MOTHERING UNDER OTHERS' GAZE: 
Policing Motherhood in a Battered Women’s Shelter

AMANDA MARIE GENGLER

Brandeis University

This paper draws on ten months of ethnographic research in a battered women's shelter to show how staff worked to coerce resident mothers to conform to hegemonic middle-class childrearing strategies (Cancian, 2002; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003). Approaching mothers who sought shelter services with the assumption that their parenting skills were lacking, staff required them to attend parenting groups, follow strict supervision policies, use staff-sanctioned disciplinary techniques, and establish acceptable routines for their children as dictated by shelter staff. Staff attempted to reform mothers who did not appear to subscribe to these philosophies through an emphasis on “positive parenting techniques” and through direct interational interventions when necessary. Here, I show how dominant ideologies around appropriate mothering are upheld and reproduced by organizational authorities, and how poor mothers and battered women who must rely on shelter services are particularly vulnerable to the policing and surveillance of their mothering practices.

The women’s group had just ended, and Amber and Yvonne sat on the back steps sharing a cigarette, hoping for a short reprieve before the children’s group let out. As I chatted with them in the muggy, summer's night air, Isabelle, Amber’s little girl, bounded out the door and began playing on the wide, low, concrete railing along the steps beside her mother. Isabelle entertained herself climbing and jumping, while the three of us debriefed. Soon Jill, a children’s counselor, leaned out the door calling, “Isabelle! It’s your bedtime.”

Amber, halfway through her cigarette, looked at me and rolled her eyes, slightly shaking her head. We talked for another few minutes before Jill opened the door again to remind “Isabelle” that it was past her bedtime, lingering in the light of the doorway to gauge our reaction. Isabelle scurried over to Amber and threw her arms around her mother’s neck. After Jill had pulled the door closed again, I asked Amber if that was Jill's way of telling her to come inside and put her daughter to bed. “Yep,” Amber replied, sighing. She looked at Isabelle and said, “Mommy’s supposed to follow the rules. We all have rules
we have to follow, whether we want to or not.” Amber took a final drag of her cigarette, said good night, and shooed her daughter inside.

Mothering is a tough job in the best of times. It is something many women worry about: how well they do it, what others think of how they mother, and what sort of children their mothering will produce. Mothering under stress, or during times of crisis, is especially difficult, and mothers who attempt to flee abusive relationships are at greater risk for their mothering to be called into question (Bumiller, 2008).

Women whose abuse sends them to battered women’s shelters may be especially vulnerable. Studies have shown that women in shelters must relinquish a great deal of autonomy and personal control (Loseke and Cahill, 1984), cope with constant surveillance of their daily lives and personal information (Pitts, 1996), and must carefully follow rules established by shelter managers or risk being disqualified for services (Ferraro, 1983; Loseke, 1992). Mothers at Recourse, the battered women’s shelter I studied, struggled daily to negotiate the rules they were expected to follow during their stay. Curfews, mandatory support group attendance, and time restrictions on television viewing were just a few. They were also required to shift their childrearing practices to fit a shelter-approved model of “good” parenting, and their mothering was subject to close scrutiny and intervention if they failed to meet these standards.

This paper explores how this dynamic shaped the experiences of mothers staying in the shelter. In particular, I show how staff worked to encourage mothering practices they deemed appropriate, and discourage those they found to be inadequate. In doing so, I shed light on how institutions reproduce and enforce ideologies of “good” mothering, and how, by virtue of reliance on outside resources, some mothers are subjected to greater ideological interventions by state and organizational authorities than others. I also show how mothers perceived these interventions and the implication that they had failed to be good moms. Finally, I consider the profound consequences of this interactive dynamic for the women and children at its core.

“GOOD” AND “BAD” MOTHERS

All mothers are potentially accountable to acceptable and normative standards of good mothering. Mothers know what it means to be a “good” mother, and “do” motherhood by engaging in practices, such as reading to children at bedtime, that are widely seen as symbolic of good parenting (Garey, 1999). Mothers are subject to surveillance in both public and private spheres, and can be held accountable if they fail to give mothering performances that fit
these ideals. Yet some families have the resources to attain greater privacy (and freedom) than others (Nelson and Garey, 2009). Women in the shelter, unable to secure this privacy, were forced to engage in typically private childrearing practices in a public arena for an extended period of time, allowing their mothering to be even more carefully monitored by outsiders.

Judgments that follow from the surveillance of one's mothering—whether one's mothering is good or bad, lacking, or unacceptable—can come both from authorities (i.e.; doctors, teachers and social service workers) and other mothers (see Reich, 2005 for an example of the former, and Blackford, 2009 for an example of the latter). Women who have been deemed “bad” mothers face any number of social or legal penalties, up to and including having their children taken away in the name of protecting child welfare (Appell, 1998; Reich, 2005). Women who are deemed “bad mothers” are well aware of these judgments, and may work to show how they have cared for and demonstrated love for their children despite their failings (see for example, Baker and Carson, 1999).

Racist assumptions and other biases often underlie child welfare decisions, and acceptable standards of care have long reflected the dominant group’s perspective (Cancian; 2002; Reich, 2005). Poor women have been demonized in popular imagination as “bad” mothers, particularly single mothers and women of color, who are assumed to be living on welfare and personally responsible for their failure to maintain a traditional family structure (Dill et al., 1999). The “good” mother is a narrow, racialized, and class-based image, which excludes all but non-working, middle-class, white, heterosexual mothers (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998). Women of color have long been subject to a variety of controlling images that are particularly difficult to escape (Collins, 1991). While ideas about what it means to be a good parent and how best to raise children differ significantly across race and class (Glenn, Chang, and Forcey, 1994), there is little space for these differences in hegemonic ideologies and child welfare policies.

Childrearing practices are also shaped by environmental contexts and past and current experiences of oppression (Ahn, 1994). Jackie Litt, in her study of African-American and Jewish mothers’ responses to the medicalization of childrearing in the early 20th century, shows how race and ethnicity colored these mothers’ perceptions of medical interventions, leading each group of mothers to receive them quite differently. While the Jewish mothers she interviewed latched on to new, medically based child-care practices to cement their assimilation into the “American way,” African-American mothers were dubious of these approaches. These women’s refusal to adopt new standards, and their reliance on home-remedies and kin-care, made them suspect in the
eyes of authorities. Willingness to adhere to scientific theories of motherhood served as an avenue of social acceptance for some, and evidence of inadequacy for others.

**Dominant Ideologies of Mothering.** As more and more parents (usually mothers) turned to experts and scientific findings to shape their parenting practices, a booming parenting-manual industry drew clear lines around acceptable and unacceptable approaches to child-rearing. The acceptable approach took the form of what Sharon Hays (1996) refers to as “intensive mothering.” This approach demands mothering that is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive” (8). While not all mothers are able or willing to live up to its mandates, many middle-class mothers accepted this philosophy, in whole or in part, as the ideal. Despite its demanding, time-consuming nature, intensive mothering came to be seen as a “moral obligation” by many.

In her 2003 ethnography, Annette Lareau studied families’ orientations to childrearing and discovered that childrearing norms differed significantly along class lines. Lareau found that middle-class parents worked carefully to orchestrate their children’s growth and development, often building their lives around the activities they scheduled for their children, and around their children’s immediate wants and needs. These parents reasoned with their children when their authority was challenged, and encouraged debate to sharpen their kids’ skills for future professional careers.

In contrast, poor and working-class families tended to foster the “accomplishment of natural growth;” allowing kids much more latitude to shape and fill their own daily lives. At the same time, poor and working-class parents also maintained a clearer divide between children’s and adults’ roles, and upheld parents as clear authority figures in the home. This approach, reflected in the parenting styles of most residents at Recourse, functioned to let “kids be kids,” while preparing them to obey the rules set by the authority figures they would likely encounter in future working-class jobs.

While ideologies of intensive mothering and concerted cultivation permeate the dominant group, “non-elite groups are more likely to deviate from this standard and emphasize obedience and duty” (Cancian, 2002: 65) or view spanking and other forms of physical discipline as acceptable and useful in some circumstances or to achieve diverse cultural goals (Ahn, 1994). Current trends that view “authoritative” and “responsively nurturant” parenting as the only acceptable ways to care for children disregard these cultural differences, despite a lack of evidence that such practices garner significantly better outcomes (Cancian, 2002).
At Recourse, these dueling approaches to childrearing—often clashed, as staff emphasized an approach to raising children rooted in white, middle-class value systems that often ran counter to those considered reasonable and effective by residents. Staff attempted to reform resident mothers into a middle-class logic of intensive mothering and concerted cultivation. Mothers at Recourse responded to shelter staff’s attempts to regulate their parenting in a variety of ways. Some accepted their guidance as expert advice, others questioned how well positioned they were to give it, and at times women directly resisted the child-rearing philosophies presented. Whatever their response, the policing of their mothering was a defining theme of many women's experiences in the house, and one that women knew could hold lasting consequences beyond their stay.

SETTING AND METHOD

The data for this paper is drawn from ten months of fieldwork and 15 intensive interviews (four with staff, 11 with residents) at an 18-bed battered women’s shelter. The shelter, located in a mid-sized Southeastern city, was housed in a large, fading yellow Victorian home filled with shabby furniture and in need of a variety of repairs. The shelter was ostensibly operated based on an “empowerment” philosophy. Upon entering the shelter the women received an orientation packet that informed them that they had chosen to join a “therapeutic” program. As a result, participation in shelter programming (support groups, counseling, etc.) was mandatory, as was following the rules staff saw as necessary to facilitate program goals.

Women were held accountable to the rules through a point system, which staff framed as a tool of “empowerment.” The point system was outlined in the orientation packet, allocating each woman five points they could “choose” to “use” during their stay to opt-out of a particular obligation (i.e.; chores, curfew, mandatory support group attendance, etc.) on a particular occasion. “Using” all five of their points, from staff’s perspective, signaled that the program was “not the right fit for them at this time” and meant their space would be given to someone for whom, presumably, it might be. Unsurprisingly, the residents experienced the point system as punitive rather than empowering, and understood that “losing” points put them at risk of being kicked out and potentially forced to return to abusive partners (see Gengler, Unpublished Manuscript).

Given the number of beds occupied by children, there were generally between 6-9 women staying in the shelter at any given time. Women were allowed to stay for up to 8 weeks, unless they lost their points, or failed a
random drug test. Other infractions that might lead to immediate dismissal included violations of confidentiality (revealing the shelter location to any non-resident), or the use of verbal or physical violence (including physically disciplining children, which I will discuss below.) Some women stayed for only a few days or weeks (by their own choice), some lost their points or were asked to leave for other infractions, and some stayed for the full 8-week period. In a few instances during the time of my observation, extensions were granted and a woman was allowed to stay beyond the 8-week time limit. This was not a common practice, and occurred only when shelter staff felt that the woman in question had been diligently working to secure housing and was close to doing so, or other extenuating circumstances, such as the impending birth of a child, were considered sufficient to warrant an exception.

Each week, staff facilitators led two mandatory support groups. One of these groups centered on domestic violence, the other group began with “house meeting,” during which announcements were made, chores distributed, and any current issues hashed out, and then alternated between a focus on self-esteem/self-awareness, and “family focus”—a parenting group. Given my interests, I observed the latter group. During the first half of my observation, this group was primarily led by Beth, a white woman in her late-twenties, with a master’s degree in social work. When Beth left to accept a full-time job, the group was taken over by Gloria, a Black woman in her late-forties with an associate’s degree in psychology. Parenting groups, however, were led by one of the children’s counselors, of which there were two at any given time, but four different children’s counselors over the course of my study. All were white women in their twenties who held at least a four-year degree (Carly had just earned an MSW). Only one of the four, Kristen, had children herself. Kristen and Heather were the children’s counselors during the first four months of my observation. When both left for other jobs, there was a brief period without children’s counselors during which no formal parenting groups were led. Once Carly and Jill were hired, Carly resumed the parenting group. However, issues pertaining to kids and parenting were at times discussed during non-parenting groups and house meetings as well.

During each group meeting I participated in games and activities as appropriate and took notes whenever possible. My visits lasted between one to three hours each week. Following each visit to the shelter, I wrote extensive field notes, all of which were coded and analyzed throughout the project following a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). All 15 interviews were transcribed in full and coded and analyzed using the same method. Data
also come from written materials (including the orientation packet, parenting packets, and other group handouts) prepared by shelter staff.

In the larger project (Gengler, Unpublished Manuscript) I explore the contradictory and paternalistic use of the empowerment rhetoric, the struggle for control that played out between residents and staff during Group, and how gender shaped the staff's structure of control and residents' resistance strategies. Here, I will focus specifically on how staff, assuming that residents' childrearing practices required improvement, worked to police residents' mothering.

**MANAGING CHILDREN, MANAGING MOTHERS**

The problem of managing children in a group living arrangement with a revolving door and constantly shifting composition was a challenge for staff and mothers alike. In an attempt to reduce as much chaos and conflict as possible, staff enforced a variety of rules around child supervision, meals and bedtimes, and acceptable disciplinary techniques. However, these policies also served to allow staff to manage and police mothers, whose mothering may not have sufficiently met their standards for good parenting.

*Regulating Families.* Child supervision was a major concern for shelter staff. While staff were charged with maintaining order in the house, they were not able to provide childcare and needed to ensure that mothers were keeping their kids in line at all times. Accordingly, one of the primary rules enforced by the point system was “child supervision.” The orientation packet stated that: “children (any age) must be on the same floor as you at all times. Example: if you are doing laundry, your children must go to the basement with you.” When there were a large number of kids in the house, or staff felt that mothers were not supervising their children well enough, announcements reminding residents of this rule were made at the beginning of the weekly house meeting.

Staff sometimes dreaded having to do this because they worried residents would argue that this was an unreasonable or impossible expectation. Staff indeed recognized that it might be. One night before group, Beth and Kristen discussed the need to make an announcement in that evening’s group session. Kristen suggested that this level of supervision was “impossible, but should be the goal” and Beth acknowledged that “there are more little people than big people and the little people are quicker than the big people.” Nonetheless, Kristen felt that “at any point in time we should be able to go up to any woman and she should be able to tell us exactly where her kids are.”

Staff felt entitled to take this stance, because they believed it represented a dire safety (and liability) issue in a community living arrangement. Beth and
Kristen justified this policy by recounting a time when a little boy had climbed on top of a dresser and fallen off. A drawer hit him on the way down, and he had needed stitches. Yet for mothers—who often had multiple children of various ages to keep an eye on, laundry to wash, and other chores to do—the rule was difficult to follow. Melinda, a white woman in her early forties, frequently worried about losing points for supervision and did lose a point when her son ran into the office and scurried under a desk to hide from her. Rhea, a Black woman in her thirties, expressed similar concerns during an interview:

I got one point, I only got one point left. You know what I'm sayin'? So I've been living on one point for about a month. So imagine that. With four kids. Two girls. I've been walking on eggshells, like "don't do that!" "don't go in there!" "don't say that!"

Mothers struggled with the fact that, technically, they were supposed to gather all of their children and go upstairs if any of the children, even a teenage child, needed to use the bathroom. In an interview Charyse, a Black woman in her thirties, told me:

You got older kids, your older kids don't want to stay up under their parent. They want their own space, and you know, they just do their own thing, not—they still in the house with you. It's not like they, you know, running around or you know, tearing up the house or hanging from the ceilings or something like that. They're in their room, on the computer, listening to the radio, looking at a DVD, you know. It's just anything to entertain theirself...they teenagers, everybody knows how that stage goes...we don't need to be sitting beside 'em every time they move, or we need to go with them to the bathroom...things of that nature. So it's a little frustrating.

From Charyse's perspective, as long as her children were not disturbing others, she felt they should be given greater latitude to spend time on their own and "do their own thing." In order for her children to grow and develop naturally, Charyse believed they needed time away from her, not to be constantly monitored and controlled. While staff might agree that children should be given increasing independence over time, this was a difficult line for them to navigate, in part because of the practicalities of rule-enforcement, but in part because of their standards for good mothering. Caroline, a Black woman in her early forties, faced a similar problem to Charyse. When Caroline's 14- and 17-year old children wanted to go to the library just up the road, she was told she had to go with them. When she argued they could go alone, staff ultimately conceded that, as long as she walked out of the house with the kids before they went their separate ways, they were "her responsibility." While I was not
able to interview staff directly about this situation, it seems likely that by seeking a loophole to the policy, staff may have questioned Caroline's mothering, and her commitment to her children.

In addition to the vigilant monitoring of children during the day, children were to be put to bed by particular bedtimes each night according to their age. This policy reflected the paternalism behind many of the rules and policies governing shelter life. As the orientation packet explained, “children's bedtimes are set to help you establish a routine for you and your family.” School-aged children were also required to attend a mandatory study hour Monday-Thursday after school, to “provide a consistent schedule.” While staff recognized that this might be yet another large adjustment for children and families who did not have to abide by such stringent rules and schedules in their own homes (where mothers themselves would have had the freedom to set and make exceptions to rules), they framed them in official materials as a better, more appropriate way to care for children.

Reform Messages: Positive Parenting. Although shelter staff needed mothers to maintain tight control of their children during their stay, they wanted them to do so only using shelter sanctioned methods. On the whole, staff members (children's counselors in particular) were highly invested in contemporary middle-class parenting philosophies that frame children as miniature-adults who demand the same level of attention and respect as any peer, and should be given the chance to make responsible choices. Telling children “no,” or raising one’s voice, were to be avoided at all costs, regardless of how time consuming alternative strategies might be. Instead, children should be reasoned with or “redirected.” For instance, when Andrew, a four-year old boy, came into the office and grabbed a cell phone off of a desk while we were all preparing for Group, Kristen, a children's counselor did not just take the phone from him, but approached the problem as follows:

Kristen told Andrew, “We can't play with Miss Heather's phone when she's not here. Why don't you come see mine?” Kristen lifted Andrew onto her lap and gave him her cell phone. Andrew began to push buttons at random. Kristen said, “Here, do you want to look at my pictures?” Kristen showed Andrew some pictures of her daughters, telling stories about each one. She then offered, “Do you want me to take a picture of you?” Andrew, his older sister, and Saida's son posed for several shots.

Kristen used shelter-approved positive parenting techniques, primarily “redirection,” (rather than simply saying “no,” removing the phone, and/or making all cell phones off-limits to children) to keep Andrew out of trouble. Despite the fact that women staying in the shelter might be unwilling or unable
to drop everything they were doing to redirect and positively engage their child every time they went astray, staff worked hard to convince them that this was the proper approach to take. Staff deliberately modeled this approach to the mothers who stayed in the shelter (ironically, modeling itself is another “positive parenting technique,” positioning staff in a paternalistic role vis-à-vis residents) by consistently interacting with children in these ways.

Staff also encouraged mothers to focus on children’s positive behavior and offer frequent praise wherever they might find the opportunity. One night Theresa, a middle-aged Black woman interning at the shelter while she pursued a bachelor’s degree in child psychology, was in the office with a distraught Jaren, a Black woman in her early twenties, who had discovered her purse was missing after Group. Her two-year old daughter, Serenity, recognized her mother’s pain and tried to give Jaren a hug, but Jaren was too distracted and upset to respond to Serenity. Theresa, ignoring Jaren’s distress, interrupted Jaren to shift her attention to acknowledging her daughter’s good behavior, saying, “Serenity’s trying to comfort you.”

While a focus on “positive parenting techniques” permeated interactions with staff outside of Group, formal parenting groups demonstrated staff’s deliberate attempts to coerce mothers into using these techniques. Heather distributed parenting packets during a parenting group she led, which she had customized for each woman based on the age of her child(ren). She told them that these materials would help them focus “not on negative behavior, but on the positive.” Carly maintained a similar agenda during her parenting groups, suggesting that the residents try to “catch the kids being good” and praise them for it. She promised the mothers, “the more you do this, the more they’ll keep doing the good stuff.”

Parenting messages were also transmitted during non-parenting groups, as in announcements during house meeting to better supervise the children, or a group during which Gloria focused on how mothers could raise their children’s self-esteem. Gloria told residents that “yelling doesn’t work” and suggested instead that mothers work to include children in family tasks, praising someone she had seen having her kids fold the family’s laundry by her side. It should be noted that, while Gloria also did not have children, residents found her advice on kids and childrearing more palatable than that of the young, white, childless children’s counselors. As a middle-aged Black woman who did not have a four-year college degree, she was closer to the majority of the women’s social positions than the other facilitators. Gloria also interacted with children differently, approaching them more as the residents did (giving them directives or admonishing them for problematic behavior.) Finally, Gloria
frequently told the residents that she brought the experience of having been a “child” of an abusive relationship to her work and would share stories about how she felt as a small child in an abusive home. Residents were able to identify with her more than many other staff members, and she seemed to garner more genuine personal respect as a result.

Physically disciplining children (which, as outlined in the orientation packet, included “spanking, pinching, pulling hair, slapping, ‘popping’ on hands, etc.”) was strictly prohibited and was grounds for a 24-hour dismissal. While this policy was understandable given the staff’s need to maintain a safe environment in a group living situation among women leaving abusive situations who may also have had traumatic childhood experiences of abuse, it was difficult for residents who adhered to more traditional childrearing philosophies to follow. Some struggled to adapt to new forms of discipline or were skeptical of their effectiveness. For instance, one night during a parenting group:

Carly asked the women, “Why is spanking an ineffective tool?” The women were quiet, and may have looked dubious, because she then asked, “why or why not?” The women immediately began to argue that spanking is effective. Ophelia, a woman whose children were grown, said, “You have to spank ‘em. And don’t pat ‘em up, don’t hug ‘em up after, that’s confusing.”

The women went on to support their stance with examples:

Margaret told of a time when her 11-year old son had hit her and “knocked her out cold.” She said that she told him she would call the police and “send him to Juvy.” She told us that she did send him [to juvenile detention], but that she is “afraid of [her] child to this day.” Sabrina asked her if she thinks this is because she didn’t “instill the fear of God in him.” Margaret quickly agreed that this was the problem, because he had “never treated his father, the authoritarian one,” that way.

While Carly did not directly contradict the women’s assertions, she glossed over their implications. Returning their attention to the handout she had provided, she discussed the importance of giving children choices, suggesting that, “little decisions, like whether to eat broccoli or carrots for dinner, empower them.” Ironically, the parallel here to the shelter staff’s own point system as an attempt to direct and control the residents through often relatively meaningless or insensitive “choices” did not seem to be apparent to her.

Reform Interventions. At times, staff used parenting groups as a direct attempt to reform mothers whose parenting, or attitudes towards parenting, they found troublesome. For instance, when Sharnita’s two-year old son was biting other children in the shelter, staff didn’t get far in enlisting a strong commitment, by their standards, to stopping this behavior. Beth told me that Sharnita, a
Black woman in her mid-thirties, viewed his behavior as “age-appropriate.” This led them to do an “ages and stages” activity during the next parenting group. The women were broken into pairs of two and given a sheet of paper with cut-outs of different behaviors (such as “puts together three- to four-word sentences” or “can ride a two wheel bike”) and a blank chart that required them to categorize these behaviors by both age range (i.e.; three- to five-year olds) and type of skill (cognitive, social, language, or verbal). The correct categorizations were not always clear to me, a doctoral student who had taken multiple child development courses during college. Unfortunately, the group failed to convince Sharnita to become appropriately concerned and vigilant. A formal letter was written to her about the problem, and the next day her son bit again and “drew blood.” Her contract (the agreement that allows women to stay in the shelter from week-to-week) was not renewed.

Mothering was also policed during daily interactions. One night, the Women’s Group let out before the Children’s Group. I asked Carly if Isabelle (Amber’s daughter) could stay with her after it ended, so I could interview Amber, a white woman in her early twenties. Carly said this was fine. While I was in the middle of the interview, Jill, the other children’s counselor, interrupted:

Jill: Um, hey, Amber? I know you guys are talking, just give me one second. Um, its almost 9:00, it’s like 10 minutes of 9:00, so we just need to get the kids in bed by 9:00.

Isabelle: Mommy!!!

Amber: I’m doin’ my best, but I can’t help group, and I mean I...

Me: Yeah, no, I asked, I asked Carly if she’d mind if I talk to her...

Jill: No, she can talk, but [Isabelle’s] saying she hasn’t even had dinner yet or anything, that’s all, so I’m just saying, I can’t feed her, and there’s no food out. So that’s all.

Isabelle: Mommy, I want something to eat!

Amber: Okay, I’m, I’ll, I’m doin’ the best I can Jill.

Jill: Okay.

Others told me of times when they were questioned about how they were handling their children, and they tied this constant surveillance and questioning back to the abuse they experienced at home. Naomi, a Cherokee woman in her thirties, told me about a time when a staff member confronted her about getting her daughter to school on time:
And it’s her attitude. [Asking me,] “Isn’t it time for Sonoma to be in school?” I don’t give a fuck, who are you? You know! Bitch, don’t even talk to me . . . one time she was like, “where are you going?” I was like, “I left HIM back in [name of town] what the fuck are you doing?” (emphasis hers).

Naomi resented this close surveillance and inquiries into her daily whereabouts and the implied judgment that she wasn’t properly caring for her daughter by getting her to school on time. By drawing the parallel to the control she experienced at the hands of her abuser, she revealed the contradictions at the core of many of the shelter staff’s practices. For many women, their partner’s surveillance and control over their daily activities was a major component of the abuse they had experienced, and some felt they were in the same position in the shelter (see also Stark 2007). As Amber put it during her interview: “I’ve been under somebody’s control for 6 and a half years, and I mean I’m still feeling like I’m being controlled.”

MOTHER’S RESPONSES

While some mothers were appreciative of information and advice on how to more effectively manage children, particularly kids who were acting out, others found the tactics advocated by the middle-class staff to be impractical given the reality of their day-to-day lives, or incompatible with their philosophies of childcare. When Carly suggested “behavior charts” to reward good behavior, Margaret, a Black woman in her fifties responded, “that takes too much energy.” When she suggested “ignoring bad behavior” Margaret again challenged her, saying, “I couldn’t ignore it,” and told us that when her 4-year old grandson (for whom she is the primary caregiver) stomps around with his arms crossed, she tells him that this behavior is “unacceptable” to her, reiterating “unacceptable” several times.

An added dimension to the class differences between staff and residents was the fact that a group of mothers were generally being given parenting advice by women who did not have children. In her interview, Amber said:

Carly’s really comin’ at it from a textbook point of view. There’s really not a manual on how to raise kids. So the thing that I think would be more effective is to have someone who actually has kids, and has that experience with kids. . . I think people would be more inclined to listen to you knowing that, well, you have kids, you’ve been through this before . . . I just think that’s a little contradictory . . . and its like, Carly, she’s probably 22 or 23? You’re two years older than I am . . . I’ve been through a hell of a lot more, I have a four year old, I’m eight and a half months pregnant, how are you gonna sit [and tell me how to parent]. It’s very hard for me to sit and listen and be able to take ‘em seriously.
Mothers at Recourse, like the women in Hays’ (1996) study, questioned or resented advice from so-called experts who had not raised children themselves. However, they often compared themselves to the standards these experts encouraged and at times expressed concern or appeared guilty and ashamed when it was implied that they were not parenting well or being caring enough toward their children. For example, during a parenting group Kristen led, the women were discussing the difficulties of leaving children at daycare when they exhibited separation anxiety or threw fits. Melinda said, of the time when her kids were past that stage, “I was just glad not to hear screaming [anymore]!” Kristen corrected her, “Well, screaming is a form of communication.” Melinda lowered her eyes and appeared slightly ashamed before softly responding, “I know, but…” and trailing off.

In a later session with Carly, a similar dynamic occurred during a discussion of the crucial developmental period of the first five years in a child’s life. Amber said:

“That’s scary about the first five years because [Isabelle’s] been through so much in the past four and a half years, we’ve been in and out of shelters, she’s been around Kyle [Isabelle’s father, Amber’s abuser] and me . . . I feel bad, I should have [done things differently] from the beginning.”

While others tried to reassure Amber, they too often worried about what their abusive relationships, or attempts to leave an abusive relationship, might say about them as mothers. Veronica told us that she felt she had “failed as a parent, having my kids in a shelter.” Lilly, a young white woman who was six months pregnant with her fifth child, had three children under the age of five with her in the shelter and a seven-year old daughter in her former mother-in-law’s custody, told me that she was thinking about giving this baby up for adoption because she “doesn’t want to drag another one through the mud.” Yet she worried that if she gave this baby up for adoption, Child Protective Services might take her other three children away from her as well.

MOTHERING UNDER OTHERS’ GAZE

Indeed, many of the women were highly cognizant of the fact that outsiders constantly monitored the choices they made about how and where to raise their children. During interviews, I learned that Child Protective Services (CPS), or related processes, led to several of the women’s admission to the shelter. Melinda was referred to Recourse when her abuser hit their teenage daughter (a first, which Melinda described as her personal catalyst for leaving) and school officials learned of the incident. Jaren told me she was given an ultimatum after police became involved in her relationship. She could either
press charges and leave the home or her children would be removed from it. Jaren reluctantly choose the former, though she visited her partner in jail and expressed conflicted feelings about testifying against him.

Yet the act of leaving children's fathers to enter a shelter could also lead to harsh judgment by the criminal justice system. At times this resulted in women losing custody of their children or being forced to return to the abusive home. For instance, Saida, who had immigrated from an Arab country and did not yet have permanent citizenship, was forced to return home when a judge granted her husband custody of her two children and she was unwilling to stay in the shelter without them. Eva, a Latina woman in her early thirties, lost custody of her children, including a breastfeeding newborn, when neighbors called police after hearing her husband scream at her for going to a doctor's appointment without wearing her wedding ring (he accused her of having an affair with her post-partum Ob-Gyn). Eva's husband, a former police officer with a record of stalking and violent behavior, locked himself in the bathroom before police arrived and claimed that she had torn his shirt. Eva was arrested, and by the time she was released the next day, her husband had filed for temporary custody. The judge ultimately extended his custody due to the fact that Eva was living in the shelter, as the judge deemed a battered women's shelter to be an inappropriate environment for children. In a culture that demands independence and self-sufficiency (see Fraser and Gordon, 1994), it is not unlikely that she also judged Eva to be a bad mother for winding up in one.

In this climate of close state surveillance, the fact that shelter staff were connected in important ways to state authorities was not lost on residents. Residents knew that if staff judged them to be poor mothers, this information might be used against them not only within the shelter, but could result in a call to CPS, an unfavorable report to an existing case worker, or become "evidence" against them in a custody hearing. As many formerly feminist-oriented battered women's shelters have shifted, as Claire Reinelt (1995) shows, onto "the terrain of the state," these webs of connections to other social welfare organizations have become increasingly consequential. Information available to shelter workers, which may be documented in myriad ways in log books, case notes, and disciplinary write-ups, could not always be presumed to remain exclusively within the shelter's domain.

Although the women in the shelter might sometimes judge each other's mothering skills, particularly when race, class, or other cultural differences were involved, many times women looked out for one another or worked to redefine themselves and other women in the shelter as good mothers. Women
routinely watched one another's children, met them at the bus-stop, or shared their children's clothing, reflecting a long tradition of kin-care and "othermothering" among low-resource women (Stack, 1974; Hansen, 2003; Nelson, 2005). Molly, a white woman in her late twenties who described herself as coming from a wholesome, middle-class family, bonded quickly with another young white mother in the shelter who was an elementary school teacher, and eventually the two moved into a shared apartment. Other women also sometimes paired up, and moved into shared apartments or continued to help provide childcare for one another outside of the shelter setting.

Most importantly, women often worked to keep one another from incurring point infractions by catching someone's missed chore or errant child. One night after group when Veronica's son was heading up the stairs alone, Lilly loudly asked, "Jayden, where's your mom?" This prompted Veronica, a Black woman in her thirties, to come out of the kitchen to see what was going on, allowing her to go up the stairs with her son and avoid the loss of a point. Another night, when an announcement was again made about the need to supervise children, keep them quiet, and get them to bed on time, Sandy made her own "announcement." Sandy, a Black woman in her late forties with one son, told the group that she and her mother, who was staying in the shelter with her, thought the kids had been wonderful during their stay. "We praise the mothers," she said. "There are very good mothers here, very loving and caring."

DISCUSSION

Mothering under the stringent guidelines in place at Recourse was a challenge for the most well-intentioned mothers. Ideologies of intensive mothering and concerted cultivation that stood in direct contrast to many residents' approaches to child-rearing pervaded staff member's orientation to mothers and the management of children in the house. This lead staff to directly intervene even over relatively minor matters, as in the vignette about Isabelle's bedtime that opened this paper. Mothers often resented the intense scrutiny they were subjected to, pointing to parallels between the control and surveillance they experienced in the shelter, and the control and surveillance they had experienced in the abusive home.

The largely white and middle-class staff failed to consider the privileged roots of their philosophies of childrearing, or recognize the dissonance between middle-class sanctioned parenting techniques and these largely poor and working-class single mothers' lives. According to the logic of intensive mothering, what is best for the child is to be the mother's primary and only
concern, without regard to the mother's own needs, or even the question of feasibility. There is a moral imperative to do one's best to implement these child-centered and time-intensive techniques (see also Lois, 2010). Staff, who generally attempted to operate in culturally sensitive ways, did not see childrearing as an area open to cultural differences, or saw too great a risk in condoning differences outside of these standards. Rather, child-rearing ideologies were seen as universal principles of treatment. Staff members were willing to invoke their privilege to defend this position, evidenced in (children's counselor) Kristen's comment one night before group that; “it's our house, and they need to follow our rules” (emphasis hers).

Staff did have an obligation to protect children from danger and abuse. The exigencies of poor mothers' lives often place children (and mothers themselves) in situations that may indeed be damaging to both. The question of where to draw the line between cultural sensitivity and extreme conditions of neglect and abuse is a challenge facing all who work with mothers in these circumstances. Francesca Cancian argues that standards of good care are needed, but they must not incorporate ethnocentric goals (such as individualism and autonomy) and most importantly must move from a focus on “parents, families, and caregivers…to poverty, neighborhoods and the wider social environments [in which kids are raised]” (2002: 76). Staff at Recourse seemed to lack a larger structural critique of the social forces driving women and children to rely on shelter services, or were unable to incorporate these understandings into the daily reality of their jobs. Instead, they focused exclusively on reforming individual women, and attempting to imbue the women with their own cultural values around mothering.

While most mothers are willing to sacrifice to do right by their children, conceptions of what is “right,” and how many and what type of resources (time, money, energy) must be sacrificed in that effort, differ significantly across multiple social dimensions, particularly social class (Lareau, 2003). This paper sheds light on the processes by which dominant ideologies that inform our understanding of “good” and “bad” approaches to mothering are reproduced. When poor and working class mothers encounter social service systems, they are held accountable to these standards, and judged negatively if they fail to adopt the professionally sanctioned child rearing practices advocated, even if they do not have the resources to do so, or disagree with their basic premises.

This issue is particularly salient for battered women and other mothers who may be in close contact with the criminal justice and child protective services systems and stand to lose their children if they are deemed “bad”
mothers in the eyes of the state (AppeU, 1998). Ironically, privileged mothers who are more likely to engage in concerted cultivation and adopt an intensive mothering approach (and have the time and resources available to do so), are able to mother in greater privacy than poor and working class mothers who often must rely on social services at some point during their lives. Thus, those who are least likely to embrace this approach, and would find it most difficult to do so, are those held most accountable to it.

The attempt to reform mothers in the shelter reflects a long tradition among social-service providers in the U.S. to work to engineer change within the populations they serve, often in an effort to manufacture social mobility. As Elliott Liebow shows in his ethnography of several women's homeless shelters, many shelter workers see it as their job to “change” the women in order to “help” them out of homelessness. Liebow emphasizes the rather obvious point that what makes women homeless is that they do not have a place to stay. Rather than needing to be “worked on,” and transformed into a “better” (read: middle-class) person, what those with nowhere to go need is, quite radically, a place to go. One of the homeless men Liebow met put this more directly, “The homeless need housing, not that psychological bullshit that puts the blame on the homeless themselves” (1993:229). Similarly, women at Recovirse needed a safe place to stay, away from abusive partners. They did not necessarily need parenting classes, support groups, budgeting workshops, or drug testing, and for those who did, this was generally not their most immediate concern.

Yet to reject the therapeutic discourse of the shelter would be to prove oneself unworthy of the shelter being offered (with strings attached.) Rejecting these services, or staff-sanctioned parenting strategies, was a privilege the women could not afford, just as the mothers in Litt’s study could not afford to reject medical intervention in their children’s lives (2000:15). Shelter staff had the power to decide who was making the best use of the shelter’s sought after resources; and a woman’s loss of her points demonstrated, in the eyes of staff, an insufficient desire to “work to improve herself” during her stay (see also Ferraro, 1983).

Working to reform the residents’ mothering practices helped affirm staff’s moral and professional identities and allowed them to feel that they were providing a valuable professional service to the women and children who came through the door. To the extent that staff could convince residents to adopt these approaches, it could also make their job managing the house an easier one by increasing their level of control over residents and their children. Some staff may also have felt they were improving the lives of the children.
they often became attached to by investing their own deeply held beliefs about childrearing in the children’s mothers. Framing their interventions as “empowering” despite often overt evidence to the contrary (see Gengler, Unpublished Manuscript) further helped staff to see themselves as compassionate, “helping” professionals rather than cops or rule-enforcers; a problem that Daphne Holden (1997) found to interfere with the positive feelings and identities those who do this work hope to gain.

Despite staff intentions, the consequences for the residents on the receiving end of these interventions ranged from minor (interpersonal irritation) to severe (the looming threat of state intervention). By transforming battered women into mothers to be policed and reformed, staff at Recourse reproduced hegemonic ideologies of childrearing which rely on essentialized visions of femininity and motherhood. Thus, an organization ostensibly designed to counter gender inequality also served to perpetuate it. Further work is needed to fully understand how hegemonic ideologies of mothering are reproduced in social service organizations through multi-layered policies and daily interactions with those they serve. It is clear, however, that to mother under another’s gaze is to risk harsh assessment against potentially powerful others’ narrow conceptions of proper mothering. This is a chance women fleeing abusive relationships may find too risky to take.

Notes

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2. A pseudonym, as are all names used throughout this paper.

3. To imply that women had chosen this shelter program over another was misleading. Most women will be sheltered in their county of origin, and since most shelters operate at or near full capacity, the shelter to which one is admitted depends almost entirely upon availability of space rather than “choice” of a program’s approach. Even the term “therapeutic” should be interpreted loosely, as no licensed counselors were on staff. “Counselors” were simply caseworkers or shelter staff members who facilitated groups or were available to speak with residents.
4. While shelter staff generally used the empowerment rhetoric of “choice,” (referring to residents as “choosing” to “use” points), residents universally spoke of “losing” points. I use their term when discussing point infractions.

5. Women who failed a drug test were usually referred to a substance abuse facility, though affected residents were generally averse to this alternative.

6. Every resident who was a “mother” was required to participate in parenting groups, even if her children were grown, or were not with her in the shelter. Thus, very few women were ever excused from this group (such an absence occurred only once during my observation.)

References


