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*Reconstructing Motherhood: Caseworker Approaches*

Scholars have found that poor women are disproportionately blamed for not meeting dominant standards of “good” mothering (Appel 1998; Roberts 2002; Hays 1996; Hays 2003; McCormack 2005). Poor, minority mothers are often blamed for social problems, such as multi-generational poverty and the low educational achievement among low-income children, that are related to larger structural disadvantages. At the same time, there are also concerns that the government needs to provide more education and assistance to low-income mothers, help prevent child abuse, and help immigrants assimilate into mainstream culture. In response, governments have increased funding for parenting skills education programs, often carried out by non-profit agencies.

In this study, my objective was to learn more about how caseworkers reconstruct mothering behavior in their clients. I conducted in-depth interviews with six caseworkers who work with approximately 100 families a year through a non-profit agency in Southern California. I also observed caseworkers on 10 visits with their clients. The majority of the agency’s clients are undocumented, low-income, Spanish-speaking Latina immigrants. The caseworkers are all bilingual Latinas from working class backgrounds.

Preliminary findings indicate that the caseworkers vary in their approach to reconstructing mothering behavior. Whereas some caseworkers begin by linking clients to resources, others view their role strictly as parenting skills educators. This approach is largely determined by their belief in meritocracy, as well as fears of client dependence on their help. Further, the caseworkers do indeed attribute poor parenting practices to “cultural deficiencies” among Latinos. In this way, they avoid blaming the mother and instead blame their culture for what is perceived as inappropriate parenting behavior. Evidence of internalized racism and the ways in which this influences the caseworker-client relationship is discussed.