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SOCIAL WORKERS AND CLIENTS:
WOMEN AT THE MERRILL-PALMER INSTITUTE, 1920-1970

by

Heleen Leeann Beggs

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through the Department of History
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1993

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The Merrill Palmer Motherhood and Home Training School was founded in 1919. It operated independently until the 1970's, when it was absorbed by Wayne State University. Lizzie Merrill-Palmer founded the School with the intention of providing homemaking training to young girls, but over the years the School expanded its services. This expansion enabled the Merrill Palmer staff to deal with clients of different ages and backgrounds. In my thesis I will focus on the relationship between the Merrill-Palmer staff and their clients from 1920 to 1970. Although both the staff and the clients were predominately female, my research demonstrates that the women did not bond together as a result of their common gender. Through the years, the social workers and the clients both tried to achieve some measure of control or power in their relationship. This interaction was significantly influenced by the factors of race, class, and ethnicity. Women who were African-American, immigrant, or working-class were treated more harshly than women who were white, native-born, and middle-class.

In addition, the social workers and their clients were affected by prevailing gender concepts in American society. These concepts changed somewhat over the fifty year period I studied, however, one assumption remained consistent. This was the belief that women were best suited for domesticity. The Merrill-Palmer staff justified their position as career women through their professional status. The staff, however, promoted traditional gender roles to their clients. In my thesis, I wish to demonstrate how changes in American society, combined with the factors of race, class, ethnicity and gender, affected the social worker/client relationship. The study is organized into three chapters (1920-1940, 1940-1960, and 1960-1970) that correspond with significant changes in the focus of Merrill-Palmer and in the relationship between its staff and their clients.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1918, The Merrill-Palmer Motherhood and Home Training School was founded in Detroit. From its inception to its amalgamation with Wayne State University in 1974, Merrill-Palmer served as one of the most influential social work and educational organizations in the area. In this thesis, I will examine the Institute's first fifty years, which included three major phases of programming from 1920 to 1970. Social workers in the first period, from 1920 to 1940, attempted to Americanize foreign mothers and instruct mothers of their own class on nutrition, physical care and socialization of children. In the second phase, from 1940 to 1960, the social workers focused on the psychological adjustments of middle-class women. In the last period, the 1960's, the social workers emphasized the importance of mothers in developing their children's intellectual growth. After 1970, the Merrill-Palmer programs narrowed in scope, concentrating primarily on research.

The concept of the School (later known as the Merrill-Palmer Institute) originated with Lizzie Merrill-Palmer. Lizzie Merrill-Palmer was born in 1837. She was the daughter of Charles Merrill, who owned a vast lumbering business in Michigan. Lizzie married her father's business partner, Thomas Palmer, in October 1855 and later adopted two children. Thomas Palmer was himself a member of an influential Detroit family and, in addition to his business

enterprises, was interested in politics. He eventually became a United States Senator and was appointed Ambassador to Spain in 1889. Lizzie was highly active in family business affairs and involved in many Detroit community organizations. She worked with the Detroit Humane Society, was a founder of the Detroit Institute of Arts, and donated many gifts, including Palmer Park, to the city of Detroit. She was recognized as a woman who was deeply committed to helping people in her community. It was not surprising, then, on her death in 1916, that she bequeathed three million dollars for the establishment of the Merrill-Palmer Motherhood and Home Training School.

The policies of the School were developed by the Board of Directors, while the financial aspects of the School were handled by the Board of Trustees. In the beginning, the Board of Directors were all female, while the Trustees were all male. In some cases members of the Board of Directors were married to Trustees, such as Catherine and Alpheus Jennings. The members of both Boards were from the middle and upper class.¹ For example, Lawrence Butler, one of the

¹Sally Brown, telephone interview by author, March 22 1993. Sally Brown is a white woman who started work at the Institute in 1938 as a Graduate Assistant with a degree in Psychology. She was married in 1941, and continued to work at the Institute until 1964. She took some time off to have children, and returned to work when they reached school age. She worked in the nursery schools, and with older children in afterschool clubs during the 1940's and then joined the Institute's teaching faculty in 1947.

Trustees, was the Vice-President of the Detroit Trust Company. Mrs. Edsel Ford, who was certainly a member of the Detroit elite, was involved in the early period of the School, and it is likely that other women on the board would have come from the same class.²

Through the years, the Board of Directors interpreted Lizzie Merrill-Palmer's intent very broadly. As a result the nature of services offered by the School expanded to include numerous social work and educational activities. The School offered programs directed not only to young girls but also to immigrant mothers, college women, working-class women both white and African-American, and even the most affluent families in the Detroit area. The social workers of this Institute interacted with women of different ethnic background, race and class.

The Institute was based on the ideology of that time about motherhood. Experts, such as doctors, educators and social workers, tried to establish a new purpose for women in an industrial age, and concluded that women could be fulfilled through concentration on domestic duties and motherhood. Some attempted to turn these duties into a "science", or a profession for women. Many middle-class women saw the idealization of motherhood as a profession as a

²Board of Directors-Minutes 1921, Merrill-Palmer Corporation Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

way to increase women's social power. They believed that increasing the status of motherhood could lead to the acceptance of such goals as female suffrage. Some middle-class women used motherhood concepts as a form of social control, for example as a way of rationalizing the Americanization of foreign women.³

The formation of the School was based on the wishes of Lizzie Merrill-Palmer as stated in her will. Lizzie explained why she felt that a motherhood training school was essential to the well-being of the community. She stated:

I hold profoundly the conviction that the welfare of any community is divinely and hence inseparably dependant upon the quality of its motherhood and the spirit and character of its homes...girls and young women of the age of ten years or more shall be educated, trained, developed and disciplined with special reference to fitting them mentally, morally, physically and religiously for the discharge of the functions and service of wifehood and motherhood and the management, supervision, direction and inspiration of homes...such girls and young women who are unable or unwilling to pay therefor shall be so educated, trained, disciplined and developed without any charge.⁴

This statement became the basis for the establishment of the Merrill-Palmer Motherhood and Home Training School. In this thesis, I will examine the power of these concepts of motherhood in relation to the Institute and American society.

³Barbara Ehrenreich, Deirdre English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women (New York: Anchor Press, 1978), 148.

⁴Board of Trustees-Minutes 1918-1923, January 1918, Corporation Collection.

The Institute was affected not only by ideas about motherhood but also by the child study movement of the early twentieth century. In this movement, led by the ideas of G. Stanley Hall, mothers formed groups to discuss the activities of their children and viewed childcare as a science. Educators and social work agencies around the country, as well as at the Merrill-Palmer Institute, were influenced by this movement, and developed parent education programs. Child care experts advised mothers on the correct way to raise children, placing the mothers in a passive role.³

The Institute was part of the Detroit community and was deeply affected by changes occurring in the area. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the automobile assembly line and the developing automotive industry turned Detroit into a thriving urban center. The new industry attracted a multitude of immigrants such as the Irish, Polish, Italians, Hungarians and Greeks to the city. Between 1880 and 1910, the number of foreign-born people in Detroit tripled, and between 1910 and 1920 this figure doubled. These ethnic groups developed their own neighbourhoods close to the central business district, where they could retain their language and their culture.⁴

³ Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 189.

⁴ Joe Darden, Detroit: Race and Uneven Development (Philadelphia, 1987), 4.

After World War I, foreign immigration was restricted and the flow of foreigners into Detroit diminished. Domestic migration, however, rose. Thousands of rural southern African-American and white agricultural workers came to Detroit to work on the assembly lines. For example, between 1910 and 1930, the population of African-Americans in Detroit grew from approximately 6000 to 120,000. When they settled in the community, they also developed their own neighbourhoods where migrants maintained ethnic and class divisions for many years. Even in the 1940's there were still significant ethnic neighbourhoods in the city center.⁷

The city's population was transformed after World War II as the result of two factors. The first was decentralization, as more and more manufacturing firms, businesses, and middle-class residents moved to the suburbs. The second factor was the increased migration of Southern African-American families. In 1940, the population of African-Americans in Detroit was 150,000; by 1970, the number was 660,000, about 45% of the city's total population. These two trends reinforced each other throughout the 1950's and 1960's. As more African-American people moved into the city, more white people moved out to the suburbs. Some parts of the larger community boomed with the flow of people to the suburbs, but the core of the city lost more stores and

⁷ Ibid.

businesses each year. The entire region became segregated along racial and class lines with a largely poor African-American city center and largely white suburbs. Those African-Americans who could afford to move out of the city found themselves resegregated into African-American suburbs.*

By the end of the 1960's, Detroit was a depressed urban area with more than its share of racial and class tensions.⁹ Detroit had already had two race riots, one in 1942 and one in 1943, but racial tensions reached a climax with the 1967 rebellion as rioters reacted to years of unemployment, job discrimination, low-quality housing and poor relations with the Detroit police department.¹⁰ How the Merrill-Palmer Institute reacted to these transformations is one major theme of this thesis.

Along with the question of the Institute's reaction to community changes, I will examine the nature of the social workers' relationship with their clients. The first factor to consider is that of race. For the most part, the social workers of the Institute were white, especially during the earlier periods, and some of their working-class clients were

* Ibid., 7.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Sidney Fine, Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989), 36.

African-American. For example, white upper-class women sat on the Institute's Board of Directors during the early period, and women such as Mrs. Edsel Ford were involved in the Institute's programs. The percentage of African-Americans working at the Institute as social workers as well as living in the community increased over the years. How did these changes affect the relationship between the social workers and their clients?

I will also analyze the class and ethnic differences between the social workers and their clients.¹¹ At first, the social workers were mostly middle-class and native-born. They worked with clients who were in both higher and lower classes than themselves. In addition, the social workers provided services for foreign-born clients. It is important to note that many of the women working at the Institute had backgrounds in areas other than social work, such as education or psychology.¹² This was especially true in the early period, when social work schools were first being developed and many women came to the profession from other backgrounds.¹³ For the purposes of this thesis, however,

¹¹The names of individual social workers will not be used in this thesis since few social workers were mentioned by name in the Institute's files.

¹²Sally Brown, interview by author, March 22 1993.

¹³Leslie Leighninger, Social Work: Search For Identity, (Westport, Connecticut, 1987), 32.

the women will all be referred to as "social workers" since they were all engaged in the same types of social welfare activities, and were subject to similar ideologies about the nature of their work and their clients.

Gender is also a significant category of analysis. The social workers were mostly female, and these workers interacted mostly with female clients. The social workers were involved with younger single women as well as with wives and mothers. The founding philosophy of the Institute stated that the social workers were to provide services to other women in order to make them better wives and mothers. How did the social workers reconcile their role as career women with prevailing ideologies about the place of women in society?

The development of professional ideology also affected the relationship between the two groups. At the beginning of the 1920's, social workers were attempting to establish themselves as professionals like doctors or lawyers. In the pursuit of this status, professional social work organizations developed an ideology about their work that stressed the importance of scientific findings and the viewpoint of the objective expert. These concepts were quite different from those that had characterized social work activities before World War I, when social work services had been administered by upper- or middle- class women on a

volunteer basis and had emphasized compassion and benevolence towards the recipients. In the 1920's, middle-class women were still drawn to this work, since it had always been identified as "female work", but they sought to transform it from a charitable activity into a professional career. The ideologies that accompanied this change affected the relationship between the two groups of women.

Finally, I will examine the attitudes of the clients to these services. It is difficult to assess the clients' feelings because the records and reports were created by the workers and therefore emphasize their perspective. Despite this difficulty, it is important to try to determine how much influence the clients had in the services. Did these clients have any control over the types of services that were offered? Why did the clients participate in these social work programs? What did they hope to gain from this participation? Both clients and workers hoped to gain something from their interaction. Linda Gordon, in her critique of the "social-control" model of analysis, suggests that it is too simplistic to assume that only social workers asserted control. She states that clients were active negotiators in a complex bargaining relationship with social workers.¹⁴ I will use this theory as the basis for

¹⁴Linda Gordon, "Family Violence, Feminism, and Social Control," Feminist Studies 12 3 (Fall 1986): 468.

conclusions about clients' behaviour.

In the following chronologically organized chapters, I will analyze the worker/client relationship at the Merrill-Palmer Institute between 1920 and 1970. Using this chronological approach will help to determine how issues in Detroit and in American society affected the attitudes of the workers and the clients. Chapter One examines the period from 1920 to the end of the 1930's, when social workers dealt with working-class and middle-class women, and attempted to Americanize immigrant women. Chapter Two deals with the 1940's to the end of the 1950's, when the Institute focused on the middle-class family and used psychoanalytic theories to help supposedly neurotic mothers. Chapter Three concentrates on the decade of the 1960's, when social workers struggled with the issues of poverty and racism in urban centers. In each period the relationship between the two groups of women changed significantly.

CHAPTER ONE: THE 1920'S AND 1930'S

During the 1920's and 1930's the Merrill-Palmer Institute reached out to clients of both working-class and middle-class backgrounds. In each group the Merrill-Palmer Institute targeted young women as well as mothers. The social workers felt that the programs were bringing scientific knowledge to families in the area and thereby improving their way of life. They wanted mothers, especially working-class and foreign women, to conform to their particular ideology about motherhood and used "science" to justify changing the mothers' practices.

The Institute served its middle-class clientele through such programs as a regular nursery school, a summer camp and a college women's advisory service. Some of the most important services offered for working-class clients included a nutritional program for foreign-born women, an experimental nursery school program and an Essentials of Living course. The Institute also immunized children in immigrant and African-American neighbourhoods. In addition, the workers of the Institute prepared background material for other social workers and teachers on the area's largest immigrant groups and their culture.

The social workers wanted to help working-class women because they assumed that they, through lack of education or because of ethnic or racial background, were ignorant about child care. The social workers used this presumption of

"ignorance" to justify attempts to Americanize the practices of immigrant women. There was little recorded of the clients' reactions to these services, but other studies of social welfare provide evidence with which to speculate about how working-class and middle-class women felt about the social workers and their actions.

The Merrill-Palmer programs conformed to the gender ideology of that period, which developed as a result of changes in women's status since the nineteenth century. The industrial age changed the nature of women's role in the home by diminishing the importance of their traditional contributions to the family economy in favour of wage labour. Women's activities, such as preparing food, making clothes and other household essentials, seemed less valuable when the value of more and more kinds of labour was measured by a monetary wage. At the the turn of the century, reformers dealt with the "woman question": now that these traditional activities were less important, what would women do with their lives?'

As Ehrenreich and English state in For her Own Good, reformers and experts, such as doctors, educators and social workers, believed that the answer to this "domestic void" could be found in scientific housekeeping and child care. The theories of scientific housekeeping and childcare were

'Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 148.

based on the principles of industrial efficiency and scientific unsentimentality. Experts argued that homemaking activities would form a full-time "profession" for women within the home. By elevating the status of domestic work, reformers hoped to increase the status of women. They used the concept of "professional" motherhood to argue for increased power for women, especially the suffrage. This solution to the "woman question" was intended to give women a new purpose to their lives but was applied differently to middle-class and working-class women.²

Many middle-class women had suffered from "invalidism" during the nineteenth century as a result of their inactive lives. Experts believed the "domestic profession" would solve this by providing them with meaningful and challenging work. Reformers gave middle-class women the task of preparing their children for a new industrial world, in order for the children to eventually solve the problems of the new age.³

Working-class women were given a slightly different task. Experts believed that the potential unrest of the working class could be eliminated through pride in their homes and aspiration to middle-class values. Working-class women who provided a comfortable home would make working-class men less likely to risk losing their home through

² Ibid., 150.

³ Ibid., 170.

unreliable work behaviour or strike activity.⁴ Working-class women had the job of raising good industrial workers, children who would grow up to punctual, hard-working and disciplined. Working-class children needed to develop a personality in harmony with their future as part of the labour force.³

In the early part of the twentieth century experts perceived scientific homemaking as the answer to the "woman question" and the raising of future industrial workers. The problem with giving women a meaningful purpose through this "profession" was that women might gain too much power, since they would be responsible for raising future leaders. Women could not raise male children properly, experts argued, since they had no experience with the "male world" and therefore could not teach essential skills for this world.⁴ Experts believed that women needed their advice to raise children, and convinced women of this necessity, and subsequently the experts rose in power.

The child study movement, led by G. Stanley Hall, was one result, as mothers formed groups to discuss the latest child care methods. At this time, experts stressed the need for educational and social welfare agencies to create parent

⁴ Ibid., 134.

³ Ibid., 181.

⁴ Ibid., 185.

education programs throughout the country.⁷ Through the parent education programs, experts were able to promote their child-care ideas to women. They assumed that their expertise was more valuable than the mothers' experience. The Merrill-Palmer Institute was influenced by this movement, and the gender ideology of the period.

While accepting the ideology that women's role should be a domestic one, most of the female social workers at the Institute were single. This pattern was reflected throughout the United States. Linda Gordon has suggested that the social workers may have felt that their careers were a privilege of their class.⁸ At the Merrill-Palmer Institute, social workers also felt that their education and their class gave them a more flexible role than other women.

WORKING-CLASS PROGRAMS

From its beginning in 1920 the Merrill-Palmer Institute focused much of its attention on working-class women. Experts during this period were concerned with assimilating foreign-born women, and used their power as part of the dominant class to change immigrants' housekeeping and child-

⁷ Ibid., 189.

⁸ Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945." The Journal of American History 78 2 (Sept. 1991), 583.

care methods.* The social workers focused on working-class mothers in programs such as the cooking class and the nursery school. The social workers reached out to working-class girls through the Essentials of Living course. The social workers judged these working-class women by white, middle-class standards of motherhood and hoped to change their practices.

One important early program at the Institute examined whether the meals that foreign-born women were serving to their families met American standards of nutrition. The staff conducted research using the recipes of a group of immigrant women.¹⁰ Female workers went into a predominately Italian, low-income neighbourhood to obtain recipes and did not reveal their intentions to the immigrant women. Instead, the workers said they needed recipes to cook meals for hospitalized Italian immigrants. The Merrill-Palmer workers either did not believe that the immigrant women could understand the research conducted on their behalf or anticipated the women would resist providing the information. Nutritionists determined, on the basis of these recipes, that the Italian meals were not adequately meeting American nutritional standards.

*Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 174.

¹⁰"Foreign Born Reports", June 1921, Kresge Historical Library Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

Social workers criticized Italian immigrant customs on the basis of their conceptions of "scientific" standards of nutrition and labelled immigrants "ignorant" for their differences.¹¹ For example, American reformers, including those at Merrill-Palmer, believed that a certain amount of milk was essential in children's diet. Since it was not the practice of Italian immigrants to serve milk as a beverage to their children, social workers criticized them for neglecting the nutritional needs of their children.¹² Social workers concluded that the immigrant women put the needs of their husbands first and those of the children second, and they believed that this practice was wrong. But from the immigrant women's perspective, putting the primary breadwinner's needs first probably made sense due both to patriarchal cultural tradition and the economic power wielded by a wage-earning husband.¹³

The Merrill-Palmer Board of Directors offered an introductory cooking course, beginning in November 1921, specifically for foreign-born women, in order to teach them how to cook "properly". Most of the women who attended the classes were Greek immigrants, and the rest of the class

¹¹Elizabeth Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925 (New York, 1985), 85.

¹²"Foreign Born Reports", Nov. 1921, K.H.L.C.

¹³Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars, 85

consisted of French, Belgian, Armenian or Mexican women. The course did not list any women of Italian origin. The foreign-born women volunteered for the classes after their various ethnic organizations were contacted about the program.

The cooking course met with mixed success. The social worker who was supervising the classes reported that the women were initially enthusiastic. She complained, however, that attendance dropped off during January, a pattern attributable to the Greek women celebrating their Christmas at that time. Only after the cooking classes were over did the Merrill-Palmer workers know the reason for the disappearance of the Greek women. The report of the class, written before the religious observance factor was known, demonstrates the negative perception the social worker had of the immigrant women: "Most of these women were not accustomed to being regular or systematic and could not be made to realize the importance of regular attendance."¹⁴ The Merrill-Palmer worker suggested that a group of intelligent, partly Americanized women make up the next group for the class. This woman did not have high expectations of behaviour for the immigrant women.

The social workers believed that the immigrant women possessed little intelligence, and thus they could not

¹⁴ "Foreign Born Reports", Dec. 1921, K.H.L.C.

contribute anything useful to the course. Therefore, the immigrant women were not encouraged to design the course around their needs. The reports described the women as enthusiastic about the program, at least initially. Perhaps they felt that by adopting American cooking habits they would gain the approval of the native-born middle-class workers, which might ease their socialization into the United States, and present an economic future based on more than unskilled jobs. Most immigrant women hoped to provide their children with increased opportunities. During this period, only the most menial and lowest paying jobs were left to foreign-born or African-American workers. ¹³

The Institute also developed the nursery school project as a significant program for working-class families. In 1921, the Board of Directors stated their belief that agencies engaged in home-making education should develop better methods of training in child care. This goal was part of the child study and parent education movement that developed from the "domestic profession" ideology. Since nursery schools were novel in the United States at this time, The Merrill-Palmer Institute recruited women from England, where early childhood theories were more developed, to act as advisors.

¹³ June Axinn, Social Welfare: A History of the American Response to Need, (New York, 1982), 130.

The Institute developed nursery school laboratories in connection with area secondary schools in order to provide child care courses for high school girls, consistent with promoting the ideology of motherhood as a meaningful career. The Board defined two objectives for the nursery school project: the first goal was the "general instruction of women in the problems of childhood."¹⁶ The second was "the training of specialists, either teachers, social workers or research students."¹⁷ The Board deliberately separated these objectives, suggesting that the Merrill-Palmer women distinguished between ordinary women and those who were child care specialists, a perception shared by American social workers during this period. By their own definition, the Merrill-Palmer women would fall into the category of specialists, creating a gulf between themselves and their female clients. The English women had the added distance of their nationality.

The nursery school program was divided into two distinct services. First, the "regular" nursery school program primarily served middle- and upper-class white children, and the second smaller part of the service, which they labelled "experimental", was designed to service African-American and immigrant children in a working-class neighbourhood. In both

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

sections of the nursery school project the social workers demonstrated a condescending attitude towards mothers. This attitude was amplified, however, if the mothers came from a lower-class background and especially if they were African-American or immigrants.

Social workers demonstrated this attitude in the reports of the experimental preschool. It opened on March 26th, 1928, in a co-operative project between the Merrill-Palmer Institute and the Board of Education.^{1*} The experimental nursery school, as well as the regular school, was a full day program designed as an enrichment facility for the children and a research laboratory for the Merrill-Palmer Institute. It was not intended as a day care center for employed mothers. The social workers referred to the preschool as "experimental" since the children enrolled were all from a working-class background, an entirely different set of students and parents from those to which they were accustomed.

Since the school was located in a neighbourhood consisting of immigrant and African-American families, the Institute decided to maintain a ratio of foreign to African-American children in the nursery school similar to the ratio of the neighbourhood. Therefore, two-thirds of the students came from foreign families and one-third from African-

^{1*} Ibid., March 1928

American families. Since it was a poor neighbourhood, no tuition was charged for the nursery school services.¹⁹ The reports of the school's first year show a considerable amount of tension between the Merrill-Palmer women, the children, and their parents. Although the reports discuss "parents" in general, in most cases the social workers were dealing only with the mother.

Before children could be admitted to the nursery, the social workers interviewed their families and judged them for acceptability. The interviewers felt that the parents demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for the nursery school services. They blamed this cool reception on ignorance about the benefits of preschool education and said: "Most of the families were foreigners with very little appreciation of what the nursery school could offer the child."²⁰ Even though the report does not identify the ethnicity of the families, it is probable that some of them had difficulties with the English language. Communication between the two groups may have been made more difficult, by a middle-class suspicion of the motives of the working class. It is also likely that African-American families would have been more guarded with the Merrill-Palmer women because of patterns of deference to white authority. They had reasonable doubts

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., April 1928

about the benefits of nursery schools since they were designed and run by white women.

Class and cultural differences between the children and the Merrill-Palmer workers were an obstacle to harmonious relations, and the social workers did not expect much from the children. As one woman wrote: "Due to the limited background of most of the children, the first few days were given to exceptionally simple activities. Very few demands were made."²¹ Armed with negative perceptions of the neighbourhood and its families, the social workers had difficulty in dealing with the children who did not behave like "normal" children. The children, raised in poor conditions and with foreign customs, naturally did not behave like the affluent white children of the other nursery schools. The nursery school program, however, had been developed with the upper-class children as the models of normal behaviour, and the Merrill-Palmer women simply attributed the children's adjustment difficulties to abnormal behaviour. The children demonstrated this "abnormal behaviour" during nursery school meals and playtimes.

The social workers organized the nursery school meals to demonstrate proper table etiquette, good manners being an important quality to develop in the working class. The first attempt at such a meal produced unexpected results:

²¹ Ibid.

the children seemed to have no idea of a formal meal and were more akin to young animals than human beings. The simple foods of the nursery school were new and strange to them. One child had never had bananas, another called custard "ice cream", several had never tasted prunes. Many were disgusted that no coffee was served. One child decided he would not remain for luncheon as he would be served only milk to drink."²²

The children were equally confused during the scheduled play times. One social worker reported that they did not know how to play, either by themselves or with others. After a month of school, the children adjusted more to the concept of playtime. One worker noted that they "seemed to have lost the clan feeling"²³ and now were able to play in small groups of two or three. The Merrill-Palmer women were shocked by the behaviour of the children and could not understand why they had been raised with no concept of formal meals and structured playtimes.

Cultural traditions, either foreign or Southern African-American, accounted for the children's unfamiliarity with the foods served at the nursery school.²⁴ Poverty, however, was the most likely cause of the differences in behaviour. The nursery school meals included foods commonly found on the tables of middle- or upper-class white families, these foods were too expensive for poor families, hence they were

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., May 1928

²⁴ Joe Darden, Detroit: Race and Uneven Development, 3.

unfamiliar to the children. Poverty also explained the children's confusion at playtime because their parents could not afford to buy expensive toys. Without explanations for their strange behaviour, the Merrill-Palmer women relied on their initial misgivings, blaming the mothers for incompetent childrearing.²³

During the first year, the relationship between the social workers and the poor families was strained. In the second year, however, the mothers became interested in their children's activities at the nursery school. The nursery school workers noted that the African-American mothers were especially interested in becoming more involved.²⁴ They attended parent education meetings and were interested in organizing their own study groups to learn more about child care. Since they became more involved, they probably believed the program had some benefit for their children. The mothers desired a more active role in the development of the nursery school programs either to ensure further advantages for their children or to diffuse the total control of the Merrill-Palmer women.²⁷ Elizabeth Pleck suggests that African-American women consistently demonstrated more support for their children's education than Italian immigrant

²³ "Nursery School Reports", July 1928, K.H.L.C.

²⁴ Ibid., Feb. 1929

²⁷ Linda Gordon, "Family Violence", 471.

mothers during this period.²⁸

Another program affecting a immigrant or African-American clientele was the diphtheria immunization project, initiated in 1930. Merrill-Palmer went into the neighbourhood, asking if the children had been immunized, in order to prevent children from contracting the disease.²⁹ The Merrill-Palmer women expected these immigrant and African-American mothers to do exactly as they were told and were infuriated when they ignored their advice. They reported that a number of tragic deaths had been caused by this inaction. One social worker recorded her reaction to the deaths: "All of this was so needless, all caused by prejudice, ignorance or useless foolish delay."³⁰

The Merrill-Palmer women did not question why the women did not immunize their children. Based on previous encounters with interfering authorities, the lower-class women suspected the motives of the social workers. Lack of education about the benefits of immunization caused some to disregard the social workers' warnings.³¹ Despite the social workers' conviction in their cause, the inability of

²⁸Elizabeth Pleck, A Heritage of Her Own (New York, 1979), 378.

²⁹"Parent Education Reports", April 1930, K.H.L.C.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ewen, Immigrant Women, 143

the two groups of women to communicate doomed the project. As usual, social workers blamed the working-class women for their ignorance.

In 1931, the Institute conducted another study involving immigrant groups for the benefit of social workers and teachers in the Detroit area. A female social worker decided to organize some informational pamphlets about each immigrant group in the area - Romanians, Poles, Italians, Hungarians, Greeks and Turks. She did not organize a study to examine African-Americans in the Detroit area. The research included historical information about the area the immigrants had come from, their reasons for leaving their native country and their contributions to American society. This study could have been a step towards some understanding between social workers and their foreign clients.

The social workers, however, did not see these foreign families as equals and demonstrated this in their research method. The social workers established a relationship with the "responsible" members of the group, such as doctors, lawyers, priests and the leaders of any political or social organizations, and then asked them informally about the nature of their ethnic group.³² It is clear from this research method that the bias towards professional, middle-class views was still prevalent even in a study designed to

³² "Faculty Meeting Reports", Sept. 1931, K.H.L.C.

discover more about immigrant families. Female social workers felt more comfortable with professional ethnic men than with immigrant women.

The social worker reported that the evaluation of statistical data had uncovered some surprising information. She said that "everything that native born people hear about foreign people clogging the courts, hospitals and insane asylums may not be entirely true."³³ She concluded that her staff were much more internationally minded after conducting the research, and said that the entire research team was pleasantly surprised by the number of people of ethnic background who belonged to the upper class. She finished optimistically:

When a man comes in who is a Turk and you see a little college gentleman, you revise your opinion immediately. He is one of the most brilliant people you would want to see. When you see that you realize that world fellowship is going to come after a while.³⁴

It is clear that even after conducting a study about the lives of immigrant people, most social workers had not dramatically altered their perception of foreign people. Immigrants were tolerable only when they were not poor and uneducated. The social workers could happily accept those people of immigrant background who were part of the professional classes. Based on the available evidence, it

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

appears that the social workers were less concerned about signs of ethnic culture and more concerned with class. Though they did not specifically mention the issue of class, the social workers did not conduct their research in the heart of poorer, immigrant neighbourhood, demonstrating that they still felt uncomfortable around working-class people. They did not feel that the poorer, uneducated female immigrants had anything of value to add to the study or that such people could set the standards for the group.

In 1930, the Merrill-Palmer Institute began a new program directly targeted towards young working-class women. The Institute started a series of homemaking programs, in conjunction with high schools in poor industrial neighbourhoods. The year long course, "Essentials of Living", was designed for older girls who were going to work after high school.

The social workers felt that the girls needed assistance in their grooming and language. "Essentials of Living" also offered a course in money management that emphasized what a girl could realistically expect to buy with her wages. The social workers believed that the girls also needed some cultural development since, as one woman put it: "One of the great lacks of all these girls is the need of some kind of interest besides themselves."³³ Therefore, the girls were

³³ Ibid.

given an English class, with magazines and articles substituting for books, and including cultural discussions of movies and plays. The social workers also tried to acquaint the girls with some art works in order to "expose them to beautiful things."³⁴ The social workers felt that generally the girls were a difficult group to teach and were unenthusiastic about the program.

Some of the components of the course dealt with concerns similar to those addressed at the Institute's Advisory Service, a program designed for college women. Both programs emphasized budgeting, vocational issues, family and personal problems, and child care. Since these working-class girls were not going to college, however, the social workers had lower expectations for them and treated these issues differently. The social workers accepted the existing class structure and did not try improve the girls' situation but only tried to help them to accept it.

MIDDLE-CLASS PROGRAMS

As stated earlier, the nursery school program was divided into two distinct sections, the "regular" program for middle-class children and the "experimental" one for working-class children. The social workers had a different attitude

³⁴ Ibid.

towards middle-class parents than they had towards working-class parents. The social workers still underestimated the abilities of middle-class parents but their condemnation was not as severe as with working-class parents.

The nursery school project was quite popular, and workers recruited many children through newspaper advertisements and word of mouth. The school had to place children on a waiting list where they were voted on by the Nursery School Committee as to their suitability for acceptance. The Nursery School Committee felt that an equal number of boys and girls should be admitted and publicized that the nursery school did not accept defective or physically handicapped children.³⁷ There were also a number of practical barriers such as the tuition fees, quotas, test performance scores and family histories that would have kept children out.

The tuition charged at the regular nursery schools would have prevented poorer families from enrolling their children. In fact, at all the nursery schools except for the experimental one, the children enrolled came from wealthy families. Many were the children of doctors or other professional men and their addresses were from affluent Detroit neighbourhoods. The committee required extensive family histories before a child could be voted on for

³⁷ Ibid.

acceptance. The committee tried to determine which families would be the most co-operative with the social workers. The nursery school workers did not want to have to deal with parents who would not follow their advice, since they believed that it was often the mother's incompetence that caused the most harm to their children. ³⁸

The committee reported that Jewish children were sometimes passed over if the nursery had already filled its Jewish quota. The committee felt that the Jewish children should not make up more than one-third of the class.³⁹ The statements about Jewish children provide the only evidence of religious discrimination. African-American children were subject to a different form of discrimination during this period, since they were only eligible to be enrolled at the experimental nursery school project.⁴⁰

When children finally reached the top of the waiting list, they were subject to a series of intelligence and performance tests such as the Stanford-Binet test and Montessori apparatus. The children were also observed for any possible "character deficiencies." The tests were then administered during the child's enrollment at the school to

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., March 1925

⁴⁰ "Board of Directors Meetings", Feb. 1923, Corporate Collection

determine if the child was demonstrating any change in performance. The nursery school workers placed a tremendous importance on the results of the tests, even to the point of enabling one low score to determine the entire assessment of a child. One worker reported her conviction that one could predict which children would develop behaviour problems on the basis of the intelligence test. She concluded:

The child who could perform tests well above his years in the standard mental test, in every action showed himself superior, while the child falling below the average of his age, showed in every case tendencies unfavourable to the development of the best citizen.⁴¹

For example, social workers labelled a boy "retarded" on the basis of one low score. The nursery school informed his mother that since the boy was retarded, he could no longer attend the nursery school. His mother objected but she was overruled by the committee. When faced with a conflict, the female workers put their faith in scientific evidence.

During this period, the Merrill-Palmer workers, many of whom were pursuing graduate degrees, expected that the parents would accept their findings because they had an expertise based on scientific principles. This attitude was common among most child-care experts at this time.⁴² The female workers demonstrated this in their opinions of the parents' reports, questionnaires that were sent home each

⁴¹ "Nursery School Reports", April 1925, K.H.L.C.

⁴² Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 201.

week. Those parents who did not complete these reports faced having their child removed from the nursery. Despite their insistence on having the reports completed, the social workers actually paid little attention to what the parents had to say. In the committee reports, the social workers came to a conclusion about the value of the parents' opinions:

Miss _____ discussed the attitude which we should have towards parents' reports. She does not feel that they can be accurate. She feels that their chief function is educational, for getting new ideas across to parents. As far as their scientific worth is concerned, they are merely an index to the parents' attitude and should be filed merely for reference. ⁴³

The nursery school women assumed that children's poor behaviour was the result of poor parenting, and they did not believe that co-operation with parents was possible. Instead, they viewed parents as misguided individuals who had to be told the correct way to raise their children before they inflicted permanent damage. The Merrill-Palmer women demanded total co-operation from the parents and if the committee felt that parents were unco-operative, it was grounds for the child's removal from the nursery school.

The Merrill-Palmer Institute continued its nursery school program throughout the 1930's, though there was some change in the enrollment at the regular nursery schools as a result of the Depression. Some children were withdrawn when

⁴³ Ibid., Sept. 1926

their parents could no longer pay the tuition.⁴⁴ Of course, there was little change at the experimental school since it had never charged tuition. At the middle-class nursery schools, a few parents were given emergency subsidies to cover the tuition temporarily, but this practice never became established.

The removal of some children from the nursery schools was balanced, however, by the admission of children of families when the mother was entering paid work. These women were usually returning to teaching as a temporary measure.⁴⁵ Even though some children left the nursery schools, new children took their place, so the Merrill-Palmer women still had full classes. At this time, the fundamental goals of the nursery schools did not change, as they were still primarily enrichment and research centers for children, but they may have been used by some mothers as day care facilities.

Programs that began in the 1930's did not differ much from those programs instituted in the 1920's. One of these new middle-class programs was the children's summer camp that began in June 1930. It admitted boys and girls between the ages of six and thirteen. The camp's purpose was to create a "laboratory wherein the school could add to its knowledge of

⁴⁴ Ibid., Oct. 1932

⁴⁵ Ibid., March 1933

the interests and characteristics of the school-age child in a situation not possible in the city."⁴⁴ The camp was located about forty miles from Detroit and had facilities for swimming, hiking and horseback riding. The majority of the children attending the camp were from the upper class. Only the wealthy Detroit families could afford the summer camp fee of \$30.00 a week (complete with required uniforms) during the Depression.⁴⁷

The Merrill-Palmer social workers regarded the camp as an excellent opportunity to conduct clinical studies of children in an unusual environment, and they stressed that the research would be grounded in scientific methods. In order to have comparative data, the children were administered the usual round of intelligence and performance tests before they left the city. These tests were repeated at regular intervals during the summer to observe any change in ability. ⁴⁸ Merrill-Palmer counsellors asked parents to inform them which areas of their child's personality they believed were deficient, then designed a special program for each child to correct the problem. The camp reports, however, did not describe the methods used to achieve the

⁴⁴ "Camp Reports", June 1930, K.H.L.C.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

objectives. ⁴⁹

The summer camp was rigidly scheduled but within this framework, the children were allowed to spend some of their day in unstructured playtime. While the children enjoyed their summer, the counsellors kept extensive clinical records on each child, judging them on factors such as the attractiveness of their personality, response to authority, respect for property rights, response to adult affection, and sociability with other children.⁵⁰ The social workers believed that these characteristics made for "good citizens" and good leaders in a industrial age. Sex identification was a very important factor of normal development as well. Social workers noted overly effeminate boys and overly tomboyish girls.⁵¹

Keeping such extensive case records was very time-consuming, and the reports had to be prepared quickly at the end of the evening. Despite the haste in which they were prepared, the case records were considered to be descriptions of the child's fundamental characteristics, since they had been scientifically designed by fellow Institute workers to correctly identify personality problems. The records were condensed and sent to the parents to identify the most

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., July 1930

⁵¹ Ibid.

troublesome area of their child's personality.³² Social workers considered children who were overly dependant, emotional or undisciplined as having personality problems, qualities that would be a disadvantage for life in a orderly, rational society.

The annual reports were always concerned with the attendance of Jewish children. While Jewish children were not singled out at the camp, the social workers recommended a limit on the Jewish proportion of total enrollment at the camp. The third annual report stated for example:

the percentage should probably never be allowed to grow larger than about one-third. Our Jewish children have been of the finest class and are not in themselves a detriment to the camp. It is only when their presence tends to keep out desirable Gentiles that they become undesirable.³³

This comment suggests that Jewish children were perceived as "different" and potentially harmful to the success of the camp. As with the nursery schools, the social workers made the distinction between "normal" white, middle-class children and those who were not quite normal, either because of their class, race or religion.

The counsellors at the camp did not welcome parental intrusion. Parents were only allowed to see their children on specific visiting days because the Merrill-Palmer workers

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

felt that excessive interaction with the parents only disturbed the children.³⁴ Counsellors reported that on visiting days the parents were enthusiastic about the camp and were eager to learn what their children had been doing. The counsellors also reported that parents tended to verbally underestimate the abilities of their children and were surprised to discover what their child had accomplished through the summer. The Merrill-Palmer counsellors attributed this surprise to the haphazard parenting skills of the mothers since they felt that many tended to coddle their children and did not understand how to bring out the best in their children. In other words, the mothers did not know how to develop the correct personality in their child.³⁵

In 1932, the Merrill-Palmer Institute started another service aimed at a middle-class clientele, when it opened the Advisory Service for College Women. This program provides a striking contrast to the "Essentials for Living" course offered to working-class girls. This Advisory Service was designed to help single or married college women cope with the "adjustments" of college life. Social workers demonstrated their acceptance of the prevailing gender ideology as they referred to the "adjustments" of college women, implying that they occupied an unusual position in

³⁴ Ibid., Aug. 1930

³⁵ Ibid.

society.

Social workers supported the career aspirations of college women, on the basis of class privilege. They recognized, however, that most would eventually marry. They believed that women could not combine a career and a family and assumed that when a college woman married, she would give up her career. Those women who wished to pursue their careers would have to sacrifice a family, and would be expected to use her "maternal feelings" within the community. At this time most of the Institute's social workers were single and white, a group, according to Linda Gordon, who felt that educated women had to make a choice between career and family.³⁴

The Institute's Board of Directors hoped that the "investigation of each case will provide case histories in which could be gained fairly concrete evidence upon the question of how far women's education is contributing to the preparation and orientation of young women."³⁷ There were to be three major fields in which services would be provided, "personal living", "home and family life" and "professional adjustment". In the "personal living" field, the social workers provided services for personality problems, psychological examinations, religious guidance and economic

³⁴Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare", 587.

³⁷"College Women's Advisory Service", Oct. 1932, K.H.L.C.

adjustments.³⁸ "Home and family life" included services such as pre-marital education, household management, child development and guidance, and guidance about the husband-wife relationship.³⁹ In "professional adjustment", social workers provided educational and vocational guidance, and help with the personal and community relationships of the professional woman.⁴⁰ In all of the areas, social workers felt that college women had to make "adjustments", since their education and career aspirations put them at odds with the prevailing motherhood ideology for women.

Throughout the 1930's, the Advisory Service concentrated on the personal or family problems of college women. Many of the case studies were used for research about college women, especially studies about early marital adjustment, a area of particular concern to experts who believed that college would spoil a women for her domestic role. The center provided not only a wide variety of counselling services but also quite a number of physical and mental examinations. Through the 1930's, the Institute provided services in the form of mental tests, personality tests, physical examinations (both at the center and at a nearby hospital), urinalysis, mental

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

hygiene tests and a pre-marital service.^{*1} Researchers used the records of the service for a wide variety of research projects as there was enormous interest in the lives of college women during this period. The social workers of the Merrill-Palmer Institute had no difficulty in relating to the college women and their situation since they had themselves been college women. The relationship between the college women and the social workers was, therefore, very harmonious.^{*2}

CONCLUSION

The 1920's and 1930's were decades of growth for the social welfare field. Social workers were no longer viewed as the kind hearted volunteers of the past as social workers became professional women with specialized knowledge. Social workers themselves were reinforcing this new professional image since it brought them increased status.^{*3} They took pride in viewing themselves as women with unique skills and knowledge. The social workers believed that the foundations for this specialized knowledge were scientific methods and

^{*1} Ibid., March 1933

^{*2} Ibid., Oct. 1934

^{*3} Daniel Walkowitz, "The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity: Social Workers in the 1920's," The American Historical Review 95 (October 1990): 1053

principles. Therefore, a reliance on scientific findings became the hallmark of the new social welfare profession. This view immediately placed the social workers at odds with the female clients for whom they provided services. The female clients had no specialized scientific knowledge; hence their concerns and opinions were usually dismissed. ** The social workers of the Institute displayed a maternalistic attitude towards all their female clients and were particularly harsh in their judgements of working-class women, immigrant or African-American women.

Throughout the 1920's and the 1930's the social workers at the Merrell-Palmer Institute had an antagonistic attitude towards their clients. They believed that their position as social welfare "experts" provided them with indisputable knowledge. If the clients did not follow the social workers' instructions, they were labelled ignorant and unco-operative. This attitude was present in the relationship between female workers and upper-class mothers. The social workers also had a more negative perception of mothers from a different religious background from themselves. Their maternalistic attitude was much more pronounced, however, in their interaction with women from a disadvantaged background. In most cases, the social workers disregarded factors in these

** Walter Trattner, From Poor Law to Welfare State, (New York, 1989), 212.

women's lives that explained their differences such as language barriers, cultural traditions and of course, poverty.

In this period, the social workers attempted to enforce a particular view of motherhood. They believed that women were best suited to a domestic role and tried to convey this message to their clients. The college women did not fit well into the ideology that motherhood was the only source of meaningful work and status for women, but they were the clients most accepted by the social workers. This was due in part to the similarity between the two groups, and the belief that a class privilege allowed college women, and the social workers themselves, to make a choice between a career and a family. While social workers made this exception for middle-class, educated women, they generally accepted the belief that motherhood was the primary role for women.

In this period, we know little about the perceptions of the female clients. Their opinions were not recorded in a systematic way, and we only receive small glimpses of their feelings. We do know, however, that in most cases the clients volunteered to accept the Institute's services. For wealthier clients, their motivation may have been to gain social status. Innovative programs such as the nursery schools and the summer camp may have appealed to wealthy parents who wanted the best for their children. Perhaps

participating in these services was a way of maintaining the status of the family within their community. College women may have participated in the service because of their unique position. Attending college was still fairly unusual for women at that time, so they may have turned to a sympathetic organization, staffed by women similar to themselves, for support in their "unconventional" situation. In this period, only 10% of women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one entered college.⁴³

The working-class clients displayed a variety of reactions to the services of the Institute. In the cooking course, the women are described as enthusiastic participants. Perhaps they desired entry into the American middle-class society. Mothers of children in the experimental nursery school were initially unsure of how to react but became active participants in the second year. They required that first year to be certain the school was beneficial for their children. The immunization project demonstrates a case where the women did not accept the Institute's services. Perhaps the method of the social workers and misconceptions about immunization prompted the women to ignore the advice. The young girls involved in the Essentials of Living program did not have a choice whether or not to participate in the

⁴³Barbara Miller Solomon, In The Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America (Yale University Press, 1985), 142.

program, since it was mandatory in the high schools, explaining why the young women were referred to as self-absorbed and difficult by the social workers.

In conclusion, it appears that the poorer female clients chose to become involved with the services of the Institute only when they perceived a direct benefit for their families. The available evidence of clients' reactions corresponds with Linda Gordon's findings on client-worker relationships, which provide a basis for speculation. As with the clients Linda Gordon studied, the Merrill-Palmer clients were wary of accepting the services of the social workers too quickly but were enthusiastic participants when they believed the services could make a difference to their lives. Accepting the services may have meant an improvement to their families' situation, but it meant a loss of privacy, as the social workers became involved in their lives. The working-class women wanted to achieve a balance between their desire to improve their situation and the need to maintain their sense of control. Clients were active participants in the social welfare system, not passive recipients, who tried to use these resources for their advantage.** We see this conflict in the varied reactions of the working-class women to the Merrill-Palmer programs.

**Linda Gordon, "Family Violence", 471.

CHAPTER TWO: THE 1940'S AND 1950'S

The Merrill-Palmer Institute completely restructured its services in the 1940's and 1950's and focused on a new clientele. In the 1920's and 1930's the Institute had intervened in both upper-class and working-class families, but in the 1940's the Institute narrowed its activities to research and counselling services for middle-class families. In addition, although Merrill-Palmer admitted some African-American children in the late 1940's, the Institute focused its energies more than ever on white middle-class clients. Social workers in the 1940's and 1950's had two objectives that required a focus on middle-class clients: a desire for increased status and the defense of traditional gender roles that seemed vulnerable in the post-war years.

Leslie Leighninger argues that social workers during this period tried to achieve a higher professional status by working with middle-class clients.¹ She states that social workers believed that working with primarily middle-class clients placed them on the same level as doctors and lawyers. The Merrill-Palmer Institute demonstrated this national trend in its programs as it avoided a working-class clientele.

Social workers also focused on middle-class clients because they felt that middle-class women posed a threat to the fragile traditional family. Elaine Tyler May argues that this anxiety about the family was experienced nationally and

¹ Leighninger, Social Work: Search for Identity, 151.

was caused by the upheaval of World War II.² Karen Anderson, in her book Wartime Women, further discusses the dramatic changes that women, especially middle class women, experienced during the war. There was a significant increase in married white women in the work force. From 1940 to 1944, the number of employed married women rose by 72%.³ Through a re-classification of jobs, many women were able to work at jobs traditionally reserved for men, for example, factory labour and driving cabs. These changes produced anxiety about gender roles since women challenged many assumptions about their abilities.⁴ Experts during the war were concerned about childcare since government day care programs were not widespread. There was also anxiety about female sexuality since single women had less supervision from their families.⁵

The Merrill-Palmer workers, like other American social workers and family experts, demonstrated a concern for the family and an increased preoccupation with gender roles through their programs. The social workers believed that if

²Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 14.

³Karen Anderson, Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II (Connecticut, 1981), 5.

⁴Ibid., 10.

⁵Ibid., 43.

the family was to remain secure, then individuals in the family would have to adhere to their traditionally defined roles. Social workers particularly emphasized this to middle-class women since they had more power than working-class women and were in a better position to challenge the traditional family in ways such as working outside the home after marriage.

As a result of the increased anxiety about gender roles, the Institute changed its methods along with its clientele. Nationally as well as at Merrill-Palmer, social workers addressed the psychological aspects of motherhood. They used psychoanalytical theories to promote the proper role for mothers, stressing the importance of female "regression" into a child-like state as part of becoming a good mother, and valued female domesticity over independence. Social workers and child-care experts idealized the "instinctual motherhood" of working-class and African-American women.* The psychoanalytic theories stressed that women who did not completely embrace their "female role" were bad mothers, therefore using guilt to deter middle-class women from challenging this role. Social workers regarded their career as a privilege of their class and education, but most viewed marriage as an eventual goal. Their professional training gave them the right to supervise the middle-class

*Ehrenreich, For Her Own Good, 230.

women, since women who had to become "child-like" to be good mothers would naturally require trained experts to tell them what to do.

A brief overview of programs offered during this time demonstrates a pattern of services geared towards the middle class. From the 1940's to the end of the 1950's, Merrill-Palmer provided numerous counselling services at the Institute, either in individual or group meetings. Unlike the earlier decades, few of the services were offered in working-class or ethnic neighbourhoods and none of the programs made any overt consideration of foreign-born or working-class clients: for example, there were no child care or cooking classes specifically designed for immigrant mothers. At this time, there were fewer European immigrants in Detroit due to immigration restrictions, so perhaps social workers were less concerned about the Americanization of the immigrants.⁷

From the College Women's Advisory Service in the 1930's grew the Family Advisory Center in the 1940's, where social workers offered counselling on family problems such as raising children or dealing with aging members of the family. There was an extensive Parent Education program, a College Women's Volunteer Service, and Recreational Clubs for children and youths. The Institute's Psychology Department

⁷Joe Darden, Detroit: Race and Uneven Development, 4.

conducted research on the dynamics of children and parents in the family. Some of the Institute's researchers were particularly concerned with identifying the potentially delinquent child.

During the war years, the Institute provided special counselling services for families directly affected by the war through the death or absence of a spouse. The Wartime Services program also helped with fund-raising activities and developed nutritional programs for the special needs of families affected by the war. Specifically, Merrill-Palmer sought to help families who were having difficulty meeting their children's nutritional needs while involved in a wartime rationing program.

In 1940, the Institute legally changed its name from the Merrill-Palmer Motherhood and Home Training School to simply the Merrill-Palmer School. The Institute said that it wanted to "open its doors to young men and women as a result of the increased understanding of the influence that both parents have on family life and the individual developing within the home."⁸ In addition to this gesture about the value of men to the family, one social worker reported that the Parent Education program no longer had daytime classes because the fathers could not attend.⁹ This gesture,

⁸ "Faculty Meeting Reports", Oct. 1954, K.H.L.C.

⁹ Ibid., Feb. 1941

however, was superficial, as social workers continued to concentrate on mothers.

The Institute's name change related to the pursuit of increased status by social workers at this time. Very few of the social workers in the 1920's or 1930's were male and the Institute's leaders believed that an increased number of male staff could bring more legitimacy to the Institute. In the earlier period three times as many women had been in leadership positions at the Institute as men. During this period men began to replace female social workers in leadership positions, both at the national level and at the Institute.¹⁰ It was commonly asserted that men were more effective in administrative and leadership positions. This belief stemmed from the idea that a "real" profession was characterized by male dominance as with other professions such as medicine or law.¹¹

In 1940, the Institute saw another important development with the arrival of its first African-American graduate student, Ethel Childs Baker. At this time, however, African-American children were not yet allowed to participate fully in the services of the Institute. Baker experienced discrimination during the first few months at the Institute as a result of the policy. She was told to use separate

¹⁰Sally Brown, interview by author, March 22 1993

¹¹Trolander, Professionalism and Social Change, 51.

dining and washroom facilities from the other graduate students. Some white graduate students supported Ethel Baker, and the Institute's director, Edna Noble White, eventually reversed these discriminatory practises. This incident is an example of the ambivalent racial attitudes of the Institute. Such discriminatory attitudes changed slowly.¹²

POLICY OBJECTIVES

In the early 1950's the Merrill-Palmer Board of Directors stated its policy objectives. It justified the focus on middle-class clients by saying that the Institute wanted to study the "normal" family. At this time, they defined normality as white and middle-class. The Institute affirmed that its purpose was "to study human development and family life through the cycles of family life and its objective is to help individuals and families live more satisfactory lives."¹³ The Board of Directors did not mention any working-class reform objectives. African-American women and working-class women did not appear in their policy initiatives.

¹²Sally Brown, interview by author, March 22 1993.

¹³"Program Committee Reports-Review of Board Action 1950-1960", May 1953, Corporation Collection

The Institute's development program of 1957 further demonstrated its perspective. The Board of Directors organized a development Program in order to gather financial support from wealthy families in the Detroit area for the renovation of some of its older buildings. At a fund raising event prominent Merrill-Palmer faculty members explained the purpose of the Institute. They asserted that "the home situation is the single most powerful influence in the life of any individual" and that the Institute provided "living laboratories for studies in normal growth and development."¹⁴ A promotional pamphlet explained:

the Merrill-Palmer focus is on normal development. We focus on what is happy, not unhappy; what is wholesome, not unwholesome; for the keys to health are found in health itself.¹⁵

The Institute released an article by one of its social workers that illustrates this policy. In "The Potentially Delinquent Child: how teachers can identify him" the author stated that the delinquent child could be discovered through an I.Q. test because "the delinquent child will generally score lower than the average."¹⁶ She told teachers to look for "unhappy marriages or broken homes" and "more dependency

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Detroit Commission on Children and Youth 1958", Oct. 1958, K.H.L.C.

on welfare agencies by the family."¹⁷ She said that factors such as a general inadequacy of adults, boys who did not want to emulate their fathers and families that were "not sources of sound personality development and character foundation" could lead to delinquency.¹⁸

The factors that the social worker identified as contributing to delinquency were more likely to occur in working-class or single-parent families. She saw poverty as a pathology, caused by irresponsible adults who did not know how to take care of their money. The social worker expressed the traditional belief of the middle-class that poverty was the result of character deficiencies and not systemic problems like the economy.¹⁹ Social workers regarded a one-parent home as a situation that was potentially corruptive to children. This article demonstrates the belief that only the middle-class, two-parent household could be "normal" and that the "abnormal" was dangerous to society. The social workers of this period were willing to help middle-class families attain "normality", but they did not make the same effort to transform "abnormal" working-class families.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Trattner, From Poor Law to Welfare State, 31.

PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAM

In the Parent Education Program, social workers demonstrated the change in attitude from the earlier period. Social workers originally designed the parent education program to help parents understand the benefits of nursery school for their children. In the early period, the social workers displayed an unsympathetic attitude towards parents. During the 1940's and 1950's, social workers superficially displayed a more co-operative attitude.

In her report on the twenty-year progress of the Parent Education program, one social worker concluded that the program had changed dramatically from the early years of the 1920's. She wrote that the social workers of the 1920's had regarded the parents as nuisances and believed the parents were at fault for their children's bad behaviour. She added that most of the blame fell on the mothers' shoulders. The social worker congratulated the Institute on progressing so far from those early days. She stated that in those times it seemed that the staff spent most of their time feeling irritated with the mothers, and the mothers were mostly bewildered about the methods of the Merrill-Palmer workers. She said: "now the staff realize that they have to come together more with the parents, with more sympathy and

understanding".²⁰ She continued to point out the improvements in the program by stating:

in the past twenty years there had been big improvements in parent education, now no-one can question a program that will share knowledge with parents. Now we see that problems are not entirely the mother's fault.²¹

She wrote that the social workers of the 1940's wanted to know the whole family, demonstrated by the encouragement to men to attend the evening classes, although that was the only example she provided about the new perspective.

It is evident that this program was still geared specifically for middle-class families since there is no mention of parent education programs that dealt primarily with African-American families or with immigrant families. A 1942 Parent Education Booklet sent home to parents confirms the impression that the service was directed to a middle- or upper-class clientele.

The topic of the booklet was "setting a good example for your child". The social workers wanted to impress on the parents the importance of their example in influencing their children's behaviour. They used a scenario to impress this point: "why are children rude to maids?". According to the social workers the answer was the attitude of the parents:

²⁰ "Parent Education Reports 1925-1941", January 8 1940, K.H.L.C.

²¹ Ibid.

because we discuss our problems in getting good help in front of them, it gives them the impression that maids are people who are inferior and troublesome. Their loyalty to their parents produces their resentment and rudeness.²²

The social workers recommended that the parents refrain from complaining about their maids or other help in front of the children. Since this example was placed in the booklet as a situation that all the parents would immediately recognize, the social workers were obviously dealing with an affluent clientele.

In the Parent Education reports the social workers strongly advocated traditional gender roles within the family. They believed that dominance behaviour was determined by gender. In their view men were outwardly aggressive or dominant, while women were conniving and sly in their efforts to gain control. One booklet contained a report about married life entitled, "How dominant are we?". The article stated that an authoritarian attitude was the result of early childhood experience, and provided examples of how either partner might try to dominate the other in marriage.²³

For the husband, as the head of the household, the marriage may be his first experience of being in authority. He may like his first chance to dominate. Or the wife may promise to obey on her wedding day but meanwhile she is quietly planning to control her husband

²² "Parent Education Reports, 1941-1950," May 1942, K.H.L.C.

²³ Ibid.

in subtle ways, the velvet glove approach."²⁴

The social workers accepted the idea that the husband should be the authority figure in the marriage and tried to promote the traditional roles to middle-class women.

From 1942 to 1945, the Merrill-Palmer Institute focused its energies on the war effort. The Institute participated in numerous fund-raising activities for the war but its primary wartime contribution was in counselling those affected by the war. As a result, the Parent Education Service, as well as the majority of the Institute's programs, temporarily concentrated exclusively on wartime problems rather than everyday family issues. For example, from 1942 to 1943, the Merrill-Palmer staff engaged in their usual community speaking engagements, but the vast majority of the speeches related directly to the war.²⁵

The Merrill-Palmer counsellors held group meetings for people who had lost a spouse due to the war and on the problems that occurred in wartime marriages, as well as child care seminars that dealt with raising healthy children in the atmosphere of the war. Parents were advised on how to talk to their children about the war in seminars such as "helping them to understand that democracy must prevail."²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., Jan. 1943

²⁶ Ibid.

In the post-war period traditional gender role concepts were strengthened by the feeling that the security of the family unit was of utmost importance and that the traditional family was particularly vulnerable. Many family experts urged that women had the burden of preserving the family and used rhetoric about the importance of the home to convince middle-class women of their proper role.²⁷ After the war, the social workers at the Institute stressed the sanctity of the family, and implied that the family was vulnerable. They stated that the family would remain strong only if women stayed home to care for their husbands and children. By discussing the vulnerability of the family, social workers demonstrated the anxiety they felt about the stability of traditional gender roles.

Social workers at the Institute, like other American family experts, promoted traditional ideas about gender roles, and to some extent, applied the values to themselves. Most social workers at the Institute eventually married and left their jobs, though some returned to work when their children reached school age.²⁸ Committee reports described one young woman as "giving up her full time job for more than a full time job."²⁹ It is not clear, however, if this was

²⁷ May, Homeward Bound, 14.

²⁸ Sally Brown, interview by author, March 22 1993.

²⁹ Ibid.

conventional practice or a policy unofficially endorsed by the Institute, nor is there specific mention of social workers who chose to remain single. Like other social workers, they believed that their education allowed them to pursue a career before marriage, and they accepted that on marriage they would sacrifice this career.³⁰

At the first Parents' Meeting after the war, one Merrill-Palmer worker's remarks demonstrated the social workers' belief in the importance of home and family life. She stated that home life was even more valuable than any program that could be offered at the Institute:

Merrill-Palmer loves to have children at its Infant Service, Play Groups, Nursery School or Recreational Clubs but it is much finer to have them in the home. Home living is indispensable. We have reached a crisis in the world where either we learn to live together or we perish.³¹

She made the connection between the developing Cold War, anxiety about nuclear warfare, and the idea that the secure atmosphere of the home could create a more peaceful world. Their concept of a secure "home" meant a role of increased responsibility for women. According to this belief, women were expected to protect their families from the evils of the outside world with their constant nurturance. While the social workers' new attitude superficially diminished the

³⁰Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare", 583.

³¹Ibid., Feb. 1947

importance of their professional role in creating a better world, it increased their supervisory role with mothers, and hence their power. For example, later that year, at a presentation for another parents' group, one social worker explained that the "primary purpose of the Merrill-Palmer Institute is that of education for family living. The purpose of the staff is to learn, to serve and to study."³² While the social workers in this period overtly stressed the primacy of the family, in practice they still continued to define what form the family should take.

While the social workers extolled the virtues of the entire family, they continued to deal primarily with mothers. One parents' meeting in 1947 addressed the issue of sex education for children. The social worker noted that thirty-five people in total, including one African-American couple, were present at the meeting. Three of them were men.³³ The social worker's observation of the African-American couple's presence demonstrates that social workers were accustomed to dealing with both a predominately white group and a predominately female one.

The reports of the Parent Education program show that the social workers in the post-war years focused their services almost entirely on the role of the mother. In

³² Ibid., May 1947

³³ Ibid., Sept. 1947

parent discussion groups, the social workers assumed that the mother did not work outside the home and therefore could devote all her time to caring for the children and making them feel secure. In the majority of the reports, the father's role in creating this secure home atmosphere was completely ignored. The social workers assumed that the father was the sole breadwinner and therefore did not contribute to the creation of this nurturing atmosphere. In the post-war era, experts regarded this division of labour in parenting as a necessary requirement for properly socialized children.³⁴ This attitude perhaps served as a weapon against the growing number of middle-class married women who worked outside the home.³⁵

There seemed to be, however, an ambivalence about the potential of the mother's influence. On the one hand, the social workers promoted the security and nurturance found in the family unit, and the mother held the primary role in the creation of those conditions. On the other hand, despite this positive rhetoric, there was a tremendous scrutiny of the psychological state of the mother. Many discussions in the parents' meetings involved the correct balance a mother should keep between nurturing her children and fostering

³⁴ May, Homeward Bound, 146.

³⁵ Lynn Weiner, From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820-1980 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 89.

their independence. The mothers at the parent meetings seemed to have anxiety about becoming overly possessive or overly attentive mothers.

This contradictory attitude may be attributed to the mixed signals that the social workers sent about the powerful role of the mother. They stated that children needed the care that only a mother could give. Then they cautioned that children who spend too much time alone with their mother become too dependant and clinging.³⁶ The social workers included in one parents' newsletter a bibliography of important reference books for parents. The most highly recommended book was The Selfish Mother, a book that examined a mother's unhealthy relationship with her children.³⁷ Again we see how the mother was under intense psychological examination. The social workers demonstrated a fear of women's power over children, that according to Ehrenreich and English was common among experts during this period. Experts were concerned about raising children to be "competent" American citizens, something that women had primary control over.³⁸ In contrast, the father's role in nurturing the child was never mentioned. The social workers did not glorify the father's role, nor did they scrutinize it.

³⁶ Ibid., March 1948

³⁷ Ibid., Oct. 1949

³⁸ Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 233.

RECREATIONAL CLUBS

The Institute designed the Recreational Clubs Program, to study the development of children from pre-school age to the teen years and the group dynamics and group leadership behaviour in children and youths. The Clubs were held in various community meeting places, such as libraries, community centres, churches and Y.M.C.A. centres.^{3*} The children were predominantly white and middle-class, and were not selected for the clubs in any way. Social workers weighed, measured and administered I.Q. tests to the children. After these preliminaries, the children were left to themselves, as much as possible, to take part in games and other activities. The Merrill-Palmer staff observed and recorded the children's behaviour.

While they were observing the behaviour of these children for research in group dynamics, social workers were quick to notice when a child, especially a boy, did not adhere to the appropriate gender role. The staff were very concerned about the behaviour of one pre-school boy attending a club. They reported that he was not fitting in well and displayed some aggressive tendencies, but they were most concerned over the fact that he was playing with girls more

^{3*} "Recreational Clubs - Staff Committee Reports 1936-1950", Jan. 1946, K.H.L.C.

than with boys his age.⁴⁰ They had found him playing house with the girls and even acting as the "mommy", cradling dolls as babies. They concluded that he had problems adjusting to his gender role and blamed his behaviour on the boy's relationship with his mother.⁴¹ The Merrill-Palmer workers concluded the mother must be smothering the boy and that her excess attention was causing gender confusion. The social workers proposed giving him some special one-to-one counselling in which he could express his hostility to his mother in a controlled environment. The social workers predicted that the expression of hostility would then alleviate his gender confusion.⁴²

This incident also demonstrates the use of psychiatric theories and methods. Leighninger argues that throughout this period, social workers started to view psychiatry as the theoretical basis for the social work profession. They believed that the use of the psychiatric methods would further legitimize the professional nature of social work and increase its status, since psychiatry alluded to connections with the medical profession, and the emphasis on the individual removed social work from a focus on reform.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., Nov. 1948

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Leighninger, Social Work, 153.

In the boy's case, the social workers perceived the mother as the sole source of the problem, an attitude similar to that of the 1920's and 1930's when social workers had blamed mothers for their ignorance in the practical matters of child care, such as nutrition, cleanliness and immunization. In contrast to the earlier decades, the social workers of the 1940's and 1950's saw behaviour problems as the result of the mother's psychological difficulties. In these decades, the Merrill-Palmer workers believed that their role in solving the child's problems was not to give practical advice on child care but to help in resolving psychological maladjustments. Using psychoanalytic theories, they assumed that all children required for a healthy upbringing was the correct psychological attitude of their mother. If the mother was psychologically healthy, then she would instinctively know the correct way of raising her children.**

Social workers often praised working-class and African-American mothers for their instinctual mothering, and told middle-class women that this was a result of their contentment with their female role. Experts predicted that women who were unhappy with their "femaleness", a role requiring domesticity and a child-like state, would take out their frustration on their children, particularly their sons.

**Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 233.

Social workers believed it was their job to advise women of their ultimate power over the happiness of their children and exhort them to employ it correctly.⁴³

The reports from the Recreational Clubs also show that in this period there was more acceptance of religious differences among the children, at least for Jewish children. Jews were tolerated in the 1920's and 1930's as long as they did not deter other families from sending their children to the summer camp. In the late forties, the social workers dealt with the issue of religious difference in a more sympathetic manner. In the reports of 1949, the social workers addressed the issue of observing religious holidays in the youth clubs. The club committee wrote:

the staff has played down participation in holidays on a religious basis, with the exception of Jewish holidays since there are a proportionately large number of Jewish children in our clubs and we aim to have the children realize that the religious observances were not the same in different groups- but if they were understood they could be accepted and made the vehicle of interpersonal bonds⁴⁴

Thus, the committee had not only increased tolerance for religious differences but also made concessions to the Jewish children. The Institute staff moved beyond accepting Jews within the limits of white Gentiles' prejudices toward promoting tolerance as an ideal.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ "Recreational Clubs Staff Committee Reports", June 1949, K.H.L.C.

While Jewish children's presence increased, African-American children had a harder time finding the same acceptance. On April 12, 1946, the Merrill-Palmer Institute officially admitted African-American children to all the services of the school.⁴⁷ While African-American children received official approval, it is clear that there was still some trepidation about providing services for them. By the end of the 1940's some recreational clubs were set up in African-American neighbourhoods, but it was a longer process for those clubs to be established. For example, in the late 1940's, the committee decided to postpone the establishment of a new club in a African-American neighbourhood, stating: "we will withhold decision until we are more aware of the community's needs."⁴⁸ The committee brought in a woman "familiar with the area" to speak to the members about the community and the possibility of opening a successful club there. It seems that the Merrill-Palmer workers, who were at this time predominately white, were still uneasy about dealing with African-American children though they had accepted Jewish children.

⁴⁷ "Board of Directors Meetings", April 1946, Corporation Collection

⁴⁸ Ibid., Oct. 1949

COLLEGE WOMEN'S VOLUNTEER SERVICE

While the Merrill-Palmer Institute concentrated on the family, it did provide some services for college women during this period. College women were one group with whom the social workers of the 1920's and 1930's had an affinity. The College Women's Advisory Service had been one of the most comprehensive programs the Institute offered. In the early 1950's the name of the Advisory Service was changed to the Family Counselling Service.⁴⁹ This name change reflected changes in the service that had been occurring since the 1940's, as it concentrated less on professional guidance and career planning and more on pre-marital and marital counselling for college women. By the time the name of the service had been legally changed, the original intent of the program had been lost. The social workers had previously believed that educated women could pursue a career and contribute to the entire community and had used the service to make them aware of this. The social workers expected college women of the 1920's to have a career, marriage and participate in community service, though not all at the same time. The programs of the new service, the Family Counselling Service, assumed that college women's primary responsibility was to their families.

In 1951, another service was established that was

⁴⁹ "Counselling Services: Announcements", Jan. 1954, K.H.L.C.

designed especially for college women, the College Women's Volunteer Service, introduced to help co-ordinate college women who wanted to become involved in volunteer activities in the Detroit area. This program operated throughout the 1950's and was involved with numerous charities such as the U.S.O., the Red Cross, the Cancer Society, and the League for the Handicapped. The service also had its own "Workshops" where volunteers would spend time making items for fund-raising events or toys for needy children.³⁰

While the College Women's Advisory Service of the 1930's helped college women with their professional aspirations, the Volunteer Service of the 1950's concentrated on a more traditional role for women, demonstrating again the increased anxiety of that period over gender roles. This service reinforced conventional beliefs about the type of work that women should be involved with. The committee members put forth the objectives of the College Women's Volunteer Service, demonstrating an ambivalence about the proper role of educated women. The committee wrote that the purpose of the College Women's Volunteer Service was:

to bring college women together in fellowship in the large Detroit area, allowing them at the same time to exercise their professional skills - especially during the years when they have growing families and cannot take a full-time job, or in the years of later maturity

³⁰ "College Women's Volunteer Service Reports 1951-1955", April 1952, K.H.L.C.

when they are able to devote more time to community service³¹

In this passage, there were two conflicting ideas about college women. First, the committee asserted that these women should be able to exercise their "professional skills". The use of this phrase placed college women in a distinct category of people who had specialized knowledge or skills, but only in a limited, qualified sense. While they may have possessed professional skills, they could not use them if they would interfere with their most important role, that of being mothers.

The passage demonstrates a greater ambivalence about the role of college than was demonstrated during the 1920's and 1930's. It acknowledges educated women's privileged position, yet accepts that their gender requires a primary role in homemaking. As the social workers asserted that women "cannot" take a full-time job with young children at home, they demonstrated what they believed was the ideal behaviour for women. It is true, however, that even middle-class women were not fully conforming to this ideal. After World War II, middle-class wives constituted the fastest growing section of the work force. In addition, the decade from 1950 to 1960 saw the greatest increase in white married

³¹ Ibid.

women joining the labour force.³²

The college women participated in volunteer activities that also conformed to traditional gender roles. In the 1953 reports, the social workers listed the women's major volunteer activities. They performed minor clerical work such as filing and answering telephones, they volunteered at children's groups, and worked in nurseries. They helped to provide recreational afternoons for the disabled in the League for the Handicapped and visited the elderly in nursing homes. In the Cancer Society volunteer group the women helped with sewing new bandages, and wrapping packages for the cancer patients. In some cases, the women helped by tutoring elementary school children.³³

In none of the volunteer activities were the women allowed to help in a supervisory capacity. They did not help with any organizational or policy matters in these charity groups. Despite their education, there was no indication that they used their specialized knowledge. The Volunteer Service did not place the women on the basis of which degree they received. There was no mention of women who volunteered in any sort of a business or commercial capacity.³⁴

Although the women did valuable work, a traditional concept

³² Lynn Weiner, From Working Girl to Working Mother, 89.

³³ Ibid., June 1953

³⁴ Ibid.

of female roles determined what type of work it was. The college women were involved in traditional "female" areas of work, such as teaching, nursing and social work, and they were never in a position of authority either in supervising others or in making policy decisions. The college women did not serve on any committees or boards, even though their education would have given them the privilege of helping in such a way.

Most of the college women who used the Volunteer Service were full time homemakers. Despite their education, the majority of them had proceeded directly from college to marriage and children. Many of them spent numerous hours each week helping at various organizations.³³ The Volunteer Reports do not indicate how satisfied the college women were with participating only in volunteer activities, or if some expressed a desire to do something else with their time. We can assume, however, that they were conscious of the expectations placed on them at that time to concentrate on their homes and families. Even while being presented awards in recognition of outstanding volunteer service, the college women all identified themselves by their husbands' names (ie. "Mrs. Joe Smith"). Despite their accomplishments, the college women followed social conventions in identifying themselves this way and were aware of social pressures to

³³ Ibid., Sept. 1952

conform to a certain role. As Elaine Tyler May argues, this trend was prevalent throughout the United States, as many women felt they should embrace a role emphasizing domesticity rather than accomplishments.^{3*}

CONCLUSION

In the services offered by the Institute, the attitude of the social workers to their female clients was different from that of the earlier period of the 1920's and 1930's. Previously, the workers had reached out to a working-class clientele with a specific reform objective. The social workers of the 1940's and 1950's did not interact with working-class, African-American or immigrant women, as a result of policy objectives that defined the focus of the Institute on the "normal" family and targeted middle-class families. Social workers had no interest in making the working-class "normal" during this time.

The policy objectives were influenced by changes occurring during that period within the social work profession. At that time, social workers were searching for ways to increase their status as a profession. They began to rely more on the theories found in psychiatry as the basis for their own counselling work. In this field, the emphasis

^{3*} May, Homeward Bound, 204.

was on the individual or on problems found within a family unit rather than with social reform. Social workers regarded this focus as more prestigious since it implied a connection to the medical profession.³⁷

As May has stated, the effects of the war also played a role in changing the attitude of social workers. After the war, most people experienced a sense of anxiety about the future and saw security within the nuclear family. The workers of the Merrill-Palmer Institute were also affected by the post-war anxiety, resulting in an increased belief that strict gender roles were essential for the preservation of the family.³⁸ Merrill-Palmer workers saw women as possessing one primary role - motherhood. They, like other experts in the United States, focused their anxiety on middle-class women since they were in a position to challenge traditional roles. Merrill-Palmer workers were even ambivalent about professional aspirations among college women, a group that these workers had supported in earlier years.

Outwardly, the Merrill-Palmer women displayed a deference to the wishes of the family and were not as openly critical as they had been previously. The social workers, however, still believed that they had the right to supervise

³⁷ Leighninger, Social Work, 151

³⁸ May, Homeward Bound, 140.

the women because of their professional training. They regarded their supervision as essential since women had to become child-like in order to be good mothers. They put more pressure on women to have the perfect family and they blamed any problems on the emotional difficulties of the mother. They used guilt to make middle-class women reluctant to challenge traditional roles by stating that women who were unhappy with total domesticity were neurotic and maladjusted. The social workers saw themselves as temporarily exempt from this domestic role because of their education, but most saw marriage and children as their ultimate goal.

While we can find out little about the clients' attitude from the reports in this period, we can make some tentative conclusions about their reactions. At this time, the public image of social workers was improving and people were more willing to seek their help for temporary counselling.^{3*} In addition, women were under a tremendous pressure during this time to have the perfect family. In the post-war period, many social commentators linked a presumed breakdown of the family to the destruction of the entire society and held women, especially middle-class women, responsible for the well-being of the family. Middle-class women were quick to turn to professional help because they had much higher expectations for their families and a greater fear of failure

^{3*} Leighninger, Social Work, 212

in this area.*° Middle-class women were, in fact, quite active in participating in the Institute's services. They believed the services were valuable as evidenced by their high participation rate. Probably many of the full-time mothers felt supported and valued at the Institute, since social workers emphasized the important role of women in the society. Because there was, however, more pressure on women to raise perfect children and to embrace domesticity, those who were unhappy may have felt guilty or isolated by their feelings.

As social workers placed more emphasis on the family and the concept of "normality" during this time, it dramatically altered the relationship between both the workers and the female clients. The concept of the "secure family" demanded female adherence to strict gender roles. While the social workers and their clients during this period were from the same class, their relationship may not have been completely harmonious, since social workers stressed there was only one legitimate role for women. Middle-class women who accepted this role probably found acceptance at the Institute, while those who were discontent may have hidden their true feelings. In addition, the concept of "normality" pushed those women who were not white and middle-class so far into the background that they became invisible.

*°May, Homeward Bound, 204.

CHAPTER THREE: THE 1960'S

The 1960's brought dramatic changes to Merrill-Palmer. During this decade, the Merrill-Palmer School officially became the Merrill-Palmer Institute. The Institute and its workers were greatly influenced by the transformation that American society was undergoing at the time. A new atmosphere created by the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty caused significant changes in the programs and attitude demonstrated at the Institute. However, Institute workers did not drastically improve their condescending attitude toward their clients. In fact, by the end of the 1960's, they were becoming increasingly removed from the everyday lives of the people they were supposed to be helping. This physical and ideological distance served to further alienate the two groups.

The change was not restricted to the Merrill-Palmer Institute. From the beginning of the 1960's, social workers in general began to change the focus of their work. The 1950's had been characterized by an emphasis on the white middle-class family. They had concentrated on solving individual family problems through counselling. Social work methods during that period relied heavily on psychological and particularly Freudian theories, which began to lose their appeal as the Cold War progressed. In the early part of the 1960's, experts began to worry about American society, particularly its children and whether they could meet the

demands of the Cold War. If the society could not handle this competition, experts warned, disaster in the shape of World War III would surely follow.¹ In the 1960's, the Institute kept its psychological focus, but it increasingly moved away from the influence of psychoanalysis. It focused on the individual rather than the social group but used cultural or social systems explanations for individual behaviour.

Another cause for concern was the supposed deterioration of African-American families which according to the Moynihan report had its roots in the economic instability of African-American men. This report focused on the failure of the African-American family and stated that this failure was characterized by female-headed households. African-American women, who had been regarded as natural mothers in the 1940's and 1950's, were now found to be lacking in parenting skills.

With these problems in mind, social workers turned from the "healthy, normal" family to a concern with what was wrong with American society. The two most obvious problems were intertwined, racism and poverty.² During this period, the government funded a large number of programs to help solve these problems. Programs such as Head Start were nationwide and heavily supported by the government. Social workers as a

¹ Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 225.

² Ibid., 233

whole were supportive of the aims of the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement. They endorsed these programs, which were even more attractive due to the federal funding.

American society became more concerned about the problems of racism and poverty as the decade progressed. While social workers focused on these issues as well, they never became fully involved because of their concerns over professional behaviour. In fact, the concept of professionalism itself may imply a commitment to the preservation of the existing social structure. The dilemma over what constitutes professional behaviour had plagued social workers since the 1920's. There were traditionally two schools of thought. One view held that social workers could not help individuals until the social root of the problem had been located and solved. In this view, social workers are active participants in social issues and are encouraged to fight systematic problems. The opposing view holds that the place of the professional social worker is in counselling individuals and helping them to cope with their situation the best they can. This view emphasizes professional regulations and education. In this concept of social work, professionals do not attempt to change the social structure but help those whom the system has abused or neglected. For the most part, this view has been the

prevailing one.³

The dilemma over the involvement of social workers in social change was further complicated by the aims of the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement. The theme of the War on Poverty was to provide career and educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, particularly for minority groups. Often "the poor helping the poor" was the means of assisting an entire community. The civil rights movement advocated the idea that African-Americans could overcome racism through community action. Later, more militant groups demanded that African-Americans become empowered and stated that they did not need the help of "outsiders." In the tense and often violent atmosphere of the time, white professional social workers were reluctant to become directly involved in these issues.

While more African-Americans were gaining in influence in the social work profession, in the 1960's the majority of professional social workers were still white and middle-class.⁴ They felt that their presence would be resented in confrontations over the issues of social change. At the Merrill-Palmer Institute, the social workers during this period were still mostly white, with more African-American and minority workers joining the ranks. The social workers

³Leighninger, Search For Identity, 210

⁴Leighninger, Search For Identity, 210.

in leadership positions were mostly white and male.³

The programs developed during the 1940's and 1950's such as the Parent Education program and the College Women's Volunteer Service were discontinued in the 1960's, quickly fading into the background as the Institute re-examined its focus. During the 1960's, American society was forced to look at the problems of racism and the deprivation of the urban environment. The Merrill-Palmer Institute responded to the social activism on these issues but did not pursue an active role in addressing them. One reason for their passivity was division among social workers generally about their role. Some felt they should be activists and should help their clients by directly challenging the conditions that created their problems. Others believed that their role was best limited to helping clients with their individual problems and acting as personal advocates rather than opponents of the entire system.

Another factor affecting the involvement of social workers was the desire of poor people during the 1960's to help themselves. Programs developed during that period focused on the empowerment of the poor and allowing those who were disadvantaged rather than outsiders to supervise their own development. This emphasis removed the middle-class social work professionals from the community and replaced

³Sally Brown, interview, March 22 1993

them with indigenous workers called paraprofessionals. Working-class African-Americans frequently confronted middle-class whites about their racist attitudes in the 1960's. As a result, white social workers hesitated to become directly involved with the social problems faced by their clients. As the decade of the 1960's progressed, the Merrill-Palmer Institute moved away from direct involvement in the communities and lives of their clients. As a result, there were few programs offered by the Institute that put professional social workers in direct contact with their clients. Social workers organized and directed few programs that were specifically designed to meet the needs of working-class people. The few that they did provide will be examined to show that increasingly distant relationship. Instead, the social workers engaged in individual counselling, research and educational activities.

At the beginning of the 1960's, the Board of Directors began to express some concern about the overall direction of the Institute. The program committee wrote in their 1962 report that;

in the past, the Institute has been concerned with "middle-class families" and "normal" development. Should we now become concerned with the problems of the inner city such as the disturbed child, delinquency, family problems, or parents without partners?*

As this excerpt demonstrates, the Institute was moving in a

* "Program Committee Minutes". 1962, Corporation Collection

new direction but was uncertain about the prospect of breaking so dramatically with the policies implemented in the 1940's and 1950's. In fact, throughout this period the Institute was plagued by an intense ambivalence about their official focus and the nature of their practical work, which was solved by a retreat from community involvement to a focus on education and research. The few community programs that the Institute did offer were the Skillman Center for Youth and the Head Start program. The Merrill-Palmer Institute also worked with the Detroit Foster Homes Project. In these programs we see that the focus had moved away from an examination of middle-class families and their problems to one primarily concerned with working-class families. The issue of race was important during this period, as the Moynihan report focused attention on the "deficiencies" of the African-American family, particularly targeting African-American women for scrutiny by social workers. In addition, the concept of proper gender roles still played a large part in determining the type of relationship that existed between the social workers and their clients.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

The Detroit Foster Homes Project was one of the community programs in which the Institute participated during

this period. Social workers involved in this project, which ran from 1961 to 1967, demonstrated their acceptance of traditional gender roles.⁷ The project required the assistance of many community organizations. As a result, the Merrill-Palmer Institute limited its involvement to one of raising necessary funds and conducting research on its progress. The foster homes were referred to in Merrill-Palmer reports as a "treatment resource for disturbed boys."⁸

In this study, fifty boys and their foster families were interviewed to evaluate the success of the project. Social workers conducted surveys to evaluate the mental and emotional adjustment of the boys, who were also judged for any sign of delinquency. While the study was supposedly focusing on the entire foster family, the main source of information came from interviews with the foster mother. Interviewers were not required to administer the survey questions to the foster fathers, and they did not discuss the relevance of the foster fathers to the boys' adjustment. In addition, no female foster children were included in the study. The director of the Detroit Foster Homes Project wrote in his evaluation about the effects of foster care on

⁷ "Detroit Foster Homes Project", 1963, Corporation Collection

⁸ Ibid.

boys but ignored the issue of girls being placed in foster care altogether. *

In this report there was a pamphlet containing a short story entitled "Only People Cry" about the pathetic life of Ellen the foster child and her hope of finding a "real family" to love her some day. This pamphlet was presumably used to generate funds for the project, and the accompanying story was designed to evoke a sympathetic response in potential donors. The organizers of the project were willing to use the image of female foster children in order to gain support for the foster home cause but to ignore them in practice. At these time, many experts were concerned about the ability of American boys to become the future leaders of the society.¹⁰

In 1965 the Merrill-Palmer Institute began its involvement in another community program, the federally funded Head Start program for disadvantaged children, as part of the government's "war on poverty." Research had shown that poor and African-American children were likely to do poorly in their first few years of school. Childcare experts suggested that these children were raised in a "deprived" learning environment lacking enough intellectual stimulation to prepare them for school. Experts also demonstrated these

* Ibid.

¹⁰ Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 220.

children had great difficulty in catching up to their peers in academic achievement. The Head Start program was designed to provide an intensive remedial session for children likely to be unprepared for their first year of school. The extra attention given to children seemed to bring them up to par with children from a more enriched environment.¹¹

The long term goal of this project was to provide educational opportunity for the underprivileged. Head Start organizers hoped that giving children an equal chance to succeed academically would lead to future equality in employment prospects. Many of the children benefitting from the program were African-American or ethnic minorities. The developers of the program hoped that this educational approach would increase the number of minority persons able to pursue professional careers in the future.¹²

Since Head Start was a federally funded program, the Merrill-Palmer Institute had to follow specific guidelines regarding the organization and implementation of the program. Social workers who supervised the local Head Start program were issued the national guide book. Unfortunately, this is the only evidence in the files about the Institute's Head Start Program. In the first instructional guide Head Start was described as a "summer program for children in low-

¹¹ Ibid., 234.

¹² Ibid.

income, poverty stricken communities, underdeveloped in speech and reading abilities."¹³ Tom Levin, in the introduction, reported on the success of the program in helping poor African-American children. The next section of the guide was devoted to a political controversy involving some Head Start staff in another chapter of the program.

An undisclosed source had accused certain Head Start staff of using their involvement in the program as a front for engaging in civil rights activism. This same source accused the staff members of using Head Start funds and office supplies in their protest activities. This was strongly criticized by Senator John Stennis of Mississippi, a Southern conservative Democrat, who felt that too many of the Head Start staff were using the federal funds inappropriately. He reported that some staff had even been arrested in connection with protests over civil rights and the Vietnam war.¹⁴ Sargent Shriver, spokesperson for the Head Start program, dismissed this criticism. He assured critics that any inappropriate use either of Head Start funds or program time would be dealt with, that employees would not be paid with Head Start funds for any involvement in civil rights work and that the Head Start program would not be

¹³Head Start Project Reports, 1965, K.H.L.C.

¹⁴Ibid.

affiliated with such activities.¹³

Even in the first pages of the Head Start guide, the program organizers were subjected to political pressure. Head Start employees were cautioned about their civil rights activities and reminded of the need to keep those activities separate. The caution strikes at the heart of social work's main dilemma- the question of how involved social workers should be in directly protesting social conditions. Even in a program such as Head Start with its underlying motivations of social restructuring, workers had to keep a superficially "objective" facade. For the Merrill-Palmer Institute, its involvement with Head Start did not initiate social activism but served to reinforce the Institute's commitment to a "professional" detachment from social issues. In addition, there is little evidence of the nature of the local Head Start program.

The manual stated that information was required from the Head Start parents regarding their reaction to the program. Gender played a large role in determining the information received about the Head Start project. In the guide, teachers were told that they should deal with the mother of the Head Start child or, if the father had custody of the child, then the teachers should deal with the step-mother.

¹³ Ibid.

Teachers were to deal with fathers only as a last resort.¹⁶ The Head Start program assumed that mothers had the primary responsibility of the child and were therefore the only people who could accurately respond to the questions. In addition, the staff of the Merrill-Palmer Head Start program were predominately women, but we do not know if there was an explicit preference for female teachers in this program.¹⁷

The Head Start workers believed that it was also important to get information on the mothers' behaviour. The Head Start organizers instructed their staff to obtain information regarding the behaviour of the mothers, such as what they did in their spare time, their reading habits, their social activities and their hobbies. The questionnaire asked if the mothers attended church services and whether they brought their children along.¹⁸ According to the manual, this information was essential to discovering what kind of an environment the child lived in. The responsibility for this environment clearly rested on the behaviour of mothers since fathers were not asked any of these questions.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The interviews and questionnaires also attempted to determine community reaction to the Head Start program. On the basis of the survey, the Head Start program was successful. The remedial program did seem to make an improvement in the abilities of the children. Children performed much better on school-preparedness tests after completing the Head Start program. Just as importantly, the program seemed to be well accepted in the communities, particularly among African-American families. Early Head Start reports stated that "in general Negroes participated more in the program and considered it more worthwhile."²⁰

Child care experts in the 1960's were concerned about the intellectual growth of American children, a concern that targeted women, particularly African-American women, for scrutiny. The expert's concerns were the result of several factors. One factor was the Cold War and the perceived need for American children to compete with their Russian peers. In the book, For Her Own Good, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English argue that after the success of the Russian Sputnik project, experts became obsessed with comparing Russian and American children. They found American children too "soft" and worried about American children being able to face the Russian enemy.²¹

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good, 231.

In the 1940's and 1950's child care experts and social workers had stressed the need for women to identify with their children as much as possible in order to nurture them properly. The experts believed that mothers had an expressive role in the child's development. In other words, the mother simply had to bond with the child and provide for its emotional needs. Parents were cautioned to worry more about their child's social adjustment than his or her academic or intellectual achievements. This attitude changed as child care experts started to believe that American children were falling behind Russian children in terms of creativity and scientific ability. By the beginning of the 1960's, there was a sense of urgent competition with the Russian children. Experts predicted that the future of the world rested on how well prepared American children were to face the challenges of the Cold War and the Space race.²²

Women, who had the primary responsibility for raising children, were now given the task of preparing their children for this competition. They could no longer just provide for the emotional needs of their children, but they had to develop their intellectual abilities, and push them towards greater "I.Q." development. Of course, since mothers had such an enormous responsibility, experts said it was necessary to examine their behaviour. If they did not

²² Ibid.

possess the necessary skills for developing academic achievement then how could they pass them on to their children? Women's behaviour was recorded and judged for a possible deficiency in intellectual skills.²³

African-American mothers came under even more intense scrutiny than white women. Previously, African-American women had been praised by some child care experts for their superior ability to bond with their children. They had been commended for their purportedly instinctual nurturing abilities, and white women had been told to emulate their emotional mothering. In the 1960's these perceived qualities became a liability for African-American women. Creating a comfortable emotional environment was no longer good enough for proper parenting, and experts found African-American women to be lacking in the areas of intellectual stimulation. The official term for this problem was "cultural deprivation", and it targeted attention on the "parenting deficiencies" of working-class minority women.²⁴

The Moynihan Report alleging the deterioration of the African-American family, published in 1965, also focused attention on African-American mothers. The report, conducted to determine the status of African-Americans, advocated that the federal government provide resources that would enable

²³ Ibid., 234

²⁴ Ibid.

African-Americans to participate fully in the society.²³

This meant no longer simply protecting the legal rights of African-Americans but actually providing programs that would improve their economic and educational situation. The report stated that one of the primary factors affecting the economic situation of African-Americans was the deterioration of their families, as demonstrated by the high rate of female-headed households and illegitimate children.²⁴

Moynihan argued that since African-American men had no stable place in the economic system, a situation stemming from slavery, they could not be strong husbands and fathers. As a result, marriages dissolved and women had to raise the children and provide income unassisted. The children therefore did not grow up in stable homes. As a result, African-American men left school early and were not able to find jobs that would pay a family wage, leading to the continuation of the cycle. Experts suggested that African-American women were too "strong" and were usurping African-American men's rightful masculine role, creating a so-called "black matriarchy." Many commentators called for African-American women to restrict themselves to a traditional female

²³ Lee Rainwater, The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), 6.

²⁴ Ibid.

role.²⁷

Though it is difficult to make specific reference to the Detroit Head Start program because of lack of local evidence, there is some similarity between this program and another local Merrill-Palmer project, referred to in this thesis as the Home Visitation Program. In the mid 1960's, social workers participated in a program that had many of the same objectives as Head Start but was conducted at home rather than in a school environment. Merrill-Palmer staff went into a local housing project and provided some pre-school instruction. The project focused on young African-American mothers, who were likely to have children at risk of falling behind at school.

Social workers discovered that the children were extremely quiet and were reluctant to play in the house. The mothers explained to the social workers that their children had been raised to be "good." The mothers remarked that their children did not "give any trouble" to anyone. The social workers felt that this situation did not provide the children enough opportunity to develop their verbal skills or their conceptual abilities through play. They encouraged the children to be more rambunctious. This directive initially disturbed the mothers. In another aspect of the program, the social workers read books to the children. They were

²⁷ Ibid.

surprised to find that the mothers were more interested in the stories than their children. When asked about this, one of the young mothers commented that she needed to have her own childhood before she would be ready to be a parent.²⁸

In this case, there is evidence of a complex relationship between the two groups of women. The social workers still felt that they had the right, by virtue of their professional status, to intervene in poor women's childrearing. The young mothers were reluctant to give up their accustomed ways but were persuaded by social workers that the new practices would benefit their children. In addition the sessions benefited the mothers because they had never been read to. This program is an example of clients weighing the advantages and disadvantages of participation in a program and tolerating the intrusion of social workers when participation benefitted them. The relationship in this case mirrors the findings of Linda Gordon, with both groups trying to realize their own objectives.²⁹

In 1968, the Institute began its last real community program. This was a project designed around the War on Poverty's theme of opportunity for working-class youths. The Institute developed the Skillman Center for youths as a "sort of community center where there would be an opportunity for

²⁸Sally Brown, interview, March 22 1993

²⁹Linda Gordon, "Family Violence", 470.

discussion groups and recreational activities."³⁰ The purpose of the center was to "prepare working-class youths for some sort of job skill" and to act as an informal recreational place for working-class youths.³¹ The program was supervised by the Merrill-Palmer Institute, but most of the community center work was not performed by the Institute's social workers. Instead, the Institute relied on non-professional people hired from the community and on volunteers, including some Merrill-Palmer graduate students.

This kind of community center was a popular program of the late 1960's. Job training programs arose from the concern over providing opportunity rather than counselling for working-class youths, especially minority youths. Social workers focused more on the immediate problems of career advancement for underprivileged youth rather than on their emotional and mental adjustment.³²

The absence of the professional social workers from the community center can be explained by another focus of the War on Poverty - that the best approach consisted of "the poor helping the poor."³³ In the 1960's, community action

³⁰ "Program Committee Minutes", 1968, Corporation Collection

³¹ Ibid.

³² Judith Ann Trolander, Professionalism and Social Change: From the Settlement House Movement to Neighbourhood Centers 1886 to the Present (New York, 1987), 164.

³³ Ibid.

advocates criticized the traditional social programs where the poor were helped by "outsiders". They regarded bringing middle-class professionals into a poor neighbourhood to provide services as paternalistic and ultimately counterproductive. These critics felt that working-class people would benefit more from services provided by people from the community.³⁴

This criticism sparked a movement towards the increasing use of indigenous workers in community centers. While professional social workers might supervise, many of the daily activities were carried out by workers from the community. These new "social workers" who did not possess professional education became known as para-professionals. This was the case with the Skillman Center.³⁵ The "unskilled" para-professionals bridged the ever-widening gap between the middle-class professionals and their working-class clientele.³⁶

In the early period of the 1920's and 1930's the social workers themselves had gone into working-class communities. In the community programs of the 1960's the social workers tended to take a more distanced, supervisory role. During

³⁴ Leighninger, Search for Identity, 215

³⁵ As a result of the use of para-professionals rather than Merrill-Palmer social workers, there are no detailed records of the daily activities of the Skillman Center.

³⁶ Ibid.

this period, the Home Visitation Program was the only one where Merrill-Palmer staff were clearly working directly with clients. Due to the new approach that the Institute was pursuing, the social workers had less direct contact with their working-class clientele than they had had in previous decades. Instead the Merrill-Palmer workers turned to research and educational activities rather than direct involvement with the social problems of their working-class clients. They seemed to be more comfortable dealing with those social issues in an academic environment.

RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Most of the work that the professional social workers performed at the Institute during this period was academic research. The Head Start Project files are filled with research reports conducted to test the theoretical foundations on which the program rested. There were examinations of preschool behaviour, father absence, family sociology and cognitive skills among low-income children.³⁷

Since Head Start was based on the theory of cultural and educational deprivation, most of these studies included information about the families' behaviour as well as the children's. The researchers intended to demonstrate the

³⁷ "Head Start Project Reports", 1968, K.H.L.C.

deprived environment which produced the intellectually underdeveloped child. They subjected the interviews and surveys to the same gender and race biases found in the project manual. For example, in most research studies, the researchers obtained the data primarily from the mothers of the children.

One particular research study conducted by the Merrill-Palmer Institute examined the connection between authority figures in the home and the child's preschool behaviour. The report stated that there was a connection between desirable preschool behaviours and higher scores on intelligence tests. The research was based on the theory that children needed a hierarchy of authority in the home. If decisions came from a number of sources, researchers believed the child would display less desirable behaviours, and score lower on intelligence tests.

The researchers concluded that in terms of the child's development, "the most desirable behaviours come from an environment where there is a central source of decisions: the mother."³⁰ While this view might have given women approval for having authority over their children, it also maintained the concept that mothers were personally responsible for their success or failure. By contrast, fathers were largely ignored as possible contributors to their children's

³⁰ Ibid.

intellectual growth. The influence of fathers was only noticed when they were absent from the home. There were a few studies which examined the effects of absent fathers, but even those studies did not credit them with much influence on academic achievement, even to the point of being interchangeable with other men. One study commented that: "in very few cases did the absence of the father mean the absence of a male figure in the child's life."^{3*} This implied that it was beneficial to the child to have a male figure in its life but that it did not have to be the father. Social workers held contradictory assumptions, that the traditional father-headed household was the most desirable family structure, but that fathers had minimal importance in childrearing. This view was common not only at the Institute but also at the national level.

There were signs among the research reports, however, that the conventional view might be losing favour with some social workers. One Merrill-Palmer study, conducted in 1965, challenged some of the traditional research methods, and criticized the significance of intelligence tests in determining future academic performance. The research report suggested that intelligence tests may only show what children have already experienced, not their full potential. It also raised the question of cultural bias in these tests, urged

^{3*} Ibid.

the use of culture-fair or culture-free tests, and questioned the basic assumptions on which intelligence tests were based. The study suggested that minority children had been unfairly categorized as less intelligent. It stated:

Educators have taken it for granted that intelligence is a function of a child's ability to cope with symbol systems. While this may be true of the vast majority of white, middle class children there may be other criteria that may be indicative of intellectual potential in less advantaged children. Perhaps there should be more of a focus on problem solving of a practical nature, on manipulative rather than verbal skills.⁴⁰

By 1965, there was some re-evaluation of research methods and consequently a re-evaluation of some of the myths about working-class and minority children's intelligence.

Another study, conducted in 1968, examined the issue of gender in research methods. This study criticized researchers who relied solely on data obtained from wives to document family life. The researcher suggested possible reasons for the practice, such as that it was cheaper to interview only one person rather than both parents, or that researchers wished to de-empathize marital conflict and disagreements between spouses. The report states:

In the "ideal" American family, couples marry for love and remain loving companions throughout. Research methods which might challenge this cherished belief of married life by indicating that it does not represent the norm tend to be avoided.⁴¹

⁴⁰Research Reports, K.H.L. Collection, 1965

⁴¹Ibid.

This study examined the decision-making differences between husbands and wives, criticized American husbands, and contended that women were only allowed to make family decisions in areas that the husband perceived to be unimportant. It stated:

husbands perceive as wife dominated only those decisions the enactment of which involves time consuming tasks. American husbands do not wish to take on bothersome tasks which are not crucial and take too much time from their leisure time.⁴²

This study, conducted by a woman, was one of the first at the Institute that was openly critical of gender roles within marriage. In the past, the social workers did not analyze the implications of gender roles but distanced themselves from these concerns by their identification with their profession. They felt that their professional status placed them in a different category from other women and so they did not examine issues that could be common to all women. This study, conducted in 1968, was still more the exception than the rule but was a significant new development, demonstrating perhaps the beginnings of feminist theories.

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Besides involving themselves in a number of research studies, Merrill-Palmer social workers concentrated on the

⁴² Ibid.

education of fellow social workers. Through the 1960's, the Institute staff became more interested in developing the academic component of social work. It was within the academic realm that the social workers were able to explore the complex social issues of the day.

Throughout the 1960's, there was a progression in the undergraduate and graduate courses from a focus on the normal family development courses of the 1950's to an examination of social issues such as racism. The Institute offered a core of social work courses which addressed family problems within a psychological framework. These courses dealt with issues such as children's mental and emotional development and relationships between family members. In each year, however, there was at least one course which specifically dealt with societal issues. In 1962, for example, the Institute offered such courses as "Human Development and Human Behaviour", "Child Development Laboratory", "Teaching Family Life Courses" and one course called "Community Change and the Role of the Professional Person". The outline for the latter course said that it was "open to teachers, social workers, nurses, clergymen, community agency personnel and others interested in exploring ways of working with children and families in mixed racial, religious, ethnic and social class neighbourhoods."⁴³

⁴³ "Workshops-Reports", 1963, K.H.L.C.

By 1964, the course had been altered slightly and retitled "The Urban Community and Social Change." The new course outline stated: "the constant changes which urban communities experience present both a problem and a challenge to the professional person," and promised that the course would "assess on-going attempts at solutions to problems of urban living."⁴⁴ In 1965, the course had been retitled "The Inner-City Family" and was designed for "professional people whose work in the classroom or in the community is bringing them into contact with the problems of the inner-city."⁴⁵ During the course:

Attention will be given to a) the nature of the inner-city community, its people, renewal and resources b) the organization and values of inner-city families c) nature and impact of deprivation among the urban population d) aspects and approaches to work with inner-city families⁴⁶

The course about the inner-city family and community continued until 1969 when it was replaced by one entitled "Racism - An American Problem: Black and White Perspectives." Even the presentation of the course outline was different. Previous course calendars had been presented in a neutral-coloured, plain pamphlet. The 1969 pamphlet displayed on its cover a brick wall covered with the names of people such as

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1969

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Thomas Jefferson, Shirley Chisholm, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These names appeared to be spray-painted and the caption at the top of the pamphlet read "What's your graffiti?" The pamphlet used popular images to demonstrate that the course was relevant to current issues.⁴⁷

The course description said that it was open to "all interested persons who wish to read and explore in depth the contemporary viewpoints of others and their own."⁴⁸ The focus was on the stereotypes and prejudices found in such fields as education, housing and child-rearing. The outline also described a novel format for a Merrill-Palmer class, since discussions would be combined with lectures, and the emphasis would be expected to shift from the objective to the personal with each person in the class presenting their most intense experiences with racism. The course outline read:

Hoped for outcomes are that participants will find that "they" and not "others" will have to work at eliminating racism as it affects their own lives and spawns responsibility and revolt. All participants are expected to become more conscious of racism as a problem demanding immediate action towards solution.⁴⁹

The reference to "they" and not "others" emphasized the need for everyone to address racism but may have been especially

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1969

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

directed at white students, who still composed a majority of the student body.³⁰ The Institute's teaching faculty was becoming more integrated in the 1960's, and while the majority of the students were white, a sizable number were African-American or minority students. The increased integration of students and faculty caused a more sympathetic atmosphere to develop at the Institute.³¹ While the student body was becoming more racially and ethnically integrated, it is important to note that all the students probably came from similar class backgrounds. The class was directed to people with different viewpoints but who likely had similar goals since they were all attending college.

Throughout this period the direction of the undergraduate and graduate courses moved from focusing on so-called normal development to concern with the problems of the inner city. As the decade came to a close, the Institute had developed some radically new courses that called for a total re-evaluation of American society. The course on racism adopted many of the new images of that period with its references to civil rights heroes and its "graffiti" cover.

The "radical" ideas demonstrated in the Institute's academic field provided a marked contrast to its lack of substantial involvement with its inner-city clientele. The

³⁰Sally Brown, interview, March 22 1993

³¹Ibid.

Institute seemed to be more comfortable in addressing these social issues in the academic realm with fellow professionals. While the 1969 course on racism professed to be open to all interested persons, it still remained a university course designed for undergraduates. The tuition charged for this course (approximately \$300.00) would have prevented working-class people from participating in those discussions. The influence of the activism of the 1960's and the concern for a new social equality affected the development of the Institute's social problem courses. It was only in the academic fields such as research and education, however, that the professional social workers felt free to explore issues such as racism and the deprivation of the inner-city.

As the 1960's came to an end, the Institute made an official change in focus. In 1962, new objectives had been put forth to move away from studying only the "normal" middle-class family. In 1969, this new focus was further cemented by the Program Committee. In their report of that year they stated that budget cuts demanded a change in direction. Their work would now be "directed to an intensive study of the young child in the urban setting"³² and an "intensive commitment to greater knowledge utilization by professionals working with young children and a search for

³² "Program Committee Minutes", 1969, Corporation Collection

new teaching and learning styles in work with college-level students."³³ In the beginning of 1970, the change in focus had become complete. In January, the Program Committee began the new decade by commenting on the Institute's new direction. The report said:

in recent years the Institute has been a teaching, research and community service organization, privately supported and operating under a broad umbrella of human development and family life. The programs covered a wide range and diversity. The Institute studied everything from infants to the problems of aging. These broad programs were very costly. The new focus is the young child and his family in an urban setting³⁴

The Institute was to be organized into three major divisions, reflecting the pattern of work conducted at the Institute since the beginning of the 1960's. The first two divisions, research and education, continued major emphases of the Institute since its inception. The third division was described as "knowledge utilization", an ambiguous term that implied some sort of direct involvement in community programs by professionals. Judging from the work of the 1960's, I feel the Institute was uncertain of how involved professional social workers should be in the social problems of the time. The ambivalence towards social activism, demonstrated throughout the decade, was confirmed once more in the Institute's official policy direction.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 1970

CONCLUSION

In this period, the Merrill-Palmer social workers were less involved in community programs. There was less contact between them and working-class clients. We can see some changes occurring, however, on the basis of the few community programs the Institute organized. Merrill-Palmer workers during the period of the 1960's moved away from a dependence on Freudian theory to a psychological approach based more on behavioral theories. They focused more on social and economic forces than on instincts and psychological urges. The effects of one's culture became more important than the resolution of childhood complexes.

Gender and race still played a role in determining the attitudes of the social workers. Despite the change in methods, the Merrill-Palmer social workers still regarded women as having the primary responsibility for the well-being of the family. This was demonstrated in the Head Start program and the research conducted during this period. Towards the end of the 1960's, however, there is evidence that previous assumptions were being re-evaluated. Research began to question such issues as gender roles in the family and the validity of intelligence test predictions. As this decade came to an end, Merrill-Palmer workers seemed to view their clients more as the victims of outside forces rather than of internal problems. As a result, the social workers

were more sympathetic to the concerns of their working-class clientele.

We can discover less information about the attitudes of the clients to the social workers. It is possible, however, to make some tentative conclusions. The community programs and research studies organized by the Institute all report an enthusiastic reception from the clients. The social workers dealt mostly with working-class mothers and said that the vast majority were willing and eager to participate in programs or research that might benefit their children. During this period, the social workers were a much less intrusive presence in working-class communities than ever before. This may have accounted for a more favourable attitude from their clientele. Working-class and minority women who were interested in changing their situation were likely to be involved in their own community groups. During this period, they did not need the assistance of middle-class professionals as much. They used the resources of their own community and those briefly offered by federal anti-poverty programs to make themselves heard.⁵³

The social work profession witnessed the rise of the para-professional, a response to working-class peoples' resentment of professionals. Professional social workers moved into an increasingly distant role, into research and

⁵³ Leighninger, Search For Identity, 215.

education and away from the politically charged atmosphere of community work. Through research and education, social workers could express their pro-civil rights views in a more comfortable environment. In the academic realm, the social workers were dealing mostly with fellow professionals who shared the same views or at least were not so personally threatening.

As a result of these social pressures, we can conclude that the relationship between the social workers and their clients was much less intimate during this period. Social workers were concerned with social issues but rarely became directly involved in attacking the root of those problems. Their working-class clientele was empowered by the civil-rights movement and the War on Poverty. Social workers became more sympathetic to the plight of their clientele, but the change in attitude likely developed as a result of the empowerment and social pressure of clients. Ultimately, the two groups had compatible goals, yet they interacted only on a superficial basis. The relationship between social workers and clients in American society during that period was reflected at the Merrill-Palmer Institute. For the Merrill-Palmer social workers and their clientele more compatible goals did not produce an improved relationship, perhaps due to increased hostility on the part of clients and a defensive attitude on the part of social workers. It was

during this period that the interconnected relationship between the professional and the client effectively came to an end. The social workers stayed in their academic world, the clients lived in their community, and these two worlds rarely met.

CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have attempted to examine the nature of the relationship between two distinct groups of women, social workers and their clients. It is apparent, however, that the broad category of clients actually includes women of various racial, class and ethnic origin. At the Merrill-Palmer Institute, social workers who were mainly white, middle-class females provided services for women, some of whom were similar to the workers but many of whom had very different backgrounds. The type of interaction that occurred was dependent on these and other variables.

In this examination, I have divided the work conducted by the Merrill-Palmer Institute into three chronological periods with different official policy direction. In each period, the policies of the Institute changed in response to professional and societal pressures. Within these general stages, the relationship between the women was further influenced by race, class and ethnicity.

Throughout each period class played an important role in determining the relationship between the women. In the 1920's and 1930's, the social workers were mainly white and middle-class. They had different perceptions of working-class and of middle- or upper-class clients. The social workers perceived working-class women as ignorant by applying middle-class white American standards of education, cooking and housekeeping practices to working-class clients. They

were outwardly more accepting of middle- or upper- class women. In the 1940's and 1950's, the social workers dealt only with middle-class women, and tried to make the women fit their concept of normality. In the 1960's, the social workers adressed working-class issues such as the enrichment of impoverished children but they rarely came into contact with working-class clients.

The issue of class was also related to ethnicity since most of the ethnic women the social workers came into contact with were from the working class. The social workers demonstrated, however, that they could overcome ethnic differences if the foreign-born people were from the middle class. The social workers treated white native-born women with some deference even though they assumed that these women needed their expert advice. Women who were most similar to the social workers, such as young, middle-class college women, were treated with the most empathy and in a spirit of co-operation.

Race often affected the nature of the services provided and the attitudes of the social workers. African-American women were affected by two problems. Most of the African-American clients were also among the poorest, so African-American women felt the effects of both racial and class assumptions. In the early period African-American women were included in the target group of working-class women offered

programs designed to improve their child-care techniques. In the 1940's to 1950's African-American women were largely ignored since few were middle-class at a time when the Institute's focus was the middle-class family. In the 1960's they re-entered the limelight due to the emphasis on the "deterioration" of the African-American family in America. African-American women were particularly seen as a problem since experts linked the plight of African-American men to the supposed African-American matriarchal family structure. Towards the end of the later period the effects of racial and class assumptions were softened by the presence of more minority social workers at the Institute and nationally.

Gender ideology played an important role in the relationship between social workers and other women. Throughout the years, social workers assumed that the proper role for women implied their primary responsibility to the family and felt that it was their place to help promote this role. This ideology came from a movement that defined women's purpose as homemakers and mothers and sought to increase women's power by attaching more status to those functions. In the earlier period there was some room for flexibility within this role but after World War II gender roles became more rigid. In the 1920's, social workers defined the role of the educated woman as one that could include a family and a career, and they believed that she

could make a contribution to the community through paid or volunteer work. They believed that class and education gave college women the privilege to perform a more varied role than other women.

In the post-war years, however, this attitude disappeared in the face of increasing concerns about the vulnerability of the American family. The social workers believed, along with many other family experts, that the burden of preserving the traditional family fell on women. The security of the home required strict adherence by women to traditional female roles, with marriage and family taking precedence over community and careers. Assumptions about gender roles played a part in determining the type of services provided and which clients received them. Merrill-Palmer workers considered women who conformed to prescribed gender roles - who stayed home with their children - as the most deserving. In the 1960's there is some evidence that female social workers were beginning to question the gender assumptions. The feminist movement, however, did not fully develop until the 1970's. Since this study ends at the beginning of the 1970's, it is hard to judge how these theories would have developed at the Institute.

An overall theme throughout the three periods was that of concepts about professionalism. At the beginning of the 1920's social work was trying to establish itself as a

profession and not just a charitable activity. Aspiring professional social workers believed that their education gave them the right to change the homemaking and motherhood practices of their clients. In the early period, social workers tried to base their work on scientific methods and objective reasoning. "Science" became a modern term to justify their power based on their social class.

Social workers used their scientific methods and ideology to override the concerns of "unscientific" mothers. The social workers felt they had a unique perspective through their professional status and this belief created a distance between social workers and their clients generally, preventing them from identifying with the problems of their female clients. It was not until the late 1960's that there was a suggestion of social workers empathizing with their clients as women because the feminist movement was only beginning to raise awareness of problems related to gender roles. Historians have tried to determine whether women are bonded through common gender experiences or separated by their differences. My study of the Institute demonstrates that differences such as education, class, ethnicity and race created barriers that prevented the women from having a common bond or identity.

In addition, beliefs about the nature of professional work implied a commitment to the existing social structure.

This created a dilemma among social workers regarding the involvement professionals should have in challenging societal institutions. Most social workers acknowledged the societal roots of their clients' problems but felt that their role as professionals was simply to help their clients cope and not to act as opponents of the entire system. In the later period, this perspective caused a greater distance between workers and clients as poor people fought the problems of racism and poverty at a systemic level. Clients from poor neighbourhoods, especially African-American clients, often regarded social workers as being unable to understand their goals because of the social workers' racial and class differences and professional status, though the social workers themselves may have added to this tension through their own actions.

In examining the relationship between the social workers and the clients, we must not lose sight of the role of the clients. It is more difficult to speculate about the motives of the clients because we can only learn about their reactions through the social workers' records. We do know that these women used the services of the Institute voluntarily, and in accordance with Linda Gordon's model, must have hoped to achieve some personal advantage by this participation.¹ Many working-class women probably hoped for

¹Linda Gordon, "Family Violence", 469.

some improvement in their own lives or that of their children. Middle- and upper-class women may have regarded participation in the services as a way of maintaining their status in their community and creating "perfect" children. In general, we can speculate by saying that all of these clients tried to live up to the ideals promoted by the experts, ideals which had a social power since they were expressed by members of the dominant group. The fact that these clients used the services of the Institute demonstrates some faith in the superior knowledge of the social workers. It also shows that these women had a desire to fulfil society's expectations of women and family life.

Both the social workers and the clients had assumptions about each other that influenced their relationship. They both hoped to achieve certain goals in providing or participating in the services of the Institute. The nature of their relationship was determined by the complex interaction of these different values and ambitions. This interaction was characterized by a struggle between the two groups, as both social workers and clients attempted to achieve their goals and maintain control in the relationship. The power struggle resulted from the fact that social workers had more power, through professional status, than their female clients.² The struggle for control was the primary

² Ibid.

characteristic of the interaction between the women, but this power struggle was often intensified by other elements. The factors of race and class and concepts about gender roles determined if the relationship would be mostly harmonious or marked by tension.

Although this examination has focused on the Merrill-Palmer Institute, it has also dealt with issues that are relevant to the social work profession generally. In fact many of these issues are still problems in today's society. The plight of the urban poor seems to be getting worse and racial tensions continue to increase. The social workers of the Merrill-Palmer Institute questioned what their role should be in attempting to help their clients. This question still applies: how should social workers help clients today when many of the old problems continue to affect society?

As we have seen, assumptions about the proper role of women have greatly affected social workers' attitudes. These attitudes distort the reality of clients' lives and result in social workers' attempting to force people to conform to unrealistic ideals. In addition, gender concepts have created distinctions that unfairly categorize women as being deserving or undeserving of help. Attacking these concepts may help future relationships to be more co-operative.

Today, there is still some support among the public and politicians for the idea that poor people create their own

problems. It is because of these attitudes that social workers should act as advocates for all their clients. Social workers should try to help their clients cope, but they should not ignore the societal causes of the problems. In fact, since social workers are the most likely people to be aware of these societal causes, they should articulate this to the rest of society.

The fundamental nature of the social worker/client relationship, however, will continue to be characterized by a struggle over control because it is based on the premise that one person has superior knowledge by virtue of her professional status. While it is possible that the social worker and client relationship could become more harmonious, it cannot be completely free of tension because of the implicit status differences. As long as social workers are given privileged status through their professional qualifications, there will be a struggle between themselves and their clients.

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