The Construction of Femininity Embraced in the Work of Caring for Children — Caught Between Aspirations and Reality

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"It's my life so I'll do what I want — right?" These words, spoken by a young woman during the course of an interview provide a suitable starting point for the following examination. The belief that you can be anything you want to be if you want it bad enough and work hard enough is the massively prevalent ideological underpinning of many of the social relations and economic and political forms that touch our everyday lives. The effect of this assured ideological construct is that many disadvantaged groups (among them women) blame themselves for their own disadvantage. Conventional wisdom claims that the failure to realize one's aspirations is the result of inadequate will, initiative or ability. Such a claim fails to acknowledge that people are embedded in social, cultural and ideological forms, relations and practices that give meaning to who they are and who they might become.

Despite the ever increasing opportunities for women in the world of work, many young women still find it difficult to draw links between their personal aspirations for work on the one hand and the realities of family and social life on the other. For many women, the relationship between aspirations and realities is made concrete and materially specific in the opposing demands of acquiring technical skills for work and the practical reasoning required to sustain their hopes for a satisfactory family life. The particular difficulties that this contradictory reality poses for women reside in those social relations, sets of guiding beliefs, principles and values that frame our view of the world, that construct our views of what it means to be a woman and, therefore, what is possible for us. In what follows, then, I pose this central question: How does any notion of femininity lead us to "choose" life situations which provide us with traditional female opportunities but militate against our choosing from a wider range of activities and opportunities? I propose to draw on data collected during a comprehensive

ethnographic study of high school students who were in the graduating year of either a general or basic level program in two large suburban high schools. All subjects were participating in a school/work co-operative program at the time of the study.

For many women, notions of femininity are a central feature through which their family life and work preparation are organized. By "femininity" I mean those socially constructed relations of gender and those appropriations of particular cultural forms, relations and discourses which render women disadvantaged. In a society that is fundamentally divided across gender at all levels of social, political and economic relations, the concept of femininity is wholly ideologically constructed. What it means to be a woman or a man is marked by the distinctions and social definitions of gender. Hence, it is always possible to think of them as being otherwise. However, the social, political and economic systems support the interests of some individuals against the interests of others through the unequal distribution of power. Hence it becomes possible for particular advantaged groups to construct, reconstruct and manipulate these social, political and economic structures to create the illusion that this particular distribution of power is essential, rational and therefore immutable.

For women, the constitution of the family is a major sphere where the realities, contradictions and myths of the social, political and economic conditions converge and get reproduced. Many young women perceive their need to prepare for an adult life of work and family as requiring contradictory ways of thinking about what it means to acquire appropriate and useful skills for the future — a contradiction that is often impossible to reconcile. What I want to signal here at the beginning, is that the concepts of skill acquisition are in themselves gendered. Given the very real tensions between responsibilities for home and family, on the one hand, and the need and desire for women to achieve financial and emotional independence on the other, requires massively contradictory ways of thinking about what it means to prepare ourselves for the future are required. For many young women this conundrum leaves them nowhere to go and a future that looks literally blank. Even in preparation for work that would appear to be as closely related to mothering as nursery school teaching is, for women the kinds of skills necessary for the world of work and those skills necessary to fulfill their place in the family as mother and wife are often mutually exclusive. Returning to the central question of how the notion of femininity contributes to the choices women make, I propose to examine how the intersection of family and work life contribute to a disruption in how young women think about what a possible future might look like. The data reported here came from Meagan, one of the subjects in the study.

Family History:

In order to understand how the structural features of Meagan's life construct for her and through her a particular relationship to the social, political and economic features of her lived reality, we need to look at some of her personal history as this grows first and foremost out of her primary social relations within her home.

At the time of the study Meagan is 18 years old. Her studies include marketing, business finance, the co-op work study program and English. In the past she has taken but failed to pursue science, math, history, geography, accounting and art. If she wanted to continue her education after high school, she would be able to go to a Community College. She chose not to pursue this route and after graduation she worked as a part time teacher-aide at the same daycare/nursery where she spent her co-op work placement.

Meagan has three siblings: Libby is 34, has a grade 12 diploma and is the mother of two children with whom she stays at home. Before having her children she worked as a secretary for a few years. Her husband is a postman. Dean is 32, married with two children. He has a University degree in Computer Math. His wife is a secretary. One of his children attends a daycare while Meagan's mother looks after the other child during the day. Meagan's third sibling, Trish, is 25. She also graduated with a grade 12 diploma, is married, works as a secretary and has no children although she is expecting her first child in a few months. Her husband is a telephone company lineman. Trish plans to quit work as soon as they have enough money to buy a house.

Meagan's father, Mr. French, is a sheet metal worker and presently the manager of a small sheet metal company where he started as an apprentice 35 years ago. He quit school after grade eight and migrated to Ontario from Atlantic Canada at the age of 17 in order to find work. Over the years he has regularly taken upgrading courses to improve his qualifications. Although he is not quite 55 years old Mr. French is planning to retire to his cottage where he plans to open a small sheet metal shop in the garage. Meagan's plans for the near future are a contributing factor in this decision.

Mrs. French also came to Ontario from Atlantic Canada when she was 17. Unlike Mr. French, who came on his own to look for a job, Mrs. French came because her father was looking for work. She rather enjoyed school as a teenager and had hoped to become a school teacher. However, due to undisclosed circumstances, she quit school at 17 after completing grade 10. She worked as a waitress until her marriage. When Meagan, the youngest of their four children was 18 months old, Mrs. French worked as a foster parent and had young children in her care until about six years ago when she first took a part-time cleaning job in a hotel. She subsequently quit this job and looked after first the older and now the younger of her son's two children.

Like her sisters, Meagan had never held a wage-earning job during high school although she helped her mother look after the various children in her care and babysat for mothers in the neighborhood. One presumes her sisters followed the same pattern. In contrast, Dean held a variety of wage-earning part time and summer jobs throughout high school and university, the best paying and longest lasting of which were those when he worked at the same sheet metal company as his father.

The Analysis

In this section I want to look at how Meagan's lived reality, as this is constructed for her most significantly by the relationships within her family, is instrumental in developing her consciousness about work, particularly the work of daycare/nursery. Initially we can wonder why she does not choose to go on to Community College and earn her diploma in Early Childhood Education. I believe that the rationale for her not to do so emerges when we first, explore the considerable value her family places on *child-rearing* as opposed to *looking after children*, second, examine how they construct how and where this activity is best done, and third, see how Meagan appropriates this perspective and builds her own sense of self-worth.

Meagan draws elaborately on the life situations of those people who are closest to her, her family — in reconstructing notions of traditional male and female roles. Meagan uses these examples and experiences to make sense of her diverging possibilities for work and family life. More explicitly, her understanding of the necessary preparation for family life as wife and mother on the one hand and the preparation required to work as an Early Childhood Education teacher mutually deconstruct each other in such a way that choosing one seems to eliminate the possibility of choosing the other.

There are several key times in the interviews when it became clear that the pressure for Meagan to take her "proper" place in the gender structure bring our attention to the sexual division of labor and social practices in her family. Her father is instrumental in constructing a patriarchal home environment that is not only successful, but which has clearly prescriptive overtones. When asked about Meagan's future when they retire to the cottage, Mr. French responds: "Well, there's only one left, you know. Meagan. So...she gets married, I guess, a boy friend or doing something."

In a later interview, Meagan elaborates on the pressures brought on the female members of the family to conform to the traditional division of labor. The discussion starts with Meagan talking about her father's displeasure over her mother's babysitting their granddaughter. She says he would prefer that his son and daughter-in-law put the child in a nursery. While on the surface he rationalizes this position by saying the work is too taxing on Mrs. French, with a little probing it becomes clear that the more fundamental issue is his daughter-in-law's determination to keep her job despite her growing family, and his son's willingness to help with the household chores:

I: Does your brother help out at home?

M: Yeah . . . He does a lot. He takes the kids out and he'll do the laundry and he'll do the dishes.

I: Does his wife work?

M: Yeah, they both work. They've just got to go do this. Barbara will go shopping and Dean will have the two kids.

I: What does your father think of that?

M: He thinks Dean's crazy to do it.

I: Does he say so?

M: Yeah. He doesn't come out and tell Dean, but he tells Mom and I [sic] that he doesn't think it should be that way. Dean shouldn't always have the kids and Barbara should be doing the, well, the um, laundry or whatever and Mom goes, well she's got him trained (laughs). Don't let it bother you.

I: What does your father say to that?

M: He just shuts up. Because he never did it you know. So he can't understand why his son's doing it. Which I can see why . . . I can see why he doesn't understand why Dean does the things that he does.

I: Why does he say Dean shouldn't be doing that?

M: Because he figures the wife should be doing it. Barbara should be home with the kids. Barbara should be doing the laundry and the dishes and that sort of thing.

I: What do you suppose he'd say if you called him on it?

M: He'd probably say, like a woman's place is in the home. They should be doing all the stuff. A man should be working downstairs with the furnace or something like that.

Meagan and her mother have their philosophical moments about this. To the question: "What does your mother think about that?" Meagan answers: "Well she just ignores him now, too. She doesn't listen to him. She knows he's wrong, and he won't admit that he's wrong, like he's so . . . old fashioned. He hasn't grown up yet . . . whereas Mum is in the what's-going-on-now. She just says . . . oh Fred, you're old. Shut up. And it works." Asked if she and her mother ever discuss this, Meagan answers: "We just let it ride. If that's what he wants to do, you know, let him...We have nothing, no control over him."

What the women in the French family do have is "a way with children." This can be seen not only from the fact that there were, over a period of several years, foster children in their home but also in Mr. French's efforts to force his daughter-in-law into taking up her proper child rearing place in his son's home. This becomes a constant recurring theme for Meagan as she talks about what prospects her future holds for her. The impact of this ideology of the family is not lost on Meagan as her parents' relationship with their children is structured on the assumptions underlying these constructs. This comes through most clearly when they talk about their aspirations for their children: Asked about their involvement in the career choices their children have made, Mr. French responds:

> "Well I guess we are from the old school, you know. Let me put it this way, . . . you can't sort of push a kid into anything they don't want to do . . . . All you do, as a father and mother, you coach 'em . . . . You can't say, I want you to be this or I want you to be that . . . . All you do, you either go along with it or you discuss it, but you . . . can't just say you know . . . . Now Meagan never indicated she wanted to be a doctor or a nurse or anything else. She just wanted to go to school and you know she sort of picked her own profession. And she asked us what we thought about it. She did come back and say, well Dad, what do you think of, well, if this is what you want in life, be my guest. Have a go at it. You know. So she decided to tackle on that condition. Now all the kids the same way, you know. Like, my boy, I said to him, if

> you ever be a sheet metal man, I said, I'll break your arm, you know . . . 'cause I've had enough of this. It was a good trade, still is . . . but I said, I never want you to be a sheet metal guy. And he'd o'made a better sheet metal man than I ever made . . . ."

While on the surface there appears to be a gross inconsistency here in how Mr. French talks about his aspirations for Meagan and how he articulates his aspirations for his son, there is, in fact, a deep seated and rigid consistency in his thinking. Meagan did not, after all, choose to be an auto mechanic, or a riveter in a car manufacturing plant or even a nurse or a secretary. On one occasion when Meagan told me that she had gone to tour a car assembly plant, I asked her if she thought she would like to do that kind of work. She responded with: "Too far fetched for me." We can only speculate about what else might be too far fetched for her. There is good reason to believe that it is only through the activity of child rearing that both Mrs. French and her daughters gain approval and some measure of status in their home. While for father and son, consistency is clearly maintained in that they participate in a dual generational upward swing in status, such that the upward social mobility of Mr. French (that of sheet metal apprentice to that of plant manager) is taken up and continued by his son. Meagan and her mother also share in constructing and maintaining a particular kind of status in their home, that of the important distinction between rearing children on the one hand and of looking after children on the other. The significance of this distinction becomes clear as we see the impact it has on Meagan's child care work at the daycare/nursery.

Meagan's prospects for marriage and family in the near future do not seem immediately obvious. Hence she, like many of her peers, is faced with finding something to do after graduation. The pressure for Meagan to move out of the house and become financially independent is intensified by the fact that her father is anxious to retire and move north. For Meagan, becoming a child care worker seems to be the obvious route for work and independence. First, it provides a continuity to her life which appears sensible to her. She articulates this in the following way: "I've always been around kids . . . I like playing kids games . . . I will be prepared to be a mother . . . I will help raise other people's kids or I will raise my own." Second, it satisfies Meagan's need to earn an income, however marginal this is given her lack of formal qualifications. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it allows Meagan to capitalize on her accumulated "skill" in an area that is not only valued in her environment, but which gains her a certain status in her home and familial relations. Her choice of child care work is very much reaffirmed for her by her parents in ways which draw significantly on their emotional relationship to her. As she says: "Dad thought that I was like my Mom. And Mom looked happy for me." In fact it is these emotional, psychological, familial forces which play such a significant part in what subsequently comes to be seen as women's "choices." In the case of Meagan, the dialectical relations which mediate the gender struggles in her home are difficult to unpack precisely because often they are so thickly frosted over with the emotional relations that attend this social formation. I state the case in these contradictory

terms precisely to draw attention to the contradictory reality within which women's choices regarding job and family have to be made. For many young women this contradictory reality makes pursing the technical skills required for job preparation extremely difficult. Meagan's own sense of acquired skill in relation to childrearing is based on her practical experience accumulated over years of contact with young children. She says: ". . . that's the only background that I have and because I've grown up with kids. I have the knowledge of it. That's the only thing I've had . . . . And I work better with children than I do with adults . . . . I get along better with them . . . . I relate more to them, I think, than I do with adults . . . . I guess it's natural instincts or somethin'."

Several factors, however, militate against Meagan's ability to sustain this positive attitude toward her relationship with children and toward institutionalized child care. To the extent that Meagan has bought into her parents' notions of child rearing, it becomes clear that the practical skills which she can apply to the work of wife and mother are not relevant to the work of institutionalized child care and have brought her full circle back into her home. As Meagan draws on her existential experience of her workplace, we can see how the institutionalized child care setting and the home based childrearing practice stand in a dialectical relation, mutually constructing and deconstructing each other. She talks of her experience of the daycare/nursery in the following way: "It's boring . . . they have the same routine every day. They don't do anything different . . . . They don't do anything exciting or, you know, just the same routine every day. All day long. And I got bored of it . . . . And I'm still bored of it." To some extent this boredom is constructed for Meagan precisely out of the realities of her not being a certified Early Childhood Education teacher. The fact that she failed to acquire this certificate disqualifies her from establishing the daycare/nursery program, from having input into the daily routines and from formulating curriculum materials and teaching practices — activity that might make the work of the daycare/nursery more interesting for her. Asked if there is anything she could do to alleviate this boredom she answers: "No, not that I know of because if you mention anything, they kind of well, you're not a qualified teacher, so to speak, you know. Why should you have anything to do with what the kids are doing?"

Meagan's daycare/nursery experience grossly devalues that which she and her family have come to value very highly, and that from which the women in her family gain a special status, so much so that it has been instrumental in dissuading her from pursuing a certificate in Early Childhood Education. Meagan draws a great deal on her "natural abilities" for childrearing, a talent which she talks about almost as if she acquired it by "osmosis." Because they have always had children around, Meagan has acquired a stock of "naturalized" skills and approaches to children that, while effective in her environment, are not recognized as legitimate in the work place. From Meagan's perspective, on the other hand, it makes little sense to go study something that one acquires by "instinct" and which, moreover, is best done in the home. This thinking is clearly articulated in the following

segment in which I had asked her whether she thought she would go back to work once she had her own children. Her ambivilence is evident:

> "I don't know. *I think* I would go back to work. It depends how, what, I was doing and if I liked what I was doing. If I didn't, I'd stay home with the kids and *teach them everything I know* . . . It's easier to stay home and teach them what you know than put them in a daycare. Because I know how they're run now, so I wouldn't want to put my kids in one."

The tension between her own sense of competence with children as this is constructed in her home and the extent to which this is disorganized for her by the idea of institutionalized child care and the technical skills acquisition required for certification is clearly a problem for her.

I: What kind of setting would you like [to work with children]?

M: Mm, like a daycare center is nice. There are so many kids, and so many different things happening. You can't really sit a kid down, talk to him, find out why they're doing certain things . . . . I think a home setting would be better.

Conclusion

For Meagan, the impediments to pursing the technical skills training necessary for her to take up a career in Early Childhood Education are grounded in those ideological notions of femininity and motherhood supported by her family. We can see a clear division of labor in Meagan's home which on the one hand provides her with a concrete example of what it means to have a home and a family and on the other hand of forming notions about what it might mean for her to work outside the home. Moreover, the source of the image that Meagan constructs regarding the relationship between home and job and between female work and male work is overtly supported, fostered and nurtured by those practices in which her father and mother engage. For Meagan, as for many young women, the ambivalence toward job training is most often rooted in the dilemma of the "marriage *or* career" duality, a dilemma that young men do not face since the socially acceptable operative word for them is "and" (Connell et al. 1981, p. 109).

What I have attempted to illustrate is that it is simplistic to think of the acquisition of skills as a way of qualifying for entry into the world of work in simple generic terms. Who we are and how we are positioned in the social world locates us in a set of material realities and ideological configurations which either provide real possibilities for or impose concrete limitations on what is possible for us. The fact that women bear children and our particular emotional relationship to the organizing features of a home and family is constructed most often in such ways that we occupy a non-arbitrary place within it.

My interest in this analysis was to put forward the gendered face of skills acquisition. People of color, other racial and ethnic minorities, people whose

waged labor is exploited in the process of commodity exchange, young people and old people (all of whom include women as well as men) know and live a different face of this same process. In the case of women, the factors that limit our access to the acquisition of skills adequate for employment go beyond the constraints or possibilities offered by the political and economic structures marked as they are by race, ethnicity, class or age configurations. Women's lives are a complicated set of interactions between these and our personal, psychological, emotional and sexual aspirations having to do with the sphere of the home. Men's and women's work outside the home is defined by a particular set of practices, discourses, and ways of seeing the world such that women's labor in the home is appropriated for the maintenance of the family unit. While in the work place negotiated currency resides in issues of labor power, wage, capital production, capital acquisition and profit, in the home the negotiated currency often takes on different forms. Here the social relations are complicated by gender, the family setting and the various forms of domestic services and emotional investment. For women, these often become the material bases on which decisions regarding the acquisition of skills for job preparation are made.

The pedagogical implications are substantial. Training programs in any area, from Early Childhood Education to machine shop, will continue to put women at a disadvantage unless such programs take account of the material and ideological realities of gender not as "essential" difference but as a social construct that legitimates "a definition of femininity which locates . . . [women's] primary role as keepers of the home with only secondary involvement in waged work" (MacDonald, 1981, p. 31). How we understand "man's work" and "women's work," division of labor in the home, division of capital in the home and the legitimacy of claims by members of the family for the use of the collective labor and capital resources all play a part in what options we see for ourselves in the world of work.

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