

Networks of Care and \$7/Day Childcare in Small-Town Quebec: Preliminary Findings in a Pilot Study*

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Informal Networks and Economic Change in Canada's 'New Economy'

Informal networks have been used by women to challenge various forms of marginalization. Researchers remind us that in the face of economic pressures and other inequalities, individuals form formal and informal networks or collectives (Skocpol and Oser, 2004), particularly in light of increased state reliance on the provision of informal care (McDaniel, 2002; Pfau-Effinger, 2005). Taking a slightly different tack, I seek to understand what informal networks are established when universal, affordable childcare is available, but the economic environment creates its own unique challenges.

Canadians find themselves in "*an information economy...a global-economy*" (Statistics Canada, 2004), marked by a decline in manufacturing and shift towards the service sector. There is a bifurcation within the service sector, with a polarization of jobs and earnings, such that while some of the new jobs are high-skilled and knowledge-based, many are low-paid and part-time. By 1996, of the ten broad occupational categories in Canada, sales and services was the largest, with a labour force of 3.6 million - twenty-six percent of total employment (Statistics Canada, 1998). Family earnings instability and inequality grew throughout the 1990s (Morissette and Ostrovsky, 2005), and there continues to be widespread worker displacement and alienation. My research attempts to show that affordable child care acts as a buffer to some of the most hard-hitting changes and challenges brought on by Canada's new economy. But even this is not without its own challenges.

The Primary Sector and Changes in Small-Town Quebec

Quebec has the largest number of workers in the wood product industry (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada [HRSDC], 2005), with entire communities relying primarily on wood. Statistics Canada reported that the "*processing of forest resources in Quebec anchors the economies of more than 250 municipalities, providing 100% of the manufacturing jobs in 135 towns and villages*" (Dufour, 2002: 2). However, between 1987 and 1999, the growth rate for the wood industry was lower than all manufacturing industries (HRSDC, 2005). In Quebec, production declined over ten percent in one year alone (Statistics Canada, 2002). The industry was hard hit by an ongoing soft-wood lumber dispute with the United States, rising energy costs, the high Canadian dollar, and environmental restrictions imposed by the government in Quebec. The impact was felt in the community which is the focus of this study, as it experienced its second mill closure in as many years. Families increasingly depended on income from 'women's work'.

The first wave of interviews I conducted revealed that of fifteen mothers interviewed who had partners, nine, or sixty percent, had partners or husbands who, at that time, worked in the lumber industry. Of the sixteen childcare providers who were married or cohabiting, eleven, or sixty-nine percent had partners in the lumber industry. Interviews with ten fathers revealed that two were working at a nearby paper mill, two were recently laid off from a mill, two left mill work for other jobs and one was on disability insurance after an injury acquired at a mill. In contrast, all the women I interviewed worked in the service sector.

There was clearly a bifurcation in women's jobs, with about half holding jobs in somewhat better-paid, female-dominated service industries, including nursing/health, adult care, and administration or civil service/government jobs. These jobs required commuting. The other half worked in lower-paid, local retail sales, food service, child care, hair/beauty and secretarial jobs. Among the fastest growing employers in the region are call centres, that draw upon a relatively cheap, bilingual, female labour force, who all depend upon affordable childcare to be able to work.

Childcare in Canada

Canadians have heard promises of a national childcare strategy, with few concrete results, for decades. Things appeared to be changing in the late 1990s, with the development of the National Children's Agenda (NCA) (Union Sociale, 1997), followed by the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Early Childhood Development (ECD) Agreement (Federal Provincial Territorial Governments, 2000), and the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care (Union Sociale, 2003). The NCA confirmed that children's wellbeing was a national priority and the ECD and the Multilateral Framework outlined commitments to enriching provincial early learning and care programs. Quebec chose not to participate in the NCA's development, seeking instead to assume full responsibility over its own family programs.

In early 2006, the newly elected Conservative government replaced funding commitments to the provinces with their 'Universal Childcare Benefit'. This 'universal benefit' gives families a taxable \$100 monthly payment for each child under six, and professes to provide parents with "*more choice in child care*" (Government of Canada, 2006). Given the cost and limited availability of spaces, the promise of a national *childcare* plan remains unfulfilled. What remains is the growing need for affordable care, and only Quebec seems to be responding.

In 1976, the labour force participation rate of women ages twenty-five to forty-four in Quebec was well below the Canadian average. It reached the Canadian average in 1999, and since 2000 surpassed it by 4.2 percent (seventy-six versus seventy-two percent) (Roy,

2006). A reason for this has been the 1997 introduction of Quebec's childcare program (Roy, 2006).

In 1997, Quebec introduced \$5 per day childcare for all four-year-olds using childcare at least three days a week, regardless of a family's household income and employment status (Government of Quebec, 2003; Tougas, 2002). By 2000, all children regardless of financial need had access to the program. The cost increased to \$7 per day in 2004. By 2004, the province had 321,732 day care spaces amounting to fifty-two percent of the province's children, compared to between fifteen and thirty percent in the rest of the country (Bushnik, 2006), and triple the 1992 level (Roy, 2006). Between 2001 and 2004, close to sixty percent of all spaces created in Canada were in Quebec, amounting to forty-three percent of all children registered in day care (Roy, 2006).

The Pilot Study

The goal of this research was to assess of the impact of \$5 per day childcare using interviews with mothers and childcare providers, and a year later, fathers, living in a community located on the Quebec/Ontario border. The community was made up of two adjoining towns. In 2001, the larger town had 2,007 inhabitants and the smaller had a population of 1,661. The community was the francophone centre of an otherwise largely anglophone county of Western Quebec.

Interviews were one hour long, in the subject's home or workplace (childcare centre) and tape-recorded. A non-probability, snowball sample was used. I also obtained a list of all daycare centres in town and contacted each one. I interviewed at the large centre (a supervisor, an administrator, four educators and two assistants), and six of eleven homes (six owner-operators and three assistants). I interviewed sixteen mothers and seventeen childcare providers. I conducted follow-up interviews, a year later, with ten mothers and ten fathers of children in the program.

The Formal Care Arrangements

The community had twelve child care centres in 2004 - eleven were home/family childcare centres, and one was a large, newly built 'installation' or childcare facility. The centres were regulated by one of two agencies in place to enforce regulations, provide information, training and support to paid caregivers, and respond to parental concerns.

The home/family childcare centres were typically in a woman's basement, and run as independent small businesses. Basements were remodeled to include cubbies for each child, play areas or 'corners', washrooms, tables for crafts and activities, and a kitchen/dining area where snacks (two per day) and lunches (one per day) were served. Each home/family centre had a self-employed centre operator, who cared for up to six children. Some had assistants, and so cared for up to nine (Albanese, 2006).

Centres had to remain open a minimum of ten hours a day, and working alone meant having virtually no breaks. On top of caring for children, the caregivers planned activities and menus, cooked, cleaned, shopped, did laundry, kept the books, provided updates to parents, etc. Most in-home caregivers did not have college training in early childhood education, but were required to take courses in nutrition, child development, first aid, etc. The large centre was built in 2004 and employed eleven women, in mostly full-time care positions. Almost all educators here had college-level training.

Findings showed the program to be advantageous for the employability and general wellbeing of women. It improved family stability somewhat, and was effective in the community's economic development (Albanese, 2006). On the other hand, families had a difficult time juggling commutes and shift work, characteristic of low-paying peripheral labour markets, and childcare centre hours of operation. They reported that commutes and shift work made drop-off/pick-up of children complicated, often requiring the support of friends, family and sitters.

Informal Networks of Care

I asked mothers how they selected their day care and if they had a preference for home/family versus larger centre care. Often, a centre's hours of operation was the main factor for selecting one over another. While all centres had to stay open for ten hours, they could choose when to open and close. Centres' hours of operation were a concern for most mothers, as all mothers interviewed had to contend with their own and their partner's shift work and commuting. Not surprisingly, it was often mothers, not fathers, who organized the juggling of people and schedules to make their childcare work.

While interviewing, I received an unexpected call and request from a neighbour. Could I pick-up her son at daycare, as her husband was forced to work overtime? Her own shift finished one hour after the daycare closed, and her parents, whom she usually relied on in 'emergency' situations, were not available. I soon learned that most of the mothers I interviewed relied on informal networks of care on a regular basis. For example, Solange and Paul were parents of two children, ages seven and two (one in day care). Solange worked in a town a half hour away. She worked rotating day and night shifts as a personal care provider. Paul worked shifts in a local mill, also about a half-hour away. Solange and Paul depended upon two sets of grandparents and a series of sitters to juggle work and child care on a regular basis. In 'emergencies' they called upon friends and neighbours. When she worked nights and he arrived home from his dayshift at 7:00pm, and a grandfather's own work schedule allowed it, the grandfather would pick up the children at school and daycare, otherwise a babysitter was hired for after school and evenings. Other arrangements were used as schedules shifted weekly.

Stephanie and Peter had four children, with one in day care. Stephanie worked in a hospital (a half-hour away), and Peter worked in a mill, also a half-hour away. Both worked a combination of day and night shifts. He often worked overtime hours, taking every opportunity to earn extra money. They too depended on two sets of grandparents and a series of babysitters. A problem for this couple was the early morning, when sitters were often not available. A grandparent would arrive at their home around 4:30am (while the children were sleeping). Stephanie then left for work at 5:00am. The grandparent filled the two hour gap until Paul arrived at 7:00am, from a twelve-hour night-shift, to wake the children and get them ready for school and daycare. The grandparent then went off to work.

Many found themselves in similar situations. The new economy, with commutes, shift work, comparatively low wages, job insecurity, part-time hours, with people holding multiple jobs and working overtime, was not easy to navigate. Having universal, affordable childcare certainly made working under these conditions more manageable. However, even this was clearly not without its share of new challenges. A patchwork and network of family, friends and sitters were necessary, on top of affordable childcare, to make day-to-day work possible.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My preliminary work shows that even with affordable child care, family, neighbours and friends are essential in assisting families when balancing the demands of Canada's changing economy. Informal networks of care were superimposed upon a formal network to meet and manage the challenges of juggling shift work and commutes - a hallmark of Canada's new economy.

A universal, affordable (high quality) childcare system is essential for young families to prosper, but there is clearly a need for some flexibility (that is not overly taxing to the already overburdened and under-valued childcare workers) and different types of supports built into the existing system. The financial cost will be great, and requires a new way of thinking about child care, but the social benefits may be greater. The Quebec model has already seen benefits to young families in the form of higher employment rates for women (Roy, 2006), more satisfied wives and mothers (Albanese, 2006) and children who are seemingly more school-ready (Statistics Canada, 2003). But perhaps even this system can be improved.

Endnote:

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