

Title:**At the intersection of idealized youth and marginalized almost-adulthood: how girls negotiate young motherhood in London, Ontario.**

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Abstract

This article discusses how young mothers in London, a mid-size city in Canada, utilize a drop-in centre service while attending an alternative program to acquire secondary school credits. The central arguments made here are informed by key concepts in the field of girlhood studies. With its attention to the interconnections between gender, age, and generation as well as other aspects of social identity, girlhood studies provides crucial insight into the lived experiences of young mothers who straddle the space between girlhood and adulthood. We interpret the experiences of the young mothers who participated in this study in light of shifting meanings and expectations of girls and girlhood in the neoliberal era (Harris 2004; Gonick 2006; McRobbie 2000). Drawing on the concept of the ideal neoliberal girl subject embodied in the “can do” and “at risk” girl (Harris 2004), this paper highlights the tensions in accessing a drop-in centre, which functions as both a site of security and surveillance, for a group of young mothers receiving social services. The findings revealed how girls who are mothers struggle to live in the present to assert a legitimate maternal identity even as they are prepared for the future through neoliberal public policies and other disciplinary practices.

Keywords: Young mothers; maternal subjectivity; drop-in centres; girlhood; girlhood studies

Introduction

A relatively new field of scholarship, girlhood studies makes an important intervention in the study of teenage pregnancy and young motherhood. By centering girls’ identities and lived realities, girlhood studies challenge discourses about the experience of parenting at a young age. The most persistent of these discourses is the construction of young mothers¹ as social problems, a view that has been critically examined by scholars in academic disciplines such as sociology (Brown, Brady, Wilson, & Letherby, 2009),

¹ Young mothers, rather than ‘teenage mothers’ is the preferred term of recognition for women in this study who argued that the former is a more empowering, less loaded description of their maternal identity than the latter.

psychology (Berman, Silver & Wilson, 2007), public health (Kirkman, Harrison, Hillier & Pyett, 2001; Darisi, 2007), and education (Pillow, 1997). Girlhood studies interrogates the construction of young mothers as social problems as part of the broader practice of characterizing young people *as problems* (Harris, 2004). Teenagers in particular are understood as not-yet-fully-formed adults, controlled by their out-of-control hormones and susceptible to delinquency and irresponsible behaviour (Lesko, 2001).

Girlhood studies responds to these characterizations by drawing attention to the specific experiences of girls both in the interconnected cultures that they create and the ones they live in and must negotiate. Girlhood scholars present a dynamic view of the lives of girls that challenges knowledge production practices, even within women's studies and feminist activism, of marginalizing girls by only referring to them as future women (Caron, 2011; Kearney, 2009). As such, we can think of girlhood studies as a site for articulating a feminist-informed standpoint located in the lives of girls if we think of girls as constituting epistemic communities. Sandra Harding (2009) argues that, "In hierarchically organized societies, the daily activities and experiences of oppressed groups enable insights about how the society functions that are not available – or at least not easily available – from the perspective of dominant group activity" (p. 194).

Although not all girls are oppressed, this 'double vision' provides the basis for a production of knowledge rooted in social locations and lived experiences (Comack, 1999; see also Harstock, 1998; Harding, 1991, 1986, 2009; Smith, 2004, 1987; Collins, 2000, 1998).

Harding (2009) further points out that standpoint theory must always attend to intersectionality of race, class, sexuality, disability and other social differences to fully

grapple with the complexities of lived realities. Although Harding does not specifically name 'age' as an intersectional factor, its impact is essential in the examination of young mothers' experiences. In this article we use girlhood studies to guide our analysis, attending to girls as a "unique demographic group" (Kearney, 2009, p. 17; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009) whose specific social location affords them an important but largely unexamined perspective related to how they articulate a self-defined subjectivity.

Following third wave feminists' insistence on recognising the ways in which different axes of identity intersect with gender to shape women's experiences, girlhood scholars identify age and generation as playing a vital role in girls' experiences. By analysing girlhood as "slippery and unstable" (Caron, 2011, p. 75), these scholars adopt a more fluid approach to girlhood that best captures young mothers' experiences of parenting in which they straddle two worlds – that of "motherhood" and "teen girl" (Leavy & Weber, 2010).

Drawing on conceptual themes from girlhood studies, this article discusses the tensions between young women's expression of subjective maternal identities and interventionist strategies and programs designed to keep them on track. The main arguments are reflective of women's desire for autonomy, the reality of economic constraints, and the possibility of reduced life chances presented by teenage pregnancy which some programs are designed to mitigate. Working with select narratives from a study with young mothers who used a drop-in program while pursuing secondary school credits, the article addresses how young mothers, seen as "girls" with adult responsibilities, negotiate these slippery, unstable, and intersecting identities within structurally defined contexts. These contexts engender expectations about who they are

and what they should be doing in the framework of “becoming.” And these expectations are ungirded by the real, but not inevitable possibility, that teenage mothers are placed at risk for living in poverty for long periods of time, especially if they are lone or single mothers.

Indeed, research indicates that young mothers are less likely than adult ones to complete secondary school or to attain post-secondary education, which can have negative long-term impacts on their employment prospects and lifetime earnings (Statistics Canada, 2008). A 2008 report from Statistics Canada found that “Teenage mothers were 17 percentage points less likely to complete high school and between 14 and 19 points less likely to complete postsecondary studies.”² However, it remains unclear whether low socioeconomic status generally, rather than early childbirth per se, is the cause of these negative outcomes. As Briggs, Brownell and Roos (2009) point out “Negative circumstances may result from teen pregnancy or drive teens to become pregnant” (p. 64). There is also research to suggest, including the findings of this study, that in some instances young motherhood can lead to increased social inclusion (Brown, Brady, Wilson and Letherby, 2009; Duncan, 2007). Nonetheless, “teenage pregnancy” and all that it implies for the present and future, remains a compelling social concern.

Furthermore, this article seeks to trouble the notion that “Adolescence enacts modernity in its central characterization as *developing* or becoming – youth cannot live in the present, they live in the future [and] in the discourse of “growing up” (Lesko, 2001, p.

² Importantly, this study also found that education was a more significant predictor of low income than early childbirth. According to the report “Both women who were teenage mothers and adult mothers with less than high school were more likely to be living below the Low Income Measures (LIM) than adult mothers with a high school diploma (4 and 5 percentage points respectively). Likewise, women who were teenage mothers and adult mothers who completed postsecondary studies were 3 and 5 percentage points less likely to fall below the LIM.”

137). By drawing on the scholarship of girlhood studies, the article explores the phenomenon of young motherhood within the social relations, economic constraints, and daily encounters that frame its experience, the extent to which is it governed by institutional power, and how women attempt to articulate their own meanings about motherhood in the face of these challenges.

Methodology

The data for this paper are derived from observation, focus groups and individual interviews with twenty-four young women accessing a drop-in centre program for young mothers in London, Ontario. The aim of the study was to explore two central questions: How does the drop-in program address their needs? And how does it shape their maternal identities? The women were aged between 14 and 19 years old, each with an average of one to two children. Though most of the young women appeared to be white, we did not confirm their racial background.³ Data collection took place over a two-year period and involved the primary data collector attending and observing thirty-eight drop-in sessions, conducting three focus group discussions and five interviews. Each participant in the focus groups and interview received a \$25 honorarium and two bus tickets, in recognition of their participation and to cover transportation costs.

Focus groups were identified as the most appropriate method, especially once they had grown comfortable with the primary data collector's regular attendance at drop-in sessions. Focus groups are particularly useful for conducting research with populations

³ The absence of this, and information about participants' socioeconomic background, limits our commentary on how these specific women reflect the raced and classed features of girls' neoliberal subjectivity. However, we suggest that their capacity to be "can-do" girls is constrained by their negotiation of living in London, a predominantly white city (MacTaggart & Zonruiter, 2014) with disproportionate rates of poverty and the stigma attached to young motherhood.

who may feel disenfranchised, unsafe, or otherwise reluctant to participate in research projects (Kitzinger, 1994 cited in Leavy, 2007, p. 173). The challenges of conducting traditional focus groups and interviews with adolescents are largely related to levels of maturity and comfort (Bassett, et. al., 2008; Colucci, 2007; Elkind, 2001; Flanagan & Stout, 2010); this may be especially the case for very young mothers. A focus group approach for this study also addressed practical concerns related to child care, which was already provided by the organisation as part of their drop-in program activities. Each focus group featured between seven and nine young women and ranged in length between twenty minutes and one hour while interviews were between ten and forty-five minutes' long. Focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Two members of the research team analyzed the data using thematic coding (Braun & Clark, 2006), identifying themes across the interviews, focus groups and field notes.

The research was conducted between September 2013-2015 in London, a mid-sized city located in southwestern Ontario, the most populous province in Canada. London has a population of roughly 500,000 (Statistics Canada, 2016) and a struggling economy. The city was negatively affected by the 2008 recession, and, although the economy has recently shown signs of recovery, the unemployment rate for youth aged 15-24 in London, at over 20%, is higher than the provincial and Canadian rates, a trend that began prior to the recession (Geoby, 2013). According to a 2008 report prepared by the City of London's Department of Social Research and Planning, "children and youth in London are more likely than any other age group to live with low income." Moreover, women in London are also more likely than men to live with low income, and low-income rates are particularly high for lone parents (Social Research and Planning, 2008).

While the young mothers themselves may not view early motherhood as a state of crisis, and with good reason, structural constraints shape their life chances placing them at greater risk of living in poverty due to low income. Hence the heightened social (and personal) concern that they must continue to pursue educational and employment opportunities to fulfill the expectations of adulthood, including autonomy and freedom in a neo/liberal economic and political framework (see for example, Power, 2005; Brown, Brady, Wilson, & Letherby, 2009). However, the reality of gendered structural inequalities invites us to pay closer attention to the neoliberal desires of policing women for individual success in view of limited economic and employment opportunities. Our analysis attends to these opposing forces, examining how and whether the drop-in program serves these young mothers and how, through their interactions with each other and institutional forces, they make meaning about their experience of motherhood.

Theoretical Framework

Girlhood scholars draw attention to shifting meanings and discourses of girlhood in the neoliberal era, including the new forms of subjectivity engendered by such cultural, economic and political transformations (Gonick, 2006; McRobbie, 2000, 2007; Harris, 2004). In the context of neoliberal welfare reform and deindustrialization, girls have emerged as new models of ideal citizenship. Defined in terms of their economic capacity, girls are increasingly encouraged by governments to harness their hitherto unexploited potential to achieve educational and employment goals as part of broader national development strategies (McRobbie, 2007). Harris's (2004) articulation of girls as the "vanguard of new subjectivity" (p. 1) helps to ground our analysis of the different ways young mothers experience and respond to the realities of their lives. As we reach the

heights of neoliberal capitalism, this neoliberal vision of girlhood accepts and encourages delaying motherhood by mobilizing recent achievements in reproductive technologies and instituting social and family policies that reward women who have children in the midst of a professional career (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007). Those who disrupt this narrative disturb the neoliberal expectation of economic productivity, that is, that girls ought to spend their girlhood reaching educational and employment goals.

Harris uses the narratives of the ‘can-do’ and ‘at-risk’ girls to explain contemporary society’s response to those who conform to and those who upset these expectations. The ‘problem’ of youth, described above, is resolved through these narratives with special attention paid to girls and their associated futurity. The narrative of ‘can-do’ and ‘at-risk’ girls suggests that the vast majority of young women are able to capture the ‘can-do’ spirit and if they face problems, are merely in need of specific programs and support services to reach their potential. At-risk girls are then understood as an unfortunate minority who have failed due to their poor decision-making. While such girls are often visibly classed and racialized subjects, the belief that they are merely an “aberration” (Harris, 2004, p. 36), a warning sign to be vigilant about choices and behaviour, enables all girls to be seen as potential ‘can-do’ girls. The project of making oneself into a can-do girl is ongoing and perhaps can be more accurately described as “the never-good-enough girl who must perpetually observe and remake herself” (Harris, 2004, p. 33).

Young mothers are viewed as at-risk girls or failed subjects whose perceived poor decision-making abilities are expressed most clearly through their ‘improper’ sexual choices and behaviour. However, girls’ capacity for self-invention means that young

mothers, even as they have failed to delay motherhood as all can-do girls ought to, are capable of re-making themselves, particularly through the intervention of programs like the one examined in this article. The purpose of this intervention is to cultivate in such girls the capacity for individual responsibility and self-discipline of which all neoliberal citizens, and girls in particular, are thought to be capable. However, we do not wish to suggest that girls and young mothers in particular merely accept these dominant narratives. As our discussion in the findings section will demonstrate, there are numerous examples of girls (Gonick et al, 2009; Harris, 2004) and young mothers (Kirkman, Harrison, Hillier & Pyett, 2001; Yardley, 2008) negotiating and developing resistance strategies to the dominant narratives that shape their lives. While we attend to these strategies we also situate our analysis within the very particular Canadian social policy context which, influenced by the rise of neoliberalism, has transformed its approach to welfare and champions personal responsibility and individual autonomy as the defining features of good citizenship. Such changes in the policy approach are reflected in the development of programs like drop-ins and the kind of services they offer.

Study Context

Drop-in centres are increasingly integral to the delivery of social services for marginalized populations. This is due, in part, to the decline of the welfare state and a greater emphasis on deinstitutionalization in favour of service delivery at local levels (Waters, 1992; Pinch, 1997; Crack, Turner, and Heenan, 2007). Viewed as ‘spaces of care’ (Conradson, 2003), drop-in centres are instrumental in supporting stigmatized and/or isolated groups by providing services through agencies, institutions, or community-based organizations. The rise of drop-in centres also reflects the shift toward

keeping youth contained as their presence in public is “constructed exclusively as a dangerous problem” (Harris, 2004, p. 148). Drawing young people, particularly girls, into such adult-managed spaces enables a greater level of regulation and the encouragement of a particular kind of can-do subjectivity. The effectiveness of drop-in centre programs and the range of services that they provide is the focus of emerging empirical and qualitative research in the social sciences (Hall and Cheston, 2002; Imamoto, 2006).

In addition to facilitating a drop-in for the young mothers, the collaborating agency in this study provided space for them to attend alternative classes run by a trained teacher from the School Board. Although the same girls attended classes and used the drop-in at the same site, each service had a different mandate. The alternative school program (the Reconnect Program) offered on-site was designed to assist young mothers unable to attend regular school to earn credits for their secondary school diploma. The drop-in centre also offered access to on site services such as information from a nurse, and access to social workers, including caseworkers from the Children’s Aid Society and Ontario Works. For example, workers from the Learning Earning and Parenting (L.E.A.P.) program would frequent the drop-in to meet with the mothers, most of who relied on social assistance as their primary source of income. In order to receive social assistance payments, young mothers in Ontario between the ages of 16 and 21 who have not completed high school must participate in the L.E.A.P. program and attend school.

In the absence of quality universal childcare, having access to all of these services, while attending school in a central location that provides childcare was convenient for the young mothers in this study, many of whom relied on the city’s public transit system as their primary mode of transportation. Research on young mothers has

documented the barriers they often face to accessing social services (Brown, Brady, Wilson, & Letherby, 2009), and drop-in programs can address some of these issues. As our findings indicate, the drop-in also provided participants with a sense of community and a 'safe' space to discuss their experiences as young mothers with other girls their own age.

While the convenience and benefits of the drop-in service cannot be understated, situating the program within the broader social policy context in which it is embedded offers a more nuanced analysis of the role the drop-in played in the lives of the young women who accessed the service. Feminist scholars have noted a shift in social policy in the neoliberal era characterized by cuts to social spending and an increasingly punitive/coercive/disciplinary approach to social service delivery (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Power, 2005; Vosko, 2000; Weinberg, 2004; Giles, 2012; Breton, 2014). The impacts of welfare state restructuring are borne most heavily by women and mothers, particularly single parent families, who are more likely to rely on state income and social support due to their unpaid caring responsibilities (Breton, 2014). Indeed, the majority of the women in this study were the primary caregivers for their children, and in some instances were also responsible for caring for parents and other family members. In several cases the father was not involved or was involved, but did not perform the bulk (or any) of the care work, a pattern that was commonly regarded as further indication of the young women's "poor" decision making in their sexual relationships.

Critics of Ontario's social and child welfare policies raise a number of important concerns about the shift to a children's rights discourse at the expense of maternal rights (Breton, 2014). As Breton explains, the turn to the child has "negative policy

implications, particularly for mothers and their families on the margins of society, as the state was no longer addressing the structural gendered inequalities in women's waged and unwaged labour – the root of child poverty and disadvantage” (p. 322). Rather welfare agencies, including Children's Aid and Ontario Works, have become centered on regulating and monitoring individual *women's* (and girls') parenting practices (Power, 2005; Breton, 2014).

It is precisely young mothers' liminal position as not quite 'innocent children' and not yet 'responsible risk-taker worker citizens' (Breton, 2014) that justifies interventions into their lives, for example through the L.E.A.P. program mentioned earlier. Introduced in 1999 under Ontario Works, L.E.A.P. is part of a “wide range of programs linked to the coercive and/or restrictive work incentive” (Vosko, 2000, p. 233), also known as workfare. As Power (2005) explains, workfare “deploys ‘some combination of liberal-therapeutic disciplinary and morally coercive techniques’ (Valverde, 1996: 361) to prepare welfare recipients for autonomy” (pp. 644-645). Informed by a neoliberal, post feminist subject – the ‘can do’ girl – which promotes self-development through education, employment, and parenting classes, L.E.A.P. aims to ensure the future economic success of young mothers and minimize their dependency on state resources.

The existence of programs targeted toward young mothers, such as L.E.A.P, Reconnect, and the drop-in, are indicative of the prevalence of the ‘can-do’ narrative, particularly the notion that given the right resources, girls are the solution to social problems. Importantly, it is girls rather than boys that are excluded from mainstream education when they become parents and it is young mothers rather than young fathers

who are invited to participate in programs that discipline them according to norms of appropriate girlhood and motherhood.

Within this social policy context, the drop-in operates simultaneously as a source of support for and surveillance of young mothers. As excerpts from focus group and drop-in discussions below will demonstrate, women and girls come under greater scrutiny when they access social services, and the drop-in was no exception. Our point here is not to dismiss the importance of and need for services like the drop in program to support young parents, but rather to acknowledge the limitations of such initiatives in the context of an increasingly inadequate and punitive approach to social welfare.

Drop-in as a Source of Support and Community Building

Many young women viewed the drop-in centre as a source of support where they could have a warm meal, share their experiences with other moms their own age, give and receive parenting advice, and access services. During the drop-in, the young women shared stories and asked questions about a number of different topics including pregnancy, child birth, approaches to child rearing, and breastfeeding. When asked what they liked most about the drop-in centre, one participant mentioned the “food” to which others agreed. Another participant indicated that she could “talk to people about, like, your experiences and come and kinda get help with things like, I have no idea, well I didn’t know when I was supposed to start [the baby] on milk...I didn’t know how and everyone’s like “Oh, this is how you do it” and I was like, “okay”.

Drop-in attendees were also able to ask staff members questions, who for the most part provided balanced information and reasonable advice so that the young women could make informed decisions. For example, during one of the drop-in gatherings, two girls

asked a staff member about the chicken pox vaccine, which prompted other girls in the group to ask what it was, if they should get it and what would happen if they did or did not get the vaccine for their babies. One young mother seemed concerned that getting the vaccine would give her child chicken pox and the staff member provided a comforting explanation and reiterated that the decision was one they should each make on their own, with their doctors, based on what they felt was best for their children. That the same girls continued to come back to the drop-in each week speaks to its importance as a space where they could socialize, eat, share their experiences with each other and receive advice.

Many of the benefits of having spaces and programs for teen mothers which have been documented in the evaluation of other services specifically for young mothers (Brown, Brady, Wilson & Letherby, 2009), were also confirmed by the young women in this study. For example, young mothers commonly report feeling less stigmatized when they participate in parenting groups with other mothers their own age.

Drop-in as a Site of Surveillance and Discipline

Although many of the women described the drop-in positively, the extent to which the space operated as a site of surveillance and discipline became strikingly apparent in focus group interviews and in discussions that took place among young women at the drop-in. A number of the women who attended drop-in program were involved with the Children's Aid Society (CAS), or knew of another young woman who was and their narratives reveal the disciplinary role that the agency (as well as staff members at the drop-in) played in their lives. For instance, during one session, a young woman jokingly stated that she abused her child, explaining that when her one-year old

bites her, she bites back. Although it was clear to staff members who knew her that she was intentionally trying to provoke a reaction, another young woman cautioned her to be careful as her statement could result in a call to CAS, and reminded her that the teacher has a “duty to disclose”.

The young woman’s caution reflects the limitations of the drop-in program’s supportive atmosphere. As girls have become the ideal representatives of neoliberalized notions of individual success and achievement they have also become familiar with the strategies employed to discipline them into these roles. This young woman’s sense of the drop-in as “an environment of constant but often unknowable surveillance” (Harris, 2004, p. 115) leads her to self-regulate, altering what she shares and what she does not in the presence of the staff.

The ever-present possibility of the removal of their children by social services, which became clear in the participants’ conversations, operated as a strong disciplinary mechanism in their lives. According to one young woman, she was reported to CAS when she yelled at a nurse who told her to stop crying after she became upset at the sight of her newborn baby receiving a spinal tap. In another instance that took place following drop-in, staff members discussed possibly reporting one young mother to CAS because it was clear that she had not been taking care of her own or her child’s hygiene.

The drop-in (as well as CAS) also seemed to promote a very particular parenting style – attachment parenting - with potentially serious consequences should they been seen to be parenting in a way that fell outside of this ideal. For instance, at one of the drop-in sessions, a staff member told a young woman, whose baby was crying after being put down for a nap, that she should not let her child cry. The young mother became

defensive, stating right away that her doctor advised her to let her son cry. Some of the other young women also came to her defense, saying they had been told the same thing and that they let their babies cry as well. The staff member was firm that they should never let their babies cry and referred to research on crying that was eventually recanted, saying it damaged babies.

This interaction between the staff member and young mother demonstrates the level of scrutiny to which young mothers' parenting choices are subjected and speaks to the fear that many young mothers have of being labeled a 'bad mother.' It also confirms what Weinberg (2004) found in her work with young single mothers in Toronto regarding the conflicting information they often receive from those in positions of authority who have the power to define what it means to be a 'good mother.' As Weinberg notes "Surveillance is frequently accompanied by conflicting expectations, making governance according to desired "standards" of mothering difficult, if not impossible" (p. 85). However, not all of the young women respond to this sense of surveillance in the same way, like the defenders of 'crying-it-out' some continue to mother in unsanctioned ways regardless of staff disapproval while others openly express their critiques of the drop-in with the aim of shaping the service to better meet their needs.

Each of these examples demonstrate the two-fold role played by the drop-in program. They reveal the importance of having a place where young mothers can interact with and support each other but also indicate that this place does not exist without judgment, whether from staff members who have the authority to intervene in these young women's lives or from the young women themselves, as we discuss in greater detail below. However, as girlhood scholars acknowledge, girls are not passive actors (Currie, Kelly

and Pomerantz, 2009; Gonick et al., 2009). The young mothers' use of this site of surveillance as an opportunity to build community demonstrates the incompleteness of these "new strategies of governmentality" (Harris, 2004, p. 146). The disciplinary regime that requires young mothers to gather together to continue their learning and maintain contact with welfare providers also enables a space in which the young women can share stories, build solidarity and even carry out small acts of resistance, as illustrated in their impassioned defense of letting their babies cry. That the drop-in program serves multiple purposes reflects the liminality of the young women's position; caught between constraining notions of the 'can-do' girl and the 'good' mother, the young women attempt to make a space where they can assert some control while still acquiescing to the demands of self-regulation and re-invention.

Experiences of Stigma in Public Spaces

As we have suggested above, neoliberal discourses that construct young mothers as irresponsible or "incapable of being responsible citizens" (Power, 2005) seem to justify and even invite heavy scrutiny and surveillance into their lives, not only from the government agencies with whom they come into contact, but also from health professionals and even strangers. As reported in other studies of young motherhood (Brown, Brady, Wilson, & Letherby, 2009; Kirkman, Harrison, Hillier & Pyett, 2001; Yardley, 2008), the young women in this study commonly experienced judgment in public spaces, especially on public transportation. In a focus group discussion, many of the women agreed that the bus was an "especially tough place to be." One young woman recounted a particularly confrontational experience:

P3: We go onto...a hybrid bus...and this old lady was sitting at the front in the first two seats so we had...another four to ourselves to put strollers plus the one

on the other side and she was going on because we brought our strollers on the bus and she had to kinda push her walker over, she was going on...look what Canada's coming to, a bunch of teen moms and all this different stuff because she had to move her walker!

The entitlement this individual felt to comment on the young woman's choices speaks to the investment the state and wider society has in women's reproductive choices as well as the contempt with which their occupation of public space is often met. After all, as youth studies scholars have pointed out, "public space is by default adult space...[and] adults retain the power to decide where young people can move about and what kinds of activities are appropriate to an environment" (Harris, 2004, p. 94).

Adult power over public spaces is felt especially strongly by girls, who have historically been associated with the private sphere. Girls' presence in public spaces stereotypically occupied by boys, such as the street or club, is usually read as an indication of moral failing (Harris, 2004). In this incident, the young women's moral deficiency is embodied in their children. The stranger's entitlement to comment is bolstered by the young mothers' transgression of acceptable norms. Not only have they chosen to parent at an 'inappropriate' age but they do so publicly, occupying space with their strollers, in stark contrast to previous approaches to the 'problem' of adolescent pregnancy shaped by secrecy and shame in which young mothers were sent away (Solinger, 2005). The stranger's comment points to shifting representations of young girls who in the past have been constructed as future wives and mothers of the nation (Harris, 2004) but are now defined by their potential for economic productivity. Furthermore, the elderly woman's view that the 'prevalence' of early motherhood signaled the nation's decline reflects deeply rooted and gendered nationalist discourses.

Several study participants also reported feeling unfairly judged as irresponsible parents in their routine interactions with nurses and doctors and other figures of authority, a theme that is reiterated in the literature on young motherhood (See for example, Brown, Brady, Wilson, & Letherby, 2009). Three young women reported being pressured by their doctors to have an abortion. One mother recounted her particular experience of being advised by her doctor to have an abortion because it was likely her child had Down Syndrome; given her age, the doctor felt she would not be able to adequately care for the child. Another woman described her experience with a female police officer:

I had a police officer to come to my house. And it was for [an unrelated] situation and she was staring at me and saying “aren’t you a little too young to be a mom?” And like, “how are you supporting your kid?” Like, listen, you’re not here for what me and my daughter is going on, you’re here for a totally different reason and you should stick to that. And she got really pissed off at me but I don’t care.

Each of these incidents demonstrate the complexities of young mothers’ experiences as they live at the intersection of idealized youth and marginalized almost-adulthood. They reveal young mothers’ liminal position; their youth ought to orient them toward the future where they will exercise the success expected of them but their ‘poor’ choice-making, their decision to become mothers ‘before their time’ disturbs this future image of self-invention and responsibility. That the policing of their choices often takes place in public is a reflection of the increased visibility of both girls and young mothers. Girls’ hypervisibility, or rather the popularization of a particular way to enact girlhood summed up in the ‘can-do’ spirit, is one method through which all girls are policed. Girls are measured against this “public visibility” (Harris, 2004, p. 120) and those found wanting are subject to ridicule and judgement and, as in the incident on the bus described above, made responsible for the moral well-being of an entire nation. Indeed, because the dominant imagery of young mothers is as recipients of welfare (Lessa, 2006), their

appearance in public undermines the narrative that all young women are capable of the success and independence embodied in the 'can-do' figure.

Maturity that comes with motherhood/young motherhood "not a crisis"

Young women who attended the drop-in and participated in focus group interviews employed different strategies to resist negative stereotypes that construct them as 'bad' or irresponsible parents. Many discussed the positive aspects of parenting, including the joy and pleasure that they derived from being mothers. For instance, when discussing what she liked most about being a mother, one young woman explained that she loved "just waking up and having her [daughter] smile and everything" and that she enjoyed "being around her everyday." A number of participants also emphasized the maturity that came with motherhood. Many said that having a child made them more responsible and that they felt less inclined to go out with friends, party, do drugs and smoke. Others reported feeling a renewed interest in continuing their education after having children, a theme that is reflected in other qualitative studies with young mothers (Brown, Brady, Wilson & Letherby, 2009; Duncan, 2007). As one young mother recalled:

...I lost a lot of my friends. But everybody does. Because they don't want to go out and party with you...but I think it's actually funner to sit at home and play games with my daughter then to go hang out.

Another young mother explained:

P6: And I love being a mom because it's changed me...in a good way...Like before I was partying all the time and now...getting my school done, taking care of my son, not drinking as much as I use to.

Facilitator: Yeah, so it made you focus on your school?

P6: Yeah and realize what's important.

The emphasis placed on the maturity that comes with motherhood seems to draw on social norms that have historically (and contemporarily) associated the transition from girlhood to adulthood with child bearing. Indeed, calling attention to their roles as mothers is one way to garner respect as adults, a strategy articulated by the women during one of the final drop-in sessions. In one lucid assessment of the relationship between the drop-in program staff and the young women, one evaluation requested that staff stop treating them “like little children” (Drop-in June 16th). Their demand that they ought to earn respect *as mothers* rather than as adults (often expressed through their love for motherhood) is testimony to the young women’s occupation of a liminal space in which their not-quite-adulthood status requires intervention in the form of programs like the drop-in while their positive descriptions of motherhood simultaneously challenge the notion that adolescent motherhood is a crisis event. Their embrace of and indeed, passion for mothering also corresponds with ideas about ‘good’ mothering and can be read as a form of resistance to neoliberal discourses that construct teen mothers as irresponsible subjects who are “not yet ready for freedom” (Power, 2005).

Other young women resisted such negative stereotypes (and the surveillance they seemed to justify), by pointing out the contradictions between these assumptions and their own as well their friends’ parenting abilities in ways that unfortunately, but not unsurprisingly, reinforced the good/bad mother dichotomy. For instance, one focus group participant positioned herself, and most of the young mothers she knew, as ‘good mothers’ by distancing them from the few ‘Other’ young moms she felt may deserve to have their children removed by CAS.

P2: ...being a teen mom in general...brings a lot of...negativity towards you especially on Facebook. Like some girls without kids are like “oh teen moms

dadadada” and I just wanna smack them all in the head...because...honestly, a lot of the teens mom I know, there’s maybe...two or three that shouldn’t have their kid or whatever but the moms that I regularly hang out with, they’re friggen awesome with their kids. They always have...clean clothes on, and they’re always really interactive with them and stuff.

This young woman’s narrative reflects dominant societal discourses on what it means to be a ‘good/bad mother’ and underscores the importance of demonstrating one’s “fitness to mother,” (Weinberg, 2004) especially in a context of increased surveillance. Ensuring that your child is clean and that you are spending quality time with them are clearly markers of ‘good motherhood.’ Indeed, as was evidenced in this study, a lack of hygiene can be justification for reporting a parent to CAS. Notions of what it means to be a good mother, particularly the self-sacrificing mother, were also apparent in the narratives of other young women. As one participant explained, she “never spent money intended for her child on herself” – so she would use the money earned for participating in the focus group to do something nice for herself.

The negotiations of good/bad motherhood are especially fraught for young women whose ‘inappropriate’ age is automatically read as an indication of ‘bad’ motherhood. While their narratives clearly reflect young mothers’ attempts to assert their ‘good’ mother status against dominant societal discourses that assume young motherhood results in poor parenting, they also reveal the extent to which young mothers are themselves invested in these discourses and the divisive work such discourses perform. As Rock (2007) explains, “One young mother unsure and scared that she is not a good mother can find value in herself by devaluing Other mothers who do not share her values or beliefs regarding child rearing.” (p. 21). Their participation in the policing of other young women’s mothering is one example of how these young women, many of whom

come from marginalized backgrounds as discussed above, internalize a ‘can-do’ attitude that opens a pathway to (liberally-defined) success.

The intention here is not to dismiss these young women as merely dupes of a disciplinary regime but rather to draw attention to the limited options afforded marginalized people, especially young women, in cities like London. These young women’s investment in schemes like this (and it must be acknowledged that their investment does not preclude them from advancing harsh critiques of the ways in which such programs can fail them), is a reflection both of the limitations of the liberal promise and the small pockets of opportunity it can provide to individual members of marginalized populations (Sa’ar, 2005). From this perspective, that the young women prioritize the convenience of having all their services available in one centralized location over the potential (and likely) pitfalls of exposing oneself to surveillance and discipline according to ‘appropriate’ girl and mother behaviour, is unsurprising.

The notion that these women might experience young motherhood positively is echoed in other studies of young mothers and is indeed the “backbone” of some critical scholars’ challenge to the ‘teenage motherhood as social problem’ narrative (Arai, 2009, p. 172). Such a view grants young women agency in their reproductive decision-making, acknowledging that women may choose pregnancy for particular, potentially positive reasons rather than dismissing their experiences of motherhood as inappropriate because they disrupt normative, neoliberal expectations of the ‘proper’ trajectory of human life. Such a view also invokes the liberal bargain (Sa’ar, 2005) as these young women’s engagement in socially unacceptable/discouraged behaviour is the pathway through which they can be remade as liberal subjects.

As the young woman above explained, it is thanks to her child that she is now focused on school and has refrained from excessive drinking. In other words, it is through her early motherhood that she has been able to successfully navigate the murky territory of “emerging adulthood” (Pryce & Samuels, 2010, p. 206) and strive for ‘can-do’ status, committed to pursuing appropriate educational and employment goals. Such an approach to motherhood, as a potentially transformative event that can motivate at-risk girls to re-commit to the standards expected of all girls, reflects the central tenet of the ‘can-do’ narrative, which imagines girls as always capable of re-invention, especially through individual hard work. By articulating themselves as still potential ‘can-do’ girls, young mothers contribute to the neoliberal fiction that success is “simply a question of application” (Harris, 2004, p. 110).

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the challenges that young mothers face as well as the negotiations that they engage in to express their resilience and desires as maternal subjects. The findings from the study on which this paper is based indicate that providing spaces of support, evidenced in the drop-in centre, is important to young mothers for consistency, safety, and a sense of community. However, the drop-in centre in this study is also fraught with contradictions and contestations including its participation in the centralization of social services that enact surveillance. The drop-in also functioned as a space within which “good mothering practices” were encouraged albeit also deeply contested.

Drawing on key concepts in the field of girlhood studies can help us more fully understand the complexities of how young mothers use public spaces and access

opportunities to help them meet educational goals. Notions of the ‘can do’ and ‘at risk’ girl frame the development of programs directed towards young mothers and that target their individual capabilities, behaviours and attitudes for reform. Young mothers are constructed as ‘failed subjects,’ but with proper management, guidance and education they can be put “back on track.” However, we also acknowledge that the possibility that young mothers can be remade or reformed into ‘good neoliberal subjects’ is deeply connected to their race and class. Thus, further inquiry is required to shed light on the ways in which young motherhood is experienced by racialized young women living in London, Ontario.

The young mothers in study, many of whom relied on social assistance, did not necessarily view motherhood as the end of the opportunities, but as a motivation to keep going. Whether or not they are able to accomplish their long-term goals remain to be seen, but it is clear that the assistance and consistent support that they received at the drop-in program played a crucial role in helping them to negotiate motherhood with a degree of confidence.

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