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**DISRUPTING THE “TRADITIONAL STUDENT” DISCOURSE:
POVERTY, EDUCATION, AND THE STATE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to disrupt the historical development and widely perceived notions of the “traditional student” in postsecondary education. For non-traditional students, or students who are mature, economically insecure, work in the paid labour market, have family responsibilities, are single parents, have disabilities, or who do not identify with the dominant Eurocentric curriculum, the education system can be exclusionary through both policies and practices. Twenty-five single mothers were interviewed about the barriers and facilitators they experienced as students in postsecondary institutions across Southern Ontario. They were invited to participate in either a group or individual interview. The challenges faced for non-traditional students cannot be separated out from the nation state in which they live in. The restructuring of social policies in Ontario have contributed to further marginalizing people who were already living on the edge. This article presents initial findings from my doctoral research and aims to problematize the invisibility many single mothers reported.

INTRODUCTION

There is no question that students who are able to access postsecondary education are seen as occupying privileged positions. Historically, this institution was only accessible to upper class white men. Eventually, women were granted access, although it was mainly occupied by upper class white women (Delamont, 2006). Education should be viewed as a basic right, particularly since it has been repeatedly cited as a means for single mothers to move out of poverty and towards self sufficiency (Blum, 2001; Christie, 2002; Deprez, Butler and Smith, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Kahn et al., 2004; Mason, 2002; Ratner, 2004; Sharp, 2004; Waldner, 2004). This is not to suggest that education is the end-all solution to poverty or even that it is the most salient one. Single mothers are heterogeneous with different needs depending on the social and political conditions of their lives. Women who experience violence in their relationships may say needing the violence to stop in their lives is the first priority. Women who experience racism may point to racism in the paid labour market as being their main barrier to economic security. Poor and low-income mothers who are struggling with decisions on whether to pay the heating bill or buy food for their children may be screaming out that they need immediate sustenance and a liveable wage; there are also women who experience these scenarios simultaneously. These conditions are the result of neoliberal state policies and unequal power relations between dominant and marginalized groups which cannot be understated.

However, what I am arguing for the purpose of this paper is that education, or more accurately the credentials acquired through education, can be used as one of many tools to fight against poverty. The institution of education is a site of contestation. It is often seen as elitist, exclusionary, and inaccessible. When I was growing up, education was a luxury I simply could not afford. Later on, when I applied as a mature student and then became a single mother student, I was made painfully aware of how the university system was institutionally created and supported in a way that made me and my life experiences invisible. These experiences are what brought me to the research I feel compelled to do in my doctoral studies. Single mothers are the subject of political and social stigma as well as experience high levels of poverty. According to Statistics Canada (2008):

About 760,000 children under 18 years of age, or 11.3%, lived in low income families in 2006, also unchanged [from the previous Census]. About 307,000, or 40%, of these children lived in a lone-parent family headed by a woman. In fact, about one in three children living with a single mother were in low income.

While the percentage of single fathers who live in poverty or are low-income may be smaller, they do exist. Future research would be helpful in determining how they experience their roles as single fathers and students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper draws upon initial findings from my doctoral research exploring the experiences of 25 single mother students in Canadian undergraduate programs in universities across Southern Ontario. I conducted individual interviews in addition to one group interview in which participants were able to choose which method they felt most comfortable with. Participants were invited to contribute to the design of the study and interview guides wherever possible. All women were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts and make changes or corrections where necessary. I submitted an Ethics Review to three separate universities and several community agencies. I spent time developing relationships with administrators involved with on and off campus support systems which provided services to single mothers. This initial stage would be considered the recruitment phase; however, because most research has been used to pathologize single mother families, it was important to build trust with single mother students and community agencies and partnerships as an insider/outsider. I will elaborate on this concept of insider/outsider when I write on the methodology used in the study.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This study is informed by feminist and anti-colonial theories. First, feminist theory is used as a way to understand the gendered political process in which single mothers are not only under resourced by the state but specifically targeted in a way that exhibits hostility towards a family status. This family status challenges the traditional power dynamics of a heterosexual nuclear family. One of feminist theory's most common mantras is "the personal is political" (Code, 1993, p. 42). The supporting ideology associated with this framework seeks to uncover the systemic and structural power relations in society, by bringing awareness to issues and experiences as not being isolated within the individual. For example, one of the participants in the group interview shared her story with the other single mother students surrounding her application for childcare subsidy. She overheard the caseworker speaking abruptly and with disdain towards the previous applicants. By the time it was her turn to sit with the caseworker and apply, she was terrified and intimidated. She began to cry. When the caseworker found out she was a recent widow and that was the *reason* for her single mother status, she went out of her way to place her children in care the next day. This happened in a city which is notorious for its long wait list for

subsidy. This participant clearly illustrated how her deserving status of single mother *widow*, privileged her in her experience with the caseworker when applying for childcare subsidy. While this was one individual event, it would be reasonable to expect others in similar situations. Furthermore, when you compare it against the experiences of other single mothers in this study who “choose” to be single mothers and the discrimination they face, a pattern emerges and a divide is clearly created between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.

Second, anti-colonial theory illuminates the Eurocentric development of Canada as a nation state; therefore, extending education as a colonialist institution. Canada has a notorious and violent past of enforcing Residential Schooling upon Aboriginal families and communities. This history is often not taught to students in the education system itself. Further, many educators, activists, and scholars challenge the Eurocentric curriculum, pedagogy, and epistemology espoused in most education systems (Baskin, 2008; Collins, 2000; Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, and Zine, 2003; Graveline, 1998; Kelly, 2000; Lavellee, 2009; Smith, 1999; and Wane, 2004). Within a Eurocentric framework, only a particular kind of student is supported and administrative policies and practices have been developed in response to this traditional student archetype. Also, “An anti-colonial framework emphasizes that it is not only Indigenous peoples who need to decolonize – the colonizers must as well” (Baskin, Guarisco, Koleszar-Green, Melanson, and Osawamick, 2009, p. 5) which, for the purpose of this study, is particularly important to disrupting dominant policies and practices in education as well as within the research process as a whole.

Instead of restricting myself by using one methodology in my research, I found it was more useful to think of the common principles found within feminist, decolonizing, and participatory methodologies. I identified and used the following four principles: self-determination, reflexivity, participation and action. During my childhood and into my undergraduate program I identified as a low-income or poverty class single mother student. This positioned me as having “insider”/“outsider” status in the research area I was undertaking in my PhD. However, I agree with Smith (1999) when she cautions us as researchers and community members not to identify in either-or terms because of the many fluid and interconnected identities which constantly change our positioning depending on who we are working with and where we are situated. Indeed, as researchers, no matter how much participation of the community is involved, we have power in designing, interpreting and disseminating knowledge. Instead, I acknowledge both the common and different experiences I have as a single mother student researcher, compared with the participants in this study, with an emphasis on single mothers not being one monolithic category of “other”. We

have various positionings of privilege and oppression, even within a traditionally privileged site such as university.

I experienced many of the same emotions and situations the single mothers in this study spoke of. I felt guilty because I was/am negotiating my time as a mother, student, and paid worker. Although most families, including two-parent families need to negotiate these time constraints, it is the single mother family in particular that is demonized in the media and in state policy development. So when your child does something wrong that perhaps every child may do at that stage in her or his development, as a single mother student, I am always fighting the internalized story which is prevalent in society; that I am somehow depriving my child. Along with the participants, I also find the role of a single mother student rewarding. My daughter sees how important education is in our lives and I feel a sense of freedom in being the sole decision-maker in my family. I also acknowledge the privilege I have in being able-bodied and white and often this body can be viewed as the “deserving” single mother where it is not her fault, therefore she is able to “better herself” through education.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Part of the recruiting stage involved reaching out and building relationships with ethno-cultural and gender and sexually diverse communities. Based on a previous literature review examining research which explores the experiences of single mother students, many of the findings were either based on seemingly homogenous populations or the researchers did not highlight the diverse intersecting identities of single mothers. Therefore, in order to bring awareness to the diversity of experiences in education, I sought to recruit marginalized women such as women with disabilities, queer identified women, Aboriginal women, women among various ages and women of colour. Each participant was asked to fill in a demographic questionnaire and although a couple of participants did not fill out certain questions which they feared may identify them, the results of this questionnaire showed that many diversely situated women and their perspectives were included in this study.

Seven women identified having a disability which ranged from physical disabilities, learning disabilities and also mental health conditions. The ages of the women were 25-44 while having small children to older teenagers and young adults. Besides Canada, participants were born in twelve other countries. Almost all women identified as being female as their gender identity, although one participant identified as queer for both gender identity and sexuality. Two participants identified as Two-spirit, one identified as bisexual, one identified as open-minded and another as not sure. The rest of the participants identified as

straight or heterosexual. In terms of race and ethnicity, among many identities, participants highlighted being Aboriginal or Native, Black, West European, Canadian-Jamaican, Canadian-Caucasian or White, Chinese, Ghanaian, Mixed (Native and White), Mixed (Black and Indian), Bi-racial and Irish. While some participants earned over \$25,000 annually (including all government supports, student loans, bursaries, paid employment and child support), seven participants stated they earned less than \$10,000 a year. Participants also expressed a range of religious faiths and/or spiritualities such as Buddhism, Earth-based Wicca, Christian and Aboriginal spirituality, no organized religion and some were not sure.

ROMANTICIZING STUDENT POVERTY

The experience of “the student” is often romanticized. As Holyfield (2002) reflects, “College was another world indeed, and my romantic image of it left me ill prepared for what I would encounter” (p. 4). There is a general perception that students pay their dues by living in “temporary poverty” in order to reap the rewards of the economic mobility a postsecondary degree is expected to bring. “But for single academic/student mothers, there is nothing romantic about the heavy financial, emotional and personal costs of raising a family alone with little or no income” (Comeau, 2006, p. 15). There is a type of romanticism that occurs in the role of a student which disrupts negative stereotypes associated with a single mother status. When attention is paid to the heterogeneity of single mothers it is often done in ways that promotes a divide and conquer discourse, creating the “good and deserving” single mother who attends postsecondary education to “better” her situation against the “bad and undeserving” single mother who needs to rely on social assistance to provide for her family (Kelly, 2000).

“Single women and their children represent the largest and fastest growing population of the poor” (Houghton, 2002, p. 1). It is impossible to overestimate the painful experiences of poverty. Adair (2003), an educator, researcher, and activist in the USA, uses her own narrative to illustrate the devastating effects of poverty:

When my already bad teeth started to rot and I was out of my head with pain, my choices as an adult welfare recipient were either to let my teeth fall out or to have them pulled. In either case, the culture would then read me as a toothless illiterate, as a fearful joke. To pay my rent and put shoes on my daughter’s feet, I sold blood at two or three different clinics on a monthly basis until I became so anemic that they refused to buy it from me. (p. 32)

Educational institutions are not always well equipped to meet the needs of a diverse student population. "To remove structural barriers one must determine whether any institutional practices and policies, which may appear to be gender-neutral, actually impede the full participation of women" (Hornosty, 1998, p. 183). The invisible and visible processes that operate to create these expectations and policies are premised upon a particular *kind* of student. "The model of a single scholar, who is able to devote all *his* time and energy to academic pursuits epitomizes this tradition" (Hornosty, 1998, p. 184). Research into student persistence "tends to privilege the experiences of traditional-aged, White college students without children" (Christopher, 2005, p. 170). Under the category of "non-traditional student", it is the single parent student who faces the greatest obstacles (Bruns, 2004; Gibson, 2000).

Marginalized and diversely situated students do exist on university campuses across Canada. Yet institutions of education continue to produce and exhibit a culture of Whiteness which is not easily pinpointed the way individual acts of racism can sometimes be (Henry and Tator, 2009a). Many participants experienced racism in school and in the community yet many also felt a sense of not belonging on campus which had more to do with the overall systemic and invisible culture of the institution. Whiteness involves elements of privileging the dominant or mainstream in a way that hides itself; reproducing its power. In education it can take the form of a hidden curriculum that for example, does not accurately teach or represent Aboriginal peoples' lives and the violence committed against them by the state. Whiteness can reproduce itself by only hiring faculty and administrators who represent the mainstream without taking equity hiring into consideration. The culture of Whiteness tends to value one standard and dominant form of knowledge creation and production. It involves a system which disadvantages and contributes to the creation of the 'other'.

The power of Whiteness, however, is manifested by the ways in which racialized Whiteness becomes transformed into intellectual, social, cultural, political, and economic behaviour. White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative and natural. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior. Whiteness comes to mean normality, knowledge, superiority, merit, motivation, knowledge, truth, neutrality, and objectivity (Henry and Tator, 2009b, p. 25).

Single mother students are qualitatively different from the characteristics which are associated with traditional students. Women spoke at great length in our interviews about the challenges surrounding economic security and providing

for their children. In Ontario, students cannot collect social assistance benefits and student loans through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) at the same time while they attend postsecondary education. Currently, an exception is made for single parents and married students who may be eligible to receive a top-up from social assistance if OSAP does not provide as much financial support as social assistance would (OSAP, 2009b). Because recipients receive such inadequate and unliveable rates on social assistance, single mother students were forced to rely on almost all of their income from student loans. Many were anxious about the amount in student loan debt they had and wondered how they would be able to repay it. The student loan repayment schedule assumes that shortly upon graduating, students will become employed in their field of study and afford to pay their monthly debt (OSAP, 2009a). Unfortunately, OSAP and the repayment schedule, like the education system itself, is premised upon a particular kind of student; namely one who does not have family responsibilities or the barriers single parents experience such as a lack of affordable and quality child care. Single mothers in this study were often the sole emergency contact and the one who needed to pick up their children from daycare or school (which were sometimes open during different hours than the timetables expected of a student). Furthermore, enforcing such a high repayment schedule under the assumption that students will find gainful employment after graduating, presumes there is no structural barriers in employment such as discrimination based on race, ethnicity, age, ability, sex, gender identity, sexuality, or citizenship status.

College and university campuses have a multiple array of activities for students to participate in, but these extracurricular activities are geared towards traditional students. Very few institutions offer family friendly spaces and activities or try to promote access for single mother students and their families. Christopher (2005) states:

For example, when asked why she did not participate in groups on campus, Ella, a Black mother of three said, "I don't feel like I'm on the same level...the people in my classes are a lot younger than I am so I have different activities than they do and my main [activity] is to go home and take care of my kids. So they have more free time than I do." (p. 176)

However, findings from Christopher's (2005) study showed more than half of the single mothers felt socially integrated on campus through their work-study jobs. Many respondents expressed sentiments of feeling like family with their co-workers and other staff on campus. The involvement in work-study positions on campus gave single mothers a sense of belonging and community, which reduces feelings of isolation. Christopher's (2005) findings illustrate an important

difference between traditional and non-traditional students: social integration into campus life may take many forms. For non-traditional students, work-study positions seem to be a strong persistence factor.

ONTARIO'S SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Whenever I think of the disastrous effects of the Harris Conservative government in Ontario during the 1990s, I think it should follow with the heading, "Single Mothers Under Attack". The social policy platform, or what the Harris government referred to as the 'Common Sense Revolution', heavily relied on the market and the privatization of the family as opposed to state funded social supports. While official numbers may have shown that there was a decrease in the number of social assistance recipients, this should not be interpreted as a decrease in need for assistance. The social safety net saw drastic cuts to funding, elimination of services such as subsidized daycare spaces and subsidized housing, and the erosion of equity rights which were highly gendered and racialized (Bezanson, 2006; Lightman and Baines, 1996) across the province, which has not been restored to this day. Cuts to social services and restrictions upon eligibility to these services contribute to further marginalizing already disadvantaged groups with single mothers being disproportionately affected. According to Campaign 2000 (2008):

In 2006, one out of three (32.3% after-tax) mother-led lone parent families lived in poverty. Lone mothers face the challenge of being the sole provider while also having to find adequate child care and secure housing, often at astronomical costs. They struggle to balance education or training, community service and/or paid work with family responsibilities. (p. 2)

The times of the year which are especially difficult for single mother students are near the end of terms when they have exhausted all of the insufficient funding they receive from OSAP and are waiting for their next instalment. The summer months prove to be particularly stressful. For one of the participants in this study, she was already anticipating this stressful time period. She had no income beginning in April and continuing into the summer. What made this situation even more difficult was she had been in recovery from addiction and had recently regained access of her child. During the many years in which her parents cared for her child as she was not able to, she survived in any way she could. She was not always comfortable speaking about her past and looked forward to immersing herself in her education and being reunited with her son. However, a lack of financial security, food security and housing security was upfront in her mind. Even on the day of our interview, she was frantically

meeting with any community agency or on-campus support that would listen to her and hopefully provide her with support.

INSTITUTION AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

The need to have internal advocates in universities is an area most participants highlighted in their interviews. Also, the great divide between academia and the community is a major barrier for single mother students who are poor or low-income because they, among other poor and low-income students, are the ones most likely to need additional resources such as food banks, housing and childcare assistance, which not all universities provide. For one participant who used a food bank on her campus, she stated that over the months they were giving her less and less and so this was not a consistent source of support for her. Other students expressed when universities did provide these services, they were not made aware of them. Some single mothers also expressed hesitation in acquiring these supports because of the stigma associated with poverty and food insecurity. Perhaps if there were universal food security policies in place across all post-secondary institutions and the identities of low-income and poor students were made more 'normalized' in academe, the stigma attached to this status would decrease?

As participants in the group interview highlighted, an internal advocate would be able to locate additional funding, subsidy, or food available to help students during the year - especially when their OSAP runs out and they are left scrambling. Moreover, bringing services that are traditionally found in some communities onto university campuses may be more helpful and would also bring issues of poverty and food insecurity on campus to the forefront. In one university I worked for, many faculty members and administrators were not even aware we had a food bank on campus. This "invisibility" of low-income and poor single mother students as part of the general student body was another major barrier which emerged from the interviews.

Affordable, quality, and flexible childcare provisions were a major concern for single mother students. It was reported by single mothers that wait lists for childcare subsidy and/or subsidized spots on campus (when there was on-campus daycare) were up to three years in length. Ida, a queer single mother who was fortunate to secure on-campus daycare felt excluded and discriminated against because of her sexual and gender identity combined with her family status. Also, it became clear to her that the majority of users of this daycare were faculty and staff who worked at the university. Ida referred to this exclusionary space as an "ivory tower daycare." However, it must be noted that several students found having on-campus daycare valuable. It provided them with a

sense of security that their children were close by, it assisted with their schedule when they had paid work on-campus such as in work-study positions, and it contributed to their goal to have their children feel a part of their university community. Although, because of long wait lists for daycare spaces and subsidy, some single mothers were forced to pay high amounts in cost for regular spaces or private childcare arrangements so they could attend classes. Julianne worked part-time just to cover the cost for private childcare arrangements. For students who had acquired daycare spaces, the hours of operation were often problematic as the university schedules some classes in the evening hours yet daycares cater to a typical work day which ends at 5:00 or 6:00p.m.

Many single mothers experienced an overall feeling they were not welcome on campus. In most cases, there were no family friendly spaces to bring your children, breast-feeding friendly spaces, or emergency child care arrangements such as during March Break when school-aged children are off but post-secondary schools are open. At a recent conference I presented at in Sweden, which is a country well known for their "Swedish model" of providing high quality standards of living through state social supports, a woman who had worked in Student Services at a nearby university and was also a single mother spoke to me after I presented. She retold a story about how her student group were fighting the administration to install baby change tables in the washrooms on campus. Her student group were met with the response from the head administrator who stated, "If we let women think they can bring their kids on campus, next they'll want to bring their dogs." So here we often hear about gender equality on campus yet if we do not also create equality in relation to family responsibilities, which women are most often the care workers responsible, then have we really achieved gender equality?

Some may ask, "Does the university have a responsibility to provide supports and services to marginalized students or should these supports only be offered in the community?" The answer may largely be influenced by how one views the purpose of education itself. Many women in the study spoke about their desire to participate in the institution as part of a larger community. For women who felt supported by their university, this was the result of feeling a sense of belonging on campus through extracurricular activities, having key administrators in their departments and financial aid offices understand their situations and be able to demonstrate knowledge in this area by providing specific resources. As one participant noted, "universities are not only educating their students but their students' entire families as well." For many single mother students, education was not only a means out of poverty but a passion they loved. They often spoke about how consciousness raising their sociology, political science, and women

and gender studies courses were; how more politicized and confident they became.

My answer to the question about the role of the university is yes institutions of education have a responsibility in providing true access for marginalized students and in the case of this study in particular, single mothers. These supports are often different from the ones the mainstream traditional student requires and therefore challenges us to expand our concept of education and how the institution proactively promotes equity.

CONCLUSION

With an increase in diversity of the student population, it is especially important to promote equity within the university. Institutions must re-examine their policies and practices in order to provide support for marginalized students. Specifically, policies need to be implemented which support the enrolment and success of single mother students. Bridging the divide between academia and the community would assist all poor and low-income students who need greater access to food security, clothing, housing, on-campus childcare and childcare subsidies. With the never ending increase in tuition fees, we must ask ourselves; who are we building education systems for? How will these increases further marginalize non-traditional students? Also, faculty members and administrators must acknowledge the diversification of the student body and be provided with adequate resources to be able to respond to students' needs against the many structural barriers which they face. Not only is access to education an important social justice issue, knowledge production in the classroom is also enriched by having diversely situated students as contributors. Further, by increasing supports and services for marginalized students and incorporating diverse ways of viewing institutions of education as part of larger communities, many students in addition to single mothers may benefit from these improvements. These students may include two-parent families, single-father families, mature students, students who are paid workers, and students who have other care work responsibilities such as caring for sick and/or older parents and family members.

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