

research snapshot

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The Transition From “Mother-carer” to “Mother-worker”

What is this research about?

Neoliberal reform is often cited as the major influence behind policy changes to social welfare in Canada. However, these changes are also informed by social values that shape the policy that is created and enforced. For example, welfare-to-work policies in Ontario emerged following the introduction of the Canadian Health and Social Transfer (CHST). CHST designated social welfare as a responsibility for provinces (rather than a national one). The introduction of welfare-to-work in Ontario also involved a shift in attitude on “good” mothering by linking social welfare to paid work, rather than supporting child care. This perception of what is “good” mothering is not only a result of policy changes, but also is a major influence behind them.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher used the method of ideational analysis to review welfare-to-work policy and its impact on mothers in Ontario. Ideational analysis considers the different idea systems at work that inform both social values, and how social policy is designed and administered by people who carry those values. Thus, societal moral codes on mothering can be seen as embedded into institutions like government and work.

The researcher looked at how moral mothering was socially constructed over time. She began with the

What you need to know:

Ontario’s welfare-to-work policy was not shaped by neoliberal reform alone. It was influenced by ideas on “good” mothering, and imposed these values into policy.

post-World War 2 era and the idea of the “mother-carer”. “Mother-carer” emerged with the attitude that the ideal mother took care of her children while her male partner worked. She was dependent, and conformed to the nuclear family image. After the introduction of Ontario Works in 1995, changes brought on and influenced new attitudes on the “mother-worker”. Mothers are seen as workers first, then carers (regardless of the barriers they may experience because of their gender). They are to be independent in the economic market, and are “good” mothers if they make the effort to be “employed”.

What did the researcher find?

The researcher found that moral codes on mothering were embedded into social policy since 1945. First, mothering was largely informed by attitudes and ideas about lone mothers. Second, changes to social welfare support were informed by differed ideas on the rights of lone mothers to social support.

In the post-World War 2 era, social welfare came in the form of Ontario Mother’s Allowance to Family

Benefits (OMA). Poor widowed mothers were seen as the most deserving of OMA support. Over time, OMA became more inclusive towards deserted wives, divorced mothers and lone mothers. At the time, it was controversial because lone mothers were seen outside of the nuclear family norm. Still, they were heavily monitored for their eligibility, earned income, and to enforce the no “spouse-in-the-house” rule.

With Ontario Works, lone mothers were both de-gendered and re-gendered. That is, their reality of being a single mother with child care responsibilities was replaced with the expectation that they should, essentially, work for welfare. However, they were also defined as “good” mothers for their ability to depend on social support temporarily, and find long-term work to take care of their children. This shift from the “mother-carer” to the “mother-worker” came about with policy changes that:

- Decided lone mothers who are unemployed and thus employable do not deserve social support for the long term;
- Observed if lone mothers appear to be living with a partner, they are not meeting their tasks as “mother-workers” and their social support is at risk;
- Saw the public engaged in re-enforcing ideas about good “mother-workers”, with forums like the “snitch” line to report mothers suspected of defrauding welfare authorities.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers may consider using this research to evaluate the social impact of social welfare reforms. This research offers insight on the existing limitations that policy like Ontario Works brings to groups like lone mothers.

Service providers may also find this research meaningful to address the gaps in current service delivery for those on welfare-to-work. In particular,

they may want to re-orient programs that reflect the attitude that mothers are workers first.

About the Researcher

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