Transforming Political Discourse: Single Mothers on State Income Support

by

Christine Todd, M.A.

Sociology Department
University of Auckland

christine.todd@xtra.co.nz

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the annual conference of The Australian Sociological Association

December 2008
Transforming Political Discourse: Single Mothers on State Income Support

Abstract

Single mothers on state income support are ‘problematized’ (Bacchi, 2001) in political discourse and the media but the way these single mothers are perceived and constructed is often inaccurate and stereotypical. These mothers are variously depicted as young, lazy and often Maori when only 3% are under the age of 20, almost 60% are Pakeha and all are actively engaged in raising children alone (NZ Government 2007). These misperceptions and misrepresentations have a direct impact on policy solutions and benefit levels as well as an indirect impact on social attitudes and the self esteem and mental and emotional well being of single mothers. The unequal power relations between those who ‘construct’ and the women who are constructed are of sociological significance.

This paper draws on the findings of a recent study which explored the way single mothers on the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) in New Zealand, who do not fit popular stereotypes, respond to, engage with, resist and transform these discourses.

Key Words: Single Mothers, Income Support, Political Discourse, Resistance, Transformation
Introduction

Single mothers on the DPB (an income tested benefit for sole parents) are described in New Zealand policy documents as ‘problematic’ for a variety of reasons: the increasing numbers of single parent families (Goodger and Larose 1999), dependency (Goodger 1998), passivity (Briar and Rowe 2003), lack of employment (Gendall and Fawthorpe 2006; Richardson & Miller-Lewis 2002; Goodger 2001), cost burden to the state (Goodger 1998; de Boer et al 2003) high rates of poor health (O’Donovan et al 2004); poverty (Baker 2008); poor outcomes for children (Jacobsen et al 2004) and single mother’s difficulty in achieving work/life balance (Fursman 2006). They are constructed as ‘particular kinds’ of women and therefore particular types of subjects and citizens (Patterson 2004). These constructions fail to acknowledge that there are barriers to single mothers entering and sustaining paid work including: suitable job availability, low skills and qualifications, limited work experience, health issues and the access and affordability of good quality childcare (Baker and Tippin 2002). Single parents are also ‘time-poor’ as they juggle multiple household roles (Crepinsek et al 2004; Vickery 1977). They are therefore more likely to find part-time work which may be low status, poorly paid and rarely includes employment benefits, regular hours or job security.

This paper is based on a qualitative study of eight women on the DPB in New Zealand. Research participants were initially recruited through an advertisement on a primary school notice board and then via a snowballing process. Participants were typical of single mother beneficiaries, therefore of European decent and aged between 30 and 50 years of age but specifically did not fit the ‘young and Maori’ prevailing
stereotypes. They were asked to respond to excerpts taken from New Zealand newspaper articles specifically chosen for their inaccurate and negative representations of single mothers on the DPB. The study was limited in size and scope with the intention of providing a rich and detailed account of individual women’s responses to the way they are negatively constructed in discourse and the media. The women’s names were changed and identifying information withheld to safeguard their anonymity.

The findings of this study echoed others findings (in New Zealand and abroad) that negative representations and stigma impact on the stress levels, anxiety and mental health of single mothers. It found that negative representations and the associated stigma compromised the quality of the participant’s relationships with family, friends and acquaintances. It found that participants negotiated and resisted the negative representations and social attitudes in a myriad of ways. They argued that mothering was the most important job in the world and that their children were better adjusted and better equipped for the world because of their conscientious and devoted parenting. They argued that receiving the DPB was the only reasonable way of managing their parenting load while maintaining their sanity and that combining lone parenting with paid work was both unrealistic and undesirable.

**Background**

Single parent families currently make up 31% of all families with dependent children, a similar proportion to other welfare states. This number is projected to increase to 38% by 2021 (Statistics NZ 2005). Approximately half of single parent
families currently receive the Domestic Purposes Benefit, although this is a significant
decrease since 1991 when 89% were on the DPB (Baker and Tippin 1999) reflecting
welfare policy reforms and an increase in women’s economic choices.

In New Zealand as in other liberal welfare states the two parent, heterosexual,
male breadwinner/female caregiver family model has historically been considered the
ideal social and economic family structure (Baker and Tippin 1999; Sainsbury 1996).
Recent decades have seen greater tolerance for diverse family forms and the nuclear
family model has ceased to be explicitly normative in policy debate. Patterson (2004)
argues that a one and a half breadwinner family model is now the ideal for two parent
families. Nevertheless assumptions about normative two parent families and the gendered
division of labour remain at the core of DPB welfare policy, central to ‘strengthening
families’ discourse (Hendricks 2003) and embedded in much legislation (Sainsbury,
1996). In this context, single parent families challenge traditional norms and are
therefore open to criticism and possibly discrimination.

Previous studies have shown that single mothers are aware of the way they are
negatively portrayed in political discourse and the media and that they generally accept
popular constructions of welfare mothers. Mothers surveyed by Patterson (2004) and
Seccombe et al (1998) used terms like stigma and stereotype to describe their experiences
of single mothering on welfare. A recent New Zealand report found that stigma was a
significant problem for single mothers on the DPB and recommended that in order to
improve their quality of life and inclusion in society that “the stigma attached to sole
parent families in receipt of the DPB… be significantly reduced, and the status of these
families raised so that it is the same as two-parent families that are not in receipt of a social security benefit (Cowley & Blair 2007: 94).

“Problematization”

Bacchi (1999:1) argues that “every policy proposal contains within it a [previously decided] explicit or implicit diagnosis of the problem”. She questions these diagnoses by asking, why it is a problem and who it is a problem for? Bacchi argues that the objects or issues of policy, such as single mothers, are given shape or constituted as problematic (or not) as a result of and within particular discourses. She says that “it makes no sense to consider the objects or targets of policy as existing independently of the way they are spoken about or represented, either in political debate or in policy proposals” (Bacchi 2001: 1).

Policy makers in New Zealand have consistently emphasized market and economy as the basis of civil society in discourse and in policy. This has resulted in a limited and varying concern for the wellbeing of women, children and the private or social sector, and where the social has been considered it has been to support and stimulate the economy. Contemporary neo-liberal discourse reconstructs subjects as genderless equals in their obligations to the labour market as a basis for citizenship. I argue that it is this dominant economic discourse which constructs single mothers on the DPB as ‘problematic’ for their lack of paid work and need for state income support.

Economic discourses seek to reconstruct single mothers as paid workers and providers as opposed to ‘dependents’ but overlook both their obstacles to participating in
paid work and their unpaid contribution to society. They give little consideration to the long term, social or economic value of children nor their best interests through conscientious parenting, the development of children’s human capital or to the social networking which builds social and cultural capital. Individuals who currently participate in unpaid care giving activities are acknowledged as good and selfless but are economically disadvantaged and criticized as ‘inactive’ and a fiscal burden. The fact that these unpaid tasks are predominantly undertaken by women, has resulted in what is widely referred to as the ‘feminization of poverty’.

The Study: Navigating, Resisting and Transforming Negative Discourse

The women in this study adopted a variety of coping strategies to cope with negative representations and the associated stigma. Cara avoided mainstream media representations and particular types of people. She said: “I don’t buy newspapers so I don’t read or take on the stigma stuff. I avoid people with the wrong kind of energy.” Kate argued that the easiest way to avoid negative attitudes is to hide her source of income. She said: “I find that if I meet people and they go ‘what do you do?’, I don’t say I’m on the DPB anymore, I say I’m at university.” Amy owns her own home and gets occasional financial help for things like a new car from family members. She looks and feels middle class. She said she avoids negative attitudes from peers and acquaintances by not appearing to be poor.

As in previous studies (Patterson 2004; Seccombe 1998) the participants in this study resisted stereotypical constructions of the ‘problem’ of single mothering on the DPB. They were aware of negative social attitudes toward single mothers on benefits.
For example Gail said “Being on the DPB – it’s only considered by, you know, a few people that….like I guess a small portion of people that you meet in society consider that it’s valuable or the right thing or whatever”. And Cara said:

“Solo mums in state houses are usually depicted as a bunch of no hopers…I hate it …and that’s the thing… that stigma holding me into the… keeping me fixed into that place because I’m carrying that energy…its like matrika shakti [Sanskrit]…the words that stay in the universe without you…how do I escape it?”

Amy responded to the newspaper excerpts with “it just comes from such an ignorant arrogant attitude. I skim read it and I can’t even be bothered investing any energy into feeling annoyed”.

Sarah located the media criticism within a neo-liberal context by referring to the responsibility of single mothers to acknowledge their agency and individual choice even though it was clear that her personal choices had been constrained and that her definition of choice was limited to traditional gendered roles. She said:

“I bring it down to… it’s the choices I’ve made, that that’s where I am. I grew up in a fairly affluent area. My family weren’t well-off but a lot of people around us were. I see people I went to school with now and I can see they’ve, you know, they’ve obviously got a very ordered life and they’re not scrambling around managing 3 kids on their own…. and I just think it’s the choice I made …… who I married. I mean that’s about the silliest choice I ever made you know. I was in the same environment that these people were in”.

Researcher prompted: “Did you have other choices?”
“Oh yeah actually, the guy, the very wealthy guy I was engaged to when I was 20. He’s very wealthy now and he always was going to be… so yea I had other choices”.

‘Speaking out’ is an acknowledged form of resistance to discriminatory behaviour (Reissman 2000). The women in this study ‘spoke’ a number of arguments which resisted the criticism leveled at single mother beneficiaries. Gail said “I’m over [worrying] about all that [what other people say]. I think parenting is the most important thing in the world. I really do. And nobody else could do it as well”. Participants argued that mothering was their primary role and that their children were better off for their conscientious parenting. They emphasized that parenting full-time was better for their own and their children’s health and that receiving the DPB was the only reasonable way to balance their parenting load with personal well being. Two of the participants had tried juggling parenting and paid work and had become ill as a result. They argued that it didn’t serve them or their children to be overworked and exhausted. Janet said:

“From my point of view it’s just the best thing to do for my child. I’m a bit older, and I get exhausted. I send my child off to school, I work part-time and then I pick her up after school and that’s just a really healthy thing to do. I don’t have to, you know, have baby sitters and child care and stuff like that, which is incredibly important for the well-being of my child.”

Cara argued that the criticism of single mothering is a misogynist attack on women’s independence and equality. She said
“this whole attitude is about ‘how men are’ and they’ve got to start waking up. I mean it’s scary. That is really scary… Yea it’s completely controlling! It’s they’re threatened! You [society/ men] do this to us and actually we’re not going to stand for this anymore. There are so many of us now and we need support from other women! Its like with my ex – he’s not going to get away with it anymore….you are not going to squash me, I am the mother and you are not going to damage my children. And my commitment to myself is not to buy into it. I actually am ready. And I’m a good mother and I’ve got intelligence and I know how to parent my children.”

Some researchers also argue that policy discussions overlook the value of the independence, freedom, control over decision making and peace of mind which single parenting affords women, particularly those who have been in abusive relationships and in doing so, risk compromising these values with programmes which rely on child care or the increased involvement of absent fathers (McKendrick 1998). Heather lives alone with her teenage son and said her experience as a single mother has been invaluable:

When I was with his dad I did not like that control. I wanted to do things for myself, to have some independence…being a single mum – I’ve learnt so much about life and about being independent… I really want to be somebody that can do things, be successful in business…If I get enough money I’ll go into business, that’s always my aim…I’m thinking if I’m very successful in business then I’ll forget about men. I wouldn’t need a partner - that’s what I think. You know that’s
always in my mind…If I’m a very successful woman I think that I’ll forget about men.

Other participants also argued that single parenting on the DPB has given them a second chance, an opportunity to re-evaluate their lives. Kate said:

“I think being at university has helped me become stronger and get my confidence back and to – I don’t want to use the word fight back, but in a way you are fighting back….it’s taken 3 years to do a degree which I think is pretty good for a full-time mother, so I started questioning myself – why am I suddenly trying to…why didn’t I do it 20 years ago, is what I’m getting. Why are you aiming for it now? Because I’m at a time in my life that I feel I’m mature enough to go for the stuff I want to go for.”

Others drew on human rights discourses. Amy argued that single mothering on the DPB is a legitimate choice:

“I didn’t want to be denied my right to be a parent… that’s why I really stuck to it and made it happen. And I had an absolute clear mind that I was entitled to the DPB, however the children came - out of my stomach or not - that they were on the earth, I was caring for them and I needed assistance.”

Sarah agreed that negative media representations deny single mothers the right to a rewarding life. She said “[They] may be entertaining reading for the bigots. No … don’t take your chastity belt off until you’re married. And then stay in that marriage… but it’s not like they’re saying you’re a person and you have a life to live.
Janet declared her pride in surviving as a single mother in the face of social and financial adversity. She said:

“I think it takes a huge amount of courage and determination just to even do it. And you have to be determined, you have to be dogged…because it’s just financially - it’s hard - well usually it’s really financially hard…and it’s stressful.”

Conclusion

This paper examined how a small group of single mothers on the DPB in New Zealand conceptualize and resist the way they are ‘problematised’ in political discourse and the media. It argued participants in the study were aware of negative representations and social attitudes towards single mothers and adopted a number of arguments to understand and resist them.

The women drew on contemporary neo-liberal discourse to make sense of criticism. They developed coping strategies of displacement, avoidance and denial and they ‘spoke out’. They argued that mothering was the most important job in the world and that children were better adjusted and better equipped for the world for their conscientious and devoted parenting. They argued that society and particularly men had a vested interest in limiting their independence. They drew on human rights discourses to argue that they had a right to rewarding and independent lives and to successfully parent alone. They argued that adequate levels of income support was necessary to ensure that
they had the material resources, time and energy to successfully raise children while protecting their own well being.

Single mothers are an inevitable reflection of an increasingly complex and diverse society and provide strong and independent female role models for the twenty-first century. I would argue that policy makers in this rapidly diversifying social context have an obligation to ensure that the needs and values of single mothers are heard, understood and accurately represented to ensure that these women and families are included in social and political processes, have adequate household income and time for themselves and to conscientiously parent their children.

3006 words

References


Briar, Celia and Rowe, Donelle (2003) *The Benefits Of The DPB.* MSD Conference


Jacobsen, Veronica; Fursman, Lindy; Bryant, John; Claridge Megan and


Seccombe, Karen; James, Delores; Battle Walters, Kimberly (1998) They
Think you ain’t much of nothing: The social construction of the welfare mother. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60(4): 849.
