

**The “Problem” of Caring for Children in Canada: The Evolution of
Advocacy, Policy, and Problem Definitions**

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Introduction

Public policymaking has traditionally been portrayed as a rational and sequential process that treads along a fairly predictable path: a public problem is readily and objectively identified; policy options are outlined and evaluated; a policy response is easily decided; the policy is implemented, evaluated, and possibly modified or terminated. Relatively recent theoretical developments in the field of public policy and administration have revealed, however, that the policy process is not as neat and tidy as traditional/rational theorists would have us believe. In these more recent lines of thinking, public policymaking is not seen to be defined by objective material facts but, rather, by battles between socially constructed understandings, ideas, and meanings. In this way, policymaking is viewed as a subjective, almost haphazard process that is directly affected by the way(s) in which public problems are conceptualized and articulated. Burstein and Bricher (1997, 137) explain:

social scientists have been noting increasingly often that public policy is strongly affected by how problems are defined. Sometimes countries adopt radically different approaches to similar problems – similar in the eyes of social scientists, at least – not because all the alternative approaches were considered and different choices made, but because policymakers [and other stakeholders] adopted one definition of the issue rather than another... When alternative approaches are considered by policymakers or the public, the direction of policy debate is often determined more by conflicts over what the problem is than by the merits of particular policy proposals.

These approaches, which are referred to in the academic literature as post-empiricist or post-positivist, form the basis for this paper. The key insight that post-positivism brings to our conception of policymaking relates to the inherently subjective nature of problem definition and the role that competing ideas play in the policy process.

The paper will begin with a brief outline of theoretical perspectives on policy development and consider post-empiricist/post-positivist approaches to problem definition and policymaking. This section of the paper will illustrate that problem definitions play an important and influential role in policy development. The second section of the paper takes the form of a case study on problem definition and child care. To this end, it will trace the development of child care advocacy, policy and problem definition in Canada from the World War II era to the present. The paper will argue that, although certain elements of the definition have endured over time, other elements have changed considerably, either because they simply did not resonate sufficiently with policymakers and the public (i.e., child care as a necessary precondition to women's equality), because of academic research and new discoveries (i.e., the importance of childhood development and early learning), or because of advocates' efforts to find new frames that would resonate with policymakers and the public (i.e., child care as a positive economic investment). The paper will also argue that problem definitions have differed by constituency.

A word of caution suggests that the paper is limited in two ways. First, it focuses on the role of problem definition in policy development to the exclusion of other influential factors. Institutions and ideologies, for example, are known to be crucially important players in the policy process. Even though it is obvious that such things as federalism and economic restraint played a role in the debate and struggle over child care, they will not be examined in this paper. Second, the paper is also arguably limited by the fact that, even though child care ultimately falls under the purview of provincial and territorial governments, it focuses on the issue at the federal level. By way of explanation,

this is because both historical precedent and members of the policy community view the federal government as playing a crucial coordinating role in the development of a comprehensive, national system of child care, much like its role vis-à-vis health care.

Models of Policy Development

Rational, Limited Rational, and Irrational

Traditional policy studies, rooted in the work of Lasswell (1956, 1971), portray the public policy process as an entirely rational, logical, and systematic sequence of events. In what Stone (1997) terms the *rationality project* and Bacchi (1999) calls the *rational comprehensive* model, public decision-making is seen to parallel the methods of scientific inquiry. This approach embraces a positivist epistemology, endorsing the view that there is an objective reality that is accessible to description and analysis, where problems are readily identified, and policy responses are obvious and uncontroversial. In this approach to policy development, actors objectively and empirically identify the existence of a problem. They then prepare an explicit and precise statement of policy goals, and proceed to outline as many alternative policy options as possible. After determining all possible means to the solution, they evaluate the costs and benefits associated with each course of action and, finally, after combining all the information they have gathered and assessed, they select the most effective and efficient alternative (including non-action). The last steps in the process involve policy/program implementation and evaluation. In this view of policymaking, problems and solutions are virtually self-evident.

Critics of the rational approach have argued that the process of policymaking is much less rational and much more haphazard and unpredictable than rational theorists would have us believe. In an overview of the subject, Howlett (2002) refers to two subsequent models that aimed to respond to and remedy the weaknesses and limitations of the rational model: the *limited rationality* model and the *irrational* model. In the first case, he refers in particular to the *incremental* model developed by Yale University political scientist Charles Lindblom (1959). Lindblom argues that the real world is incremental, not rational, and he suggests that policymaking is not an entirely comprehensive identification and evaluation of all possible policy options but, rather, a process of trial-and-error. Decision-makers do not maximize policy outcomes in the traditional, rational sense because they really only consider a few competing alternatives and seize on the first plausible, acceptable option they encounter. In this way, it is suggested, policy-makers work through a process of “continually building out from the current situation, step-by-step and by small degrees” (Lindblom as quoted in Howlett 2002, 175).

In the second case – the irrational model – Howlett refers to Herbert Simon (1955, 1957), who acknowledges that a number of obstacles might prevent decision-makers from attaining pure, comprehensive rationality in their analyses. Among the obstacles Simon identifies are cognitive limits to policy-makers’ collective ability to consider all possible options and an inability among policy-makers to determine all possible consequences in advance and thus choose the best possible alternative. Simon concludes that policymaking is guided by a “bounded rationality,” in which decision-makers possess only a limited amount of information on which to base decisions. Also in the

category of the irrational, Howlett refers to March and Olsen who, in 1979, proposed a *garbage-can* model of decision-making that rejected the existence of even a modicum of rationality. March and Olsen make the case that policymaking is a highly ambiguous and unpredictable – and therefore inherently irrational – process in which the act of matching solutions to problems is a largely ad hoc one, depending on a number of random and unpredictable factors such as personalities, alliances, and arrangements. According to Howlett (2002, 176),

the garbage can metaphor was used deliberately to strip away the aura of science and rationality attributed to decision-making by earlier theorists. March and Olsen sought to drive home the point that goals are often unknown to policy-makers, as are causal relationships. In their view, actors simply define goals and choose means as they go along in a process that is necessarily contingent and unpredictable.

Not unlike Lasswell's purely rational model, both the limited rationality and irrational approaches to policy studies came under critical fire. Briefly, as Howlett (2002) explains, the limited rationality approach was criticized for, among other things, being unable to explain large-scale change and innovation and for confining policymaking to bargaining within a select group of senior policy-makers. Furthermore, by discouraging systematic analysis and planning and by undermining the need to search for promising new alternatives, it was also said to promote short-sighted decision-making. The garbage-can model was also criticized, in this case for its lack of applicability to all situations (i.e., it is more applicable in polities where the institutional structure is fragmented and participation is pluralistic than in polities where institutions are centralized and integrated and where the number of participants are limited) and for its inability to explain long-term patterns in policymaking.

Postempiricism and Problem Definition

More recent approaches to policy studies can be grouped under the heading of *postempiricism* or *postpositivism* (see for example Fisher 1998, 2003; Rochefort and Cobb 1993; and Stone 1989, 1997). According to Fisher (2003, 12), postpositivism is “an epistemological orientation that seeks to move beyond an ‘objectivist’ conception of reality” – in other words, beyond a rationalist approach – toward a richer understanding of the social world and a more complete and accurate conception of policymaking. This orientation is rooted in the assertion that “problems do not exist ‘out there’; they are not objective entities in their own right” (Dery 1984, xi). In postempiricist perspectives, a difficult or worrying condition “becomes a *problem* only when people think something can be done about it, and a *public* problem when they argue that *government* should do something” (Burstein and Bricher 1997, 136-37). Public problems are therefore seen to be socially constructed, becoming problems only when they are *given* meaning and *given* voice by some social actor(s). As such, social ‘facts’ are not really facts but, rather, interpretations, and policy issues and problems are defined on the basis of these interpretations. The key issue with postempiricist approaches is that problems don’t merely exist; instead, they are *subjectively constructed and defined*. Thus, postempiricist theorists argue

that rationalistic policy analysis is impossible... These scholars call for the use of interpretive (hermeneutic) and discursive (deconstructivist) techniques to demonstrate that politics and policy are grounded in subjective factors and seek to show that what is identified as objective ‘truth’ by rational techniques is as often as not the product of deeper, less visible, political presuppositions. For postempiricist policy analysts, the social construction of ‘facts’ and their subjective interpretations are the stuff of policy politics. (Fischer 2003, 14)

In this way, problem definitions can be referred to, quite simply, as *ideas*, and the policy process as the *struggle over conflicting ideas*.

Importantly, the way in which a problem is defined has a direct impact on the type and range of alternative policy solutions that are proposed and the course of policy action that is ultimately chosen. After all, “policies are responses to problems, and so the character and shape of the problem will deeply affect the nature of the response” (Pal 2001, 93). As Dobrowolsky and Jenson (2004, 157) explain, a problem definition “sets discursive boundaries, making some claims meaningful and others less relevant.” To this end, every problem definition is a strategic representation of a situation in which “groups, individuals, and government agencies deliberately and consciously fashion portrayals so as to promote their favored course of action” (Stone 1997, 133).

To recap, the process of problem definition involves identifying a troubling condition, deciding something can be done about it, interpreting the social ‘facts’ that point to its existence, shaping a compelling argument about the nature and extent of the issue, and articulating the preferred means to solving the problem. Rochefort and Cobb (1993, 61) suggest that a problem definition ought to provide answers to the following key policy questions:

- What indicators suggest that some sort of a problem exists?
- How did this problem come into being?
- What key features distinguish this problem from other social issues, providing guidance for the design of specialized remedies?
- What are the characteristics of the group identified with, or affected by, the problem?
- What is the nature of the appropriate solution, and is it feasible?

To this end, they propose a scheme that outlines the constituent parts of a problem definition. This scheme includes such categories as problem causation, nature of the

problem, characteristics of the problem population, ends-means orientation of problem definer, and nature of the solution. Although not every problem definition or policy argument will contain all of these characteristics, more often than not, most will be present. The scheme, borrowed from Rochefort and Cobb (1993, 62; and in Pal 2001, 105-06), will help us to understand how the problem of caring for children in Canada has been understood and defined and why particular solutions/policy responses have been suggested/adopted and others have not. The scheme is outlined below.

An Anatomy of a Problem Definition

Causation

The way a problem is defined necessarily includes some statement about its origins. The question of blame or culpability is perhaps the most important dimension of causation. A second important distinction is whether a problem is attributed to individual or systematic causes. Other considerations include the extent to which a problem is intended or accidental, and whether there is a single causal agent or a variety of influences. Has child care become a public problem because of women's entrance into the paid labour force? Because some parents simply don't have the resources to care/provide properly for their children? Because early childhood education and development has become so important that we want to put it in the hands of the experts? The issue of causation has been an important component of the child care debate in Canada.

Nature of the problem

Severity. A second important descriptive dimension is severity (i.e., how serious a problem and its consequences are taken to be). If a problem is to enjoy agenda access, it

helps if the issue affects large numbers of people or carries a devastating impact, even to only a small number of individuals. How serious is the problem of child care? Is the lack of child care in Canada having a devastating impact? Are other problems deemed to be more severe and therefore more deserving of agenda access?

Incidence. A problem's incidence represents the overall scope of people affected as well as those groups disproportionately at risk. Incidence can be measured over time (i.e., is a problem declining, stable, or growing, and if so, at what rate?). Incidence can also be measured across populations (e.g., social class, gender, age, cohort, employment status, etc.). How many families/children need child care services? As time goes on, do more or fewer families require care? What populations are most in need of assistance? And relatedly, are these populations deemed to be deserving of assistance?

Novelty. An issue that is seen as novel, unprecedented, or trailblazing is often quick to grab attention; however, issues that have not been seen before are difficult to conceptualize and they lack familiar solutions. Although the problem of caring for children isn't novel, child care as a public problem is a relatively recent phenomenon. Few, if any, jurisdictions have solved this problem with any degree of certainty and, as such, there is a lack of familiar policy options.

Proximity. An issue can be characterized as having proximity if it hits close to home or directly impinges on a person's interest. If this is the case, affected individuals/groups might become concerned and express this politically. For how many people does child care have close proximity? Does the problem impact political decision-makers, or does it

have greater proximity to other groups of people? Does a lack of proximity to people in positions of power help to explain why the problem has not been adequately addressed?

Crisis. This is a situation where dire circumstances exist and/or where corrective action is long overdue. The problem with labeling a situation a crisis is that, often, quick responses and band-aid solutions occur, rather than more comprehensive, long-term reforms. Has the problem of caring for children reached crisis proportions, or is it manageable?

Characteristics of the problem population

The political willingness to make policy changes is often conditioned by societal perceptions of those who stand to “benefit.” Is the group seen as worthy or unworthy of assistance? Underlying this question is the notion of culpability. Persons/groups who are deviant are seen to be more blamable and less deserving than persons/groups who are more mainstream. Who’s worthy of policy attention is the driving question here, and it has been tremendously important in relation to the child care debate in Canada. Are working mothers deemed worthy of assistance? What about poor families who are deemed unable to care for their children properly? Do they deserve assistance? What about children themselves? Do they constitute a worthy or deserving group in and of themselves?

Nature of the solution

As we noted earlier, problem definitions set the stage for successive stages in the policy process, including the articulation of possible solutions. Problem definition shapes solutions primarily because of the causal explanations that are at its core. Caring for children is arguably a problem, but to find an effective response, we need to isolate the

root of the problem (i.e., isolate its cause). If, for example, caring for children is deemed to be a problem that is related to women's entrance into the paid labour force, we need to address the issue of care as it relates to women's employment (i.e., advocate for a solution that will facilitate women's employment in the paid labour force). If caring for children is deemed to be a problem related to parents not being able to properly care/provide for their children, we need to address the issue of care as it relates to social welfare. And if caring for children is deemed to be a problem that is related to early childhood learning and development, we need to address the issue of care as it relates to education. Proposed solutions may gain more or less support, depending on their social, political, and/or economic feasibility.

Who Can Define Problems?

Who participates in the process of problem definition? Is it only government actors? Or can social movement organizations and/or interest groups participate in the process of problem definition? What about the voluntary sector? Does it play a role in defining problems? The media? And what about the general public? What role, if any, does it play in problem definition? The literature is remarkably silent¹ about who, or which groups, participate in the process of problem definition – perhaps because the answer seems obvious. Given that problem definition is fundamentally about the interplay of ideas, it is essentially an interactive and iterative process, in which all members of a policy community, be they social or political actors, play a crucial role.

¹ A separate body of literature, rooted in a sociological perspective, focuses on collective action frames and framing processes as they relate to social movements. See, for example, Benford and Snow 2000. Although space prohibits an examination of this literature, it is important to acknowledge its existence.

Problem Definitions: Static or Dynamic?

A final consideration concerns the extent to which a problem definition can change over time and the reasons why it might. Here it is instructive to think of overall policy directions, government ideology, conceptions of citizenship (i.e., entitlements and reasonable expectations), and the political opportunity structure. It is often the case that a problem definition simply does not possess the currency to make it, in a meaningful way, onto the political agenda. Or, those concerned cannot agree on a problem definition. Or, those concerned cannot agree on a satisfactory solution. In such cases, over time, members of the policy community will likely engage in a back-and-forth process of problem redefinition in an effort to garner meaningful policy attention. As we will see throughout the remainder of this paper, this has been the case with the issue of child care in Canada.

Child Care in Canada

Who's Responsible for Caring for Children?

The question of who's responsible for caring for children has been an enduring one in Canadian politics. In effect, if parents cannot care for their children due to employment commitments, alternative forms of care must be utilized/made available. Since women began to enter the labour force in very large numbers in the 1960s, intense debates over the issue of child care have ensued. The debate has been shaped by the following questions:

- Is child care a private or public responsibility?
- If it is deemed a private responsibility, should government intervene in order to assist parents in securing/financing care through the marketplace? Or should it be dealt with by parents, through informal care arrangements?

- If it is dealt with in the marketplace, what sort of regulatory role should government play, if any?
- Is child care a citizenship right? Is caring for children a public problem? Should government play a role in ensuring that children receive adequate care?
- If child care is deemed a public problem, what level of government is responsible? How extensive should government's involvement be? What form should it take? Should all parents/families/children be eligible to receive care?

Many of these questions can be asked in a slightly more academic/technical manner:

- What is the nature and extent of the problem? Is government intervention necessary? Is it warranted? On what grounds?
- What policy instrument(s) should be used? Information-based instruments, such as moral suasion or shaming? Expenditure-based instruments, such as cash transfers, grants, subsidies, tax breaks, or vouchers? Regulation? Or direct service provision?
- If intervention is deemed necessary, what level of government is responsible? Or, should the responsibility be shared? If so, how should costs be shared?
- Should intervention be targeted or universal?

Clearly, the questions are many and the debate complex. Since it became a matter of public dialogue in the 1960s, the problem of caring for children has occupied a considerable amount of political space; indeed, throughout the past four decades, the issue has surfaced again and again within the context of policy debates. Yet, Canada does not yet have a comprehensive, national policy on child care. Levels of support, funding, and program development differ across provinces and territories.² In an effort to deal with the issue, members of the policy community – or the various actors involved with the issue – have engaged in an ongoing debate over the nature and scope of the problem and the best way to solve it. What is particularly interesting in the context of this paper is how the debate has evolved over time. In other words, how has the *problem* of caring for children been understood and defined by concerned constituencies? What ideas have shaped the debate? How have these ideas changed over time, if at all? In a review of the

² Like other social policy areas, such as education and welfare, child care is constitutionally the responsibility of the provinces.

evolution of child care advocacy, policy, and problem definitions in Canada, the next section of this paper will tackle these questions.

Ideas, Understandings, and Problem Definitions

Child Care as an Issue of Social Obligation and Women's Employment Equality: The World War II Era

The modern-day roots of the Canadian child care debate can be traced back to the World War II era, when more and more women took employment in the wartime industries of the paid labour force. When the war began in 1939, just under a quarter of Canadian women worked outside the home. At war's end, in 1945, a third of adult women in Canada had joined the labour force. Significantly, when women's wartime employment peaked in the autumn of 1944, one million women were working full-time (Timpson 2001, 13).

It is noteworthy that the federal government first became involved in the child care debate during this time period, if "only grudgingly" (Mahon 2000, 588). To be sure, by 1942 the government had acknowledged that the paucity of child care options was hindering the necessary entrance of women into the labour force. As such, in July of that year, the federal government signed an Order in Council agreeing to cover 50 percent of the costs of child care for women working in industries deemed essential to the war effort. Although this measure proved temporary, the implications and spillover effects were many:

- The initiative "challenged prevailing assumptions that women's roles as full-time mothers and homemakers were natural and unchangeable" (Timpson 2001, 14).
- It set important precedents that influenced the shape of child care politics and policy in the years to come. The agreement legitimized federal government involvement in the provision of a service that constitutionally was deemed to be

an area of provincial jurisdiction. According to Mahon (2000, 588), “the net effect was that all three levels of government were drawn into child care funding and provision, without any level having clear or primary responsibility.”

- It illustrated that the federal government could use its spending powers to work with the provinces to finance the provision of child care (Timpson 2001, 14).
- The agreement established a precedent for federal involvement in the development of child care provision to facilitate women’s entry into the paid labour force. (Timpson 2001, 14-15)

The program was terminated in 1946, ultimately underscoring “the prevailing assumption that married women would and should withdraw [from the labour force] to the household as the men returned home from the war to take their rightful place as breadwinners” (Mahon 2000, 589).

In the pre-war period, women were generally relegated to the private sphere and expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers. Their workforce participation was tolerated, but only if they were young and unmarried, divorcées, spinsters, working-class with restricted means of financial support (Timpson 2001, 13). During this time, the problem of caring for children was seen to be a private issue, falling squarely on the shoulders of the mother. However, once the war began, women were generally expected to move into the paid labour force in an effort to facilitate the war effort. In this context, the problem of caring for children was caused by extenuating political circumstances. It was a novel problem which occurred during a crisis period. Women who supported the war effort by working in wartime industries were deemed to be a deserving group and, as such, government intervention was deemed necessary – but only for a short period of time. Thus, the problem of child care in Canada was largely born of World War II and the notions of civic responsibility that defined the period. Caring for children so their mothers were able to facilitate this effort became the objective and the problem definition, which carried with it clear ideas of social obligation. In a derivative manner,

child care during this period was seen as facilitating women's workforce participation, which suggested the early stirrings of an equality argument in this matter. Interestingly, for our purposes, when the first federal child care policy was enacted – in the form of the Order in Council outlined above – it took the form of direct service provision. As above, this arguably established a precedent for federal involvement in the policy area and, as such, plays a crucial role in the problem definitions and policy proposals that will follow in later decades.

Child Care as a Private Issue: The Immediate Post-War Period

In 1943, the Canadian Advisory Committee on Reconstruction established a subcommittee to consider the issues women might face during the period of postwar adjustment. In particular, the subcommittee was asked “to examine the problems relating to the re-establishment of women after the war and to make recommendations to the Committee on Reconstruction as to the procedure to deal with the problems and other matters relating to the welfare of women in the period of reconstruction” (Advisory Committee on Reconstruction in Timpson 2001, 15-16). The subcommittee's 1944 report, entitled *Post-War Problems of Women*, argued that women should be permitted to choose whether to return to the domestic sphere or continue in paid employment. The authors of the report assumed, however, that “the normal urge towards marriage, and home and family life... can be relied upon to reduce largely the number of women now listed as gainfully employed” (Advisory Committee on Reconstruction 1944 in Timpson 2001, 16).

Not surprisingly, the number of women working in paid employment decreased significantly in the immediate post-war period. In an effort to open up jobs for men returning home from the war, women were laid off in droves and effectively forced back into the private sphere and a state of domestic dependency. In 1945, the federal government introduced a universal Family Allowance program, which was available to all families and did not separate the deserving from the undeserving.³ However, it did suggest that government encouraged women to stay home and raise their children. The wartime cost-shared child care agreement was terminated in 1946, which also arguably terminated “the federal government’s brief recognition of the link between child care and women’s employment” (Timpson 2001, 17). The decreasing number of women’s employment opportunities during this time “signaled the reassertion of male economic primacy and a new discourse about men needing to earn a ‘family wage’” (Timpson 2001, 16-17). At the same time, it reasserted the idea that women were fundamentally responsible for caregiving and homemaking. It is thus clear that, in the immediate post-war period, the problem of child care was reclassified a private issue/individual problem, plain and simple. For now, it was effectively off the public agenda.

Child Welfare and Women’s Equality: Child Care Advocacy and Policy in the 1960s, 70s, 80s and early 90s

In the 1950s, married women began to enter the workforce once again. By 1958, for the first time in Canadian history, the number of married women outstripped the number of single women in the paid labour force (Timpson 2001, 19). In 1954, the

³ In 1989, the government changed the program from universal to targeted, instituting a clawback of family allowance payments for middle- and upper-income families. In 1993, Prime Minister Jean Cretien rolled the Family Allowance program and the Child Tax Credit into the Child Tax Benefit, an income-tested income support program targeted to low-income families.

Department of Labour established the Women's Bureau and endowed it with a mandate to gather information about working women (e.g., the characteristics of working women, their reasons for working, the types of jobs they held, and their long term employment plans) in an effort to guide the development of federal labour policy. Marion Royce was appointed the first director of the Women's Bureau and, according to Timpson (2001, 19), she was "clearly committed to exploring the concept of motherhood at work." To this end, throughout the 1960s, the bureau undertook to gather information about the problems faced by working women with family responsibilities (Briggs and Burt in Timpson 2001, 19).

Although Royce and her colleagues understood that many personal and societal factors had an impact on women's employment opportunities, other actors within federal government circles were reluctant to acknowledge this fact. Royce thus feared that the issue of child care was not within her jurisdiction and, as a result, "she quietly urged the Family and Child Welfare Division to use its channels to probe the need for day care" (Mahon 2000, 10), which was, as Timpson (2001, 20) reminds us, "a strategy that undoubtedly reinforced the definition of child care as a welfare issue in federal public policy." To be sure, this marks the beginning of the federal government's standpoint that the care of children is largely a problem of social welfare. At the same time, however, it is instructive to note that "femocrats" working within government were prepared to acknowledge child care as an issue that is directly linked to women's employment equality.

The Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) was introduced in 1966 as an open-ended federal-provincial shared-cost⁴ program. The intention was for the federal government to help the provinces pay for social welfare programs, partly in an effort to provide “non-profit services that have as their objective the lessening, removal or prevention of the causes and effects of poverty, child neglect, or dependence on public assistance” (Pence in Scherer 2001, 189). Scherer (2001, 189) observes that the CAP was never really *intended* to fund child care but that it allowed provincial governments to fund the costs of child care for low-income families receiving social assistance. Ultimately, this permitted an expansion of the child care system, if only for a targeted group, which again reinforced the federal government’s social welfare interpretation of the child care issue.

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) was established in 1967 in order to “inquire into and report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps may be taken by the Federal Government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in Canadian society” (Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada in Timpson 2001, 30). The RCSW was charged with exploring the status of women in a number of areas, including marriage and divorce, immigration and citizenship, taxation, criminal law, and employment obstacles and opportunities. The commission received some 350 written briefs by individual and organized women. Of these briefs 78 percent raised concerns about women’s employment or child care. And, of the 273 documents that focused on these issues, 74 percent raised concerns about the intersection of women’s employment *and* the care of children (Timpson 2001, 32). So, although the commissioners were not specifically asked to consider child care or the

⁴ Via the CAP, the federal government matched provincial expenditures on welfare policies and programs.

ways in which women's employment opportunities might be affected by their child care responsibilities, they adopted four related principles:

- Women should be free to choose whether or not to take employment outside their homes;
- The care of children is a responsibility to be shared by the mother, the father and society;
- Society has a responsibility for women because of pregnancy and child-birth, and special treatment related to maternity will always be necessary; and
- In certain areas women will for an interim period require special treatment in order to overcome the adverse effects of discriminatory practices (i.e., employment equity).

In 1971, arguably in response to the report of the RCSW, the federal government introduced the Child Care Expense Deduction provision of the *Income Tax Act*, which allowed parents to deduct a percentage of their receipted child care expenses. Also in response to the RCSW, the government changed the terms of the CAP such that subsidies were allowed for a broader income group. In any event, these developments instituted means-tested subsidies for the poor and tax deductions for the better paid, a trend that would continue well into the future.

It is evident that the RCSW made a firm case for child care as first, a problem directly linked to women's employment equality and, second, to women's overall equality. After the RCSW report, many advocates within the women's movement made child care a priority (Friendly and Rothman 1995 in Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004, 160) and, as Mahon (2000, 600) puts it, "the discourse on child care changed, becoming part of a larger agenda aimed at establishing women's equality with men. [And w]ith this new definition came the demand for universal child care." The government's targeted policy response which, as above, came in the form of tax deductions and modifications to the CAP, only nominally acknowledged the intersection of women's employment equality

and child care. Overall, this suggests that, while many saw child care as a means to achieving women's equality, government still saw the issue as a private one or, in the case of those in need or in danger of becoming in need, one of child welfare. In any case, the RCSW's recommendations are important because, in the decades to follow, women's organizations and child care advocacy groups agitate for the government provision of child care services on these grounds.

The early 1980s proved to be pivotal years for the child care debate in Canada. First of all, the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, led by Judge Rosalie Abella, echoed the views of the RCSW, referencing child care as a necessary precondition to women's equality. In a resounding endorsement of support for the ideas that came out of the RCSW, the Report of the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment in Canada (1986) described child care as "the ramp that provides equal access to the workforce for all mothers" (Abella in Bacchi 1999, 130). Secondly, the Trudeau Liberal Government appointed a task force, led by Katie Cooke, to examine the issue of child care in Canada. Also released in 1986, the *Report of the Task Force on Child Care* made a number of recommendations that suggested the need for a national system of quality child care. And finally, in the federal election campaign of 1984, the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party, under the leadership of Brian Mulroney, included the development of a national child care program in its platform. The party won the election that year and, in 1985, appointed a Special Parliamentary Committee on Child Care. According to Scherer (2001, 191), "the committee was to examine and report on the child care needs of the Canadian family, bearing in mind a focus on the child." In the end, the committee was split along party lines in regards to its conclusions, with the PC

members believing that the focus should be on giving money to parents to purchase the child care services of their choosing, and the Liberal and NDP members pushing for the establishment of more regulated spaces. This last point indicates the deep ideological divisions in the child care debate, suggesting that, at this time, the right viewed child care a private issue that should be dealt with in the market place, while the centre and left, in their push for service delivery, viewed it as more of a public problem. The fact that the child care debate had secured an important place on the national political agenda, however, is clear.

By 1987, the PC Party had developed its National Strategy on Child Care. In effect, the strategy was a package of existing tax measures with a bit of additional funding to create and operate new child care spaces. Dobrowolsky and Jenson (2004, 162) refer to the strategy as being “weak on national standards and strong on tax deductions and for-profit services.” The biggest component of the strategy was a promise to commit \$3 billion over seven years to develop child care where needed and to change the federal/provincial cost-sharing arrangements by removing child care from the CAP. The other significant component of the plan was to offer tax assistance to families, with the intention of encouraging them to choose from a variety of child care options, the option of one parent staying at home being among them. Separating child care funding from CAP might have signaled the end of child care being seen as a welfare service, which would have changed the definition of the problem from the government’s perspective. However, many child care advocacy and women’s groups mobilized against the government’s proposal since the advocates’ ideal was universally accessible, public funded, not-for-profit, and high-quality child care. Although the government went ahead

with its strategy and introduced Bill C-144, the Canada Child Care Act, in the House of Commons in July 1988, the plan died on the order papers in the Senate when an election was called in later that year. The problem of child care was not reintroduced by the PC Party in its subsequent term. As Dobrowolsky and Jenson (2004, 167) explain, the

federal government led by the Conservatives abandoned attention to child care after 1988 and instead focused exclusively on low-income and disadvantaged children. The citizenship regime was shifting, in other words, from one committed to support for all Canadians to one that was concerned primarily to ensuring that no one fell out of society. Talk about combating exclusion replaced that of equality.

In its 1993 Red Book of policy proposals, the Liberal Party announced a commitment to the development of a national child care system, promising \$720 million dollars and the creation of 150,000 spaces over three years. The child care lobby was more supportive of the Liberal proposal than it had been of Bill C-144, mainly because it was not focused on tax incentives and instead showed support for the notion of a universal program. This suggested a shift in the overarching conception of the problem - from a private issue relying on tax breaks to a public problem that could be dealt with through direct service delivery. The social welfare focus remained, but this time child care was framed as a solution to lessening the impact of child poverty. In any case, once in office, the Liberal Party announced the contradictory commitment to eliminating the federal deficit and reducing the debt. As a result, many social programs were streamlined while others were eradicated altogether. And while Lloyd Axworthy, the Minister of Health and Social Services, remained committed to the development of a national child care program, and introduced a proposal to that end in December 1995, it was abandoned the following month when a cabinet shuffle saw Axworthy replaced with a new minister.

In 1995, government dealt a serious blow to the CAP-funded child care services and spaces that did exist when it merged the CAP and the Established Programs Financing (EPF) to form the *Canada Health and Social Transfer* (CHST), in which the funds the provinces and territories receive for health, social services, and education are rolled into a single block funding arrangement. The CHST was largely intended to cut costs and decentralize social policies but, in effect, it amounted to reduced federal and provincial support for social services, including child care.

Analysis suggests that, during the last thirty years of the twentieth century, the problem of caring for children occupied a significant amount of political space. Married women's mass movement into the paid labour force and the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women brought the issue of child care into the public arena like never before. Starting from the premise that women's employment equality and women's overall equality would be difficult to achieve without an adequate national child care system in place, many feminist organizations and child care advocacy groups participated with government in an ongoing debate as to the nature and scope of the problem. In part because it was unwilling to pay significant policy attention to the issue of women's equality, government was reluctant to define child care as a public problem and to become actively involved in the issue. This was reflected in policies and programs that came largely in the form of easy-to-sell (to the general public) and easy-to-deliver tax breaks. Government was, however, willing and able to define child care as a social welfare issue and this was reflected in the subsidies available to those in financial need. The focus on child poverty that emerged in the mid-90s reinforced the notion of child care as a welfare issue but, at the same time, expanded the concern to one of combating

the social and economic exclusion of disadvantaged children. It is worth noting that, for many feminists and child care advocates, the government's tendency to view child care as a targeted welfare issue limited the possibilities for universal service delivery. Although government proposals were put forth, a comprehensive national program was not developed during this period. The dawn of the 21st century, however, would see significant changes in the way child care advocates and governments approached the problem of caring for children.

The Late 90s and Early 2000s: Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and "Investing" in Children and the Economy

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the collision of four significant forces brought the issue of child care back onto the public agenda in a big way. First, the federal government resolved to eliminate child poverty in Canada by 2000, thereby propelling children and children's issues to the forefront of government policy attention. Secondly, academic researchers and child care advocates began framing child care in *positive economic* terms, arguing that the child care sector generates significant economic activity and that investment in the industry yields high returns and is beneficial to society. Economists at the University of Toronto, for instance, illustrated that for every \$1 spent on child care, there is a \$2 economic benefit, as returns come back through increased workforce participation, higher tax revenues, enhanced child development, and lower social spending (Cleveland and Krashinsky 1998). Thirdly, the "huge deficits that had inspired years of whining about spending and making deficit reduction the prime political goal seemed under control. New investments were beginning to seem possible" (Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004, 170). And finally, the explosion of research on and

interest in child health and development and brain science⁵ provided “scientific arguments for investments in early childhood services, including nonparental care... The argument made by the experts is that *all children*, not just the disadvantaged, benefit from stimulation in the early years, especially infancy and early childhood” (Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004, 170). The combination of these forces significantly altered the way in which the problem of child care was understood and talked about. In incremental steps, the government appeared to suggest that child care was not necessarily a social welfare problem or an economic burden but, rather, an industry and social benefit worthy of *investment*.

Although – for the federal government – the possibility of a universal child care system was off the table for now, the *National Child Tax Benefit* (NCB) – a joint initiative of the federal, provincial, and territorial governments – was introduced in 1988 as an alternative. The NCB combined two key elements: monthly payments to low- and middle-income families with children⁶, and benefits and services designed and delivered by the provinces and territories to meet the needs of families with children in each jurisdiction. The goals of the NCB were to facilitate the move from welfare to work and promote attachment to the workforce by ensuring and illustrating that working families were better off than non-working families; reduce child poverty (Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004, 171); and reduce duplication and redundancy in social programs and services. The NCB had the impact of conveying “the themes of providing supports for parents to transform them into ‘productive workers,’ and the advantages of quality child

⁵ See, for example, McCain and Mustard 1999.

⁶ The NCB consists of a base benefit paid to low- and middle-income families, as well as the NCB Supplement, which provides low-income families with additional child benefits on top of the CCTB base benefit.

care for counteracting the risks associated with growing up poor and in disadvantage” (Dobrowolsky and Jenson 2004, 170). All told, the NCB reinforces government’s position that the problem of caring for children is a problem only for the underprivileged (i.e., social welfare). The NCB was also illustrative of the ECEC and ‘investing in children’ approaches mentioned above.

In June 1999, the federal/provincial/territorial governments announced the creation of a *National Children’s Agenda*. The Agenda is focused on childhood health and safety, success at learning, and social engagement and responsibility and identifies six key areas where the federal and provincial/territorial governments can work together in the name of children: (1) supporting parents and strengthening families; (2) enhancing early childhood development; (3) improving economic security for families; (4) providing early and continuous learning experiences; (5) fostering strong adolescent development; and (6) creating supportive, safe and violence-free communities. Although the *National Children’s Agenda* endeavours to reinforce government’s position that it is investing in children and families, Scherer (2001, 194) suggests that it is

a document without substance, and it does not actually commit to creating better policies for children... Although the document discusses the importance of cooperative efforts, there are no concrete actions that will lead to nationwide policies for children. There is some discussion suggesting that the government’s role is to make information accessible to the public and some talk of the role of the voluntary sector in program delivery. However, there is no discussion of using the NCA as a means of prioritizing government policy to benefit Canada’s children and families.

Just after the turn of the century, the federal government reached two significant agreements with the provinces (except Quebec) and the territories. The first was the *Early Childhood Development Initiative*, signed in September 2000, under which provincial and territorial governments agreed to use \$2.2 billion (over five years, beginning in 2001-

2002) in federal transfers (via the CHST) to improve and expand early childhood development programs and services in four priority areas: pregnancy, birth, and infancy; parenting and family support; early childhood development, learning, and care; and community supports. The overall goals of the program were twofold: first, to promote early childhood development, so that, to their fullest potential, children are physically and emotionally healthy, safe and secure, ready to learn, and socially engaged and responsible; and secondly, to help children reach their potential and to help families support their children within strong communities.

The second federal/provincial/territorial agreement represented an effort to build on the objectives laid out in the *Early Childhood Development Initiative*. The *Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care* (ELCC) was reached in March 2003. Under this framework, the federal government agreed to provide \$935 million over five years to support provincial and territorial government investments in early learning and child care. The objective of the initiative was to promote early childhood development and support the participation of parents in employment, education, or training by improving access to affordable, quality early learning and child care programs and services. The ELCC set out to invest in provincially/territorially regulated early learning and child care programs for children under six by increasing the number of child care and preschool spaces, improving the quality of child care and preschool services, and reducing the cost of those services to families to low- or modest-income families. Early learning and child care programs and services funded through the ELCC were intended to increase direct care and early learning opportunities for children in such settings as child care centres, family child care homes, preschools,

and nursery schools. Funding was to be used at the discretion of the provinces and territories for such things as capital and operating funding, fee subsidies, wage enhancements, training, professional development and support, quality assurance, and parent information and referral. In the 2004 budget, another \$75 million was added to ECEC funding for 2004/2005 and 2005/2006, bringing the total to \$1.05 billion over five years.

In 2004, the federal Liberal government, continuing with its commitment to invest in children, announced that it would work with the provinces and territories to develop and institute a national system of child care based on four key principles: quality, universality, accessibility, and developmental programming (QUAD) (Cool 2007). The 2005 Budget committed \$5 billion over five years to enhance and expand early learning and child care with the provinces and territories, allocating \$700 million in the 2006-2007 fiscal year, and \$1.2 billion in each of the next three years. The federal government entered into negotiations with individual provinces between April and November 2005. In signing the agreements-in-principle, provinces made a commitment to developing detailed Action Plans that identified their spending priorities based on the QUAD principles. Ontario and Manitoba released their Action Plans and entered into bi-lateral agreements with Ottawa in November 2005. These agreements committed the federal government to a five-year funding program, with a one-year back-out provision.

Thus, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the problem of child care was framed in a new light – one of economic gain and the benefits associated with “investing” in children and early childhood education and care. To the extent that serious policy proposals were put forth and enacted, it appears that this new definition of the problem resonated with

decision-makers and policy-makers. It is important to note that there was still an element of social welfare/social responsibility implicit in the problem definition, but this time in the context of child poverty-reduction/equality of opportunity for children. What is especially important is that, by the mid-2000s, government appeared to have largely accepted child care as a public problem and ECEC an issue of great importance. As such, it was willing to engage in seemingly meaningful discussions about the problem of caring for children. Through its efforts, the federal Liberal government conveyed a willingness to consider a comprehensive system of early childhood education and care as the solution to the problem of caring for children.

The Harper Conservatives, the Illusion of Choice, and We're Virtually Back Where We Started: 2006-Present

The election of the Harper Conservatives in January 2006 signaled a major shift in the trajectory of child care policy in Canada. Harper indicated the onset of the shift when he announced that the federal government intended to back out of the bilateral agreements it had reached with the provinces the year before. He enforced the policy shift when he replaced the Liberal government's *Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care* with the *Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB)* and the *Child Care Spaces Initiative (CCSI)*.

The UCCB is an unconditional cash benefit of \$1200 per year paid to families for each child under six years of age. The benefit is paid monthly to families across the country irrespective of income, financial situation, or employment status. As an unconditional cash benefit, UCCB payments are not specifically earmarked for child care expenses and can be spent on virtually anything. The Harper Government framed the

UCCB as providing “choices for families” and as a program that recognizes parents as the *real* experts regarding how their children should be raised and cared for. It is noteworthy, however, that the UCCB is a benefit taxable to the lower-income spouse and, as such, it tends to favour single-earner couples over single parents and two-earner couples, thus leading to “unequal treatment in the distribution of net benefits between different types of families with the same income level (Prince and Teghtsoonian 2007, 185). It is also noteworthy that the “actual workings of the UCCB and its interactions with other programs, particularly the Child Care Expense Deduction, result in the universal benefit disproportionately helping upper income families” (Prince and Teghtsoonian 2007, 197). According to Prince and Teghtsoonian (2007, 187) we need to “let go of the assumption that the primary purpose of the UCCB is in fact to provide financial support for parents using out-of-home child care.” In reality, they suggest, “*the central purpose of the UCCB is to... provide a symbolic endorsement of the decision by some parents – mostly mothers – to provide full time care for their children at home [italics in original].*” As such, it seems reasonable to conclude that, by framing the problem as one of lack of choice for Canadian families and framing the solution in the same light, the government is pushing us back to where we started: the problem of caring for children has been nudged back into the private sphere, the responsibility of caring for children falls squarely on the shoulders of the mother and/or the traditional nuclear family and a gendered division of labour – in which stay-at-home mothers and their children are supported by breadwinning fathers – are encouraged, and women’s labour force participation is effectively discouraged.

The CCSI represents the Harper Government's effort to encourage the creation of new child care spaces. It focuses on workplaces and community groups, offering \$250 million a year in tax credits to employers and non-profit organizations who undertake to build new spaces. The funding is intended to support the creation of approximately 125,000 new spaces over a five-year period by providing assistance with capital costs. There is no provision in the CCSI for assistance with operating costs and, as such, it is not clear how the spaces thus created will be funded over the long term. It is noteworthy that the Initiative relies heavily on a "commitment of financial resources by private sector actors, and rests on an assumption that communities of interest will emerge that are capable of generating and sustaining diverse forms of non-parental care with only tax incentives to assist with capital costs" (Prince and Teghtsoonian 2007, 189). In this way, the CCSI deemphasizes the role of government (including provincial and territorial governments) and emphasizes the role of businesses/employers, voluntary organizations, and communities.

Government's current conception of child care is not dissimilar from its conception of the problem in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. At its core, the problem of caring for children is seen to be a private one. Now, however, in cases where a mother makes the "choice" to seek employment in the paid labour force, the care of children is viewed as a responsibility to be shared among parents, the private sector, the voluntary sector, and the community. In addition, the language of "choice" effectively serves to mask the fact that government views its role as one of encouraging and coordinating investments in children by exclusively non-governmental actors – including parents and families, private businesses/employers, voluntary organizations,

and communities. Discussions of child care as a government investment or as a means to advancing women's equality have all but disappeared from the debate.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolution of child care advocacy, policy development, and problem definitions in Canada from World War II to the present. In so doing, it has shown that understandings of the *problem* of caring for children and, as a result, proposed solutions to the problem, have changed over time. The paper has also shown that the problem definition has differed by constituency, with government's and advocates' views on the issue being markedly different.

Our earlier discussion on the anatomy of a problem definition can be applied to child care in Canada. In terms of causation, it is clear that the "problem" of caring for children was traditionally viewed as a private, family matter. The problem first became a public problem, however, when women began to move into the paid labour force in significant numbers. Initially child care was tied to the notion of social obligation vis-à-vis the war effort, but it quickly came to be tied to the issue of women's employment equality. For many feminists and most child care advocates, child care has been viewed as *the* problem and a universal child care system *the* solution to women's employment equality and women's overall equality. Until approximately the 1990s, government was reluctant to view child care through this lens, and opted instead to view the underprivileged as the problem and social welfare assistance as the solution. As such, targeted means- and income-tested programs were offered by government as a solution to the problem of caring for children. When academic researchers and child care advocates changed the problem definition and argued that quality early childhood care and

education was of critical developmental importance, government began to pay closer and more substantive attention to the issue. And when researchers and advocates showed that the economic and social benefits of *investing* in child care and children are significant, decision-makers and policymakers genuinely began to consider more involved problem definitions (investment and early childhood education and care) and contemplate more complex policy options (including universal service delivery). However, the election of the Harper Conservatives in 2006 signaled a virtual return to early conceptions of the problem. The issue of caring for children was pushed back into the private sphere, and is now regarded by government as an issue that is best dealt with by traditional nuclear families where only one parent – usually the father – works outside of the home. In the absence of such an arrangement, government has strongly suggested that the private and voluntary sectors and communities ought to play a role.

If we return to Rochefort and Cobb's (1993) anatomy of a problem definition, we can see other reasons why the problem of caring for children remains a problem to be adequately dealt with. Although some view the problem and its consequences as severe or somewhat severe, many disagree. With the exception of the war-effort, the issue has never reached what most would consider "crisis" proportions. In terms of proximity, the problem of child care is less likely to touch those in decision-making positions or positions of political power (if such individuals require outside care, it is very likely that they can pay for it) than it is to touch those who are seen as "unworthy" or "undeserving." Finally, the nature of the solution that has long been *proposed* by activists – a national, universal child care system – is viewed by many not only as unnecessary and undesirable, but also as cost-prohibitive, while the "solutions" that have been

implemented by governments have been viewed by those with opposing views as misplaced and inadequate. This has resulted in the back-and-forth process of problem definition and redefinition outlined in this paper.

Future research efforts might investigate – in greater detail – the ways in which particular groups, organizations, political parties, or governments have defined the problem of caring for children and the reasons why they have done so. A second line of research might consider the interaction of problem definitions with other crucial factors – including interests, institutions, and ideologies – and the ways in which these interactions have inhibited the development of a national, universal system of child care. Finally, comparative studies of problem definitions and child care policies in various countries might help us better understand the relationship between problem definition and child care policy. Certainly all such efforts would enhance our understanding of problem definition as it relates to the problem of caring for children in Canada.

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