

**The Unfreedom of Being Other:
Canadian Lone Mothers' Experiences of Poverty
and 'Life on the Cheque'**

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Abstract

This paper theorizes the experiences of lone mothers living on welfare in contemporary consumer society using a governmentality framework, with particular attention to liberalism's practices of unfreedom. Analysis suggests two main ways in which lone mothers were constructed and disciplined as Other: as 'welfare bums' who were not in the labour market; and as 'flawed consumers' without the financial resources to participate in consumer society. This type of study, with its attention to the 'messy actualities' of how subjects take up neo-liberal discourse, offers possibilities for the re-politicization of the Foucauldian-inspired governmentality literature by accounting for the costs of neo-liberal forms of rule, and providing insight into how it might be contested.

Key words: consumer society; governmentality; lone mothers; neo-liberalism; welfare

Freedom is a defining characteristic of liberalism, the political philosophy that underpins Western democracies and that currently holds sway in much of the world. Liberalism emphasizes moral and economic individualism, and sees the role of government as strictly to protect the freedom of the individual, ensuring that the majority can pursue their own ends without undue interference from other people.

As a political philosophy, liberalism is concerned with the normative principles fundamental to governmental institutions and practices in liberal-democratic states. However, French philosopher Michel Foucault approached liberalism from a different perspective, one concerned with the problematics of governing. Foucault's orientation to the exercise of power in liberal political regimes has been termed "governmentality". Governmentality studies offer valuable insights into the relationship between the individual, the market, and the state; a rethinking how government (in its broad sense) works in liberal regimes; and the ways in which radical values can be bound to new forms of regulation (Dean, 1999; Frankel, 1997).

Foucault recognized that from its beginnings, classical liberalism created a series of problems about how to govern individuals, families, markets, and populations. These problems arose from liberalism's insistence that political authority had necessary limits, bounded by individual freedom and the self-regulatory properties of social domains such as the market (Rose, 1996a). Unlike earlier forms of rule, and more recent authoritarian regimes, liberal governments had to learn to govern through the freedom of individual citizens. Liberal forms of government create, promote, and depend on particular forms of individual freedom (Hindess, 2001a; Rose, 1999).

Most governmentality scholars have only concerned themselves with the ways in which liberal forms of government exercise power and govern through freedom. However, despite a deep and abiding commitment to the exercise of freedom, liberal government has never

granted this right of citizenship to everyone. Foucault (1991) explains that liberal forms of government did not *replace* the older forms of rule, sovereignty and discipline, but incorporated them, such that we can think of liberal rule as a sovereignty-discipline-government triangle. Following this line of inquiry, a few governmentality scholars have argued that disciplinary forms of rule, which would superficially appear to be antithetical to liberalism's practices of freedom, are in fact constitutive of and integral to liberalism (Dean, 2002; Hindess, 2001a & 2001b; Valverde, 1996). Liberalism depends on the 'unfreedom' of some to ensure that the rest will consent to be governed in and through freedom. While some members of society are judged to be capable of properly governing themselves through freedom, others are not – or, as Hindess (2001a) argues, not yet. Those who are not, or not yet, ready for freedom must be governed through older disciplinary methods, with the goal of instilling enough self-discipline and self-responsibility that they will one day be able to properly exercise their freedom and be governed accordingly (Dean, 2002; Hindess, 2001a & 2001b; Valverde, 1996).

In one of the nineteenth century's most important liberal philosophical treatises, On Liberty, J.S. Mill justified authoritarian or despotic rule, as long as the end purpose is the improvement of the subject of rule (Hindess, 2001a & 2001b; Valverde, 1996). Mill considered the cost that the subjects of despotic rule paid for their own improvement to be 'of little importance compared with the benefits they [could] be expected to receive' (Hindess, 2001a, p. 105-106). Such sentiments have contemporary expression in neo-liberal forms of social policy such as workfare, which deploys 'some combination of liberal-therapeutic, disciplinary and morally coercive techniques' (Valverde, 1996, p. 361) to prepare welfare recipients for autonomy. Just as Mill dismissed the cost of liberal coercion, so too do contemporary reformers: 'those who would be free must first be bound' (Mead, quoted in Dean, 2002, p. 47).

The 'Other' constructed by liberal government is composed of those considered not capable of exercising their capacities for freedom appropriately. Historically, it has encompassed diverse groups, including children, women, the poor, the unemployed, aboriginal peoples, the feeble-minded, homosexuals, the indigent, and the delinquent. Hindess (2001a) explains that there have been three broad categories of response under liberalism to those who are identified as being not fully autonomous. At one end of the spectrum are the strategies of extermination, enslavement, and assimilation, used to govern those considered impossible to educate in the relevant capacities – the 'hopeless cases'. At the other end of the spectrum is the liberal ethos of welfare, which provided a benevolent, supportive social environment for those who were viewed as having been unable to develop the necessary capacities through no fault of their own. In between these two poles is the perspective that the capacity for autonomous responsible action can only be developed in unruly populations through extended periods of discipline. With the decline of the welfare liberalism, this later perspective has gained ascendancy in governing the Other (Hindess, 2001a). Indeed, the increased exercise of sovereign and disciplinary power is the necessary effect of contemporary neo-liberalism (Bauman, 1988 & 1998; Dean, 2002; Rose, 1996a; 1996b; & 1999).

This paper presents an example of the effects of neo-liberal forms of governance on the subjectivities of a particular marginalized other – lone¹ mothers living on welfare. As a handful of other scholars drawing on the governmentality literature have done, (e.g., Lawler, 2000; MacEachen, 2000; Polzer et al., 2002; Robertson, 2000), this paper seeks to connect the discourses of neo-liberalism with the experiences and 'practical subjectivities' (Valverde, 1991) of particular subjects who live

¹ Though the women in the study referred to themselves as 'single mothers', like Standing (1998), I will use the academic term 'lone mother' which is inclusive of divorced, separated, widowed and never-married mothers.

under its rule. This type of study, with its blend of theory and interview data, is new for governmentality scholars, who have been more concerned with examining the programs and technologies used to put particular rationalities of government into effect. With few exceptions, governmentality scholars have ignored the direct effects of government as it is experienced, taken up or resisted by its 'objects' – real people in their everyday lives. Though they have used empirical data, in the form of texts, in their analyses, they have remained aloof from the lives of those to whom rule is directed. Moreover, in their attention to the operation of government through freedom, most governmentality scholars have also ignored marginalized groups who are disciplined through unfreedom. As Skeggs (1997) argues in the case of the scholarly abandonment of class, 'we need to ask whose experiences are being silenced, whose lives are being ignored and whose lives are considered worthy of study' (p. 7).

Despite its critical potential (O'Malley et al, 1997), governmentality studies have disengaged from politics, orienting instead toward detached, diagnostic descriptions of forms of rule (Frankel, 1997). This eliminates 'the possibility of assigning costs to the existence of any form of governmentality' (O'Malley et al., 1997, p. 509). Similarly, Valverde (1991) reminds us:

Insofar as the ultimate and often forgotten interest of critical social theory is to change the world being interpreted, the discourse analysis of critical social theory has to give pride of place to the relations between discursive practices and the practical subjectivities of those who produce and/or consume discourses (p. 177, emphasis added).

Like Skeggs (1997), this research was motivated by the desire 'to contest, to overturn a reality, social relations, the relations of human beings to things and others which are glaringly unbearable' (p. 14). To assist in the re-politicization of governmentality studies, this paper seeks

to contribute to an account of the costs of neo-liberal forms of rule, by examining how lone mothers on social assistance are disciplined both by unfreedom and their desire for freedom, and to the creation of conditions and strategies for its contestation.

The Study

Fifteen lone mothers were recruited for a study addressing the question 'What does it mean to be a lone mother living in poverty in consumer society?' The study was conducted in late 1998 and early 1999 in a town of approximately 7000 people in Nova Scotia, a province on the Atlantic coast of Canada. Like many other towns in Atlantic Canada, the study site is in economic decline, resulting from the devastation of the natural resources (e.g., fish and coal) that once provided the backbone of employment and structural changes in the economy. The official unemployment rate at the time of the study was approximately 20%.

All study participants relied on social assistance as their primary source of income, which de facto put them at less than two-thirds of the Canadian Low-income Cut-offs (commonly used as the poverty line in Canada) (National Council of Welfare, 2000). Study participants ranged in age from late teens to early 40s, and had primary responsibility for one to three children, all under the age of 13. Like virtually all the town's residents, study participants were white. Five were enrolled in a new day-time educational program designed to enable adults to earn a high school diploma; four were enrolled in post-secondary education; one had recently finished a high school equivalency diploma; and one had received a university education in her distant past. The remaining four participants had not graduated from high school and were not currently enrolled in any educational programs.

Each participant was interviewed from one to four times using an open-ended format. A total of 36 interviews were conducted, each lasting

approximately 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were coded and analysed to elicit common themes related to being a lone mother living on social assistance.

The Other as 'Welfare Bum'

Like working class women in other studies (e.g., Lawler, 2000; Skeggs, 1997), all participants were aware of negative ways in which they were perceived. This negative perception was encapsulated in the label 'welfare bum', which they viewed as referring to someone lazy and irresponsible, who was getting something undeserved. While they had strategies to brush off negative stereotypes (see Power, 2002), participants were humiliated, outraged and bewildered at their treatment by the Department of Community Services staff. There were two particular types of interactions with DCS in which participants felt that they were treated as less than human: the denial of requests to fund expenses that participants considered to be basic needs; and being kept under surveillance in various ways. These strategies are part of DCS' disciplinary mode of governing those on social assistance, the Other who is constructed as being incapable of exercising freedom.

Needs Denied

All participants spoke of having unexpected expenses that they felt justified either an increase in their monthly cheques or a one-time supplemental benefit. Usually these expenses were related to health care costs, unexpectedly high heating oil or electricity bills, or educational expenses. Requests for extra funds, made to the social worker, were virtually always denied. Such requests were usually made at a time of desperation, when participants had no idea how they would make ends

meet, nowhere else to turn, and were feeling especially vulnerable, emotionally and financially. Thus, the refusal of their requests was particularly painful and bitter, and seemed like punishment for situations over which they had little or no control.

For instance, Irene², who had a long history of drug and alcohol addictions in her past, and no family to help her, couldn't understand why DCS denied her requests for extra money to cover the costs of transportation and child care for her two pre-schoolers so that she could attend essential medical appointments and support group meetings:

I--I've been writing letters to Family Benefits to see if they would increase my cheque and they won't allow that. They won't allow me any money for baby-sitters so I can go to my AA meetings; they turned me down on that. Ah, I had to go see a psychiatrist up the hospital twice a week, they wouldn't supply transportation for that. (...) I have to do that stuff because it's...it's ah, part of my life. It's a life and death thing for me that I attend these meetings³.

For Irene, having her needs denied was related to her fear of losing her children. She knew that without her support group, she would probably return to drinking and taking drugs. If that were to happen, she would be unable to properly care for her children – her justification for living – and they would likely be 'taken away' by Children's Aid.

All the women in the study felt that the rules by which their incomes were governed were arbitrary, their implementation seemingly dependent upon the interaction between the social worker and the

² All names are pseudonyms.

³ Though there may be reasons to reproduce the speech of marginalized groups *verbatim* (see, for example, Charlesworth, 2000), in this paper, I follow the arguments of Bourdieu (1996), Poland (1995), and Standing (1998) that verbatim representation tends to reinforce stereotypes and cultural constructions of marginality, maintaining hierarchies of knowledge and power. Out of respect for participants, I have tidied linguistic tics, while remaining true to my interpretation of the spirit and intent of what was said. I have not changed words and have signaled all cuts in the transcript.

recipient. For instance, Donna told the story of her son's trip to see an orthodontist in a nearby city. Her social worker told her that neither transportation nor the \$40 cost of the appointment would be covered by the DCS. Donna accepted this, until she found out that the DCS had covered the costs of transportation and the appointment for an acquaintance's son, who had exactly the same procedure with the same doctor around the same time. She called her social worker and asked why her acquaintance's expenses were covered and hers were not:

I thought she would say "Well, bring down the receipt and we will reimburse you, my mistake" or something, right? She said, "Well I don't understand how she got that. She would have to put that in under special needs," she said, "but I don't know how the hell she got that". She basically argued with me, but I mean I know for a fact they [DCS] gave it to her [the acquaintance], they gave her the transportation money plus the money for the appointment, and she told me they couldn't help me. You know, like I said to Mom, "Why? Why is that?" I mean it was basic. It doesn't make sense. It has to do with—there, it shows it has to do with the social worker.

Donna wanted to believe that the system was fair, and treated her fairly, but was unable to reconcile that with her experiences.

Having requests for additional financial assistance rejected was especially humiliating for these women because they had hesitated to ask in the first place. This was in part because they felt, as Kathleen expressed, 'like a mooch anyways' – in other words, that they were not entitled to what they received from social assistance. They were also humiliated because they felt as if they should be able make ends meet financially, with the amounts of money they regularly received on their cheques (though none were able to do so).

Since the rules that governed their income and other aspects of their lives seemed so arbitrary, most women in the study were not willing

to fight for what they felt they deserved for fear that their benefits would be cut altogether. For example, Kathleen told me about an apparent overpayment that the DCS had made to her while she was working at a summer job, and the consequent deductions that were still being taken from her cheque. She didn't understand the rationale for the overpayment, and explained the main reason why she didn't question her social worker further or mount an appeal:

I don't like fighting with people like that because I'm scared to death that they're going to say "Well, if you want to fight about it, your name's scratched off the list."

Kathleen's explanation illustrates how insecure and fragile most participants considered their source of income to be; i.e., a dispute with their social worker, the gatekeeper of their cheque, could result in the termination of benefits. Only two participants, Elizabeth and Alexis, described arguing with DCS personnel on a regular basis for what they needed and thought they were due. They had both grown up in families that relied on social assistance, and understood from an early age that being pleasant, compliant, and respectful seldom gets anyone what they need from DCS. Elizabeth and Alexis had learned that the social assistance system left a lot of decision-making discretion to the social workers, and that if they, as recipients, fought vigorously, they could sometimes turn that discretion to their advantage. But despite their regular and vociferous arguments with their workers, even Elizabeth and Alexis didn't often succeed in getting what they thought they deserved. And despite their public bravado, confrontations with DCS exacted a toll:

Every time I come back from there I cry. They make you feel so low, they make you feel like you're worthless, and they think they're God because of what they give you. And they give you nothing. They don't! (Elizabeth).

In the end, despite occasional small victories, the DCS exerted significant ('God-like') power over Elizabeth's and Alexis' lives, as they did over all the participants. Such control is characteristic of a disciplinary mode of rule used to govern those who are constructed as unable to exercise their own freedom.

Living under Surveillance

For the women in the study, living 'on the cheque' meant living under surveillance. In several important aspects, participants felt as if their lives were controlled and regulated by Community Services. Notably, they described employment and income, relationships with men, and their abilities as mothers as falling under particular scrutiny. Surveillance, or at least the possibility of surveillance, is an important disciplinary strategy for those constituted as Other. Surveillance was a key disciplinary strategy of the workhouse, and was the centrepiece of social reformer Jeremy Bentham's 19th century panopticon design. While contemporary social assistance recipients are not institutionalized, they can be reported for suspected or imagined transgressions to the authorities who control the flow of their monthly income. In some Canadian provinces, encouragement to surveil and report has been institutionalized in toll-free 'snitch lines' for turning in suspected 'welfare cheats'. Nova Scotia did not have such a phone line at the time of the research, but one participant thought the DCS used 'spies' to help them in a recent campaign to 'check up' on welfare recipients.

Paula explained that she wanted further education and a job so she could come 'off the cheque' and escape the surveillance imposed by the DCS.

I don't like the fact that you have to report everything you do. It's like your life is not your own. So--and every move you make you've gotta ask, like you've gotta check in, so I said

no. I'll go to school and I'll get my education and then I'll get off it. I won't have to ask them for anything.

Irene described similar thoughts about how social assistance controlled her life.

That was my biggest dream, to get off welfare altogether. I don't want any more of the government's money, I'll get my own money. I'll be able to do it, you wait. I'll prove them wrong. But it's like it's always controlled, eh? Like the government controls every move you make or every bit of money you make, they're always in control of everything. And that's not a way to live, it's not .

Relationships with men also came under particular scrutiny by the DCS. The women in the study knew that since they were collecting social assistance benefits as a lone parent, living with a man was forbidden; however, the line marking 'living together' wasn't clear. Cindy explained that she had been reported to DCS when she and her boyfriend had first gotten together.

When we first stuck on together, his ex-girlfriend called and said that we were living together, which isn't true. (...) So I called my social worker, I said, "No, he doesn't live with me." I said, "Call up and ask his mother, she'll tell you". And I said, ahm, "I'm not gonna lie to you. Two nights a week he spends the night here", I said, "If you have a problem with that, tell me". I said, "But I don't see the big deal in two nights a week. He doesn't eat here, he doesn't shower here, I don't do his clothes", and well, I consider living together all that stuff.

The experience of living under surveillance was reflected in stories the women told about social workers making surprise visits, looking for an extra toothbrush, a man's shaving equipment, or other signs that a man was staying overnight; and in stories about social workers staking out their clients' homes, watching if male visitors left by midnight.

Whether or not these stories had actually happened, they had become part of local 'welfare folklore' through which these women learned what was permitted and what was prohibited while living on the cheque. In effect, welfare folklore regulated what women did – or at least did openly.

Anyone on social assistance could be reported to the DCS, sometimes for vindictive reasons, as was the case for Cindy, and for another participant's sister. While participants knew that they had the right to receive 24 hours notice before allowing their social workers inside, few would have been comfortable refusing their social workers at the door and requesting a 24-hour notice of inspection. Such a move would automatically raise their workers' suspicions and put them at risk of more intense surveillance.

Along with their work patterns and sexual habits, the women in the study also had to worry about perceptions of their abilities to look after their children, for fear of being reported to Children's Aid. While all mothers can be reported to Children's Aid, those living on social assistance are particularly alert to this danger because the consequences of their inadequate financial resources could be perceived as constituting negligence, and because they are already morally suspect simply by being on welfare. For example, all but one of the women with school-aged children recoiled at the idea of sending them to a school breakfast program⁴. Along with their concern that such programs stigmatized their children (because they targeted children from low-income families), some, like Cindy, worried that allowing a child attend such a program could be interpreted as maternal negligence.

Oh my god, I'd die. Because people would think that I'm not feeding him. And then they'd call the Children's Aid on me or something, saying that I'm not feeding him. I'd be so humiliated.

⁴ School breakfast programs are a relatively new phenomenon in Canada. They are not state-funded, but rather are run on a charitable, voluntary, ad-hoc basis.

Like many other aspects of life on the cheque, it seemed to participants that intervention in people's lives by Children's Aid was arbitrary. Although Cindy and other participants lived their day-to-day lives with the assumption that as long as they looked after their children as best they could, they wouldn't have to deal with Children's Aid, they didn't really know for sure how it was that the agency got involved with families. They would take no chances on activities such as school breakfast programs that could raise suspicion.

Participants' lives were governed by arbitrarily applied rules, and by the possibility that they could be reported by anyone (and no one in particular, since the name of the initiator of any such report remained confidential) for a real, suspected, imagined or fabricated transgression of those rules. Such arbitrariness would give rise to considerable anxiety even among those living irreproachable lives, and leave a lingering paranoia about whom one could trust. In this context, along with the difficulties of managing financially on an inadequate budget, the demands of lone parenting, and reported episodes of ongoing depression, it is not surprising that most of the women in the study reported keeping to themselves; having few, if any, friends; and relying mainly one or two close family members for support. Surveillance is a highly effective disciplinary mode of regulating conduct.

The Other as 'Flawed Consumer'

Poverty is a relentless feature of life 'on the cheque'. While living in poverty is not unique to social assistance recipients, it is a given for all those who receive it. Poverty provided the backdrop for many of the stories participants related to me, and was the most obvious way in which they felt a sense of exclusion and marginalization in their daily lives. For the most part, the women were less concerned about the impact of being

poor for themselves than about the direct impact on their children, and on their relationships with their children. They worried about their inability to provide their children with a 'normal' childhood, in comparison with those around them, and in comparison to their own standards of acceptability. Their inability to do so left them with a sense of failure as mothers. As Joanne told me:

When I was growing up, I didn't lack anything. We pretty well got what we wanted. That's the hard part. You like to be able to do the same for your own.

The 'normal' childhood participants wanted to provide for their children included such things as regular treats; adequate money to fully participate in school and extracurricular activities; presents for birthdays and Christmas; satisfactory clothing and food; and opportunities for recreation, entertainment, and vacations. Participants' intense desires to be able to provide their children with the 'things' of normal childhood should not be trivialized or pathologized, but must be set within the larger political context of their exclusion, dispossession, and marginalization (Lawler, 1999; Lawler, 2000; Steedman, 1986). In the remainder of this section, I present a few examples of how participants tried to protect their children from the family's poverty.

In the following excerpt, Irene puts priority on buying Christmas gifts for her children, but her words and hesitancy in expressing herself suggest that she knows the budgetary re-shuffling that will enable her to do so will come at a high cost to herself, and will not be satisfactory anyway.

This time last year I had a lay-away for my kids [for Christmas] down at [discount retail store] and this month I couldn't do it. Because my cheque went way down, I can't do it. But they will get it, you know, they—they will get stuff for Christmas. But I'll have to take it out of my..out of my

expenses and...get it all done out of...that; that's the only way I..I can do it (18 September 1998).

Like other mothers in the study, Irene consoled herself that her children had what they 'needed' for survival, but between the lines of her words was a sense that she felt she had fallen short of what she would like and 'should' be able to provide for them.

Other participants underlined that one of their highest priorities was to try to ensure that their children fit in with their peers, even if household items, food, or personal items for themselves had to be sacrificed to do so. In telling me how her monthly income was spent, Linda explained:

Another thing that comes out [of the monthly budget] that's very important is the children's milk money for school, and their pizza and hotdog money every week, because they won't be ostracized. I won't have other children saying they're too poor to get those. Because that's..it's more important. And their outing money for Brownies and Beavers, and that amounts to over about seventy dollars a month, by the time you add that all..all up. And ah... that about covers it. Sometimes I can afford [heating] oil, sometimes I can't. Sometimes I have to borrow money for oil... There's not much to a cheque.

Linda took money needed for other expenses to ensure her children had as close to a 'normal' childhood as she could manage. However, she and other participants knew that no matter how much they juggled the budget, or 'robbed Peter to pay Paul', there was often no way of fulfilling their children's requests.

Using all the resources available to them, participants felt that they were able to provide their children with what they considered 'the basics', sometimes at significant cost to themselves. In this sense, they drew on the comfort of an older conception of the nature of the parent-child relationship – that it was the parent's responsibility to provide 'the basics'

(i.e., a roof over their heads; food in their bellies; clothing on their backs; and love), but no more. However, all participants wished they could provide their children with more of the 'things' associated with childhood that they saw others around them enjoy. This was eloquently expressed by Joanne:

“You’ve got your health, you have a place to sleep, and something to eat.” It’s an awful thing to preach to kids but you have to. You have to make them understand. You can’t keep brushing them off, like “Oh yeah, one day you get this and that” because that day might not come. So you have to tell them like it is. We’ll do what we can do. If we can afford it we’ll get it, and they’ll learn to appreciate it better, anyway, compared to someone who gets it all the time.

Joanne called on a moral ethos of being grateful for what one has in order to discipline the desires induced by consumer culture. Joanne explicitly compared her family’s situation to the situations of poor people in developing countries and was quick to conclude that she and her children were not poor in this sense. By being able to provide their children with ‘the basics’, she and other participants recognized that they did not live in absolute poverty. None-the-less, they all felt the effects of relative poverty. While Joanne tried to rationalize her family’s poverty and dampen her children’s consumption desires by comparison to poverty standards of other times and places, her comments suggested that she recognized the power of the new standards of consumption to exclude her and her children, and her failure to provide for her children as she would like.

Escaping Otherness

All the women in this study talked about getting off welfare and having a better life. All believed that the only way to achieve that goal was to get a decent-paying job. As they saw it, getting an education was a prerequisite to qualify for work that would enable them to be financially better off than being on social assistance. In other words, they yearned to govern themselves, as liberal citizens, both to escape the punitive restrictions of welfare and enjoy the freedoms of the market enjoyed by others.

Four participants were close to finishing postsecondary educational programs and planned to move away to more prosperous areas after graduation. But for most, realizing their dream of escaping otherness by finding paid employment was a more distant and complex process. They knew it would be impossible to support themselves and their children at the sort of minimum wage jobs they might be able to find with their current levels of education, especially since those types of jobs don't provide drug benefits, a critical advantage of social assistance. For the majority, who hadn't graduated from high school, getting their high school diploma was the first step towards obtaining a decent-paying job.

For most of the women, what they meant by 'getting a job' was finding employment that would provide them with a higher income than social assistance, and thus, a 'normal' life that included consuming things they currently couldn't afford. For example, Evelyn explained that she had recently begun the first step of implementing her long-term plan of getting a job, by studying for her high school diploma. She told me:

I've got a goal, that I'm going to get off this cheque. My goal in life is that I can walk into that mall and if I see something that she [daughter] wants, or something that I want, I don't have to worry about saying, "Oh I'll get it next month" or "I'll start saving for that" or start—you know what, I'm going have the money in the bank (*laughs*).

Evelyn expresses well the dominant consumer ethos of our times—that one shouldn't have to wait or save, but rather, receive immediate gratification of one's desires. However, Evelyn's example also illustrates Miller's (1998) contention that consumption is a primary vehicle by which mothers express their love and constitute their relationships with their family members in consumer society. Thus Evelyn's desire to be able to buy whatever her daughter might want is not simply a materialistic impulse, but a fervent wish to be a better mother and a better citizen, as understood by those living in consumer society.

Another participant, Donna, spoke of wanting to be educated and employed to set a good example for their children. Donna had recently completed her high school diploma but her aspiration to go to college to become a teacher's aide had been thwarted. After her husband abandoned her and left his bills for her to pay, Donna had to declare bankruptcy, which left her unable to apply for a student loan for seven years. Obtaining a student loan was the only way that she could consider attending college.

I don't care if I'm fifty and have to go back to school, I will do that for the sake of the children. (...) To me, I don't feel that I'm a role model to—as for giving them love and support and everything, yes, but as to say, you know what I mean? (...) Almost three years ago, just after I'd had my [surgery], I went to college and I got my grade twelve, and they [her children] came to see me graduate. To me that made me—that was like I had won the lottery. Because it made **ME** feel so good. (...) We used to sit down in the evenings (...) and we would do our homework together, the two older ones and me (...) I wish to God that I could have got it [into college] when I applied for it, because now I would have the [teacher's aide] course over with and like I said, whether it be part-time work or just you know, relief work or whatever, I would be...doing it, you know. And that's the—that's the hard part about it, right?

Donna made her point indirectly. She contrasted her joy and pleasure in being a role model for her children with respect to finishing high school, to the pain of her frustrated ambition to be employed. For Donna, setting a good moral example by working outside the home, and thus being a self disciplined, self-governed citizen, was equally important as assuming independent economic responsibility for her children.

Work also offered an escape from the stigma of being a 'welfare bum'. For example, in discussing the idea of workfare for lone mothers, Linda told me:

I believe...every mother should...be there for her children. Like not at work, where they have to drive, or they can't always leave work. But I also believe there's a time when *yes, you shouldn't be taking something for nothing, and it's time to regroup, retrain, get out, go to work* (emphasis added).

Linda expressed very well the neo-liberal ethos around social assistance – that social assistance recipients get 'something for nothing' and that they should retrain and get to work. Linda's only caveat is that mothers should be at home when their children are young. She did not argue, nor did any other participants, that mothers' work at home raising their children should be compensated, even though she and others considered it a full-time job. Instead, all the women, even those who had little prospect of ever getting off social assistance, assigned the highest value and importance to financial independence and self-sufficiency through paid employment. In other words, they had all accepted for themselves neo-liberalism's promise of government through market freedom.

Irene's case is perhaps the most poignant. With a long history of poor mental health and addictions, it seemed unlikely that Irene would ever be able to work to support herself and her children. Her interviews

were littered with references to work and the reasons why she couldn't work or it didn't make sense for her to work. For example, in discussing how tight her finances are, Irene told me:

It's going to be tough for...for next couple months before Christmas because you know, I just--if I had a job it would be different but I can't get a job because my nerves are bad and I'm going to this program [A.A.] and ah, you know, I'm not able to work right now. And it's not that I don't want to work, believe me, because if I had, you know, if I was physically and mentally capable of doing it I would, but I just can't do it right now. And ah, that's what I would like to do. Just get out there and get a job and get a car and give more to my kids than what I'm giving.

Stuck in an impossible financial situation because of inadequate social assistance, it seemed to Irene that the only way out was to get a job. Irene wasn't able to work, but even those women in the study who were physically and mentally capable of work faced multiple difficulties entering the labour market. With official unemployment rates of 20% in the region where they lived, decent-paying jobs with benefits that would lift them above the poverty line were rare—and most of the women would have many years of post-secondary education ahead of them to even qualify for such jobs. However, moving away for the possibility of finding work entailed leaving behind their support networks, notably family members who provided numerous critical services, such as child-care and transportation. Most of the women dismissed the option of moving away as impossible to consider, at least until after they had achieved post-secondary education.

Discussion

The women in this study were disciplined by the authoritarian procedures and decisions of the DCS, administered through the social

workers. They were also disciplined by their poverty, administered through the DCS on behalf of the provincial government and ultimately, the people of the province. These disciplinary measures created desires within participants: desires for freedom, independence, and belonging. Participants saw employment in the marketplace as the only way to fulfill these desires.

Paid employment has long been seen as the route to responsibility and respectability for men. But in the twentieth century, apart from the War effort in the 1940s, it is only since the second wave of feminism that most women have also come to see employment, rather than child-rearing and domestic responsibilities, as the route to self-fulfillment and citizenship, and as their duty and responsibility⁵. The promotion of paid employment for lone mothers on welfare is consistent with the liberal feminist position that workforce participation is the key to women's emancipation. While women's workforce participation can be seen as 'liberating' (i.e., essential to ensure women's independence, freedom, and rights, and thus full citizenship), in promoting the individual's responsibility to find work above all else (with the concomitant need to remedy individual deficits of skills and training), neo-liberal governments have positioned the burden of responsibility for the problem of poverty with individual women and promoted only one route for its amelioration.

After centuries of a struggle that was born as liberalism itself was formed, Western women, as a group, have overcome their historical construction as Other to a significant degree⁶. They have won the right to exercise their freedom as men do in our society, shrugging off their historical dependence and subservience, and developing their capacities

⁵ Perhaps it is not a coincidence that women have been able to make great strides in the realm of production at the same time that the terrain of government and freedom has shifted away from this arena, towards consumption.

⁶ This is not to say that the struggle is over and done, even for white middle class women. And some groups of women, such as women of colour, and women living in poverty, are still Othered to a much greater degree.

for choice, responsibility, and autonomous, self-directing activity. It is not surprising then that the women in this study looked to financial independence through employment—not a relationship with a man—as the permanent escape from their Otherness as welfare recipients. They expected the DCS to follow through on their rhetoric to help them off the system and into work, so that they could reach full independence through economic citizenship. This fits with Rose's (1999) argument that at the end of the twentieth century,

citizenship is not primarily realized in a relation with the state nor in a uniform public sphere, but through active engagement in a diversified and dispersed variety of private, corporate and quasi-corporate practices of which working and shopping are paradigmatic (p. 246, emphasis added).

In other words, it is through work and consumption that members of contemporary Western industrialized societies—including women—reach full citizenship. It was exactly these two arenas of present-day life from which participants felt most excluded.

Participants were governed by both the unfreedom and the freedom of liberal rule. The disciplinary strategies of governance included the low level of benefits; surveillance; denial of requests for needs considered essential; and incentives to move into the labour force. Participants were also governed by their desires for liberalism's promise of independence, freedom and choice, especially in the arena of consumption. The combination of ruling through freedom and unfreedom is a powerful mechanism for instilling the desire for 'self-improvement'. J.S. Mill considered this the justification for disciplinary governance of those not yet mature enough to be governed by liberal means (Valverde, 1996).

Under neo-liberalism, the 'social' orientation of welfare liberalism is being dismantled so that the moral and psychological obligations of

'economic citizenship' can be shifted towards the maximization of the 'entrepreneurial comportment of the individual' (Rose, 1996b, p. 340). This ethos of neo-liberalism is manifest in national and provincial social policies in Canada that have reduced the size of the state-funded social safety net, and promoted individualized market solutions to the problems of what used to be known as 'social' security. These problems are gradually being reduced to a series of individual life events, such as post-secondary education, disease and disability, and retirement, and it is becoming the individual's responsibility to maintain her own and her family's economic stability and purchasing power during those events. The discourse of neo-liberalism had been taken up by the women in this study and reflected in their thoughts about themselves, their responsibilities, and their relationship to society, as well as their practices, hopes and dreams. They sought to attain, through education and employment, the individual means to assure their families' economic well-being and belonging in consumer society, and felt they had no claim on collective benefits for the work they were already doing raising children.

Conclusion

I have made a case that the lone mothers who participated in this study are governed by both freedom and unfreedom under neo-liberal rule. However, we all governed by both freedom and unfreedom, to varying degrees. Lone mothers on welfare live under significant disciplinary measures; however, the desire for freedom – both freedom from disciplinary rule and freedom to consume – shapes how they govern themselves. On the flip side, those of us who are governed primarily through our freedom are also governed by the threat of unfreedom. As Bauman (2001) states, 'the sight of the poor keeps the non-poor at bay and in step' (p. 117).

This study suggests that the integration of sociological concern for the everyday practices and practical subjectivities of those who consume discourses with governmentality concerns for broader political discourses and rationalities is a productive one, offering insight into the effects and human costs of liberal forms of government. The study results demonstrate that the human costs of neo-liberal governance are significant for those who are constructed as being unable to govern themselves properly, in this case, lone mothers on welfare and their children.

I follow Rose (1999) in arguing that 'to the extent that we are governed in our own name, we have a right to contest the evils that are done to us in the name of government' (p. 284). The underlying logic of our current neo-liberal form of government suggests that it can only offer increasingly strict and repressive disciplinary regimes to govern those who have been constructed as not having the means to govern themselves through freedom. Is this the choice we wish to make as a society? Is this an acceptable cost for 'what we have come to think of [as] freedom, that is to say, for our current regimes of government through freedom' (Rose, 1999, p. 273)? I do not believe so. The case of lone mothers living on welfare presented here suggests that those of us already governed through our freedom must understand the conditions of freedom's operation and use it wisely to create a society that brings its constructed Others back into itself.

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