CHILD NEGLECT FROM THE STANDPOINT OF MOTHERS

by

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B.A., Open Learning University, 1991

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the School of Child and Youth Care

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

This study documents the standpoint of mothers in relation to the child welfare system using institutional ethnography as the research method. Specifically this research explores the contradiction between the crucial role mothers play in protecting children and the absence of their standpoint in child welfare, an absence exemplified in the recent Gove Inquiry. The literature reveals that management tools, such as risk assessment and mandatory reporting organize the child protection process to ensure accountability without incorporating the experience of mothers. This study focuses upon why mothers' standpoint is left out, what happens when it is left out, and how mothers experience systems in which there is little or no acknowledgment of their work in caring for children.

The starting point for the research is the mothers' stories. As consistent with the methodology, these stories provide a starting point for illuminating how documents, forms, legislation and policies impact mothers' experiences with the child welfare system. I argue that the knowledge held by mothers, which provides insight into the prevention of child neglect, is silenced through the official child welfare process. According to the findings, the official process of responding to reports of child neglect textually construct 'neglectful mothers' without including the context of mothers' lives, nor their knowledge. This unintentionally leads mothers to isolation, distrust and hopelessness.

This research turned the official way of understanding neglect around, to hear about it from mothers themselves. As mothers with limited resources describe their daily work in caring for children, new definitions of the problem of so-called child neglect are highlighted from their stories. Associated with these definitions are potential responses to the issue of child neglect. I conclude that, including the standpoint of mothers in conceptualizing the

problems underlying child neglect provides a greater depth of understanding and more effective response to so-called child neglect.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Beginning, sustaining and completing this thesis could not have occurred without support and encouragement from many people. I would like to acknowledge the following people in particular:

Dr. Marie Campbell, who continually challenged me to be true to what I had learned from the data, and who provided opportunity to understand theories which helped make sense of our everyday world.

Dr. Brian Wharf, who provided unfailing encouragement and support, a vast knowledge of child welfare and a sense of stability when I was struggling.

Dr. Marilyn Callahan, whose excitement about this research and invaluable insights provided through her own research kept me believing in the course I was taking.

My parents, especially my mother, who taught me through their own example, the importance of the work involved in caring for children.

My two children, John and Sandra, who suffered through "I'm almost finished this thesis" for several years, thanks for your patience.

DEDICATION:

Writing this thesis has left me with stories and of mothers' lives and of the child welfare system that will remain with me for a long time. I would like to dedicate this thesis to the women who shared their stories with me and who are continuing to work hard caring for their children.

INTRODUCTION

During 1994 and 1995 the story of 5 year old Matthew Vaudreuil's abuse and death was covered extensively in the media. Judge Gove was appointed to review the events and circumstances leading up to the death and to review the child protection policies and practices in British Columbia. Both the media and Gove focused on mothers as the underlying problem in child neglect, blaming social workers for their inability to properly assess mothers for their potential to neglect or abuse.

In the following thesis I turn those assumptions upside down and look at the issue of child protection from the standpoint of those doing the crucial work of protecting children in our society - mothers. A review of the literature reveals different ways of knowing 'child neglect', from theoretical perspectives, from the standpoint of mandated child welfare, and from the standpoint of mothers reported for neglecting their child. This study explores how the official standpoint, that of our child welfare system, has named the mother as the problem underlying 'child neglect.' The findings indicate that the resulting legislation, policies and practices obliterate the experiential knowledge of mothers reported for neglect. From the standpoint of mothers the present child welfare system moves mothers closer to neglect through its treatment of those reported for neglect. According to these mothers, prevention of so-called child neglect requires authorities to pay more attention to mothers' experiences and respond to the social and economic issues facing them.

Chapter 1 provides the background for this research. I describe the internal contradiction I experienced as a mother when reading the *Report of the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection* (1995) as it became evident that there was no discussion about the crucial work that parents do in caring for and protecting children. I describe my experience of

knowing women who cared for and about their children also feeling invisible and unheard in the current child welfare system. Thus the focus of my inquiry considers the discrepancy between theoretical knowledge about mothers expressed in child welfare legislation, policies and practice and the *Report of the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection*, and the experiential knowledge of mothers who have been reported for neglect.

Chapter 2 explores literature illuminating how mothers' experiences have been excluded from defining the problem and solution of so-called neglect. Research exploring child neglect from developmental, ecological and critical standpoints is outlined. This chapter then reviews the introduction of management technologies into the child welfare process, outlining how the local interaction between a social worker and mother is organized, through text, at sites far removed from that interaction. Conflicts within the field of child welfare are traced to this extra-local form of governance which defines the problem of "child neglect" as "the parent" apparently ignoring the daily struggles facing parents struggling to raise children with limited resources. Feminist research is explored, highlighting the stresses of poverty, sole-support parenting and powerlessness facing mothers reported for neglect. The research question arises from this contradiction between the management of child neglect, which pre-supposes the mother as the problem, and the importance of understanding this issue from the standpoint of those experiencing child welfare practices:

What is mothers' experience of "child protection" when they have been reported for neglecting their child(ren), and what can their daily lives tell us about helping them with their job of parenting?

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used to answer the research question. It is an interpretative methodology using an ethnographic form of inquiry. The qualitative data gathered for the purpose of this study includes interviews, participant observation and

documentary analysis. The approach used to analyze the data is reflexive, moving from experiences of mothers to the policies and practices that provide the context for their interactions with the child welfare system.

In Chapter 4 I describe the official work process of social workers which involves determining whether or not a child is "neglected", and if so, implementing a solution. In this chapter I argue that this official process has an unintended negative effect. Through analysing the stories of women who had been reported for neglect I discovered that the official process can lead women to isolation, distrust and hopelessness.

In Chapter 5 I turn the official way of knowing "child neglect" upside down and explore it from the standpoint of mothers. I argue that parents and their work of parenting, situated outside of government practice and policy, are best understood by listening to them. We hear from parents responsible for caring for children under difficult circumstances what those challenges look and feel like. Their lives tell us about the domino effect of limited resources and how lifestyle differences and difficulties in parenting can lead to reports of child neglect from the community. Their ideas for solutions flow from their lived experience of parenting under difficult circumstances.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 6, some policy changes and approaches to preventing child neglect are outlined. These recommended changes to our current approach are derived from the stories and analysis provided in preceding chapters.

CHAPTER 1 - PROBLEMATIC

A RESPONSE TO GOVE

In November 1995 Judge Thomas Gove submitted the *Report of the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection* to the British Columbia Cabinet. Judge Gove had been appointed by Cabinet, to report and make recommendations on the adequacy of the services and policies and practices of the Ministry of Social Services[1] in the area of child protection. His final report contains 118 recommendations. These include the training, qualifications and regulation of child protection social workers and other professionals working in the child welfare field, the paramountcy of the child's safety and well being, stricter guidelines for reporting and investigating, thorough practice audits and annual performance assessments of social workers, and a new child welfare organizational structure.

The approach to prevention in Gove's report is outlined in recommendations to regulate and increase the training and qualifications of social workers and others coming in contact with mothers "at risk of neglecting". In the report there are 24 recommendations which involve increased training, qualifications and regulating of social workers, and other contracted child welfare workers. Three recommendations are related to increased training for police and health care professions in the area of assessing potential abuse or neglect. There are no recommendations which focus on parent's work in protecting children and the need to support that work through training or resources, although Gove emphasized the need for children and youth as well as child care professionals to be informed and have a voice in the child welfare process:

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[1] Throughout this document the ministry responsible for child welfare and Income Assistance is referred to as the Ministry of Social Services (or MSS). While the names have now changed to the Ministry for Children and Families, responsible for child protection, and the Ministry of Human Resources, responsible for Income Assistance, the name was MSS during the time the data was collected.

> Recommendation 14. All child care professionals and foster parents who make reports that children are in need of protection should be fully informed of the outcome of the investigation.
>
> Recommendation 40. Children who are affected by administrative decisions need easy access to independent advocacy, especially when their interests and the interests of their parents or other caregivers differ.
>
> Recommendation 18: Contract service providers (including foster parents) and child care professionals, such as teachers and physicians, who provide services to a child at risk should be fully informed of the child's background and present circumstances so that they can appropriately meet the child's needs.

The opportunity for parents to have their voices heard is mentioned only in the context of complaints and appeals, similar to those accused in criminal investigations:

> Recommendation 39. Children, parents and caregivers who are affected by administrative decisions about child welfare service delivery:
> a. need consistent, accessible complaints procedures and recognized bodies to review those decisions, and
> b. need to be informed of their right to a review of the process involved and of their right to advocacy.

The preceding is one of <u>two</u> recommendations regarding a parent's right to a complaint process. In contrast, reporting of parents by community members and the corresponding assessment of parents by social workers was discussed in <u>twenty</u> of the recommendations. One recommendation includes an increased basis for reporting neglect by community members and investigation of those reports by social workers:

> Recommendation 79. The circumstances of emotional harm should be amended in s.13(1)(e) of the <u>Child, Family and Community Service Act</u> to include "likely to be" harmed by the parent's conduct.
>
> Recommendation 8. All reports of new incidents of child abuse or neglect should be investigated, regardless of:
> a. the credibility of the reporter, and
> b. whether there has been previous investigations of similar incidents.

Others discussed the process of assessment.

> Recommendation 10. When conducting investigations and doing risk assessments, social workers should do complete collateral checks and comprehensive social histories of the child and family.
>
> Recommendation 16. All case planning should be child-centred and should be informed by ongoing professional assessment of the family's functioning in regard to the child's safety or well-being.

Parents involvement in "case planning" to ensure the well being of their child, or their assessment of the needs of their child is not mentioned in this process.

Of these 118 recommendations in the report, 19 contain the word parent or family. These are primarily focused on assessing the parent and limiting support to the parent.

> Recommendation 15. Child protection social workers must complete a comprehensive risk assessment when investigating a child protection report. The risk assessment should include corroboration from collaterals of explanations for injuries or neglect which the parent may give about the child. The assessment should not give "strengths" of the parent disproprtionate weight. (Gove, 1995: p. 56)

> Recommendation 27. The ministry's policy should state clearly that the protection of the child is paramount, and should not be overshadowed by a desire to help parents improve their lives and abilities.

Upon reading the report, I felt devalued and silenced as a parent. I felt that the work I had done, and was continuing to do in caring for my children was invisible, even non-existent in this report. I thought of the parents that I had worked with in various community programs and in research projects. I thought of their work, caring for their children, attempting to do the best with the few resources that they had. I thought of the love and the tenderness that I had seen, as well as the exhaustion from being up all night with a sick child. I remembered, for instance, how one of the mothers had breastfed one child while ensuring her 3-year old had crayons and paper. She was attending to his need while engrossed in caring for and baby, and talking to me. In the middle of our conversation, she stopped to praise his drawing. This was a woman who had been reported for neglect. Like many parents I knew who had contact with the child welfare system, she felt that her experience, her lived reality of parenting, was not heard. One woman described it as "feeling like you don't even exist." The predominant feeling expressed by mothers in contact with the child welfare system was an overwhelming sense of being the object of policies, rather than being seen as a person involved in solutions for the care of their children.

If our child welfare system is set up to protect children, and if, as current statistics show us, mothers are the primary caregivers and protectors of our children, why is there no mention of the work mothers do in preventing child neglect through their care and protection, and why is there no place for their voice in the child welfare system? In the following review of the literature, my exploration of the "child neglect" issue is driven by these contradictions: **Why is it that child protection programs, polices, and enquiries like the Gove report, which are intended to help mothers and children, instead ignore mother's work, knowledge and solutions, and apprently fail to make use of everything mothers know about child care?**

CHAPTER 2 - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

CHILD NEGLECT THEORIES

Researchers have explored the problem of child neglect and child abuse since the turn of the century. Until this last decade the majority of research in North America has been based upon developmental and ecological theory. However, there is a growing body of literature stemming from feminist and other forms of structural or critical theories which provides alternative perspectives to child welfare and child neglect.

Developmental Theory

The history of child welfare demonstrates how certain values and belief systems about the care of children form the basis for the legislation designed to "protect children" (Krane, 1995; Callahan, 1995; Wharf, 1993). A focus on individual fault, stemming from developmental theory is evidenced in child welfare research and legislation since the turn of the century. In the 20th century the problem of neglected children has been variously "known" as i) the moral shortcomings of mothers (Macintyre, 1993; Swift, 1995), ii) families not conforming to the two-parent patriarchical family (Krane, 1995; Callahan, 1993; Macintyre, 1993), and iii) sick and villainous individuals (Hacking, 1992; Callahan & Callahan, 1995). This belief that the problem lies in "parental inadequacies" has remained at the heart of mandated child welfare, although the social and economic conditions facing parents reported for neglect have been raised as issues by those working closely with the parents. (Callahan, 1993; Macintyre, 1993; Swift, 1991).

Since the late 1960s many researchers conceptualized neglect as a medical problem, using the "symptoms" identified in the research to assess the potential of mothers to neglect (Polansky, Chalmers, Buteenweiser & Williams, 1979) . This perspective has arisen from a scientific basis and is termed as "developmental theory" within the psychology and child care literature. The approach is microscopic, looking at units and parts of units in order to

understand cause and effect relationships (Callahan & Ricks, 1993). In the literature based on developmental theory, causes of neglect and psychological characteristics of the mothers form the focus of the research.

Researchers conceptualizing neglect as medical, developed solutions aimed at healing a sickness. For instance Polansky et al.(1979) described the "symptoms" of parents who neglect their children as problems with relatedness, impulse control, confidence and verbal accessibility. In later research Polansky, Ammons and Gaudin (1985) outlines his finding that neglectful parents are not embedded in helping networks. He attributes this to the high rate of depression, leading to helplessness and then to isolation. The characteristics "found" in developmental research studies have been used to identify mothers who are "at risk" of neglecting or abusing their children.

In the early 1960's, C.H. Kempe, a pediatrician, brought the 'battered baby syndrome' to the attention of the general public (Kempe, 1962) and the medical community took control of the issue -"it is the responsibility of the medical profession to assume leadership in this field" (Helfer, 1968). The media responding to the issue identified abuse both as an illness and a crime, referring to the "sick adults who commit such crimes" (noted in Hacking, 1992).

Hacking (1992) describes how physical abuse in the 60s and 70s, then sexual abuse in the 80s became the actions the public identified as child abuse. Policies designed to respond to physical and sexual abuse which focused on blaming the individual became the overiding policies of child welfare organizations (Callahan, 1995). These policies developed similarly to those in police investigations, reflecting the categorization of child abusers as criminals. However, these same policies and procedures were also used to respond to reports of child neglect, which, historically have been the majority of concerns within child welfare (Callahan, 1995).

The inclusion of neglectful parents, primarily mothers, in the same category as child abusers, primarily men, is criticized by Hacking (1992). Krane (1995) provides some

insight into that apparent contradiction, suggesting that women are held responsible for both the abusive acts and child neglect in their idealized role as "the nurturer and protector":

> As this worker succinctly put it: Mothers are traditionally responsible for raising those kids and caring for them, and we tend to be hard on them. We have expectations because they're mothers and they're supposed to protect and that is their role in life. (p. 17)

She describes how mothers are held responsible for their children's well being, even when there are obvious factors outside of their control (i.e. sexual abuse of the children by their father). In cases of neglect it is most often a single mother caring full time for her children who is reported for neglect, not the father who has abdicated his responsibility for both the care and the financial needs of his children (Swift, 1995). This blame on the mother flows from developmental and ecological research which focusses on the "characteristics" of faulty mothers and their potential to neglect.

Ecological Theory

According to Laird (1995) the 1960s and 1970s also ushered in a "widespread interest in systems and ecological theories as well as renewed interest in the family" (p. 150). Ecological theory focuses on structure, patterns, and function, how systems work. The interdependent nature of our world and the inadequacy of attempting to understand any phenomenon in isolation from its context is the hallmark of ecological theory. There is a recognition that people, events and relationships are in a constant state of change; research based on ecological theory recognizes the state of flux and the interconnectedness within our society (Callahan & Ricks, 1993). However, there is little mention of poverty, racism, sexism (Callahan, 1993), or social construction of knowledge (Laird, 1995). Problems from a family systems perspective "have been perceived as products of faulty family structure, communication, rule systems, or unresolved intergenerational issues, many of which are attributed to faulty mothering" (Laird: p. 153). Much of the research about child abuse and neglect from an ecological perspective has focused on the mother as the

"dysfunctional centre" of the family, on the intergenerational nature of neglecting mothers and on the isolation of neglectful parents.

One study (Krane, 1995) documents how women are reported as neglectful due to failure to protect their children from a sexually abusive partner. Various researchers have described the mother as the central figure in the mother/father/daughter dysfunctional triangle of sexual abuse cases (Zuelzer & Reposa, 1983; Sgroi et al, 1985; Meiselman, 1978 noted in Krane, 1995). Krane (1995) argues that this has twisted the focus from the father to the mother where "a mother's apparent lack of interest in the sexual relationship with her husband is portrayed in the literature as abnormal or dysfunctional while a father's "need" for sex is "normal and functional" (James and MacKinnon 74-75) and understandable". That insufficient psychological investment in children is associated with the mother and not the abuser/father...demonstrates...the shift in focus from the actions of men as abusers to the in/actions of women as mothers (and wives)" (p. 11). These studies based on an ecological perspective suggest that the mother is required to take on complete responsibility for protecting her children. It has been identified as her "role" in the family unit. Krane (1995) critiques these conclusions which place the blame on the mother for situations in which children are abused by the father.

Another issue that arose from an ecological perspective was the intergenerational nature of neglectful mothers. Mosher (1994) draws from Polansky's research in her discussion of the intergenerational transmission of neglectful parenting. Reflecting on his findings that neglectful families are more isolated she connects it to "the community distancing and rejection that they had experienced in their own childhood" (p.8). Mosher explains it as a cause and effect relationship rather than an explanation that helps us to see the social organization of people's lives.

However some ecological research focused on context rather than the individual. Valentine's research (1985) describes how forces at work in individuals, families,

communities and the broader culture all contribute to child neglect. The findings of a four year program which studied two Winnipeg inner city neighbourhoods on parent network building (Lugtig & Fuchs, 1992) showed that informal support can be strengthened by social network intervention, and formal helping can be meshed with informal structures to reduce the risk of child maltreatment. Garbarino & Sherman (1980) recommended moving from a one-to-one rehabilitation and treatment model, with its focus on parental inadequacies, to a community consultation model, which reflects a belief that the core economic and social issues underlying neglect need to be responded to by the community.

While the preceding recommendations regarding social support networks and community responsibility for issues such as neglect are rarely embraced by government agencies (Cameron, Vanderwoerd, Pierson & Cheung, 1994) the "knowledge" derived from developmental and ecological studies, emphasizing "dysfunctional" mothers, forms the basis for many of the policy and practice initiatives in child welfare (Wald & Wolverton, 1990). Critical theorists provide insight into the rationale behind this individualist approach.

Critical Theories

Critical theories seek an understanding of human behaviour as a result of inherent conflicts and injustices in social institutions rather than as a result of individual or group pathologies (Callahan & Ricks, 1993). Critical theorists examine the process of constructing inequality in everyday life as well as the outcomes. Feminism, and other theories which challenge the current hierarchical bureacracies in favour of community or client determined services are all expressions of critical perspectives

Research from feminist theorists has identified sole-support parenting, poverty and powerlessness as key problems facing many parents reported for neglect (Swift, 1995; Campbell, 1991; Callahan, 1993). Research from a feminist perspective emphasizes the importance of hearing the actual experiences of mothers reported for neglecting their

children, experiences invisible in the current child welfare system (Wallace,1994; Wharf, 1995). While I will explore the issues facing mothers in more detail later in this chapter I will focus first on research which illuminates why the experiences of mothers are invisible within child protection programs, policies and inquiries such as the Gove Report.

As expressed by Wharf (1995) "the voices of female clients, female workers, and indeed children, are not included in the development of child welfare policy" (p. 833). The lack of client participation is echoed by Thomson (1990, cited in Davies, 1990) in her research of child welfare management, "these managers see their jobs as very separate from their public who are merely another object to be planned for, another factor to be taken into the resource allocation equation. One is left with the feeling that the services are not 'public' in any real sense" (p.64).

There are numerous theories that attempt to explain the problems with the current child welfare system, a system characterized by the lack of participation by workers, parents and children. The movement from community governed children's aid societies to state governance and the introduction of business management processes form the context for these theories (Davies, 1990).

One theory connects the capitalist labour process, exemplified by Taylor's scientific management principles with the control of social workers labour within the child welfare system:

> Within this framework, it is postulated that control over the labour process is sought through the separation of "conception from execution" of tasks. Further, it is argued, planning and coordinating functions (i.e., conception) are increasingly controlled by a small number of senior managers and administrators. The performance (execution) of tasks is then carried out by front-line field workers. (Davies, 1990:85)

However, as Davies (1990) points out, the nature of front-line social work in which some form of planning decisions must be made at the front line make the application of scientific management to social work fraught with contradictions. In order to control and monitor practice the state and its' managers have insisted on "conformity to bureacratic norms, such

as quantitative analysis of output and obligatory recording and filing activity reports on practice." (Davies,1990:86)

Hall's thesis of moral panic has also been applied to the child welfare field. Parton (1981) argues that the reaction to child abuse tragedies and the resulting attack on social workers can be categorized as "moral panic". The necessity for government to manage this panic through social control over social workers and the families coming in contact with government social workers, is central to this theory. The potential for government to increase control over social work practice has been seen as appropriate given the increase in public outrage regarding child abuse and the identification of the problem as inadequate social workers and deviant parents (Parton, 1981). Financial restraint policies and an increased focus on individual responsibility have further defined the role of social workers as social police rather than helper (Davies, 1990). Within this context governments across North America have moved to contain the practices of the social worker into a policing role, attempting to limit the participation of workers and families in the policy development process.

The use of management technologies, to organize the social worker into a policing role and reduce the potential for the family and social worker to be involved in the conception or planning component of child protection has been explored by Callahan (1993) and Campbell (1988). These technologies are found in organizational forms, documents and policy manuals and identify the work to be carried out, the information to be gathered and the process by which to gather that information.

> It is argued that the use of conceptual practices, made practicable by improvements in computer facilities, represents a major development in managerial method which restructures organizational meanings, outcomes, and relations among participants in human service organizations. (Campbell, 1988: p.157)

This restructuring allows managers to organize or control the work of social workers and ensure accountability from locations far removed from the workers.

This discussion articulates the different perspectives upon which child welfare research is premised. While the research arising from developmental and ecological

theories focus on negative character traits of 'neglectful mothers', the research arising from a critical perspective identifies structural controls which decrease or eliminate opportunities for the participation of mothers and social workers in child welfare planning. This control is exercised in child welfare practice through management technologies which utilize findings from developmental and ecological research to organize social workers practice, thus reducing opportunities for mothers and social workers to participate in the conception of the problem and solutions.

MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGIES

The belief that parental inadequacies lie at the heart of child neglect has been prevalent in legislation since the turn of the century (Swift, 1991). Only recently however has this concept come to dominate child welfare practices through the development and use of specific technologies, for example to assess "risk" of neglect. Research in the area of child neglect has been used by child welfare agencies depending upon its ease of implementation and congruence with management requirements. Developmental and ecological studies focusing on parental inadequacies have allowed management to utilize so-called characteristics of "neglecting parents" and develop tools for social workers and community members to assess the match between parents and these characteristics. "Risk assessments" and "mandatory reporting," which are premised on identification of neglecting parents, enjoy widespread use throughout North America. However, critics emphasize, that while these tools may be useful for mangement, they do nothing to assist parents and children.

Historical Movement to Management technologies

Since the 1960's official child welfare activities have increasingly been organized by administrators in government ministries who focus on attaining efficiency and accountability through written polices and required documentation (Callahan, 1993;

Ferguson, 1984). At the same time that management technologies were first being introduced the organizations which were mandated by legislation to respond to issues of child welfare were strongly affected by the renewed public interest in child abuse. In response to the furor over the villianous and sick acts of physical and sexual abuse being reported by the media, reporting of abuse and neglect from the community has risen substantially (Ministry of Social Services, 1995; Lindsey, 1994). The organizational structure of child welfare services has developed and changed with the demand for services. The British Columbia Ministry of Social Services, like similar government bureaucracies across North America, moved from a form of public organization which depended upon the profession of social work for its administrative structure to a form dependent upon what Callahan (1993) calls the corporate management of present day child welfare:

> Corporate management is founded on the beliefs of scientific management, which emphasizes definable outputs, clear lines of responsibility, and efficient use of resources. The application of corporate management to child welfare work results in a reformulation of the mission of child welfare, from one that defines outcomes for clients, improving child care, and family functioning, to one that defines outcomes for the organization, providing efficient and effective service within a legal mandate and organizational resources. Decision-making moves upward because knowledgeable people are redefined as those who know about the organization rather than the problems of the clients and front-line service delivery. (p. 87)

Now, rather than child welfare workers driving the policies, those determining policies are top government officials responsible for administration. The problems and solutions identified and reflected in the policies and standards developed for front-line social workers have become responsive to management needs rather than client needs:

> Most administrators of service organizations, familiar with the politics of the budgetary process, the importance of maintaining a supportive climate in the organizational environment, and the low status of clients in the larger society, are aware that the actual delivery of services to clients is secondary to two more crucial functions: to adequately regulate and control the behaviour of clients, and to maintain secure links with other organizations (Ferguson, 1984: 133).

Cassin (1980) describes these routine methods that professionals use to regulate and control and calls them management technologies. Management technologies have

ensured a focus on legal and budgetary accountability through systematization of the work at the front line (Wallace, 1994). Campbell (1992) discusses how the documentary information required of front-line workers in an Ontario social service organization served management purposes of organizing and categorizing for efficiency. The organizational structure of the present British Columbia Ministry of Social Services is similarly organized through documentation which provides legal and financial assurance to the government that the legislative mandate of the Ministry is being implemented within the financial and policy guidelines (Wallace, 1994).

Risk Assessment Tools and Mandatory Reporting

Two management technologies which are prevalent in child welfare practice are risk assessment tools and mandatory reporting. These approaches to child welfare have been widely praised in most jurisdictions with calls to increase their use (Cicchinelli, 1990).

Risk assessment tools are designed for social workers to assess the likelihood of parents neglecting their children. A list or matrix of the characteristics and environment of the parent is checked by the worker to analyze the potential for maltreatment (McDonald & Marks, 1991). Pecora (1991) indicates that although these instruments "are not able to be used to substantiate allegations of child maltreatment...some of the risk assessment systems currently in place help workers focus their assessment efforts, structure their decision making, and document their casework files". Similar organizational benefits were identified in further research (American Public Welfare Association, 1990). Risk assessment:

> "Operationalizes what has been traditionally considered good casework practices; provides a basis for the classification of cases into risk related groups--facilitates prioritization; can effectively serve as the basis of worker training, and; provides more readily accessible case information" (p. 7)

Risk assessment tools are based on developmental research and focus on parental characteristics. These tools are congruent with corporate management since they appear to concretely measure parental inadequacies and in turn justify a determination of neglect.

However, according to many researchers it doesn't appear to help the parents or their children (McDonald and Marks, 1991; Doueck, English, DePanfilis and Moote, 1993; Wald & Wolverton, 1990; and Caldwell, Bogat and Davidson, 1994). The rationale for these tools was to assist management rather than children and parents.

Another management technology, mandatory reporting, has become more and more common across North America over the past 30 years. Mandatory reporting legislates the community member's duty to report perceived child neglect or abuse, or child neglect or abuse. From the beginning it has been seen as a key prevention in protecting child neglect and abuse, and responsible for a decrease in children's deaths (Lindsey, 1994). However, the correlation assumed between mandatory reporting and a decrease in children's deaths appears to be erroneous (Lindsey, 1994). Conversely, Lindsey (1994) found that the statistics demonstrate that the increase in mandatory reporting, which has greatly increased the reports of abuse and neglect, appears to have had negligible impact on the percentage of children dying from abuse and neglect.

Researchers have identified two concerns that have been created out of this use of mandatory reporting as the cornerstone for preventing child abuse and neglect. Due to the growing numbers of reports under mandatory reporting legislation, increased financial resources have been required to carry out the corresponding investigations (Kamerman and Kahn, 1990). In most jurisdictions the financial resources have been pulled out from family supports in order to support the investigation focus of child protection. The decreased family supports have occurred concurrently with an increased accusatory investigation focus:

> Investigation of a report of child maltreatment is not an innocuous intrusion into family life. By the time an investigation is complete, the family has had to cope with anxieties in both their formal and informal support systems alerted to state suspicion of their parenting. Even if the report is expunged from the central registry due to lack of substantiation, it is seldom expunged from the mind of the family. (Hutchison,1993:60)

The parent, who is often struggling to parent under difficult circumstances is faced with decreased family support yet an increased potential to be reported by a community member (Pelton, 1994). The combination of mandatory reporting, lack of services and risk assessment tools would appear to make her life even more difficult than it already is. Ferguson (1984) argues that clients actually experience this administrative approach to social services as oppressive and demeaning. She quotes from one woman who had been a client, "They take a human soul and destroy it, take a person's dignity and bend it down to nothing" (p. 147).

Summary

The movement to management technologies in the field of child welfare has created practices which assist managers to administer. Technologies such as "risk assessments" and "mandatory reporting" allow for widespread application through standardized understanding of the defined problem. These practices are based on research which identifies parents as the problem and focuses on characteristics of parents which identify them as 'neglectful'. However, as critics point out, these tools do little to help parents and children. Instead there are indications that they are detrimental to the well-being of those families who come in contact with the child welfare system. While the preceding literature indicates that corporate management drives the work of social workers, what is missing is understanding how this approach structures a distance into the relationships between the front-line social worker and the mother, and how that relationship is experienced by mothers.

CHILD WELFARE LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

The literature reviewed in the following section illustrates how front line workers are organized to interact with clients through the legislation and policies of the child welfare structure. It describes how the practice of those implementing child welfare policy and legislation is organized based on the official naming of child neglect through documents

such as risk assessment tools and mandatory reporting that standardize information (Wallace, 1994; De Montigny, 1995). In the context of the child welfare structure of governance, workers document information about the family for organizational purposes (Smith, 1987; Campbell, 1992). This information becomes the textual reality about the family which can be transferred to others through its textual form (Smith, 1975). These textual descriptions are part of the management technologies that bring the problems and solutions into systemic relation. The governing structure works through documentary processes whereby child neglect and neglectful parents are constructed to fit the official problem (parental inadequacies) and solutions (treatment). When one examines these processes one can see that this "way of knowing" parents reported for neglect reflects the standpoint (Smith, 1987) of those developing the legislation and those administering it.

The Power to Name

If we review the history of child protection's conceptual practices we can identify how the naming of a social problem dictated the subsequent forms of action. Within the early child saver movement the middle- and upper-class reformers worked for legislation to solve the child neglect problem, which they believed was caused by parental inadequacies. Hacking (1992) described how the development in the 1960s of the category of child abuse, which includes child neglect, categorized abusers as "sick and criminal". The social problem of child neglect was thus formed, framed and sanctioned by the medical community and the media as an "individual" issue. The research that followed attempted to describe, scientifically, the characteristics of the individuals who were reported for neglecting their child (Polansky et al., 1979). Once that was accomplished, solutions could be developed and appropriate action on the 'social problems' taken by child welfare agencies. The child welfare agencies were organized under legislation which sanctioned this naming of the problem as an individual issue. The process in child welfare was similar

to Mueller's discussion of "the Women of Peru" and development programs. Mueller writes:

> The "problem" has already been worked up as a Development Problem, and the "solution" has already been prescribed within the format of a Development Project...there is a feedback loop between the power to name the problems to be solved and the power to impose solutions for precisely those problems so named. (Mueller, 1988: p. 132, 137)

Child welfare's organizational texts define the terms within which action can be officially taken. Within both the present legislation and the *Child, Family and Community Service Act* the defining of child neglect has met with difficulties. However, those who report neglect and those who must determine if protection is needed for a child have expressed a desire for a clear and concise definition (Region L's Response to the White Paper, 1993). The 'ruling' of child welfare requires the documented reality of neglect in order to categorize, quantify and determine action (Smith, 1975).

In an attempt to address the 'haziness' of what constitutes neglect the *Inter-Ministry Child Abuse Handbook* (Province of British Columbia, 1988) provides a firm definition:

> **Neglect** means the failure of those responsible for the care of the child to meet the physical, emotional or medical needs of a child to an extent that the child's health, development or safety is endangered.

Naming the solutions for child neglect relates specifically to the definition of child neglect as a 'problem' with the parent. Parenting courses, budgeting courses, and one-to-one therapy sessions are seen as the appropriate methods to solve the problem (Laird, 1995). When these do not work, it is deemed that the parent is unsuitable to parent their child and the child is apprehended and put in the care of the 'state.' (Swift, 1991) While the issues of poverty, powerlessness and single parenthood are clearly contributing factors the policies and standards currently in place prevent child welfare staff from providing solutions to these problems (Ferguson, 1984). Instead, the solutions offered, such as counseling and parenting courses, reflect how the social problem of child neglect has been named and categorized.

The preceding literature provides insight into how the official way of knowing the problem of child neglect and its possible solutions is documented in legislation and policies. But this still leaves the worker with a problem of relating the official definition to the real lives of parents and children.

Extra Local Ruling

There are several characteristics of the present form of governance described in the literature that help us understand how official definitions of the problem move from the legislation into people's lives. Dorothy Smith (1984) describes the governing structure as "organized on principles of universality and impersonality" (p. 75). She relates its capacity to govern 'universally' on its extra local nature, describing how ruling is evidenced through the way in which interactions between people at a local level are dictated by requirements laid down from somewhere else (Smith, 1984).

The advancement of management technologies has increased the ability to control the practices of social workers from outside their local interaction with clients (Campbell, 1992). Policies and documents are used to ensure child welfare workers follow the policies and legislation in a standardized fashion (Smith, 1975; De Montigny, 1995). More recently, the use of computer programs to document the information required by management has further standardized practice (Campbell, 1992; Callahan, 1993). According to Campbell (1992) the local interaction between client and worker has become increasingly organized by the standardized requirements emerging from decisions made extra-locally.

A current form of extra-local ruling can be found in the risk assessment forms mentioned earlier, favoured by many child welfare agencies throughout North America (Pecora, 1991). These forms provide a list, sometimes a matrix of "risk factors" describing characteristics of mothers, the family, and the environment which are believed to indicate when a child is at risk. The policies to implement such a form would be

determined and developed from within the governing structure. If child welfare workers throughout the region use this form, they would assess neglect in light of the categories listed within the risk assessment tool. Their local interactions with clients, the differing contextual and cultural factors would be ignored. Thus, through the use of text on a standardized form, official ideas about children and families come to dominate what happens between parents and workers.

Documentary Reality

Text includes "words, numbers and images on paper, in computers, or on television and movie screens (Smith, 1987:17). Recent literature has provided insights into how text is used, through policies, forms and required documentation, to ensure a final documentary product corresponding to the needs of those governing. Darville (1989) describes two different types of literacy - organizational literacy and the language of experience. He discusses how work in our society is done using documentary practices:

> Organizational accounts may convey more than mere concepts and categories...They often describe particular events...These include newspaper 'stories', psychiatric 'case histories'...Such accounts refer to particular events, and perhaps even borrow some of the practices of the narrative, but they intend an organizational and not an experiential framework for understanding. (p. 9)

These documentary accounts are created for a purpose. Texts are used in child welfare practice to create documentary realities of the local experience for the purposes of attaining information pertaining to a budget, court purposes, or for accountability reasons: "It is through texts that mundane activities ultimately appear or stand as proper social work, hence as matters of record. A home visit becomes an entry in a running record, an apprehension becomes a Report to the Court, a decision to request custody of a child becomes a Notice of Hearing, and so on,"(De Montigny 1995: 223). These accounts about parents and children include the information required for corporate management purposes without the context, such as poverty, the impact of violence by a partner or racism (Swift, 1995).

Darville says that the dominant organizations and professions of our society share a common understanding of the terms and "working in relation to one another, they organize their knowledge and take their actions in textual form. These literate practices are means of exercising power in our society." (Darville, 1989: 9-10) Texts are used to coordinate workers organizational action (Smith, 1975). But this method of organizing action also 'distorts'. Experiential knowledge, when converted into documentary categories, will be different from how the original knower experienced it. Local experiences must be made to conform to the "administratively recognizable and standardized form capable of yielding sense to the standard procedures for reading it and on the standard occasions of its reading" (Smith, 1975: 265). This is the work done by child welfare workers. They are required to abstract from people's experiences those that fit the categories and terms as named by the governing structure.

Campbell (1992) and de Montigny (1995) argue that the work of front-line social workers, as constructed through organizational documents, penetrates and alters the worker's relationship with clients. Campbell (1992) provides an example of how social workers must gather information about a mother for court purposes and how doing so constructs neglect in a particular and organizationally relevant way: "'neglect' is constructed intertextually as the social workers' case notes fit the legal requirements for whatever finding a judge can make "(p. 505).

The textual construction of neglect is, as described above, the means by which child welfare organizations ensure the extra-local policies are carried out at the local level according to the organizationally named problem and its official solution. The organizational work of categorizing someone as neglectful has been analyzed by Swift (1991;1995) de Montigny (1995), Campbell (1992) and Wallace (1994).

An example of how the construction of mothers as neglectful starts with reporting by community members is found in Swift's (1995) analysis of the documentation of reports by social workers in the 1930's:

> A variety of conditions could bring a family to agency attention on grounds of neglect, but these were confined almost exclusively to the female domain of home and child care. Even in cases of extreme poverty, the father's domain of 'building and subsidizing' the home was rarely viewed as a cause for investigation. Complaints generally involved evidence indicating the physical care of the home or children and/or the behaviour of family members. When a child was the focus of complaints, head lice; dirty, ragged, or inappropriate clothing; misbehaviour such as truancy from school; or petty theft might be cited...In other cases, the presenting complaint concerned a lack of supervision. Often the major concern was the quality of housekeeping, with a dirty house or a 'filthy' room' cited as an indicator of neglect. The most common complaints involved morality, alcohol, loud parties, and the use of 'bad language' in front of children were frequently cited....as reasons to investigate for neglect. Insinuations of sex outside of marriage on the part of the mother clearly caused the most concern. Mentioned in various complaints were that a mother had entertained a 'foreign visitor,' kept roomers, or went out at night. (p. 79)

Swift then describes the corresponding case notes of the social workers who responded to those reports by investigating the mother. Again the focus is on the inadequacy of the mother to provide the appropriate standards of care and on her moral failings. Swift describes how these, rather than poverty or issues of sole-support parenting are documented. The documentation of the failings of the mother then become the defined problem and the mother is placed into the category of 'neglectful parent'. The recordings in the case files are used to identify appropriate services and also, as described by Campbell (1988) to document the evidence that is required in court for apprehension of children from their neglectful parent.

Both de Montigny (1995) and Swift (1991) provide more recent examples that demonstrate how little has changed from the preceding examples taken from the 1930's. Descriptions from case notes within the past decade describe the filthy conditions of a house, filthy children, the smell of urine, the empty beer bottles, and the presence of a male visitor. Campbell (1992) provides an example from Karen Swift's work (1991) to demonstrate the construction of neglect:

> Welfare workers produce cases of 'neglect' in case records, following instructions for the way child neglect can be spoken about...[from] the mandates and organizational structures of child welfare agencies These instructions dictate what observations can and cannot be counted. Social workers cannot, for instance, count the mother's poverty, or the violence she may be routinely subjected to, but must note and report individual behaviours and specific effects on particular

> children. Swift shows how the structuring of reporting constructs the mother as responsible for the protection of her children in whatever circumstances. (p. 504)

Working to what Darville (1989) calls organizational literacy requirements, social workers impart an administrative knowledge about the parent to others within the governing structure. This knowledge is constructed to correspond to the appropriate categories. In constructing a parent as neglectful, those working for child welfare organizations, and those reporting, draw their definition of neglect from documented definitions and their own values and experience. Although the practicalities administering the law and the necessity of protecting children who need the state's protection cannot be overlooked, reporting neglect as required for organizational purposes plays a large part in the construction of a parent as neglectful. What is left behind because it doesn't 'fit', may present quite a different view of the parent.

It is important to note that the mother's narrative, the experiential telling of her story, is not contained within the administrative document. A line of fault, (D. Smith, 1987; G. Smith, 1995) or separation between her experienced reality and the documentation, is established. The mother's epistemic knowledge, attained through daily life, is not required in order to determine into which category she fits:

> For these individuals their knowledge of everyday events situated them on one side of a line of fault separating them from the objective bureaucratic domain of a politico-administrative regime, whose knowledge of the world is created with a view to administering it (G. Smith, 1995).

Summary

This discussion articulates how the official way of knowing the problem of child neglect is translated into practice. At this point the literature reviewed has primarily described child neglect with a view to administering child welfare. We have considered how the problem of, and solutions for, child neglect are officially named in legislation and policies. Individual child welfare workers, using management technologies move these official definitions into people's lives through their decisions and actions. The legislation,

policies and forms determine what will be documented for the purposes of administering official child welfare. This text ensures that information and knowledge about children and families which flow from the official definitions of the problem is well documented. However, there are other ways of knowing about children, mothering and child care (Smith, 1987; Laird, 1995; Wallace, 1994). As noted earlier, social workers in the early part of this century identified social and economic issues underlying the "problem" of child neglect. How does the official way of knowing parents conflict with the experience of mothers, and how does that play out in the social work profession, and in the development of legislation and in practice?

CURRENT CONFLICTS IN CHILD WELFARE

Conflicts arise primarily because of the need to reconcile the rigidity of legislated protection with the reality of people's lives. Some of the conflicts that have surfaced in the development of new legislation in British Columbia, in the social work profession, and in the practice of child welfare are discussed in this section. However, the standpoint that continues to be entrenched in a government's approach to child welfare is the administrative or official way of knowing child neglect as a problem of parental inadequacies. While serving the needs of those administering the Child Family and Community Service Act, this approach creates contradictions for social workers within the system and for parents reported for neglect. For parents and those working most directly with them the administrative ways of understanding neglect may seem inadequate.

Legislation

The struggle to define government's role in "protecting children" is reflected in the move to change British Columbia's *Family and Child Service Act of 1980* to the *Child, Family and Community Service Act.* The new legislation is the end result of a process which started with community consultation. This consultation produced two summary

reports; *Making Changes: A Place to Start,* and *Liberating Our Children: Liberating Our Nations* which led to the *White Paper* and, finally, the *CF & CS Act.* The guiding principles of the new legislation incorporate the concepts of protecting children from neglect, hearing the child's views, and recognizing that the family is the preferred environment for the care and upbringing of children and should be supported in their nurturing role.

However, Wharf (1993) roundly criticizes the gulf between the community panel reports and the *White Paper* which led to the *Child, Family and Community Service Act.* He states that the principles that were included within *Making Changes* but left out of the *White Paper* include the principle of treating people with respect and dignity, and acknowledging the existence of systemic barriers which have resulted in discriminatory treatment based on gender, class and race. *Making Changes* also recommends that a variety of services, including child welfare, should be delivered out of neighbourhood-based, integrated centers (P. 87), whereas the *White Paper* merely recommends encouragement of community involvement (p. 1). While *Making Changes* and *Liberating Our Children: Liberating our Nations* make continued reference to poverty - when governments allow children to live in poverty they are in effect committing systemic child neglect (Making Changes, p. 9) - the *White Paper* makes no mention of poverty nor of the responsibility of government to meet the basic living needs of families and children.

One factor in the differing views that Wharf describes between the reports of the community panels and the White Paper that led to the new legislation, is the differing knowledge bases - an administrative knowledge and an experiential knowledge (G. Smith, 1990). As described earlier, the legislation and other components of child welfare governance have been initiated by those responsible for administering the legislated mandate and responsible to a political agenda. Those who spoke to the community panel included parents living on income assistance, youth in care, first nation's parents, community workers and front line Ministry of Social Services workers. Thus, we see

reflected in the development of the new Act how the standpoint of parents and community members differs from those developing the legislation "with a view to administering it" (G. Smith, 1990). Even though there was initial community consultation in the development of the new legislation the final Act reflects administrative solutions, not those of parents and workers (Wharf, 1993).

Child Welfare Practice

Those practicing social work within the bureaucracies mandated to "protect children" are both part of the governing structure with its focus on parental inadequacies, and in direct contact with parents, primarily mothers, whose standpoint is outside that of the governing structure. The internal conflicts that arise in child welfare work due to the opposing tasks of supporting families and investigating for parental failings have been documented by Callahan, Lumb & Wharf (1994), and Wallace (1994).

The case for separating investigation of families reported for sexual and physical abuse from support to families reported for neglect is based on the incompatibility of the advocacy and investigative functions:

> In all but rare cases, advocating for children cannot truly be done apart from advocating for families and the admittance of the investigatory, coercive and child removal function into the helping agency inevitably interferes with the agency's capacity to carry out its role in advocating for families and of protecting the child and preserving the family by providing helping services (Pelton, 1978 noted in Callahan & Wharf, 1993).

Harrison (1980) found that the essence of role conflict for child welfare workers related to reconciling the roles of both helper and investigator. Working within the structure and documenting according to the requirements on standardized forms, a former worker found: "When I actually did make meaningful contact with a client, I could find limited means within my role to help them...The circumstances in which many of my clients lived overwhelmed me at times and often demanded very different solutions than what I had available to offer "(Wallace 1994:4). A line of fault between the worker and

mother is created through the administrative standpoint that the worker must take as part of her job. Through practicing child welfare she is responsible for administering official child welfare with pre-determined solutions, whereas the mother is an object of these solutions (De Montigny, 1994; Swift, 1995)).

The issue of power is key in creating this point of contradiction for workers (Callahan & Wharf, 1993). In a recent British Columbia pilot project *Strengthening Families by Empowering Women*, social workers had the opportunity to hear from a single mother about her perceptions of social workers with the Ministry of Social Services. "She reaffirmed that workers are seen to be powerful, and that in fact, some workers do misuse that power, resulting in tragic consequences for the client...Staff...were reminded of...their need to pay attention to power imbalances between worker and client." (Callahan, Lumb & Wharf, 1994: 8). According to Diorio (1992) mothers are very aware of the power which workers have over their lives, and this knowledge permeates the relationship between worker and mother.

The responses and the preceding discussion of the internal conflicts facing child welfare workers demonstrate what Smith (1987) has termed bifurcated consciousness in which "two modes of consciousness that could not coexist with one another, one a world organized textually and organized to create a world of activity independent of the local and particular...[the other] a consciousness implicated in the local particularities exist in the same person, often in the same places...But moving from one to the other [is] a real shift" (pp. 6-7). Social workers operating from an administrative standpoint, a world organized textually and extra-locally, must interact at a local level with mothers and children whose realities are outside of that administrative standpoint.

Summary

The legislation and corresponding policies continue to define the problem of child neglect as a problem with the individual and the family while research and experience

suggests that underlying issues of poverty and sole support parenting are not considered. A different understanding of the problem appears when parental experience, including the realities of systemic neglect and the power imbalance between parents and the child welfare structure, is considered. When we do that, systemic neglect, the power of the child welfare structure in relation to a parent's powerlessness, and a different knowledge of the problem appears. It appears that conflicts arising for social workers stem from working within the framework of a theoretical or administrative way of knowing mothers, while seeing evidence that a mother's experience tells a different story. What is missing from the discussion at this point is an alternative way of understanding neglect that corresponds to the mother's experience rather than the "official way of knowing" that was described in the history and governance of child welfare.

UNDERSTANDING CHILD NEGLECT FROM A FEMINIST STANDPOINT

Feminist theory helps us understand how things work through identifying the uneven distribution of power in society. Feminist theory looks at gender issues and power differentiations as they are structured by patriarchical systems (Callahan & Ricks, 1993). The notion that knowledge is socially constructed and that epistemic knowledge can identify power imbalances creates a different approach to research than that found in research arising from developmental or ecological views of the world. In research related to child neglect Callahan (1993), Callahan, Lumb & Wharf (1995) Swift (1991) and the Community Panel (1992) name poverty, powerlessness and sole-support parenting as representative of the social and economic imbalances of power which lead to mothers being reported for neglect. Feminist researchers emphasize the importance of empowerment and hearing women's experiences in order to understand issues such as "child neglect." (Callahan, 1993).

Sole Support Parenting

Sole support parents are at more than the usual risk of being seen as neglectful. Campbell (1991) suggests that it is often those parents who, owing to a lack of resources, are in situations that put them and their parenting in the public eye. Campbell's study shows the family circumstances of children admitted into care in British Columbia and specifically that single parents are more at risk of being seen as neglectful.

The table below, from Campbell's study (1991), shows that neglect rather than sexual or physical abuse is the key reason for apprehending a child from a single parent (52% vs. 17.4%). An opposite trend was seen for two parent families.

Reasons for Apprehension	*Single Parent (female)*	*Two parents*
sexual & physical abuse	17.4 percent	52 percent
neglect	52.1 percent	24.4 percent
other	30.5 percent	23 percent

Table 1. Documented Reasons for Children being apprehended from their parent(s) in British Columbia (1991). (Source: J. Campbell, 1991)

Callahan (1993) argues that the "so-called crime of neglect should simply disappear from the child welfare statutes." According to Callahan, it is not a crime but rather a lack of basic resources, including alternative child care arrangements, professional counseling, and the ability to take holidays away from their children, leave single parents who live below the poverty line exhausted, stressed, and vulnerable to neglect. Swift (1991) provides an explanation for the high number of single mothers charged with neglect. "At times, these women have been charged with neglect because they could not, simultaneously, work for pay outside the home and be at home with their children, but neither could they afford to pay others to care for their children " (p. 256).

A disproportionately large number of children under 11 years are apprehended from single mothers (77.3%) when compared both with those apprehended from two parent families (48%) and those over 11 apprehended from single mothers (12.7%). The age of 11 is the

age at which childcare is no longer required, thus a parent may have respite from care without having to pay for child care. This fact can be seen from the table below:

Age of Child	*Single Parent (female)*	*Two parents*
adolescent	12.7%	52%
under 11 years	77.3%	48%

Table 2. Age at which children were apprehended from their parent(s). (Source J. Campbell, 1991)

While Campbell's figures set out "the facts", these statistics don't offer any explanations. Kerr (1992) suggests why we may see such discrepancies between the figures for apprehension from single parents versus two parent families:

> Single mothers seem to be in a no-win situation from the beginning, scrutinized and punished if their parenting skills are compromised by the lack of quality time with their child, yet without reasonable options that would allow them to create a setting that is conducive to the production of a healthy, happy child. (p.3)

Poverty

Poverty is also a factor in reports of neglect for single parent families according to Campbell's study (1991). Poverty (income under $20,000) is a factor in 95% of the apprehensions from single parents as compared to 45% from two parent families as demonstrated in the following table.

Income	*Single Parent (female)*	*Two Parents*
Income assistance as source of family income	72 percent	33 percent
Income under $20,000	95 percent	46 percent

Table 3.Income level in families where children were apprehended from their parent(s). (Source J. Campbell, 1991)

This finding suggests that the financial context of neglect needs more attention in policy and in research. Recent feminist literature has described how caring work is undervalued in our society - based on a historical systemic division of labour in which women work in the home domain caring for children, for no money, while men work outside the home for money (Baines, Evans & Neysmith, 1991). The current societal view of caregiving is based upon the 19th century model of marriage in which there are two parents involved in

two jobs: one, a full time job providing financial support and the other a full time job of caring for children and household (Abel & Nelson, 1990; Smith, 1984; Swift, 1991). The financial costs, in this model of family life, are borne by the male breadwinner, while the work of care-giving is done by the dependent wife. Griffiths and Smith (1987) found through their research that a "Single Parent' is a constituent of a discourse, naming a form of family that is defective...The effective form is one in which the man heads the household and earns a salary or wage, thus enabling his wife's labour to be exclusively available for the tasks of housewifery and mothering." (p. 171). Thus, when a woman is a sole-support parent she must carry what has traditionally been carried by two people, both the costs and the work of care-giving.

Wolf-Bradley (1995) describes the attitude she has seen and experienced as a mother:

> Mothers are also often resented and seen as being supremely selfish in what they do. Women who raise children while on welfare evoke more hatred than people who use welfare money to fund holidays...And what other job gets you that kind of poverty? Motherhood means either working to pay child care, or harder yet, parenting full time with no income. No chance to build a pension. No tax recognition for the lost wages. Motherhood is one of the most direct routes to poverty later in life, and society even refuses to acknowledge this reality. (Vancouver Sun, Jan. 26/95, p. A19)

Powerlessness

Diorio (1992) describes the powerlessness of women reported for neglect. Through legal and bureaucratic mandate the position of the child welfare worker is one of "ascendancy over others," that is, over parents (Diorio, 1992), while at the same time the social workers themselves are placed in a powerless position in relationship to the legislation and bureaucracy (Callahan, 1993).

According to McKnight (1992) the result of this organizational context has been a construction of parents into clients rather than citizens, "Modern institutions...redefine us not as a people in a place, but as individuals in a system." Ferguson (1984) describes the impact of becoming a "client" in a state welfare system. She writes "the skills that allow a

poor person to succeed in obtaining benefits [are] the skills of impression management, plus patience, perseverance, a low profile, and a high tolerance for ambiguity and for insult" (p. 147). The feeling of powerlessness experienced by social assistance clients, together with the issues of poverty, often lead parents to the hopelessness that is perceived by many social workers when working with parents reported for neglect (Mosher, 1994).

Why is there a continued focus on the inadequacies of the parent to the exclusion of the devastating economic and social factors that underlie situations categorized as child neglect? Swift (1995) describes the power of those original reformers and relates it to those who hold the power to make changes now:

> The original reformers were clear on this point. They believed that in saving neglected children, they could also save themselves and their positions of privilege (Sutherland 1976; McBride 1983). Their scheme was ingenious, providing themselves and their representatives with the authority of the state to intervene and alter the private lives of those whom they saw as dangerous to their own interests. The arrangements were inexpensive and, at least in theory, easily carried out, since low-income mothers were lacking in political consciousness and power. This basic approach...remains in place today, and its attractions to middle and upper-class Canadians are apparent. The alternative, after all, would be far-reaching changes in pursuit of a more equitable distribution of wealth and power. (p. 86)

Whether the conscious rationale Swift attributes to the early reformers occurs or not, her insight leads us to view the naming of problems and solutions in light of who is doing the naming and what is to be accomplished by the naming of the problem (Mueller, 1988). A government official inadvertently provided some insight into this when he responded to the suggestion of research into the concept of parenting as work/employment. While initially commenting on the difficulties of administering such a concept, he went on to say: "Why would we want to ask questions about something we don't really want to know the answers to" (D. Rutmann, personal communication, April 26, 1995). This answer reflects the need of those determining policy to focus on administrative and politically feasible solutions. Government officials don't need to know anything that doesn't support those solutions. After all, would it be in the best interests of those who

have the power to change how the current economic structure treats those whose work involves the care of children?

Empowerment

'Empowerment' is often used to refer to the process of those who have been under the power of others, attaining power and control over their lives (Callahan et al., 1994). Within feminist theory it refers specifically to women gaining personal and political power (Van den Berg & Cooper, 1986). Recent literature points out the interconnection between power and knowledge, identifying that the views and "knowledge" of those in power supersedes the knowledge of those without power (Laird, 1995). In caring for children men have traditionally developed the discourse about children and families, whereas the work and the experience of that care has been in the hands of women whose experience has been "largely rendered invisible" (Baines et al., 1991). The concept of empowerment thus infers the importance of hearing and respecting the "knowledge" of those who have been silenced (Laird, 1995, Callahan, 1995).

Empowerment contains the word power. The traditional view of power in our governing structures is founded on the view of power as a property with which to control and dominate those with less power, managing through determining goals, withholding information and creating rules to censure behaviour (Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1986). In contrast, empowerment is seen as "a political act because it allows people control over their own lives and the ability to make decisions for themselves" (Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1986:6). Callahan argues that "central to the notion of empowerment is that it involves overcoming negative valuations placed on members of stigmatized groups" (p. 10). She concludes from her research in the area of child welfare that few people are more stigmatized than mothers who have been reported for neglecting or abusing their children.

Another factor central to the notion of empowerment and power is "knowledge". Laird (1995) reviews post-modern analyses of the interconnection between power and knowledge:

> White and Epston (1990), leaning on the work of Foucault (1979, 1980), among others, explored the intricate relationships between knowledge and power, in which certain values are privileged and given the status of "knowledge" or "science," whereas the views and values of others are subjugated." (p. 152)

The preceding quote indicates that the knowledge of neglect and power to act reside in one group and the experience resides in the other. In the governance of child welfare the official way of knowing parents as inadequate, as described previously, organizes the work of the social worker to apply that "knowledge" about neglectful parents, without paying attention to the experiential knowledge of the parents (de Montigny, 1995).

An empowering practice of child protection might start with the knowledge or the narrative of the client or mother (Laird, 1995; Diorio, 1992). The knowledge of a woman's experience situates her and the listener at a concrete, rather than theoretical, point of entry for understanding the issues facing her (Smith, 1987). A recent study (Callahan et al, 1995) which attempted to incorporate the concept of empowerment into the child welfare structure contained "education sessions with workers and single-parent women focused upon the daily struggles of living in poverty with children, and on suggestions for workers to improve their practice. "Clients were teachers"(p. 10-11). Compounding that line of thought with the dictionary version of empowerment, "to give official authority or legal power to," suggests that empowerment could be a process of women changing the official structures with their present legal power to name problems and solutions and implement them, to structures, which ensure women have control over their own lives and a voice in decision-making and naming (Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1986).

Summary

Feminist theory provides us with a deeper understanding of the social and economic conditions facing mothers reported for neglect, which contrasts sharply with the official

way of knowing mothers. However, the theoretical and statistical knowledge about these conditions does not contain the knowledge that stems from a mother's experience of the child welfare system.

A MOTHER'S STANDPOINT

The historical obscuring of women's experience has led to the present lack of attention to, and policy interest in mother's experiences. Included in the following review is some of the work that has been done on the "silencing" of women's experience. We can turn to the women themselves, learning from those whose experiences afford them a lived understanding of their oppression. Scholarship on standpoint and experience-based knowledge offers methods for an understanding of women's silencing. It highlights the absence of narratives from the mother's standpoint in the organizational text of official child welfare institutions.

Standpoint

According to Smith (1987) a person's knowledge of a situation or a problem arises out of their standpoint, which is determined through the activities they carry out, and how they are situated in relation to governing or ruling practices. For mothers, their standpoint describes "how their everyday worlds are organized and how they are shaped and determined by relations that extend beyond them." (Smith, 1987: 121). From this view the official way of knowing and documenting the problem of child neglect as "parental inadequacies" reflects a standpoint within the ruling practices of child welfare governance.

Standpoint refers to where a person is situated and what she or he does that can be "observed, spoken of, and returned to check up on the accuracy of an account" (Smith, 1987: 123). Standpoint differs from perspective in that it represents their actual activities, rather than their perceptions of self. Smith describes how, as a single parent, she "cleaned up after, fed, bedded down, played with, enjoyed, and got mad at two small children. I inhabited a local and particular world."(p. 7) These activities are actual, rather than

textually created or based on theories of motivation or perceptions. In contrast Smith describes her work as a university professor, " I entered a world organized textually...and organized to create a world of activity independent of the local and particular"(p. 7). And yet it is in that world of text that knowledge about social issues, such as child neglect, is created (Smith, 1987). The theoretical "knowing" of child neglect based on developmental theory, ecological theory and feminist theory has stemmed from standpoints within the world of text rather than experiential knowledge.

It has been argued that a manager's standpoint is similarily organized by textual accounts independent of the local and particular. An official managerial standpoint invades the work of child protection even for workers who occupy the same interactional 'space' as their clients. A mother's standpoint, which contains knowledge of her experience of sole-support parenting below the poverty line, is obliterated in text-based interactions and reporting. As Mueller has argued about peasant women and development knowledge, the standpoint of the official way of knowing, which has the legal authority to name the problem and solution, has no need of a parent's knowledge within the context of the named problem. Some feminist scholars, such as Mueller (1988) and Narayan (1988) point out that by eliminating women's experiential knowledge from the official text, both the women and those they interact with are put into inauthentic relationships.

Silencing of Mother's Experiences

There are a growing number of studies in which women's experiences have been researched. However, in the area of child welfare, research exploring the experiences of women reported for neglecting or abusing their children is limited and recent (Diorio, 1992; Krane, 1995; Callahan et al., 1994).

Historically women's experiences have been silenced in all official discourse. According to Van den Bergh & Cooper (1986) one of the objectives of feminism is to open up the discourse to include the experience of women. Van den Bergh & Cooper identify

the right to name one's own experience as a fundamental component of feminism. Smith (1984) describes the discourse of women being "renewed and reshaped by women who assert; I am here; I speak for myself...Women say this for themselves. They make room for themselves in this arena in which women speak" (Smith, 1984: 11).

The limited account in the literature of mothers' experiences and their evaluation of the child welfare services has been noted by several researchers (Diorio, 1992, Swift, 1991, Pelton, 1994): "remarkably few efforts have been made in the field of social work to document the perceptions and to understand the experiences of parents who become the clients of public child welfare agencies" (Diorio, 1992: 224).

Diorio (1992) provides several reasons why there has been such a limited documentation of mothers' experiences. These reasons relate to the displacement of experiential ways of knowing by an official way of knowing which perceives the parent as the problem. He suggests the parents' role as the "problem" has discredited their comments and knowledge. The power of those determining the official way of knowing the problem and whose knowledge is therefore seen as valid (Laird, 1995), silences the experiential knowledge of mothers. Other reasons Diorio suggests for the absence of mothers' experiences in social work literature include an unquestioned assumption that coercion is necessary with involuntary clients and a professional casework structure which prescribes the role of expert to the social worker. The parent is believed to be without any expertise or right to take part in evaluating the child welfare structure or service (Diorio, 1992). This "way of knowing" ensures that other voices are not heard, thus the power of naming the problems and solutions remains in the hands of those with power. This official standpoint has no alternative standpoint:

> It is hard for [those in power] to look behind or beneath or around the corners of the ruling apparatus. By contrast, the discourse of women discloses connections and relations, makes the segregating barriers permeable and thin, forces the questions of humanity, of life, of caring and of the unique person, to become the topics of public speech (Smith, 1984).

How can we understand this obliteration of mothers' knowledge through the concept of standpoint as expressed by Smith (1987) and move to a discourse which "discloses connections and relations"?

Epistemic Privilege

The concept of epistemic privilege (Narayan, 1988) recognizes that the voices of those who speak from a standpoint outside of the official or administrative standpoint are also valid. It has been claimed that members of oppressed groups may have epistemic privilege (Harding, 1982; Harsock, 1983; Jaggar, 1985; noted in Narayan, 1988). "The claim of epistemic privilege amounts to claiming that members of an oppressed group have a more immediate, subtle and critical knowledge about the nature of their oppression than people who are non-members of the oppressed group." (Narayan, 1988, p. 35)

Narayan (1988) indicates that epistemic privilege doesn't imply that those experiencing oppression have a clearer understanding of the causes; nor that others can never understand the experiences of those who have been oppressed if they make an effort to come to grips with the details of those experiences. However, as she states:

> I think they have epistemic privilege when it comes to immediate knowledge of everyday life under oppression - all the details of the ways in which their oppression is experienced, seen to be inflicted, and of the ways in which the oppression affects the major and minor details of their social and psychic lives. They know first-hand the detailed and concrete ways in which oppression defines the spaces in which they live and how it affects their lives. (Narayan, 1988:36)

A mother's epistemic knowledge provides insight into the oppression which has been described by Diorio (1992), Swift (1991) and Callahan et al. (1994). A recent study by Griffith and Smith (1987), examined the experiences of single mothers with their required role in their children's schooling. Griffith and Smith (1987) describe parent-teacher meetings, in which the mother is required to describe what she does with the child - does she read to her children at night? do her children watch too much television? and how does she help ensure their homework is completed? Mothers sometimes experienced these

meetings as working together with the teachers, while at other times she resented the intrusion, questioning the connection between caring for children and the focus of the discussion. Mothers she interviewed "describe[d] similar experiences - talking to teachers about the ways the home fits with the work of the school "(p. 2.) In her study she discovered that the school requires and expects work, time and energy from a parent, in addition to a familiarity with a child development discourse as contained within "professional educational practice, print and television media, teacher training, and community workshops for parents "(p.2). In the narratives provided by the mothers there is evidence of a social organization of their activities to make their home life fit the requirements of the school:

> "In situating women's working experience as mothers, we see them at work at a point of juncture between the actualities of the economy on which their households depend and the social organization of the school...The concept of social relation analyzes [labour] as an ongoing concerting of courses of action in which what people do is already organized as it takes up from what precedes and projects its organization into what follows. (Smith, 1987:)"

This study provided insight into how the oppression of single mothers occurs through requirements for mothers to provide 'labour' which corresponds to a two parent family. These requirements are determined from outside of the mother's control and within the official organization of the school.

Interviews held with parents who had been reported for neglect or abuse provided parental perceptions of a child welfare organization in the United States (Diorio, 1992). The findings indicated that parents perceived social workers and the organizations they worked for as "having limitless or unstoppable power to act independently of or through the local juvenile court to (1) intervene in their family at any time, (2) make immediate, exclusive, or even final decisions regarding them and their children, and (3) command or enforce parental obedience with the agency's or court's standards and directives" (Diorio, 1992:p.227). It is the mother's interaction and experiences with the child welfare system that convinces her of this omnipotent power.

A study (Krane, 1995) describing the social relations experienced by mothers who had come to the attention of child welfare organizations because their children had been sexually abused found a similar issue of power, as well as a construction of the mother as the "protector". Discussions with these mothers revealed that mothers felt blamed, feared losing their children, and organized to be "mother protectors" (Krane, 1995). Their lives were dictated by the need to fit the ideal of a "good mother", even though their limited resources and time often made this impossible. Drawing from preceding discussions regarding the categorization of neglectful parents based on issues that may relate to lack of resources, Krane's findings raise the question of how situations in which the issue is neglect rather than sexual abuse are experienced by mothers.

The themes of power and blame are also expressed by women participating in research by Callahan et al. (1994). Findings indicated that although

> "single parent women and their children make up a very large portion of child welfare workers' caseloads...they were not considered when developing child welfare policy and practice programs...Single parent mothers in this project argued forcefully that they have an enormously difficult job with few supports and resources. They want child welfare services to be re-shaped to deal with their reality. (p. iv)".

What is the reality of women reported for neglecting their children? The concept of standpoint described earlier indicates that if the "problem" of child neglect as experienced by a mother is to be understood the actual activities which make up the daily lives of mothers must be heard.

An administrative knowing of neglect constructs activities and narratives into organizationally sanctioned realities that prescribe both problem and solution in child protection work. While feminist research has uncovered systemic factors affecting a mother's life there appears to be limited documentation of the actual experiences of a mother's interaction with child welfare organizations that relates what mandated child welfare looks and feels like from mother's experience. There is very little research

exploring how administratively defined problems and solutions to child neglect are experienced by those reported and investigated.

SUMMARY AND RESEARCH QUESTION

In this chapter I have reviewed literature which illuminates the problem identified in Chapter One, the exclusion of mothers' work, knowledge and solutions in official child welfare programs, policies and critiques. The literature reveals that developmental and ecological theories focusing on negative characteristics of mothers form the basis for management technologies and tools used in child welfare management to organize and control child welfare practice. Government's power to control and name the problem and solutions to child neglect is carried out through child welfare work that is standardized text based procedures. Conflicts in child welfare can be traced to the contradictions between applying the defined problem and solutions found in the organizational text of official child welfare to the lives of parents attempting to parent with limited resources. Poverty, powerlessness and sole-support parenting are all identified by feminist scholars as critical factors in so-called 'child neglect', but these everyday realities have no place apparently in the analysis by welfare workers of reported cases of neglect. It is as if the economics of parenting were immaterial. But the literature on child welfare management suggests that the assessments do support the proper administration of the legislation. I am concerned that the activities and context of mothers doing the crucial work of caring for children is excluded from what gets known about mothers and child neglect. Thus, to further illuminate the issue of so-called child neglect I would like to provide space for mothers' knowledge, gained through their daily struggles and silencing within the child welfare structure.

The historical approach to "child neglect" as a problem with parents, the contradiction between the administrative approach to child welfare and the realities of poverty and sole support parenting, and a need to confirm and expand upon the current

literature exploring the parent's standpoint in the child welfare system, has led me to the following research question:

What is mothers' experience of "child protection" when they have been reported for neglecting their child(ren), and what can their daily lives tell us about helping them with their job of parenting.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH APPROACH

"Could you just hear me?
for what I have to say.
and how I say it.
listen to my voice and how I speak
ideas
dreams
thoughts
could you just hear me for me
for what I have to say?"
Renee St. Germaine (Focus, May 27, 1993)

METHODOLOGY

"If people would only hear what I was saying" is a common cry of women who find themselves parenting on their own and struggling to make ends meet. This study is a response to that cry, starting with the women who can describe their actual ongoing process of living. Through locating the starting point in "bodily sites, local, actual, particular" (Smith, 1984) I have attempted to make visible how theory and practice interrelate in the lives of the women. Therefore the study starts from the standpoint of the women and their stories; standpoint differing from perspective in that it represents their actual activities, rather than their perceptions. Understanding how the concepts of poverty and powerlessness are contained within actual activities within the lives of actual people is explored in relation to the data discovered through stories.

Ethnography

To answer the research question posed I have used an ethnographic methodology, in which I interviewed and interacted with mothers who have been reported for neglect. I chose this form of methodology as it corresponds to the research question that arose out of my inquiry into the literature as well as my values and beliefs about my life and the lives of

others. Harding (1987) describes research methodology as "a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence" (p. 2). Ethnography has been described as the inscription of social discourse, a narrative (Geertz, 1988 noted in Artz, 1994) which entails "the gathering and interpretation of multiple forms and kinds of information...not at arms length, but in the field "(Artz, 1994). Smith (1987) describes it as a "commitment to an investigation and explication of how "it" actually is, of how "it" actually works, of actual practices and relations (p. 160)."

Institutional ethnography locates the strating point for the research within actual experiences, exploring from there how text, such as legislation, policies, and forms, organizes and inflences those experiences. It has been described as a materialist ethnography, in which "social phenomena [are] concretely embedded in the social organization of the everyday world" (G. Smith, 1995:637) while abstract theories and abstract ideologies are identified as such. George Smith (1995) discusses the importance of explicating people's experience from their standpoint, rather than from a theoretical position or theory. Dorothy Smith (1984), writing of how institutional ethnography helps to understand peoples' everyday experience, describes how "our standpoint has its ground in women's experience in the everyday world." (p. 9) She describes the standpoint of women as taking a position in "situated experience" (p. 10). An ethnographic study which attempts to document "how it is" is thus congruent with my search for recording the knowledge that arises out of mother's experiences.

Interpretive vs. Predictive

My beliefs have led me to a form of non-positivist inquiry, a feminist/interpretive approach rather than predictive. Further, the process by which data has been gathered and analyzed is reflexive as opposed to objective. In the following section I will explore the present understanding of these terms in relation to my "situated" place within this research.

A feminist/interpretive approach to research is based in a non–positivist tradition,

> which suggests that we have moved beyond making positivist claims that reality is objectively independent of human understanding, that knowledge can be attained by individuals in ways that leave them unaffected by their membership in socially constituted and historically changing groups and that universally applicable truths reside in the objectively separate and external world waiting to be discovered by a precise and "correct" methodology (Artz, 1994:6).

Lather (1991) outlines a framework of categories of human interest, categorizing research approaches with their underlying theoretical understanding of the world. She places prediction, in which a hypothesis is predicted, within a positivist "knowledge claim". This study does not attempt to predict or to offer a hypothesis about "neglectful mothers" which can be tested to determine a universal truth. Instead, through this research I hope to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the experiences of mothers reported and investigated for neglect. This corresponds to Lather's placement of interpretive research methodology into the category of understanding.

Each mothers' experience is unique. Her own feelings, responses and story can not be generalized to a larger population. Within a predictive approach the researcher establishes an appropriate sample size, with certain conditions attached to ensure validity, in order to be able to predict a generalization to a particular population. However, within an interpretative approach there is an affirmation of "the uniqueness of human situations and the importance of experiences that are not necessarily accessible to validation through the senses" (Sandeloski, 1986). In this research, rather than attempting to predict I am hoping to provide a voice for mothers' experiences, and for others to see reflections of their own experience within that documentation. As Darville (1989) states:

> The concrete details of another's life (or a character's experiences) lead hearers or readers to an awareness of their own lives. Narratives "stimulate by their particularity" (Creber, 1972,130). Stories provide a "meeting place" for all who have had the experience that the stories convey (Freire, 1971; 1985).

Reflexive vs. Objective

> This is not a shift from an objective to a subjective epistemology...but rather a move from an objective to a reflexive one, where the sociologist, going beyond the seductions of solipsism, inhabits an actual world, the social organization of which she is involved in investigating." (G. Smith, 1995; p. 356)

My choice of an interpretative methodology reflects my understanding of the world as dynamic, in a continual state of change. The reflexive nature of people, their actions, their interactions and their understandings of the world argues for the nature of reflexivity to be acknowledged within research. An integral part of the research process is my situating myself with mothers in an attempt to gather an understanding of their experience. A research methodology which is reflexive provides an opportunity for the words and understandings of others to be reflected back from the researcher to those interviewed. My role as a researcher is not to step back objectively and determine what was said and what was meant. Rather as I talked with women I was part of the conversation. As a researcher I reflected back to women what I heard and what I understood from their narratives. In return, their responses let me know if I heard and, often offered me a deeper level of understanding as knowledge built through the interaction between us. My own situation as a woman, a mother, and a single parent assisted me in hearing the importance of many of the emotions that have been silenced. I was not outside the interpretive framework.

Timothy Diamond, in *Making Gray Gold* (1992), demonstrates the new insights that are possible when the researcher is an active participant in the topic being explored. From the standpoint of a nursing assistant it was possible for him to feel and do much of what nursing assistants did that could never be discovered from a position external to the standpoint of nursing assistants. It is my hope that I have documented the experience of mothers in a similar fashion.

In the same way the lives of the women I interacted with are reflexive to those around them. When they heard that someone had reported them for neglect they responded - either through emotions or actions or both. The interaction with the social worker when he/she came to investigate was again reflexive. The actions of the social worker "protecting children" were reacted to by the mother, and her reaction in turn responded to by the social worker. Thus, through hearing the narratives of mothers' who have been reported for neglect I have attempted to record their reflexive actions and emotions from their

standpoint. As identified in the literature review, there is a line of fault created by the differing standpoints of social services administration and mothers. Thus, one component of the research relates present practices, which are based in the problems and solutions identified by the politico-administrative regime, thus providing a resource for contextualizing mothers' experiences. However, my primary focus has been on identifying the experiences on the other side of the line of fault - that outside the politico-administrative regime.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

> We begin from where we are. The ethnographic process of inquiry is one of exploring further into those social, political, and economic processes that organize and determine the actual bases of experience of those whose side we have taken. (Smith, 1987, p. 177)

I have employed several methods of gathering data for this research: interviewing based on a narrative/reflexive approach, participant observation, and documentary analysis. Corresponding to the research question and to the interpretative methodology, the data gathering and analysis will be generative rather than verifying a particular hypothesis.

Much of the data was gathered during research work with the Child, Family and Community Research Program at the University of Victoria. From August, 1994 to June, 1995 I collected data as the program coordinator of The Risk Assessment Project, a collaborative project funded by the Ministry of Social Services. The final report entitled From Risk Assessment to Family Action Planning (Weller & Wharf, 1996) was based upon an analysis of the themes found through the interviews and focus groups.

However, the data and analysis presented within this thesis differs from the project report. This report includes analysis of official documentation as data and a materialist ethnographic research approach to analyzing the interviews, observations and documentation which provided opportunities to understand previously undetected connections between text and women's experiences.

Interviews

The key informants for this study were mothers who had been reported for neglect. The women I interviewed were contacted in a variety of ways. I participated in parent's groups, asking parents who wished to tell their story to contact me for an interview. I asked social workers to contact any parents they felt might be interested in participating in this research. I then set up interviews with those who indicated an interest in sharing their story. I held interviews with 20 mothers in five different areas of British Columbia - Fernie, Prince George, Victoria, New Westminster and Vancouver.

I interviewed women in their homes or a place of their choosing. Through recorded interviews I explored with them their stories of interactions between themselves and members of the child welfare staff at the Ministry of Social Services. My purpose for the interviews was explained to each of the women. The interviews were open–ended, but thematic – exploring the mothers' experience of key MSS functions: accepting reporting, investigating and apprehending. Drawing from Friereian pedagogy, the discussions were situated in their thoughts and language "beginning from their words and understandings of the [topic], relating the [topic] to their conditions." (Shor, 1989:33)

The discussions started with the women's narratives. The dialogue which followed involved collaborative reflections on the meanings in her story. "These meanings are "local", in the sense that they refer to "the language, the meaning, and the understanding developed between persons in dialogue, rather than broadly held cultural sensibilities" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). "Global, totalizing knowledges, such as are expressed in various psychological and systemic theories, are eschewed in favor of local meanings and vocabularies." (Laird, 1995:157) The transcription of the dialogue was given to those interviewed and their comments and changes were then incorporated into the final transcripts. This edit allowed the women to read what they had said and identify the extent

to which it represented their thoughts, their feelings and their memory of what had occurred. It was from those reframed transcriptions that I analyzed the data.

I also interviewed 28 social workers with the Ministry of Social Services and seven district supervisors. I asked social workers to tell me a story of a family who had been reported for neglect or who had self reported and their relationship with them. District supervisors were asked to discuss their perceptions of the official response to concerns of neglect. As in the interviews with the mothers the interaction started with the interviewee's narrative and ideas were then reflected back to them to attain a deeper level of understanding.

I facilitated focus groups held with mothers and with social workers to review the data that arose from the interviews. The discussion and points raised within these focus groups has also been included as data in this research.

Participant Observation

My methods included participant observation with mothers and with Ministry of Social Services social work teams. I participated in the activities of both mothers and social workers, observing the interactions, the activities, and the discussion. I also participated in team meetings with social workers as they reflected upon how to respond to specific reports of neglect. Within each of these situations the other participants were aware of my role as researcher. I collected and transcribed field notes from these observations.

Documentary Data

Through the dialogue with the parents the documentation and policies that organized their social relations with the social services system were determined. The documentation I reviewed included legislation, policies and guidelines for practice that a social worker is required to follow in responding to concerns of neglect. Analysis of the documentation and policies involved clarifying how the legislation and policies organized the practice of child welfare and defined the problem and the solutions of so-called child neglect.

Analysis

Analysing the data to arrive at the findings was a reflexive process. It involved continually reviewing the interview data in light of the textual data and the larger organizational context. Initially I documented the data in story form - what was the official process and how did mothers experience child welfare practices and the daily life of caregiving children? Through writing the stories I began to develop a deeper understanding of the interconnections between the women's experiences and ruling practices.

Their experiences are indeed socially organized and I began to see how to make sense of their talk, their, problems, and their lives by seeing in their stories how the official world infringed. Sometimes it was what social workers did, sometimes it was what community members did or said; at other times the women simply feared that these people, external to their lives would intrude upon them. The analysis was a process of discovery, in the women's stories, of both what was seen and what was missed by outsiders. The materialistic nature of institutional ethnography required me to find in the stories, not my ideas or interpretation of connections, but the actual traces of ruling relations in the lives of those I intereviewed.

The findings arose from rewriting and revisiting various aspects of the analysis numerous times, each time gaining a deeper understanding, and thus a more thorough analysis, of how documentary reality related to the women's poverty, silencing and negative experience of the child welfare system. I received input at several points in the process, by other researchers, who reviewed the validity of the analysis in light of the data, and by mothers, who reviewed the analysis in light of their experience.

SUMMARY

The methodology used for this research is materialist, interpretative and reflexive, illuminating the standpoint of mothers and identifying how the documentation, legislation and policies of child welfare influences their lives. The following two chapters will

provide an analysis of the data, gathered from interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis. These findings flow from the research question which seeks to understand mother's experiences of child protection policies and of parenting with limited resources.

CHAPTER 4 TWO WAYS OF KNOWING ABOUT NEGLECT AND SUPPORT

The Ministry of Social Services is mandated to respond to child neglect. In this chapter I argue that the official way of responding to the issue of child neglect, even when 'support' is being offered, has a negative effect on the women reported for neglect. The purpose of the work of the Ministry's social workers is to determine whether or not a child is being neglected, then implement the corresponding programs or apprehension. Although most social workers interviewed expressed a desire to support mothers, for mothers reported for neglect, or even for mothers who seek help voluntarily with their children, the process can feel judgmental and blaming, often leading the mothers to isolation, distrust and hopelessness.

In the following analysis I will be referring to the reported parent as "mother" in order to reflect the sex of the actual parents (94% of whom are women) who are responsible for caretaking children and, therefore, as the parent identified as neglecting their children. I will also be introducing the women who shared their stories with me. The names used are all pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of those interviewed.

THE OFFICIAL WORK PROCESS OF "CHILD PROTECTION"

The following is a description of the official MSS child protection services process of protecting children from neglect through a reporting and assessment process (Ministry of Social Services Family & Children's Services Policy Manual, 1995; participant observation, interviews). Legislation (Section 7, *Child & Family Services Act, 1980)* starts the process by requiring community members to report to MSS if they believe a parent may be neglecting their child. That report usually results in a mother being investigated by a social worker and asked to explain the situation outlined by the

community member. Components of the investigation include interviews with the parent and child, and collateral checks with other members of the community who have contact with the family. The purpose is to assess whether or not the mother has been neglectful or has failed at her job of 'mothering'. In 1993-94, eighty-five percent of neglect investigations were unsubstantiated and did not require any protective services[2] . It is important to note that documentation of all reports and investigations remain with the government for reference in case of future reports. In those situations in which there were 'protection concerns' parents are required to receive specific monitoring, support and treatment services according to official child protection policies and documents. According to MSS Social Workers, if they believe that a child is at risk of imminent harm the child is apprehended and placed in the care of the Ministry while the parent is monitored and treated until she is 'competent enough' to regain custody of her child. These procedures are designed to protect children by assessing the parent and the family situation to determine whether the circumstances qualify as "child neglect" as defined by the legislation and policies. Social workers do this by categorizing the mother according to the policies and official forms, documenting how her characteristics correspond to the 'risk factors' for neglectful parents, and then implementing the corresponding solutions (Interviews, F & CS Policy Manual, 1995).

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2 In 1993/1994, the Ministry received 9,254 reports of neglect. Of these, 6,094 were investigated by a social worker. Reports not investigated require a judgement call by the District Supervisor and her/his written notation to this effect. The outcomes of those investigations included: 45.5% in which there was no service required; 22.8% which were referred to community agencies; 8.4% which were referred to other Child Protection offices; and 23.4% which were provided with a family support or protective service (Policy, Planning and Research Division, former Ministry of Social Services).

REPORTING NEGLECT

The Official Work Process of Reporting

The primary approach to preventing child neglect, according to the Inter-Ministry Handbook (1988), is through detection of neglect by community members and reporting it to the Ministry. In the following section I argue that mandatory reporting results in a high number of reports of neglect, many unsubstantiated, due a legal obligation of community members to report "potential neglect" and the broad definitions of what constitutes "neglect".

In assessing whether or not a report of neglect merits investigation workers are guided by both the Intake Form (Figure 1) and the policies and legislation. The initial report, based on an assessment by a community member of potential neglect is passed on to a social worker to determine if it fits the criteria. This process transforms the community member's assessment into an objective, professional and textual account. For each report from a community member, as well as calls from parents, a worker is required to document the complaint on an Intake Form. This is a management tool developed for administrative efficiency to capture the information required to administer child protection and to ensure accountability (if the worker follows the form the work is done and children are protected). The process of determining whether or not the perceived neglect is worthy of investigation starts with the worker choosing either 'Voluntary Service Request', which would lead to an offer of support, or "Report of Child Protection", for which there is an investigation (See Figure 1). (See Wallace (1994) for further elaboration of this process).

Figure 1: Categories from the MSS Intake Form; #

A. Voluntary Service Request	B. Report of Child Protection	
	More than one code can be entered. At	least one of a) to f) MUST be checked
[] a) Family Support Service	[] a) Physical abuse	[] h) Investigation in Child Care Resource
[] b) Repatriation	[] b) Sexual Abuse	
[] c) Services for Youth	[] c) Emotional Abuse	DO NOT REGISTER----------
[] d) Adoption Services	[] d) Neglect	[] l) Investigation directed by MHO
[] e) General Inquiry DO NOT REGISTER	[] e) Absent From the Home	(Protocol 2 Interministry Handbook)
	[] f) FRA SEC.29 (death of Guardians)	[] m) School Board Employee
	[] g) Alleged Offender(s) resides outside the family home	Investigation (Protocol 3 Interministry Handbook)

As Wallace (1994) points out the Intake Form thus frames how and what a worker looks for in determining if the report is investigatable. The choice for workers is limited - often a report comes in regarding a behaviour or incident which isn't easily categorized within categories B a) to f) and isn't a voluntary service request. What appears left out are those parents reported, but who would agree to and benefit from the kind of services noted under A. But a social worker can't check A, because it wasn't initially a voluntary request. Reports which are not requests from parents are almost automatically checked off under (B) according to the social workers interviewed (field notes, October, 1994). Wallace (1994) agrees and notes that the "the tendency to consider all reports as (B) can be traced to the Ministry documents which inform the worker's decision making at intake."

Fifty-five percent of all reports to Family and Children's Services offices are categorized as "neglect," as the definition in the legislation comes closest to describing situations which don't clearly fit into any other discrete category. In the new act a 'child in need of protection' is defined in Section 13 (See Appendix B) as including a child who has been, or is *likely to be harmed* because of neglect by the child's parent" (emphasis added). This broad definition leads the social worker to check off 'investigatable' on the Intake

Form, for perceived standard of care as well as the actual neglect of a child. Section 13 also defines as 'in need of protection' a child who demonstrates severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or self-destructive or aggressive behaviour." Due to the broadness of these definitions many behaviours, which children may exhibit without being neglected by their parents, can be classified as potential neglect. In effect, at the point of entry into the system "neglect" is defined as 'problematic behaviours' of a child or parent, encompassing a broad spectrum of situations in which a child or parent may be seen as not fitting the 'norm'. Thus, a report by a community member of 'potential neglect' is likely to lead to an assessment by the social worker of 'investigatable neglect' due to the wide range of behaviours that could fall within the official definitions. Wallace (1994) examined this process and argued that the majority of mothers reported become 'potentially neglectful' owing to the textual procedures of the Intake Form.

The reporting process described above demonstrates how broad definitions of child neglect can result in a wide range of behaviours by either a child or parent being reported by community members and documented as Neglect under "Report of Child in Need of Protection." This categorization becomes part of the organizational understanding of the parent. For administrative purposes "Report of Child in Need of Protection" identifies the next steps in the process for the social worker, assessment and investigation.

Analysing Reporting from a Mother's Standpoint

Isolation :"It feels like I have to hide"

In this section I argue that there is a contradiction in how the documentary practices of child welfare, which are designed to protect children and support families, have organized community members and MSS workers to practice in ways which can lead a mother to isolation and distrust. Mothers I interviewed lost the sense they were part of a supportive community when they were anonymously reported and investigated according to official policies. Current child welfare practices, which are described as supporting mothers in their parenting role, instead leave them feeling blamed, silenced and powerless.

The practices flowing from policies and legislation lead many mothers to isolate themselves from community members and develop a strong distrust of the Ministry of Social Services.

One of the issues that arises for a mother is the difference between what some community members and the mother perceives as adequate care. Reporters and the mothers they report may have different priorities in looking after children. However, entry into the Child Protection system is initiated by community members according to the community member's standard of care.

> **Connie:** This last summer I had gone to get groceries and when I came back there was a card in my door. It was from Social Services and it said to please phone them because someone had reported me because my kids were dirty. Lots of times, if I go into town to pick up groceries I don't bother cleaning them to just go in and pick up a thing of milk. Whoever had reported me obviously doesn't have kids - kids like dirt. They go down to the creek and they play in the clay - they get just covered from head to toe in dirt.

In Connie's story a community member believed that children who were covered in dirt are likely being neglected. Connie did not believe that dirty children were neglected. Instead, her standard of care reflects a belief that children *'like dirt'*, and that allowing them to play in dirt is a positive way to parent children. These two different standards of care could co-exist, or be discussed directly by the community member and mother. However, the community member's legislated duty to report any potential child neglect makes her/his standard, in which dirty children represent neglect, part of the process which leads to an investigation of a mother's parenting and her standards.

While they may recognize there are differing standards and priorities for caring for children, comments made by mothers suggest that they often internalize the criticism and attempt to move towards the 'community standard.' This was apparent in my interviews, when mothers themselves appeared to be measuring themselves against an external standard.

> **Connie:** The day that the worker came the children weren't dirty that day.
>
> **Donna:** I did have a home support worker who helped me clean up the house for a while. It's better now.

Both Connie and Donna believed that they needed to stress to me that even though their priorities and standards were different than the standards of the community members who had reported them, they still were 'improving.' Connie's relief that the children weren't dirty the day the social workers arrived to investigate indicates her belief that dirt on children is a concern that she should attempt to eliminate, even though she may not agree with its importance. Likewise, Donna worked towards improving her house so that it could meet the 'community standard.' These women realized that they were considered inadequate mothers by some members of the community, therefore they attempted to move towards those 'standards.'

However, other mothers gave up on their own standards, as the difference between the 'standards' of the community and the reality of their lives as sole support parents with limited resources was too wide a gap to try to meet.

> **Linda:** He said that they had five reports that day that my three kids (9,7, and 5) were in the park by themselves and they were concerned. I had brought them home after school and they had had a snack then they went to the park which is just three blocks away. I was making a turkey dinner and then going to get them when it was ready...They have way too many expectations of me trying to parent - my children not being allowed to go to the park!.. Since the last appointment I have kept my kids inside - they don't go to the park now. I said if that is what they want.

Linda found the expectations of community members and social workers difficult to live up to as a sole support parent. She felt that it was important for the children to play in the park, and believed that they were old enough to be at the park alone between their after school snack and dinner. However, the social worker who investigated the report agreed with the reporter that this constituted neglect. Having no extra money for child care, and a limit to her energy in raising her three children the mother decided that the children would stay inside rather than go to the park. The money and extra person in a two-parent 'average income' family which allow for after school programs, recreational activities and/or child care were not available to Linda. She capitulated to community pressures.

Moreover, the anonymity of mandatory reporting allows members of the community to be absolved of any responsibility for assisting and supporting the parent

before or after they make their report. This contributes to a mother's experience of community as watchdogs rather than supportive neighbours. Many of the mothers reported tried to guess who the anonymous caller was, so as to make sense of their complaint:

> **Belinda:** Here in the building there is a group of women that sit around and gossip - I think it was one of them, and the woman that reported apparently said that I was dragging my kid around by the hair in front of the window. As if!! They also reported me when I ran down to do the laundry for ten minutes and left my 1 year old with my 6 year old. I stay at home every day with my children - I just don't understand.

The questions remain in the mother's mind - why would someone want to report me? Don't they understand how hard I work at raising children? Why would they tell a lie about what I was doing with my child? When the community member's only responsibility is to report what they perceive as neglect, it changes their relationship to their neighbour. Rather than thinking of offering help, they exercise a form of power over her. A mother is left with the knowledge that someone, who will remain anonymous to her, is watching her.

The feeling of being watched can make a mother feel like isolating herself from others:

> **Grace:** Not too long ago someone reported that I wasn't able to parent two of my children. I suspect that it was my ex-husband that reported. I think that if it may have been done out of revenge then they should let the person know. That would help me deal with it better if it was him. Instead, after they told me that someone reported me I stayed inside away from the neighbours - I wondered if one of them had reported me.

The fact that reporters are anonymous indicates to the mother that anyone the mother knows or meets can report her without her knowing. As women start to become aware that a 'reporter' could be anyone around them they start to distrust others and isolate themselves. They become aware that community members, through their ability to report anonymously, are part of the governing apparatus which has the legal power to apprehend their children. As mothers attempt to move away from watchful eyes they isolate themselves and become distrustful of neighbours and other community members.

Some mothers described the experience of anonymous reporting as "omnipotent, invisible eyes" who are everywhere, and they want to hide.

> **Susan:** It feels like I have to hide - I want to pack up all my things and head back to my parents. I'm scared that no matter what I do someone is going to report me. Just recently my daughter was going to go skating and I hadn't given her money for it yet. Well this other woman gave her money for the skating. Then I get really afraid, paranoid, because someone is going to say that I'm not able to give my kids money for things like skating.

Susan is now aware that her relationship with both social workers and community members (any of them) is one in which she may be known as 'at risk of neglecting her children.' In this case the lack of financial resources for recreation was internalized by Susan as a potential "report". As described by Susan, mothers can end up feeling paranoid and distrustful of those around them.

In addition to reports reflecting 'community standards', where we might assume the reporter was acting out of the best intentions, many of the reports I heard were driven by malice. However, these reports were still taken as the starting point for investigations. One social worker I talked to was going out to visit a woman who had been reported by her ex-husband five times. None of the reports had been substantiated and yet each time the mother was investigated. When I asked her why she kept investigating the mother she responded "*you never know when there might be a real concern*". The responsibility a social worker feels to investigate is captured by Wallace (1994):

> The mandate and procedures through which child protection is presently accomplished takes the whole picture of a child's life and funnels it, through documentation into a set of criteria upon which a set of practices are initiated. The completion of these practices are constructed to be protection. The legislation and policy assign this responsibility for ensuring that protection to one social worker in a local office. Workers feel the responsibility for the lives of those children who are reported to them. They feel the pressure to handle that responsibility in ways that are sanctioned as providing protection. (pp. 108-109)

The responsibility placed on workers leads them to investigate reports which may be malicious. To prove that these reports are not done out of concern for the child is extremely difficult (Wallace, 1994). I read through one file which documented twelve instances in which an ex-husband reported his former spouse for neglecting their children. In one of the instances he reported that he was standing across the road from her apartment and could see a beer bottle on the kitchen table and was sure she was drinking and not

supervising the children. He himself had a restraining order to stay away from her due to his violence against her and the children. Yet for each of these reports there was a documented report of a child "in need of protection", and a corresponding investigation, asking the mother to defend her position. The reporting process, which relies on a social worker's responsibility to 'protect children,' allows opportunities for men to exercise control over their ex-wives.

Ex-husbands are not the only reporters who exercise control. Some mothers talked about how a community member's power to report was used as a form of control:

> **Terri:** My old landlady - we didn't get along - she used to tell me that she was going to phone Social Services on me.

In Terri's situation her landlady didn't want to do some required maintenance work for Terri's apartment, and used the threat of reporting to quiet Terri's requests. A mother becomes aware that if someone reports her for neglect then she is likely to be investigated, and her parenting will be questioned without the context of the reporter's vindictiveness. For the mothers, there is a contradiction in whose comments and experience are validated. Mothers believe that the comments made by reporters who are not always concerned about the well-being of a child, is validated over that of the mother who spends every day caring for the child.

The preceding analysis illustrates the contradiction between the idea that community is supportive and a mother's experience of being watched and judged by the 'community'. While one of the notions of community is closeness - a direct interaction between people - anonymous reporting does not involve any direct contact between the mother and reporter. Instead the reporter's identify is hidden from the mother. This leads mothers to experience community members as powerful watchdogs hidden from view, rather than as people who are concerned and want to support her as a parent. Mothers <u>feel</u> the position of being 'ruled' as they are categorized as 'potentially neglectful' through procedures which transform a community member's report of neglect into an official categorization of 'potentially neglectful' mother. This categorization places mothers in a powerless,

watched and ruled position which moves them to isolate themselves and distrust neighbours and community members.

ASSESSMENT AND INVESTIGATION

The Official Work Process

In this section I argue that the official way of knowing about neglect aims to categorize people so that child protection programs can be implemented where needed. I provide a description of the assessment process, which involves social workers and other professionals in the community assessing the 'risk factors' of the mother in order to determine which programs or remedies are appropriate.

The actual investigation of each report is mandated by Section 13 and 16 in the Child, Family and Community Services Act. Careful analysis of the investigation process in the Policy Manual, reveals that social workers are directed to assess the potential for risk by focusing on the mother and whether she has 'failed' at parenting or housekeeping. The policies and standards which a social worker is required to follow restrict and constrain what information is documented about the situation. This information corresponds to the theoretical belief that parental failings are the 'child neglect problem'. The information that social workers are required to look for and document when doing an investigation are found on the Risk Assessment Form S2392 (91/12) and in the policy manual (Section 6.4.17). The ten risk factors outlined include "Parental willingness to protect the child", "parental ability to protect the child" and "Environmental conditions of the home and family". Also included within the risk factors is the "Impact of parental behaviour on child". To assess this impact the social worker is directed to interview the mother and child and document a description of the mother's behaviours on the Risk Assessment Form including:

a) physical, mental or emotional abilities;
b) mental health;
c) substance abuse;
d) parenting skills and knowledge
e) parent's perception of the child and the child's needs;
f) criminal record(s) involving violence;
g) cultural and religious practices.

The information to be gathered, from a) to g) focuses on what the mother is capable of doing and whether she has 'failed' at parenting her child(ren) or housekeeping. There is nothing on the forms directing the worker to assess the mother's strengths, or hopes. In order to determine the risk to the child the social worker must consider the potential for negative characteristics in the mother, such as alcoholism, mental illness, lack of parenting skills, violent, deviant cultural or religious practices, and/or lack of emotional and mental abilities. At the end of the assessment interview, which focuses on attempts to 'find' risk factors and locate the negative characteristics of the mother, the home and the family, the social worker documents the level of cooperation of the mother and offers 'appropriate' support services or apprehends the child(ren). The information acquired in the interview creates a textual reality of the parent and their situation, which allows the social worker to categorize parent as 'neglectful, 'potentially neglectful' or 'not neglectful' and to determine whether they qualify for the requisite services.

In this section I have argued that the response of Child Protection social workers and community members to child protection issues is organized to solve the problem of neglect through the assessment and categorization of the mother. The investigation process assists the worker in making an assessment of the mother's potential for neglecting her child, yet organizes the interaction to focus on the negative traits and faults of the mother. This approach to child protection could be described as a linear problem solving process with the problem defined as parental failings. It may seem logical to assume that there is a direct causal connection between a mother's 'bad' behaviour and a report of potential neglect. But what is missed here? What are the side effects of this approach on the mother who is investigated? Those are the concerns that I bring to this analysis.

Analysis of Investigation and Assessment from a Mother's Standpoint

Parents who have been investigated and assessed by Child Protection social workers describe the process as demeaning and silencing. In this section I argue that being the object of these procedures can lead mothers to a sense of hopelessness, hopelessness at her chances of ever moving out of her present situation, of actual help, and of being heard.

The power of the social worker to assess a mother as 'guilty' of neglect often colours the initial interview, leading the mother to a feeling of "guilty before being proven innocent":

> **Joan:** And then the social worker came to my house. He told me that they had had a report and that my daughter was in need of protection and he had talked with the school and my daughter and the RCMP and there was likely going to be charges laid.
>
> **Belinda:** The other woman - the first thing that came out of her mouth was - you've been caught. I was ready to cry.
>
> **Linda:** The social worker when he picked me up said to me "let me tell you something, you are in hot water". And he said that I was lucky it was him because the other worker wasn't as lenient.

In Joan's story both she and her daughter were told that Joan was *"likely going to be charged"* prior to hearing the family's side. The social workers who investigated Belinda and Joan also presumed the mothers were guilty The mothers, consequently, must defend their position from a place of assumed guilt. The delegated power given to social workers to assess guilt gives them the legal 'right' to know the guilt of the mother based on the documented information from other community members.

Mothers also experienced the probing carried out in investigations, with its accompanying power, as invasive and disempowering. This invasion occurs during direct interactions with the mother as well as the collateral contacts that social workers make with other 'professionals' in the community.

> **Jo:** The one worker that came over - she just invited herself in - she just handed me her card and walked in. I had just got up and was still in my underwear - if they could have had some common courtesy and stayed out in the hall until I got some clothes on. She sat down right on the couch and started right into the questions.

> **Belinda:** The social worker phoned the school and the school said they are well looked after. I was embarrassed about him calling the school.

In interactions which are characterized by the power of the social worker over the mother the mothers experience invasion. They feel powerless to stop the workers from entering their home and they are powerless to stop them phoning other community members to check with "professionals" about their parenting abilities. Every part of their life becomes open to invasion and they realize that they are powerless to prevent this from occurring.

Many of the parents expressed a desire to move off of income assistance and away from the Ministry of Social Services. However, the burdens of attempting to climb out of the trap with limited resources and energy, while still raising young children, is difficult. One woman describes how her attempt to move into a training program ended in the apprehension of her children.

> **Lisa:**. Okay I made a mistake - I didn't look after the children as well as I should of and I should have asked for help. But it is really hard to ask for help - it is really intimidating - you feel like you are asking for things that you are really not entitled to...I could have gone to them for help but there is a cost to that - and that cost hurts. I don't like the family services system much - I have no trust in it.

A few days before her children were apprehended she had found out that she was pregnant, she and the baby's father had just broken up, and a water pipe burst in her home soaking the carpet. When the ministry worker arrived she hadn't fixed the carpet yet because money from the next welfare check wouldn't arrive for two more days, and so the place smelled like moldy carpet. At this point Lisa was still trying to go to school and look after her two young children. She realized that she wasn't coping but did not want to reach out for help to MSS Family and Children Services. Thus, the 'cost' of asking for help from the Ministry created a situation in which Lisa was 'not coping', and yet not willing to ask for help. This cost involved the potential for being assessed guilty, assessed for their negative parenting characteristics and evaluated by 'professionals' in the community. She had lost hope in receiving help from government services.

The stresses of her personal situation, together with the knowledge of what "help" from MSS would mean, led to the apprehension of her children. She describes how the social workers who apprehended her children treated her.

> **Lisa:** Apprehension: my kids were wandering around just outside the house at about 6:00 a.m. - I was exhausted - I had just found out I was pregnant and I was asleep. My kids are 4 1/2 and 3 (my daughter was 2 at the time).
> The day after the kids were wandering around they came to the house. I invited them into the house to talk and they saw that the house was an absolute disaster and so they decided that the house was unfit for the kids to be there so they took them. The whole thing took about 15 minutes from the time they came into the house. I was not given a chance to explain anything - it was really quick.

What comes across strongly in this story is the "doing to." Lisa and her children are objects in this setting - they talked **to** her, but didn't talk **with** her. They judged her relationship with her children on the condition of her house and on the community member's report. The interaction followed legislation and policies that legally allow social workers to enter a home and apprehend a child based on their "judgment" as to whether or not the child is in need of protection. They made their decision without any of the information that they could have gathered from either the mother or the children. Lisa could not refuse to let them take the children away - they had the legal right. She was not informed of her own rights in this situation and thus, without the administrative knowledge felt helpless and powerless. She felt she was treated as if she was both a villain and insane rather than a mother struggling to make life better for herself and children. Treated by the system as the object of child protection practices, rather than as a partner in working towards a better future for their children, mothers lose hope when they realize they are perceived as incapable of being actively involved in the solution.

This hopelessness is compounded by the absence of their voice in the process. Jane, a friend of Lisa's, expressed her frustration at how Lisa's experience went unheard.

> **Jane:** If parents are getting their kids apprehended then they should have an understanding of what the social services are allowed to do and not allowed to do. One of my friends had three of the water pipes burst in her house and couldn't afford to get them fixed until welfare day. Two days before welfare day then the social workers came in and fifteen minutes later they walked out and took the kids. They didn't bother sitting down and asking her questions or find out what had been happening. What they did do was to smell the carpet which had been sitting in the

> water and smelled moldy. I know that there were a couple of other things that contributed to it but the problem is that they still didn't sit down and find out what was going on. They didn't give her a chance to sit down and explain.

In attempting to assess the potential for neglect the social worker is looking for behaviours, words or actions that might indicate the mother has the potential to neglect her child. When doing an assessment the worker does not have to look for the contextual reasons a mother has been reported for neglecting her children as those don't correspond with the documentary requirements. The work process leads workers away from real interactions with clients and that has a cost. Lisa experienced a hopelessness when attempting to put 'voice' to her situation. The voices of mothers expressing their experience or challenging how the problem and solutions are defined are obliterated through the present process.

Solutions to the 'problem' of child abuse are applied according to the mandate and the policies of the Ministry of Social Services. When mothers are not heard as part of defining the problem, they are also excluded from determining the solution. Instead they are seen as 'the problem' and they feel a hopelessness due to their powerlessness to change the definitions and the process.

Women sense the contradiction between their struggle to provide a decent life for their children and how they are treated, yet they feel silenced and powerless to change the treatment. The preceding stories highlight how hopelessness arises for mothers through 1) "knowing" that there is a cost to help from social services, thus an unwillingness to ask for help 2) realizing that mothers aren't perceived as partners in the process of child protection but rather as objects to be assessed, categorized and treated with the appropriate solution, and 3) that their voice relating their context goes unheard in the process. Feeling betrayed as they see the solutions provided by child protection as harming themselves and their children, yet unable to challenge the process, these women feel that the situation is hopeless. As the ruled rather than the ruler they become hopeless and "have no expectation of good or success...no ground for hope [their powerlessness renders them] incapable of solution, management, or accomplishment." (Collins Dictionary, 1993)) Their situation

feels impossible. The social relations developed through the work processes and documentary practices of the child welfare system have organized them to be the receiver of solutions to the problem rather than the knower of the problem.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Support Services - The Official Work Process

The monitoring and treatment component, or support services, of MSS Family and Children Services may be provided to parents who request support services, who voluntarily accept services after an unsubstantiated report, or whom social workers decide "require" support services. In this section I argue that the provision of support services is based on financial eligibility and proven 'risk factors.' Thus, the work process of 'support' becomes an ongoing form of assessing the parent for indications of problem parenting.

The majority of ministry offices in British Columbia divide their social workers into intake workers and family service workers. The intake workers take the information from a reporter, usually by phone, and translate it into the organizational categories on the intake form. The same intake worker would then proceed with the investigation or support as identified on the intake form. Once the investigation was completed, and if support services were required, the "case" would be handed over to a family service worker.

The support services available to families have grown in number over the past decade as the theoretical belief in "protecting children by supporting families" has gained popularity. However the majority of the services (homemaker services, family advancement workers, parent training, Nobody's Perfect parenting program and special services to children and family) are financed under the Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act (GAIN). Logistically and financially the Income Assistance Division, a division which emphasizes reduction of expenditures (field notes, October, 1994), controls the support services.

According to the Policy Manual (1994) these support services require an income test for eligibility and an assessment of the family by the social worker with Family and Children Services. Besides meeting financial eligibility requirements the assessment by the Social Worker must document high levels of family stress or conflict in order to receive the services. The social worker, knowing availability of services and eligibility requirements for each service, decides what is most appropriate for each family situation. To attain those services the social worker requires documentation regarding the negative aspects within families.The family's knowledge of their own needs in attaining stability and well-being for their child(ren) is not required.

As described by Wallace (1994) this can leave a worker feeling uneasy:

> There was a clear and distinctive boundary between ourselves as workers and the group called clients and carrying out my daily work seemed to maintain that boundary. I was outside the families I was working with, passing judgement on them from a distance and referring to a policy manual to determine actions I would take to remedy their inadequacies as parents...When I actually did make meaningful contact with a client, I could find limited means within my role to help them, other than referring them for personal counselling or parenting training (p.5)

The budget limitations on each of the "support" services requires priorization by the MSS Family and Service's team (fieldnotes, October, 1994). At one of the team meetings that I attended the social workers had to decide which two of three families would receive the support service due to these budget limitations. The discussion focused on which family had the greater number of risk factors, and the inadequacies of the mothers to cope in each situation.

Thus, even within the "support" role workers find that they are still legislated to respond to concerns of neglect within the accepted solutions, those solutions corresponding directly to the named problem of parental fault. By documenting the "problem" in order for a parent to receive any support services the social worker is constrained through proper attention to the documentation, to perpetuate the "mother at fault" as the identified problem.

Analysing Support Services from a Mother's Standpoint

Distrust: "Maybe her job is to spy on me"

Turning to an analysis of women's experience with Ministry of Social Services support services I argue that these services carry the same blaming and judgemental attitude found in the process of community reporting. While these support services are set up to help mothers parent, analysis shows that they are experienced by mothers as judgmental, invasive and a form of social control. Many of the mothers who experienced the "support services" of MSS became distrustful of the ministry as a result of their experience.

Many of the parents who voluntarily approached the ministry to request services felt really positive about receiving services initially.

> **Diane:** We talked to the social worker first and that was great and we talked about my son getting counseling for anger management. I agreed that that would be good if that would help anything.
>
> **Joanne:** I contacted them first. I went in and asked for help because I couldn't get my girls to go to school. That worked out really good. They got a private teacher and set the girls up in a room upstairs with a teacher doing correspondence. That worked out really well, when the girls got their correspondence back they got A's and A +'s .

Later, the mothers started to realize that there was a negative element in the original agreement regarding the support services to be provided. In both cases, the mother had agreed to the counselling and extra educational services for their children. In addition, Diane had been given a home support worker. The mothers were looking for something to help them deal with their 11-14 year-olds. However, the actions and scrutiny of the ministry staff demonstrated that they were "looking at" the problem differently than the mothers:

> **Diane:** For instance Dawn (the home support worker) calls pretty frequently. She happens to call often when my son isn't here. He was staying with his 20 year old sister. Dawn said, and implied that he was spending too much time over at his sister's place - he spends a couple of days there a week - but often she's over here when he's not... She asked me what my son was doing with all of his time [her son was suspended]. And what kind of question is that - there's not much to do - you piddle your time around when you're at home. If she had suggestions that would help. They won't pay for things like recreation. There's not a whole bunch to do when you don't have any money - you can't afford anything.

Dawn's questions and comments were critical of how Diane organized her son's time. Instead of offering suggestions that would help relieve a tough situation - an 11 year-old child is suspended from school and has limited opportunity for activities to keep him busy - the support worker is attempting to figure out what Diane is doing wrong. As required by ministry policy, she is assessing Diane to determine her parenting faults, in order to later report to the social worker how effectively Diane is parenting.

The relationship between the Child Protection workers and the mothers becomes one of 'ruler' over 'ruled' in which the mothers feel that they are being judged as inadequate and blamed without their situations being considered.

> **Terri**: The system doesn't look at it that way - they think I'm not managing...They say - you must be doing something wrong...A lot of it - they said that it was to do with my upbringing, then my abusive marriage, also that the arguing is because of the fact that me and my mother argue. (We argue because she's always trying to tell me how to bring my child up - he hears and thinks that he doesn't have to listen to me). It would have been nice if they hadn't tried to blame it on everything else.

Due to the required 'assessment' mothers feel blamed. Every part of their lives is looked at to determine how to place the blame on the mother.The documentary practices which require social workers and contracted support workers to assess the parent frustrated that other possible reasons for their difficulties aren't considered.

As mother's experienced the frustrations and contradiction they start to question what 'job' the support worker is doing.

> **Diane:** She talks to me like I'm l0 years old. I used to do friendly visiting - here I go over and visit with an older man the other day I had made soup and was going to bring it over to him. When I go over there he doesn't want to see my son. So I go over there when he is over at his sisters. I don't think that I should have to explain everything to Dawn - so she doesn't know that I do things like that. Maybe her job is to find out every little thing that I do - I don't know.

The 'job' of the home support worker reverses the relationship between a mother and someone who comes into her home to 'help out'. The mothers felt that their own situations were not understood - that the "bad" was forefront in the minds and attitudes of the workers, rather than the mothers' strengths. Now Diane finds the homemaker (Dawn), who is supposed to be helping, taking the same critical approach as the social worker.

Dawn reacts to what she sees and hears from the standpoint of official child protection, not the mother's or the child's situation. She doesn't question why the boy is not in recreation. Does this have something to do with money? What is wrong with him going to his sisters - especially when he is spending so much time at home with his mother? Is this wrong because it doesn't fit the 'norm'? Support workers frame their interaction with mothers to fit a model in which they too are "knowers" of the mother and of the problem of child neglect. For a social worker or support worker, the positive strengths of the mother don't fit into the constructed picture of a 'neglectful mother.' The mothers interviewed thus felt a lack of acknowledgment regarding their strengths. Instead they felt blamed and silenced, and questioned whether the ministry workers role was really one of support.

In addition to the emphasis on "bad parents" mothers often experienced a sense of harassment rather than support. Diane discussed how she began to feel that the home support worker was spying on her.

> **Diane:** I don't mind the parenting part - if she'd stick to that. But instead I feel like I'm being harassed right now. She keeps calling me and saying that they will check into my son getting into school or doing correspondence but doesn't do it.. I feel that she is just being nosy and spying on me. And she's brought me bread by a couple of times when I didn't really want it. I am beginning to wonder why she is coming around now - I felt like I did know and now I'm beginning to wonder - is it to spy on me.

Diane wanted assistance with her parenting and with her son but instead was feeling 'spied on'. The continual checking up on her at unplanned times feels unnerving to Diane. She was still waiting for the worker to follow through on the original promises.

> **Diane:** The home support worker is really frustrating, the first two visits were okay. Then she started promising all kinds of things and not doing them. She said that she would talk to the kid's teachers at school and this has got to be about six weeks ago and I asked her and wanted to know if she had done that and she said that no she hadn't done that yet. Once there was no insurance on my car and I had a welfare appointment - and she forgot that she was supposed to pick me up. I waited till the last moment and then ended up walking the four miles into town...She could be on time she could do what she says. I've gotten to the point where I'm really frustrated because she hasn't done the things that she said that she was going to do.

For Diane, there were numerous promises that the support worker had made which she felt would have been supportive. However the worker was not following through on those promises. Instead Diane experienced a contradiction as she realized that the worker was directing her energies to 'spying' or assessing her rather than carrying out the initial 'solutions.'

As Diane questions *"why she is coming around now"* she has, without realizing it, pointed out that Dawn's function includes activities other than support; it also includes assessment of the parent. Home support workers must write up reports to the Ministry child welfare worker (field notes October, 1995) describing whether or not the parents they are working with are neglecting their children. By arriving or phoning at unexpected times, Dawn evidently feels that Diane won't be able to hide "neglect" from her. This continual assessment of the parent through 'support services' can lead parents to realize that the support being offered is inherently contradictory. They feel harassed more than supported.

As in the preceding section, the interviews revealed evidence of the power provided to those on the ruling side of child welfare, those carrying out the mandated policies. Both Diane and Joanne discussed how the legislated power of the Ministry was used by the support worker and social worker:

> **Diane**: She has told me that I could be deported - I don't need to hear that. I worry about that anyway - and she's mentioned it two or three times. I'm on welfare because I'm on hold for permanent residency because I have separated from my husband. We were used to living on $75,000. Right now my status is that they are in the process of processing my application. I don't need anyone to tell me that I might be deported. I love living here. I was really angry when she said that.
>
> **Joanne:** They have said that if the girls don't go back to school they are going to take them away and put them in a foster home.

As the contradiction between how the child welfare workers and the mothers define the problem and the solutions becomes more pronounced the issue of power comes to the forefront of the relationship. When the child welfare worker defines the problem and solutions according to the official way of knowing the problem then they have the power to enforce those solutions (Child and Family Service Act, 1980: Section 16). In the situations

just discussed the workers used that power in their attempts to force the parent to comply with their 'solutions.' The message to the mothers is that child welfare workers don't see support as a partnership or a working together to resolve issues. Even while working in 'support' mode, they appear to be focused on parental failings, using enforcement if necessary to 'fix' the parent.

When I spoke to mothers who had been experiencing "monitoring and treatment" services from the Ministry of Social Services some of them felt that the end result was worse than the initial situation.

> **Diane:** It might help if I have someone to talk to about how I feel - if I could have someone that I could let know what my frustrations are. There is also the thing that you're afraid of it coming back to you - I'm afraid of having Dawn mad at me because then she could turn around and say I'm not doing things right -my house isn't clean enough and stuff like that. And you also feel like they're all working for the same people and so they're all on the same side.
>
> **Joanne:** What would I change? I would have never gone in and asked for help. I would never have believed that it would have come to this where they are wanting to take my kids away.

For Diane there was now a fear that anything she did or said would get used against her, and for Joanne there was the fear of apprehension. These two mothers experienced the support services as harassment and judgmental. Even these mothers who had gone to the government for help became distrustful of any services provided by the government as they realized that instead of the situation improving it had become worse.

The practices which flow from defining the problem as parental fault leads to differences between how the parent sees the problem and how the social worker or support worker responds to the problem. Mothers' stories demonstrate their travel down a path from a positive anticipation of attaining help to a distrust and rejection of the Ministry. How does this happen? In the preceding stories we saw how the focus of the services offered appeared to shift from one of assistance to one of blaming and judging. The mother's own situation and strengths are not acknowledged because the monitoring and treatment programs emphasize "the mother needs fixing" as the solution to the problem of

"mother at fault". The contradiction that my analysis discloses is that in the course of supporting women, the Ministry alienates them.

SUMMARY

As described through these stories the concept of "neglectful mothers" as it appears in B.C.'s child welfare legislation and corresponding policies creates practices which mothers experience as an obliteration of their own subjectivity and misreading of their family situations. These practices are experienced by the mother as blaming, invasive and judgmental. The mothers feel unheard in the interactions and powerless. The social relations developed through the procedures and documentary practices of the child welfare system have organized mothers to be the receivers of solutions developed by others rather than the knowers of the problem. They are seen and treated as objects upon whom the ruling practices are carried out, their own experiences subordinated actions based, not in the practicalities of their lives but in legislation and policies. In response the mothers often isolated themselves and their children, and drew to distrust community members and anyone connected to the government. They stopped asking for help and many felt anger, hopelessness and despair as they felt betrayed by the systems supposedly set up to help them and their children.

In this chapter I have argued that the official process of protecting children from neglect has the unintended negative effect of moving mothers down a path towards isolation, distrust and hopelessness. The silencing and powerlessness of mothers eliminates opportunities to review how the problem is defined and approached which might have given the women a little sense of power over otherwise difficult lives. The contradiction of having child protection work creating despair rather than support argues for a change to the present approach. As discovered through the stories told by the mothers there is a different way of naming both the problem and the solutions when one starts with a mother's experience of sole support parenting below the poverty line. Thus, the next

chapter addresses the present silencing through an exploration of how the daily experiences of those mother's reported for neglect can illuminate the issue of so-called neglect.

CHAPTER 5 EVERYDAY LIFE FROM A MOTHER'S STANDPOINT

The previous chapter addressed how the problem of and corresponding solutions to, so-called neglect were defined and implemented from the standpoint of those administering the official mandate of child protection. I want to turn the official way of knowing upside down and explore it from the standpoint of the parents. As defined by Smith (1987) standpoint is determined by the activities a person carries out and how they are situated in relation to governing or ruling practices. In this chapter I argue that the work of caring for children under difficult circumstances is situated outside of governing practices, providing parents with a standpoint of experience from which to know the problem of child neglect differently than those administering the official mandate. The knowledge of the parents I interviewed provides insight into how a lack of physical, financial and emotional resources can lead to a domino effect of stresses and reports of neglect by community members. I argue that parents' knowledge and lived experience of parenting with limited resources provides alternative definitions and solutions to so-called child neglect.

MOTHERING - SITUATED OUTSIDE "OFFICIAL" CHILD WELFARE

Child welfare refers to the well-being of children. The work parents do in caring for and about their children is aimed at ensuring children's well-being. However, that work is neglected in our systems, in our attitudes and in our approach to prevention of child neglect. While the primary responsibility for child protection lies with the mother, the everyday work that mothers do in "protecting" their children is not recognized in the official approaches to preventing child neglect.

Although the mother is primarily responsible for child protection, her parenting work is omitted in the official textual approach to preventing child neglect. A section in the government of British Columbia's Inter-ministry Child Abuse Handbook (1988) provides

information on the prevention of child abuse and neglect. According to the handbook the primary and secondary prevention services and programs are designed to "prevent child abuse or neglect from occurring in the first place" (p. 11) and to ensure "early detection of child abuse or neglect" (p. 12). The prevention activities listed in the handbook focus on educating community members, children and parents to identify the risk factors for neglect and abuse and respond accordingly by reporting. Tertiary prevention is described as "preventing the offender from abusing again through monitoring and treatment." However, these services are made available to a parent only if they have been reported or if they self report. Support is not provided to parents unless they are "assessed" as potentially neglectful or if they request assistance and it is approved by a child welfare worker. The work that mothers do in preventing child neglect is not mentioned in the handbook.

Just as the actual work of parents is neglected in the official documentation, social workers describe how parents struggling to raise their children are neglected by the current child welfare system:

> **Jerry**: There is only so much that you can do. How do workers manage? Priorize. It means that we end up neglecting many parents.

Social workers are busy - too busy to have the time to support parents in their job of protecting their children. Their duties and responsibilities include investigating complaints of neglect and abuse, assessing parent capabilities, recording this information and preparing for and attending court. For social workers, assisting families is difficult when the resources are not available and their time is so limited:

> **Joe:** I have a difficult time defining neglect. Because it is everything from society's neglect to the situation that people are born into. And the resources are not there.
>
> **Mary**: In a way I would like to summarize it by - the overall social services network/system that has been established to look after children and families has been neglected. That is a system neglect. We get on to these poor parents who are poor, struggling, and often don't have the education - when we don't have the ability to handle the situation.

Mary describes how the current welfare system, which is set up to protect children, is self-defeating. She describes a resourceless systemic neglect which alienates and judges the very people who are the primary protectors of children, but who are struggling due to lack of resources. While the work of parenting is not acknowledged in the system, then the resources required for that work are also not acknowledged. The work of the parents as well as the parents themselves are neglected as social workers cannot provide the resources or time that are needed to ensure parents with few resources can do their work properly.

Parenting work is also not acknowledged in our society. We recognize work as valuable by assigning a wage but the work that mothers do is not seen as valuable. It is perhaps symbolic of the lack of appreciation for mothering work that it never appears on forms related to income assistance, employment insurance and other official documentation. All the mothers interviewed received "temporary income assistance" as mandated under the *GAIN Act*.. Under the *GAIN Act* those mothers who have children under seven are considered "temporarily unemployable," while those whose youngest is seven or older are considered "employable" and expected to search for work. Application forms for jobs include spaces for paid employment and for volunteer work. When a mother has stayed at home doing the unpaid work of caring for children, her work is not accepted as "work" on those application forms. For those mothers at home with their children, doing the work alone and with limited resources, there is no pension, there is a no acknowledgement of their work in the labour market and they do not receive a wage. Instead they receive income assistance, just as anyone who is not working receives income assistance.

Attitudes of some staff in the Ministry of Human Resources reflect this omission.

> **Belinda:** One of the workers said to me - why did you have three kids - why didn't you have an abortion. I can't believe her. I worked okay - I've put into the system - she doesn't know what I've done. A worker needs to understand how you feel, instead of talking to you like you're beneath them.

In her interaction with the Financial AssistanceWorker (FAW) Belinda's work as a parent was not acknowledged as a social asset. She was seen as someone who was a burden on

society because she had three children. In the interaction the FAW felt that she could criticize Belinda's choice to have children. In her mind she worked whereas Belinda did not. The current work that Belinda was doing in raising her three children was completely omitted from the conversation and, apparently, from the consciousness of the worker.

Community members also relay a message to mothers on income assistance that they are seen as "welfare bums", not people that work.

> **Kerri:** My dentist was complaining that we get dental and why should we get dental - it is going out of his taxes. I was lying in the chair and he was complaining to his assistant that he was having to pay all these taxes for us to have dental.

In this interaction the dentist states his belief that his work was important work, and that he resented having to pay taxes to support someone like Kerri. While the average income of a dentist is eight times that of Kerri's income he saw himself as underpaid and Kerri overpaid. His perception rested on his belief that Kerri did not work but he did. The interaction itself emphasizes how parents and their work are neglected. In that room Kerri was overlooked and devalued, both as a worker and as a person listening to the conversation. In many ways, Kerri's situation in the dentist's chair reflects the invisibility of the work she does in the minds of many members of society.

In this section I have argued that it is parents who are legally responsible for the work of protecting children. However, child protection procedures operate on the basis of a certain knowledge of families - knowledge worked up <u>without</u> considering what parents know. The official documents have a bias built in which de-legitimizes what parents know. This is especially important when it comes to donsidering mothers' contributions of caring work. The reports from the community, the assessment of the social worker and the reports by the home support worker, are all entered into those standardized forms of knowledge (organizational text). However, the work of the parent is invisible in that text. The mother is officially "temporarily unemployable", "at risk" of neglecting her children, needing to be professionally assessed. But not once is she textually identified as <u>working</u> for the welfare of her children. Her standpoint, and her local world of getting children

dressed, fed and off to school, of caring for and about her children, is situated externally to the world of official child protection. It is no wonder, then, that social workers fail to notice or value parenting work. Her understanding of the work, her knowledge of her situation, and her experience of parenting with limited resources is not heard, as her work is not acknowledged as work, nor as the primary source of preventing child neglect.

LACK OF RESOURCES: DOMINO AFFECT

What does the child protection system miss when it fails to notice that parenting is work and that individual mothers, even those who have trouble with the responsibility are actually very knowledgeable about it? Not learning about mother's efforts and how they might be supported leads to further problems. In this section I argue that there is a domino effect in which lack of resources can lead to work overload or 'burn out' on the part of the mother and reports of neglect from community members, or risk factors seen by social workers.

As do all parents, those I interviewed were doing the labour intensive routine work of parenting. Like any other type of work, this work requires certain resources to do it well. Parents, as noted above and in the preceding chapter, are responsible for raising their children in such a way that the community does not perceive that a child is being neglected or abused. For parents doing it with fewer resources than other parents, how does that responsibility and that job feel and look?

What does caring for and protecting children involve? Most of all it involves physical energy, time and patience. Jane, one of the mothers I interviewed, has four children ages two to eight. What is her life like?

> **Jane:** My basic day - I get up at 6:30 in the morning and I get two of them off to school. Included in all of that is getting lunches for school, and getting breakfasts for the two of them. I often start cleaning the house then too because they are up so early. Also I need to walk the kids to and from the school each day, taking the younger two with us. Then this one has a cut or that one needs something special for school that day.

Her day starts early because she needs to get all four children up from bed, dressed and fed. She prepares lunch for the two that are going to school and make sure that they each have their homework, or notices to return to school. She starts cleaning the house early because all day she will be required to intersperse her cleaning with responding to the needs of the two children at home during the day and of all four children after school. She needs to make sure the house is child proof for the two year old. Walking the four children to school she must ensure they're dressed properly for the weather (she lives in Prince George) and that all four are careful crossing the streets. This work is not just physical labour, it also requires the patience to respond to children's needs, even when rushed.

> **Terri:** My daughter goes to daycare at 9:00. It's a real rush getting everyone up and out the door. When I first get up I get the stuff that I need to get the baby ready all on the floor. Then I get my daughter up and get her dressed and I make her lunch and breakfast. Sometimes she gets fussy about what she wants to wear or eat for breakfast, and you need to take those extra minutes to figure out what she needs.

The work requires more than walking through certain steps. It also requires responding to the specific needs and requests of a child while ensuring that everything is organized for each child. To carry out the work required to meet the routine required by the daycare Terri must have both children organized by a particular time or she is required to pay $15 for every day she is late. However, it is not simply a question of completing tasks. For the child, it is very important that she doesn't feel like just another task, but rather is responded to as a cared for person. The ability to share her likes and dislikes, her problems as well as joys with her mother, is crucial to her well-being. Thus, while the actual work of mothering requires labour and organizational skills to achieve the tasks, the ability to respond to the questions and demands of one's children without becoming frustrated and angry at them for disrupting a routine is an extremely important part of the work. As these tasks indicate, the legal responsibility of protecting and caring for children is also a physical, mental and emotional responsibility.

The work is different for those attempting to parent full time alone than for those in two-parent families. How do the lives of Jane and Terri, and others interviewed, differ

from other parents? First, the physical tasks described above are all done by one person. They are the sole organizer, disciplinarian, arbiter of disputes, cook, cleaner, and nurturer for their children. They are required to manage the finances alone, and make all the decisions about their children and their life together, alone.

This work is much more difficult and stressful when one is doing it alone because the time and energy required is limited to one person rather than two parents. Terri describes the physical work and the mental attention that is required:

> **Terri**: I'm up until 12 the night before. The baby sometimes wakes up 4, 5 or 6 a.m. and so I'm up with him when I feed him. Then I get up the next morning to get my daughter ready for daycare at 9:00. With my 11 year old son - he has Attention Deficit Disorder. I still can't go to sleep unless I know he is asleep because I know that if I don't [stay awake until he's asleep] then he will get up right away and go and do things. Even when I'm in another room I constantly have my ears open so that I know what they are doing.

Terri is responsible for responding to her baby throughout the day and night. She is also conscious that she must always be alert to the activities of her son. She takes her responsibility of knowing what her children are doing seriously, continually monitoring their activities. For Terri the work of caring for her children requires both labour and a readiness to respond twenty-four hours a day. Her work is very different than the definition of neglect - "take no care of; fail to do. SYN: disregard, fail, forget, ignore, omit, overlook. ANT: cherish" (Collins, 1993). For mothers parenting alone, the work of caring for and cherishing children is a responsibility that continues around the clock and is carried solely by them, and sometimes they get too tired to do it all.

There are few to no breaks for those parenting alone on income assistance. In comparison to parents in two-parent families, or single parents who work for pay outside the home or attend school, most of these parents have very few breaks in their parenting work. The work and responsibility described by the mothers I interviewed was ongoing, without the opportunity for a change from the tasks and the continual interaction with their children that other work provides.:

> **Belinda**: I'm only a 26 year old woman - I used to go out and party. But now I've been at home every day for the last three years looking after my kids. You can

> judge me as a bitch, but you can't judge me as a bad parent here, because I am a single mother on welfare. Of course I'm stressed - I've never been out in three years.

While Belinda recognizes that parenting without breaks is stressful she also sees herself as a good parent. She knows that she spends all of her time and energy on caring for her children. Like many of the mothers, she has limited support from others in her life to allow her to take a break from parenting. None of the parents interviewed had the personal resources to pay for childcare although many talked about the need for a break. The lack of respite from the work of caring for their children meant that these women had fewer physical resources available to them than parents who have another adult to share the work.

When parenting alone mothers used an alternative approach for many of those tasks which required an additional adult.

> **Linda**: I would go running off to the store to pick up milk - 5-10 minutes - and that is a no-no to Social Services. My son who is seven knows the numbers for next door and the kids always know where I am. If they say 5 - 10 minutes though when am I supposed to have a shower. Because something might happen - it takes me 20 minutes in the shower.

However, those ad hoc approaches were often 'criticized' as inappropriate. However, single mothers with few resources may have few choices.

In addition to reduced physical labour for those parenting alone these parents also have fewer financial resources. As noted earlier all of the women that I interviewed were living below the Statistics Canada poverty line and all of them were receiving social assistance. For some the social assistance supplemented other earnings while for most of the mothers it was the extent of their money for the month. In British Columbia the social assistance rate for sole support mothers is 57% of Statistics Canada low income level.

Mothers stretched the money that was given to them, using it for basics required for them and their children to live. After the rent money, which is $700 for a two bedroom apartment for her and her three children, the money Terri receives from Income Assistance is soon gone.

> **Terri:** First off my check - My hydro was taken off - $110. I pay it through the bank machine because it doesn't cost any money to send it through the bank

> machine - I compared it with the cashier and with an envelope etc. Then I go to the drug store - I spend almost $100 on toilet paper, diapers, tylenol for kids, etc., vitamins, soap, shampoo then cleaning supplies and laundry soap.

She now has less than $400 to spend. If she spends $325 on food and $25 on the telephone then she is down to $50 for clothes, laundry, furniture, transportation and any other incidental expenses.

> I do laundry in a Hoover that my parents bought but I'm paying them $50 a month for it. I use the dryer in the building and go through about $8 per week.

Needless to say there are times when the money runs out and certain items are not purchased or laundry isn't done.

> **Terri:** Around the second week - two weeks before the next check I'm totally tapped out of money for laundry - for the dryer etc. I put off doing things like bedding because it is so expensive. So we have been out for at least a week.
>
> **Belinda:** Why should my children eat crap...I can't afford healthy food..I didn't eat crap growing up - they're not going to eat stuff like that.

Having fewer financial resources means that there are certain things left undone that would be done in those families who are at or above StatsCan Low Income Level. Not being able to do the laundry or buy healthy food for one's children are examples of how finances can affect the lives of children and their parents. For those I interviewed lack of money made parenting more logistically difficult as well.

> **Sandy:** I don't have a vehicle or anything. Him, Christmas Day he had blood poisoning so I had to get my mom to help out so that we could get to the hospital. I always have to ask someone to help. Especially things like the transportation. With the transportation it is really hard if you have kids. You can't get on the bus with a stroller now. If you take a taxi it costs $2.10 to start and about $6 by the time you get to the hospital.

Sandy can't just jump into her car with her child and drive him to the hospital like the majority of other mothers in our society. She needs to ask around for someone to drive them to the hospital. She knows that it will cost at least $6 to get to the hospital by taxi. As described earlier that would likely mean less food or less laundry for the month. Instead of an ordinary mothering task her work takes on a more complex nature, making many activities more difficult and more work than that required of other parents.

Raising children without having transportation or money for recreation or the "in clothes" in addition to limited money for groceries and laundry can create a tension between the children and parents. Single parents in a focus group expressed the following frustration:

> It's hard because the kids are trying to keep up with the Jones's and we don't have the money.
>
> Everyone doesn't have ideal circumstances for their kids but they do the best they can with what they have.
>
> Peer pressure for kids - financial competition among teens - our incomes as single parents don't allow our kids to compete with clothes, shoes, etc.

These mothers described the frustration of not having enough money to provide their children with the same items other children had while knowing that their children were experiencing peer pressure. They were faced with teenagers who were angry at them for not being able to provide the same "name brands" as their school mates. They were frustrated at the material culture which stressed material items, as reflections of a child's value. And they realized that in not providing these items their children were made to feel "different". While parents may know that they are doing the best with what they have, they also realize that their children feel the impact of having less money than their peers. The frustrations and tensions that arise can appear to community members and social workers who are "assessing" the parenting as representing "risk of child abuse or neglect".

As with most parents, the mothers I interviewed wanted to have the best for their children. As I talked with these women reported for child neglect I saw and heard many examples of the tender, caring feelings that these women had for their children.

> **Kerri**: I want to make his life so much happier than it is. And I don't know how to do it because I usually don't have the money. Like sports and stuff.
>
> **Lisa:** I would love to be able to get my son a computer - they use computers in the school right now. I've looked in the newspaper for second hand ones. the lowest that they have one for is $600 - I can't afford that. And that isn't fair to them - that is an unfair disadvantage at school because most of the other kids will have access to one.

In one home I saw a sign on the wall *" I love being a parent"*. There were drawings around the room done by her two children, together with charts rewarding chores that had been carried out. Those mothers that I interviewed with their children, without exception, held their children, their children climbed onto their laps, they nursed them, they had kleenex ready when they cried, and toys when they started getting fidgety. In those situations in which I interviewed the mother with older children there, there was a comfortable rapport. One mother stated:

> **Linda:** If you can't develop a friendship with your children then who are they going to trust - who are they going to turn to talk to...Me and the kids are really close.

In Collins dictionary "care" is defined as "to feel trouble or anxiety, to feel interest or concern, to be concerned about" (1993) The synonyms provided for the word care are concern, solicitude, anxiety and worry. These women cared deeply for their children and felt a deep frustration at not being recognized by neighbours, school teachers and social workers through the time and rapport that they developed with their children. Instead they felt judged by the absence of resources that they couldn't afford.

Given the strain on limited resources, as mothers try to balance stretching the money with ensuring that she and her children stay healthy and don't sense the "difference" as strongly, many mothers run out of money by the end of the month. One choice is to go to Ministry of Social Services Financial Assistance Workers for a crisis grant. However, according to the mothers interviewed the government punishes those who ask.

> **Lisa:** You have to constantly pinch pennies. You have to budget x amount for food and you have to stick to that budget. Because every time you go to a worker for any extra money for food etc. then it can reach a point where they can divide up your checks throughout the month and I can't afford for them to do that so I don't go to social services very often and ask for that - I ask the kids dad, I go without.

In this situation the mother will be judged to be poor at budgeting. This will be documented in the file and a computer database. There is also a punishment that can be meted out when a person requests extra money to make ends meet. This option results in a

mother being documented as an inadequate budgeter and punished by not getting the complete monthly amount at the beginning of the month.

While asking for money from the non custodial parent may be an option, it can also give rise to problems. Currently twenty-one percent of single parents receive child support payments from the non custodial parent. All single parents are required to pursue maintenance:

> **Belinda:** My ex-husband is a certified psychopath (they certified him at the university). Well they wanted me to ask for maintenance from him. He had come and put a gun to my head, in front of my children - do you think that I want to ask for maintenance from a guy like that! I used to have a phone. My husband and his girlfriend kept on phoning me and harrassing me.

By not pursuing maintenance Belinda is seen as being non-cooperative with the Ministry of Human Resources, even though the safety of her children are at stake when he is part of their life. There are no current statistics on the number of children in single parent families who have a parent who is abusive. Although I didn't ask the women I interviewed specifically, 12 of the 20 women indicated that their children's father had been, or still was abusive, seven didn't mention whether or not the father was abusive; and one said that he was not. Those who do have an abusive ex-partner often have to expend time and energy on the accompanying harrassment, including the phone calls that Belinda mentioned. After being reported by a neighbour for yelling at him on the phone she now goes without a phone in order to avoid the harrassment and the potential for being reported for child abuse or neglect:

> **Belinda**: The neighbour thinks that I yell at the kids [Belinda was reported by a neighbour for yelling at the kids], she heard me yelling at him on the phone and thought that I was yelling at the kids

For Belinda the option of accessing support, including financial support from the non-custodial parent is fraught with more difficulties than advantages. Others, who do receive maintenance have their benefits reduced by the amount received above $100. Generally, for many custodial parents pursuing maintenance can mean harrassment, and having to ask for money from someone who has abused them.

In order to make ends meet many mothers figured out ways to 'beat the system', thus running the risk of being charged with fraud:

> **Kerri:** I get a diet allowance for the three of us and bus passes for me and my son. To get those you need to go to your doctor each month. That gives me an extra $60 per month from the diet pass and $74 for the bus passes. I don't use the passes - we walk everywhere.That way I can use the money for healtlhy food - fresh fruit and vegetables.

Kerri was well aware that this would be considered fraud, but she did it because she wanted to ensure that her children had fresh fruit and vegetables. Currently there is a big crackdown of welfare fraud in the province of British Columbia (field notes), with an increased number of auditors attempting to find those that are cheating the system. Single mothers who find innovative ways to better care for their children through manipulating the system may be caught by fraud investigators and required to pay back the money.

The persistent lack of resources gives the mothers a sense of living on the edge of hopelessness, and the potential for lapsing into temporary neglect of their children.

> **Belinda:** There are times that I know that if I walked out of here I might just keep on walking.The kids really stress me out sometimes and there's only two rooms in the house. Yes I yell at them - I'm not going to spank them., I'm stressed - they fight from morning to night. After I pay my rent I have $400 left over.

> **Terri:** I find it hard to understand how people could abuse their kids - but when you look at the frustrations and the stress it becomes easier to understand...
> I would love policy makers to live like we do - first of all let them find an apartment with the money that social services provided, let them try and buy furniture, let them try and buy food - let them live like that for a year - they would change the system if they had to do that.

These frustrations and the "work overload" that comes from attempting to do the job of parenting well, without the resources that other parents have, can affect a mother's efficiency and competence in parenting. There is a domino affect for many of the parents in which the lack of resources, coupled with parenting alone and no acknowledgement of their work, leads to a stress level which can result in temporary lapses of parenting and reports of neglect from community members. If the parent is living in poverty then these lapses are usually reported because of their visibility to others.

I heard from those I interviewed that there was a direct relationship between lack of resources and reports of neglect. Living in small quarters with three young children and limited money leads to stress. Both neighbours and social workers see the "bad mother" who yells at her children. Poverty often lies at the root of reports and assessments of neglect although it is never mentioned in the organizational text as a factor which contributes to those reports.

Parents described the relationship between their inability to provide resources with people's perception of them as inadequate parents:

> **Kerri**: If we don't have enough money to clothe our kids and stuff then they look at us as if we are bad parents.

> **Jo:** The neighbours in the building were reporting us all of the time. The walls were really thick in that building. You could hear the upstairs answering machine go on. You could hear her screaming when she had to go to bed all of the way down the hall. When we moved into a house later on then the social workers stopped visiting - there were no more reports.

Kerri and Jo both knew that there was a relationship between resources and people's perception of their parenting. Kerri could sense people's reaction to her inability to provide the community standard "clothes and stuff." For Jo it was evident in the change in housing, one which provided a level of privacy, relative to housing in which sounds could be misconstrued as neglect or abuse (a child screaming).

Social workers also described the relationship between poverty and reports of neglect.

> **Joanne:** Sometimes we get calls that relate more to poverty then to factors that the parents can provide. For example we might get a call about how a child should get new runners or is eating Kraft dinner every night. Sometimes it is even specific to the place in which they are living - "I've lived in that house and it is not appropriate for a child."

These comments reflect the difficulties that those reporting for neglect have in differentiating between situations in which the parents can not provide certain resources for a child and those in which a parent is neglecting their responsibility in providing for a child. As described by the social worker, the lifestyle of a single parent with few material resources can result in in reports of neglect that reflect poverty rather than neglect.

Through the preceding data I have argued that caring for children is work. When it is done as a single parent on income assistance it is stressful and exhausting. My analysis of 20 mothers reported for neglect shows that they care deeply for their children. This care is reflected in their actions and in their words, which demonstrate an abiding concern for their children's well-being. A lack of breaks from the work and the challenge of coping with are two sources of stress. These stresses, and the steps single parents may take to alleviate them, can lead to reports from the community or documentation in MSS files of fraud or incompetence. Thus, while the parents worked hard at caring for their children, they often failed to meet community standards of parenting due to their limited energy and financial resources. They experienced a domino effect, with a lack of financial resources leading to a lack of physical resources and a failure of society to acknowledge their work, and a sense of living on the edge or "work overload."

SUMMARY

The preceding quotes provide descriptions of the work that parents do in caring for childen and the care they have for their children. However, their work is not included in the organizational literacy of the systems with which they interact. Instead these parents are documented as unemployed. Their caring and their importance in ensuring that their children are not neglected does not appear to be acknowledged in the "prevention" approach of the Ministry of Social Services, nor in Gove's report. This chapter has shown that by not connecting the work of these mothers in caring for children with the potential neglect of children when that work stops, the system allows prevention approaches and possible solutions to lie buried and ignored. In the previous chapter it was argued that, by seeing the mother as a problem, practices were developed which eliminated the possibility of the mothers identifying possible prevention approaches or solutions. In this chapter we have seen how the work of mothers, especially single parents on income assistance might provide some understanding of the struggles faced in caring for children under difficult

circumstances. I have argued that it is through their epistemic knowledge, which has arisen out of their experience as described above, that we can move from practices which create isolation, distrust, and hopelessness to practices which prevent child neglect.

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

I started this research with the contradiction I saw between women's lives and the official policies of child welfare. Through the process of gathering and analyzing the data I discovered a wealth of knowledge that is held by women who have had interactions with the British Columbia child welfare structure. In these concluding comments I will be exploring how this knowledge provides a deeper understanding than the official organizational and theoretical understanding of what has been termed 'child neglect'. I argue that mothers' experiential knowledge offers a different, and perhaps more authentic, way of addressing the problem of so-called child neglect than the official knowledge does.

CURRENT CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

The child welfare system, as it is currently structured, is comprised of the visible, documented knowledge of potential child abuse and neglect, the organization of child protection work it supports, and the invisible lived experience of the parents, primarily the mother, and her children. In the current system the organizational knowledge has effectively eclipsed the mother's lived experience through management tools which conform to the officially named problem of child neglect, 'parental inadequacies', and rewrite the mother's experiences into its terms.

As pictured in Figure #2 what becomes visible about families who encounter the child protection system is what the system <u>makes</u> visible. The visible child welfare system contains organizational knowledge gathered through management tools or technologies. These tools are developed according to the definition of neglect and abuse determined by those at 'headquarters', extra-local to the interaction between child welfare worker and mother. These tools require particular information, outlined in policies and forms, which correspond to the organizational knowledge of the problem as parental inadequacies. As

these inadequacies are documented, the officially visible side of child welfare is reinforced through documentation which contains the 'reality' of parental inadequacies and the application of treatments, such as apprehending children from mothers, as solutions.

Figure 2: Current Child Welfare System: How the experiences of mothers and children are documented and known as 'child neglect.'

Organizational Knowledge (Extra-local)
Power to name the problem & solution
↓↑

VISIBLE — Management Tools (Risk Assessment Tools, Mandatory Reporting)

↓↑

Identification of neglectful parents = application of solution (monitoring, apprehension)

↓↑

LINE OF FAULT

mother as object of practices
↑

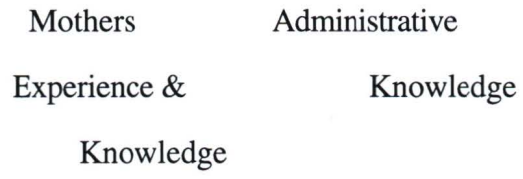
INVISIBLE — Mother's and Children's Lived Experiences

What is hidden through eclipsing mothers' experience in the official documentation of child welfare?

First, the job of parenting is invisible in the child welfare system. The work that is done by mothers day in and day out to protect their children and ensure their healthy development is not documented. Implicit in the invisibility is the assumption that this is a natural part of being a woman, not a job which requires energy, time and resources. The fathers who abandon their children or don't pay child support are not considered neglectful. Instead our current system focuses judgement and criticism on the mothers who do the daily job of caring for the children. The job itself, crucial to the protection and well-being of children, is not acknowledged in the official documentation of child welfare and other government systems.

The lack of resources to do the job of parenting at 'community standards' is also invisible in documented child welfare. The assumption that resources have no impact on the ability to parent or the appearance of parenting is implicit in the reporting, assessment and monitoring process. Mothers with limited resources feel judged and evaluated as failures in the current process. In order to receive support services which correspond to their lack of resources they must demonstrate that they have failed at parenting.

Figure 3: The Eclipsing of Mother's experience in the child protection system



By eclipsing mothers' experiences their knowledge is also eclipsed. What valuable insight do mothers have that is not documented or responded to in our current approach to child protection? Mothers' have knowledge about the reality of their daily lives and the actual context for reports from community members of child neglect. They also know about what is needed to support them in their work of protecting their children. This knowledge leads to different definitions of the problem and solution than are found in the current child protection system.

MOTHERS' DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTION

As evidenced in Chapter Four, 'child neglect' is constructed through offical ministry procedures which may categorize a mother as 'potentially neglectful', or 'neglectful.' However, the likelihood of being reported for neglect is connected to numerous factors, many outside an individual mother's control. Chapter Five explored the work of parents who parented alone with limited resources, experienced work overload and

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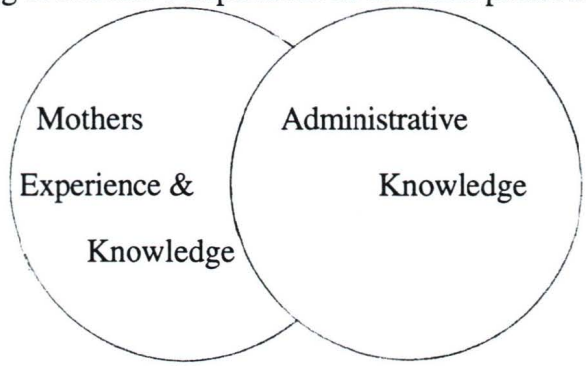

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the corresponding reports of neglect. As I will argue in this section, definitions and solutions arise out of their lived experiences, definitions and solutions which could turn the child protection system upside down.

I asked women how they defined neglect and I listened to their stories of parenting, and of being reported. What I heard led me to identify five definitions of 'neglect' which differed from the official child protection definition: lack of resources for parenting work; work overload; parents who are unsure of how to parent; parents who can't or don't want to do the job of parenting anymore; and societal neglect of the work of primary caregivers. For some parents only one of the preceding definitions applied to their situation, while others experienced all of them.

The first definition "lack of resources", does not refer to actual child neglect, but rather to the issues underlying the majority of reports of neglect. These women are poor. They were familiar with the experience of not having the resources they needed to parent. As discussed in Chapter 5 many identified the connection between poverty and the reports of child neglect by community members.

When the problem is defined as 'lack of resources' corresponding solutions are identified by mothers:

> **Kerri:** If only they could provide the same services for me as they do for the foster parents for my son - recreation, transportation, food, breaks.
>
> **Darlene:** Single parents with children - if they need homecare - to not just question but to help out. Because a lot of parents need it.

As with all jobs the job of parenting requires resources to do the job well and some breaks from the work itself. The resources the mothers said they needed were not extravagant but are similar to those received by foster parents. These parents were adamant that the number of reports of child neglect would decrease substantially if enough financial resources were provided to ensure all children had healthy food and recreation opportunities and their parents had access to transportation. For single parents, respite from the work is crucial. Thus, the solution parents recommended for 'lack of resources' is <u>provision of resources</u>

for parenting work, including resources for child care, home care assistance, transportation, recreation opportunities for children and healthy food, without the label of "failed parent".

The second definition, 'work overload', refers to the temporary lapses in good parenting sometimes experienced by parents. Parents noted that temporary lapses occurred across the socio-economic spectrum. The women I talked to made the point that everybody has "temporary lapses" in good parenting, but they were caught and blamed. Only they are subject to the scrutiny that brings "temporary lapses" into the view of child protection workers.

Why does one "lapse" in one's parenting responsibilities? These mothers convinced me that it happens when they are simply overburdened for too long, without breaks. Solutions recommended by parents then flow from the defined problems. As expressed in the previous quote most of the mothers talked about the need for breaks from their parenting work. Others described how helpful it was to have supportive adults in their life, especially parents, assisting them with some of the work. A third solution identified by a mother feeling overburdened with the stresses was as follows:

> **Diane:** It might help if I have someone to talk to about how I feel - if I could have someone that I could let them know what my frustrations are. There is also the thing that you're afraid of it coming back to you. It would be nice if it wasn't someone that was part of the system.

Peer support, and opportunities to talk about the stresses and frustrations of parenting without having the fear that those discussions will be reported back into the system was identified by several parents. Thus, some of the solutions proposed to respond to work overload include breaks, assistance with the work, and peer support, solutions similar to those in paid work settings.

The third definition, 'parents who are unsure of how to parent', may be a universal feeling of parents. Several of the women expressed concerns that they weren't parenting 'properly' and wanted to learn how to parent more effectively. Parents indicated that there were several sources of information that assisted them in their parenting work. Other

parents were a key source of information and support. Books and parenting groups were also mentioned. Some discussed the positive and negative role modeling of their own parents and its impact on their own parenting. Two of the parents described how the negative "learned" role modeling of their own parents had been one of the reasons behind those situations in which they had neglected their own children. One of these mothers described how a peer support group in which parenting frustrations were discussed helped her revisit some of those negative patterns. Another talked about how the impact of a social worker offering support and help rather than investigation gave her the strength to change her parenting patterns. Solutions to this issue consist of universal information about parenting and support for change.

The situations in which actual child neglect occurs are often found within the fourth definition, 'parents who can't or don't want to do the job of parenting anymore'. Given the difficulty of the job when it is being done alone with limited resources and no acknowledgement, it is no wonder that some women feel that their children would be better off elsewhere with more resources. Two of the parents interviewed had asked the social worker to take their child away from them as they were afraid they were going to do something drastic. The children were not removed from the home and placed with another family in either situation. Both of these parents knew that the children would be better off with someone else. Each felt that they couldn't carry on the job of parenting without resources any longer.

These two parents expressed how difficult it was to acknowledge that they weren't able to or didn't want the work of parenting. They felt judged as bad women for not wanting to carry on with the work of parenting. Not wanting their children to feel they didn't love them but at the same time knowing that they were not providing the time, energy and resources that their children needed often resulted in a seesaw reaction; wanting someone else to look after them but fighting to get them back.

The solutions for this definition ultimately lie with the parent, reinforced by support provided to ensure the best decision for the child. For parents this is a very difficult step to take. In our society women are often seen as morally wrong if they give up their children. They are rarely supported in the decision, even when it is obviously in the best interest of the child. The solution as described by a social worker and mother highlight the issues involved:

> **John:** If you're going to make decisions about who should be parents and who shouldn't you've got to help those parents be okay to be something other than parents.
>
> **Janine:** I had my kids taken from me cause I wasn't managing anymore. One of the foster parents the kids were with were really good to the kids and to me. They nurtured me as well as the kids and I had opportunities to parent with them, not be isolated because they were in care.

The first solution addresses the 'morally wrong' issue. It stresses the need to acknowledge the difficulty of the job, and the need to support mothers if and when they decide to have their children move in with another family in the best interests of those children. The second point, regarding the potential for co-parenting, identifies opportunities for connections to remain between the parent and children. In those situations in which children move out of their homes, they will be in families that care for and about them, and their natural parents can have opportunities to demonstrate that they care about them even if they are unable to care for them. The solutions proposed for this fourth definition include allowing parents to decide not to parent, helping those parents be okay to be something other than parents, and support opportunities for co-parenting.

The final definition, 'societal neglect of the work of primary caregivers', reflects the lived experience of mothers who work hard, yet are not acknowledged as working. As discussed previously, parenting work is not reflected in the child protection systems or other private and public systems, nor is it acknowledged by many community members. The power of a few to define what is work, has eliminated caring for one's children as work in todays world.

One solution to this final definition identified by parents includes the acknowledgment of parenting work through organizational documentation. One parent stressed the need to have her work identified in the income assistance process, as 'parenting work' rather than as 'temporarily unemployable'. One idea would be a revision of policies and forms which would incorporate the documentation of parenting work in other systems, such as the child welfare system and employment systems. As one parent noted:

> **Belinda:** I think if you really are looking after your children there should be a benefit.

Alternative approaches to acknowledging parenting work, such as credits for education, could be developed. These types of changes all provide the documented acknowledgment of parenting work, creating changes in attitudes and the perceived value of taking care of children.

Changing the interaction between front-line worker and parents to one of respect for their experiential knowledge as well as for the actual work itself was mentioned numerous times by mothers.

> **Parents:** "What I would like to see is them treating me with respect"..."Treat me like an equal"..."Treat people with respect, don't make them feel like they are abusing the system by having children"..."The workers that are the most critical of any parent are the ones that don't have any kids. They don't know what it's like."

Respect arises out of an acknowledgement of a person's knowledge, strengths or expertise. As documented in the preceding chapter the focus on the negative traits and characteristics of parents, together with the predefined problem of "parental inadequacies" pre-impose a picture of the mother as someone without knowledge, strength or expertise. By incorporating an awareness of parents' work and accompanying knowledge into the process, through documentation, education of social workers, or a system which provides the parents with the ability to direct activities, the potential for front-line workers to demonstrate respect increases.

Congruent with the need for respect is the need to be heard and receive a response. One woman described her experience of feeling silenced:

Diane: I felt invisible...like they didn't want to hear what I had to say.

Diane's sense of invisibility reflects a system in which the mother is only the object of practices, her lived experience of limited resources or work overload are invisible in the organizational documentation. Changes would result from actually hearing and responding to those that are experiencing poverty and raising children with limited resources. Incorporating opportunities for those experiences to be heard within the conception and planning processes of government policies would provide opportunities for systemic changes.

Several mothers described the importance of being an active participant in identifying the problem and solutions. One mother described a community initiated group she was involved in:

> **Linda:** I'm with the Children's Cheer society - people on low-income can send their kids to camp for a couple of days in the summer. Then we had the Christmas parade and the Christmas party for the kids. We just go in and decide what is going to happen. We've got a number of fund raisers - a dance, etc. we build money up for the kids so that they can rollerskate and go to camp.

Another woman was involved the creation of an advocacy group:

> **Jane:** That is why I have my group going. So that we can know what we can get and what we can't get. What we are entitled to and what we are not entitled to.

Both of these women have a sense of hopefullness rather than hopelessness. They were actively involved in addressing the "problems" as they knew them. The involvement gave them an opportunity to be "doers" rather than objects of practice. One women described her participation as empowerment. Related to the preceding points regarding acknowledgement, these types of activities gave women space for their voices, their energies and recognition of their knowledge.

Solutions to this final definition are multiple. They include acknowledgement of parenting work, respect for parents experiential knowledge and systemic changes which

would ensure women's voices are part of defining problems and solutions and they are active participants in working towards solving the problems as they define them.

SUMMARY - TURNING THE OFFICIAL APPROACH TO CHILD WELFARE UPSIDE DOWN

In this thesis I have attempted to turn the official way of knowing child welfare upside down through moving the eclipsed experience of mothers out of the shadow of the administrative knowledge. The illumination of a mother's experience provides new insights into the impact of the current child welfare system on mothers and what their lived experience can tell us about the problem and potential solutions for so-called neglect.

Changing the approach according to the findings of this study would involve a restructuring of the child welfare system. The following principles for a revised system flow from the issues expressed by the women interviewed.

a. Ensuring the voices of those receiving the services, primarily mothers and children, are directing the type of service/resource required for the welfare of children.

According to the findings from this research, primary caregivers are currently objects of practice rather than participants in official child welfare. However, their knowledge and experience provides opportunities to gain an understanding of so-called child neglect based upon the reality of their lives. Active involvement in redefining the problem and solutions of child neglect, in stating what resources and supports are required for the job of parenting and the healthy development of children and in becoming partners in moving towards those changes, would redefine parents as "knowers" and "doers" within the child welfare system. There are examples of this principle being put into action in pockets throughout North America. An exellent example is found here in British Columbia with the "Strengthening Families by Empowering Women" pilots (Callahan et al., 1994).

b. Redefining of the child neglect problem from "parental inadequacies"

In the preceding section I described various definitions and solutions flowing from parents' lived experience and knowledge. Mothers stressed the need for all parents to have access to respite, healthy food, transportation, recreation for children, and universal information about parenting, without the need to demonstrate "failed parenting". As the programs now stand, we transgress most of the rules about adult learning, both for parents and for those attempting to understand the issues underlying child neglect. When parents are told that they are failures they take that label on rather than seeing themselves as caring mothers. For those working with children and families, as well as those determining policies the current structure doesn't allow for mothers to be teachers, an approach in Callahan et al.'s work that provided opportunities for workers to learn from clients and develop respect for their knowledge.

c. Acknowledgement of the job of parenting in documentation, policy development and resource decisions.

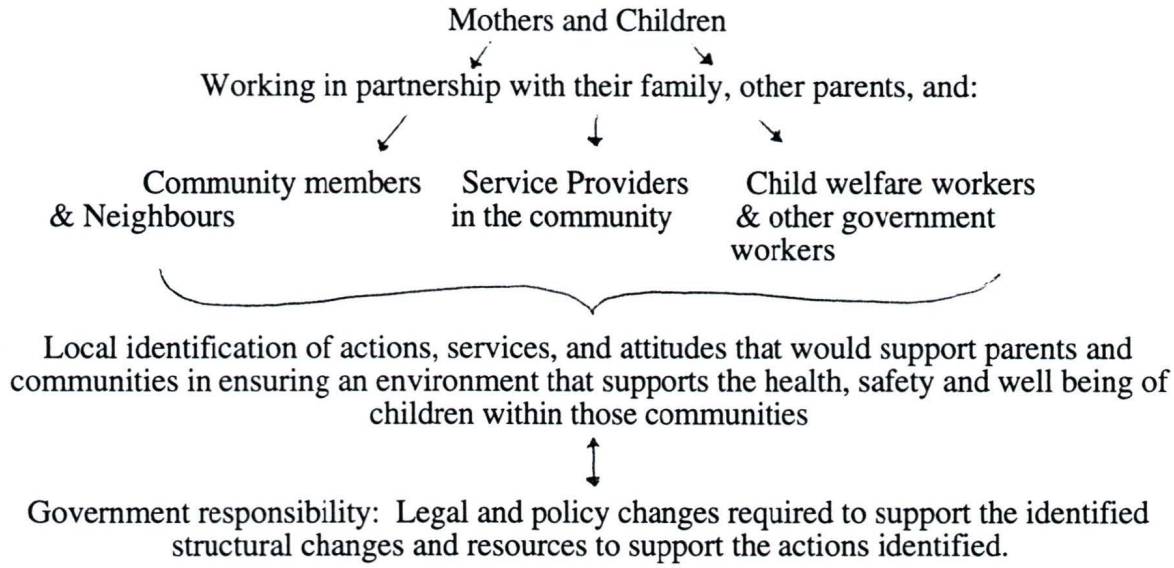
Acknowledging the job of parenting underlies the principles of including the voices of parents and redefining the problem and solutions. Acting upon the acknowledgment that parenting work is the cornerstone for protecting children as well as ensuring their healthy development includes practical support for that work; revising policy so that mothers' knowledge about the work has a place to be heard and acted upon. These actions include the provision of necessary resources and peer support opportunities for parents to effectively carry out their job.

d. Changing the locale of decision making and defining of the issue to the local level.

Starting at the extra-local level implies one size fits all. Starting at the local level allows the needs of each unique situation to be addressed. It also allows for the development of responsive services within local communities. And it prevents a categorization of parents based on a theoretical understanding of "the problem".

A child welfare system based on the preceding principles would turn the current accountability process upside down and reverse the allocation of resources from the treatment side to the side aimed at enhancing the well-being of all children and preventing children and parents coming in contact with the child protection side of child welfare.

Figure 3: Turning the Official Approach to Child Welfare Upside Down



The involvement of mothers in the process of structuring is an opportunity to fundamentally redesign child welfare, not just reshuffle the old philosophy of "parental inadequacies" into a new model. While I recognize that this thinking is contrary to mainstream thinking there has been a growing body of literature which supports this perspective (Community Panels, 1992; Swift, 1995; Callahan et al., 1994; Wharf, 1993). In addition this approach is congruent with the preliminary vision and principles identified by the new Ministry for Children and Families. Reflecting on the stories I heard from mothers this approach would be validating and respectful of their job, and allow them to carry out their work of ensuring the health, safety and well-being of their children.

In closing, I want to reflect back on the problem represented by the Gove Report and tie it to the findings of this research. The report of the Gove Inquiry, with its' absence of the standpoint of mothers is not an anomoly. Policies and processes which intimately impact mothers are developed and designed without the mothers' standpoint considered. Lately, there have been numerous announcements in the media regarding a national child benefit and the alleviation of child poverty. What are the policies that are behind these announcements, and how are they impacting the everyday life of a mother struggling to parent with limited resources? As the preceding research demonstrates, what appears to be a "logical" approach to a problem, can create more problems than solutions if the standpoint of those impacted is not identified and considered. However, if the standpoint of those who are objects of the governing structure is heard, then solutions which correspond to the actual problems can be identified, and action taken to address the actual problems. The standpoint of mothers and children are crucial when reviewing, analyzing and critiquing announcements such as a national child benefit, or changes to our child welfare system.

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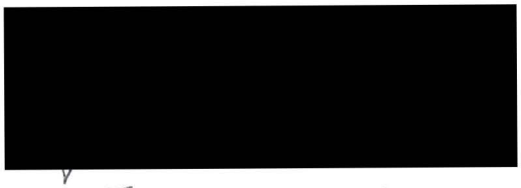
Author 

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APRIL 17/97