“Not just somebody’s mother”: University Campus Daycare Co-operatives in Ontario and British Columbia, 1960s to 1970s

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Historical Context

University campuses in Canada were home to numerous social movements in the 1960s, including the Women’s Liberation Movement. Struggles for accessible daycare services had been a part of feminist advocacy since the post-war period (Pasolli, 2015). This period saw some daycare advocacy in Toronto, but this ultimately collapsed in the 1950s (Prentice, 1989). Although many still believed that women should concentrate on working within the home, the women’s liberation movement and the increasing numbers of women in university and in the workplace in the 1960s provided the stage for more vocal feminist daycare advocacy (Rebick, 2005).

Research Questions

- How were university daycare co-operatives connected to the women’s liberation movement?
- On what ideological bases were these co-ops created?
- How did the radical ideas of the co-ops adapt to or challenge the liberal institutions of the university and the government?

The Co-ops

The Simon Fraser University Co-operative Family:
- One of the first university-based co-operative daycare centres to emerge in Canada.
- “The need for daycare was now,” explained Melody Killian, one of the parents involved with the creation of the co-operative.
- The “Co-operative Family” was run on the spirit of reciprocity.
- Licensing would require a qualified supervisor and a constitution.
- Hiring a supervisor would go against the ideological basis of the co-operative as a centre with shared responsibility for each child.

University of Toronto Campus Co-operative Daycare Centre:
- In the spring of 1969, students involved with the Women’s Liberation Group surveyed for interest for a daycare centre at the University of Toronto.
- Although the university denied that there was any available space, the daycare occupied 12 Sussex Drive and declared it the new home of the daycare.
- The centre aimed to provide children with freedom and also provide a space for men to participate in childcare, thereby challenging sexism.

“We have gone against the grain of every tendency in this society- the tendency to set up leaders and followers, to own property exclusively (including children), to be, first and foremost, individuals”
-Melody Killian, SFU Co-operative Family

“We can’t go much further without something more definite than we’ve had in the past from Queen’s. I think we are almost at a stalemate.”
-Jenny Lowther, Queen’s Co-operative Daycare Centre

Conclusion

The university co-operatives examined were deeply influenced by the New Left and Women’s Liberation Movements. Co-operatives challenged and adapted to the pressures of liberalism within the university and the provincial governments in which they operated. They also challenged the nuclear family and the gendered division of care work. However in the end, they would be co-opted by university administration. Despite their inability to continue as co-operatives, these experiments in accessible and affordable daycare laid the groundwork for the recognition of the importance of childcare on university campuses and the responsibility of institutions to provide it.

Archival sources consulted: Queen’s University Archives, Canadian Women’s Movement Archives (University of Ottawa), Simon Fraser University Online Archives.