Cultural Conceptions of Motherhood and its Relation to Childcare Policy in Canada
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Motherhood has been a much discussed area of scholarly debate, particularly since second-wave feminists sought to abolish the reproductive essentialism of women’s roles. Second-wave feminists argued that women must be "freed from the tyranny of their biology by any means available," and thus, by rejecting their roles as mothers, women can be free from the private sphere. Since then, theorists have proposed alternative solutions to liberating women from maternal oppression. Prominent scholar in Canadian childcare policy, Martha Friendly, argues that society has constructed a false narrative that “women’s priorities are everyone’s priorities”, while subjecting them to inadequate childcare policies and infrastructure. Motherhood theorists Andrea O’Reilly and Sharon Hays analyze the ways in which patriarchal discourse has contributed to women’s internalization of maternal roles and expectations. Additionally, Sara Ruddick argues that it is possible to address the social constructivism of gendered essentialism through language use, which can be understood by hegemonic society.

This paper stems from the realization that in this generation women are often perceived to have conquered gender equality. However, it is still expected that life as a woman in the 21st century will include motherhood. What does this say about women’s progression in society? I have grappled throughout my time as a feminist with my own internal second-wave voice, edging me to reject all maternal roles. However, women in both scholarly and personal settings have advised that it is not wrong for women to desire motherhood. In this paper, I use Foucault’s truth/knowledge paradigm, which critiques the naturalization of “truth” void of a sociohistorical context, to provide a literature review on the already existing arguments theorists have made about childcare and motherhood. Their theories are reviewed in regards to both structural and micro-level barriers that have prevented change in regards to social understandings of motherhood and childcare policy in Canada. Foucault is useful in application to this area of study because his theory addresses the question of why the Canadian concept of motherhood and childcare policy has not changed. This paper will not only focus on how these constructions were formed, on which many feminists have previously spoken, but also how systems and policy maintain this power to lead us to our current situation. This paper ends with an original contribution, extending from the reviewed literature, arguing that in spite of the numerous types of motherhood that exist in society, a lack of alternative cultural representations of motherhood perpetuates essentialized, internalized, and oppressive maternal roles. However, alternative cultural representations of motherhood may transmit change in childcare policy in Canada.

Martha Friendly’s research traces the politics that led to the current structure of childcare policy in Canada. In 1986 the Federal Task Force on Childcare stated that childcare is not a frill to those seeking to use it in society, but is a “fundamental support service.” However, Friendly outlines that in spite of this and due to an increase in women’s labour force participation rates, childcare policy has not developed in coherence with society’s progress. She argues that this was demonstrated when the Liberal government under the leadership of Paul Martin promised to

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3 Ibid., 41-42.
give $5 billion dollars to fund childcare in Canada⁵. This was eliminated once Stephen Harper was elected in 2006, who instead distributed $100 monthly cheques to families with children under the age of 6.⁶ Friendly demonstrates that since 2006, activist groups like Code Blue for Child Care emerged to address issues surrounding federal childcare policy and “supporting families” through meeting “income and child needs.”⁷ As I write this piece, the Liberals have reemerged in the political sphere and, under the direction of Justin Trudeau, promise “to deliver affordable, high-quality, flexible, and fully inclusive child care for Canadian families,” that would be “funded through investments in social infrastructure.”⁸ As Trudeau begins his career as Prime Minister, a follow up piece will be useful in analyzing if and how he implements and changes policy⁹.

Martha Friendly adds a structural approach to the debate on childcare access by outlining her views on the failings of the Canadian childcare system. She argues firstly, that policy and programs are incoherent and poorly developed and secondly, that public funding is inadequate.¹⁰ At the program level, two concerns dominate: both quality and access are poor.¹¹ Friendly asserts that proper ECEC programs would help “healthy child development”, support mothers, help create “social cohesion for new comers to Canada” and provide equity for all in Canada.¹² However, the federal government takes no responsibility for either ensuring access or availability of ECEC programs. This is specifically demonstrated in Friendly’s data from 2001, as provincial governments only spent $1.9 billion on regulated childcare, with 58% of this spent in Quebec and only $167.9 million on Indigenous ECEC programs.¹³ Friendly states that if Canada was to take responsibility for ECEC programs, it would spend the equivalent of what the EU’s Childcare Network spends, which is 1% of GDP for children 0-5 years old. This would mean Canada would be spending approximately $10 billion every year on ECEC programs.¹⁴ Friendly argues a “mature” ECEC system would have components including all families having a childcare facility in their own neighbourhood and childcare becoming a public infrastructure.¹⁵ Friendly’s research is useful as she identifies systematic variables that specifically effect women in intersecting ways; working to disable the monolithic category of ‘woman’ as she analyzes which groups in society are most affected by our current childcare policies. Furthermore, she also demonstrates how our policy does not match societal change in women’s roles.

⁶ Ibid., 42-43.
⁷ Ibid.,” 43.
⁹ For a more in-depth view on historical and structural construction of childcare in British Columbia, see Lisa Pasolli, Working Mothers and the Child Care Dilemma (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).
¹¹ Ibid., 108.
¹² Ibid., 109.
¹³ Ibid., 111-112.
¹⁴ Ibid., 113.
¹⁵ Ibid., 115.
Friendly’s work in the Canadian context can be applied to a larger feminist discussion on the formation and lived experience of motherhood in the Western context. The next part of this paper will focus on how societal understandings of motherhood influence the structure of Canadian childcare, as Friendly has outlined. Andrea O’Reilly produces extensive research on motherhood and demonstrates how a larger structural discourse of patriarchy defines and confines women to their essentialized roles of mothers. Using the work of Adrienne Rich, she argues there is a difference between the role of being a mother and the institution of motherhood. Similar to the aim of this paper, she recognizes that this has been a topic long occupying scholars and feminists and yet little change has been made. She argues that the reason for this is that motherhood is “grounded in gender essentialism” and “naturalizes the opposition between the private and public sphere”, and which gender belongs in each one. Without recounting all of her eight rules of patriarchal mothering, due to a limitation of space, O’Reilly argues that under patriarchy, motherhood removes the mother’s selfhood. O’Reilly’s work is useful as it introduces the distinct and significant difference between being a mother and motherhood as an institution. This distinction contributes towards revealing that motherhood is understood and performed differently by every individual, contrary to the dominant narrative portrayed in society.

Following structural arguments of the oppression of motherhood, there are many scholars who discuss the individual, lived experience of women as mothers and their relationship to childcare. These scholars argue that the subjective understanding that women have of their gendered role perpetuates their confinement to the private sphere. Although her work is almost two decades old, Sharon Hays provides an extremely useful analysis of the ways in which social roles impact the subjective understanding of identity. Like many other theorists, she argues that there is a binary in society that forces women to choose between being nurturing stay-at-home mothers, or selfish career women who work for pay. She acknowledges that this is a Western construction as “anthropological data shows that in 186 contemporary cultures, individual mothers are the principal caregivers of children in only 20% of the cases.” She uses the concept of “intensive mothering” to describe the effects of this internalization, as women feel guilty if they choose to become working mothers because they believe they should be the sole caregiver of their children. “Intensive mothering” is neither a choice women make nor a symbol of love; it is “an indication of the power of men, whites, the upper classes, capitalists, and state leaders to impose a particular form of family life on those less powerful than themselves.” A woman’s chosen social role always revolves around their relationship to motherhood. For example, if a woman chooses to work and have no children, then she is “cold, heartless, and unfulfilled.”

17 Ibid., 17.
18 For all 8 rules of patriarchal mothering see O’Reilly, “Outlaw(ing) Motherhood,” 20.
20 Ibid., 20.
21 Ibid., 104.
22 Hays, Cultural Contradictions, 153.
23 Ibid., 133.
she chooses to have children and work, then she is neglecting her children; if she chooses to be a stay at home mother, then she is unproductive.\textsuperscript{24} The key to Hays’ work is that she uses interviews by women of multiple classes, occupations, and ethnicities in order to get a subjective narrative of many experiences and self-identity of motherhood, while simultaneously addressing the social constructiveness of this role.

Sara Ruddick’s extensive literature on motherhood argues that one of the reasons that mothers’ roles are so hard to change is that they are not always oppressive; as many women do not feel their maternal role victimizes them.\textsuperscript{25} Ruddick argues it is important to acknowledge that the female body in childbirth is an incredible thing for those who choose it.\textsuperscript{26} She further argues that the role of motherhood is not necessarily oppressive as birth is a biological act, however motherhood is a social construction that “romanticizes innate mother/child bonds,” and this is what contributes to the oppression of mothers.\textsuperscript{27} Ruddick’s deconstruction of the narrative surrounding motherhood is beneficial in allowing mothering to be empowering for those who choose it. In contrast to what Hays argues, Ruddick gives the option for women to find motherhood empowering in spite of a potentially limiting role that society constructs for them.

A Foucauldian discourse analysis helps recontextualize these arguments to provide an alternative examination to the topic of motherhood and childcare policy in Canada. Foucault states, “Historical contents are buried and disguised in our formal systems,” becoming a naturalized discourse.\textsuperscript{28} However, he argues that these contents cannot be established unless this truth is “exercised” and this action only happens through “individual articulation.”\textsuperscript{29} This is demonstrating that “the individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” in creating this power.\textsuperscript{30} Foucault also argues that discourse has no power or truth unless it is continually being acted out within an understanding that it should be acted in this way.

Judith Butler helps explain how gender essentialism is present in our current sociopolitical systems through this naturalized discourse. She argues that gendered constructions of the body have always existed through patriarchal ideas that equate sex with gender.\textsuperscript{31} Gender is not something one chooses, but something that is assigned and that one embodies within a cultural framework.\textsuperscript{32} This is present in institutions of both motherhood and childcare, as women are assigned roles based on an idea that “inscribes” gender onto the body\textsuperscript{33}; however, through

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{29} Foucault, \textit{Power/Knowledge}, 89 and 98.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{32} Butler, \textit{Sex and Gender}, 40.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 36-37
performing the act of being a mother, this is strengthened and seen as “truth.”

“Truthful” discourse tells women that they have particular roles in society, which contribute to many women becoming mothers. However, through the very action of performing these maternal roles, this is strengthened and power is maintained, as these gender roles are seen as natural. This is significant because it helps explain how cultural understandings are maintained and why there have not been changes in spite of all the arguments feminists have made in this domain. Childcare will not be universally implemented in society because of gendered ideals that expect women to be in the private sphere.

What the theorists I have outlined above demonstrate is what philosopher Jeremy Bentham refers to as Panopticon, where in prison, “the inmate [is induced into] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” In his work, Foucault uses Bentham’s theory, coining “Panopticism,” where “surveillance” of inmates becomes permanent, even if an individual is not actually being surveilled, because individuals learn to police themselves due to their internalization of societal expectations. As demonstrated above, O’Reilly argued that motherhood is an institution constructed by patriarchy, which posits women as best suited to look after children and deeming them unfulfilled until this role is embodied. Douglas and Michaels coined this as “New Momism”, arguing this is how power is maintained. This suggests that not only is motherhood the entire focus of a woman’s life, women must also prove themselves as good mothers before they can do or be anything else, perpetuating the “you must be it all” narrative. By choosing to step outside of constructed gendered category to become a “citizen or a worker” one has failed to fully embody the mandated gendered role. However, O’Reilly believes that this could be challenged through her concept of “maternal empowerment,” which “gives women the agency, authority, authenticity and autonomy denied to them in patriarchal motherhood.”

Using Foucault’s theory, it is possible to see precisely why “New Momism” has been perpetuated but “maternal empowerment” has not, as a woman’s identity in society comes from living up to those maternal standards. Putting children first is a choice some women believe they are freely making and find enjoyment from, and thus they continue to make that choice, perpetuating the naturalization of maternal roles, and perpetuating an inaccessibility of childcare in Canada.

Hays’ arguments on “intensive mothering” contribute to Foucault’s theory of Panopticism, as women have learned to surveil each other’s roles. Hays uses Darnton’s term “mommy wars” to describe how working and non-working mothers each believe the other group has failed as a woman for choosing the roles they occupy. Women use their understanding of available

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34 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 93.
36 Ibid., 201.
39 Ibid., 243.
cultural, archetypical characteristics of what a mother is to solidify their arguments against the other group. What is significant about this, is that Hays is acknowledging that no one is outright scolding women for choosing to work, but that the discourse that women are to be “appropriate” care givers, or “child-focused”, is so deeply engrained in gendered identities that women police themselves. This demonstrates how culture influences gender beliefs and the resistance that arises when culture attempts to change. It also demonstrates how hard cultural change is to make, when even those who identify as belonging to the same subculture are influenced by larger dominant discourse, which becomes oppressive to both sides of the argument. This aligns with the resistance many feminists have been met with in regards to a change in childcare policy in Canada.

As mentioned above, Ruddick argues that archetypal mother/child bonds have ceased to exist in Western discourse of motherhood. This discourse defines “good and bad mother narratives” which have become internalized by women. However, Ruddick suggests that this can be challenged through language use that those who are not mothers will understand. Her suggestion is to use a “war versus peace” metaphor, as both of these categories are often considered masculine and feminine domains. However, it can come to be understood that just as it is a social construction to assume men are more aggressive, as it is to assume women are more naturally inclined for motherhood. Foucault helps us see why this has not been an effective propellant of change, as change has to occur for both male and female roles. Patriarchal gender essentialism has been naturalized for both men and women, and thus in order for change to occur, alternative representations of these roles must be recognized by society. Only then will public infrastructure, like childcare, accommodate for these roles.

As previously mentioned in this paper, Friendly suggests tangible solutions to creating a “mature” childcare program in Canada. However, her arguments for change have also been met with resistance. Through analyzing the actual structure of childcare in Canada, it becomes evident that only certain groups are allowed to utilize services, while it neglects already marginalized groups in society. For example, in 2008-2009 the First Nation and Inuit Childcare Initiative gave 450 spaces to First Nations children, even though there were 108,885 Indigenous children under the age of 4 in Canada, while simultaneously neglecting specialized programs for Indigenous children who live in urban settings with other ethnicities present. There are 1,188,800 mothers in the paid labour force with children 0-12 years old but only 24% of children 0-6 have access to a regulated childcare service. There are 326,190 children who come

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 4.
44 Ruddick, Maternal Thinking, 49.
46 Ibid., 136.
47 Ibid., 144-147.
48 Ruddick, Maternal Thinking, 152-153.
51 “Public Investments in Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada,” 112.
52 “Canada,” 297.
from low income families but only 27% of them are able to access childcare. As Ruddick argues, “under patriarchy, a mother is a heterosexual, married, financially dependent woman whose self-definition is derived solely through her maternal role; to be otherwise is to be abnormality, a non-mother.” If mothers are defined in a particular way and these roles are continually enacted without alternative forms of motherhood being seen, then discourse is perpetuated. Furthermore, childcare policy will not be inclusive of all women and the different ways in which they choose to enact mothering, and thus possibilities of change are diminished.

Even if under the leadership of Justin Trudeau Canada were to implement a universal childcare policy, it is possible that many would choose not to utilize its services. This is not to dismiss the fact that, just as many scholars argue, many in Canada do need the facilities that childcare would offer. However, I am proposing an alternative idea that the reason that this has not changed in the face of feminist lobbying is the fact that gender roles are so deeply engrained in subjective gender identities that women want to stay home with their children. Therefore, for those who choose not to occupy this role, changing alternative ideas of motherhood takes time. Foucault argues, “Truth makes the laws, produces the discourse which decides, and transmits.” Anthropologically speaking, culture is learned “through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission.” This transmission creates “patterned ways of doing things that exist in identifiable form over extended periods of time.”

How then, are different cultural patterns taught within a totalizing discourse of power? Discourse resistance is possible, as demonstrated by women earning the right to vote or entering the workforce. Foucault argues that “where there is power there is resistance” that does not come from one act of “revolt” but multiple acts of resistance in varying degrees over multiple periods of time. This is why it is important to acknowledge other forms of motherhood, as it is the only way to offer new cultural representations that are then eventually transmitted into other generations and institutions, such as childcare. To add to this argument, I want to incorporate the presentation bell hooks made at York University in 2015. She argued that cultural transmission of gendered or racial ideologies has not happened yet because alternative forms of these cultural roles have not been seen in society. One of the reasons women have not been able to make changes within this realm is because there have not been alternative representations of mothers in

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53 “Public Investments in Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada,” 113.
54 “Canada,” 300.
55 Ruddick, Maternal Thinking, 63.
57 Foucault, “Power/Knowledge,” 94.
59 Ibid.
61 bell hooks, (presentation given at Xpression Against Oppression: Keynote: bell hooks, York University, Toronto, 22 October, 2015).
society. hooks argues that what we create is impactful to society and thus if we want to evoke change we need a variety of images available in a non-competitive way. 62

Extending from hooks’ argument on cultural transmission, I conclude this paper emphasizing in spite of a naturalization of a particular institution of motherhood, that women are intersectional and active agents in society. Even though many groups of women are being denied the same voice and privileges as others, there are many alternative subjectivities of maternal roles that can be highlighted here that will work to disable our naturalized view of motherhood. For the purposes of this paper, I highlight a few. Patricia Hill Collins argues there are two archetypal figures in white mother’s narratives of Black women: the inferior Mammy and the strong, aggressive matriarch. 63 In contrast to this, her subjective experience as a Black mother consisted of not having distinct boundaries of the maternal mother from community mothers and Black motherhood being symbolic of power. 64 O’Reilly utilizes both the film “Our Dear Sisters” and Paula Gunn Allen’s book Spider Woman’s Granddaughters to show alternative discourses of Indigenous mothering. Both works focus on Indigenous discourse, centered on “respect of life and of women,” “communal- responsibility” for children and a “mothered-centered culture in which women are revered and empowered precisely because they are mothers.” 65 Furthermore, alternative representations also need to include the empowerment, legitimacy and compensation for women who choose to stay home with their children.

The literature of past scholars has contributed strong critiques of patriarchal discourse that constructs and influences our static, essentializing, and oppressive gendered identities that influence our current social structure. However, the role of culture needs to be included in this debate, as it can help us create a society where all women can choose to perform the role they wish to, and will be assisted with access to the appropriate resources in order to embody this role. The next part of this debate needs to include literature from mothers of all intersectional identities and subjectivities; across barriers of sexuality, ethnicity, race, immigration status, class, employment status, martial status, adoption, caregivers and contraceptive methods. It must make sure to highlight the multiplicity and fluidity of women’s identities and the structural barriers involved in their lived realities. Ruddick argues that a multitude of research has been done on mothers, but no one has listened to them. 66 These are the subjectivities that need to be heard in order to evoke change.

Bibliography


62 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 278-281.
65 Andrea O’Reilly, Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006), 68.
66 Ruddick, Maternal Thinking, 26.

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