sufficiency of the nuclear family, premised on gender inequi-

ties. This interpretation fits well with the privatization of family troubles in the name of the deficit.

Social policy on single parents has several fundamental components. First, it is familized, in that single mothers are seen first and foremost as family members. Only rarely do men claim benefits on the basis of family status; instead, they more often make claims as individuals, such as for unemployment insurance. Social policy is categorizing single parents unequivocally as familial and is defining them, by default, as secondary wage earners who cannot receive benefits as individuals and so tumble into the family category. Second, social policy on single mothers creates dependency, both familial and economic. Mothers with dependent children who lack access to jobs with living equitable wages, to quality day-care programs, to educational opportunities — all of which act together for single mothers of every class to diminish life chances — are not autonomous human beings. Social policies at various levels construct single mothers as dependent. Labour market differentials are not considered a central part of the policy equation. Not surprisingly when research reports that women who have children early in life have the least life chances of all (Grindstaff, 1988). And third, social policy which translates experiences of single mothers into administrable categories of need misses the diversity of the realities single mothers face. This denies autonomy in that administrative creations become the means by which experiences are interpreted and acted on. "Facts are interpretations of reality which are real for the people in the situation, whether they are based on a wrong interpretation of the situation or not" (Brittan, 1973: 13). Few of these kinds of questions have been addressed, by research.

The issue and challenge of child care is illustrative of several dimensions of what research questions remain to be answered. Child care has been variously defined as a women's issue, a workplace challenge, and a family issue. The fundamental question of private versus public responsibility and entitlement is implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the debate about child care. That this question is very much gender-based has less often been explicitly acknowledged in all its ramifications. To the extent that child care is seen as a woman's responsibility, indeed a women's monopoly in that child care done for pay is also women's work, the incorrigible propositions of gender and family are maintained. This occurs in several ways. First, gender division of labour at home is mirrored in the workplace and used to justify paying women lower salaries than men. So, when marriages or "unions libres" (the French term for common-law unions) come apart, it is women who differentially face the brunt of inequities both at home, in child care responsibilities, and at work in their low earnings. Second, women are held accountable for childrearing in large measure in society, even as empirical studies reveal that many other forces impinge on children's lives as they mature. Mothers are often cited with contempt for their failures in

the heightening of tensions between men and women illustrated by the Montreal massacre of 1989 and in numerous instances of child abuse and deviance. Whether these are real failures or, more likely women-blaming or blatant misogyny, is very important. But the fact of women's centrality in child care leaves women vulnerable to having the psychological fallout of identities gone awry linked to women's mothering. Some feminist psychoanalytic approaches have begun to consider these issues, but more could be done, especially in exploring at the macro level the implications for single mothers.

Social policy on single mothers builds on the contradictory notions of intentionality and victimization. The concept of intentionality relates to the idea that women are devious creatures who will stop at almost nothing to achieve their ends of lives of dependency, if not on a man, then on the public purse! A popular belief is that women lure men into situations, through either fantasy (the Thomas hearings) or diabolical manipulation (the Tyson trial), to block the man's ambition, gain access to his fortune, or simply to avenge some imagined or real injustices. Related is the notion that women, en masse, would deliberately use pregnancy as a means of obtaining welfare benefits. Intentionality is built into social policy on single mothers in the implicit, but sometimes explicit, assumption that single mothers are in need of support only until they locate another man on which they can become financially dependent. Intentionality is also assumed in today's prevalent idea of childbearing as choice — i.e., she had the choice to get pregnant or not, so she now must face the consequences of that choice. The rubric of choice can be illusory, particularly in light of gender structure and the non-choices it implies, not the least aspect of which would be difficult or non-existent access to abortion.

Victimization is the now stuffy idea that young women fall into difficult situations of unwanted pregnancy and abandonment in marriage as a result of their own inadequacies or those of the men they fall for. Missing in this quaint scenario, of course, is the all too real victimization that occurs to women when they are left with the responsibility for raising children on their own with limited child support from ex-partners, and with limited job prospects. The newer notion of empowering women with labels, such as survivor, although welcome in many ways, might diminish the dialectical relationship between socially structured opportunities and individual self-image. Can one be a survivor in psychological terms when one's job prospects remain so limited?

The tension between intentionality and victimization parallels the long established good girl/bad girl concept. The classical rational male or androcentric image of the man in charge is transposed to the woman in the case of intentionality. With the victimization lens, the single mother is stripped of all wilfulness and becomes the swooning maiden. The reality is

somewhere in between, with both intentionality and victimization needing the intensive scrutiny of research. One way to approach this unanswered question would be to listen to single mother's voices on their own terms, to hear their perceptions as they see them, and their images of what social policy for them might be.

What seems most needed in policy research on single mothers is frames for the pictures. The pictures are clear enough: poverty, struggle, unlikelihood of recovering totally, tighter and tighter public purse strings, and tighter economic constraints with reduced employment and educational opportunities. What is needed is a framework that ties together the various ways in which social policy and structure work to create these pictures and leave them unaltered in essential terms for generations, despite the supposed changes society has experienced.

Moving Targets

Much of the background to social policy on single mothers is changing, and yet social policy and researchers act as if the picture were static. The image of the classical man as the guiding hand in the formulation of state policy is eroding slowly. In part, the extent and emotionality of the backlash of the 1990s against feminism, against welfare state policies of the past, and against public programs which essentially share wealth and resources more equitably might be measures of the insecurity of the classic man and his guiding hand. Victories are everywhere — in the growing public support among Canadians for aboriginal self-government, in the increasing likelihood that something of a social charter might be written into the new constitution of Canada, and in the increasing influence of Aboriginal and women's groups on the constitutional process. Father knows best as maker of social policy might be becoming something of the past.

And yet, there are new challenges quickly moving onto the horizon. Unemployment and the current economic crisis in Canada is one of the most powerful of the new moving targets (Smardon, 1991). Fine (1992) makes it clear that recession reconstructs families: women work while men look after the home and children, marriages fail more often, children are more often placed in foster care, violence against women and children increases. Unemployment might be the biggest threat to masculinity men face. Unemployment for men also calls into question the construction of the family as based on a breadwinner male and a dependent female (true whether or not the woman also works outside the home as well because of the differential earning power of men and women). It further calls into question the family as a private haven from work. The difficulties and enormous stresses families face in the current economic crisis allow social scientists a laboratory in which to examine the economic underpinnings of family life

in Canada and to gain insights into what single mother families are in the larger picture of family and societal change.

Child poverty is another moving target, catching the attention of Parliamentarians of all parties in Canada and of the world through the United Nations report on children (United Nations, 1991). The House of Commons report on child poverty, tabled in December 1991, notes that child poverty is a "blight on society" (*Globe and Mail*, 16 December 1991: A18). Children, the report notes, are much more likely to live in poverty if they live in single parent woman headed families. And the report aims to eliminate child poverty in Canada by the turn of the century while vague on the essentials of how this might be done. It is not clear, whether there will be further initiatives on child poverty other than the 1992 Federal budget's child benefits proposal, intended to provide greater assistance to low income families. Whether it does this, in reality, is open to debate.

The United Nations report (1991) makes the compelling link of child poverty to gender inequities and uses the unequivocal term of "the apartheid of gender." Allocation of scarce resources, jobs, rights, property, health care, and so forth on the basis of gender is the undeniable cause of child poverty in the world, says the report, and the largest impediment to development. This seems to be an immense leap forward, shifting the paradigm from blaming women for having too many babies in many parts of the Third World to a contextual understanding of the interconnections between women's status and children's life chances. This, indeed, is a target which is moving rapidly and in the direction of improved understanding and more effective social policy development.

Population aging is another moving target with fundamental consequences for single mother families. Demographic changes over the past few decades have meant more generations in families (McDaniel, 1990; 1992a; Walker, 1991), greater proportions of our lives spent caring for older relatives (McDaniel, 1992a; 1992b), longer times spent as widows, and pensions that remain user-unfriendly to women for reasons that relate to women's job ghettoes with no benefits packages at all and to the privatization of pension responsibility and reform (Gee and McDaniel, 1991; National Council of Welfare, 1990). Family sizes have declined, resulting in fewer child-related responsibilities, but more generational responsibility falling to adult children who might be only children, or one of two. Family life today for Canadian women is a vastly different experience than it was one or two generations ago.

The implications of shifting demographic age structure for single mothers are many, all unexplored so far in research. The prospects for financial security in old age for women, who are barely scraping through raising children on their own today, are not bright. Women without partners remain normatively responsible as well for older relatives, including mothers, aunts,

and sometimes former mothers-in-law. Walker (1991) found that women are the preferred helpers to older relatives. Women's imbeddedness in family does not decline with an increased divorce rate, or a lower birth rate, as some pundits might have us believe.

Caring is another moving target. For women, caring is something expected, something done for love rather than pay or extrinsic reward. Very little research has been done on caring and its central place in society (McDaniel 1990, Myles, 1991; Walker, 1991). Reitsma-Street (1991) reveals how caring and the societally reinforced compulsion to care constructs women's lives. Reitsma-Street looks at delinquent girls and how caring is policed into them by so-called caring professions and institutions such as the criminal justice system. She argues that girls, whether delinquent or not, are coerced into caring for others to the neglect of themselves, their future careers, and to bear the costs of caring with little complaint. The failure to care for others, according to Reitsma-Street, is the failure to be accepted as a good girl in our society. More research on these aspects of caring for women's lives, and in particular for single mothers, is needed.

Privatized caring, whether of dependent children or of older relatives, or indeed of bosses in the workplace, tends to make invisible the needs of both the cared for and the carer at the micro level. If caring is women's nature, women's reward for being good, and an intrinsic part of the gendered division of labour in the family as we construct it, then state policies will reflect this as a given. The consequence may be unintended, but it is to drive a wedge between the cared for and the carer. Women, particularly single mothers, cannot indefinitely bear the costs to themselves of having so much of the caring fall to them.

Changes are occurring at a faster pace than ever in the economy and in the ways in which family life is lived within the wider sweep of time. Social policy has been slow to reflect the new realities. Social research could beneficially examine some of the new trends and emergence of new collective understandings, and what implications these might have for understandings of single mothers in context.

Conclusion

The prevailing image today in Canada is one of retrenchment: job losses and plant closures, cuts to social programs, and talk about getting leaner and meaner. The direct and indirect consequences of this for single mothers are negative indeed. But there are other forces at work too — demographic changes, new political alliances, and perhaps most importantly, shifting conceptual frameworks and tools to enhance our understandings of single parenthood in both pictures and frames.

A few tendencies to be wary of include demographic determinism, substitution of the category for the individual, and emphasis on coping to

the neglect of everything else. Demographic determinism is a growth industry in Canada — explaining everything from supposed lack of competitiveness, to women's demands for equal rights and opportunities, to problems with health care and pensions, to increasing numbers of single parents. The notion seems to be that social policy can only be reactive if any aspect of the cause of a phenomenon is demographic. An inertia, or perhaps cynical fatalism, runs through this kind of thinking. The substitution of the category for the person is similar. This is reinforced by administrative fiat, but the paradigm is used in other ways as well. The futility of giving a single mother a break in any way to enable her to get ahead because all single mothers are X, Y and Z, is but one example of using the category to the detriment of the individual. Coping takes various guises in today's era of retrenchment. The prevalent notion of belt-tightening is one form. The image is of people collectively cutting back on an extravagant lifestyle for the good of all. Those whose belts are tightened most are forced to cope, without consent or recourse, and without the voice they require to articulate the other edge of coping or caring.