

A Certain Kind of Girl:
Social Workers and the Creation of the Pathological Unwed Mother, 1918-1940

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Jennifer Gunn, Advisor

January 2013

Acknowledgements

Margaret Fuller once said, “If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it.” I was extraordinarily lucky in the course of my graduate career to benefit from the collective light of many. A tremendous debt is owed to my advisor, Dr. Jennifer Gunn, who has been a mentor to me for nearly a decade now. She was an enthusiastic supporter of this dissertation from the moment it was envisioned and she nurtured its development through numerous reconceptualizations and reorganizations. I benefited greatly from her close attention to detail and her superior knowledge of archival repositories. I also derived great strength from her thoughtful advice, her open door, and her unending supply of chocolate. My gratitude to her extends far deeper than I can adequately express in these pages.

Dr. Susan Jones and Dr. Dominique Tobbell were also instrumental in the development of this dissertation. Both Dr. Jones and Dr. Tobbell read numerous chapter drafts and supplied insightful commentary that helped nascent conclusions begin to bloom. In short, they helped me to find my voice and I am tremendously grateful. My remaining committee members – Dr. John Eyler, Dr. Elaine Tyler May, and Dr. Regina Kunzel – influenced me in ways both small and large. Their work inspired me and was instrumental in my formation as a historian. As with all my committee members, my dissertation was enriched by their careful analysis and astute commentary. I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with such a fine group of scholars.

The completion of this dissertation was greatly aided by the kind help of numerous archivists. David Klaassen and Linnea Anderson of the University of

Minnesota's Social Welfare History Archives patiently pulled many, many boxes of material and offered suggestions for other places to look when my search was fruitless.

Debbie Miller of the Minnesota Historical Society introduced me to the Sauk Centre Home School collection, while Harold Miller of the Wisconsin Historical Society helped me identify similar collections available for use.

I also benefited greatly from the camaraderie of the students and faculty in the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine program. A special thanks to Maggie Charleroy, Peter Kernahan, and Neal Holtan, dear friends who helped light my path.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and my sister, Christina, who taught me to follow my dreams and believed in me while I was chasing them. I could never have achieved this without you.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my husband, Randy, and my daughter, Emma, for showing me that not all dreams have to be chased. Some of the best things in life are right before my eyes.

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to understand the basis for the re-characterization of unwed mothers from pitiable to contemptible during the interwar period by analyzing the experiences of unwed motherhood after the baby's birth. The plight of unwed mothers in Minnesota serves as a compelling case study. Minnesota's late Progressive-era children's legislation (of which a large portion was dedicated to the welfare of illegitimate children) was widely regarded as the national standard in modern child welfare management. Popularly called the Minnesota Plan, this 1917 legislation shifted the social welfare emphasis away from the unwed mother and onto her child. This slight shift in emphasis created a new paradigm in social welfare work; suddenly the unwed mother was implicitly beyond reformation while her child was explicitly in danger from her influence.

The creation of the pathological unwed mother depended on the confluence of several separate yet related trends regarding the legal status of illegitimate children and changing practices in social work and the social sciences. In an effort to protect illegitimate children, the Minnesota Plan made them *ipso facto* wards of the state and transformed social workers into the determiners and guardians of the children's best interests. The subjectivity involved with determining hallowed social welfare precepts like health, happiness, and opportunity would prove to be particularly damaging to unwed mothers, who typically fell short in all three categories when case workers visited the home.

At the same moment in time that social workers were gaining these new state-sanctioned powers and duties, they were also searching for validation and recognition from the larger community of professions. The pursuit of “scientific” methodology dominated the field’s efforts at legitimation and drove innovations in practice, most notably by relying on social science studies to scientifically prove the subjective diagnoses social workers made daily in the course of their case work duties. These studies created a pseudo “science of illegitimacy” by the 1930s. A sudden increase in social science studies that measured the emotional, developmental, and psychological handicaps of children stymied by the stigma of illegitimate birth verified the anecdotal observations made by social workers during home visits and thus “scientifically” began to transform unwed mothers to unfit mothers.

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Chapter One

Framing the Custodial Shift

In the midst of the recent Great Recession, an article on the sociological impact of unemployment took a strange turn and began to discuss the sociological effects of illegitimacy. Without citing any academic sources, the author stated that “a large body of research shows that one of the worst things for children, in the long run, is an unstable family.” The article discussed the “average out-of-wedlock” child and the typical life experiences that could be expected, saying that by the age of five his or her mother “will have had two or three significant relationships with men other than the father, and the child will typically have at least one half sibling.” The author warned “this kind of churning is terrible for children” and would result in a generation of children who had heightened risks of mental health problems, troubles at school, and teenage delinquency.¹

More recent articles have continued in the same vein. In a 2012 article titled “The Kids Are Not Really Alright,” the author argued that children of single mothers, regardless of economic class, are disadvantaged when compared to children who are raised in a traditional, two-parent household. “Why is this? Single mothers, even from wealthier families, have less time. They are less likely to be able to monitor their kids. They do not have a partner who can relieve them when they are tired or frustrated or angry with their kids.” The author concludes that the net effect of this parental imbalance is the creation of “diverging destinies,” wherein children who are products of single

¹ Don Peck, “How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America,” *The Atlantic* (March 2010). Article accessed online at www.theatlantic.com on February 16, 2010.

parent homes grow to be socially and economically disadvantaged adults due to their childhood deprivations.² Such rhetoric is re-entering the mainstream consciousness of American society in a manner not seen for generations. An article alleging similar fallouts from single (unmarried or never married) motherhood and filled with quotes from eminent sociologists and economists recently graced the pages of the venerable *New York Times* and received little comment despite the fact that single motherhood is no longer the stigmatized condition it was fifty, or even twenty, years ago.³ Recent data estimates that nearly four out of ten births in America are to unwed mothers; for women under the age of thirty, this rate increases to nearly fifty percent.⁴

Despite the rise in unwed motherhood and the apparent social acceptance of a woman's right to choose when and under what circumstances she becomes a mother, unwed motherhood is still a controversial action. Wisconsin State Senator Glenn Grothman, for example, introduced a bill in March 2012 to amend state law to require the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board to "emphasize that not being married is abusive and neglectful of children, and to underscore the role of fathers in the primary

² W. Bradford Wilcox, "The Kids Are Not Alright," *Slate.com*, 20 July 2012. Article accessed online at http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2012/07/single_motherhood_worse_for_children_2.html on 20 July 2012.

³ Jason DeParle, "Two Classes in America, Divided by 'I Do,'" *The New York Times*, 14 July 2012. Article accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/15/us/two-classes-in-america-divided-by-i-do.html?emc=eta1> on 17 July 2012.

⁴ Rob Stein and Donna St. George, "Unwed Motherhood Increases Sharply in U.S., Report Shows," *The Washington Post*, 14 May 2009. Article accessed online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/13/AR2009051301628.html> on 16 May 2009; Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise, "For Women Under 30, Most Births Occur Outside of Marriage," *The New York Times*, 17 February 2012. Accessed online on 17 February 2012 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/us/for-women-under-30-most-births-occur-outside-marriage.html?emc=eta1>.

prevention of child abuse and neglect." In his report "How the United States and The State of Wisconsin Are Working to Encourage Single Motherhood and Discouraging Children in 2-Parent Families," Grothman wrote that the government urges women not to get married by making programs like low-income housing assistance, school choice, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), tax credits, and food stamps more attractive than marriage. His solution was to end or severely restrict public funding of these social safety nets because it was "somewhat outrageous that some married couples feel they can only afford one or two children in part because they are paying excessive taxes to provide programs for someone else to have four or five children."⁵

The prejudices surrounding single motherhood and its effect on children are eerily reminiscent of the conclusions of scientific studies of illegitimacy in the interwar period. Those studies also commented on social handicaps, economic disadvantages, and emotional turmoil caused by illegitimate status. For example, a 1942 study (based on a thesis completed several years earlier) that attempted to gauge the "success" of unwed mothers who retained custody of their children documented the case of John, a little boy whose mother was twenty-one years old and unmarried at the time of his birth. His mother was described as "immature, unstable, and very promiscuous in her relationships with men." Because "she was too temperamental to get along well with anyone," his mother was constantly moving between apartments and jobs and uprooting John in the process. There was no constancy in his life. At the time the study was made John was being raised "in a low-type" boarding house and had to tend to his own care during the

⁵ Wisconsin Senate Bill 507. Full-text of the bill and accompanying committee hearing notes accessed from StateNet Legislative Tracking Software and Westlaw on 12 March 2012.

day while his mother was at work, a fact that his mother “did not regard as a serious problem.”⁶

The manner in which John was being raised allegedly had negative implications for his socialization, emotional health, physical well-being, and the rate of his development. All of these ill effects theoretically could have been averted by non-maternal custody, a solution that by the end of the interwar period was increasingly recommended in all instances of illegitimacy in order to spare the child from such ordeals. This dissertation examines the shift in custodial outcome preferences for illegitimate children between the years of 1920 and 1940. I argue that scientific studies of illegitimacy that created unwed motherhood as a pathology triggered the custodial shift in the name of child welfare.

To demonstrate this, I trace the development of the pathological unwed mother through five types of scientific studies prevalent during the interwar period: quantitative/demographic studies of unwed mothers and delinquents, eugenic studies of unwed mothers’ familial background, sociological studies on life as an unwed mother, psychiatric studies of unwed mothers, and psychological and developmental studies of illegitimate children. Grouped together and considered as a whole, I refer to these studies as “illegitimacy studies.” This was not a term assigned to the studies by their creators.

My argument is partially framed as a case study of the Minnesota experience in the earliest chapters before broadening to a consideration of developments across the nation. The first chapter considers the development of the Minnesota Plan. The Plan was

⁶ Jane S. Hosmee, “Traits Predictive of the Successful Outcome of Unmarried Mothers’ Plans to Keep their Children,” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 12 (1942): 283-284.

a sweeping piece of late Progressive era legislation that designated premarital pregnancy as a punishable, pseudo-criminal offense and ushered in the heyday of the state's juvenile reformatory system, which, not coincidentally, became one of the first sites of scientific studies of unwed motherhood by professional social workers. Minnesota's legislation was considered a preeminent piece of social welfare legislation; child welfare advocates repeatedly held it up as an example to be duplicated by other states. The Minnesota Plan reframed illegitimacy as a child welfare issue instead of a women's issue, a slight shift in emphasis that arguably hastened the creation of the pathological unwed mother. Moreover, the Plan created the bureaucratic structure that would be necessary to fully implement the custodial shift.

The second chapter explores these earliest studies of illegitimacy and considers how efforts to understand causation resulted in demographic and heredity studies that marginalized unwed mothers by creating an undesirable "type" of girl who was deemed most likely to become premaritally pregnant. The quantitative and demographic studies of illegitimacy began in the Progressive-era and were some of the earliest attempts to understand who the unwed mother was. These studies peaked between 1920 and 1925, but they had a lasting influence on illegitimacy studies. Nearly every study of unwed mothers undertaken during the interwar period contained some discussion of the mothers' demographic backgrounds to supply context to the arguments and frequently to justify the studies' conclusions.

The quantitative demographic studies were closely linked to the hereditary and eugenic studies of unwed mothers, which also peaked in the 1920s. While social workers

incorporated aspects of each approach in their casework methodologies, the original impetus for such considerations sprang from the disciplines of biology, genetics, and psychiatry. Reacting to the nature-nurture debate, these fields were attempting to understand experimentally whether and to what extent criminally deviant behavior was biologically preordained.

There was an existing class bias inherent in the identification of sexual delinquents in the Progressive and early interwar periods. The “undesirable type” of girl was most easily characterized by her socioeconomic class and family background. Upper-class girls who found themselves in trouble could rely on their families’ power and financial means to protect them from the social punishment of the reformatory. Middle-class girls tended to seek help from private social work agencies in the early interwar years and typically avoided commitment to the reformatory. This dissertation argues in part, however, that by the end of the interwar period there was less differentiation amongst working and middle-class unwed mothers as the scientific studies of illegitimacy transformed all unwed motherhood into a pathological state. The emphasis on the social class of unwed mothers is therefore limited to the first few chapters.

The demographic and heredity studies of unwed mothers discussed in chapter two implicitly emphasized class status as a causal factor for unwed motherhood; at their simplest, the conclusions of these studies can be stated along the lines of “the unwed mother came from an undesirable background and her premarital pregnancy was a reaction to her environment.” These studies framed unwed pregnancy as a symptom of undesirable forces that were acting upon the unwed mother. This is not to say that the

unwed mothers were absolved of culpability. Clearly not every girl from a working-class background with a familial history of alcoholism or other social ills became premaritally pregnant. The studies instead argued that these forces may have predisposed certain types of girls to find themselves in a compromised position, an understanding that allowed for the possibility that premarital pregnancy was not an (un)conscious goal of the mothers.

To achieve the transition from a state to a national study, chapter two is followed by the case history of fourteen-year-old unwed mother Elsie, a resident at Minnesota's reformatory the Sauk Centre Home School for Girls in 1921. Elsie's history contextualizes the environment in which many studies of sexual delinquency and illegitimacy were undertaken in the interwar period while framing the lived experience of unwed motherhood that will be the focus of the remaining chapters.

While many histories of unwed pregnancy approach the issue as one that ends after the birth of the baby and the mother's departure from the maternity home, chapter three continues the story by considering the practicalities of life as an unwed mother and the struggles the average mother would have encountered in her efforts to support a baby on her own. Popular from the mid-1920s through the early 1930s, these studies were performed by social scientists and social workers in an attempt to document life as an unwed mother and were concerned primarily with the practicalities of establishing paternity and securing gainful employment. These studies also extended the nature-nurture debate implicit to the quantitative and eugenic studies of unwed mothers by trying to measure the extent to which the middle-class values unwed mothers were

exposed to in the reformatory or maternity home settings had been internalized and could be translated to a real life setting.

The unwed mothers profiled in chapter three are not limited to mothers who were confined in a reformatory. The experiential studies of unwed motherhood were the first studies to unify unwed mothers as a singular group because their emphasis was on how the unwed mothers performed, not how the women came to be unwed mothers. This lumping of unwed mothers as one population bloc was critical for the eventual articulation that all unwed mothers shared a similar pathological makeup.

The failures of most mothers to live up to the expectations of their caseworkers serves as segue to chapter four, which discusses the psychiatric studies of unwed mothers during the 1930s that were initially undertaken to explore possible reasons for their perceived maternal shortcomings. This chapter argues that the psychiatric studies were the ultimate unifier of unwed mothers because they largely stripped socioeconomic and hereditary factors as causes, a process that the experiential studies had previously begun. The focus on psychiatric causation for illegitimacy was perhaps the most important component of the pathological mother's creation. Contrary to earlier constructions of unwed motherhood which acknowledged the possibility that unwed motherhood was shaped by environmental forces, psychiatric analyses of unwed mothers concluded that their illegitimate pregnancies fulfilled a deep-seated psychological need. Importantly, these studies argued that unwed mothers *chose* to become pregnant out of wedlock, transforming their pregnancies into external symptoms of internal disease.

The final chapter synthesizes the conclusions drawn throughout the dissertation by considering studies of illegitimate children from the late 1920s and 1930s to trace the implementation of the custodial shift. These studies were interdisciplinary in nature and relied on analyses derived from the fields of child development, child psychology, and social work. While the subjects of these studies were outwardly the illegitimate children themselves, this chapter argues that the children served as one final lens with which to view the unwed mothers' pathologies and the extent to which they could be transmitted to their children. The ultimate conclusion that the unwed mothers' diseases were chronic in nature and negatively effected their children's development was a powerful recommendation for non-maternal custody, in addition to broader social changes that may have influenced preferences for non-maternal custody such as increased cultural acceptance of adoption and the economic impact of the Depression.

The issue of science is a tricky subject to navigate in the context of social work research. "Science" for social workers in the interwar period was an intangible, loosely constructed moniker that was applied to their casework conclusions and sociological studies as a tool of professionalization.⁷ The studies were certainly shaped by the purer scientific undertakings of other fields, such as genetics, medicine, and sociology, but they were in many ways islands, never truly contributing to a greater scientific conversation or producing reproducible scientific knowledge themselves. But even islands must be constructed of something and illegitimacy research is no exception. The scientific studies

⁷ The ways social workers used science to professionalize is discussed in great detail in Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

profiled in this dissertation can be categorized by their loose affiliation to purer scientific fields: social diagnoses, experiential studies of unwed motherhood, and studies of illegitimate children's adaptation were clearly designed to mimic sociological population inventories; considerations of demographic backgrounds and family trees owe their genesis to the fields of eugenics and genetics; intelligence testing, character studies, and psychoanalyses of unwed mothers were influenced by the fields of mental hygiene and psychiatry.

Much of this dissertation is therefore informed by earlier histories of the development of these fields. Historians since the 1970s have diligently considered the ways in which eugenics was applied to social, institutional, political, and medical arenas during the first portion of the twentieth century. A significant historiography has aimed to understand the ways in which eugenics and the scientific field of genetics developed in relation to each other. One of the most notable contributions to this conversation was Kenneth Ludmerer's 1972 work *Genetics and American Society: A Historical Appraisal*.⁸ Ludmerer argues that American geneticists were initially ardent supporters of the eugenics movement, but by the 1920s the field began to distance itself from eugenic studies due to the tendency of its proponents to overstate and misapply genetics theories. The popularization of eugenics in the public sphere diluted its scientific basis. The application of eugenic principles to race and other social concerns of the interwar period created a deepened chasm between eugenics and genetics.⁹

⁸ Kenneth Ludmerer, *Genetics and American Society: A Historical Appraisal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

⁹ This argument is central to Daniel Kevles' thesis in *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

Diane Paul's work on the social and political context of eugenics aptly explains the appeal of the eugenics movement to the American public. The vast social changes associated with industrialization, immigration, and urbanization created a longing for social order and brought into stark contrast superficial qualities possessed by the "right" kinds of people (the native born, white, middle-class population) and the "wrong" kinds of people (all other groups, but especially working class and immigrant populations). The broad application of eugenics to population studies and family planning offered the promise of restoring social order by selectively breeding the traits valued by America's ruling classes.¹⁰¹¹

Related to these broad studies of eugenics in American culture are more focused considerations of applications of eugenic thought to specific societal subsets, specifically the feeble-minded, as a type of social engineering. The identification of the defective individual in early twentieth-century America often relied on the construction of family histories that highlighted alleged inheritable characteristics like feeble-mindedness, criminality, sexual delinquency, alcoholism, and even medical conditions like epilepsy. The ability to trace such "defective" characteristics through multiple branches and generations of a family tree gave the impression that the expression of such traits was

¹⁰ Diane Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1995); Diane Paul, *The Politics of Heredity: Essays on Eugenics, Biomedicine and the Nature-Nurture Debate* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

¹¹ Numerous other historians have similarly considered the ways in which Americans latched on to eugenic theory, often used interchangeably with the theories of social Darwinism, as a mechanism for creating a fitter race. See for example Carl Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in American and European Thoughts, 1860-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

inevitable due to heredity. Efforts to prevent the propagation of such traits in future generations typically centered on confining, controlling, and sterilizing the afflicted individuals.¹²

Closely related to accounts of interwar eugenics is the historiography on interwar psychiatry, particularly as it related to the identification of feeble-minded women and the application of psychiatric diagnoses to undesirable populations as a method of social control. Perhaps the star is Elizabeth Lunbeck's work, *The Psychiatric Persuasion*.¹³ While Lunbeck's primary interest is the construction and gendering of psychiatric knowledge, her use of case records from the Boston Psychopathic Hospital allows for extensive examination of how psychiatric diagnoses were constructed and applied to specific types of criminal offenders, especially so-called sexual delinquents. Lunbeck's work and others like it offer important context for the ways in which psychiatric theory was used as a punitive device to justify allegations of internal disease.¹⁴

¹² The literature on this subject is vast. Some classic works in the field include Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988); Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Philip R. Reilly, *The Surgical Solution: A History of Involuntary Sterilization in the United States* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); E.A. Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Cold Spring Harbor: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001); Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹³ Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ See also David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*, 2nd edition (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1990); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995); Nathan Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Theresa R. Richardson, *The Century of the Child: The Mental Hygiene Movement and Social Policy in the United States and Canada* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

The scientific developments of the interwar period highlighted by these eugenic and psychiatric studies framed the conversation social workers were having amongst themselves and with unwed mothers, but it was a nuanced conversation. Most studies of illegitimacy undertaken by social workers during the interwar period failed to reference the scientific theories that influenced their lines of questioning. Perhaps it was assumed the reader would understand the broader scientific frame of the studies, but for whatever reason actual science (either theoretical or applied) is largely missing from the studies profiled in this dissertation. Their utility rested almost exclusively in their application to policy.

An important theme relevant to much of the historiography concerned with psychiatry, eugenics, and its application to social welfare policy is the notion of social control. While historians have located instances of social control from the obvious, such as the criminal justice system, to the implied, such as the rise of mandatory education requirements, others have been reluctant to attach social control to considerations of social work. Leslie Margolin, for example, has argued that “it is absurd to speak of anyone inventing or formulating social work as a strategy of oppression.” She goes on to note that,

Social work is able to carry on its activities only by remaining oblivious to its use of power, a critical part of its survival involves creating new ways to keep it oblivious. That is social work’s ultimate sophistication; to consciously induce unconsciousness, and then find ways to forget that unconsciousness is being induced in the first place.¹⁵

¹⁵ Leslie Margolin, *Under the Cover of Kindness: The Invention of Social Work* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997): 5-6.

While Margolin inadvertently embraces the notion of social control by altering it to a state of unconsciousness, she is reacting to the heavy-handed use of social control theory in social histories. Many historians who have applied social control theory to policies created in the early twentieth century have used it to “condemn the state as paternalistic.”¹⁶ Eileen Boris has called for a redefinition of social control as a theory of social intervention, as “an intervention into families on the part of the state and professional experts, mediated by the gender, class, race, [and] ethnicity of both family members and interveners.” Boris presents this as an interactive process; subjects of reformers’ interests did not passively accept state and expert attempts to control their motherhood and family life.¹⁷ They had their own ideals to fulfill, which other historians have demonstrated could be achieved by manipulating the very system that at times strove to be the manipulator.¹⁸

This does not mean, however, that social welfare efforts were not coercive in nature. Mary Odem has argued that the “distinction between environmental and coercive strategies, between preventive and institutional solutions, is not as clear as some historians have suggested.” Regarding female sexual delinquents in particular, Odem

¹⁶ Eileen Boris, “Reconstructing the ‘Family’: Women, Progressive Reform, and the Problem of Social Control,” In *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, edited by Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1991): 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 82.

¹⁸ See for example Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (Boston: South End, 1988); Linda Gordon, *Heroes of their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence: Boston, 1880-1960* (New York: Penguin, 1988); Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Kathleen Jones, *Taming the Troublesome Child: American Families, Child Guidance, and the Limits of Psychiatric Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

argues that the reliance on surveillance, legal prosecution, detention, and institutionalization was abundantly coercive in nature; what Odem is less clear on is where the line between coercion, social control, and the agency of the coerced or controlled should be drawn.¹⁹ Coercion was definitely an element of the custodial shift and its presence will likely be felt by the reader in all of the chapters of this dissertation. Whether coercion is identical to social control is questionable and is less relevant to my thesis than an understanding of how custodial policy was created and changed.

This is not to suggest that I did not spend time considering whether the custodial shift is rightly considered a tool of social control. Much of my argument rests on the premise that the studies were the basis of punitive social policy, a statement that in and of itself suggests an undercurrent of social control. However, the source material available to me skims over the voices and actions of the unwed mothers by their very nature. Locating agency, specifically agency in response to placement pressures related to the custodial shift, is difficult. It is likely that county welfare records, court records, or the case records of placement agencies would contain enough detail to locate agency, but unfortunately these records were generally restricted and not available to scholars. Without them, characterizing the custodial shift as a form of social control instead of, as I currently view it, a reaction to the “science” contained within the illegitimacy studies, is too one dimensional to be of much historical merit.

¹⁹ Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995): 108-109.

Instead, I attempt to have a conversation with an assortment of excellent historical studies concerned with the regulation of nonmarital female sexuality amongst the poor and working classes in the first half of the twentieth century, specifically Regina Kunzel's *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*, Ruth Alexander's *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930*, and Mary Odem's *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*.²⁰ Each work considers the construction of the sexual delinquent and modes of intervention to illustrate the declining agency and autonomy of women considered to be sexually transgressive.

Mary Odem's work addresses the construction of female sexuality in broader terms than Kunzel or Alexander. She considers mechanisms for policing the sexual behavior of single women in California in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by examining the changing debate about the nature of female sexuality and the state's response to changed assumptions. Late Victorian ideologies painted women as passionless beings who lacked sexual drive and merely responded to the demands of the marital bed out of a sense of duty. Unwed women who engaged in sexual behavior were therefore the victims of male lust. Progressive reformers, however, turned this

²⁰ Ruth M. Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Other works that have reacted to a similar set of problems include but are not limited to Constance Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women's Adolescence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Debran Rowland, *The Boundaries of Her Body: The Troubling History of Women's Rights in America* (Naperville, Illinois: Sphinx Publishing, 2004); and Johanna Schoen, *Choice & Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

conceptualization on its head by restoring sexual agency to women and recasting sexual experimentation as a willful and immoral expression of feminine desires.

This ideological transformation meant that women who engaged in premarital sex were newly understood as delinquents whose sexual appetites needed to be controlled through rehabilitation. Odem spends an ample amount of time considering how this transformation resulted in a sexual double standard where women were the exclusive guilty parties, and usually even seen as the initiators, of premarital sex. Odem's primary emphasis throughout her argument is concerned with the ideologies and mechanisms of controlling women's behavior.

Ruth Alexander focuses on one specific mechanism for the control of sexual delinquents, namely the state reformatory, to examine the construction of and response to female sexual delinquency in the early twentieth century. Less interested in social control per se, Alexander focuses her study on the agency of working class girls who were identified as and punished for being sexual delinquents. She uses the case files of 100 girls sentenced to New York state reformatories between 1915 and 1930 to structure her analysis.

Alexander traces the path from working class girl to sexual delinquent by first considering the socioeconomic norms for young wage-earning women in the early twentieth century and their pursuit of consumer commodities and commercialized leisure with the few wages they did not need to help support their families. These pursuits often brought them into close contact with males and authorities were quick to clamp down on working class girls who violated social norms of sexual comportment because it was a

threat to social stability and the institution of marriage. The now delinquent girls were sent to state reformatories for retraining and rehabilitation. Alexander's argument repeatedly emphasizes a class component to sexual delinquency in this time period. Middle class adolescents also frequented dance halls, amusement parks, or theaters, but their expressions of sexual desire were confronted with the aid of mental hygienists and child guidance experts instead of the juvenile court system. A girl's class influenced adult perception of her sexual activities and the meanings ascribed to them.²¹

Regina Kunzel narrows the focus of Alexander and Odem by specifically considering the plight of the unwed mother sent to a maternity home, girls who were "living embodiments of illicit sex" because their pregnancies "rendered their transgression[s] disturbingly visible and inarguable."²² Kunzel uses unwed mothers to trace the professionalization of social work and its gendered aspects through the lens of illegitimacy work during the Progressive and interwar periods. Specifically, Kunzel considers the transition from "benevolent reform" of unwed mothers by evangelical women to the scientific treatment of unwed mothers by expert caseworkers during the 1920s and 1930s. The evangelical reformers were ideologically aligned with the Victorian view of asexual women who were necessarily assaulted or tricked into intimate relations by nefarious, predatory men. In contrast to the coercive environment of the reformatory described by Alexander, the evangelical approach was to introduce mother

²¹ Alexander also considers life inside the reformatories and the tenuous balance between coercion and kindness that pervaded the environment of the schools. Although the state's assessment of their "delinquent" status had placed the girls in a submissive position, Alexander locates agency in the girls' acquiescence to reformatory rules. Good behavior was the only way out. Alexander concludes with a consideration of life after parole from the school and the girls' struggles to shed their delinquent identities and acclimate to society.

²² Kunzel, p. 19-20.

and baby to middle class norms and pious living, characteristics that were embodied and modeled by the maternity home matrons. Unwed mothers were to find strength in religion and redemption from their interactions with their babies. The pregnancy may have been the cause of their downfall, but motherhood was to be their salvation in the evangelical model.

Social welfare services professionalized during the Progressive era and replaced the evangelical approach with the expert diagnoses of trained social workers, who proselytized the scientific approach to sexual delinquency embraced by the reformatory matrons profiled in Alexander's study. Under the influence of social workers, the unwed mother was transformed from a pitiable victim to an aggressive sexual delinquent. Much of Kunzel's narrative describes the tug-of-war between the groups to explain why their specific ideological approach to illegitimacy was the preferred response. She considers the experiences of entering a maternity home and attempts to locate maternal agency by discussing maternal attitudes toward and interactions with social workers and maternity home matrons. Her study is primarily a story of professionalization with unwed mothers used as a vehicle to explore social work's methodologies for obtaining professional recognition, and the maternity home as a major site for the professionalization of the discipline. In this sense, the social workers themselves are her primary actors while unwed mothers are the understudies.

It is to Kunzel's work that my argument is most indebted and, for this reason, it is imperative to clearly demarcate the ways in which our arguments intersect and diverge. We both use unwed mothers and the social construction of illegitimacy as a means to

examine deeper questions. In her own words, Kunzel aimed to demonstrate how the multiple narratives of illegitimacy (i.e., unwed mothers as “innocent victims, sex delinquents, unadjusted neurotics”) became “legitimizing vehicles, first for evangelical women and later for social workers and policymakers, in their larger struggle for cultural authority from 1890 to 1945.”²³ Kunzel examined how women gained cultural authority through their relationships with and at the expense of other women.

My questions are primarily about how the relationships between unwed mothers and social workers were mediated through the new science of illegitimacy and the ways in which the social construction of illegitimacy affected custodial outcomes and policy changes. While illegitimacy is consistently framed as a child welfare issue throughout the interwar period, social workers understood and constructed illegitimacy by studying unwed mothers. The goal of the child welfare movement was to “save” the children, but without first pathologizing unwed mothers there was no tangible person to save the children from.

I take Kunzel’s argument about the role of the professionalizing social worker and the correlated emphasis on science at face value; the fact that the social workers who appear in my study may have often had ulterior motives (either conscious or unconscious) for scientifically diagnosing unwed mothers as diseased individuals is assumed. I am less interested in the social workers’ motivations for incorporating science into their practice as I am about how the science itself was constructed and how its results were applied to unwed mothers, and by transference to their children. The sexually

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

delinquent unwed mother did not arise in a vacuum; my dissertation seeks to understand the various strains of scientific inquiry that social workers were reacting to and incorporating in their construction of the unwed mother.

Kunzel's work also addresses the custodial shift. She discusses the preference for maternal custody in the Progressive and early interwar period and further notes an emerging preference for adoption by 1945. Kunzel and I are in agreement about the nature of the shift, but the mechanisms that resulted in the shift differ within our narratives. Whereas Kunzel sees an individualization of casework and custodial decisions as a result of the increased professional authority of social workers, my narrative de-emphasizes emergent professional authority and focuses instead on the ways that conclusions from the "scientific" illegitimacy studies gained cultural authority and were incorporated into collective judgments of maternal fitness by individual social workers and state structural forces.

While I do not deny that increased control over custodial outcomes was an expression of social workers' newfound authority, I give more weight to the notion that the custodial shift was due in equal measure to the incorporation of science at the agency level. This is in stark contrast to previous studies that have argued that science, specifically its expression in psychoanalytic theory, "influenced an elite minority fringe rather than the main body of [social work] theory and practice" during the interwar period.²⁴ These studies have argued that the development of the psychiatrically flawed

²⁴ See for example Leslie B. Alexander, "Social Work's Freudian Deluge: Myth of Reality?" *Social Service Review* 46 (December 1972): 517-518, John Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination: A History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States* (New York: Cornell

unwed mother was a post-World War Two phenomenon, but my research indicates that the psychiatrically damaged unwed mother was one incarnation of the pathological unwed mother born in the interwar period.

My research shows that those with the authority to influence custodial decisions, a group that includes social workers but also mental hygienists, physicians, and child development experts, were influenced by an array of studies that demonstrated an inability of the unwed mother to adapt to motherhood and by default affected her child's development. Of critical importance for custodial outcomes in the interwar period was not necessarily the belief that the unwed mother was damaged, but the idea that the disease she was afflicted with was chronic and transferable to her children in the long-term because the mother's illness affected her ability to oversee the proper development of her child. Social workers were reacting to and embedding university generated research in their daily operations. It was those actions that made the pathological unwed mother an actual being instead of a theoretical entity because she became something from which her children needed to be protected; the custodial shift was therefore a simultaneous reaction to and creation of the diseased unwed mother.

It is important to quickly explain the use of terminology in this dissertation. Terms like "pathological," "diseased," "abnormal," or "defective" are my interpretations of how unwed mothers were being constructed in the scientific literature. I have used the terms "illegitimate" and "illegitimate pregnancy" in the same manner that the experts who authored the studies of unwed mothers used them. I have elected to use the term

“illegitimate” because by its very nature it implies something that is not quite right, desired, or deserved, a connotation that is useful when considering the evolution of policies that argued unwed mothers did not deserve their children. I also frequently refer to unwed mothers as “girls,” even though some of the mothers who appear in this dissertation should rightly be referred to as women. This usage reflects the rhetorical norms of the illegitimacy studies and highlights the paternalistic undertones of the custodial shift.

With the exception of published material, all of the names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms given in order to protect the privacy of the unwed mothers and their children.

A final note on race, or more specifically an explanation for the lack of racial diversity in this dissertation, is warranted. While other histories of unwed motherhood have emphasized the differential reaction to premarital pregnancies in white and African-American populations in the post-World War Two period, a similar consideration of illegitimate pregnancy during the interwar period proved challenging.²⁵ I did not find a single instance of a black unwed mother in the case records I examined from reformatories in Minnesota or Wisconsin. This speaks to the fact that these were predominantly white states and, moreover, to the reality that black sexuality was regulated differently than white sexuality. There was a presumption that illegitimacy in minority populations was to be expected and it therefore did not carry the same degree of

²⁵ Rickie Solinger’s *Wake Up Little Susie* is perhaps the most notable iteration of race and its relation to the construction of illegitimacy in America.

stigma as premarital pregnancies in white populations. (This was explicitly stated in several methodological introductions to social work theses.)

Black mothers were therefore customarily excluded from illegitimacy study populations. In the instances when they were included (and their numbers were always slight), race was not considered to be an important variable in the study. If black unwed mothers were included it was because they were unwed mothers who fit the parameters of the study's design, not because they were black. As Rickie Solinger has argued, the consideration of race as a distinct contributory factor to unwed pregnancy emerged in the postwar period because "race, or rather the place of blacks in American society, was emerging as a vital, pressing social issue." Race could be used to justify "race hierarchy at a time when that hierarchy was threatened."²⁶ The same cannot be said for the interwar period.

This does not mean that research on black illegitimacy was not being performed, but it was conducted mostly by black academics and was outside of the sphere of the average social worker. E. Franklin Frazier's sociological studies of the black family are a notable example of early inquiries that referenced illegitimacy, but incorporation of such studies into this dissertation was problematic because the studies emphasized race at a time when other studies of unwed mothers actively discarded it.²⁷ The only major study of black illegitimacy conducted during the interwar period was performed by Columbia University social work student Ruth Reed, who published *Negro Illegitimacy in New York City* in 1926. Reed's analysis tended to follow the format of quantitative

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁷ See for example E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932).

illegitimacy studies and did not offer any significant conclusions contrary to those applied to white populations.²⁸

Regina Kunzel has noted that “before the 1940s the argument that illegitimacy was culturally accepted in black communities led most social workers to dismiss it as a problem deserving serious concern and offered some convenient rationalization for devoting so few resources to black unmarried mothers.”²⁹ The lack of racial diversity in this dissertation is a reflection of which unwed mothers were considered to pose the biggest threat to the moral and social order. Before World War Two, the most destabilizing acts of sexual immorality were thought to be those perpetrated by white women.

²⁸ Ruth Reed, *Negro Illegitimacy in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926).

²⁹ Kunzel, p. 158.

Chapter Two

Progressives Politics and Premarital Pregnancy in Minnesota

In August 1923 an anonymous phone call alerted the Minnesota Board of Control to the case of a pregnant fifteen-year-old girl named Jennie. A state social worker was dispatched to Jennie's apartment to confirm her condition and perform an initial interview. Although the worker could get "very little" out of Jennie, she arranged to return three days later to escort her to a prenatal examination, at which time she hoped to learn more about the circumstances leading up to Jennie's pregnancy.

Jennie's mother had passed away three years earlier, but she found a home with her aunt and uncle. At her aunt's urging, Jennie was more forthcoming about her condition when she next saw the worker. Although the worker still described Jennie as "very hard to interview," Jennie supplied her with the names of two possible fathers. She admitted to being intimate with two schoolmates and described repeated sexual encounters at school and her aunt's home.

Jennie's aunt and uncle said they would be unable to care for Jennie and her baby. Her aunt described Jennie as being hard to control, a girl who consistently ignored instructions when her uncle was away from home. Jennie's uncle added that she rarely told the truth and he asserted his belief that Jennie was making up a relationship with her classmates in order to shield an older man. The worker declared that Jennie seemed to be "immoral" and might be a good candidate for Minnesota's reformatory school for girls.

Her uncle agreed that Jennie might be “better off” in “some institution where she would have discipline.”

Four days later Jennie gave birth and named an older man, Mr. Jensen, as the father of her child. A neighbor told the worker that she believed Jennie’s claim might be accurate. She said that “everyone in the apartment building knew that Mr. Jensen, an elderly man,... used to go to [the] apartment very often to see Jennie...When he would go there he would send everyone out of the apartment.” The neighbor also hinted that Jennie traded sexual favors to Mr. Jensen in exchange for fashionable clothing. Jennie had wanted a pair of “Russian boots” but her uncle refused to buy them for her. Tellingly, Mr. Jensen purchased the boots for her. When questioned about this new information, Jennie admitted that Mr. Jensen “gave her money to go to the movies and would also buy her candy or fruit or anything she asked for. He often asked her to have relations with him but relations occurred just once.”

Jennie and her baby were sent to the Salvation Army Home for convalescence. Jennie’s aunt went to the social worker’s office and said after further consideration she was willing to allow Jennie and the baby back into her home. She brought a blanket and some clothes for the baby and eagerly questioned the worker about Jennie’s possible release date from the maternity home, but the worker declined to supply her with any information regarding future plans for Jennie. One month later, against the wishes of the family, Jennie was sent to reform school on charges of delinquency. While she was there, her baby contracted scarlet fever and died.¹

¹ Case Files, Sauk Centre Home School for Girls, Box 19, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Jennie's experience with unwed motherhood would have been drastically different if her pregnancy had occurred even one decade earlier. Although she would still have experienced a remarkable degree of social ostracism, her condition would have been construed as a reflection of unfair gender norms or misplaced devotion to an undeserving man. Jennie's failure to conform to socio-sexual norms would have been understood as an unfortunate instance of moral turpitude, certainly, but would never have been construed as criminal or deviant in nature, as her pregnancy was in 1923.

The involvement of the state in Jennie's affairs and its authority to place her in a state reformatory as punishment for her actions was the result of Minnesota's sweeping 1917 child welfare legislation. This legislation, commonly referred to as the Minnesota Plan, vested the state with guardianship of all unwed mothers under the age of eighteen and their children thanks to the wide-reaching umbrella of child welfare reform, whereby the children in question were understood to be both the unwed mother and her baby. The Minnesota Plan resulted in a new and thoroughly modern tension between the state and the autonomy of women's bodies by transforming an innately personal and biological event into a bureaucratic undertaking that understood birth almost exclusively in terms of economic and social costs to the state.

The end result of the Minnesota Plan was the creation of a *de facto custodial shift* that insisted on adoption in most cases of illegitimacy instead of the traditional custom of maternal custody. This shift occurred between 1917 and 1940, involved dramatic social and cultural changes, and was the result of an unprecedented amount of authority given to state child welfare workers to define, identify, and intervene in instances of alleged unfit

motherhood. At the Sauk Centre Home School for Girls, the state reformatory in Minnesota where unwed mothers were sent on charges of immorality, eighty percent of unwed mothers retained custody of their children in 1920. By 1940, nearly eighty percent of mothers at the same institution were placing their children for adoption.²

While the custodial shift is at its simplest the result of the Minnesota Plan's recharacterization of illegitimacy from a moral ill to a child welfare issue, a corresponding impetus behind the custodial shift was scientific and medical studies of heredity, intelligence, and child development that seemed to indicate that illegitimacy itself was an expression of undesirable inherited characteristic that would be repeated in future generations unless the cycle was impeded by the separation of mother and child. Custodial policy in cases of illegitimacy was a social reaction to the scientific debates over nature versus nurture that were prominent during the interwar period. Much policy regarding illegitimacy during the interwar period, including the manner in which the Minnesota Plan evolved over time to further restrict mothers' rights, may be understood as large scale social tests, or applications, of scientific theory.

The passage of the Minnesota Plan in 1917 was heralded as a new era in social policy concerning unwed mothers. Its tenets laid the groundwork for increasingly punitive policies toward women who disobeyed sexual protocol by elevating the opinions of state social workers about unwed mothers to something resembling scientific truth. The interplay between social workers and science as a tool for professionalization was instrumental in the passage of the Minnesota Plan, as the state was determined to

² These statistical calculations are based on the information contained in the Home School's registry of births. See Sauk Centre Home School Birth Registry, Minnesota Historical Society.

restructure its child welfare program according to the best conventions of the era, but the emphasis on scientific social work unwittingly laid the groundwork for new “scientific” theories of fit motherhood that would reshape the custodial conventions of illegitimacy during the interwar period by prioritizing the “scientific” assessments of social workers over the wishes of unwed mothers and their families.

This chapter will consider the Progressive impulse for the reform of illegitimacy and child welfare laws in order to frame the development and implementation of the Minnesota Plan. The chapter argues that the Minnesota Plan, which would become the national standard for illegitimacy policy almost immediately after its passage, was instrumental in restructuring illegitimacy almost exclusively as a child welfare issue, thereby removing maternal rights from the equation and prioritizing the illegitimate child (and, in effect, the state) in all custodial negotiations.

The Progressives, Illegitimacy, and Child Welfare

The Minnesota Plan was very much a reflection of its time in the sense that its passage was the result of expanded state involvement in social welfare issues and the power of the child welfare movement in the late Progressive era. The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed a crucial reformulation of illegitimacy in the public imagination from a social problem linked to gender inequality and the need for reclaimed standards of morality to an issue of child protection and the future health of the state that necessitated legislative oversight.

The Progressive era in the United States (1870-1920) was notable for its emphasis on comprehensive social reform and protective legislation. Composed primarily of

middle and upper class men and women, the Progressive movement sought to remedy a host of social problems affiliated with urbanization and industrialization by agitating for increased governmental regulation and state oversight of social problems thought to be related to the new urban environment. These problems, such as poverty, crime, labor unrest, and political corruption, were believed to prohibit working class families from establishing a home life that conformed to middle class ideals. Progressive legislation was therefore targeted to improve the daily living and working conditions of America's working class and immigrant poor.

The Progressive reform movement was different from earlier philanthropic movements in multiple ways. Progressive reform was "scientific" reform. Reformers developed new empirical research techniques and relied on extensive sociological investigations to study the causation of social problems. The solutions reformers suggested were not reliant upon traditional philanthropic models of voluntary relief, but rather depended upon state intervention. Progressives relied on experts to develop relief responses and created vast bureaucracies staffed by experts in order to manage their new social programs. The Progressive goal was not to radically alter the composition of the American socio-political system, but rather to help guide it in formulating an effective response to the social upheavals caused by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.³

³ See Lewis L. Gould, *America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1914* (New York: Longman, 2001); Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

Illegitimacy was one problem typically associated with the movement of young, single women to urban areas in search of work in the late nineteenth century. Philanthropic interest in unwed mothers emerged in the 1870s and 1880s and developed in tandem with the child welfare movement. The period witnessed the opening and wide geographic dissemination of homes for unwed mothers, foundling homes, and orphanages. The initial reform response to illegitimacy was largely evangelical in nature and featured efforts to rehabilitate the unwed mother by focusing on her moral redemption. Unwed mothers were thought to originate almost exclusively from working class and immigrant backgrounds. Many of them either “got into trouble” while working in the city or traveled to an urban area after learning of their condition in search of aid, anonymity, and a livelihood.

For most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, help arrived in the form of kindly evangelical women. These women believed they were specially equipped to minister to unwed mothers due to a multitude of personal characteristics, such as “empathy, a sense of community responsibility, class orientation, religious fervor, an awareness of the sexual double standard, and knowledge of the exigencies of economic life for unmarried women.”⁴ As Regina Kunzel has demonstrated, maternity home matrons sought to establish a relationship with their charges that was at once maternal and sisterly. They understood their work to be a collective missionary undertaking and believed reformation of the girls required the creation of a home environment where the

⁴ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, “‘Ruined Girls’: Changing Community Responses to Illegitimacy in Upstate New York, 1890-1920,” *Journal of Social History* 18 (Winter 1984): 248.

unwed mothers in the role of children would grow and thrive under the maternal guidance and Christian love of the matrons.⁵

Maternity home matrons during this period characterized unwed mothers as “fallen or ruined women” who had “loved too well and trusted too much.”⁶ The use of the terms “fallen” and “ruined,” as Joan Jacobs Brumberg has explained, was meaningful on multiple levels. When used as a noun, as in “the cause of my ruin,” the term implied intentional seduction, a state of physical imperfection and non-virginity. When used as a descriptive adjective (“a ruined girl”) or as a verb (“he ruined her”), it was suggestive of a young woman’s truncated opportunities for marriage and middle class social aspirations.⁷

Many late nineteenth century reformers believed the unwed mother had been tricked into her condition by promises of marriage or coerced into sexual relations while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. This stereotypical unwed mother was not sexually aggressive. Maternity home matrons visualized unwed mothers as friendless waifs who were easily misled by the temptations of urban living and the natural desire to create a home of their own. The girls were not characterized as innately immoral, but rather foolish and overly innocent. They were “motherless, weak and untaught – not wicked.” Curing the unwed mother of her sorrows and preparing her for re-entrance into

⁵ Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 10-35.

⁶ Quoted in Kunzel, p. 21.

⁷ Brumberg, p. 250.

society necessitated a strong introduction to middle class notions of maternity, morality, and righteousness to restore and strengthen her character.⁸

Unwed mothers could expect to spend several months in maternity homes, which gave the girls ample time to benefit from the homes' redemptive emphases. Religion was a constant companion inside the homes. Unwed mothers typically attended morning and evening prayer services, went to church services at least once a week, and spent a portion of each day engaged in prayer and Bible study. When not considering their spiritual health unwed mothers were expected to work. The daily chores of the home were performed by the mothers. Girls were assigned cooking, cleaning, laundry, and gardening duties. Some homes supplemented these chores with basic educational lessons, vocational training, and classes on infant hygiene. This busy schedule was a crucial aspect of the unwed mothers' rehabilitation. The program was expected to help girls "learn to love the good and pure, do household duties, enjoy work, and be cured in body and soul."^{9 10}

Maternity homes tried to mitigate the stigma of unwed motherhood by fortifying the mother's relationship with God as a means to help her find inner strength in the face of social isolation. The stigma attached to the unwed mother's status was considered to

⁸ Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 59-60.

⁹ Attitude expressed by a matron at a National Conference of Social Work in the 1870s, as quoted by Jacqueline A. Leggett, *Trends in Attitude Toward the Unmarried Mother: Being a Study of the Trends in Attitude Toward the Unmarried Mother as They are Reflected in the Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work from 1874-1949*. (Master's thesis, Catholic University of America, 1949): 5.

¹⁰ There are several excellent sources on the experience of unwed motherhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to Kunzel and Brumberg, see Marion J. Morton, *And Sin No More: Social Policy and Unwed Mothers in Cleveland, 1855-1990* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Karen Bridget Murray, "Governing Unwed Mothers in Toronto at the Turn of the Twentieth-Century," *The Canadian Historical Review* 85 (June 2004): 253-276.

be nearly unbearable and impossible for all but the strongest of unwed mothers to manage. The matron of an early maternity home in Minnesota noted in her hospital's 1888 annual report that the attending physician mischaracterized the death of one of the mothers as heart failure when it was in fact due to a "sense of shame and disgrace" so overpowering that "life became a burden too heavy for endurance."¹¹

By the early 1900s the burgeoning strength of the child welfare movement began to divert reformers' attentions to the status of the illegitimate child. The social upheavals of urbanization and industrialization that led to increased rates of illegitimacy also affected America's youngest citizens in new and particularly alarming ways. Rising rates of juvenile delinquency, widespread childhood poverty, the ubiquitous nature of child labor, and soaring infant mortality rates were pressing national issues that inspired Progressives to action.¹²

Child welfare leaders were certainly motivated to some extent by compassion, but they also recognized a need to mold dependent, delinquent, and neglected children into figures who understood and conformed to middle class ideals. As historian Walter Trattner has explained, if future generations were to "possess the strength of mind, body, and character" to be good citizens, they had to be protected as children. "Youngsters, in

¹¹ Winton U. Solberg, "Martha G. Ripley: Pioneer Doctor and Social Reformer," *Minnesota History* 39 (Spring 1964): 16.

¹² For histories of the child welfare movement, see Molly Ladd Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Alice Boardman Smuts and Robert W. Smuts, *Science in the Service of Children, 1893-1935* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Deborah Dwork, *War is Good for Babies and Other Young Children: A History of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England, 1898-1918* (London: Tavistock Publishers, 1987).

other words, were the hope – or the threat – of the future.”¹³ The child welfare movement was a vocal advocate for child labor legislation, public playgrounds, access to health care and childhood immunizations, compulsory education, daycare and kindergartens, mother’s pensions, foster care, and pure milk.¹⁴

The strength of the child welfare movement climaxed in the decade of the 1910s, often remembered as “the children’s decade.” The catalyst was the 1909 White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children. Convened by President Theodore Roosevelt, the purpose of the conference was to analyze and discuss the deleterious effects of institutionalization on children. The conference’s impact was much wider, however. Historians typically credit it with leading to the formation of the U.S. Children’s Bureau (officially founded in 1912), the development of the widow’s pension movement, and the growth of adoption agencies, to cite a few developments on the national level. The White House Conference also fueled a spurt of state legislation related to child welfare. By the end of the children’s decade, forty states had passed laws providing public aid to children in their own homes, twenty states had created commissions to study and revise children’s laws, twenty-two states had established child

¹³ Walter Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: Free Press, 1979): 104.

¹⁴ See P. Bean and J. Melville, “The Child-Savers,” in *Child Welfare: Major Themes in Health and Social Welfare*, vol. I, ed. Nick Frost (New York: Routledge, 2005): 311-333; Robert H. Bremner, *Children and Youth in America: A Documentary History, vol. 2, 1866-1932* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971): 3-246.

Mother’s pensions, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three, were a form of social welfare advocated by the child-savers to provide a subsidy to families who lacked a male breadwinner. They were championed as a program that would strengthen the non-nuclear family by preventing its collapse due to economic insolvency. For histories of mother’s pensions, see Joanne L. Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Mark Leff, “Consensus for Reform: The Mothers' Pension Movement in the Progressive Era,” *Social Service Review* 47 (1973): 397-417.

hygiene divisions within the state health departments, and the majority of states had strengthened child labor and compulsory education laws.¹⁵

The problem with illegitimacy legislation as it existed in 1910 was that it was essentially non-existent. Illegitimacy legislation was synonymous with bastardy laws, whose sole intent was to prevent state obligation for the support of illegitimate children. These laws disregarded the welfare of illegitimate children for a simple reason – their welfare was not a factor considered when the laws were written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁶

Child welfare leaders believed that bastardy laws devalued the lives of illegitimate children because they failed to include provisions to protect the health of illegitimate babies or extend any educational and social opportunities to illegitimate children. Instead, the laws seemed custom designed to ensure that the stigma of illegitimacy would cling to the illegitimate child for life by stamping him or her with the bastard designation. Reformers were motivated to introduce new illegitimacy legislation by a desire to release the child, if not the mother, from the stigma associated with premarital pregnancy.¹⁷ To achieve this goal, the child welfare movement had to

¹⁵ Katharine F. Lenroot, *First Ten Years Work of the Minnesota Board of Control* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Board of Control, 1928):1; Alice Boardman Smuts and Robert W. Smuts, p. 81-102; Kriste Lindenmeyer, *A Right to Childhood: The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997): 9-29.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 27-47; Ernst Freund, *Illegitimacy Laws of the United States: Analysis and Index* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919); Mary Ann Mason, *From Father's Property to Children's Rights: The History of Child Custody in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 50-120; and Jyl J. Johnson, *Gender, Families, and State: Child Support Policy in the United States* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1997): 30-32.

¹⁷ Lillian Ripple, *Social Work Studies of Unmarried Parenthood as Affected by Contemporary Treatment Formulations, 1920-1940* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1953): 19-20.

transform illegitimacy from a topic that was not discussed in polite company to a social crusade that command widespread public support. Borrowing the sociological research tactic made famous by the settlement movement and infusing it with the popular allure of muckraking journalism, child welfare leaders incited public support for the reformation of illegitimacy laws and the protection of illegitimate children by publishing the results of covert investigations of unlicensed maternity homes that highlighted the need to protect illegitimate infants from the dangerous conditions encountered in the homes.

There were too few evangelical homes to tend to the needs of all unwed mothers and, most likely, there were a large percentage of unwed mothers who were unwilling to submit to the strict, evangelical methodology. Unwed mothers were known to seek aid in unlicensed maternity homes for their lying-in periods. These homes promised anonymity to the mothers, a modicum of medical care, and placement of the child. The homes were also known to supply notoriously bad conditions and high infant and maternal mortality rates.¹⁸

Perhaps the most infamous investigation of these homes was conducted by the Baltimore Vice Commission in 1913. Posing as married men with pregnant daughters, aunts with pregnant nieces, and other respectable members of society, Commission members petitioned doctors, nurses, ministers, and social workers for help. The prospect of a substantial economic windfall motivated nearly all questioned to offer unsavory and illegal services. One maternity home promised complete privacy and agreed to “do away” with the baby for a fee ranging from \$125 to \$400. Doctors and clergy also offered to dispose of unwanted infants for fees as low as \$15 to as high as \$500. The Commission

¹⁸ Leggett, p. 15-19.

found midwives and nurses who were willing to perform abortions or who offered instructions on how to quietly and quickly choke a baby in its first moments of life. The Commission concluded that religious, medical, and moral authorities were willing, perhaps even eager, to submit “to the desires of unwed mothers” as long as they were appropriately compensated.¹⁹

Authorities in Minnesota began a similar investigation of maternity homes in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area in 1915. Several former customers of a matron named Mrs. Ide were reluctantly deposed by the state attorney and shared stories of cruelty and neglect. One woman said that when her labor pains started, Mrs. Ide made her get into a bathtub and forced her to remain there for the duration of her labor even though she begged to be released. Her baby narrowly escaped drowning.

Another mother sneaked to the nursery to visit her child when Mrs. Ide was out and “found the child in a filthy condition, wrapped in rags and in a cold room...the only person in charge was a twelve-year-old girl.” One mother stated that during her time at the home “there were three very young babies crying all the time without sufficient attention. They were left lying on their faces in a half-smothered condition.” The deponent was “not sure whether or not it was to prevent their crying or to prevent their being heard.” She further stated that the hired nurse was especially rough with the babies.

¹⁹ Winthrop D. Lane, “Just Flickerings of Life,” *The Survey* 36 (May 6, 1916): 157-160; Elizabeth Feder, *The Elite of the Fallen: The Origins of Social Policy for Unwed Mothers, 1880-1930* (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1992): 197-198.

She claimed that “one time when [the nurse] was bathing a baby, the doorbell rang and she tossed the baby about three feet to the bed without even covering it.”²⁰

Investigators also interviewed women about their experiences with baby farmers. Single mothers and unwed mothers often struggled to find childcare for their children and frequently resorted to “baby farmers” out of desperation. Baby farms were boarding homes for infants who were unable to remain in the care of their mothers due to employment constraints or familial objections. The quality of care received in such places varied widely, but sensationalist reporting of the prevalence of poor conditions found at baby farms made them akin to murderous homes and dens of vice in the public’s mind.

Historian Sherri Broder has demonstrated that baby farmers were commonly neighborhood acquaintances or even family members of single mothers. Baby farming was a cooperative business model where resources (cash and childcare) were pooled to be theoretically mutually beneficial for working class women. However, baby farming was a controversial venture with hazards for all parties involved. Mothers would often abandon children at baby farms or fail to pay the required board. The farmers often struggled to care for a large number of children and wrangled with the health implications of bottle-feeding in an era when infant formula carried significant health risks and was linked to elevated rates of mortality from gastrointestinal disease. The experiences of children at baby farms became a cautionary tale for mothers and the eventual regulation of baby

²⁰ “Minnesota Day Care Study,” 1915, Box 26, Child Welfare League of America Papers, Social Welfare History Archives.

farms during the Progressive era was considered to be a victory for the child welfare movement.²¹

The Minnesota commission's analysis of baby farming in Minneapolis echoed the conclusions made by the Baltimore Commission regarding the allure of economic gain from cases of illegitimacy. The woman interviewed by the investigators ran a combined maternity home and baby farm. The farmer was described as "a bright, capable woman, a practical nurse with ability" who could have managed her home properly if she had been so inclined, but "to run it 'in the proper way' would cut the profits and it was the profits, not a successful piece of work, that appealed to the woman. Human welfare was not her concern." The woman charged the following fees for her services:

Private Room, Board and Laundry per week	\$15.00
Ward Room, Board, and Laundry per week	\$10.00
Delivery Room	\$5.00
Physician's Services during Confinement	\$25.00
Nurse's Services during Confinement	\$15.00

The typical unwed mother would have entered the home at least one month prior to her expected delivery date. The farmer could expect to earn at least \$45.00 if the mother chose the ward option and did not pay for medical services during the delivery. This translated into a substantial monthly profit, as the woman had space for ten expectant mothers in her home at a time. Regarding the fate of the infants, the farmer said

The mother may place it in my nursery for \$5.00 per week until adopted out or she can sign it over to me for \$130.00 for six or seven months in

²¹ Sherri Broder, *Tramps, Unfit Mothers, and Neglected Children: Negotiating the Family in Late Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002): 173-198.

advance. Then she has nothing more to do with it. She leaves here perfectly free. I do keep the child until I find a good and suitable home for it or if it dies I pay all the expenses. That is for \$130.00 cash. And that covers all the expense of the child even if I have to keep it here for a year or more.²²

The chances of the baby farmer retaining custody of the child for a year, or even six months, were incredibly small. Child-savers estimated the illegitimate infant mortality rate at two to three times higher than the legitimate infant mortality rate. National mortality statistics were almost nonexistent due to poor birth registration practices, but city studies conducted by the Children's Bureau between 1913 and 1917 demonstrated mortality rates for illegitimate children that were three times higher than the legitimate rate in Boston, 3.3 times higher in Baltimore, and 2.3 times higher in Milwaukee.²³

Concern about the wellbeing of unmarried mothers did not evaporate in this new era of child welfare, but any acknowledgment of maternal suffering was increasingly approached through the lens of the child's suffering. Sensational articles about desperate unwed mothers who resorted to infanticide or child abandonment rather than face the stigma of their condition made frequent appearances in most urban newspapers. The articles tended to emphasize the fear and relative immaturity of the mothers, a popular

²² "Minnesota Day Care Study," 1915, Box 26, Child Welfare League of America Papers, Social Welfare History Archives.

²³ Emma O. Lundberg, *Children of Illegitimate Birth and Measures for their Protection*, Bureau Publication no. 166 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926): 7-8. Reformers explained the high rates of illegitimate infant mortality as primarily due to economic stressors and the absence of breastfeeding by the mothers. There was also some recognition that detrimental prenatal conditions combined with the mental stress and upheaval of maternal social relationships in the first weeks of the infant's life contributed to high rates of mortality. The environmental conditions of mother and baby were also blamed for substantially higher death rates among illegitimate children due to premature birth and intestinal diseases. See Emma O. Lundberg and Katharine F. Lenroot, *Illegitimacy as a Child Welfare Problem, Part Two* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921): 88-101; George B. Mangold, *Children Born Out of Wedlock: A Sociological Study of Illegitimacy with Particular Reference to the United States* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1921): 116-125.

characterization of unwed motherhood that would be instrumental in efforts to cast unwed mothers as unfit mothers in later years.

A *New York Times* article about a seventeen-year-old mother who was accused of abandoning her two-month-old child in an apartment hallway included the mother's emotional testimony at her grand jury hearing. Describing the young girl as sobbing and leaning on a man for support, she tearfully the court that,

We had no money. The child was born at my home. We tried to put it in a nursery, but everywhere we went it was refused because we didn't have enough money. I used to work in a rug factory where I got \$17 a week, and I kept my mother and three sisters... We were desperate... We were cold and tired. There was a baby carriage in the hallway and we went in and put the baby in the carriage, covering her up with blankets so she was good and warm. We just hoped some kind hearted soul would find the child and take care of it.²⁴

While the mother was presented as pitiable, the substance of this article was concerned with the fate of the child. Readers were left to imagine what could have happened if the infant had not been discovered by "some kind hearted soul." Beginning in the Progressive era, newspaper articles detailing attempts by unwed mothers to dispose of their infants by drowning them, throwing them into furnace fires, and abandoning them on city streets became part of the muckraking campaign by child-savers to demonstrate the need for state oversight in cases of illegitimacy.²⁵ The goal was to sentimentalize the illegitimate

²⁴ "Pair Plead Guilty to Abandoning Baby," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1924, p. 10.

²⁵ Articles like these began to appear during the Progressive era and became a mainstay through the interwar period. See for example "Slays Baby to Save Daughter, Illegitimate Child Gotten out of the Way," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 6, 1910, p. 15; "Girl is Convicted of Killing Her Baby," *The New York Times*, Oct. 16, 1936, p. 52; "Mercy Sentence for Mother who Slew Baby," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 6, 1920, p. 3; "Police Find Baby's Charred Body in Ash Can, Arrest Unwed Mother," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 18, 1936, p. 2.

child in an attempt to replace traditional notions of bastardy with modern notions of protection.

These studies into the circumstances of illegitimacy were well-publicized by the child welfare movement. Julia Lathrop, head of the U.S. Children's Bureau, grew fond of noting that illegitimate children should not be punished, but protected. The evidence assembled by 1915 at state and national levels certainly seemed to indicate that the lives of illegitimate children were in peril before they were even born. In addition to the high rates of mortality associated with illegitimacy, reformers dwelled on a more generalized notion of the illegitimate child in danger. The U.S. Children's Bureau described the illegitimate child who was a ward of the state as "apt to have fewer opportunities of education and training than he may receive in a private family home, and, in view of these circumstances, [was] more frequently found among the dependents and flotsam and jetsam of our various cities." Illegitimate children who remained with their mothers were thought "to suffer all the more from the stigma which society with remarkable success [had] been able to lay upon [them]."²⁶ These impressions of the quality of life that illegitimate children could expect if they remained in maternal custody were the first whisperings of the custodial shift, although the legislative machinery needed to realize the shift had yet to be created.

In 1920 noted reformer Ada Sheffield, president of Boston's Conference on Illegitimacy, admitted that it was a 'futile attempt' to remove stigma from the unwed mother because 'a woman soiled is a woman spoiled,' a comment that demonstrates the

²⁶ United States Children's Bureau, *Standards of Legal Protection for Children Born out of Wedlock: A Report of Regional Conferences* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921): 96.

reversal of social concern in cases of illegitimacy from the mother to the child quite well. Reformers began to discuss a division between ‘deserved’ and ‘undeserved’ stigma; the illegitimate child fell into the latter category, while the unwed mother occupied the former.²⁷

It would not be an accident that the new illegitimacy legislation of the late Progressive era prioritized the needs of the illegitimate child. The compelling rhetoric of the child welfare movement effectively recast the unwed mother as the erring party and her child as the unfortunate victim forced to carry the burden of her mistake. The Minnesota Plan of 1917 was considered a national triumph for the Progressive child welfare movement because it made this reversal in victimology a legal standard and therefore an accepted public truth that unwed mothers were somehow less deserving recipients of social welfare than their children.

The Minnesota Plan: An Idea Takes Shape

A March 1917 letter to the editor of the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* noted that the bills that would shortly become the Minnesota Plan were being deliberated in the state legislature that morning. The author, a woman, proclaimed that passage of the bills would “form a code of which Minnesota may well be proud, and which will place the state in the front rank in the most important department of social service.” She went on to praise the chair of the commission that authored the bills, Minneapolis juvenile court judge

²⁷ Brumberg, p. 262.

Edward F. Waite, and opined that his leadership had made it possible “for all the children of the state to be benefited by his wisdom and his judicious, kindly sympathy.”²⁸

When the Minnesota Plan was passed the following month in April 1917, the state legislature was lauded for “making a better record than any of its predecessors in the character and scope of its social welfare legislation.”²⁹ The accolades continued to stream in from national child welfare leaders, an array of child welfare philanthropies, and government officials and ordinary citizens of other states. There was a feeling in the air that Minnesota had truly accomplished something special, that the new legislation would usher in a new era in the protection of illegitimate children. These feelings would prove to be accurate, but the overall importance of Minnesota’s legislation would not be understood for many years until the full weight of the custodial shift it authorized was observed and experienced by thousands of the state’s unwed mothers.

The Minnesota Plan was widely interpreted at the state and national levels as a piece of illegitimacy legislation, even though its numerous bills dealt with several child welfare matters only marginally related to unwed motherhood. The Plan was “intended for the benefit of children who [were] beginning life under such handicaps as [could] be lightened or removed by remedial legislation.” These children fell into the traditional categories of defective, illegitimate, dependent, neglected, and delinquent children. The Minnesota Plan catered to a wide array of child welfare concerns, including feeble-mindedness, baby farms, and parental desertion. The Plan contained regulations to strengthen laws related to abandonment, non-support, guardianship, and mother’s

²⁸ Maria Sanford, “The Public Pulse: The Child Welfare Code,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* (March 22, 1917): 6.

²⁹ “The Legislature’s Work,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* (April 20, 1917): 8.

pensions. It established a licensing system for child placing agencies, child caring institutions, and maternity hospitals. It also strengthened adoption laws and statutes concerning sex offenses like abortion, sexual assault, and carnal knowledge.³⁰

These laws were considered to be supporting laws designed to address the secondary social problems associated with or resulting from illegitimacy. This was prudent policy making. Child welfare leaders believed that “the problems [were] inseparable; the problem of the illegitimate child [was] all tied up with other problems, they belong together and you cannot separate them.”³¹ This belief that the child welfare challenges facing Minnesota, and indeed the nation, in 1917 were linked to illegitimacy established the punitive precept of the legislation, namely that illegitimacy was responsible for an array of long term social welfare problems that adversely affected the quality of the illegitimate child’s life and proved to be a continuous burden on state welfare resources.

Prior to the enactment of the Plan, Minnesota had little to no state oversight of dependent children. Except for a small and erratic amount of work performed by the Bureau of Women and Children in the state’s Department of Labor, no state agency was charged with overseeing child welfare. The Board of Control, the state agency in charge

³⁰ Edith Nagel, *A Study of the History of the Ramsey County Child Welfare Board from the Time of its Inception in 1917 until its Consolidation with the Ramsey County Welfare Board on July 1, 1937* (Master’s thesis, University of Minnesota, 1946): 1-11.

³¹ Grace Abbott, *The Child and the State: The Dependent and Delinquent Child, The Child of Unmarried Parents* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938): 622; “Bureau of Child Welfare is Urged by Revision Board,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, December 20, 1916, p. 5; Arvida Norum, *The Development of the First Ten Rural County Child Welfare Boards in Minnesota Employing Executive Secretaries* (Master’s Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1945): 5-6; Mildred Mudgett, *Results of Minnesota’s Laws for Protection of Children Born out of Wedlock* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor Children’s Bureau, 1924): 183-184.

of state hospitals, prisons, and institutions, was supposed to regulate all child-helping institutions in the state, but the board members complained that the laws were too vague to be effective and their staff only large enough to monitor the state institutions for children. Any aid extended to dependent children, similar to the aid given to unwed mothers, typically originated from private individuals and charitable organizations that were too small in number, too limited in funds, and too meager in power to address all of the state's child welfare needs.³² Minnesota social workers would later describe the period before the passage of the Minnesota Plan as one when “[unwanted] babies were disposed of as so many surplus puppies and kittens” and when “a handsome child could be sold for \$25 and a less handsome one...sold for \$5,” a reference to the activities of the period's notorious baby farmers.³³

State leaders credited the genesis of the Minnesota Plan to the efforts of Minneapolis juvenile court judge Edward F. Waite. Closely allied with the child welfare movement, his efforts to control juvenile delinquency and his association with maternalist politics made Judge Waite an ideal spokesperson for a new child welfare code. The juvenile court was the brainchild of Progressive era reformers interested in intervening in instances of juvenile criminality while a chance at reforming the character of the offending child was still possible in order to prevent the development of a hardened adult criminal. The juvenile court movement suspended jury trials for children, created separate reformatories for youth, and developed probationary systems to aid in

³² William Hodson, “State and Local Administration in Child Welfare Work,” in Emma O. Lundberg, *The County as a Unit for an Organized Program of Child Caring and Protective Work* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926): 19.

³³ “Child Welfare Up Before Board Today,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 26, 1919, p. 13.

rehabilitation efforts. The first juvenile court was established in Chicago in 1889 and spread to all but two states by 1928. In Minnesota, only the state's three largest counties possessed a juvenile court in 1905, but by 1909 the court had expanded to every county in the state. The rapid expansion of the court aided in the rising cultural prestige of juvenile court judges.

Juvenile court judges were perceived to be uniquely in touch with modern youth, thus earning them the title of experts on child welfare needs. Some juvenile court judges, such as Denver's Judge Ben Lindsey, became worldwide authorities on juvenile delinquency due to their insights into adolescent psychology and its link to criminal behavior.³⁴ Juvenile court judges found some of their staunchest advocates among the ranks of the maternalists, a movement of middle class women who believed that a scientific approach to matters of childrearing and child welfare could improve the lives of children while simultaneously elevating women's roles in the socio-political sphere. As historian Molly Ladd-Taylor has demonstrated, "mothering was a central organizing principle of Progressive era politics... [that] between 1890 and 1920 became an overtly political concern, inextricably tied to state building and public policy."³⁵ Judge Waite received support and advice during his campaign from multiple national child welfare organizations, including the powerful Child Welfare League of America. Waite's ties to maternalist politics and the juvenile delinquency movement likely affected the final shape of the Minnesota Plan, especially its emphasis on rehabilitating unwed mothers by

³⁴ Steven L. Schlossman, *Love & the American Delinquent: The Theory and Practice of 'Progressive' Juvenile Justice, 1825-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977): 55-58.

³⁵ Ladd-Taylor, p. 43.

placing them in state reformatories and the high value the Plan placed on scientific approaches to child welfare initiatives and their corresponding bureaucratic infrastructure.

Judge Waite did not have a national reputation on the level of Ben Lindsey, but he was well known and widely respected in state and national child welfare circles. Described as a man with a “quiet and retiring manner,” Waite was nominated to the district court in 1904 and moved to the juvenile court in 1911, where he would remain for nearly thirty years. He was widely believed to “have a way” with troubled youth. As one supporter stated in 1912, Waite had “the most old-fashioned common sense, the best of gentle humor, and the kindest appreciation of what a fellow has in him and how to bring it out of any man we ever knew.”³⁶

Despite Waite’s relative celebrity in Minnesota’s child welfare circles, the campaign to enact the Minnesota Plan was an uphill battle that consumed several years of his life. Waite’s campaign to reform Minnesota’s illegitimacy laws began as an effort to amend the bastardy laws. At the 1914 State Meeting on Corrections and Charities in a speech to the assembled delegation, Waite described Minnesota’s bastardy laws as “a disgrace to an enlightened and Christian state, from its cruel title ‘Bastards’ to its concluding paragraph.” He went on to say that,

One searches in vain for a trace of human feeling for the helpless child thrust into life without a welcome or a name. [The law] has one purpose and one purpose only – to save possible expense to the county in which the child was born. This early nineteenth century chapter should be

³⁶ See a set of notes from an interview with the *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 20, 1940, Box 8, Edward F. Waite Papers; and an untitled newspaper clipping, October 31, 1912, Box 4, Edward F. Waite Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

rewritten by a twentieth century hand, guided by a true Minnesota heart. It will then contain provisions for the public guardianship of illegitimate children, and for just and adequate responsibility on the part of both unmarried parents.³⁷

Waite was advocating not just for a revision of the state's bastardy laws, but a significant expansion of the state's involvement in illegitimacy cases, a goal that is somewhat concealed under the sentimental language of his critique. He very clearly placed the economic considerations that led to bastardy laws secondary to the welfare of illegitimate children, a stance that reflected his child welfare background.³⁸ Waite did not disregard the necessity of economic support for children, but he saw illegitimate children as a special case whose needs could not be completely addressed by clothing, shelter, and food. Their lot in life to greet the world "without a welcome or name" meant that comprehensive legislation was needed to remedy illegitimacy's underlying handicap of stigma. Illegitimate children were thought to need more than material comforts to thrive.

As Waite's campaign for revision of the bastardy laws progressed, he began to speak of a state plan that vested counties with the oversight and execution of a comprehensive set of illegitimacy laws. These laws would ideally include provisions for state guardianship of illegitimate children, which were deemed necessary to protect their welfare by allowing the state to control the children's immediate environment. This provision in the Minnesota Plan is the single most important clause for the custodial shift because it allowed the state to determine what elements were needed for a healthy

³⁷ Edward F. Waite, "Need for Revision and Codification of Minnesota's Laws Relating to Children," *Proceedings of the 23rd Minnesota Conference on Charities and Corrections* (St. Paul: State Board of Corrections and Charities, 1914): 5.

³⁸ This separation of child welfare versus fiscal responsibility would be fleeting, especially once the Depression places an unprecedented demand on the state's welfare funds.

childhood environment. The state's interest in determining fit and unfit motherhood was just a short conceptual leap away.

The legislative reaction to Waite's plan was decidedly mixed. No one questioned the premise that society had a responsibility to provide for the health, education, and vocational training of illegitimate children. Legislators, however, balked at the financial concessions required of counties under Waite's plan. His plan was predicated on the assumption that counties would be willing to assume financial responsibility for unwed mothers and their children until the adjudication of alleged fathers resulted in a financial settlement, at which point the mother could presumably repay any debts she had acquired. Importantly, Waite's plan expected counties to pay for all costs associated with illegitimate pregnancies incurred by their residents regardless of where the child was conceived or delivered. As most unwed mothers, especially from rural counties, sought aid in the state's cities, this meant that the counties would be responsible for charges for services they could not regulate or validate.

Even liberal legislators argued that the state's responsibilities for the care of illegitimate children could not disregard the very distinct possibility that the unwed mother and her child might become permanent social debtors. They acknowledged the fact that an unwed mother may never be able to pay the county back for its initial expenditure and might require ever greater sums of money for their continued support, which the county would be mandated to give. The long-term cost of such a plan would drastically exceed existing amounts of welfare allotments, potentially placing an unsustainable strain on county budgets.

Legislators imagined multiple situations, both in the immediate and distant futures, where cases of unwed pregnancy might adversely affect county finances if counties were required to support illegitimate children for extended periods. A Children's Bureau study of illegitimacy in Boston during 1914-1915 found that most unwed mothers could not afford to care for their child and most fathers did not contribute support, leaving the majority of financial obligations to be assumed by the public. The report found that for more than three-fourths of illegitimate births "all or part of the expense" was met by public or private organizations. The likelihood that the children would require long-term public support was inferred from statistics illustrating that more than three-fifths of the children were under "prolonged care" of Boston social agencies for all or most of the first year of life. The expense of such care was upwards of \$100,000 annually. Moreover, a significant portion of private and state social welfare resources were devoted to case work with unwed mothers and their children.³⁹

Moreover, Waite's supporters cautioned him that rural counties were likely to resent being presented with a bill for lying-in expenses from urban maternity homes for services rendered to county residents. Marjorie Embry, one of Waite's allies from the Child Welfare League of America, mimed a rural county official as being likely to complain that,

There are already a half dozen places for every dollar in the county treasury. Why should the poor tax payers have to pay for a lot of high-fallutin' doctors and social workers to look after the Jones girl up in the big city. She's only gettin' what she deserves now, and if she gets shamed a little, maybe she won't have another one right away...It's no more than right for the big cities to take care of the poor country girls,

³⁹ Lundberg and Lenroot, p. 64-66; Ida R. Parker, *A Follow-Up Study of 550 Illegitimacy Applications* (Boston: Research Bureau on Social Case Work, 1924): 44-45.

because all the money is in the cities anyway, and it's all the county can do keep up their roads.⁴⁰

Embry believed attitudes like these stemmed from “folksy old gentlemen” who were biased against the unwed mother and resentful of the perceived wealth of urban areas. But, real or imagined, attitudes that characterized reform of the state’s illegitimacy law as bad business were a serious threat to its passage well before its basic tenets were firmly articulated. To effect reform of the bastardy laws, Waite and his supporters needed to dissuade legislators from equating amendment with increased financial burdens and untested social policy that benefited unwed mothers. The reform impetus needed to be placed solely on the shoulders of illegitimate children, whom all parties agreed were deserving of aid. The sole question remaining was how to lend credibility to Waite’s proposals. Waite’s 1914 request to appoint a children’s code exploratory committee was denied.

It is here that the progression of events in Waite’s campaign grows somewhat murkier and, to some extent, calls into question whether the Minnesota Plan was Waite’s idea or whether he was the spokesman for a plan formulated by the Child Welfare League of America. Several factors seem to indicate that the latter is most accurate. There is nothing in Waite’s papers or speeches to explain why he suddenly turned his attention to the bastardy laws and the welfare of illegitimate children in 1914. By his own admission, Waite’s true interest was the reformation of delinquent boys. Moreover, Waite’s plan was eerily similar to a plan presented by C.C. Carstens, director of the Child Welfare League of America, to the 1915 National Conference on Charities and Corrections.

⁴⁰ Marjorie Embry, “Planning for the Unmarried Mother,” unpublished speech, n.d., Box 26, Child Welfare League of America Papers, Social Welfare History Archives.

In his report, titled “A Community Plan for Child Welfare” and based on several years of research, Carstens advocated for the separation of public and private child welfare efforts in favor of a county organization. Both Waite and Carstens repeatedly offered some version of the sentiment that illegitimate children should be legally entitled to “a chance to be born sound in brain and body; a fair chance for normal development in body, mind, and morals; the greatest possible relief from permanent consequences of the child’s own inexperience and reformation from antisocial conduct; and adequate protection against the wrongs of others.”⁴¹ The county organization was presented as being especially important to achieving these ideals because officials might eventually need the authorities of control or compulsion when permanent care of the illegitimate child by the state or non-biological parents was deemed most appropriate, another aspect of the Plan that foreshadowed the custodial shift in the state.

Carsten’s speech was well received on the national stage and succeeded in legitimating Waite’s proposals for the state of Minnesota, stimulating extensive political pressure that led to the formation of a children’s code exploratory committee in 1916. The committee was headed by Waite and included several representatives from Minneapolis social welfare organizations, the superintendent of the state orphanage, other juvenile court judges, clergy, and political leaders. The committee was in session from September 1916 to February 1917, at which point they presented forty-three bills to the

⁴¹ Nagel, p. 5-8.

Legislature. Thirty-five of the bills were signed into law and christened the Minnesota Plan. The Plan became law on January 1, 1918.⁴²

Three components of the Minnesota Plan were widely considered to be transformative approaches in the care of illegitimacy. First, the Minnesota Plan placed an unprecedented emphasis on prosecuting alleged fathers to ensure that a lump settlement or a monthly support payment was made to the mother. The law required fathers to support illegitimate children at the same financial level that legitimate children were supported, which should theoretically have allowed unwed mothers to be self-sufficient and voided the difference between legally imposed obligations and socially recognized responsibilities of parents for their legitimate and illegitimate children. Adjudication also carried with it rights of inheritance and the right to use the father's name. These were elements that reformers considered particularly important for reducing the amount of stigma attached to the child. Because so many support elements were linked to the establishment of paternity, the Minnesota Plan empowered social workers to press paternity charges on behalf of the mother in instances where the mother refused to do so. As long as the state possessed the name of the potential father or fathers, they did not need the mother's cooperation in securing filial rights of support.

The second crucial component of the Plan was the realization of Waite's suggestion that the state should be allowed to assume guardianship of children "who need

⁴² It should be noted that Minnesota was not the only state considering new child welfare codes, although it is accurate to characterize the Minnesota Plan as the most expansive in its ends and most restrictive in its means. For information on competing illegitimacy plans, see Lundberg, *Children of Illegitimate Birth and Measures for their Protection*; Ruth I. Workum, "The Cincinnati Illegitimacy Plan," *Hospital Social Service* 4 (1921): 247-255; George B. Mangold, *Children Born out of Wedlock*; and Robert South Barrett, *The Care of the Unmarried Mother*, Rpt. (New York: Garland, 1987).

what they cannot provide for themselves, and which natural or legal guardians are not providing for them.” This clause was applicable to all minor children in the state, but was used most frequently to justify state guardianship of illegitimate children. The state’s guardianship began as soon as they were informed of an illegitimacy case, even if the child in question was still in utero. The loosely worded clause continued to note that after the mother’s commitment to a state institution the state “may make such provisions for and disposition of the child as necessity and the best interests of the child may from time to time require,” meaning the state had the power to decide permanent placement of the child without consulting or securing the permission of the mother.

This clause of the Minnesota Plan set the legal precedent for the custodial shift. Technically the state was not allowed to separate an unwed mother from her child without her permission, but the statute allowed for separation against the mother’s will if it was needed “in order to prevent serious detriment to the welfare of the child.” Judge Waite defended this authority by noting that although he recognized the “natural right of the mother to her child...this right is subordinate to the welfare of the child.”⁴³ The structure of this portion of the Minnesota Plan was intentionally written to be broad in scope and vague in details. Its language meant that parental fitness and the child’s best interests were not legally defined and thus subjective measurements left to the determination of state officials.

Finally, the Minnesota Plan also allowed the state to assume guardianship of the unwed mother herself if she was under the age of eighteen. Guardianship extended until

⁴³ Lenroot, *First Ten Years Work of the Minnesota Board of Control*, p. 3; Edward F. Waite, “Placement of the Child Born Out of Wedlock: Is It an Exclusive Public Function?” *Minnesota Medicine* 15 (August 1932): 510-511.

the mother reached the age of twenty-one. The Plan assumed that unwed mothers were often from bad home environments and poor family situations that were likely to contribute to the mother's repeat and the illegitimate child's future delinquency. Guardianship allowed the state to remove unwed mothers from their home environment and commit them to an institution without having to satisfy the legal requirements of proving delinquency, although most girls sent to reformatories in the state were charged with some sort of moral crime. The power of the statute extended to any siblings of the unwed mother who showed warning signs of future delinquency, although the law did not explicitly state the nature of such warning signs and again left the interpretation to state officials.⁴⁴

This portion of the law implies that while the Plan was explicitly motivated by child welfare concerns, it was also implicitly written to address and control the lurking menace of the so-called "girl problem." The girl problem was yet another creation of Progressive reformers who were alarmed by the relative economic and sexual freedom displayed by young women who found paid work in the factories, offices, and department stores of cities. In their spare time, these young working girls were known to frequent dance halls, movie theaters, and amusement parks for recreation. Reformers noted that each locale offered ample opportunity for flirtation, sexual experimentation, and alcohol consumption due to the unsupervised nature of the venues. These activities were thought to be linked to rising rates of prostitution, venereal disease, and illegitimacy.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Mudgett, p. 195.

⁴⁵ There is a substantial body of literature documenting the girl problem and female sexual delinquency. See, for example, Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of

Progressive efforts to control this behavior led to equating sexual precociousness with delinquency. By characterizing unwed mothers as female juvenile delinquents, the Minnesota Plan from its outset championed the belief that there was something inherently “wrong” or “bad” about young girls who became pregnant out of wedlock. This characterization allowed the Minnesota Plan’s statutes regarding unwed mothers to be purposely interpreted in punitive ways, as future chapters will explore.

The provisions of the Minnesota Plan, especially the state’s ability to assume guardianship of unwed mothers and their children, was the Progressive’s attempt to solve multiple social problems with one piece of legislation. At its simplest, the Plan aimed to reduce rates of illegitimacy in the state, control female juvenile delinquency, and protect the health and welfare of illegitimate children. If it succeeded, Minnesota would be “the only state in the Union which...made effective casework with unmarried mothers practicable,” a feat with greater national importance for social policy than many of the Plan’s initial supporters realized.⁴⁶

The Minnesota Plan was controversial among state representatives from the very beginning, as previously noted, and dissatisfaction with the Plan increased over time. Many legislators opposed the Plan on principle alone due to its economic implications. It would take years before other legislators began to speak out against the Plan, noting that

North Carolina Press, 1995); Crista DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Laura S. Abrams, “Guardians of Virtue: The Social Reformers and the ‘Girl Problem’, 1890-1920,” *Social Service Review* 74 (September 2000): 436-452; Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); and Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

⁴⁶ Joanna Colcord, “The Need of Adequate Case Work with the Unmarried Mother,” *The Family* iv (November 1923): 167.

the political pressure, thanks to the involvement of the Child Welfare League, and the public rhetoric surrounding the Plan's ideals were so intense that they were not fully aware of the power they were vesting in the state's child welfare agencies. In 1922 one former state senator claimed that the Plan was purposely written in an obtuse manner and that he never would have voted for it if he "had known what the bills really meant." Many public officials and private citizens in the state who had initially supported the Plan eventually began to feel as though they were tricked into believing in legislation that exceeded the normal boundaries of governmental control.⁴⁷ The innovative state and county level organization of the Plan was partly responsible for the public belief that the new laws were too intrusive in practice and too expansive in scope.

The County as a Delivery Unit for Social Welfare

While the rhetoric of the child welfare movement was instrumental in the passage of the Minnesota Plan, its loose organization of largely unsupervised county welfare units was perhaps more to blame for the custodial shift in the state. The vast bureaucracy of county welfare units was too large for the state's supervisory authority, the Children's Bureau, to adequately oversee. Moreover, the degree of power the Minnesota Plan granted to county level authorities allowed individuals to make decisions regarding fit motherhood based on mere impressions of the mother that were informed by her and her family's reputations within the community. The language of the Minnesota Plan also allowed for liberal interpretation of the law, thus exponentially expanding the powers of

⁴⁷ Hodson, p. 25-26; Nagel, p. 12; Mudgett, p. 201-203.

state and county workers to intervene in instances of premarital pregnancy that drastically exceeded the limits that many state lawmakers originally envisioned.

Authority vested to the state under the Minnesota Plan was symbolically centralized within the State Board of Control, which was established in 1908 as a replacement for the Board of Corrections and Charities. The Board of Control was the workhouse for social welfare initiatives within the state and was arguably too taxed with its existing responsibilities to oversee the state prisons, hospitals, and orphanages to monitor the additional state responsibilities outlined in the Plan. Luckily, the Plan granted the Board the authority to create any necessary bureaucratic machinery necessary for the fulfillment of the Plan's objectives. To this end, the Board created the state's Children's Bureau in June 1918.

The small bureau was staffed by a case work supervisor and five field representatives who offered advice and consultation to each of the eighty-six counties within the state.⁴⁸ The Bureau was designed to promote enforcement of the Minnesota Plan's statutes, encourage cooperation between public and private agencies, and to take initiative in child welfare cases when other agencies or individuals failed to become involved.

The Children's Bureau depended on county child welfare boards to fulfill a large percentage of its mission. This design was in accordance with national experts' belief that the county was the most effective delivery unit for welfare systems because it already

⁴⁸ This number would shortly increase to eighty-seven. Lake of the Woods County was created in November 1922 from the northern portion of Beltrami County.

oversaw programs like poor relief, taxation, and education. The county system also ensured that welfare efforts would be equally distributed between urban and rural areas.⁴⁹

County boards were expected to establish paternity and support for illegitimate children, investigate boarding and maternity homes for state licensing purposes, periodically investigate private homes where dependent children were placed for boarding, investigate prospective parents in adoption cases, supervise dependent and feeble-minded persons committed to the state's guardianship, and investigate applicants for mother's allowances when requested by the county juvenile court.⁵⁰ Like the Children's Bureau itself, the responsibilities given to the county welfare boards were more than the small boards could realistically handle.

Part of the reason the mission and scope of the county welfare boards exceeded their organizational capacity was because, although they were crucial elements in the successful functioning of the Minnesota Plan, the state did not make establishment of the boards mandatory. A county board could only be established once the Bureau received a

⁴⁹ There was a large increase in the number of county child welfare programs in the late Progressive era. Emma Lundberg of the Children's Bureau divided them into four categories: 1) plans that relied on an expansive county level public welfare program as part of a state-wide plan, like Minnesota; 2) broad county level social work plans promoted by the state but not mandated by the state or duplicated at the state level; 3) state coordination of private and public relief efforts at the county level; and 4) county care of dependent, neglected, and delinquent children without state oversight.

Minnesota and North Carolina were the only states to attempt the first category of county welfare programs. Also passed in 1917, the North Carolina plan was frequently compared to the Minnesota Plan. North Carolina appointed county boards of charity and public welfare that had a much larger agenda than Minnesota's county child welfare boards and substantially less authority. The boards did not have specific, recurrent duties, but rather responded to requests by state officials to make particular visits or conduct studies on specific matters. The two systems were therefore similar only in their organization. For information on the county welfare systems, see Emma Lundberg's *The County as a Unit for an Organized Program of Child Caring and Protective Work*.

⁵⁰ Lundberg, *The County as a Unit*, p. 4-8.

written request from the county commissioner. This bureaucratic oddity was the result of negotiations between the Plan's supporters and its detractors in the state legislature. The original wording of the Plan logically stated that "there shall be a child welfare board in each county," but the Plan was in danger of failing legislative approval unless the phrase was amended to "there may be" a board in each county. The Plan's supporters agreed to this amendment out of the practical need to see the Plan enacted into law, but also out of a belief that without community support of the county board's activities there would not be sufficient communication and partnership between the Bureau and the county to make enforcement of the Plan's laws practicable. In order for the stricter child welfare laws to gain traction in the state, individual communities needed to endorse them.

It is not surprising that the Children's Bureau devoted much effort during its earliest years campaigning for the establishment of county boards.^{51 52} In order to appeal to the largely rural audiences who were believed to be less interested in the social and political ideals of the child welfare movement, Bureau staff members relied on economic arguments to gain support for their cause. Field representatives visited counties to discuss "modern" methods of illegitimacy management by arguing that the traditional responses to unwed pregnancy like ostracizing the mother and her child had failed to reduce rates of

⁵¹ Despite this, it should be noted that the Children's Bureau was successful in increasing its involvement in illegitimacy cases during its formative years. In 1918 the Bureau was notified of 782 illegitimacy cases. This number nearly doubled by 1921 when the Bureau was aware of 1,385 illegitimate births. The Bureau was especially proud of the fact that by 1920 more cases of illegitimacy were being reported to its officials than the number of illegitimate births being noted on Department of Health issued birth certificates, a shift that the Bureau interpreted as an increased awareness of the proper way to handle illegitimacy. It is, however, likely that neither the Children's Bureau nor the Department of Health had an accurate handle on the number of illegitimate births in the state during the initial years of the Minnesota Plan.

⁵² Mudgett, p. 203-206; Nagel, p. 35.

illegitimacy in the state, which made the problem a continuous financial burden on the state's tax payers.

The Bureau's social workers argued that the Minnesota Plan was capable of reducing rates of illegitimacy and the corresponding financial drain on cash-strapped rural communities, but, as they repeatedly emphasized in their speeches, achieving these objectives would require widespread community support of the Plan. They exhorted their audiences to demonstrate support by establishing county child welfare boards.

Children's Bureau staff members targeted female audiences during the campaign to establish county boards. They gave a series of emotional speeches with a handy dose of pragmatism to club women and church groups from the same communities. Repeated contact with sympathetic female members of the community (and by default, the women's husbands) proved to be an effective mechanism for generating community support for the boards. By the fall of 1926, eight years after the enactment of the Minnesota Plan, Minnesota had 80 county child welfare boards out of a possible eighty-seven boards.⁵³

The county child welfare boards were typically composed of the school superintendent, the county commissioner, and three individuals appointed by the state Board of Control. Most county boards were not staffed by social workers due to a lack of trained workers in the state and a general unwillingness of qualified social workers to

⁵³ Two of the counties without child welfare boards opted to appoint a welfare worker from the juvenile court. The remaining five counties declined to participate entirely. Each of these counties was among the state's most sparsely populated areas.

Hodson, p. 27; Lundberg, *The County as a Unit*, p. 7-9; Ethel Maxwell, *A Study of the Social Attitudes of Negro Unmarried Mothers who Have Retained Custody of their Children known to the Child Welfare Division of the Ramsey County Welfare Board* (Master's Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1939):11-12.

relocate to rural areas. Instead, the three remaining vacancies were commonly staffed by retired school teachers, nurses, and other women deemed to be in good social standing who the community also believed possessed extensive knowledge about children. The composition of these boards inadvertently made illegitimate pregnancy in Minnesota a class issue. The vast majority of cases that came to the attention of state authorities were from families who lacked the resources to address the problem privately, whereas the women selected to serve on the welfare boards commonly hailed from the community's more elite families. The socio-economic divide between unwed mothers and those with the authority to comment on their maternal aptitude often muddied the ability of the boards to respond in an unbiased manner. On the other hand, it also appears that the county boards earned the goodwill of the community by policing the behavior of individuals and families who were somehow offensive to the community.⁵⁴

It was rare for unwed mothers to self-report their condition to the county board. Many cases of premarital pregnancy or premarital sexual activity were reported to the board by members of the community, usually neighbors or acquaintances of the family. A case from Wisconsin, which passed a child welfare code based on Minnesota's in 1929, demonstrates the logistics of this. The community reported the case of a widowed man recently remarried to a woman whom his neighbors believed did not respect him or

⁵⁴ This is a phenomenon that has been well documented by historians. Many have noted a broad tendency of reform efforts to police suspicious populations. While there is some degree of debate regarding the degree of agency displayed by these populations, most historians agree that the development of welfare policies was rooted, to some extent, in class conflict and a maternalist agenda. See Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work*, p. 43-134; Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poor House: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

remain faithful to him. She was accused of letting his teenaged daughters stay out all night at dances while she attended to her dalliances.

An investigation by the county board revealed four teenaged daughters in the home. Although they could not prove the allegations of infidelity, circumstances did appear to corroborate the allegations that the girls had too much unsupervised time. The oldest daughter had one illegitimate child. The second oldest daughter was illegitimately pregnant and named four men as the possible father. Caseworkers decided to remove the two youngest daughters, aged twelve and fifteen, to prevent them from following a similar path. Board members believed they had intervened in the nick of time to prevent the conception of two more illegitimate children, while the community celebrated the fact that the family was now being monitored by the state.⁵⁵

The Minnesota Board of Control believed the county boards' ability to respond to community complaints and to police the activities of county residents was essential to the Plan's success. The Board of Control spun the county boards' reliance on idle community gossip to identify cases as evidence that board members were "in close contact with the problems and needs of their respective communities" and argued that this link enabled them to be "sensitive to local public opinion."⁵⁶ In this respect, many board members' lack of relevant training was of little concern due to their ability to act as moral arbiters within their communities.

⁵⁵ Esther DeWeerd, *Five Years of Welfare under the Children's Code in Wisconsin* (Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Conference of Social Work, 1934): 36.

⁵⁶ *Minnesota State Board of Control Tenth Biennial Report, 1919-1920* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Board of Control, 1920): 24.

But, because the child welfare boards were staffed by community members who lacked training in social work and whose knowledge of child welfare was typically perfunctory at best, the boards required a high degree of guidance and oversight from the trained staff of the Children's Bureau in order to function. The intensive demands placed on the small staff of the Bureau by the burgeoning ranks of county boards quickly became problematic.

Each field representative from the Children's Bureau was responsible for supervising fifteen to twenty county welfare boards, in addition to handling any individual cases within the counties that were thought to need a degree of skill and experience not possessed by the staff of the county boards. The representatives were supposed to visit each county a minimum of one time per quarter, but whenever a new county board was established representatives were expected to attend each meeting of the board for the first several months. The hours were long and were often made longer by the rural nature of the state. In one 150-mile-long county, it took the field representative two days to travel from the southern end of the county to the northern end due to poor train connections. In another instance of an unwed mother who lived on an island and required regular visits, the field representative had to travel 75 miles by train, twenty miles by trolley, twenty miles by stage, and six miles on horseback just to reach her.⁵⁷ The extensive travel coupled with slow transit times and vast territories meant that field representatives were unable to perform more than a fraction of the duties assigned to them, forcing county welfare boards to interpret the laws by themselves.

⁵⁷ Mudgett, p. 199-200; Norum, p. 102; Lenroot, *First Ten Years Work*, p. 3; Elizabeth A. Ryan, "A Reminiscence of County Social Service Work, 1932 to 1974," *Milwaukee History* 18 (1995): 15-24.

The activities of the child welfare boards were divided into three main areas: unmarried mothers; feebleminded and epileptic county residents; and children's work, which was concerned with the care of dependent children, oversight of adoptions, and regulation of county boarding homes. The Minnesota Plan required any person with knowledge of an illegitimate pregnancy or birth to report it to the state Board of Control. Official reports of this nature were made by physicians, nurses, social workers, and licensed maternity home matrons, although the unofficial reporting system directly to the county boards by members of the community rivaled official reporting in the volume of referrals. Once the Board of Control received notice, the case was referred to the mother's home county for investigation. Members of the child welfare board interviewed the mother and her acquaintances to obtain accounts of the mother's sexual experience, previous sexual histories of both the unwed mother and the alleged father, and a complete familial history. County board members would also inquire after the mother's plan for her baby.

The case should then have been discussed at the next full meeting of the child welfare board. Members were presented with pertinent background information regarding the mother's reputation and familial background, in addition to the results of the mother's physical examination, which included venereal disease testing and a mental examination. A schedule of visits with the mother would be drawn up to ensure that she had appropriate guidance and support during her pregnancy and with her custody decision. County board members would also meet with the county attorney regarding establishment of paternity, an appropriate level of child support should the child remain

in maternal custody, and the desirability of filing criminal charges against the alleged father (typically for carnal knowledge).⁵⁸

These procedures were the ideal outlined by the Minnesota Plan, but analysis of welfare board records indicates that boards were seldom so organized. The Chisago County Welfare Board serves as an interesting case study of how the boards functioned in reality. Founded in 1918, the Chisago County Welfare Board was one of the first in the state. The county seat, Center City, was less than 45 miles from Children's Bureau headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota. Nevertheless, the board did not meet with a representative from the Bureau until December 1920 and did not begin to intervene in instances of unwed pregnancy until the latter portion of 1925. The board struggled to function in its early years. County funding was erratic at best and board members were forced to hold tag sales to pay for basic supplies like stamps and stationary.⁵⁹ The relative failure of Children's Bureau staff members to properly oversee a county board that was essentially in their own backyard raises questions about the adequacy and frequency of help extended to boards in more isolated regions of the state.

The Children's Bureau's apparent failure to appropriately supervise the county child welfare boards meant that the boards functioned as a relatively autonomous unit, interpreting the statutes with varying degrees of stringency and creating their own standards for casework with unwed mothers. Once the Chisago County Welfare Board became involved with unwed mothers in 1925, they adopted a paternalistic approach to their interactions. When the board established a relationship with an unwed mother, they

⁵⁸ Charles E. McLennan, "The Problem of Illegitimacy," n.d., Box 1, Hennepin County Illegitimacy Conference Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵⁹ Chisago County Welfare Board Minutes and Miscellany, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society.

continued to monitor her parenting style and her child's welfare for years, a clear expansion of the Minnesota Plan's original objective to offer aid to mothers during pregnancy and during the first year of the child's life. Indeed, the records from Chisago County paint an image of an almost soap opera-esque relationship between the unwed mother, the board, and the community at large. Board members spent a great deal of time intervening in disputes between unwed mothers and boarding home matrons, solving love triangles, and urging paternal involvement in the pregnancy and the child's life. These interactions required a degree of intimacy and involvement in the daily experiences of unwed motherhood that was not anticipated by the language of the Minnesota Plan and not always appreciated by the unwed mothers themselves. The most intensive (and thus most intrusive) casework occurred with mothers who chose to retain custody of their children.

The Chisago County Welfare Board's official agenda in instances where the child remained in maternal custody centered on efforts to secure paternity payments, urge adoption in cases where maternal fitness was doubted, and monitor the behavior of girls deemed likely to have additional illegitimate pregnancies. The success of the board in accomplishing these tasks fluctuated widely. Their reaction to missed paternity payments versus their commitment to regulating the sexuality of unwed mothers sets up a useful dichotomy for exploring the board's priorities.

The Minnesota Plan mandated that paternity payments be made to the state and distributed to the mothers by the county child welfare boards on a monthly basis. This arrangement was designed to encourage higher rates of paternal compliance with

paternity settlements and to ensure that payments were not squandered by unwed mothers on frivolous expenditures. The county boards also had the power to determine what percentage of the monthly payments the mothers should receive in cash and what percentage would be invested in a savings account by the boards on behalf of the mothers. Ensuring that unwed mothers received their payments in a timely manner often required that board members serve as advocates for the mothers, a role that few boards adequately fulfilled.

In Chisago County, a young girl named Helen gave birth out of wedlock in 1927. She pressed paternity charges and was granted an allowance of \$12.50 per month in child support, of which the county board decided \$5.00 would be placed in a savings account. By the following summer the father of Helen's child was in arrears. Although the board would have already known about the missing payments, Helen appealed to them for help. The board dismissed her complaint as unfounded, citing poor crop conditions in the county as a legitimate reason for missed payments. They assured Helen that the father was "making payments as quickly as he [could]." Helen returned to the board's meeting to complain about missed payments in January 1929, April 1930, July 1930, August 1930, and at every board meeting between January 1931 and October 1934.

In July 1930 the board investigated the father's financial status and informed him he could afford to pay child support. He did not. By January 1931 the total amount owed Helen was almost \$200. Although the board could have the father arrested for nonpayment and they publicly agreed with Helen that he was "making excuses" not to pay, they declined to initiate any actions on her behalf. In April 1933 Helen's father

visited the county attorney and asked him to press charges of nonsupport, but he also refused. Helen's case continues in the minutes of the Chisago County Welfare Board until the case record falls silent. The final entry regarding Helen notes that the father was over \$400 behind in child support and there is no indication that Helen ever began to receive regular support payments.

The Chisago County Welfare Board was more effective in their attempts to regulate maternal sexuality, especially in instances when they considered the mentality or morality of a mother to be particularly low. For example, Inez gave birth to her second illegitimate child in 1931, but planned to marry the father and legitimate the child. The board disapproved of Inez's husband's propensity to drink "whenever he had any money" and suddenly began to discuss Inez's "low mental scores." Fearful that Inez would continue to have children, legitimate or otherwise, the board recommended her as a candidate for sterilization. Another honest young woman named Pearl reported to the board the birth of a stillborn illegitimate child in Milwaukee in 1929. The following year Pearl moved to Minneapolis for work and the board recommended that she be brought back and placed in reform school because they feared "another difficulty may develop" unless she was properly watched.⁶⁰

The punitive component of the board's preoccupation with the regulation of sexuality is obvious. But what about their lack of concern regarding timely child support payments? The board's minutes do not record justifications for their actions, but it is plausible that their response to Helen's situation was also meant to be punitive. It is likely

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* The reaction of the board to Inez's case is linked to popular understandings of heredity, delinquency, and recidivism that will be discussed in later chapters.

Helen was receiving some support from her parents and she may have even been living with them, meaning that she was not dependent on county aid for her survival. There was likely no pressing financial reason from the county's standpoint to press charges against the father of Helen's child. As long as her parents continued to support her and the baby, the only party suffering from lack of support payments was Helen herself. The Minnesota Plan was not written to be nor was it implemented as a tool to protect unwed mothers. Moreover, the Plan's reliance on virtually unsupervised child welfare boards to intervene in cases of illegitimacy meant that social workers had little direct, daily control over the lives of unwed mothers who were not institutionalized. The Plan in many ways let the care and control of such mothers to be dictated by the moral codes of county welfare board members and community norms.

Conclusion

The Minnesota Plan was the first large scale attempt to legislate a solution to child welfare concerns, especially those linked to illegitimacy, in one package. The Plan flawlessly wove together the objectives of the child welfare movement with the aims of the maternalist political movement to place the emphasis of the state's response to illegitimacy on the child's well-being instead of the unwed mother, who was the traditional focal point of social welfare responses.

The Minnesota Plan won accolades from child welfare supporters across the country for its innovative approach to illegitimacy. Three components to the Plan were considered to be especially beneficial to the illegitimate child: the establishment of

paternity, including rights of inheritance, and the resulting financial support of the illegitimate child from paternity settlements; state guardianship of all illegitimate children; and state guardianship all unwed mothers under the age of eighteen until they reached the age of twenty-one, in addition to any unwed mothers' siblings thought to be at risk for premarital pregnancy.

The guardianship powers of the Minnesota Plan would prove to be its most controversial components, as many felt the state was overstepping its authority and becoming too paternalistic in its attempt to regulate private matters. The organization of the Plan, especially its reliance on county boards, exacerbated complaints about its intrusive nature. The lack of state oversight allowed county welfare boards to interpret the Minnesota Plan as they desired, often resulting in an overemphasis of the Plan's most punitive provisions. In its efforts to supervise unwed mothers and care for the well-being of illegitimate infants, the Minnesota Plan armed hundreds of untrained members of county welfare boards with the authority to judge fit motherhood and sexual delinquency, decisions that were often influenced by personal biases related to class differentials between the average board member and the typical unwed mother.

Perhaps most importantly, the Minnesota Plan developed the legislative frame and the necessary bureaucracy for creating a custodial shift of epic proportions during the interwar period. As the next chapter will demonstrate, state guardianship of unwed mothers often meant they were transferred to state reformatories on various immorality charges. The notion that unwed mothers needed reformation increased anxieties about their maternal fitness, a question that had been newly raised by the child welfare

movement's elevation of the illegitimate child to a protected status. By prioritizing the rights of the illegitimate child over those of the unwed mother, the Minnesota Plan enabled the eventual creation of social policies that would demand adoption in all cases of illegitimacy. Adoption would become synonymous with the illegitimate child's best interests.

Chapter Three

Policing Desire: Unwed Mothers and Scientific Social Work at the Sauk Centre Home School

In November 1921 St. Paul authorities arrested sixteen-year-old Catharine, her sister, and her cousin for public intoxication. During her interview with social workers, Catharine admitted that she had recently discovered she was pregnant. She said that she “runs around a great deal” and met “Art” at a dance. They went out “seven or eight times” before she discovered her pregnancy. Catharine claimed not to know Art’s real name or where he lived. The worker noted that, “Altho the girl’s story may be true in a general way, she is quite evidently avoiding the truth, appears unreliable, good natured, and indifferent.” By the late spring of 1922 as Catharine’s lying-in period was drawing near, she was officially arraigned on delinquency charges. A county social worker wrote to the superintendent of Minnesota’s state reformatory for girls and pleaded that a space be found for Catharine in the overcrowded facility.

Judge Orr wished me to say that he is holding back every case that is possible, owing to your request. This morning we had a 16 year old expectant mother in court. The home conditions are such that this girl cannot be sent home. The maternity homes in St. Paul are crowded to full capacity. Judge Orr wants you to make a special effort to take this girl.

Catharine was transferred to the reformatory, where she gave birth to a son in July 1922. They stayed at the reformatory together until October 1924 when they were paroled to Catharine’s uncle’s home in a western suburb of Minneapolis. According to school parole officers, Catharine’s care of her son left something to be desired. She gave him “very erratic care,” boarded him in several homes, and considered placing him for adoption

during the first year following her release from the school, all actions that called into question Catharine's commitment to raising her son.

In March 1926 Catharine was returned to the reformatory for violating the conditions of her parole, which, although not noted in her case file, could have ranged from a minor infraction like moving without notifying the school or going out dancing at night to a major infraction such as criminal activity. Frustrated by her behavior and disappointed in her maternal capabilities, school officials "explained to [Catharine] that she had had every chance to prove that she was the proper person to take care of the child but she had failed to make good. We told her plans would have to be made to have the baby be brought into Juvenile Court to be committed." Catharine's son was placed in the state orphanage within two months of her return to the school and adopted soon after.¹

Catharine's case history is a prime example of how the Minnesota Plan functioned in instances of "unfit" motherhood. Social workers identified a delinquent girl, arranged for her rehabilitation by sending her to a reformatory, and monitored her progress as a mother until her unsatisfactory performance resulted in the placement of her child for adoption. Mimicking in action the child welfare rhetoric that led to the passage of the Minnesota Plan, the social workers in Catharine's case placed the perceived best interests of the child over Catharine's maternal rights. As this chapter and the ones following will discuss, the wellbeing of Catharine's baby was not understood in terms of the child's demonstrated health or happiness but by the failures or successes of Catharine herself. The determination of (un)fit motherhood under the Minnesota Plan would prove to have

¹ Sauk Centre Home School for Girls Case Files, Box 7, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota (hereafter Home School Case Files).

more to do with the perceived shortcomings of a mother as an individual and as a member of society than a woman's actual commitment to or success at motherhood.

This chapter considers in detail the experiences of unwed mothers like Catharine who were sentenced to the state's reformatory for girls, the Sauk Centre Home School. A brief case study of the Home School highlights how the Minnesota Plan functioned in practice, how the state's authority affected custodial outcomes, and how the unspoken mental correlation between the terms "unwed mother" and "unfit mother" began.

The synergistic relationship between the terms "unfit" and "unwed" undoubtedly created, or at least exacerbated, the interwar period's custodial shift. At the Home School, the percentage of mothers who retained custody of their children experienced double-digit declines between 1920 and 1940. Similar statistical declines occurred across the country amongst all groups of unwed mothers during the same period. The state reformatory, however, was the site of the most dramatic reversal in custodial outcomes, which were especially extreme in Minnesota due to the state's early passage of illegitimate child welfare legislation.

The Minnesota Plan's strong supervisory provisions awarded social workers a high degree of authority to influence (and depending on the age of the mother, the ability to decide) preferred custodial outcomes. The dramatic rise in adoptive custody during the interwar period is less surprising when one considers that the individuals with the authority to influence custodial decisions were the same individuals who were "scientifically" inventing and measuring degrees of maternal fitness. Social workers in Minnesota in essence created and enforced acceptable representations of maternity. These

were extraordinary powers that were only marginally monitored by other state authorities, thus allowing the Home School and the State Board of Control a relatively autonomous functional status that ultimately resulted in a near “epidemic” of unfit, unwed motherhood in the state.

This chapter considers how the Minnesota Plan created and sustained scientific interest in unwed mothers by discussing the role of science in the reformatory and the effects of such scientific social work on unwed mothers, their children, and the social workers themselves. After a brief consideration of the typical reformatory experience and daily life at the Home School, this chapter will focus on the earliest scientific studies of unwed motherhood that laid the theoretical groundwork for the creation of the pathologically flawed unwed mother.

The Reformatory Experience

The reformatory debuted in nineteenth century America in tandem with new environmental theories about the root causes of juvenile delinquency. Mid-century reformers believed that delinquent personalities were created by environmental conditions, meaning that reformation could be accomplished in large part by altering an individual’s environment. Reformatories tended to be populated by the working class residents of urban areas, as the innate poverty and poor environmental conditions associated with tenement dwellings was believed to breed criminal tendencies. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth century dependency was a harbinger of delinquency and reformatories admitted in near equal measure adolescents charged with criminal acts and

adolescents whose only crime was extreme poverty. This commingling of dependency and criminality as near-synonymous states blurred the definition of delinquency and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, created challenges for scientifically identifying and reforming offending youth.

Reformatories were originally intended exclusively to house adolescent boys, as delinquent males were perceived to vastly outnumber the population of delinquent girls. Offending females, moreover, were deemed to be more problematic than boys due to their alleged propensity for volatile and hysterical behavior, making reform efforts more challenging and less likely to have a lasting impact on girls' personalities.²

The arrival of reformatories designed for female delinquents coincided with broader efforts to protect women from improperly expressed sexual desires or attention, such as anti-prostitution efforts and initial evangelical attempts to rehabilitate urban unwed mothers.³ Prior to the construction of reformatories for girls, delinquent females were placed in prisons with adult offenders where it was feared that impressionable

² There are numerous sources available on the history of the reformatory. See for example Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995): 95-127; Steven L. Scholssman, *Love & the American Delinquent: The Theory and Practice of 'Progressive' Juvenile Justice, 1825-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Mark Colvin, *Penitentiaries, Reformatories, and Chain Gangs: Social Theory and the History of Punishment in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997): 153-185; Herbert Alan Johnson and Nancy Travis Wolfe *History of Criminal Justice*, Third Edition (Cincinnati, Ohio: Anderson, 2003): 203-296.

³ For mid and late nineteenth century anti-vice measures and early efforts with unwed mothers, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, Second Edition, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997): 202-222; Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (Oxford University Press, 1993); Mara L. Keire, *For Business & Pleasure: Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890-1933* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

adolescents learned vicious habits and licentious behaviors from older inmates, further exacerbating the delinquent state.⁴ In comparison to prisons, parents of delinquent girls believed the reformatory would offer “a gentle, non-punitive alternative” that, most importantly, would attempt to reform their daughters instead of merely incarcerating them.⁵

The first reform school for girls opened in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1856. The gentler experience expected by girls’ families was reflected in the school’s mission statement, which promised to reconstruct, rebuild, and reform girls by ‘enlighten[ing] understanding, [and] mending and regenerating the heart, by teaching pupils what is true, and by training them to think it and speak it, and by showing them what is good.’ At the Lancaster school, girls benefited from supervision that was delivered with ‘the firm but kind guidance of a parent.’⁶

In reality the parental guidance delinquents experienced still closely resembled the strict structure of prison life, although the reformatories relied to a greater extent on the redemptive power of religion. The reformatories retained a relatively austere

⁴ Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sister’s Keepers: Women’s Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981): 7-46; Colvin, p. 131-153; Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons, 1800-1935* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985).

⁵ Quoted in Barbara Brenzel, “Lancaster Industrial School for Girls: A Social Portrait of a Nineteenth-Century Reform School for Girls,” *Feminist Studies* 3 (August 1975): 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41-42 and Georgina Hickey, “Rescuing the Working Girl: Agency and Conflict in the Michigan Reform School for Girls, 1879-1893,” *Michigan Historical Review* 20 (Spring 1994): 1-28.

environment that was far from offering the creature comforts of a middle-class family home or its associated familial habits.⁷

The arrival of the twentieth century witnessed a surge of maternalist efforts to reform women's prisons and reformatories. In lieu of a punitive atmosphere that focused on individual renouncement of and repentance for criminal tendencies, a "new penology" emerged during the Progressive era that attempted to rehabilitate prisoners and prepare them for reformed living beyond the prison walls.

The first state reformatory for women opened in Bedford Hills, New York in 1901. The reformatory was developed and staffed by notable female reformers who argued that 'criminals are made what they are by association and treatment.' True reformation required 'remember[ing] that they are human.'⁸ This stance was in stark contrast to nineteenth-century prison management theories that operated under the assumption that criminal tendencies were 'overcome by whatever elevates self-control' and resulted in a strict emphasis on routinized schedules to modify delinquent behaviors and inculcate overt social control into the prison setting.⁹

Maternalist reformers rejected this paradigm and strove to foster the development of artificial maternal-child bonds between prison superintendents and inmates in order to redefine the traditional atmosphere of prisons and reformatories. Reformatory matrons rejected the use of guards, confining walls, and corporal punishment. The juvenile court

⁷ Anne Meis Knipfer, "'To Become Good, Self-Supporting Women': The State Industrial School for Delinquent Girls at Geneva, Illinois, 1900-1935," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (October 2000): 420-446 and Sarah A. Leavitt, *Neglected, Vagrant, and Viciously Inclined: The Girls of the Connecticut Industrial School, 1867-1917* (M.A. Thesis, Wesleyan College, 1992).

⁸ Quoted in Freedman, p. 126-130; see also Ruth Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995): 3-4.

⁹ Hickey, p. 12-13.

and the reformatory, new bastions of maternalist power during the Progressive era, were imagined to function as complementary “parental” units with the aim of reforming delinquents with gentler methods based upon maternal guidance and female supervision. Indeed, the inclusion of the word “home” in most reformatory names was far from accidental; it spoke to the atmosphere and the relationships reformers strove to demonstrate.

The process of transforming delinquent girls into well-behaved doyennes of middle-class ideology was reliant upon sufficiently cowing the often defiant demeanor of alleged delinquent girls, a process that began during a girl’s appearance before the juvenile court. The juvenile court was a gendered arbiter of justice. Male offenders were typically charged with truly criminal acts, such as robbery or assault. Female offenders were tried almost exclusively for moral or behavioral transgressions, such as incorrigibility. For unwed mothers, their “crime” was their pregnant condition.¹⁰

Juvenile courts were in many ways reacting to and punishing girls for a generational divide. The end of World War One and the advent of the Jazz Age ushered in a new youth culture with fashions, dating patterns, and slang unique to adolescents, phenomena that had no comparison to the experiences of previous generations. Youthful revelers drank alcohol, frequented parties, and danced in a sexually provocative manner. Teens shed the tradition of adult supervised courting in favor of dating. Preferred date locations, like movies and quiet parks, offered teens a new level of freedom to engage in

¹⁰ Steven L. Schlossman, *Love and the American Delinquent: The Theory and Practice of “Progressive” Juvenile Justice, 1825-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977): p. 57-59; Laura S. Abrams, “Guardians of Virtue: The Social Reformers and the ‘Girl Problem,’ 1880-1920,” *Social Service Review* 74 (September 2000): 437-439.

acts of intimacy previously reserved for the marriage bed. Petting – the ubiquitous act of kissing, hugging, and sexual touch that stopped just shy of intercourse – became an expected element of dating.¹¹

This newfound sexual freedom was certainly more liberating for males than females. Unlike women, males were not stigmatized for lax morals, nor did they face the moral and material risks associated with accidental pregnancies. Girls who “went too far” bore the brunt of societal punishment. As historian Susan Cahn has argued, the sexual revolution of the 1920s still included a moral mandate “that marriage was the only suitable site in which women could pursue sexual pleasure.”¹² Limiting sexual encounters was firmly within the woman’s domain. If women imposed limits on sexual activity, the reasoning went that men would accept the limits, meaning that “failures of ‘then’ could only result from failures of ‘if.’” This if-then scenario meant that all premarital sexual acts were the woman’s fault because she had either failed to set limits or she was not truly chaste.¹³

¹¹ This is not to say that premarital pregnancy was a new phenomenon in the early twentieth century. Other historians have documented cases of illegitimacy in earlier eras. The change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the societal response to the condition. See Laura Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage, 1991): 147-160; Joan Jacobs Brumberg, “‘Ruined’ Girls: Changing Community Responses to Illegitimacy in Upstate New York, 1890-1920,” *Journal of Social History* 18 (Winter 1984): 247-272; Amanda Lea Miracle, “Intimate Connections: Violence, Patriarchy, and the Law in Seventeenth-Century Infanticide Cases,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 105 (Spring 2010): 6-16; Julie Miller, *Abandoned: Foundlings in Nineteenth Century New York* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

¹² Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 16-18; Dana Lynn Barron, “*Illegitimately Pregnant*”: *Unmarried Mothers and Poverty in Philadelphia, 1920-1960* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1995): 77.

¹³ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): 88.

The case histories of the young women sentenced to reformatories in Minnesota and Wisconsin offer an endless parade of “problem girls” whose primary offense was some form of sexual delinquency. In 1919, Angela went to Chicago at the age of fourteen to escape poor home conditions and find work. On a return visit to her small town of Oconto Falls, Wisconsin in 1921, she met “the cause of her downfall,” Stanley, and was sentenced to five years at the state reformatory for becoming illegitimately pregnant. Edith was the daughter of a “very neglectful, common prostitute” and alcoholic. In 1925 at the age of eighteen, she began dating Jacob, a local boy who took her to the Elkhart Lake Lime Kilns and raped her. Edith served three years at a reformatory for her incorrigibility, while Jacob remained free. Mary was also eighteen years old when she discovered her pregnancy in 1921. Her “immoral tendencies” since the age of fourteen had “caused her family much unhappiness.” The father of her child promised to marry her, but left town the night before the wedding. She, too, would serve three years for her crime.^{14 15}

The girls briefly profiled in the above case histories fit into a neat pattern. They were young women from working class families who often shared a socially suspect familial background and whose immoral behaviors were understood with a sense of inevitability because of it. The notion that their families, their behaviors, and even their

¹⁴ Wisconsin Home for Women Case Files, Series 2081, Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin (hereafter cited as Wisconsin Home for Women Case Files).

¹⁵ For example, the most common offenses for girls sentenced to the Wisconsin Industrial Home near Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the years 1921-1925 in order of frequency were pregnancy, venereal disease, adultery, and fornication. Out of the 240 commitments during this period, 174 commitments (73 percent) were due to sex-related offenses. See Wisconsin Industrial Home Inmate Case History, 1921-1925.

personalities were somehow something they needed to escape or reform was a constant element throughout the commitment process and life at the reformatory.

Trials for commitment to the state reformatory were ideally conducted as private, informal affairs. The presiding judge would hear testimony from the girl, her parents, and community officials with generalized knowledge of the family, such as social workers, pastors, or teachers. The emphasis of these hearings was not to ascertain guilt or innocence (guilt was presumed), but rather to clarify the mechanisms that led to an adolescent's delinquent behavior and to determine the appropriate treatment.¹⁶

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of commitment hearings was the girl's testimony. Her account offered vital clues about how the home environment, her daily routines, and her friendships may have led to delinquent behavior; these variables, as will be discussed later in the chapter, formed the basis of the first aggregated data regarding juvenile sexual delinquency produced by the reformatories. Specific, personal details about relationships with parents and the extent of a girl's sexual experience were common lines of questioning at the hearings. Judges often took a belligerent, prosecutorial tone when questioning the girls, thus framing the proceedings as a shameful occurrence.

¹⁶ Protocol for commitment to the state reformatories required filing an official complaint against a girl with the juvenile court. In Minnesota and Wisconsin the organization of the child welfare codes meant that most complaints were filed by state officials. In Minnesota, the most complaints were filed by the county welfare boards. In Wisconsin, police officers filed the majority of complaints. In both states, the second and third most frequent reporting groups were parents and relatives, respectively. See Esther DeWeerd, *Five Years of Welfare under the Children's Code in Wisconsin* (Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Conference of Social Work, 1934): 11. For a broader study of the commitment process with an emphasis on Philadelphia, see Emma O. Lundberg, *Unmarried Mothers in the Municipal Court of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Thomas Skelton Harrison Foundation, 1933).

Consider for illustrative purposes the transcript of Viola's commitment hearing to the Wisconsin Home for Women, which occurred in 1931 when she was five months pregnant. The casual nature of Viola's relationship with the alleged father revealed in her testimony underscored her delinquent status and cemented an impression of a carefree, sexually liberal girl whose proclivity for brief liaisons needed to be contained.

Q: Who is the father of that child?

A: Well, I don't know his last name, but I know his first name.

Q: Where did you meet him?

A: He played in an orchestra at the Eagles [Club]. He used to come there a little. He left his orchestra and came down and danced a couple of dances. We got acquainted and he wanted to know if he couldn't take me home.

Q: What happened?

A: He took me home...Next morning he wanted me to go out and have breakfast. We had breakfast and went for a ride.

Q: Then what? Where did your intercourse take place?

A: About ten miles on the ---- Road.

Q: In the car?

A: Yes.

Q: You had intercourse with him on that occasion only?

A: Well...

Viola went on to reveal that he had asked to see her again, but she would not agree to it since she had recently completed treatment for gonorrhea and she did not want “to start in again” if she was cured. The revelation that Viola had multiple sexual partners and contracted venereal disease incensed the judge, who demanded to know the names of all the boys she had “been knocking around with.”

Q: To be perfectly frank, you have been rather promiscuous in your intercourse, isn't that a fact?

A: Well, in a way it is.

Q: You have taken on almost any young fellow you met, haven't you? Now be honest with me, isn't that true?

A: Yes, I guess.¹⁷

¹⁷ Wisconsin Department of Public Welfare, Wisconsin Industrial Home for Women, Inmate Case History Books, 1921-1925, Series 1387, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter cited as Wisconsin Industrial Home Inmate Case History).

Like Viola, the case records from the state reformatories in Minnesota and Wisconsin indicate that many of the girls sent to the schools were guilty of (or at least accused of) having sexual relations with more than one man. The case biographies are filled with statements like, “had illicit relations with boys for a period of two years;” “admitted in court that she was intimate with several men, has venereal disease, and is pregnant;” and “claims that John is the father of her baby, but admits to having sex with other men when she was mad at him.”¹⁸

The population of the state reformatories seems to have been skewed towards young women who were sexually experienced to a degree that maternalists found shocking and was a by-product of the unwed mother’s transformation from someone who should be pitied to someone who should be feared.¹⁹ Indeed, the pregnant condition of the girls profiled in this study was often interpreted as a testament to their habitual tendencies to engage in sexual relations, as opposed to an unlucky byproduct of novice experimentations. In this aspect – the proportion of girls in the reformatories who were thought to possess multiple sexual partners – the population of reformatories in Minnesota and Wisconsin was unique. Other studies of juvenile sexual delinquency, most notably Mary Odem’s work, have emphasized the fact that the girls sentenced to the reformatories were typically engaged in monogamous sexual relationships with men they believed they would eventually marry. This state of affairs is far different from the average girl in the Minnesota and Wisconsin reformatories who freely admitted to

¹⁸ Wisconsin School for Girls Case Files, Series 1381, Volume 12, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter cited as Wisconsin School for Girls).

¹⁹ Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 56-58.

“taking on” almost any interested party.²⁰ It is questionable as to whether the girls profiled in this study were actually more sexually brazen than the girls profiled by Odem. It is possible that the state reformatories in Minnesota and Wisconsin were more selective about the type of sexual histories that warranted confinement to the schools, but it is equally possible that sexual delinquents either over or understated their sexual histories in an attempt to respond to authorities with the answers they wanted to hear. The commitment process may have constructed an artificial sexual reality.

Following their court appearance, girls sent to reformatories anywhere in the country would have encountered a physical design and reformatory atmosphere that varied little between institutions. The Minnesota Home School was a typical reformatory. Constructed in 1911 by the State Board of Control, the Home School expanded rapidly in its first ten years, increasing from an initial size of 163 acres to 447 acres with an additional 600 acres of leased land by 1920. The Board described the Home School’s grounds as being “admirably located on a tract of wooded and farm land, with Sauk Lake, a beautiful body of water, in proximity. Though custodial in nature, the institution is a home in every sense of the word.”²¹ The School’s grounds consisted of thirty small cottages, one large dormitory, a school building, church, several recreational centers, and various agricultural buildings.

New arrivals to the Home School spent an initial introductory period of several weeks in the main dormitory. The function of the dormitory was to accustom new girls to the School and its rules while staff members performed intake assessments, which

²⁰ Odem, p. 136-148.

²¹ Minnesota State Board of Control, *State Board of Control Sixteenth Biennial Report, 1930-1932* (St. Paul: The Board, 1932): 181.

eventually included psychiatric and medical examinations. The girls were required to turn in all personal belongings in exchange for the school uniform, a throwback to the reformatory's penitentiary roots. Indeed, the first few weeks of life at the School "stripped young women of belongings that gave them a sense of personal identity, severed them from nearly all human contact, deprived them of any opportunity for independent action, and impressed on them the gravity of their new situation."²²

Good behavior at the dormitory was rewarded by a transfer to one of the small, homelike cottages on the school's grounds. The cottage system was the invention of nineteenth century reformers, who crafted the system to serve the previously discussed principle of *loco parentis* and to reinforce the "parental, protective, and restraining order of the state."²³ The number of girls assigned to each cottage was capped at thirty. Cottages had shared living and recreational rooms, but each girl had a private bedroom. Girls who arrived at the school with their young children or while pregnant were assigned to special maternity cottages that were equipped with modern nurseries.

The routine of the girls' days at the reformatory varied little. During the Home School's earliest years, much emphasis was placed on mastering agricultural and domestic pursuits. The 1922 annual report bragged that, "Within our family cottages, an intensive training in home arts has not only created within the girl a home-appeal, but has made fit that girl to become the home-maker and home-holder, her own experience has shown her mother failed to be."²⁴ By the mid-1920s, the school placed greater emphasis

²² Alexander, p. 71.

²³ Brenzel, p. 41; Hickey, p. 12.

²⁴ Minnesota State Board of Control, *State Board of Control Eleventh Annual Report, 1921-1922* p. 5.

on educational training and ensured that each girl received at least an eighth grade education. Additional courses in dressmaking, millinery, beauty culture, and shorthand, among others, were also offered in an attempt to prepare the most promising girls for a future career.²⁵

Wholesome recreation was an integral part of the reformatory experience. The superintendent remarked in an annual report that “the girls never tire of their parties, held in their own cottages. During the summer months, basketball, tennis, and croquet are played by the girls, while picnics, fishing, and swimming add much to their enjoyment.”²⁶ By encouraging the development of a sense of community amongst the girls, Home School officials hoped the newfound bonds of sisterhood would be reforming in nature, as sexual delinquents were thought to be “casualties of excessively heterosocial working-class amusements.” As historian Regina Kunzel has shown, the formation of sisterly bonds with other School students offered the promise of a “spatial and psychological separation from men that would free residents from their supposed preoccupation with the opposite sex.”²⁷ Feminizing influences were theoretically purifying influences.

Science Enters the Reformatory

The real “work” of the reformatory during the interwar period, however, was encapsulated by the scientific endeavors undertaken by the staff with the aid of university

²⁵ *State Board of Control Tenth Biennial Report, 1919-1920* (St. Paul: The Board, 1920): 65; *State Board of Control Thirteenth Biennial Report, 1923-1924*, p. 127-128; *State Board of Control Eighteenth Biennial Report, 1928-1929*, p. 239-240.

²⁶ *State Board of Control Eleventh Biennial Report, 1922-1924*, p. 129.

²⁷ Kunzel, p. 78-79.

and government-sponsored social science researchers. Within the reformatory, science had multiple meanings. Science as a tool identified types and degrees of delinquency; as an element of the schools' identities, it inspired confidence in the standard reform methodologies; and as an emblem, it became the professional calling card of the schools' employees, instilling them with prestige and cultural authority. The prominent role assigned to science within the reformatory was not a coincidence, but rather a reflection of larger trends within the professionalizing fields of social work and the social sciences.

The quest to professionalize or, more accurately, to be recognized as a profession subsumed much of social work journals and professional conferences during the opening decades of the twentieth century. Historians have argued that the catalyst for social work's professionalization campaign was a speech given by Abraham Flexner at the 1915 gathering of the National Conference on Charities and Corrections. Flexner was renowned for authoring a 1910 report that many credited with initiating the widespread and radical reformation of U.S. medical education. It was for this reason that the Conference asked Flexner to address the assembly on the concept of professions. Patricia McGrath Morris has argued that Flexner's opening remark that social work was "hardly eligible" for the status of a profession affected the trajectory of social work's philosophy, methodology, and teaching for most of the twentieth century.²⁸ To many historians,

²⁸ Patricia McGrath Morris, "Reinterpreting Abraham Flexner's Speech 'Is Social Work a Profession?' Its Meaning and Influence on the Field's Early Development," *Social Service Review* 82 (March 2008): 29-60.

Flexner's speech was "the most significant event in the development of the intellectual rationalization for social work as an organized profession."²⁹

Flexner's evaluation of social work was based on the same principles he had used to assess medical education five years previously. He defined a profession as a learned vocation not accessible to a lay population, one that "needs to resort to the laboratory and seminar for a constantly fresh supply of facts" to prevent the field from degenerating into mere routine. To Flexner, social work failed to qualify as a profession for three reasons. First, Flexner characterized social workers as bureaucratic mediators who directed clients to sources of aid but failed to follow the case until it reached an appropriate resolution. Secondly, social work lacked a distinct body of knowledge and was instead an amalgamation of knowledge derived from other professional fields. Lastly, Flexner refused social work a professional designation because the field lacked "a purposefully organized educational discipline."³⁰ The assembled audience was left nearly speechless by Flexner's comments. Organizers invited Flexner to address the conference because they valued his presumed expertise on the educational structure of professions. They expected to hear a speech about the elements of professionalization, not whether social work qualified as a profession.³¹

²⁹Donna L. Franklin, "Mary Richmond and Jane Addams: From Moral Certainty to Rational Inquiry in Social Work Practice," *The Social Service Review* 60 (June 1986): 516.

³⁰Abraham Flexner, "Is Social Work a Profession?," Reprinted in *Research on Social Work Practice* 11 (March 2001): 152-165.

³¹It should be noted that many of Flexner's characterizations of social work were unfair. To speak to Flexner's final point about education, for example, there were schools of social work in New York, Chicago, Boston, and St. Louis with an annual graduation rate exceeding 900 students. Social workers were already actively encouraging the expansion of university programs and the correlated increase in trained social workers as a gateway for greater professional authority.

Historian Roy Lubove has criticized Flexner's assessment of social work as being too narrowly defined by the experiences of the medical profession. Lubove argues that social work should not have been judged by the same standards and that consideration should have been given to the field's commitment to "changing aspirations and organization of services." Indeed, Lubove argues that social work's finesse at resource mobilization and organizational liaisonship was a "pivotal" task within an industrializing society that was worthy of the professional mantle. Flexner's argument held sway in the social work community not because the field was unprofessional, but because social workers themselves undervalued the professional nature of their work.³²

Social workers interpreted Flexner's introductory allusions to the importance of science as tantamount to a testimony that there cannot be a profession in the absence of science. This ideological leap is not altogether surprising. As the cultural importance of science escalated in the latter half of the nineteenth century, scientific pursuits and scientific metaphors left the laboratory and informed and reflected social change. According to Charles Rosenberg, the net effect of this was an "increasing emotional relevance of science, [and] its expanding role as an absolute, able to justify and even motivate the behavior of particular individuals." This effect was closely linked to the new role of society to dictate the "professional scientists' values and attitudes."

Science was believed capable of legitimating social work by codifying and communicating social norms. By the beginning of the twentieth century, "analogies and

³² As Regina Kunzel has demonstrated, the willingness of social workers to understate the professionalism of social work was likely influenced by gender inequalities. See Kunzel, p. 39-50; Morris, p. 29-35; Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930* (New York: Atheneum, 1980): 105-107.

arguments drawn from science became...an increasingly plausible idiom in which to formulate – and in that sense to control emotionally – almost every aspect of the inexorably modernizing world.”³³ In short, the injection of science into social work theory and practice held the promise of transforming the *opinions* of trained social workers into irrefutable scientific fact.

Science at the Home School can be divided into two categories: standard social work methodologies that the profession was ardently attempting to recast as being scientific in nature and, as will be discussed later, new methodologies that attempted to both incorporate and create new theories about adolescence, delinquency, and sexuality.

An unwed mother’s first encounter with scientific social work at the reformatory occurred on the day of her arrival during intake interviews when staff attempted to confirm the sometimes scanty case history that accompanied an unwed mother to the school by utilizing a tool dubbed “social diagnosis.” Developed in 1917 by Mary Richmond, social diagnosis can best be described as an allegedly scientific interview technique created, at least partially, in response to Flexner’s criticisms of the field.

To characterize social diagnosis as a new technique is somewhat of a misnomer. The tactic was essentially a rebranding of the nineteenth century friendly visitor’s straightforward question and answer methodology. The key difference in the social diagnosis approach was the emphasis of the questions and the sources of testimony. Richmond described the technique “as consisting of any and all facts as to a personal or

³³ Charles Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997): 1-21. See also Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977) and Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

family history which, [when] taken together, indicate the nature of a given client's social difficulties and the means to their solution."³⁴

Sources for social diagnosis were three-fold: the client, the client's family, and non-familial acquaintances who were intimately known to the client such as the family physician or minister. The methodology of a juvenile court hearing relied on a modified version of social diagnosis and hence the unwed mother's court documents and testimony formed one layer of evidence for the diagnosis. The technique depended upon gaining a complete understanding of the unwed mother's background and was thus markedly more intrusive than previous interview techniques. Social diagnosis was based on the premise that the presenting problem was a mere symptom of greater socio-psychological problems that needed to be identified by the social worker in order to "cure" the client. A young girl's pregnancy was then only an outward marker of "psychological, physical, and sociological" problems, or one small symptom of a greater systemic disease.

The information collected from each of the sources was blended in order to form a complete and accurate portrait of the client's environment and potential source of the delinquency. Social diagnosis relied on accumulated and repeated data points in order to verify conclusions, which meant no detail from the interviews was discarded as irrelevant unless confirmed to be untrue. Repeatedly forming the same impression of the cause and nature of a client's problem – in essence, verifying a hypothesis – from unique sources was critical for confirming the final diagnosis. It was believed that hasty treatment

³⁴ Mary E. Richmond, *Social Diagnosis* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1917): 43.

decisions based on incomplete information had no chance to effect successful rehabilitation of the client.³⁵

Mary Richmond's instructional manual on social diagnosis included an extended section on questions unmarried mothers should be asked during their interviews. Richmond instructed social workers to question whether the unwed mother's family home was "clean and respectable looking" and whether her parents were "earnest or indifferent to moral standards." Was there a history of illegitimacy in the family? Did the unwed mother have a "physical peculiarity" or was she mentally deficient? Did the girl "leave her home to hide her shame" and did she "appreciate the seriousness of her act and its consequences?"³⁶ No aspect of a girl's history remained private, as it was all considered important for forming a correct diagnosis.

The questionnaire used at the Home School for intake interviews does not remain, but the written record of the unwed mothers' responses indicates that the School followed a similar line of questioning regarding the home environment. Joan, who was committed to the school in 1926, was the product of divorce after both of her parents alleged infidelity; her father remarried eleven days after the divorce was finalized and Joan was left alone with her mother and her mother's "violent temper."³⁷ Della was committed to the school in 1921. A home visit by her caseworker found little to say about her home or community that was "in the least complimentary." Her guardian was her sister's husband. He worked hauling wood and coal in the winter, but tended bar in the off season. The

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38-39; Philip Klein, "Mary Richmond's Formulation of a New Science" in *Methods in Social Science: A Case Book*, edited by Stuart A. Rice (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1931): 47.

³⁶ Richmond, p. 413-419.

³⁷ Home School Case Files, Box 4.

worker observed that she “would judge from the bar room odor that he hadn’t been any farther than the opposite side of the bar previous to [her] call.”³⁸ A more complete summary from a social diagnosis is found in the case file of Josephine, a fourteen-year-old girl impregnated by a twenty-year-old neighbor in the early 1930s.

Josephine is unusually well-developed for her age. She has few friends because she lives in an undesirable location. Gravel trucks pass in front of the house, the yard is sand and gravel and nothing will grow. The location is definitely an unwholesome place for a girl. Josephine has been shunned by other children at her school because of the reputation of her parents. Her mother divorced her father for cruelty about 3.5 years ago and left town with another man who had a very poor reputation. Josephine’s father has been trying hard to give the children a home, but much of the time the children are left without any supervision as Mr. --- is employed on WPA and other odd jobs.³⁹

Home School social workers were not sympathetic to the circumstances that led to Josephine’s pregnancy. When questioned about her relationship with the baby’s father, Martin, Josephine said he was her first boyfriend and she was eager to win his affection. When Martin was asked about the circumstances of the relationship, however, he replied that he was drunk, Josephine was around, and that he did not intend to marry her. The facts of Josephine’s case history coupled with her home environment indicated to social workers that she was predisposed to solitariness, immaturity, and emotional instability.

The usefulness of a technique like social diagnosis is difficult to gauge. Case records from the Home School indicate that diagnoses rarely influenced the type of treatment an unwed mother received, a reality that is paradoxical in nature. Social diagnosis was predicated on a belief of the inherent utility of individualized casework

³⁸ Home School Case Files, Box 10.

³⁹ Home School Case Files, Box 12.

recommendations, yet Home School social workers were failing to use the information gained to create a unique prescriptive response. Instead, as will be shown in greater detail during an analysis of the population studies of sexual delinquents, social workers at the reformatories reversed the intended application of social diagnosis in order to standardize the expected presentation (and thus the diagnosis) of an unwed mother.

Treatment protocols at the Home School, specifically the emphases on morality and middle-class standards of home and family, were implemented at the population level but based on commonalities in data garnered from social diagnoses. Using this method, social workers were theoretically able to treat the part (the individual) while treating the whole (the school population). This is not to say that avenues for the application of conclusions drawn from individual diagnoses did not exist. Impressions gained from interviews with unwed mothers were often used to form decidedly unscientific judgments of an unwed mother's character, which had implications for parole and custodial decisions. The objectivity supposedly embedded within social diagnosis, at least at the Home School, was a charade for a sort of scientific morality. Home School officials made judgments based on their understanding of the social worth of each girl's familial background; moral opinions regarding an unwed mother's home life, family, or personality were cloaked within the technical language of psychology and the social sciences.

Such an analysis may be harsh, but it is not without merit. Records indicate that girls sent to the Home School from a middle class background were seldom labeled delinquent. Consider the case history of seventeen-year-old Esther, who arrived at the

Home School a few years before Josephine. Esther's parents had a good reputation in their community and prided themselves on close supervision of Esther's activities and acquaintances, a habit that may have led to Esther's adolescent rebellion. Esther began to go to shows and dances on the weekend where she would drink and smoke. She reported to social workers that she had relations with four boys whom she met at church dances. All of the boys' fathers held prominent positions in the town as, for example, the local physician and the chief of police. Esther's parents and their circle of acquaintances enjoyed a decidedly upper middle class standing.

The Home School's evaluation of Esther concluded that she was a rebellious and spoiled girl, but not a delinquent who was a danger to society's moral fabric. Case workers described her "pleasing personal appearance and personality" and noted average adjustment in social attitudes, moral discrimination, and emotional stability. The rationale for these conclusions was not included in Esther's case file, but the modern reader has to wonder what parameters, exactly, defined "average moral discrimination." The traditional perception of moral behavior presented in Esther's liaisons, which included sneaking out of her bedroom window to have sex with the police chief's son behind her woodshed, is difficult to locate. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Esther was deemed rebellious instead of delinquent because social workers could relate to her; she was socially and economically similar to them in a way that Josephine, a poor girl from the metaphorical wrong side of the tracks, was not.

This difference in perception between traits associated with coming-of-age rebellion versus outright delinquency was rooted in social class. Esther's treatment at the

Home School reflected this double standard. Esther used the reformatory as a private maternity home to shield her from “the social criticism of her town.” She entered the School in January 1936, gave birth in April, and was paroled a few months later.⁴⁰ Even by such a simple measurement as length of time served, Esther had an exceptional experience when compared to the average stay of several years required of “delinquent” offenders from lower social classes.⁴¹

The juxtaposition of Josephine and Esther’s case histories begins to shed some light on the role of science in the reformatory and the ends that it served. Many of the scientific theories that informed practices at the Home School contained inherent distinctions between good and bad or normal and delinquent based on social class. Social workers were therefore predisposed to see delinquency in a certain type of girl and simple rebellion in the same girl’s more privileged counterpart. Studies of adolescence and, more specifically, studies of reformatory populations reinforced the belief that certain individuals were likelier to experience difficulties in social adjustment, moral discrimination, and emotional stability. It is likely that the tendency to see such failures in working class girls was an (un)conscious evaluation of their likelihood to overcome the social and economic obstacles associated with unwed motherhood.

⁴⁰ Home School Case Files, Box 1.

⁴¹ Esther was an exception to the rule at the Home School. There do not appear to have been many girls from a middle class background at the School. If they were there, their case records indicate that they were there at the request of their parents and not the courts. Using the reformatory system in this manner was not unique to Minnesota. Ruth Alexander uncovered similar manipulations of the system in her study of New York reformatories. See *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995): 48-54.

The New Science of Adolescence

The cultural recognition of adolescence as a distinct phase of life is often dated to the publication of psychologist G. Stanley Hall's book *Adolescence* in 1904. Hall was one of the preeminent American psychologists of the early twentieth century. Trained at Harvard University, Hall was a lecturer at Johns Hopkins University in the 1880s, the founder and president of Clark University, founder of the American Psychological Association, and the author of more than 300 books and articles. Hall's public reputation was largely built on his championship of the child study movement and his close affiliation with the Child Study Association of America during the opening years of the twentieth century.⁴²

Hall's work informed the nascent juvenile justice movement and its theories of corrective rehabilitation to a strong degree. Hall considered sexual urges to be a normal part of adolescent development, a marked departure from the Victorian reliance on notions of passionless femininity and childhood sexual innocence. The human sex instinct, according to Hall, is an impulse that is motivated by pure emotions (love of partner, offspring, community, and nature) and is yet capable of being tainted by external (environmental) influences. The risk for the adulteration of the pure sex instinct was thought to be most marked during adolescence and more pronounced in adolescent girls, who were thought to be naturally less in control of their physical urges, than in adolescent males.

⁴² Crista DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007): 91-93 and Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985): 73-79.

Protection of the female adolescent's pure sex instinct was critically important for the continued evolution of the human race. Hall framed adolescence as the blooming, nascent period of adulthood. Misdirected adolescent yearnings could theoretically "mark the beginning of racial retrogression, degeneration, and devolution" by suppressing the expression of acquired characteristics. This theory was an application of Lamarckian theories of soft heredity, although in Hall's derivation of Lamarck instead of acquiring the characteristics of their parents it was theoretically possible for individuals to selectively devolve to an earlier state of being if exposed to undesirable environmental stimuli.⁴³

Hall's most famed theory was the theory of recapitulation. Stated simplest, Hall's recapitulation theory held that all stages of evolution are reflected in the life of an individual. During development a single-cell organism develops into a newborn child whose capacities are equal to a lower mammal. The maturation process mimics the evolutionary process, thus framing childhood as a state where impulsive behaviors are reflections of earlier stages of human evolution. Delinquent children were manifesting a stalled state of evolutionary development.⁴⁴

⁴³ For discussions of Lamarck and soft heredity, see Stephen J. Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002) and Richard W. Burkhardt, *The Spirit of System: Lamarck and Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

⁴⁴ For histories of G. Stanley Hall, see Dorothy Ross, *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), Stewart Hulse and Bert Green, *One Hundred Years of Psychological Research in America: G. Stanley Hall and the Johns Hopkins Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), and Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968): 132-138.

Hall further believed that traits acquired by parents or grandparents presented during adolescence. Each generation carried the potential to inherit these traits and develop higher traits of their own to be passed to the next generation, furthering the evolutionary process and elevating the human race. Improper environmental conditions during adolescence were capable of interrupting the recapitulation process and stunting evolutionary change.

The environmental emphasis of Hall's theories justified the reformist desire to remove children from the care of unfit parents and the influence of improper environments. Hall's work similarly justified and explained the predominance of youth from working class families within the juvenile court and reformatory systems because Hall's formulation of adolescence favored the middle class experience. Working class families seldom possessed the economic means or the cultural literacy to transform a previously independent stage of life into a newly distinct developmental phase that suddenly demanded extended juvenile dependence and parental supervision; working class families depended upon their adolescent offspring to contribute financially the family through gainful employment.

The realities of working class life when seen through the lens of Hall's theories contained much to alarm members of the maternalist movement. Poverty, early entrance into occupations, modern amusements, and close associations and interactions with men seemed to inculcate an acceptance of female juvenile and sexual delinquency as a normative condition in working class circles. Hall's remedy for the environmental adulteration of the pure sex impulse – pursuing educational and cultural diversions until

marriage offered an appropriate outlet for sexual urges – was unrealistic for working class families, who could not afford to support an extended adolescence and relied on their older children to earn incomes. The working class experience of adolescence was inadvertently transformed into the prototypical model for the development of delinquent girls.

The reformatory posed a solution for interrupting this development. It offered a fundamental change in environment (often rural instead of urban) and possessed institutional mechanisms for exposures to middle-class ideals and norms of living. It also offered the opportunity for the creation of an experimental laboratory of delinquency, complete with a ready population on which to test socio-biological theories on the development and growth of the delinquent adolescent.

Hundreds of such experiments were undertaken during the late Progressive and early interwar periods in an effort to understand the background of the “average” delinquent. Many of the studies surveyed large populations ranging in size from several hundred to several thousand youths and attempted to quantify an array of variables, such as age, parental marital status, number of siblings, and familial health. These large populations were typically confined in prison or reformatory settings; the studies were performed by sociologists, criminologists, and psychologists. Other studies performed by professionals in the same disciplines as the large-scale studies were much more focused and analyzed extensively only one of the factors common to the large scale populations, such as previous sex experiences or relationships with parents.⁴⁵ The aim of these studies

⁴⁵ See for example Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, “Parental Conditions of Wisconsin Girl Delinquents,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 38 (September 1932): 232-239; Morris

was to understand “to what extent deleterious influences were present and could be regarded as factors” in the development of delinquent personalities.⁴⁶ The U.S. Children’s Bureau was the most prolific producer of such studies, publishing 22 studies with substantial statistical analyses of unwed mothers during the 1920s alone.⁴⁷ These studies were performed by government bureaucrats with diverse backgrounds, but many of the lead authors were trained social workers.

The wealth of studies concerned with identifying common denominators amongst groups of sexual delinquents was triggered by the belief that unwed mothers could be identified prior to their pregnancies if a reliable model of susceptibility could be produced. This assumption, which I will refer to as the theory of commonality, was first expressed in the lengthy and influential 1918 work *The Unmarried Mother: A Study of 500 Cases* by Percy Kammerer, who can loosely be described as a criminologist.⁴⁸

Gilmore Caldwell, “Juvenile Delinquency in Wisconsin,” *Journal of Juvenile Research* 14 (1930): 87-95; Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, “Are Broken Homes a Causative Factor in Juvenile Delinquency?” *Social Forces* 10 (May 1932): 514-524; and Kate Burr Johnson, “Problems of Delinquency among Girls,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 12 (October 1926): 385-397. For large scale studies, see for example Julia Matthews, “A Survey of 341 Delinquent Girls in California,” *Journal of Delinquency* 8 (1923): 196-231 and Anne T. Bingham, “Determinants of Sex Delinquency in Adolescent Girls Based on Intensive Studies of 500 Cases,” *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 13 (February 1923): 494-586.

⁴⁶ Katharine De Pre Lumpkin, “Factors in the Commitment of Correctional School Girls in Wisconsin,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 37 (September 1931): 222.

⁴⁷ See for example U.S. Department of Labor and Children’s Bureau, *Children Indentured by the Wisconsin State Public School* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925) and Emma O. Lundberg, *Children of Illegitimate Birth and Measures for Their Protection* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1926).

⁴⁸ The scientific context of Kammerer’s work can be illuminated by the individuals who influenced its creation. The introduction was authored by William Healy, a child psychiatrist and criminologist, who established the first child guidance clinic in the United States. His book, *The Individual Delinquent*, was quite influential and much cited to after its publication in 1915. Kammerer thanks criminologist Edith N. Burleigh, parole board superintendent of the Massachusetts Training Schools, Jessie D. Hodder of the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women, and social worker Ada E. Sheffield, among others, in his preface.

Kammerer's study was the first large-scale attempt to answer the question of causation, the discovery of which often served as the end point for social diagnosis and the starting point for treatment and prevention.

Kammerer identified cases for his study by soliciting files from social agencies in Boston. His reliance on unwed mothers already known to the social welfare system skewed his conclusions from the outset, but the consumers of Kammerer's theories uniformly dismissed any assertion that his study population was flawed. Indeed, in the introduction to the book famed psychiatrist William Healy noted that he "was inclined to strongly discount Mr. Kammerer's modest doubt concerning the entirely representative character of the groups from which his data are obtained." Healy went on to argue that "nearly all the illegitimate children one ever comes to know about...have passed through the hands of public and private agencies," meaning that *all* unwed mothers "may be fairly considered as belonging to just such groups as are studied" in Kammerer's book.⁴⁹

Kammerer, however, ultimately failed to offer specific causes of illegitimacy, preferring instead to restate and reclassify multiple factors traditionally associated with illegitimacy. There were multiple reasons for this. Inadequate record series meant that Kammerer had too little information to suggest a psychological component of premarital pregnancy, an assertion he had originally hoped to make. Not could Kammerer conclusively comment on the role of heredity in illegitimacy since "the ancestral traits [were] usually difficult to determine, and it [was not] possible to regard heredity as a

⁴⁹ Percy Gamble Kammerer, *The Unwed Mother: A Study of Five Hundred Cases*, Patterson Smith Reprint Series in Criminology, Law Enforcement, and Social Problems (Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1969): 10. Kammerer's study population was similarly defended by noted psychologist Havelock Ellis in his book *The Philosophy of Conflict and Other Essays of War-Time*, Second Series (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919): 152.

major factor in a single case.”⁵⁰ Kammerer instead emphasized the role of environment in his conclusion by constructing a generalized category that he divided into nine compatible and overlapping categories: poor physical environment, poor choice of companions, demoralizing recreational activities such as dances and movies, educational disadvantages including lack of reproductive knowledge, poor home conditions, early sex experience, heredity, physical abnormality, and mental instability.⁵¹

Kammerer’s categorization of factors leading to illegitimate pregnancies were striking for both their breadth and relative vagueness, but for social workers during the interwar period they were nevertheless utilized as a useful guide for determining which unwed mothers were “accidentally” pregnant (e.g., middle-class girls or victims of rape) and which unwed mothers were delinquent victims of poor environment or poor heredity. To escape the delinquent diagnosis and achieve “accidental” status, unwed mothers had to escape any discernible relationship with Kammerer’s causalities. The emphasis on causality and typology was a reflection of a new cultural belief that unwed mothers who became pregnant after false promises of marriage, assault, or sexual coercion were atypical, a belief that was in stark contrast to the predominant belief in the early twentieth century that unwed pregnancies were almost always the result of male improprieties. Kammerer’s study seemed to scientifically confirm by quantitative analysis that familial and environmental factors rather than gender relations were more at fault for premarital pregnancies, effectively erasing sympathy from the reform response.

⁵⁰ Kammerer, p. 153.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48-193.

Kammerer's codification of factors believed to commonly result in premarital pregnancy was a distinct theoretical departure from the dogma of the early Progressive era. The evangelical reformers located blame externally by identifying unwed mothers as the victims of male lust, sexual coercion, and unfortunate social circumstance. After the publication of Kammerer's work, scientific handling of unwed pregnancy located fault internally within in the individual. True, certain elements of circumstantial causation remained, such as poor environment and home conditions, but, as will become increasingly clear, these factors came to be understood less in terms of circumstance and more in terms of natural abilities and predisposition. Kammerer's theory of commonality would continue to hold sway in studies of unwed mothers until a different type of commonality – psychological imbalance – usurped its prominence by the mid-1930s.

It is perhaps useful to momentarily consider in detail the demographic portrait of the average unwed mother in a Minnesota reformatory in order to better understand the type of offender the Minnesota Plan was targeting. The Home School population as a whole, including girls sent to the school for reasons other than pregnancy, was skewed toward a working class population. [See Appendix 1 for complete data.]⁵² The average age of admission for the period between 1920 and 1940 was fifteen years old, although girls as young as nine and as old as twenty were also admitted. More than half the girls entered the school with a sixth to eighth grade education and upwards of eighty percent were employed at the time of their admission. Most girls came from a home headed by a

⁵² I calculated the statistics based on figures reported by the Home School superintendent in the biennial reports for the years 1920-1936.

single parent, although this figure is influenced by the high percentage of girls who had a deceased parent.

The population data from the Home School is comparable to other demographic data on delinquents and unwed mothers. A 1922 study of eighty-nine unwed mothers in the greater Boston area presents a similar profile, if slightly more economically depressed in character. The majority of the girls were still teenagers at the time of their pregnancies. Over half the girls in the study had an education equivalent to or less than grammar school and nearly ninety percent were working in unskilled or semiskilled occupations prior to their pregnancies. Less than ten percent of the girls became pregnant while living at home, a statistic that the study's compiler found most striking until she looked for an explanation and found that "most of the homes were broken by the death of one or more parents, divorce, separation, desertion, alcohol, immorality, non-support, defective intelligence, [and] mental or physical disease."⁵³

The statistics published in the Home School's annual reports also placed a strong emphasis on the character of the girls' home environment by grading reported parental characteristics as good, bad, or weak. Social workers' diagnoses of the home environment and parental competency became increasingly negative as the interwar period progressed, a development that was both informed by and informing studies of sexual delinquents and unwed mothers. During the early years of data collection, fathers were much more likely than mothers to be classified as bad or weak influences; mothers fell into these categories less than ten percent of the time in the early 1920s. This

⁵³ Alberta S. Guibord and Ida R. Parker, *What Becomes of the Unmarried Mother? A Study of 82 Cases* (Boston: Research Bureau on Social Case Work, 1922): 26-27.

dynamic changed quickly, however. Between the years 1925 and 1936, over forty percent and often more than fifty percent of both mothers and fathers were deemed inadequate by school social workers. During the same period, rates of assumed alcoholism and the number of home environments considered unfit experienced a similar increase.

The accelerating rate of homes and families deemed to be unfit within these statistical analyses was a reflection of a broader trend toward reframing issues of delinquency in terms of familial fitness.⁵⁴ The quantitative studies identified common denominators in the delinquent experience, but no combination of factors could sufficiently answer the question as to why some disadvantaged children became delinquent and others did not. The answer to this question increasingly seemed to rest with the unseen.

⁵⁴ This change in the assessment of maternal fitness cannot be easily explained. It is difficult to say with certainty whether the increased rates of alcoholism alleged by the social workers at the Home School were reflecting a reality or whether they were the judgments of individual social workers. Rates of alcoholism and consumption during Prohibition are almost non-existent since the U.S. government ceased to compile statistics during the period. Some effort at measuring the amount of alcohol consumption was performed by the Bureau of Prohibition within the Justice Department. The Bureau found that rates of consumption in 1930 decreased to 0.6 gallons per capita from an estimated 1.7 gallons per capita in 1914. These statistics were criticized by contemporaries for underestimating the drinking rate, however. The Department of Commerce estimated that the per capita consumption rate during Prohibition was 1.63 gallons per capita, an increase of nearly twelve percent over the pre-Prohibition rate of 1.46 gallons. See Malvern H. Tillitt, *The Price of Prohibition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932): 35-40, 114-120 and Sarah W. Tracy, *Alcoholism in America: From Reconstruction to Prohibition* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

The declining maternal fitness rate during this period was likely related in part to the rise of “mother blame,” an aspect of the child guidance movement that increasingly pinpointed the cause of juvenile unrest to poor mothering. This phenomenon will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

A Winding Tree: Unwed Motherhood and Studies of Heredity

The quest to determine what was “wrong” with unwed mothers was amplified by a startling realization in the 1910s that a significant portion of unwed mothers tended to become illegitimately pregnant multiple times. Research into the root causes of recidivism was especially compelling because recidivist populations were the so-called “worst offenders” of unwed mothers. A study of the illegitimacy rates in Baltimore for the year 1915 claimed that twenty-five percent of the city’s unwed mothers had previously given birth out of wedlock. Within the population of recidivist offenders researchers found that twenty four women had borne fifty seven illegitimate children, a number with staggering implications when it was extrapolated to national rates of illegitimacy.⁵⁵

If researchers could understand what made young women become repeatedly pregnant out of wedlock, then perhaps they could use the findings to develop preventative programs. Recidivist populations were appealing test subjects because whatever caused illegitimacy – poor environment, mental abnormality, broken homes, et cetera – was arguably ultra-concentrated within these populations.

During the initial years of the Home School’s existence, there was a strong belief in certain scientific circles that recidivist delinquents suffered from poor genetic makeup. This belief was partially born out of necessity. Social workers were growing increasingly skeptical that the environmental components emphasized in the demographic analyses could truly explain causation. Noted social work researcher Miriam Van Waters, who

⁵⁵ Anna Rochester, *Infant Mortality: Results of a Field Study in Baltimore, MD., Based on Births in One Year* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1923): 158.

would later serve as superintendent of the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women at Framingham, complained that all the physical, social, and mental factors really mean when they are reduced to their essence is that

among those who challenge our behavior codes or fail to conform to them are found the sick and the healthy, the dull and the brilliant, the defective, the accelerated, the unprotected and the overprotected. It is a gigantic folly and indeed a travesty of the human spirit to imagine that merely untoward environmental conditions produce delinquency. They produce suffering [only]...⁵⁶

To Van Waters and others, there was a deeper explanation not yet understood. Hereditary studies, usually in the form of eugenics, offered hope of unlocking adequate understandings of causation.

An extension of social Darwinism, the term “eugenics” was first used in 1883 by Sir Francis Galton. The field attempted to scientifically study inherited characteristics while simultaneously encouraging “wellborn” people with desirable traits to propagate and discouraging individuals deemed “unfit” from reproducing.⁵⁷

Galton’s theories were an extension of theories of so-called “soft” heredity, a collection of relatively loose theories that preceded the modern study of genetics. French evolutionist Jean Baptiste de Lamarck argued in the early nineteenth century that animals alter their habits to satisfy the demands of new environmental conditions. The prioritization of selected organs and related disuse of others to meet these needs caused, according to Lamarck, physiological changes that were heritable. While most of Lamarckian theory was discredited by the latter portion of the nineteenth century, the

⁵⁶ Miriam Van Waters, “Delinquent Attitudes,” *The Family* (July 1924): 109.

⁵⁷ Angie C. Kennedy, “Eugenics, ‘Degenerate Girls,’ and Social Workers during the Progressive Era,” *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 23 (February 2008): 22.

belief that acquired characteristics could be inherited persisted, as well as the notion that habits could affect heredity.⁵⁸ Criminal anthropologist Benedict-Augustin Morel, for example, developed a theory of hereditary degeneration which argued that children could inherit criminality and immorality from their parents. In general, social scientists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed that a damaging environment would result in defective offspring.⁵⁹

While the work of Kammerer at first glance seems to be discredited by such theories, in reality the statistical analyses of delinquent populations bolstered the hereditary arguments due to the frequency with which inadequacies could be identified within the parental population. The statistical studies and the yet to be discussed studies of inheritance combined to form a complete picture of a population that, by virtue of heredity, chronic environmental flaws, or some combination of both factors, was inherently flawed.

Eugenics developed in tandem with the major social reform movements of the Progressive era and was influential in shaping many social work beliefs about the best approach to social problems. Indeed, Molly Ladd-Taylor has argued that the American eugenics movement was “characteristically progressive” because it involved middle-class

⁵⁸ Diane Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity, 1865 to the Present* (New York: Humanity Books, 1998): 40-42, Elof Axel Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Cold Spring Harbor, New York: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001): 111-114; Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 39-45; Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981): 20-25.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, p. 23.

professionals applying scientific expertise in order to solve pressing social problems via government intervention.⁶⁰

Eugenics was useful as a way of approaching social problems in biologizing terms. The field lent “scientific authority to social fears and moral panics” and allowed social work professionals “to represent their prescriptive claims about social order as objective statements irrevocably grounded in the laws of nature.”⁶¹ Research was seldom critically analyzed in terms of methodology or conclusions. In a pattern that was to repeat itself throughout the interwar period, the conclusions of studies were “again and again, without reference to the data upon which they were based, reported in subsequent studies” as the basis for generalizations assumed to have wide applicability.⁶²

Moreover, eugenics enjoyed great popular support because it implied that issues of concern to the middle-class, especially sexuality, were something that could be controlled.⁶³ There was an underlying if unexpressed belief that eugenic models applied

⁶⁰ Molly Ladd-Taylor, “Saving Babies and Sterilizing Mothers: Eugenics and Welfare Politics in Interwar United States,” *Social Politics* 4 (Spring 1997): 137.

⁶¹ Frank Dikotter quoted in Erica Bicchieri Boudreau, “‘Yea, I Have a Goodly Heritage’: Health versus Heredity in the Fitter Family Contests, 1920-1928,” *Journal of Family History* 30 (2005): 371.

⁶² Lillian Ripple, *Social Work Studies of Unmarried Parenthood as Affected by Contemporary Treatment Formulations: 1920-1940* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1953): 92. It should be noted that this was at least not entirely willful ignorance of the scientific method and appropriate research processes. Except in rare instances, the average social work researcher knew little more than the most rudimentary techniques of statistical analysis and had little to no experience with research methodology. “Scientific” social work had to be created by individuals who were not scientifically trained.

⁶³ The widespread appeal of the eugenics movement was evidenced by the popularity of fitter families’ contests at state fairs. Judges of the contest considered family pedigrees in their quest to identify the best family while contest organizers viewed the events as an opportunity to educate the public about and promote eugenics. See Laura L. Lovett, “Fitter Families for Future Firesides: Florence Sherbon and Popular Eugenics,” *The Public Historian* 29 (Summer 2007): 69-85 and Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 29-30 and 124-132.

to illegitimacy could potentially halt the cycle by identifying populations that were likely offenders and prevent their procreative tendencies, either by targeted social intervention campaigns or more drastic sterilization programs. Negative eugenics offered a method to interrupt the inheritance of undesired social characteristics by controlling the reproduction of undesired populations.

Eugenics was well-suited to the field of social work because women were considered to be especially competent at conducting eugenic examinations. The same attributes that made women desirable social workers – a mix of social and analytical skills such as the ability to develop sympathetic friendships and build confidence in clients – were translatable to eugenics because they allowed workers to swiftly assess “an individual’s physical, mental, and temperamental traits” in a short amount of time.⁶⁴

Although Minnesota was not an epicenter of the production of scientific knowledge in the early twentieth century, there is evidence that state officials were conversant with and influenced by eugenic theories. Famed biologist Charles Davenport had an especially strong voice in influencing the trajectory of scientific research at the Home School, thanks in part to his numerous appearances before the Board of Control. Like many of his contemporaries, Davenport believed that certain human characteristics, like alcoholism, criminal behavior, and sexual promiscuity, were hereditary.⁶⁵ As Neal Holtan has argued, however, Davenport’s “energetic mission to publicize his findings and

⁶⁴ Paul, p. 55.

⁶⁵ Kevles, 41-46; Rosenberg, p. 89-97.

his passion to promote eugenics gradually overcame his scientific objectivity” and led Davenport to champion genetic theories that were not supported by research.⁶⁶

In 1904 Davenport had established a research station to work on projects concerned with variation, hybridization, and natural selection at Cold Spring Harbor. Davenport’s initial offerings to the fields of biometrics and genetics were scientifically respectable; it was his forays into human heredity that were less stringent. Davenport decided to investigate human genetics by collecting extended family pedigrees, the results of which were published in his 1911 book *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*. Whenever a trait appeared frequently within a given pedigree, Davenport assumed the trait was inheritable and eventually argued that “physiological and anatomical mechanisms made some people alcoholics, others manic-depressives, [and] still others feeble-minded.”⁶⁷

During one address to the Minnesota Board of Control in 1912 Davenport was asked about the relative contributions of heredity and environment to human development, a matter of pressing concern to the administrators charged with overseeing the state’s reformatories, prisons, and state hospitals. Davenport commented that reformatories merely served to ensure that defective children attained the appearance of good manners, but that “no fundamental change of character” resulted from their exposure to a desirable environment. Davenport elaborated that,

⁶⁶ Neal Ross Holtan, *Breeding to Brains: Eugenics, Physicians, and Politics in Minnesota in the 1920s* (Master’s Thesis, University of Minnesota, 2000): 19-20 and *From Eugenics to Public Health Genetics in Mid-Twentieth Century Minnesota* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2011): 28-30.

⁶⁷ Kevles, p. 44-46; Paul, p. 57-58.

Young girls brought into the institutions where the best of Christian environment constantly surrounds them, break through every restraint and barrier which is afforded them in order to get out and hunt up some man to go off with them. And we find that not merely the individual, but their mothers and grandparents and other relatives have had the same impelling instincts, have had the same uncontrollable instincts.⁶⁸

Although Davenport's theories seemed relatively outrageous at face value, they were plausible due to accumulated impressions of unwed mothers and recent eugenic pedigree and family studies which argued that sexual delinquency and illegitimacy were inheritable traits. Rather than science leading to the formation of conclusions, in illegitimacy research science was widely used to confirm pre-existing notions of the type of girl who was likely to become an unwed mother. Moreover, scientific studies could be manipulated to seem as though they endorsed new social policies like the Minnesota Plan. State oversight of unwed mothers and their children was much less controversial if it could be proven that the mothers were genetically predisposed to promiscuous pregnancy, requiring supervision in order to prevent future pregnancies.

Social workers who had intimate knowledge of the case histories of multiple unwed mothers could easily believe that some girls were more prone than others to become illegitimately pregnant. Indeed, published case histories seemed to dwell on cases where the girl's background or character could easily explain the pregnancy. Lizzie was twenty-two years old and the mother of a twelve-day-old baby when she was approached by a worker from the Milwaukee Traveler's Aid Society. Lizzie claimed she had left her boarding home to look for work in the city, but a subsequent investigation

⁶⁸ Quoted in Holtan, *Breeding to Brains*, p. 23.

revealed that her foster parents, who were already caring for Lizzie's four-year-old child, had asked her to leave.

The foster mother told the worker that Lizzie was not married the first time she became pregnant, but to give the impression of an impending marriage she ordered furniture and had it sent to the foster parent's home. After discovering her most recent pregnancy, Lizzie again claimed to be married and produced an engagement ring as evidence. The foster parents believed her until the bill from the jeweler, addressed to the foster parents, arrived a few days later. Lizzie then confessed that she had been intimate with a married man who was already the father of three legitimate children. Lizzie's childhood priest rather disgustingly told the worker that he was unsurprised by Lizzie's situation and noted that "a person cannot believe a word she says."⁶⁹

Dorothy was twenty years old when she came to the attention of social workers. She was known to have a poor home environment -- her father and brother were bootleggers; her mother had lived with another man; and the family home was widely known as a place where men and women met for immoral purposes. The community accused Dorothy's parents of prostituting Dorothy and her two siblings for financial gain, so the children were removed from the home and placed in state custody. Dorothy, who already had two illegitimate children, became pregnant for the third time after sleeping

⁶⁹ Julius L. Makowski, *Care and Treatment of the Unmarried Mother: A Study of Six Cases of the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau, Milwaukee, Wisconsin*. (Master's Thesis, Marquette University, 1929): 87-103.

with another boarder. The man refused to admit paternity, claiming that Dorothy had been active with all of the male boarders, and left town.⁷⁰

Similar case histories abound within the published material available from this period, although it is unlikely that the average unwed mother would have had such a salacious background. On the contrary the abundance of such histories suggests that, quite logically in the case of reformatories, the unwed mothers who came into contact with social workers were from a specific socioeconomic class, but also that social workers sought out unwed mothers whose case histories contained these types of elements for publication because those mothers fulfilled their expectations of who an unwed mother should be. The evidence reinforced the stereotype and therefore lent it credence. Thus, the type of girl which this type of anecdotal evidence suggested was most likely to become pregnant out of wedlock would possess some or most of Kammerer's markers, but would also display poor character (which was interpreted as poor mentality) or possess a familial history of social transgressions.

Perhaps unwittingly, even social work's most basic tool of social diagnosis lent credence to eugenic notions of familial defect. The goal of social diagnosis, namely learning the entirety of an individual's history in order to diagnose the cause of his or her decline, was fundamentally adept at rooting out familial transgressions and thus played into eugenicist theories that certain characteristics or behaviors could be passed from one generation to the next.

⁷⁰ Lizzie Adams Powers, *The Unmarried Mother: A Study of Sixty Four Cases in the Evangeline Booth Home and Hospital of Richmond, Virginia*. (Master's Thesis, The College of William and Mary, 1934): 106-107.

Mary Richmond recommended in *Social Diagnosis* that social workers evaluate the moral and physical qualities of the extended family. To consider the possibility of parental hereditary defects, Richmond suggested that workers ask if parents or other relatives had “marked moral, mental, or physical defects” and to consider if there was any evidence suggesting that there were definite “physical or mental dangers to be guarded against” developing, or whether children had been exposed to “moral contagion” by parental immorality. Richmond’s questions were designed to ferret out an array of supposed inherited conditions, including feeble-mindedness, intemperance, criminality, vagrancy, and sexual immorality.⁷¹

Many of the “inherited” traits social workers used as markers to explain and predict unmarried motherhood and other conditions were in reality evidence of a difficult life. The social workers’ judgments of the average delinquent’s familial environment undoubtedly influenced the degree to which they considered individual girls’ conditions as inevitable. The disgust which many social workers harbored for their young charges is palpable in case reports. As historian Dana Barron has uncovered, social workers’ descriptions of their clients “were colored by their impressions and opinions of the client’s character...The case records were full of value judgments. They made no secret of what they thought of particular clients and families.”⁷² For example, regarding the home environment of one sex delinquent, the worker wrote that

So foul was the odor in all the house, that it penetrated the visitor’s clothes and did not leave after walking about a mile in the fresh air. The mother was dressed in a soiled, faded dark blue apron without a belt and with a large tear in the front. Her neck, ears, and face did not seem to be clean.

⁷¹ Kennedy, p. 23-29; Richmond, p. 379-442.

⁷² Barron, p. 79.

One girl was playing...and wearing a very dirty little white dress; her face was pale and her hands extremely dirty. The baby boy was asleep in a baby buggy in the front room and covered with soiled clothing.⁷³

Such a display of need was viewed as outward evidence of internal (genetic) maladaptation. The family trees of sex delinquents reflected similar disarray, with social workers commonly noting multiple branches with questionable histories. Penelope, for example, was committed to a Wisconsin reformatory at the age of seventeen on charges of fornication. Court histories had recorded that Penelope had suffered from venereal disease for two years, that her parents lived together despite her mother's "bad reputation morally," and that she had three siblings. The worker's impressions of the family and their home during her visit nicely demonstrates how quickly environmental impressions of filth and disease were translated to conclusions about familial disease.

[Penelope's] home was found on the edge of town located near the round house, a small house miserably neglected and dirty. The father and three children were at home when the visit was made, sitting around a smeary and much littered table. One boy's speech was scarcely intelligible – a decided impediment. The other boy would not venture out of a dark room but wandered around in there bumping into things. The house itself was filthy, the air foul. When the mother was seen later, she was also of filthy personal appearance.⁷⁴

More often than not, a brief interview with the family confirmed initial impressions of disease or defect. Another young charge to the same reformatory, Carole, was committed due to sex delinquency with her brother and another man. Her brother was sent to prison on rape charges for his role in the crime. In Carole's remaining immediate family, one sister was sent to the reformatory for delinquency and later to prison for bigamy, one

⁷³ Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, *Social Situations and Girl Delinquency: A Study of Commitments to the Wisconsin Industrial School* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1928): 100.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

brother was sent to the industrial school, two other brothers were in a home for the feeble-minded, and her father had died while in a mental institution. Carole's mother had a poor reputation in the community due to the frequency of male callers she entertained and her propensity to spend her free time "on the street." The worker felt that Carole's maternal grandmother, with whom the family was living at the time of Carole's commitment, "countenanced and even encouraged the condition of things."⁷⁵ This brief foray into Carole's family thus revealed at least three generations with known sexual delinquencies and extensive mental deficiencies.

Findings such as these were considered to be especially significant due to earlier studies of degenerate heredity that proved the validity of eugenic theories to many practicing social workers. Most notable amongst these studies was R.L. Dugdale's 1877 analysis of the Juke family and Henry Goddard's 1912 study of the Kallikak family. Dugdale's study began as an investigation into the prison population in New York state in an attempt to study prisoners' heredity and environment. Dugdale found no cases of particular importance until he realized that he had spoken to six persons under four family names who were related to each other in some degree. Within the wider familial population, Dugdale uncovered histories of illegitimacy, pauperism, criminality, and feeble-mindedness. While Dugdale did not argue that these conditions were strictly inheritable, he did propose that heredity combined with select environmental conditions may lead to the expression of such traits.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Lumpkin, p. 135.

⁷⁶ See R.L. Dugdale, *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity* (New York: Putnam, 1910) and Elof Axel Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Cold Spring Harbor,

Goddard's study of the Kallikak family was in many ways a response to Dugdale. His study traced the ancestry of a young girl named Deborah, whom he judged to be a moron with immoral tendencies. (Notably, it was Goddard who was responsible for defining moron, imbeciles, and idiots as classes on a scientific intelligence scale, a fact that will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.) He argued that her genetic flaw could be traced back to her great-great-great grandmother, who was allegedly a feeble-minded tavern girl.⁷⁷ Of key importance for understanding how genetic studies of unwed mothers would later influence policy is Goddard's near exclusive emphasis on genetics in his study. Dugdale's analysis, by contrast, placed considerable importance on the power of environmental mechanisms to shape human behavior.

Goddard's work, like much of the work performed by early eugenicists, relied on a (mis)interpretation of the nineteenth-century experiments of Gregor Mendel. After nine years of breeding experiments with pea plants, Mendel posited several laws of inheritance, namely that the inheritance of traits is determined by genes, that an individual inherits one such unit from each parent for each trait, and that a trait may not show up in an individual but may still be expressed in a later generation. Eugenicists interpreted Mendel's laws to mean, quite simply, that like breeds like. Applied to human populations, Mendel's theories meant that social deviants were the victims of bad

New York: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001): 161-172; Kevles, p. 71-72; Paul, p. 43-45.

⁷⁷ See Henry Herbert Goddard, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912); Kevles, p. 77-90; Paul, p. 50-54.

hereditary stock and that those with physical or behavioral defects would produce similarly affected children.⁷⁸

Historian Wendy Kline has argued that Goddard's hereditary emphasis "was the dawning of a new day" for the field of social work because it created a scientific approach that experts could use "to categorize, diagnose, and segregate the unfit."⁷⁹ This eugenic approach complemented more traditional approaches of separating the worthy from the unworthy and, in the context of the reformatory, was a scientific approach that justified the physical separation of sexual delinquents.

The extent to which family trees were used as a tool for understanding delinquency and heredity in the field of social work is staggering. It is not an overstatement to allege that during the early interwar period a study into the causes of delinquency was not deemed complete without the delinquents' family trees. Typically presented in ornate chart form or in an extended discussion of statistical occurrences, social workers made no real effort to understand the importance of the variables displayed in their analysis.⁸⁰ The numbers presented were considered sufficiently meaningful to need no explanation. To a well-trained social worker who was familiar with the studies of Goddard, the conclusions capable of being derived from the data were self-evident.

⁷⁸ Carlson, p. 132-137 and 337-341.

⁷⁹ Kline, p. 30-31.

⁸⁰ For studies with extended graphical representations of family trees, see Clara Harrison Town, *What Happens in the Psychological Clinic? Report of Department of Psychology, Children's Aid Society of Buffalo and Erie County, New York* (Buffalo, New York: Children's Aid Society, 1927) and J. Harold Williams, "Heredity and Juvenile Delinquency: A Preliminary Study of Twelve Families," *The Eugenics Review* 9 (1917-1918): 18-31.

The studies produced by social workers of illegitimacy echoed Davenport's conclusions regarding the heredity of wayward girls. He argued that illegitimacy was caused not by economic or environmental circumstances (as Dugdale may have at least considered), but in the style of Goddard that wayward girls were inflicted with an "innate eroticism" that was "determined by a dominant Mendelian element." In "normal" people the erotic center of the brain would be inhibited by a genetically determined governor, but in abnormal individuals the erotic center lacked the inhibitor, resulting in an excess of erotic energy that was expressed in bursts of licentiousness.⁸¹

Studies authored by social workers implicitly echoed Mendelian theory, but lacked any overt recognition of this. Any scientific theory within social work considerations of familial trees was subsumed by intricate details of casework methodology, likely in an attempt to prioritize social work's contribution to scientific discourse by downplaying the actual science the studies were reacting to. For example, in a 1920 study of a delinquent girl population in a state reformatory the author considered parental character, parental marital status, parental mentality, abnormal characteristics in siblings, alcoholism, and a host of other similar factors. [See Appendix 2.] The lengthy report merely recounted statistical variations found within each category. Any attempt at analysis of the data was done with extended social diagnoses of individual cases, but again the details given were considered to be self-explanatory, such as a comment that the mother of one delinquent "seemed astonished because the agent assumed that she

⁸¹ Kevles, p. 53.

might know what her children were doing when they were away from the house.”⁸² The closest statement resembling analysis or any attempt at a meaningful conclusion was an aside that “the detrimental social characteristics of their parents make clear the fact that the great majority of girls in this study have been handicapped” by their heredity and poor parenting.⁸³

The lack of analysis within these sections makes abundantly clear that hereditary studies of sexual delinquents were not performed as an exploration of possible hereditary causation but as rote verification thereof. There was no need to analyze statistical results because the high percentage of undesirable elements proved the (often unspoken) thesis of each study that delinquency was “often closely associated with feeble-mindedness, insanity, epilepsy, and other traits which are known to be heritable.”⁸⁴

By the mid-1920s social workers largely took for granted the fact that proper case histories would necessarily illuminate multiple dysgenic strands. As one prominent social worker remarked in the introduction to her study of unwed mothers, a thorough case worker will consciously look for “the hereditary aspect, in this case presumably a predisposition to irregular sex expression” and other clues of familial dysfunction, such as statements about ‘low grade mentality,’ ‘sex offender,’ or ‘criminal record.’ After all, “the more one knows concerning the stock from which these girls came and conditions under which they live, the easier it is to understand how they become unwed mothers.”⁸⁵

⁸² Alice M. Hill, “Social and Environmental Factors in the Moral Delinquency of Girls Committed to the Kansas State Industrial Farm,” *Public Health Reports* 35 (June 1920):1520.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 1535.

⁸⁴ Williams, p. 18.

⁸⁵ Ida R. Parker, *A Follow-Up Study of 550 Illegitimacy Applications* (Boston: Research Bureau on Social Case Work, 1924): 20-26.

These understandings of innate compulsions or defects affirmed Davenport's suggestion that unwed mothers were somehow wired to "hunt up some man to go off with them."⁸⁶ Quantitative studies of small populations of unwed mothers buttressed these notions by analyzing rates of recidivism. A 1940 study of 35 unmarried mothers found a recidivism rate of twenty-two percent, with over sixty percent of the recidivist group pregnant with their third illegitimate child.⁸⁷

A 1924 study by social worker and sexual delinquency researcher Ida Parker tried to track the sex habits of unwed mothers for two years after their confinement was completed and divided the mothers into two groups based on custodial decisions. The first group was composed of mothers who lived with their babies. Within this group twenty-nine percent had "illicit sex" after the birth of their baby; twelve percent became pregnant by and then married a man who was not the father of the first illegitimate baby; four percent married the father of their first baby, but not before being intimate with another man first; and seven percent gave birth to a third illegitimate child. In a second, smaller group of women who retained legal custody of their baby but did not live with the baby, nearly thirty percent of the mothers showed evidence of "sex irregularity" after their confinement. In total, nearly twenty percent of the mothers tracked by Parker became pregnant again. Among the women who became pregnant again during the

⁸⁶ The notion that there was a familial tendency for illegitimacy certainly held sway in Minnesota. Case histories commonly contain asides that implicate familial predestination as a cause, such as in the case record of a twenty-year-old unwed mother whose sister was previously pregnant out of wedlock. The administrator of her mental exam noted in his notes that the woman unsurprisingly took "her present situation very calmly and as an everyday occurrence." See Department of Public Welfare Psychological Services Bureau, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁸⁷ Margaret T. Sullivan, *A Study of Thirty-Five Cases of Illegitimacy Under the Care of the Child Welfare Division of the Board of Public Welfare during the Fiscal Year 1935* (Master's Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1940): 29.

course of Parker's study, over sixty percent of them already had at least two illegitimate children.⁸⁸

Parker was likely unsurprised by the results of her study. Two years earlier, she had conducted a smaller study of 351 women known to social agencies for at least a three-year period due to illegitimacy, twenty-nine percent of the women had one or more illegitimate children prior to the birth of the baby involved in the study. Parker noted that the figure was "undoubtedly understated" because the agencies had no previous information on fifty-five percent of the mothers.⁸⁹

Parker's studies, when understood with the other quantitative studies of the early interwar period and accumulated impressions gleaned from casework, created a typology of unwed motherhood. The act of having more than one child out of wedlock, especially after a rehabilitative intervention, was evidence of deep-seated dysfunction. Aside from possessing an array of undesirable familial characteristics, unwed mothers also seemed to suffer from a compulsion to become illegitimately pregnant that was seldom extinguished by the birth of one illegitimate child. The act of becoming pregnant outside of marriage fundamentally defined the pathology of unwed motherhood, in the sense that illegitimate pregnancy was understood as both a response to and a creation of socio-biological illness.

Preservation of the New Familial Unit

⁸⁸ Parker, p. 52-56.

⁸⁹ Guibord and Parker, p. 38.

Despite the acknowledgment of this typology and the implications for understanding illegitimacy as a hereditary compulsion, preferred custodial outcomes in cases of illegitimacy failed to adapt along with the data, even in punitive environments like the state reformatory system (i.e., an environment where the state had the power to enforce its preferred outcome). Most unwed mothers, following a tradition established in the late nineteenth century, retained custody of their children because maternal custody was deemed by evangelical reformers and, to a lesser extent social workers, to be in the child's best interests. Reasons for favoring maternal custody dwelled on assumed implicit benefits to the child, such as the intangible value of a biological mother's love and care on the growth and development of children.⁹⁰

There was, however, a seedier undercurrent to this lofty rhetoric that was concerned with maternal contrition and punishment. Maternal custody of illegitimate children without a swift marriage ceremony meant that the mothers wore their children as a sort of badge of dishonor and immorality, a living scarlet letter that advertised earlier transgressions. An unwed mother atoned for her mistakes by bearing this burden, which was somewhat antithetically also the key to her redemption. This duality was widely recognized by Progressive era social reformers, who often celebrated it for its similarity to Christian doctrines that extolled the virtues of suffering prior to salvation. These attitudes were most prevalent in the evangelical private maternity homes, such as the Florence Crittenton Association, but they were also embraced by the social work field at large.

⁹⁰ Elza Virginia Dahlgren, *Attitudes of a Group of Unmarried Mothers toward the Minnesota Three Months' Nursing Regulation and its Application*. (Master's Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1940): 103-104.

Child welfare concerns aside, there was a concurrent understanding that the shame of illegitimacy would affect an unwed mother to the same degree regardless of whether she retained custody. The experience of illegitimate pregnancy itself was thought to be transformative to a woman's nature. It was indubitably at least transformative for her interactions with familial and social networks. Adoptive custody could not erase the memory of the pregnancy from an unwed mother's or her acquaintances' minds, which led to the belief that maternal custody and the joy a mother can garner from her child might be the only ray of hope available to illegitimate mothers. Case workers discussed a mother's tendency to "carry on for the sake of her baby." Without her child to protect and nurture, an unwed mother was assumed to greet the world "with a deep, hard scar on her soul – to face life with only her hardness to protect her and keep her going."⁹¹

These sentimental words camouflaged a very real social work strategy, which held that maternal custody was also a form of contraception. If mothers were allowed to walk away from their responsibility, to let the state assume responsibility for the care and support of their children, what would prevent them from having additional children out of wedlock? Preservation of the illegitimate family unit was in many ways a form of social insurance.

The preferred custodial outcome in cases of illegitimacy would drastically change over the course of the interwar period, but at least during its initial years maternal custody was the desired outcome. Prior to the advent of scientific studies of unwed mothers, sentimentalism and basic economic theory prioritized biological bonds. Records from the Home School indicate that prior to 1925, 71 percent of mothers retained custody of their

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, NFCM.

children. If familial custody of the child is included in this figure, nearly 80 percent of mothers retained some degree of custodial contact with their child.⁹²

Table 2.1
Custodial Decisions at Sauk Centre for the Years 1920, 1922, and 1924
(Data is given as percentages.)

Custodial Decision	1920	1922	1924
Maternal Custody	79	67	68
Familial Custody	4	6	14
Adoptive Placement	17	27	18

To achieve such high rates of maternal custody, unwed mothers were often pressured, guilted, or cajoled into accepting custody of their child. One maternity home in Atlanta bragged of its matron's ability to "somehow hypnotize the families of the girls into thinking it is a privilege for them to care for the babies."⁹³ The illegitimate child was commonly used as a pawn to manipulate the mother. Allusions to the possibility that the child may someday feel as if he or she were carelessly abandoned by the mother were popular approaches, as this letter from an imagined infant to his teenage mother demonstrates:

I am the abandoned baby! You, Mother, are going home for Christmas, going back into your family, going out again among your friends to enjoy the Holiday and all the happiness of reunion...I, your baby here, can never

⁹² Sauk Centre Home School Files, "Record of Babies Born, 1916-1946," Minnesota Historical Society.

⁹³ "Message from the General Superintendent," Florence Crittenton *Bulletin* 5 (April 1930): 5.

be linked with your name nor remembered in your future by anyone you know or meet...

Just as I had become used to your arms and begun to know your voice and recognize in my vague but instinctive way your movements and your smile, you are walking off and leaving me. Whose arms will pick me up from my coop tomorrow? Into what 'home' shall I be consigned?

Do you think they are sure to fix that bottle the way you have been taught? Do you think they will wait on me with the same gentleness you were shown and told to use?...It's going to be pretty tough on me among strangers, and what I can't understand is why you pretended to love me and hugged me up and played with my toes and kissed my ear if you were just going to end up walking off and letting me take my chance in a boarding home.⁹⁴

Dangling the possibility of future guilt if maternal custody was not retained was a technique employed by private and state organizations through the early 1920s. Protocol at a state agency in Ohio required social workers to respond to unwed mothers who expressed a desire for adoptive custody to concede that "it might be the best plan" while simultaneously questioning the mother whether she had considered "the long years ahead when she would sit in the quiet of some evening and think back to when she had held her little one in her arms?" If this image did not prove effective, the worker was next to raise the possibility that the child might one day find the mother and question if she "would be able to face the child and say, 'Yes, you are a lovely girl now, but I didn't have the courage or the backbone to face the world with you as a baby?'" This combination of guilt and shame was believed to carry "the most weight" when discussing custodial options with unwed mothers.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ National Florence Crittenton Mission Records, Box 12.

⁹⁵ Mabel Higgins Mattingly, *The Unmarried Mother and Her Child: A Fact Finding Study of Fifty-Three Cases of Unmarried Mothers who Kept their Children* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University School of Applied Social Sciences, 1928): 37.

Case workers did not have any qualms about manipulating mothers into keeping their children. Most believed that the initial relief mothers may have experienced when separated from their child would soon be replaced by even greater feelings of guilt and loss. The desire to place a child for adoption was believed to stem from transient feelings of fear and shame rather than a genuine desire to sever maternal rights. Florence Crittenton president Robert South Barrett advised that it was preferable to initially place a child in maternal custody and “have [mother and child] fail” rather than to immediately agree to temporary foster care or permanent adoptive custody. Barrett believed there were many methods for an unwed mother to make “a more or less complete adjustment to society” with negligible levels of stigma and adequate economic prospects if case workers were willing to embark on a long period of trial and error.⁹⁶

Multiple independent studies conducted during the early 1920s found that Barrett’s recommendations were in widespread use at state and evangelical agencies. Boston social worker Ida Parker reviewed case work procedure at several local agencies and found that in only six of the eighty-nine cases under her review was separation of mother and child the initial recommendation. Parker noted that “frequently the first plan was experimental and was tried in the hope of persuading, training, or sometimes almost compelling the mother to keep the child...the agencies tried to find some way of keeping mother and child together and made other disposition only when this failed.”⁹⁷

Maternal custody was routinely urged without adequate consideration of a mother’s ability to support her child or the impact of retaining custody on a mother’s

⁹⁶ Robert South Barrett, *The Care of the Unmarried Mother*, Reprint, Women & Children First Series (New York: Garland, 1987): 100-101.

⁹⁷ Parker, p. 32.

relationship with friends and family, who were often either unaware of the pregnancy or were eager to protect the experience from becoming public knowledge.

Myrtle was twenty-two years old when she agreed – at her social worker’s urging – to retain custody of her child. Myrtle consistently claimed that she became pregnant after being assaulted when her parents were away from home and that she “had never seen [the man] before, never saw him again, and would not recognize him if she did.” Her family was outraged and disgraced when she shared her condition with them. They sent her to a maternity home several hours away in an attempt to keep her pregnancy a secret. They refused to have any contact with her while she was at the home, with the exception of her brother who wrote repeatedly to tell her that “no decent man would marry her” in the future. Myrtle’s family said she could come home after the baby was born on the condition that she left her child behind and never spoke of what happened.

Myrtle felt her family’s anger and shame acutely, but she also loved her baby and was reluctant to part with her. She did not believe she could take care of her alone. Myrtle had never lived away from home prior to coming to the maternity home and she had no job skills or education. Her case worker told her she was being “overly sensitive” and was “too conscientious and too much given to trying to please,” especially when it came to Myrtle’s parents, whom the caseworker dismissed as “ignorant, country people.” With her caseworker’s assurance that all would be well, Myrtle decided to keep her baby. She found a job as a cook and had to board her baby since she could not cook and take care of her at the same time. Myrtle had to pay for her own room and board, as well as for her daughter. One brief follow-up case note said that Myrtle “has been and is still having

a hard struggle,” but the caseworker failed to identify her own culpability in Myrtle’s misfortunes. Instead the worker noted that “no force was used” when Myrtle decided to retain custody. She was simple “guided and helped in her choice.”⁹⁸

It is not surprising that Myrtle’s struggles were not especially distressing to her caseworker. There was an expectation that unwed mothers would initially struggle as they adjusted to their new role in life and position in society. But there was also a prevailing belief that redemption would follow soon after. Unwed mothers who truly dedicated themselves to their children were believed to be capable of overcoming any obstacles that stood before them. Social work literature from the period was strewn with triumphant tales of unwed mothers who conquered illness, bankruptcy, and familial abandonment.

Consider, for example, the case history of Marie, a young girl who traveled with her infant daughter from Chicago to Nebraska in the hope that once the father, Bert, saw his child he would help to support her. But Bert was a hard man, “a good-for-nothing” who cared only for “wine, women, and song.” Marie had no choice but to board her child and find work, but she soon became ill and fell behind on board payments. When she regained her health, the boarding home demanded that the bill be paid in full in a matter of days or the baby would be placed for adoption. Jobless and with little hope, Marie worked at the home for free in order to pay her debts. She struggled for years. “Many times she went almost in rags to keep up the payments and clothe the baby.” Her luck turned, however, and she met a man who married her and adopted her daughter. It was

⁹⁸ Powers, p. 32.

the beginning of much happiness for Marie, who, the reader is meant to infer, somehow earned a second chance.⁹⁹

Most of the case histories regarding successful unwed motherhood from the late Progressive and early interwar period conclude with the mother marrying and beginning a new family, as in Marie's history. More rarely, case histories exalted the unwed mother who found fulfillment exclusively in her child. Celia was a young girl who had once dreamed about finding a husband who was "removed from the grime of factory and trade" and was "just a little bit better in the social scale than any one she had ever known." She met a dashing, mysterious man when she was twenty-two-years old and quickly fell in love. Her mystery man said he did not believe she cared for him at all and suggested that she should do something to prove her love to him. Three months later Celia was pregnant and her lover was gone. She later found out he had not even told her his real name. Celia's hopes for a better life were instantly shattered, but she chose to keep her baby regardless, a son she named Harry.

The early years of his life were difficult. Celia boarded Harry while she worked as a clerk. She suffered periodic bouts of illness, including anemia, malnourishment, and chronic heart problems, but she still managed to support Harry without any charitable aid. At the time the case history was written, Harry was eight years old and living with his mother in rented rooms above a garage. Celia had previously told him about his father and she believed Harry was more affectionate toward her once he understood the sacrifices she had made for him.

⁹⁹ Ann Ulrich and T. Earl Sullenger, *Child-Placing* (Omaha, Nebraska: Bureau of Social Research, 1937): 13-14.

The social worker wrote that Harry was reluctant to depart from his mother's company during her visit and that he kissed Celia with "great affection" before leaving the room. This was only one of a multitude of affectionate displays between mother and son that the worker believed demonstrated "a beautiful attitude of comradeship between the two and a spirit of understanding which implied mutual aid and encouragement." The possibility of a future marriage for Celia was dismissed as unlikely, as she still retained her youthful ideals of what her husband should be like. The social worker noted that Celia would "never get the kind [of man] she expects to fall at her feet." This was not, however, any unhappy assessment in the eyes of the worker because she believed that Celia had already found the true meaning of family – love, support, and happiness – with her son.¹⁰⁰

Case histories like Marie's and Celia's followed a formulaic pattern. Girl becomes pregnant, girl suffers in order to care for her child, and girl finds happiness in the end despite her hardships. The proliferation of narratives like these served to form a body of professional fables that demonstrated the power of a biological mother's love to overcome adversities and reaffirmed the righteousness of pro-maternal custody policies.

The realities of unwed motherhood rarely conformed to such narratives. As will be discussed in the next chapter, studies of unwed motherhood tested the assumptions embedded within these histories and found that the ideal was seldom achieved.

¹⁰⁰ Mattingly, p. 39-41.

Conclusion

The process of transforming unwed motherhood into a pathological condition began almost immediately in the wake of late Progressive child welfare reforms. Child welfare efforts to protect the illegitimate child changed the dialogue surrounding illegitimacy into one where the unspoken assumption increasingly became that social workers had a duty to protect the infant from its own mother. In Minnesota the process of entering unwed mothers into the new state juvenile justice system was built upon the premise that unwed mothers needed to be reformed, language which automatically implied that unwed mothers possessed some type of defect and therefore were not the logical first choice to raise their child.

Populations of unwed mothers and other sexual delinquents became the subjects of numerous scientific inquiries due to the zeal of social workers to professionalize, and the ability of the studies' conclusions to play into broader scientific desires to elucidate causes and find solutions to social problems. The pathologization of unwed mothers furthered the agendas of the experts who conducted the studies and their associated reform movements. The studies were primarily concerned with trying to pinpoint causative factors of illegitimacy while simultaneously creating a predictive portrait of the typical unwed mother. The studies could therefore identify the disease and suggest a prescriptive cure.

The socio-economic background of most mothers who were sent to reformatories embeds such studies with an inherent compositional bias. The wealthy daughters of Minnesota's lumber and flour barons would naturally not be represented within the study

populations. Social problems like broken homes, unemployment, and poor health would logically be found amongst the families of the unwed mothers who came to the attention of state authorities. However, no effort was made to identify situational deficiencies that were a reflection of circumstance instead of character or heredity. Instead, these environmental factors were grouped as unifying elements that could explain causation, an analytical judgment that quickly devolved into a conclusion that only certain types of individuals were likely to become pregnant out of wedlock and that the circumstances of their pregnancies were biologically rooted. These conclusions were reinforced by studies from across the country with similar results. By the end of the 1920s, a standard “type” was cast for the role of unwed mother.

Social policy concerning custodial outcomes failed to keep pace with the development of “scientific” understandings of unwed motherhood. Mothers typically retained custody of their babies in keeping with traditions from an earlier era. Plus, the quantitative studies that produced a typology of illegitimacy failed to examine maternal aptitude. While the studies certainly raised questions about the types of characteristics that might eventually be expressed in illegitimate children, none of the studies offered commentary on the ability of unwed mothers to raise their children in a socially acceptable manner. It was hoped that the indoctrination in middle-class values and behaviors supplied to mothers at state reformatories would be enough to alter their path. Intervention by social workers to prevent the circumstances that led to unwed pregnancy was therefore the most important prescription during the early interwar period.

Experiential studies of unwed motherhood, which will be discussed in the next chapter, would alter this perception.

Interlude

The Story of Elsie and Andrew, or the Voices behind the Science

Quantifying, qualifying, enumerating, and amalgamating – the voices of the unwed mothers sent to the Home School during the interwar period had a tendency to get lost in the scientific agenda that motivated social workers. Their identities and their true stories were stripped; the only significance of their individual experiences was where meaningful data points could be located to create, validate or challenge a scientific theory.

For several reasons, it is worthwhile to pause for a moment and consider one case history in its entirety. Tracing one mother's story from the time of her intake at the Home School until the time the case is marked closed allows for a deeper understanding of how the Minnesota Plan functioned and the types of information Home School officials reacted to when considering desirable case outcomes. On another level, a consideration of one girl's story in detail – her background, the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy, her prospects for the future – contextualizes the environment in which many studies of sexual delinquency and illegitimacy were undertaken in the interwar period.

Finally, this case history amplifies the voice of one unwed mother. The records left with which to consider unwed pregnancy were typically not created by unwed mothers themselves, but rather by the individuals whose job was to intervene, study, and direct the situation to a desirable outcome. The available voices of unwed mothers are therefore filtered and, if not silenced, are abbreviated and limited to brief bursts that caseworkers found to be compelling pieces of information useful for diagnosing and

treating their clients. Working with records from reformatories and social work agencies is unique in this respect, as it is possible to derive insights into the state of mind of both the social worker and the client by considering what pieces of conversation were important enough to warrant notation. The social workers' perspectives are necessarily highlighted in this study of how the condition of illegitimacy was pathologized, but total primacy of this point of view denies unwed mothers any sense of agency. This consideration of one case history is an attempt to understand the unwed mother herself instead of the thought processes of her case worker.

Elsie, the unwed mother profiled in this section, was a unique case in the Home School records due to the length of her file and the inclusion of multiple letters from friends and family in it. Most personal correspondence was removed from the files and it was sheer luck to stumble across one with such a rich collection of voices. Historians are often struck by the power of the voices that still seem to live and breathe in dusty, long forgotten files. Elsie's voice rang particularly clear and by the end of the file she felt like a friend. Her struggles to retain custody of her child serve as a useful example of the manner in which unwed mothers managed to preserve some degree of autonomy even while inside a system that freely admitted a desire to dictate custodial decisions and the life course of unwed mothers.

Elsie's case history may also prompt readers to evaluate the characterizations of illegitimacy and unwed motherhood from a different perspective. Elsie's background fit the stereotypical portrait of an unwed mother. Her attitude, which was at times defiant and deceitful, likely reinforced notions of how an unwed mother might be expected to

react to authority. And yet her attitude also challenged assumptions that will be discussed in later chapters about the depth of maternal feelings for illegitimate children, the willingness of mothers to sacrifice for their children, and the strength of the maternal-child bond. Elsie's history does not neatly fit into the scientific categorizations of unwed motherhood discussed in this dissertation, and it is likely that none of the mothers who make brief appearances in these pages would do so. The real story is necessarily more complex than statistical analyses or psychiatric evaluations could convey. It is hoped that Elsie's history will help to form a more complete representation of the lived experience of unwed motherhood in Minnesota during the 1920s and, by doing so, will both contextualize and complicate the scientific conclusions discussed in the remaining chapters.

Elsie and Andrew were childhood sweethearts who, at the ages of fourteen and seventeen, were anxious to be married. Elsie's parents refused to consent to the marriage, believing Andrew to be "worthless" and "unable to provide" for a wife. Elsie intentionally became pregnant as a ploy to force her parents' consent, but instead her father had a violent quarrel with Andrew and threatened to press charges of carnal knowledge against him, forcing Andrew to leave town.

The county child welfare board was notified of Elsie's condition and began to search for Andrew in order to establish paternity. The county worker uncovered bitter opinions about the two lovers in the course of her investigation. The townspeople held a low opinion of Elsie and her family, some even going so far as to argue that Andrew should not be held responsible for anything because the pregnancy was "more Elsie's

fault” than his. This is not to say, however, that the townspeople thought very highly of Andrew either. The sheriff said that Andrew was “no better than Elsie,” describing him as “a mean little rascal” who would benefit from time at the boys’ reformatory.

Andrew was still missing by the time Elsie gave birth to a son, whom she named Frank, in November 1921. The county welfare board arranged for Elsie and Frank to be transferred to a Minneapolis maternity home while the board worked to secure employment for Elsie. During her pregnancy and after Frank’s arrival, Elsie was adamant that she did not want to be separated from her son, no matter what the cost. The maternity home matron reported to the county that Elsie took “good care of her baby, but [seemed] very much dissatisfied” with her circumstances. “She [begged] to go home every day,” but she was not wanted at home.

The county struggled to find a position for Elsie. Domestic service was the preferred placement because it would allow Elsie to keep Frank by her side while she worked. Luck was not on Elsie’s side, however. The county worker was repeatedly informed by employment agencies that it would be difficult to place a young girl with a baby at a time when there was “plenty of competent work to be had.” Promising placements evaporated as soon as employers became aware that Elsie was an unwed mother. One woman said her mother-in-law was ill and a crying child would disturb her. Another woman’s husband forbade Elsie’s employment because the family included two teenage sons; a final potential employer canceled at the last moment because she decided that Elsie would be “stubborn and unreliable.” As the weeks wore on without any real

employment prospects, it became increasingly likely that the state would send Elsie to the Home School.

Always one to take matters into her own hands, Elsie left the maternity home, placed Frank in the care of a neighboring woman, and journeyed to Fargo to join her older sister, Rose, and her fiancé. Elsie would later argue that she traveled to Fargo in search of work, but county officials believed she was searching for Andrew. When they finally found Elsie in September 1922, she and Frank were committed to the Home School. She failed to make a positive first impression with the staff. Her intake file noted that,

She is a girl who resents authority and is very unwilling to accept direction. She is most independent in her ideas and showed a very stubborn, unyielding spirit in regard to any good which might come to her through being in the Home School. She feels the child welfare board has been unfair and that the law (which we represent) is against her. She still thinks very fondly of Andrew and would like to marry him.

As noted in the previous chapter, Home School officials believed Elsie's social background helped to explain her attitude and her pregnancy. Like so many girls at the reformatory, Elsie came from a broken family. When her parents were together, they often fought and her mother eventually left with another man. Elsie's father was then determined to be temporarily insane and he was committed to the state hospital for several months. Elsie's older brother was left to run the farm and tend to the children during this time; the youngest children were soon committed by the child welfare board to the state orphanage. Elsie's Home School file noted that it "was no surprise" that she was "allowed to run wild under [such] conditions."

Elsie's case file falls silent until February 1923, when her sister's new husband, Brook, began to write letters to the School's superintendent to inquire about plans for Elsie and Frank. Brook wrote that Rose was "worried sick" about Elsie and suggested that she and Frank be allowed to live in Fargo. They were anxious to give Elsie a home since she "had no home she could call her own and she [was] but a mere child herself."

The Superintendent must have momentarily considered this proposition, as she wrote to the Fargo police department and asked for their opinion. The police responded that Brook was a veteran who people in the community considered to be "a fine young fellow and his wife a sweet little woman." An officer interviewed Brook about his motivations for extending such an offer to Elsie. He concluded that Brook seemed "very anxious to have his poor sister come stay in his home as he says the poor child needs helps now if she is ever going to get on her feet again." The officer commented that he liked Brook's "attitude in the manner."

Seemingly satisfied with this response, the Superintendent contacted officials at the state Children's Bureau for final approval of the transfer. The Bureau informed the superintendent that there were allegations that Brook was the father of Elsie's child, making her transfer to his out of the question. The Bureau further noted that in the previous year,

Brook was peddling [alcohol] between Grand Forks and Minneapolis. His brother-in-law was smuggling it across the border from Canada. [They] looked up Brook pretty thoroughly at the time and found he had unpaid grocery bills and unpaid rent as well as 10 or 12 checks drawn on a bank from which he had insufficient funds. No one wished to prosecute him because he was an ex-soldier and did not seem well...At various places I was told he was the smoothest crook they ever saw...If the police and

Fargo think [they] are alright it is because they do not know them. It is [our] opinion that Elsie should not be sent to Brook nor anyone near him.

There is no indication in the file that the superintendent shared this information with Brook or ever wrote him a letter offering a decision in the matter. In March 1923 Brook wrote another letter.

We received Elsie's letter and states that you folks are asking her to adopt her baby out because he is getting to large to stay at that home. Are we to take from her letter that she cannot come?

Brook's letter went unanswered. In May of that year Elsie became eligible for parole but school officials decided to keep her at the school longer, believing that she would immediately run away from wherever she was paroled to and journey to Fargo.

Perhaps because of the revelations from the Children's Bureau, Home School officials began to intercept Elsie's mail sometime in the late spring or early summer of 1923. The accumulated letters indicate that Brook and Rose discovered the reason for Elsie's continued stay at the Home School in August. A letter to Elsie dated August 22, 1923 noted that they had "got a nasty letter from the old man...I feel as if I could choke him to death. He says Frank is mine. Imagine that." When Elsie did not respond to his letter, Brook realized that she was not receiving her mail and thus once again wrote to the Superintendent.

Some few days ago we sent Elsie a letter that her father wrote to me, accusing me in a nice way of being the father of Elsie's baby...Now as Elsie never got this letter it is evidently at your office, and I would thank you very kindly to return this letter to me. I already know this is the reason you do not care to have Elsie come and live with us.

Brook received a curt response from the Superintendent's secretary, who wrote that the Superintendent was "too busy" to answer his correspondence. The Home School made it

quite clear without uttering a single word that Elsie and Frank would not be moving to Fargo.

While these negotiations were occurring, Home School officials continued to pressure Elsie to relinquish custody of Frank but she remained firmly opposed to the idea. In early winter 1923, Home School officials made a bargain with Elsie. If she would temporarily commit Frank to the state orphanage for a period of six months and if she could successfully secure employment and keep her position for the entire period, they would not object to her reclaiming custody of Frank. It was presented to Elsie as a type of proving period, a time for her to demonstrate her maternal commitment and her ability to support a child. Elsie agreed.

It is likely, however, that the School did not believe that Elsie and Frank would be reunited. A letter from the orphanage questioned whether the commitment was truly “only to be for six months, or [would] it be more in the usual way, with the understanding that the superintendent [was] to hold it for six months before placement [was] attempted?” The ultimate goal was not for Elsie to prove much of anything to the Home School; their desire was that time and separation would dull her emotions for Frank and allow for permanent separation.

Elsie was a headstrong, committed girl and was not easily swayed. Her first week away from the school at her new domestic and nanny position in rural Winona, Minnesota, she penned a brief letter to the School, noting that “every day seem[ed] a month away from Frank” and asking for information about how he was faring without her. The School did not supply much information about Frank in their response. Instead

they urged Elsie to focus on her position and asked that her next letter speak more to her “work, and [her] home, and what [she was] doing.” Ideally, thoughts of Frank would have no role in Elsie’s new life away from the School.

Her employer’s first report to the School indicated that Elsie was not succeeding in erasing Frank from her thoughts and, if anything, she was becoming more committed to the notion that they belonged together. Her employer reported that,

Elsie does her work well, but mechanically, she puts no soul or feeling into what she does. She told me she could not love my baby and hated doing things for her, as she always wondered what was done for her baby. Elsie is also a self-pitier, always criticizing the School and what was done. She told me that, ‘Mothers are just nobody out there, nothing is done for them.’ This was too much. I asked what she expected. Told as that as she was not forced to become a mother, there was no reason to expect people to praise her for becoming one.

The accuracy of Elsie’s employer’s words were confirmed by Elsie’s own letters back to the Home School, which continued to dwell on Frank and lacked any indication that she was adjusting to life without him.

How is my darling boy? I wonder every day how he is and what he is doing. Is he fat or skinny? How does he eat now and does he ever ask for me? I would be the happiest girl in the world if I could only have him again...Kiss my darling for me. I miss him so much.

Most of Elsie’s letters went unanswered. When the School finally responded to her in February 1924, they rather coolly noted that although they realized “the real sacrifice it [was] to be separated from [her] little son” Elsie needed “to brace up and do [her] best” because the arrangement was in her best interests.

The exact week that the School encouraged Elsie to brace up, they began to investigate possible adoptive parents for Frank. The social worker who took Frank to the

orphanage made the acquaintance of a man “who begged to take the little boy home; said his wife would be ‘wild’ about him.” The man was told that it might be possible to adopt Frank by the summer. School files noted that they “would like Frank to have a good home. Elsie [would] never supply that.” The basis for such an opinion is somewhat of a mystery. Elsie had no problems at the School prior to her removal to Winona for her domestic position and was consistently presented as a loving mother in all of the School’s files. The belief that Elsie would be a poor mother must have only been influenced by the School’s impression of her family and her personality. By early spring 1924 adoptive placement for Frank was almost guaranteed, pending Elsie’s agreement.

Ironically, it was Elsie’s poor performance at her domestic position during her proving period that saved her from separation from Frank. Her employer continued to complain about her in each report, noting that Elsie still refused to show any affection toward the child in her charge and that she was “unpopular” with the other staff. The Home School began to realize that they had to remove Elsie from the position, but then what were they to do with her? A memo to the Children’s Bureau noted that when Elsie was approached about a possible adoption in March 1924 that she was “very unwilling” to discuss the matter and that she was “determined to have her child,” much to the School’s chagrin. Social workers did not want to leave Frank in Elsie’s care, but without her consent to adoptive placement they had few choices available to them.

Elsie could not return to the School with Frank. He was becoming too large for the nursery. Following preferred social work methodology of the times, the School was hesitant to allow Elsie to retain custody of Frank without a husband because it was

unlikely she could earn enough to support him on her own. It was known that Andrew had recently returned home, so the School asked the county welfare board to interview him and inquire about his feelings toward Elsie.

The report sent back to the School noted that Andrew was “well dressed; a country boy with some city experience.” He admitted paternity of Frank and expressed a desire to marry Elsie. He felt confident he could support a family because his father had offered him the deed to the family farm. The School passed this information on to the Children’s Bureau and remarked that if Andrew “[was] sincere, then why not a wedding?” It would “relieve the situation” and there were no other easy options. The Superintendent wrote that she was “inclined to think that Elsie will never be liked” by another man because she was “a difficult girl to approach” and “few could ever really care for her.” With some hesitancy, state officials agreed that a marriage between Elsie and Andrew was the only solution other than court proceedings to forcibly sever Elsie’s custody, an act that seldom occurred in the early years of the Minnesota Plan.

Home School officials approached Elsie with the plan in person a few days later. It is not recorded what School officials said in the conversation, but, given Elsie’s later actions, it is likely that Elsie was presented with the choice of marriage or adoption. Elsie said that marrying Andrew was something that she used to desire, but she no longer felt that way. She only wanted her son. After the social workers departed, Elsie went to the county sheriff and swore out a warrant for Andrew’s arrest on charges of illegitimacy and carnal knowledge. She later told social workers that she did so in order to guarantee that she would have income from child support payments and could therefore support Frank

regardless of her marital status, an act that would make proceedings to forcibly place Frank for adoption more difficult for the state.

Elsie did not take the time to think through her plan, however, and was shocked when Andrew was arrested to await his trial. She understood that if Andrew was in prison, he would be unable to make child support payments, leaving Elsie and Frank in a vulnerable position. She immediately wrote to the School and asked if they thought if she married Andrew right away “they [would] release him so he can help me?” The rest of Elsie’s letter was an obvious attempt to convince both herself and School officials that she wanted to marry Andrew.

I have found now that I really do love him & I know he will change a lot after this is over. As I s’pose it has been hard for him too. Andrew certainly is willing to do anything in the world for Frank and I...I love him and I know it will be best for Frank and both of us...I will be the happiest mother in the world then and I certainly will be a good girl. It has been so hard for me to be away from Frank. It seems he is the sweetest baby in the whole world. You just can’t realize how much I love him...Please don’t think of me adopting Frank out as long as I have a chance like this.

Elsie’s letter fooled no one. School officials wrote in her file that they were “sure she does not love Andrew” and noted she was only marrying him to keep custody of Frank. “That is all she cares about.” Elsie and Andrew were married in May 1924 and Elsie was reunited with Frank in July. She was seventeen years old.

It was not a fairy tale ending for Elsie, however. She was able to retain custody of her son, but at considerable cost. The School received a letter from Elsie’s sister in November of that year with grim news.

Elsie and her baby and husband were out here for the harvest but Andrew finds it easier to live off his relatives than earn his own living as long as they allow it.

I think it would be well for you to investigate just what he intends to do because he surely proved himself no good while he was here. Of course I understand this is no affair of mine but Elsie won't complain because she is afraid of being sent back to the School. I have seen Andy strike her unconscious while they were with us. He wouldn't go out and work although there was great demand for men and good wages were paid all fall. He drank so we were ashamed of him. The day they left we went to Fargo and when we got home we found they had stolen about \$35 out of the cash register of my husband's store, also a lot of canned goods and other groceries, amounting to \$15 or \$20. I am not trying to make any trouble for Elsie because I think a great deal of her but I think he should be watched so he takes care of her properly.

Elsie's parole officer from the School was sent to interview Elsie in light of the letter.

Elsie claimed that Andrew worked all the time, never hit her, did not drink, and treated her with respect. The parole officer wrote that an array of bruises was clearly visible on Elsie, but she would not say a word against Andrew, likely out of fear that she would lose Frank again. Without a complaint, there was nothing the Home School could do. Elsie's case file contains a few additional reports of potential abuse in subsequent years, but, like many case files at the Home School, it falls silent after her twenty-first birthday.¹

¹ Sauk Centre Home School for Girls Case Files, Box 22, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

Chapter Four

So Happy Together? Experiential Studies of Life as an Unwed Mother in the Interwar Period

Sybil was an average teenage girl in 1930. She was described by her high school teachers as a happy, well-adjusted student with numerous friends who participated in an array of extracurricular activities. By all accounts, Sybil was a model of responsible youth and she described her life as “nearly perfect.” The sensation of perfection only increased once Sybil began dating Harold, a popular sports team captain at Sybil’s school who, according to one source, was “who all the girls wished for when they blew out the candles on their cake.” Teenage bliss is often fleeting, however, and Sybil’s world came crashing down three months into her relationship with Harold when she discovered she was pregnant. Her father petitioned the court for Sybil’s commitment to the Home School because “she seemed so broken at having to leave school and having the community know of her condition that [he] feared she might endanger her life.”

Sybil immediately pressed charges against Harold, who pleaded guilty to carnal knowledge and freely admitted paternity of Sybil’s child. He furthermore expressed a desire to support the baby as soon as he could secure employment. Humiliated and scared, Sybil was relieved by Harold’s response to the charges, but she did not exhibit any feelings of gratitude. Home School officials and Sybil’s parents, on the other hand, found Harold’s testimony to be “very candid” and respected him greatly for not denying his responsibility.

Without consulting Sybil, the Home School and her parents mutually agreed that Harold was marriage material and a wedding should be arranged as soon as possible. Sybil was released from the school to make plans for her future, but she shocked everyone when she flatly refused to marry Harold. She heard rumors that he was denying paternity to his friends and was angered by his inability to keep a job due to his habit of “follow[ing] shows and merry-go-rounds.” To Sybil, Harold represented the ultimate mistake in her young life and she was reluctant to saddle herself with a husband whom she viewed as immature and needy and who would likely need as much oversight as her child. Sybil’s refusal to consent to the marriage could not be broken by her parents or social workers. When asked what it would take for her to consent to marriage, Sybil tartly questioned whether Harold could be sent to the Home School because she believed “he could learn a lot” there.¹

Whether by choice or by circumstance many unwed mothers like Sybil during the interwar period were *de facto* single mothers. It was this reality that first instigated social (experiential) investigations of unwed motherhood during the early 1920s. The studies were only marginally scientific in methodology. They had a primary goal of amassing and analyzing data from casework files or personal interviews in an effort to understand daily life as an unwed mother, much like the statistical analyses of the delinquent populations were produced to understand the demographic and environmental commonalities of unwed mothers. And, also like the statistical analyses, the results of the studies were believed to be useful measurements for standardizing the social welfare

¹ Sauk Centre Home School for Girls Case Files, Box 7, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

response to premarital pregnancy. These studies were extensions of Kammerer's theory of commonality.

But unlike Kammerer and the other scientists who used quantitative techniques to study the unwed mother, the researchers who performed the social analyses of unwed motherhood represented by these studies usually made no effort to distinguish between delinquent and non-delinquent populations. This omission was a reflection of the pervasiveness of the theory's ultimate conclusion that many girls who became pregnant were predisposed to be or even intentionally became pregnant out of wedlock. As discussed in chapter two, the population level studies of unwed motherhood made the non-delinquent teenage mother the exception to the rule. By the time the experiential studies of unwed motherhood became an accepted research approach to illegitimacy, some degree of delinquency was assumed to be a characteristic shared by unwed mothers.

The selection of Sybil's case history for the introduction to this chapter is an illustration of this trend. If Sybil had become pregnant in 1920 instead of 1930, it is unlikely she would have been considered delinquent due to her demographic background. She was set to graduate high school; she was a well-engaged and well-liked student who came from a respected, loving family. The population studies produced by Kammerer and his followers would have likely excluded Sybil as an outlier, but by 1930 she was understood as delinquent *because* she was pregnant, her background notwithstanding.

These studies had two important impacts on the field of illegitimacy research. First, the experiential studies gradually eroded the need for the statistical analyses of demographics because, as will be discussed in this chapter, they exposed a new "truth"

that unwed mothers, regardless of economic class and whether they fit the statistical pattern of the prototypical delinquent, shared similar personality traits and behaved in similar manners when confronting life as an unwed mother. The experiential studies blurred the previously distinct lines between girls like Sybil and girls like Elsie and raised new questions about who the unwed mother was and how illegitimacy could be averted if it could not be predicted by demographics and familial history alone.

Secondly, the experiential studies tested the effectiveness of late Progressive era illegitimacy legislation (like the Minnesota Plan) that was designed to reduce the financial burden on the state and prioritize the welfare of illegitimate children. The studies repeatedly concluded that the economic support systems built into the laws were ineffective at guaranteeing financial support from putative fathers. This meant that many of the related child welfare objectives embedded in the legislation as attempts to ensure that illegitimate children received the same opportunities as children born in wedlock were also ineffective, as the provisions were dependent on the financial security of the unwed mother. These conclusions raised anew questions about the type of custodial arrangement that was in the best interest of illegitimate children, thus intensifying the assault against maternal claims to illegitimate children.

The economic impetus behind these studies as the interwar period progressed cannot be overstated. Research indicated that the state significantly supplemented the income of unwed mothers through various social welfare programs. This cost became increasingly difficult to defend or afford during the economic turmoil of the early 1930s. The experiential studies became a mechanism for measuring what, precisely, the state

was buying with its money and whether the investment in maternal custody of illegitimate children was a sound one from economic and child welfare standpoints.

This chapter considers the typical experience of unwed motherhood as seen through the eyes of social workers and their research-oriented counterparts. Undoubtedly if this chapter were told through the voices of unwed mothers, the narrative and the conclusions regarding an unwed mother's ability to be a "good" mother would be radically different. While the voices of unwed mothers do make fleeting appearances within this chapter, their relative silence is intentional. The experiential studies under consideration rarely incorporated statements or testimony from unwed mothers, even when access to the mothers and ample case histories were available to researchers. Unwed mothers' worldviews were not deemed important.

This chapter aims to demonstrate how experiential studies of unwed motherhood began to transform understandings of the illegitimate child's best interests by presenting the struggles common to unwed motherhood and the corresponding (mostly unfavorable) social work analyses of the situations. It is in these studies that the first instances of unwed motherhood being equated with "bad" motherhood began to appear in the literature, usually because the behaviors and attitudes of the mothers failed to live up to social workers' expectations. The experiential studies were an important component of the pathologization of unwed motherhood because they identified facile symptoms of maternal failure that were universal to the experience of unwed motherhood.

This chapter briefly considers the methodologies of social work research in the 1930s before considering elements of unwed motherhood that were under professional

review, such as maternal adaptation, employment, and the success of mother and baby as a familial unit. A later chapter will consider analyses of maternal success or failure from the perspective of the illegitimate child; this chapter, however, strives to focus solely on the practical, lived experiences of unwed motherhood without regard to how those realities affected childrearing. Notably, while numerous historians have considered these issues from a wide lens of social welfare reform or studies of welfare recipients, a systematic consideration of daily life as an unwed mother in the pre-World War Two period has yet to be written.

Social Work Research in the 1930s

The character and quality of research inquiries into illegitimacy changed drastically during the 1930s. Social work literature in general contained markedly fewer references to illegitimacy and the quantitative studies of the 1920s all but disappeared. This change can be explained in two ways. First, the 1930s was a decade in flux. The larger social welfare field was shifting away from its emphasis on child welfare issues and becoming increasingly involved with studies of psychoanalytic theories of behavior and their possible application to casework, a trend that will be more fully discussed in the next chapter.

Second, social workers were distracted from illegitimacy research by a need to focus on the larger and more prevalent social issues caused by the Depression. Social conditions forced a prioritization of income maintenance, housing permanency, labor

legislation, and consumer protection, forcing more traditional efforts in child welfare to be placed on the back burner.

This is not to say that social work research into illegitimacy and child welfare issues stopped during the 1930s [e.g., 1930 White House Conference on the Child]. The approach and the type of product produced did change, however. The replacement of quantitative studies of illegitimacy with more nuanced qualitative or experiential studies can in part be traced to Dr. Richard Cabot's presidential address at the 1931 National Conference of Social Work. He challenged social workers to "measure, evaluate, estimate, [and] appraise" their results, to base their practice and their claims on tested evidence rather than on faith.² The effect of this exhortation is seen in the various experiential studies, community surveys, and social accountings that filled the pages of social work journals in the following years.³

The experiential studies of unwed motherhood are rightly considered to be an extension of the more scientific (if flawed) quantitative studies of the 1920s; studies in the 1930s were literally social workers testing their casework skills and the corresponding policies that encouraged maternal custody, albeit in a manner that even more than the previous decade's work defied the rigors of scientific controls and the ability to replicate results. As noted illegitimacy researcher Mabel Mattingly noted, social work "very much" needed "more study into the different phases of the problem and a much more accurate check on results already obtained" in order to possibly formulate "a revised plan

² R. Cabot, "Treatment in Social Case Work and the Need of Criteria and of Tests of its Success or Failure," *National Conference on Social Work Proceedings* (1931): 21-23.

³ Lillian Ripple, *Social Work Studies of Unmarried Parents as Affected by Contemporary Treatment Formulations, 1920-1940* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1953):110.

of treatment.”⁴ Or as another researcher stated more boldly, the field could not “blindly continue to accept bromidic common-sense interpretations” of illegitimacy that stemmed from the quantitative and hereditary studies.⁵

Research in the 1930s tended to use small data groups to draw wide conclusions, a methodological model that furthered the dissemination of Kammerer’s theory of commonality by basing “universal” conclusions on small study populations. This approach was also a continuation of the empirical research approach popularized by the Children’s Bureau in the late 1910s and early 1920s. More a survey of conditions rather than a scientific study, the Bureau’s reports were sociological in nature and relied heavily on statistics in lieu of conversations with scientific theory.

The Bureau’s research on infant mortality serves as a useful example of this methodology. Staff canvassed urban cities, armed with a detailed questionnaire, in order to ascertain the number of births and infant deaths, infant growth history, housing conditions, and parental characteristics. The survey responses were supplemented with information gained from city records and the cooperation of local social welfare agencies. The results of the study confirmed the basic accuracy of existing knowledge and added nuanced considerations of the various factors that affected infant mortality, most of which were gained from the in-person interviews undertaken by staff social workers. The studies were hailed as scientific inquiries into a pressing social problem and, as Richard Meckel has argued, “proved to be more comprehensible and sophisticated than anything

⁴ Mabel Higgins Mattingly, *The Unmarried Mother and Her Child: A Fact Finding Study of Fifty-three Cases of Unmarried Mothers who Kept Their Children* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University School of Applied Social Sciences, 1928): 74-75.

⁵ Henry C. Schumacher, “The Unmarried Mother; A Socio-Psychiatric Viewpoint,” *Mental Hygiene* 11 (1927): 775.

previously undertaken.”⁶ They set a methodological pattern for social work surveys that would continue throughout the interwar period.

Social work research was quite similar to the methodology and aims of sociological research produced by university academics during the interwar period, likely because many of the social work studies published in the field’s journals were undertaken by university-based, or at the very least, university-trained social workers. Both social workers and sociologists produced studies that had a heavy statistical component. Experts in both fields were motivated by a belief in social engineering, the notion that the results of sociological surveys could directly guide leaders in formulating policy decisions by offering predictive tools.⁷ As one commentator noted, “From the standpoint of social work no research is justified which does not promise to answer some question which needs to be answered in order that work may be better done.”⁸

The predictive emphasis in experiential studies rather than an experimental basis was readily dismissed by social workers, as true experimentation in the social sciences was generally agreed to be unfeasible. Observation replaced experimentation as the chief mode of scientific inquiry.⁹ As one contemporary noted in defense of social work’s

⁶ Richard A. Meckel, *“Save the Babies”*: American Public Health Reform and the Prevention of Infant Mortality, 1850-1929 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990): 179-182; Alice Boardman Smuts, *Science Discovers the Child, 1893-1935: A History of the Early Scientific Study of Children* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1995): 184-189.

⁷ For a discussion of the social sciences during the interwar periods, see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Ross and Theodore M. Porter, *The Modern Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸ Rowland Hayes, “Research and Social Work: Research as a Joint Project between the Field and Schools, Councils, and National Agencies,” *Official Proceedings on the National Conference on Social Welfare* (1931): 510.

⁹ It should be clarified that the quantitative studies discussed in the previous chapter were indeed considered experimental by social workers, although modern observers would be more likely to

observational tendencies, “If the method is investigation, the purpose is prediction, for the ultimate objective of scientific study is prediction, for with prediction we have control.”¹⁰ The ability to predict a client’s next actions was a stated aim of scientific social work and a barometer of a particular social worker’s acumen. Leslie Margolin has argued that in an ideal world the social workers’ “tacit assumption” would be

that clients’ actions, and social workers’ reactions to them, are determinate, coherent, and noncontradictory, that every instant of their behavior and experience can be coordinated with that of the previous instant and is fully apprehendable and knowable by social workers, the clients themselves, and anyone else who might care to understand them.¹¹

If additional data could be compiled and analyzed, social workers could theoretically predict an individual unwed mother’s success or failure based on knowledge of broad trends, combined with the case worker’s intimate knowledge of the unwed mother’s personality and character. On a broader scale, the assumed predictive value of the experiential studies would come to be critically important for formulating policies regarding unwed motherhood. If several small select groups of unwed mothers were deemed to be unfit mothers and if these same outcomes were found in individual casework, it stood to reason under this framework that *all* unwed mothers were “bad” mothers. Scientific confirmation of such a theory would justify the custodial shift.

In an abrupt departure from the focus of studies in the 1920s, social work research in the 1930s focused on the lived experiences of unwed motherhood after the completion

classify them as simply a different mode of observation and data collection than the sociological studies considered in this chapter.

¹⁰ Georgia France McCoy, *A Study of the Removal and Placement of Dependent Children in Foster Homes and Institutions in Los Angeles County, California, with Special References to Boarding Home Removals* (Master’s Thesis, University of Southern California, 1937): 20.

¹¹ Leslie Margolin, *Under the Cover of Kindness: The Invention of Social Work* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997): 51.

of the lying-in period instead of causation. Researchers noted that they had “little dependable information” as to what becomes of unwed mothers once a file was marked closed, yet for “purely practical and immediate purposes it [seemed] important to know how the unmarried mother turns out” in order to understand whether she did indeed “make good” in her life and her child’s life.¹² In this sense, social work research in the 1930s continued an earlier child welfare belief that “there can be no illegitimate children, only illegitimate parents.”¹³

The interest in the performance of unwed mothers was part of a larger trend of mother-blame. Mother-blame as a concept speaks to a societal tendency to identify maternal error as the source of familial discord. In the twentieth century, “bad” mothers typically fell into three groups: mothers who did not raise their children in a traditional nuclear family, mothers who could not or did not protect their children from harm, and mothers whose children turned out “wrong.”¹⁴ The experiential studies of unwed motherhood focused primarily on the first category, although later studies would also consider the specific effects that single motherhood had on children.

Social workers who judged the mothering skills of unwed mothers were reacting to the same maternalist rhetoric that was responsible for the enactment of the Minnesota Plan and other like-minded legislation in the late Progressive era. By emphasizing the societal value of a “good” mother and by using maternalist arguments as the basis for an

¹² Ida R. Parker, *A Follow-Up Study of 550 Illegitimacy Applications* (Boston: Research Bureau on Social Case Work, 1924): 5-6.

¹³ Julia Lathrop quoted in L. Ripple, p. 18; Maud Morlock, “Putting the Findings of Child Welfare Research into the Practice of Social Agencies,” *Hospital Social Service* 23 (1931): 205-210.

¹⁴ Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, eds., *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 3.

array of pro-family social welfare programs, such as the Sheppard-Towner Act and the abolition of child labor, maternalists also ironically damned women who failed to conform to middle-class expectations of motherhood as bad mothers.¹⁵ Much of the social welfare policy of the interwar period was predicated upon a popular ideal of white, middle-class motherhood within the confines of a nuclear family unit. Anything that deviated from this stated ideal was automatically suspect, a reality that tainted the experiential studies of unwed motherhood from the outset.

First Comes Love, then Comes Marriage?

Many girls who became illegitimately pregnant followed long-standing tradition and looked to the prospect of marriage to “save” them from the stigma of unwed motherhood, but the mechanisms of how these marriages were brokered have not received much attention to date. In his study of forced marriages in New York City, historian Stephen Robertson alleges that adequate historiographical understanding of marriage customs in cases of illegitimacy is missing from the existing literature because such instances are “largely absent from records of such institutions as the reformatories studied by Ruth Alexander and the maternity homes investigated by [Rickie Lee] Solinger and Regina Kunzel because only girls who could not pursue informal means –

¹⁵ For a discussion of the maternalist impact on social welfare policies, see Sonya Michel and Seth Koven, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

those rejected by their families or unable to find the man who had impregnated them – were drawn to the institutions.”¹⁶

This characterization does not hold true for the Home School’s case files. Indeed, one might argue that mechanisms for arranging marriages in instances of unwed pregnancy receive scant attention in the literature because life as an unwed mother, specifically postpartum life, has not been central to the theses of the historians Robertson cites. They were generally more concerned with the social construction of unwed motherhood and the professional reaction(s) to it. In much of the historiography unwed motherhood refers primarily to the biological state of pregnancy, negating the need to give much consideration to what happened to the unwed mother and her child in the antenatal period. Social elements of unwed motherhood, like forced marriages, are important for the consideration of the pathology of unwed motherhood, however, because a mother’s matrimonial state became a symptom of familial (dis)harmony in the experiential studies of the interwar period. The matrimonial state of the mother was of natural relevance to studies of *unwed* mothers.

Most of the girls who were sent to the Home School knew who the father of their baby was and had some idea of where the man could be located. Moreover, many of the unwed mothers sent to the school had not been entirely abandoned or rejected by their families. As demonstrated by the case study at the opening of this chapter, planning for the future of unwed mothers at the Home School often involved a collaborative exchange between social workers and the girl’s family during the early 1920s.

¹⁶ Stephen Robertson, “Making Right a Girl’s Ruin: Working-Class Legal Cultures and Forced Marriage in New York City, 1890-1950,” *Journal of American Studies* 36 (2002): 218.

Marriages arranged at the Home School were usually initiated at the request of the unwed mother herself. This does not mean that the mothers were always in love with their future husbands. Several girls forthrightly admitted that marriage was the only way to protect their reputation and spare their family from shame, a declaration that transformed marriage into a utilitarian means of self-preservation. Even in instances where there was some degree of emotional attachment, the dire need to marry quickly combined with the relative youth and inexperience of most Home School girls created an unstable recipe for marital bliss. Many marriages initiated because of unplanned pregnancies were unsuccessful marriages.

The records of Minneapolis Family and Children Services (FCS) supply difficult to locate information on the outcome of forced marriages. Mabel and Alvin were married in 1918 due to Mabel's pregnancy. Their unhappy marriage came to the attention of Minneapolis FCS when Mabel called for advice in June 1927, nearly ten years into her marriage. Alvin was staying out all night and drinking. When Mabel questioned him about his actions, he told her it was "none of her business" as long as he continued to support the family. Mabel then received an anonymous letter in the mail alleging that Alvin was dating a younger woman named Gladys, a waitress who was "an attractive flapper type and interesting to men." Mabel did not confront Alvin about Gladys, but believed the story to be true since he had become "cold" to her, "did not demand satisfaction like he previously had," and had begun to carry condoms in his coat pocket.

When the social worker asked Mabel what she believed to be the source of her marital discord, Mabel confessed that it was all because of her earlier pregnancy. She was

“fond” of Alvin prior to their marriage and happy he was willing to marry her once she became pregnant, but Mabel said that she “had never been able to feel the same way toward him” after her pregnancy. The worker noted that Mabel “thot that sometimes he knew it. She seemed to put the entire responsibility on him because she became pregnant.”

Mabel also said she believed that Alvin struggled with anger regarding the circumstances of their marriage. Mabel claimed that Alvin “continually reminded her if she had had relations with him before her marriage she had probably had it with other men and might be doing it now for all he knew.” Alvin accused Mabel of being unfaithful every time she left the house. Whatever love Mabel had for Alvin “was almost killed by his treatment of her and she felt that if he had had an affair with another woman, she would never forgive him.”¹⁷

Alvin and Mabel’s case history is a textbook example of the types of problems social workers came to expect to emerge in instances of forced marriage. The traditional preferences for marriage as a solution for illegitimacy dissolved for this reason during the interwar period, becoming suspect as early as 1925 and largely disavowed as sloppy casework by 1930. The Progressive belief that marriage operated as a “restraint, a control producing upright living” was undermined by the interwar perception that forced marriages created more problems than they solved.

Social workers argued that despite the physical maturity of teenage girls, they had not yet had the “opportunity for the stablilizing of emotional reactions, for the orientation of the individual as a social being, and for the acquiring of moral standards.” Teen

¹⁷ Minneapolis Family and Children Services, Box 19, Social Welfare History Archives.

marriages should therefore be expected to produce an array of social ills, such as “improvidence, incompatibility, non-support, abandonment, abuse, exploitation, infidelity, separation, divorce [and] improper rearing of offspring.”¹⁸ Another case from the Minneapolis FCS records illustrates this phenomenon remarkably well.

Mr. and Mrs. Scott were married in 1935 when Mrs. Scott was four months pregnant. The young couple had dated for two years prior to her pregnancy and “cared a great deal for one another” until the marriage, after which Mr. Scott became “very quiet, indifferent, and disinterested.” Mrs. Scott was concerned that he would either desert her or file for divorce, leaving her to care for their child by herself. These fears intensified when Mr. Scott joined the National Guard two months later and left town for training.

Mrs. Scott wrote her husband letters at training camp, only to have him return her letters addressed with her maiden name, intimating that there was no attachment between them. After weeks of this, Mrs. Scott drove to the training camp and begged him to agree to support her only until she could finish night school “and make something of herself,” at which point she would not ask him for anything else. Mr. Scott coldly replied that as far as he was concerned, she could “put the brat in a home.” It was this exchange that prompted Mrs. Scott to seek help at FCS.

After listening to Mrs. Scott’s presentation of the case, her case worker requested a meeting with Mr. Scott. She described him as “an ineffectual looking young man...with a rather hard boiled attitude.” He claimed not to be interested in either his wife or child, that he was “done” with both of them. The worker angrily asked him if was “the type of young man [who] while he saved his own face my marrying the girl, was now washing

¹⁸ Quoted in Robertson, p. 218.

his hands of his responsibility?" Mr. Scott replied that his primary motivation for the marriage was to avoid charges of carnal knowledge, not because of he possessed any deep affection for his wife or unborn child.

Mr. Scott continued on to note that he had truly loved his wife once, but around the time of her pregnancy he found her "stewed to the gills" and in the company of another man, casting the paternity of the baby in doubt. Mrs. Scott had previously had an abortion, but she refused to undergo the procedure again and demanded that Mr. Scott marry her or face criminal prosecution and public embarrassment. He agreed to her terms, but allegedly told Mrs. Scott that he was marrying her only to supply the child with a name, that "they would never make a go" of married life, and he had no intention of living with her.

Mr. Scott was openly dating another woman whom he had been fond of prior to his marriage. His mistress was aware that he was married, but they were so "crazy" about each other neither one could stand to end the relationship. The case worker said that the affair "was rather unfair when Mrs. Scott was carrying his baby and unable to have any fun herself." Mr. Scott questioned the veracity of that statement and again hinted that his wife had been unfaithful to him before saying that the only reason he agreed to the meeting was to secure the case worker's help in filing for divorce. The worker refused, noting that he had no grounds for a divorce, and advised him that someday soon "someone as pretty as his wife would find someone who would care for her and offer her a home, at which time [Mrs. Scott] would probably divorce him for desertion."

Only part of the case worker's prediction came to fruition. When Mrs. Scott gave birth to her child, she had not had contact with Mr. Scott for months. She had no place to live and was forced to move back in with her parents, who could ill afford the extra mouths to feed. Mrs. Scott's case file at FCS remained open for another three years with sporadic activity, usually inquiries about types of relief she was eligible for and whether Mr. Scott could be forced to pay child support. The file ends abruptly with Mrs. Scott's decision to file desertion charges against her husband. Mr. Scott left the state before he could be arrested, leaving Mrs. Scott with no legal recourse to secure support from her husband and a small child who still needed food, shelter, and clothing.¹⁹

Mr. and Mrs. Scott's case is a prime example of a relationship that failed to achieve any of the stated goals of forced marriage, with the exception of supplying the child with a name. Both mother and baby became the financial responsibility of the state. The marriage did not create a stable familial unit. The marriage was not a successful resolution to the unplanned pregnancy, a truth that held for many forced marriages. Married unwed mothers were still likely to become de facto single mothers.

For precisely this reason, University of Minnesota social work professor Mildred Mudgett wrote a 1924 article for the social work journal *The Family* that advised against forced marriages in instances of illegitimacy. Mudgett argued that many more marriages deteriorated than the public acknowledged because they managed to last longer than one or two years, at which point other external factors were often blamed for the dissolution of the marriage. Mudgett alleged that those explanations were misleading, citing a 1923

¹⁹ Minneapolis Family and Children Services, Box 19, Social Welfare History Archives.

study of divorce cases in Minneapolis in which 20 percent of the couples pointed to the forced circumstances surrounding their marriage as the primary cause for their discord.

Mudgett used case records from an assortment of Minneapolis social agencies to form her data set and concluded that the ripple-effect of forced marriages could permanently damage the life of the couple in addition to their child. She cited an array of grim statistics: over 50 percent of the marriages in her study “broke down sufficiently” to require social work intervention within the first six years of marriage; 20 percent of the men deserted their families and an additional 20 percent were brought to court on charges of non-support.

If the male remained in the marriage, Mudgett found that “instead of being fond of his wife, the man [was] more likely to taunt her with the circumstances of their marriage, or, in many instances, he [was] extremely jealous of her. He [would argue] that since she was willing to have relations with him before marriage, probably he was not the only one, and possibly she had not been true to him since then.”

Most distressing to Mudgett was the effect of forced marriages on the children. She found instances of men denying paternity of the child, being “especially ugly and abusive” to the child, or pressuring the mother to place the child for adoption. Mudgett seriously questioned the ability of a couple forced to marry because of an unplanned pregnancy to give their child a healthy home environment and to model healthy relationships. Mudgett warned that the effects of growing up in a forced family may not manifest for years and appear unexpectedly in adulthood, as she demonstrated with the case history of Mr. Burns.

Mr. Burns' trouble did not develop until he was twenty-seven-years old, when he found out that his mother's marriage was forced and that she married a man not his father. About this time he met an eighteen-year-old girl who promptly fell in love with and married him. Thirteen years later the family came to the attention of a social agency and at that time there was evidence that the man was rather unstable mentally....

When the case was reopened five years later, the man had lost his job because of his socialistic tendencies, and his wife was about to be confined with her seventh child. He disclaimed paternity for most of the children. He was sure someone was trying to poison him, and although there was not the slightest ground for suspicion, he kept telling his wife he would get a confession out of her yet, it took him 27 years to get the truth from his mother, and so on. A few months ago he was committed to the State Hospital for the Insane.²⁰

Mudgett concluded that, "In many families, there is no evidence that the status of the girl or the child was improved by marriage."²¹

Mudgett's paper was one of the earliest studies to question whether maternal custody was in line with the values and motivations of the child welfare movement. Although her paper was written to discourage social workers from hastily signing off on forced marriages, it was also a bellwether for future studies that would question exactly what type of home the illegitimate child would return to and in what ways the home environment would affect his or her development.

Despite the recognition that forced marriages did not usually result in ideal unions, advocacy for marriage in instances of illegitimacy was slow to recede as a case work response. By 1930 policies regarding marriage had become increasingly idiosyncratic, with impressions about the sustainability of a marriage based on social workers' impressions of the mother's moral fiber, the depth of emotions between the

²⁰ Mildred D. Mudgett, "The Social Effect upon the Family of Forced Marriage," *The Family* v (March 1924): 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

mother and father, and the likelihood that the marriage would be financially secure and thus of benefit to the state.

Guidelines for when to recommend marriage in instances of premarital pregnancy reflected the ambiguous nature of predicting a “good” marriage and were accordingly vague. In a study of marriage policy at various social work organizations, David Gerecht wrote in his 1936 study that marriage was generally “not favored” unless there was “a definite indication of probable success.” However, Gerecht failed to elaborate on what standards were reliable indicators of marital success, stopping with a terse statement that marriage was desirable when “mother and father [were] compatible and in cases where true affection exist[ed].” If a case worker was unable to ascertain these indicators or was doubtful of their durability, Gerecht recommended that workers consider the factors that indicated that marriage was a practical solution (ie, the pregnancy itself) and give such factors “disproportionate weight” in the analysis of desirable outcomes.²²

The examples of “good” marriages documented by Gerecht raise questions about what factors were weighted most heavily when advocating for marriage. One case involved a widowed woman named Mrs. Jackson, who had been living with Mr. Smith for five months following the birth of their child. Smith had promised to marry Jackson numerous times, “but never found it convenient to do so” because “he could not stand her disposition.” Jackson believed that was a ruse concocted to disguise his true reason for hesitancy, namely that he might be held financially accountable for the support of her two daughters from a previous marriage. With the intervention of a social worker, Smith

²² David Gerecht, *Factors Influencing the Social Treatment of Illegitimacy Problems* (Master’s Thesis, University of Southern California, 1936): 44.

finally agreed to marry Jackson for the purpose of legitimizing their child, but he “expressed his intention of demanding a divorce as soon as the marriage was consummated.” Given Smith’s stance, it took the worker over a month to find a minister willing to perform the marriage ceremony. The worker believed, against all evidence that indicated to the contrary, that this would be a successful union because Jackson and Smith were adults who had been living together amiably for nearly six months, indicating some degree of natural compatibility.²³

A similar questionable case of a “good” marriage arranged by the same social service department involved a divorced twenty-six-year-old housekeeper named Carmen and her neighbor, Mr. Jamison. By the time a neighbor reported the couple to social services, the pair had been living together for over four years and had two illegitimate children together. Carmen also had a legitimate daughter from her former marriage who had to be boarded out because Jamison was abusive toward her. At the time of the social worker’s first interview with the family, Carmen was trying to gather the courage to leave Jamison. In addition to his abusive personality, Carmen alleged that he had the “objectionable habit of bringing strange men home to drink liquor. These friends of his he encouraged to make objectionable advances toward Carmen. He was amused at her resentment and resistance.”

The worker urged Carmen to reconsider her decision and to think of the impact her decision could have on her children. Presumably, the worker was considering the legitimacy status of the two illegitimate children and not the positive effects of leaving that would allow Carmen’s legitimate child to rejoin the family and spare the other

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

children being raised by an alcoholic, aggressive father. Carmen relented and agreed to the marriage on the condition that Jamison “changed his attitude and showed more affection” toward her. At the worker’s follow-up visit after the marriage, Carmen reported that nothing had changed and Jamison was continuing to bring strange men home and spending a large proportion of their money on alcohol.

These facts were noted, but the worker marked the case as closed since she had achieved her goal of legitimizing two children through marriage. In her concluding notes, she wrote that

The success or failure of this marriage cannot be definitely determined...In spite of constant quarreling and petty bickering the couple have lived together for over four years during which time a lack of marriage had not made either party obligated to continue the relationship.²⁴

In both cases, the woman’s failure to leave an undesirable relationship was understood to be an implicit endorsement of the relationship and a correlating desire for marriage. Moreover, social workers were generally willing to overlook obvious signs of unhealthy relationships in favor of prioritizing the state’s interest in securing financial support of dependent children. Admission of paternity through marriage meant that Jamison and Smith became legally responsible for the children’s support, thus theoretically reducing the state’s welfare rolls by the formation of a self-supporting familial unit or the establishment of paternal obligation in the event that the marriages ended in divorce or desertion. When weighing factors for or against marriage, it is clear that the economic benefits of marriage were weighted much more heavily than the social problems likely to result from bad matches.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42-44.

Paternity Hearings

Adjudication was the most common method of proving paternity. The process of adjudication required the unwed mother to file a complaint with the county attorney, justice of the peace, or the municipal court. The complaint was usually filed during the first six months of pregnancy. The mother was then interviewed by the county attorney who, after gathering the facts of the case, determined whether there was sufficient cause to file charges. If so, the alleged father was typically charged with “carnal intercourse resulting in pregnancy.” The father was then arrested and placed in jail to await a preliminary hearing or set free on bail.

Criminal charges associated with illegitimate pregnancies appear to have been a relatively rare occurrence in Minnesota. The State Board of Control only published data on this for a four-year span (1924-1928). Cumulative totals of criminal charges for these years were 15 abandonment charges, 31 incest charges, 228 carnal knowledge charges, and 8 rape charges. Collectively unwed fathers were charged with 312 criminal counts, but this number translates to a scant five percent of the identified fathers.²⁵ It is difficult to judge what set of circumstances prompted criminal charges to be added to the civil paternity suit. There were certainly hundreds, if not thousands, of men within the same time span who could have been charged with carnal knowledge. It is likely that criminal charges were reserved for especially heinous cases. The need to secure financial support

²⁵ Minnesota State Board of Control, *State Board of Control Fourteenth Annual Report*, p. 51-56 and *State Board of Control Fifteenth Annual Report*, p. 8.

for the illegitimate child usually trumped any desire to prosecute alleged fathers for criminal offenses.

Preliminary hearings were held in the civil court and were open to the public. If the mother was determined to have a case, a trial was scheduled for three to six months later (after the birth of the child.) The trial itself was also open to the public and “the court room was often overcrowded with curious listeners” who anxiously awaited the salacious details of the course. The unwed mother’s cross-examination was often an extremely embarrassing procedure for the mother. Alleged fathers’ defense commonly rested on supplying the court with testimony from other men that, true or not, they had also been intimate with the mother, creating the classic legal conundrum of “his word versus her word” and raising probable doubt as to paternity.

The unwed mother also commonly had to endure questions focusing on the details of the alleged sexual contact with the accused father and other men from the mother’s past. A legal expert writing in the 1960s described paternity hearings as “devastatingly rigged against women, [their] requirements barbaric in terms of consideration for human dignity,” as mothers were often forced to describe “in open Court in very explicit terms how, where, and when the male’s penis entered her vagina. The entire procedure implicitly indicates that the Court regards her as a whore...”²⁶

²⁶ Robert Viet Sherwin, “The Law and Sexual Relationships,” *Journal of Social Issues* 22 (April 1966): 113-114; Rickie Lee Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 36-38.

These questions were known to be “to the delight of the [court room] mob seeking sensual gratification” from the mother’s testimony.²⁷ If the father was found guilty of the charges or admitted paternity, he was accountable for paying for the “care, maintenance, and education” of the child until he or she reached the age of sixteen, died, or was adopted. The father was also responsible for paying any bills from the mother’s lying-in period and the cost of his prosecution.

Paternity by acknowledgement occurred when the alleged father signed an affidavit admitting paternity. This path did not require court action, thus sparing the mother from filing a complaint and being interviewed by the county attorney. However, the responsibilities associated with acknowledged paternity were lesser than those associated with adjudication. While it was assumed that an acknowledged father would provide the same level of support for his child as an adjudicated father, acknowledged paternity was a moral admission that was not enforceable by a court order, which meant that child support payments were also not enforceable the law. Payment agreements in instances of acknowledged paternity were commonly oral agreements witnessed only by the mother and a representative from a social welfare agency. If a father failed to make timely payments a mother had the right to sign a complaint against the father and begin adjudication proceedings, but a father could avoid the warrant for his arrest by fleeing the county.

Paternity could also be established by legitimation, which was a relatively simple process that occurred when the alleged father married the unwed mother. The child’s

²⁷ Julius L. Makowski, *Care and Treatment of the Unmarried Mother: A Study of Six Cases of the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau, Milwaukee, Wisconsin* (Master’s Thesis, Marquette University, 1929): 29.

birth certificate would then be amended to legitimate once the father signed an affidavit swearing that he was the father of the child born prior to his marriage.²⁸ Legitimation was the preferred route to establish paternity during the 1920s, but became increasingly less common as the interwar period progressed due to new understandings of the desirability of forced marriages. During the 1930s, adjudication proceedings were standard in most cases of illegitimacy.

For girls sent to the Minnesota Home School, initiating prosecution against the alleged father was undertaken as soon as possible. Although the Minnesota Plan granted the state near total control of the unwed mother, its authority did not extend so far as to allow the state to bring paternity charges *for* the mother. All complaints had to be made by the mother herself.²⁹ This often proved frustrating to social workers at the reformatory. Lingering emotions for the alleged father coupled with a desire not to create trouble for him or be the cause of public embarrassment (for the alleged father or herself, or her family) often made mothers reluctant to press charges. Still other unwed mothers felt they did not need to initiate legal proceedings to ensure help from the father. One such girl, nineteen-year-old Ann, was allegedly “flippant” about her pregnancy and bristled when asked about it because “she did not think it was anyone’s business that she had become pregnant.” Ann refused to press charges because she was certain the father of

²⁸ Thorfin N. Tangedahl, *A Study of the Specialized Work with Alleged, Acknowledged and Adjudicated Fathers in the Hennepin County Welfare Board’s Unmarried Mother Program* (Master’s Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1946): 13-19.

²⁹ In Wisconsin, county or town officers had the right to file a complaint against the alleged father without the consent of the mother. An amendment of the law in Minnesota in 1927 allowed “the county board or any members thereof in which the mother resides” or a member of the Board of Control to “complain to the justice of municipal court, who may summon the mother and question her under oath respecting the father.” A mother could avoid inadvertently initiating paternity proceedings by evasively responding to the questions, however.

her child, who was married, would come to her aid. She was immune to her caseworker's pleading and "seemed unimpressed when the worker remarked that if [the father] did [help her], it would be more than he had ever done for his wife."³⁰

Unwed mothers who were impregnated by older men or men they perceived to be in positions of authority were especially hesitant to press paternity charges and often forthrightly refused. The case files of the Home School are full of instances where the unwed mother, either out of fear or contempt, refused to initiate paternity proceedings against the father of her child. In 1931 sixteen-year-old Kathryn was impregnated by a physician in whose home she was employed as a domestic. Kathryn claimed that she became intimate with the physician when his wife went on vacation and that she "did not leave the house at all for two weeks and relations occurred frequently." Kathryn believed that the physician's wife was suspicious of their relationship because once she returned from vacation she "never let [Kathryn] near the doctor unless one of the children was there." One night the physician came up behind Kathryn while she was working in the basement and went upstairs to rejoin his wife "without cleaning off his trouser." Kathryn heard his wife say, "You've been fooling around again, have you?"

Excruciatingly intimate details like these were furnished by Kathryn and other unwed mothers during a series of interviews designed to encourage the initiation of paternity charges while simultaneously collecting information that would be included in the mother's sworn statement against the alleged father. Most mothers eventually succumbed to the pressure to initiate proceedings, but a few, like Kathryn, remained stalwart in their refusal.

³⁰ Sauk Centre Home School Case Files, Box 11.

When asked how she planned to support her baby without initiating paternity charges, Kathryn told Home School officials that she would simply marry her former boyfriend, Lucas. School officials pointed out to Kathryn that Lucas might not be interested in marriage when he discovered that she had been “unfaithful” to him. Kathryn retorted, “Well, do you think he has been to me? I don’t.” When pressed for an explanation to defend this statement, Kathryn said that she knew Lucas well enough to know that he would not refrain from going out with other girls. Lucas’s mother had reportedly told Kathryn that Lucas earned \$80 in two weeks, but that on the day after payday he had nothing left. This was incontrovertible evidence to Kathryn that Lucas was “stepping out.” She also believed that their “considerable fondness” for one another would compensate for previous errors and result in a happy marriage.³¹

In a similar case from 1933, an orphan named Marion who was indentured to a couple as a maid became pregnant by her employer. Marion told officials at the state orphanage that she had only been in the residence for two weeks when her employer, whose own wife was pregnant, approached her and told her how attractive he found her. Marion was flattered by the attention and willingly submitted to a sexual relationship. When she became pregnant, her employer returned her to the orphanage with instructions to say that two strangers were the cause of her trouble. Marion’s employer assured her that “the State would give her something to do away with the baby if they thought it was from two strange men.” Once the baby was aborted, Marion was supposed to write a letter to her employer’s wife saying “that she was fine and well, making sure to underline fine and well so [her employer] would understand.” Marion’s employer vowed to call her

³¹ Sauk Centre Home School Case Files, Box 13.

a liar and deny all involvement if she accused him of paternity. Officials from the state orphanage described Marion as being “dull of mentality, but not a problem child.” She was too afraid of the consequences to her reputation if her employer openly denied his relationship with her in court. It was easier to give her child for adoption, which she did in the spring of 1934.³²

Paternity proceedings were often further confounded by alleged fathers who would consciously manipulate a young mother in order to protect themselves. Sixteen-year-old Alyce was impregnated by her high school boyfriend, Edison, in 1922. When she told Edison about her condition he left town. Alyce’s father kicked her out of the house when he discovered her pregnancy. She sought refuge with her aunt, who contacted the county child welfare board. The board’s worker convinced Alyce to press paternity charges against Edison. He sought out Alyce after his release from jail and promised to marry her immediately if she would drop the charges against him. Alyce did so and the next day Edison disappeared. The authorities could not locate him, so Alyce was unable to refile charges. She eventually placed her child for adoption when it became clear to her that she would be unable to support the baby without financial support from Edison.³³

Most states, including Minnesota, allowed women to file paternity charges up to two years after the birth of the child, so many unwed mothers waited to file charges until after they had decided to retain custody. Their decision to file charges was often

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Sauk Centre Home School Case Files, Box 7. For an additional in-depth analysis of paternity proceedings in Minnesota, see Monica K. Doyle, *Descriptive Analysis of 415 Cases of Illegitimacy* (Master’s Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1928): 50-68.

motivated by a realization, similar to Alyce's, that it would be extraordinarily difficult to raise a child without paternal support. One unwed mother, who had previously declined to do so, poignantly described her decision to press charges against the father of her child in a letter to her caseworker. She had reached the decision even though she was concerned about the probability of her success because the father "flatly denie[d] everything, ...[was] a very wise speaker, and weigh[ed] his words, so as not to convict himself in any way." Her worker went to the county attorney, who thought he might be able to "frighten" a confession out of the father.

Now isn't it terrible that I should have to plot to have someone frightened, when circumstances should be such that he should realize the real truth and always know his responsibility rather than always have the impression that I put one over on him...If he persists in taking the stand of innocence I shall go the limit with the case. You were right when you said about a month ago that I was not capable of seeing things as they really were. I am beginning to see more clearly now. As each hour passes I feel more keenly the injustice that is being done me and the dreadful position his attitude places me...I am so disheartened at looking forward to such a dreadful hopeless future for the baby and myself that I believe if things are not finally settled in the next few days I am going to forfeit pride, etc. and take things into my own hands. Just imagine, while he goes on enjoying the fruits of perfect freedom and peace of mind here I sit in a place of dreadful inconvenience.³⁴

The state's interest in securing support for an illegitimate child, *any* support, could result in men being wrongly adjudicated as a child's father. Patricia and Ralph were married when she became pregnant, but Ralph's father later petitioned to have their marriage annulled due to his belief that Ralph was not the biological father of Patricia's child. The Church agreed to the annulment, which prompted Patricia to file paternity

³⁴ Mattingly, p, 48.

charges against Ralph. During the trial, Ralph claimed that Patricia “chose” him as the father of her child because “he had a job and the other men did not.” He also claimed that he did not even know Patricia at the time of the conception, but Patricia countered with her belief that her child was born three weeks early. Despite the fact that the delivering physician testified that the baby appeared to be full term, the court declared Ralph the legitimate father of the child.³⁵

The issue of premature birth versus full term birth was a common obstacle in paternity cases. Both the unwed mother and the alleged father typically tweaked gestational times to prove their versions of events. As in Patricia and Ralph’s case, even when medical opinion seemed to indicate the falsity of the mother’s testimony, the courts usually found in favor of the mother. In a case similar to Patricia’s, Jane gave birth to an 8 lb, 3 oz. child that her physician described as full term, but which Jane believed was at least five to six weeks premature. The district attorney was concerned that such a discrepancy made their case against the alleged father weak, but Jane insisted that she “was not at all concerned” with medical opinion and willing to testify to the baby’s premature arrival in court. At Jane’s trial, two other men admitted to having been “out all night” with her around the time period the physician placed conception and engaging in relations with her numerous times. The jury, however, unanimously delivered a guilty verdict against the man Jane alleged to be the father.³⁶ The unwed mother’s testimony, no matter how promiscuous she may have appeared, was typically favored over the

³⁵ Gerecht, p. 70.

³⁶ Makowski, p. 24-28.

testimony of the alleged father. The court's – and taxpayers' – goal was to get a father, any father, to provide support.

In some instances, even the county attorney was surprised when the paternity petition was accepted by the court. Bette became pregnant in 1926 while on parole from the Home School for having immoral relations and contracting gonorrhea. She befriended Butch, a gravel truck driver who would stop to talk to her while making deliveries to her family's farm. They became intimate after Butch promised he would marry her if she got into trouble, but when she called to tell him about the pregnancy he refused to speak to her and instead sent a friend to ask her “how much money it would take for her to see a doctor and get an abortion.” Enraged, Bette immediately pressed charges against Butch.

At the preliminary trial in April 1927 Butch accused Bette of having relations with other men, but Bette was unwavering in her story that Butch impregnated her in October 1926. The case was set to go to trial the following month, but before the court date arrived Bette gave birth to a full term child. The county attorney requested a stay and wrote a concerned letter to the Home School superintendent:

Candidly, I fail to see how we can get a conviction of Butch...Bette and Butch had sex in October, but the baby was born seven months later fully developed. I am convinced she had intercourse with Butch, but I am not convinced that she did not have intercourse with other men and I am quite inclined to believe that if this case was tried out, that it would result in an acquittal.

The superintendent urged the county attorney to proceed. The presiding judge commented that although Bette was “dispensing her favors to quite a number of the male sex,” he was adjudicating Butch as the father of her child.³⁷

³⁷ Sauk Centre Home School Case Files, Box 4.

In the United States during the Progressive era, many paternity proceedings recognized the principle of *exception plurium concubentium*, a legal defense that allowed for the dismissal of paternity cases if the defendant could show that the unwed mother was intimate with another man during the likely period of conception. However, courts increasingly denied this principle during the interwar period. As George Mangold explained it,

The most important question [was] not the identity of the putative father, but the plan of procedure which [would] best safeguard the interests of society...If a number of men each risked the possibility of paternity their intent was quite [as] immoral and debased as if each one were clearly proven the putative father of some illegitimate child....So much more than the support of the child is involved that the right principle of action requires that all men who have sex relations with a woman during the time when conception occurred [should] contribute to the support of the child. It [was] immaterial who [was] the actual father.³⁸

Although each possible father was technically a putative father in Mangold's understanding of paternity law, there were no instances in records from Minnesota where more than one man was held accountable for child support. The Board of Control officially adopted a resolution in 1918 that essentially stated that the state did not believe a potential father was wronged by being named the father in instances where there was more than one possible father. Following Mangold's logic, if there was enough evidence to indicate that a man could possibly be the father of the child, then there was also enough reason to hold him responsible for the child. By having sex outside of marriage, men were opening themselves up to the possibility that they would pay child support for

³⁸ George B. Mangold, *Children Born out of Wedlock: A Sociological Study of Illegitimacy, with Particular Reference to the United States* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri, 1921): 162.

a child they did not father. The Board of Control hoped their stance would result in decreased willingness of men to engage in relations, but the rising rates of illegitimacy throughout the interwar period indicate that the policy was not an effective deterrent.

The Failed Economic Promises of Paternity Hearings

The amount an adjudicated father was required to pay in support was left to the discretion of individual judges. Most settlements were “lamentably small” and were not enough to prevent the unwed mother from seeking employment. No clear reason for this trend could be found. Robert South Barrett alleged that support payments were typically small because they were considered to be a moral transaction, not a punitive one. More generally, Barrett believed there was “a sort of tradition” that payments should be small, although he did not speculate on the source of the tradition.³⁹

The history of illegitimacy is riddled with paradoxes and the issue of paternal support for illegitimate offspring is perhaps the biggest of all. If the impetus for establishing support was to protect the welfare of the child and the state’s budget, shouldn’t the support have been sizeable enough to actually provide for the child? Furthermore, the expressed moral imperative for paying support would seem to mandate high payments. Perhaps by only granting the unwed mother a pittance, it was a passive manner of expressing cultural disdain for her predicament. The uneven standards of accountability could also be seen as yet another manifestation of the sexual double standard discussed in chapter two.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Payments were usually made as either a lump sum or periodically. Lump sum settlements typically carried a smaller dollar amount than periodic payments, but many social workers favored lump sum payments due to the high percentage of fathers who defaulted on periodic payments. A smaller amount initially was thought to be better than risking the possibility that the father would not make any or only a few periodic payments. Neither option truly qualified as support for the child, however; one study of paternity payments in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin found that the average amount of lump payment was \$321.39. At the usual rate of disbursement these funds would have been exhausted by the time the child was three years old. Periodic payments were equally sparse. Most states capped monthly payment amounts between \$15 and \$25.⁴⁰

Paul and Rosella's case is typical of settlements made in Minnesota. Paul was adjudicated to be the father of Rosella's eighteen-month-old son in late 1932. He was ordered to pay for the "maintenance and education" of his son at a rate of \$10 per month for fifteen years. The periodic payment was bonded with \$1500 presented in the form of two sureties in case of future default on child support. Paul was also ordered to pay \$22.60 to the county for prosecution costs, \$106.75 to the state for confinement costs, \$23 to Rosella for her previous expenses, and \$315 to the county welfare board for the cost of the child's boarding for the previous fifteen months.⁴¹ It is not recorded to what extent Paul paid the settlement against him.

⁴⁰ According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average income for families between 1920 and 1935 was just over \$1,500 annually. An array of charts and graphs detailing average family incomes can be accessed at www.bls.gov. See also Robert South Barrett, *The Care of the Unmarried Mother*, Reprint, Women & Children First Series (New York: Garland, 1987): 69-71.

⁴¹ Sauk Centre Home School Case Files, Box 13.

Social workers, by and large, did not begin to analyze paternity payments until the onset of the Depression intensified the need for public assistance. As part of a larger research directive to understand who was applying for aid and why, state offices and academic social workers began to investigate the average size of paternity settlements and the frequency and duration of payments. The results were not encouraging. Eugenia Rockwell, supervisor of the Ramsey County Welfare Board in Minnesota, began a three-year investigation into paternity payments in 1934. She began her research by identifying and tracking the outcomes of the 49 illegitimacy cases heard in the Ramsey County courts in 1924, ten years previous to the start date of her study, to gauge whether unmarried fathers paid court orders.

After discarding cases that were dismissed, involved more than one child of the same father, or cases where the child died prior to reaching the age of majority, Rockwell was left with a sample size of 28 cases. She tabulated annual payments from the month paternity was declared in 1924 to the conclusion of her study period on January 1, 1937.

In six instances, the children had died or been adopted during the course of the study, thus ending the father's financial obligations. The total amount collected on these cases was \$12,266, but the total amount due was \$44,865, meaning that the fathers combined paid a scant 23 percent of the court-ordered settlement. Considering the group of 28 fathers as a whole, Rockwell found that only one-quarter of fathers paid more than \$500 and 36 percent of fathers paid less than \$100 in a ten-year period. In 1936, the final year of Rockwell's study, only two mothers (7 percent) received any payment from the fathers. Even for these "lucky" mothers who continued to receive some portion of the

settlement money, the amount paid by the fathers had “been dropping in recent years,” prompting Rockwell to assume “that in the next three or four years the amount collected will be practically nothing.”

The median total payment for all 28 cases of support orders over the ten-year period was \$241. The average payment was \$438, which averages out to \$43 per year and less than \$4 per month paid toward the support of the child. As low as these figures were, Rockwell believed they over-inflated the average amount of money an unwed mother received because there were several outliers in the data that artificially raised the average, such as an especially generous businessman who was married and eager to avoid the publicity of an illegitimate child. Rockwell concluded that paternity payments were not the economic safety net for mother and child that reformers intended. Indeed, Rockwell believed that “many a young unmarried mother would have made happier plans for herself and child had she not, through order of the court, had hopes raised of sixteen years of support for her child – hopes which in most cases ended in resentment and disappointment.”⁴²

⁴² Eugenia Rockwell, “Policies and Practices in Establishing Paternity in Ramsey County,” 8 June 1937, Hennepin County Illegitimacy Conference Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

A later study from Washington, DC made similar conclusions, indicating that the laxity in payments experienced in Minnesota was a national problem. In a study of 35 cases of illegitimacy, the author of the study found that 66 percent of fathers failed to contribute to the support of the child, 21 percent occasionally contributed, and 13 percent regularly contributed, although the amount of their contributions was not noted. Fathers who voluntarily accepted responsibility for the child were more likely to make regular support payments than those adjudicated by the court system, which led the author to question whether paternity suits should be abandoned because adjudicated fathers “responded in an antagonistic manner” and were “determined to escape all responsibility.” See Margaret T. Sullivan, *A Study of Thirty-Five Cases of Illegitimacy under the Care of the Child Welfare Division of the Board of Public Welfare during the Fiscal Year 1935* (Master’s Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1940): 37-38.

Rockwell's conclusions were echoed in the statistical data published biennially by the State Board of Control. Although the Board was aware of difficulties in securing paternity settlement payments by the mid-1920s, the Board did not respond by creating new policy directives or pushing for greater paternal accountability. Instead, the Board relied on the criminal system to punish fathers who ignored their duties while focusing its efforts on securing appropriately sized settlements. In the 1922 report, the Children's Bureau chief, William Hodson, optimistically noted that "while the courts [were] still sometimes willing to settle these [paternity] cases for small sums there [was] a general tendency toward more adequate sums." Hodson believed fathers would pay the paternity settlements because failure to do so constituted contempt of court, "an offense which [could] be summarily dealt with," and a charge believed to be more effective than the traditional charges of desertion or non-support.⁴³

The next report in 1924 found that most paternity payments ranged in sum from \$10 to \$30 per month with an average payment of \$15. This settlement amount would remain standard for most of the interwar period. However, the Board was already aware that "in a large number of cases where paternity [was] established, the adjudged father...absconded and no support [was] obtained from him."⁴⁴ No action was taken or advised to correct the tendency for paternity settlements to be interpreted by fathers as largely symbolic decrees. The issue of non-payment of support was largely a trifling matter of secondary importance to the Board until the Depression.

⁴² Minnesota State Board of Control, *State Board of Control Eleventh Annual Report*, p. 12-13.

⁴³ Minnesota State Board of Control, *State Board of Control Eleventh Annual Report*, p. 12-13.

⁴⁴ *State Board of Control Fourteenth Annual Report*, p. 8-9.

In their 1934 report, the Board of Control noted that the amount of money collected for support from admitted or adjudicated fathers had greatly decreased in the previous years, with a thirty percent decline in payments in 1932 and an “almost” fifty percent decline in 1934. The Board called the decline “a direct effect of the economic depression” that had “reacted on all classes of society,” implying that at least some the fathers of unwed children were from a higher economic class than the unwed mothers, whom the Board had for over a decade by this point statistically characterized as predominantly working class girls.⁴⁵

The Board’s concern about declining paternity payments was likely amplified by increasing rates of illegitimacy in the state beginning in the latter years of the 1920s following a multi-year decline. This, too, the Board blamed on the Depression, citing increased idleness, lack of employment opportunities, lack of funds to procure an abortion or leave the state, and an increased number of transient male workers who were “aloof from home ties” and more likely to ignore the moral code. The attitude of the Board was to accept the situation and hope for a decline in illegitimacy rates once the economy revived.⁴⁶ However, as the previous chapter and the remaining chapters argue, a correlated response was a changed preference in custodial outcomes from maternal custody to adoption, at least partially as an attempt to reduce the state’s burden for the care of dependent illegitimate children.

The composition of Minnesota’s legislation for the support of illegitimate children made maternal custody, especially in the wake of declining and nearly non-existent

⁴⁵ *State Board of Control Eighteenth Annual Report*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ *State Board of Control Sixteenth Annual Report*, p. 8.

support payments during the Depression, an expensive proposition. The U.S. Children's Bureau commented in 1938 that the design of Minnesota's paternity laws as child welfare laws meant that the primacy placed on "the welfare and support" of the illegitimate child implied that the child's interests had to be placed "above the aim of conserving public funds." If a father did not meet the terms of the paternity settlement, the state had an implicit obligation within the legislation to fill the void with public funds. State attempts to recoup the costs of welfare from either the putative father or maternal/paternal relatives was deemed to be "unsound social policy," as the efforts would likely be futile and the prosecution costs would add to the state's fiscal burden.⁴⁷

In an ironic turn of events the power of the state to dictate the life course of both the unwed mother and her child, a power so desperately fought for during the development of the Minnesota Plan, bound the state to support the illegitimate family, even in times of dire fiscal uncertainty. The most direct route to reducing the economic burden to the state was either to increase the frequency and amount of paternity payments (a nearly impossible task, for by the mid-1930s even conscientious adjudicated fathers had legitimate claims of financial insolvency) or to relieve the state of the burden of support for illegitimate children by shifting the custodial outcome, placing them in permanent homes (where, conceivably, public assistance could be denied when funds were lacking) and ending the state's financial obligation.

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Labor and U.S. Children's Bureau, *Paternity Laws: Analysis and Tabular Summary of State Laws Relating to Paternity and Support of Children Born out of Wedlock* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938): 6-8.

Supporting Baby on Her Own

The recognition that paternal support for the illegitimate child was a relative rarity likely spurred social workers to investigate the abilities of unwed mothers to provide for their children independently. An undercurrent of these studies was an attempt to assess the maternal fitness of unwed mothers, a theme that will be expanded on in chapters four and five.

Unwed mothers who chose to retain custody of their child had few housing options. Mutual placement (mother and baby living together under the same roof) was the preferred housing outcome throughout the interwar period. Mutual placement could be achieved by placing the mother with her family, other relatives, friends, or in a boarding home. Some employment options, like domestic work, also frequently allowed an unwed mother to bring her baby along. If mutual placement was impossible, efforts were made to place the child with its maternal grandparents or other relatives. If the family was not amenable to caring for the child, illegitimate children were often boarded with a foster family until the mother could afford to or desired to be reunited with her child.⁴⁸

While mutual placement was typically the first housing option attempted, it was also frequently the most unsuccessful. Many mothers were unable or unwilling to live with their children due to the strain of caring for an infant and working, whether at a place of employment or in the pursuit of domestic duties. A study of nearly 300 women from the Boston area who were initially placed with their children found that three years later only half of the women still had their child with them.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ripple, p. 26-27.

⁴⁹ Parker, p. 31.

Another study of 82 cases of unwed mothers attempting a mutual placement in boarding homes in the Chicago area from 1936-1937 found that most mothers did not find the experience constructive. Mothers complained that the matron of the boarding homes were too involved and offered too many childcare suggestions when the unwed mothers themselves felt they possessed maternal maturity and did not need external guidance. Other frequent complaints included being too exhausted to adequately care for their child after work, resentment about the “cramped” social life of motherhood, and unkind or judgmental treatment from the head of the boarding house or other tenants.⁵⁰ Unwed mothers struggled to find housing arrangements that satisfied their emotional need to be close to their child, but remained affordable and allowed them some degree of personal autonomy. The result was frequent rearrangement of the living situation in the early years of the child’s life.

The case of Audrey, who gave birth at the age of seventeen, is typical of the boarding home mutual placement experience. Audrey and her son were first placed in a mutual boarding home, but only stayed for three weeks despite the fact that she considered the matron to be “kind and good.” Audrey complained that she “just couldn’t adjust to the family set up” and wanted to be alone with her child. This was impossible, so Audrey moved to a rooming house and placed her son in a day nursery. This arrangement proved to be equally unsatisfactory, as the “arrangement necessitated certain duties in the evening, which Audrey resented at the end of a working day, and she became very impatient with her little boy, neglecting his needs and desires.” Fatigued and

⁵⁰ Janet Reed, *Mutual Placement of Unmarried Mothers and their Children: A Study of 52 Unmarried Mothers who have been placed with their Children in Boarding Homes* (Master’s Thesis, University of Chicago, 1938): 54-59.

overwhelmed, Audrey moved back to the original boarding home where the matron was willing to help her with her childrearing responsibilities.⁵¹

Like Audrey, many unwed mothers found they needed help to raise their child. Single motherhood in the truest sense of the word was not a realistic proposition during the interwar period. Mothers needed financial help from their families or the child's father. If this was not forthcoming or if the amount was inadequate to fully support mother and child, unwed mothers needed childcare during the day while they went to work and some help with childrearing duties at night. Social workers were at least cognizant of this and attempted to place mothers either with their families, who could theoretically offer both financial and childcare help, or in a domestic position that would allow them to care for their child while earning a living wage.

The tradition of placing unwed mothers in domestic service positions originated in nineteenth-century evangelical reform work with prostitutes, orphan girls, and unwed mothers. The occupation had "ideological as well as practical appeal" to maternity home matrons, who believed the work would be redemptive and perhaps the only type of position where a mother could expect to keep her child with her. As Regina Kunzel has explained it, the appeal of a domestic position for reformers was also the source of unwed mothers' dislike for the position. In an era when female work opportunities were rapidly expanding in urban settings, domestic positions effectively isolated unwed mothers from the temptations of the city and "limited their independence in ways that young women

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

found restraining and reformers found assuring.”⁵² Domestic positions were often seen as an extension of the maternity home’s work. The home environment reinforced middle class values, while the employer served as a protector and observer in place of the maternity home matron. Women were willing to employ unwed mothers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because “good” help (i.e., white, English-speaking women trained in domestic skills) was considered to be an increasingly rare commodity in urban areas populated by immigrant women. As one employer commented, “A woman of this class is generally so glad to get a good home where she can keep her child with her that her gratitude makes her an ideal servant.”⁵³ From the perspective of maternity home matrons, placement of unwed mothers in a domestic position was a winning proposition for all parties involved.

The impetuses for placing unwed mothers in domestic positions were largely unchanged in the post-World War One period. Nationally throughout the 1920s unwed mothers most commonly found employment as domestics or wet nurses. As in earlier time, “the constant, kindly oversight and training in right standards of living as well of as work” was considered to offer “inestimable” benefit to the unwed mother.⁵⁴ Domestic positions fulfilled basic needs of room, board, and wages, but they also served to showcase to unwed mothers the heights they should be aspiring to in the future. It was, in a sense, a standardized form of indoctrination into middle class ideals of family, morality, and fine housekeeping, a sort of final step in the redemptive process still typical of work

⁵² Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 34.

⁵³ Quoted in Kunzel, p. 34.

⁵⁴ Parker, p. 33.

with unwed mothers during the early 1920s. For these reasons, domestic service placements during the 1910s and 1920s were “never doubted as the wisest plan” for unwed mothers.⁵⁵

The tactic fell from favor during the mid-1920s, however, for multiple reasons. The new studies concerned with illegitimacy causation found that a large percentage of unwed mothers were domestics at the time of conception, making their return to a similar position of questionable desirability during the postpartum period. Labor conditions also changed and there was a readier supply of acceptable white domestics who were not necessarily unwed mothers. Moreover, studies of the experiences of unwed mothers found that most mothers were unsuccessful in housework positions. The biological feat of giving birth did not automatically translate to a physical ability or knowledge about how to run a home. Domestic positions were not necessarily less demanding than factory or clerk positions, so unwed mothers placed as housekeepers experienced emotional and physical burnout similar to their counterparts who secured non-domestic employment. Ida Parker ruefully noted that unwed mothers were capable of earning a living at housework “if under constant supervision, but were unable because of physical or mental handicaps to care for the child in addition.” In a related earlier study of unwed mothers, Parker traced the experiences of thirty-two unwed mothers who were given a domestic position after leaving the maternity home. Of these women, thirteen percent left their position after one month, one-quarter were no longer employed at the end of three months, and nearly half the mothers were no longer employed at the end of six months.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Gerecht, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Parker, p. 31; Guibord and Parker, p. 34.

The dissatisfaction apparent in domestic placements was often mutual on the part of both the employer and the employee. One former employer of an unwed mother, Ida Garrett Murphy, penned a short article on her fifteen-month experience for *The Survey* in 1920. The unwed mother, Minnie, entered Murphy's home when her child was six weeks old. Murphy immediately noted that although Minnie was in her employment, she was too weak to do "the heaviest work of the household" for two and one-half months, a period in which Minnie did not even do her own washing. The implication of this statement was that by employing an unwed mother in her home, Murphy (or another member of her staff) temporarily added more chores to her daily schedule, in addition to incurring the expense of Minnie's room, board, and salary. There were also expenses related to the baby that an employer should consider: certified milk and baby food; extra fuel for sterilizing bottles, cooking the baby's food, the baby's washing and bath, and heat in the baby's room; and basic supplies for the baby such as a crib, sheeting, mattress, blankets, quilts, and diapers. The expense associated with furnishing adequate rooms for mother and baby was a considerable investment, even for a family of means.

Murphy next considered the impact of the child on Minnie's ability to adhere to a desirable work schedule. Somewhat lamentably, Minnie's child was already on a schedule when Minnie was hired and Murphy never questioned altering the schedule. "The inconvenience [of adapting to the baby's schedule was] a far smaller evil than an upset baby and an overstrained mother." The recompense for adapting to the baby's schedule was "a well baby who was quiet night and day and required the minimum of attention." Yet even the minimum level of attention equated to "four to five hours during

the working day” when Minnie was occupied with her child and thus not performing her domestic duties. Again, the implication here was that unwed mothers were an imposition on their employers, forcing employers to adapt to their routine and overlook vast amounts of time during the day spent in the sole pursuit of childcare. What kind of domestic help spent nearly half the work day ignoring the duties of the household?

Minnie’s dubious ability to succeed at her position was compounded by her apparent lack of housekeeping skills, which surprised Murphy because she was assured by a caseworker before hiring Minnie that she had five years of experience. Murphy thought that training Minnie was “a pretty difficult job” because Minnie “was young, had little idea of any of the proper methods of household work and was irresponsible in almost everything except the care of her baby. This resulted during the first six or seven months in reducing her already reduced working efficiency in half.” Minnie’s reduced capacity at domestic work galled Murphy because she had not even given Minnie a full housekeeping schedule. She was excused from preparing lunch for the adults, cooked no meals for the children, no daily dusting, no daily cleaning of the bedrooms or bathroom, and no outside sweeping. Her sole duties were to clean the house once weekly, washing and ironing for a family of four, and daily preparation of breakfast and dinner for Murphy and her husband. For the time, the schedule was relatively light. It was expected to be easily accomplished, but it still managed to “consume the young mother’s time and strength.”

Murphy nobly continued to employ Minnie despite her shortcomings to build Minnie’s sense of “personal worth and integrity,” a characterization that framed Minnie’s

employment in the Murphy household as an act of Christian goodwill. When advising as to the practicability of employing an unwed mother Murphy wrote that it was possible to find a successful arrangement, but none other than “an employer with some consideration and social sense” should attempt to do so. The duties placed on the employer were substantial.

If the employer is not anxious or at least willing to help the young mother with her serious problems of labor and social readjustment it will be more profitable to both to avoid the arrangement. The young mother who has often scant executive skill must be taught and helped to organize her whole working day on a new and somewhat complicated basis. She needs to be helped over some rough and unfamiliar places with the baby’s care. She must be advised and guided in facing either the old or new social environment. In all this the employer stands logically in the position of next friend. As such she should have sufficiently quickened sympathy and understanding to be more willing more than with any other type of service to carry out some standards both of work and of baby care.

The employer-employee relationship when unwed mothers were hired as domestics was, at least in Murphy’s experience, akin to a mentor-mentee relationship that was draining on the employer’s patience, time, and finances. Similar to the work of benevolent matrons in private maternity homes, hiring an unwed mother could be an evangelical act, an example of applied reform. Women who entered into a working relationship with unwed mothers were intrinsically aware of the unwed mothers’ “fallen” state. They had to be willing to be protectors and guardians of the mothers’ reclaimed virtue. But they also had to be realists. Within a few months of her employment, Minnie had begun “to crave the old associations” and spent her time off in the city amongst her old friends. Murphy accepted that “direct control of [Minnie’s] social life was impossible” and cautioned readers that the belief that it was possible to keep unwed mothers from

associating with men was “a Utopian dream.” The specter of immoral relations, past or present, was a reality that employers had to accept.⁵⁷

Kind employers like Murphy, however condescending she may have been, appear to have been a rarity in the lives of Minnesota Home School girls who were placed in domestic positions. Many of the girls either ran away or requested to be returned to the School rather than stay in their position. As with mutual placement in boarding homes, in the best of situations Home School girls complained that their employer was too strict, did not allow them to take time off, and constantly asked questions about their past. In the worst situations, Home School girls reported employers who abused them, failed to pay their salaries, sexually assaulted them, overworked them, and cruelly taunted them about their pregnancies and personal histories.

Unwed mothers were not desirable employees, which meant that the ideal, respectable middle-class women with whom caseworkers would have preferred to place the mothers either declined or only accepted when they had altruistic motivations, like Murphy. Anecdotal evidence from Home School records suggest that most domestic position arrangements were a meeting of equally desperate individuals – employers who could not afford “respectable” help and unwed mothers who were desperate for a place to begin again. The combination of two parties who were each hoping for something or someone better was frequently unsuccessful and thus short-lived. Most Home School girls were placed in two or three homes before they found one where they were comfortable or decided to board their child and seek an alternative form of employment.

⁵⁷ Ida Garrett Murphy, “The Unmarried Mother at Work,” *The Survey* 43 (28 February 1920): 642-645.

Data from the State Board of Control demonstrates that domestic service was the most common form of employment for unwed mothers throughout the 1920s, with an average of 54 percent of working unwed mothers placed in domestic positions through 1928. The next most common occupations were waitressing, hotel work, clerks, and factory employment. It should be noted, however, that the working unwed mother was somewhat of an oxymoron. While upwards of 90 percent of unwed mothers were employed prior to their pregnancy, an average of 84 percent of unwed mothers were unemployed in the postpartum period. This was most likely the result of several synergistic forces. Unwed mothers struggled to balance childcare and employment. In many cases employment and motherhood were essentially mutually exclusive conditions, in the sense that unwed mothers had difficulty locating reliable help to tend to their baby while they were at work or they could not secure a job with sufficient wages to pay for daycare or boarding of their baby.

The high rates of unemployment were also a reflection of cultural values during the interwar period. The prevailing belief was that mothers, single or not, best served their children by remaining in the home and tending exclusively to the duties of hearth and child. This view was embodied by the Progressive campaign for mother's pensions. Mother's pensions or mother's aid were state-funded programs enacted in the 1910s that enabled local governments to make payments to single mothers so they could remain at home to care for their children. The perceived benefits to this program were numerous. It decreased the rates of childhood institutionalization, allowed women to maintain their traditional role as homemakers and mothers, allegedly prevented the development of

juvenile delinquency by providing at-risk youth with a stable home environment, and decreased rates of maternal and child poverty.⁵⁸ As the Children's Bureau explained in 1928, it was "actually cheaper in dollars and cents to maintain children in their own homes than to support them in institutions, and 'homemade' children, cared for by their own mothers, have the best chance of becoming healthy, normal citizens."⁵⁹

Unwed mothers were typically not awarded mother's pensions, however. The pensions were reserved for "deserving" single mothers, like women who had been widowed, deserted by their husbands, or whose husbands were in a tuberculosis sanatorium or mental hospital.⁶⁰ There was a moral undercurrent inherent in the mothers' pensions laws. Reformers were adamant that the funds should not be directed to unworthy women, lest it be interpreted as sanctioning their life choices. Many states had morality clauses built into aid legislation that limited aid to mothers who were judged to be "a proper person, physically, morally, and mentally, for the bringing up of her children."⁶¹

The inclusion of a morality clause in mother's aid legislation was rooted in the elevation of motherhood in the nineteenth century as an occupation with almost saintly requirements, a characterization that was reinforced to some degree by the maternalist

⁵⁸ Alisa Klaus, *Every Child a Lion: The Origins of Maternal and Infant Health Policy in the United States and France, 1890-1920* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993): 217-218.

⁵⁹ Emma O. Lundberg, *Public Aid to Mothers with Dependent Children: Extent and Fundamental Principles* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1928): 2.

⁶⁰ The exception to this is aid to mothers provisions in Washington, Nevada, Colorado, Indiana, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia, where statutory language was more general and provided for aid to "mothers with dependent children" without restrictions related to death, desertion, widowhood, or physical and mental incapacities. See Lundberg, p. 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

movement in the twentieth century. Mothers were popularly construed as society's "moral guardians" who were "architects of a new social order." Every aspect of child development was thought to require vigilant maternal oversight and moral training. The nuclear family was similarly reshaped as a refuge from the external world; mothers protected the home and family from external threats.⁶² Unwed mothers failed this litmus test on the basis of their compromised morality and, at least for single mothers, their inability to supply their children with the traditional familial environment.⁶³

Unwed mothers were known sometimes to receive mother's aid. Occasionally a sympathetic liberal judge might grant a mother temporary aid. Other mothers, building on the tradition of wearing a wedding band to pass as a married woman, were sometimes successful in inventing a deceased or deserted husband in order to secure aid. Because the viability of this latter tactic depended on convincing local authorities of the veracity of the tale, it is nearly impossible to trace unwed mothers who succeeded in manipulating the system and earning pensions.⁶⁴

⁶² Judith A. Dulberger, "*Mother Donit for the Best*": *Correspondence of a Nineteenth-Century Orphan Asylum* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996): 24-25.

⁶³ The Social Security Act of 1935 did not substantially improve the plight of the single unwed mother. The Act included a clause (Aid to Dependent Children) for public assistance of needy children under the age of sixteen who were deprived of breadwinning parental support and who were living with a relative engaged in their full-time care. The Children's Bureau, however, worked to exclude illegitimate children from eligibility by allowing states to transpose eligibility standards developed for mothers' pensions to ADC requirements. Before 1940, ADC was therefore primarily a widow's program. For a discussion of the development of ADC, see Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917 to 1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996): 132-145.

⁶⁴ For further information on mother's pensions, see Linda Gordon, *Pitied but not Entitled: Single Mother and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).; Susan Stein-Roggenbuck, "Wholly Within the Discretion of the Probate Court': Judicial Authority and Mother's Pensions in Michigan, 1913-1940," *Social Service Review* 79 (June 2005): 294-321; Joanne L. Goodwin, "Employable Mothers' and

The tendency of unwed mothers to hold low-paying jobs or to be unemployed greatly affected the mothers' ability to support their children, especially since their small incomes were rarely supplemented by paternity payments. Concurrent with investigations concerned with the regularity of paternity payments, social workers also began to investigate the average salaries of unwed mothers and the extent to which their low incomes made them reliant on public funds and affected their ability to provide their children with an adequate home environment.

The inability of unwed mothers to provide for their children was not a new phenomenon of the Depression years. Ida Parker's original study of unwed mothers in Boston in 1922 found that three years after the birth of their child, most mothers were either unemployed or employed at menial, low-paying jobs.⁶⁵ The data presented above from the Board of Control indicates that a similar state of affairs existed in Minnesota. The economic turmoil of the Depression, however, meant that the extent of unwed mothers' unemployment (and their affiliated reliance on state support) suddenly mattered to a greater degree than ever before.

'Suitable Work': A Re-evaluation of Welfare and Wage-Earning for Women," *Journal of Social History* 29 (Winter 1995): 253-274.

⁶⁵ Parker found that out of 259 mothers, 97 "were not gainfully employed." This number is deceiving, however, as 49 of the women were housewives and presumably supported by a husband and two were in school. Only 46 women had no occupation and no additional means of support. Nineteen women were clerks; 44 held semi-skilled positions such as laundresses, dressmakers, and nurses; 96 were servants; and 2 were professional persons. See Parker, p. 29-30. All the studies I found on unwed mothers and employment placed unemployment rates at between 40 and 90 percent with the exception of a study on unwed mothers in Baltimore in 1923. In this study less than fifteen percent of the mothers were unemployed, a startling low number for the period. The majority of mothers were employed in similarly low skill professions as the women in the remaining studies, however, with 24 percent employed as factory workers and 21 percent employed as domestics or a kindred occupation. See Anna Rochester, *Infant Mortality: Results of a Field Study in Baltimore, MD., Based on Births in One Year* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1923): 156.

A study of 35 unwed mothers under the care of the Child Welfare Board in Washington, D.C. during 1934-1935 found that the “majority” of mothers “were in occupations that required no particular cultivated skill, consequently the financial return was small.” The employed mothers worked as nurse-maids, domestics, dressmakers, and waitresses. Their average weekly salary was just over \$7. The majority of mothers (27 percent) made \$5 per week, although there were a few outliers who earned as much as \$10 per week. Nearly 40 percent of mothers in the study were unemployed.

Of the 43 children included in the study, 53 percent were supported exclusively by the Child Welfare Division’s allotments. Sixteen percent were supported by relatives and an additional 9 percent were supported by their mother and (step)father. Only two mothers, or 4 percent of the study population, earned enough money to independently support their children. Sixty-five percent of the fathers, including those who voluntarily established paternity, had never made any contributions to the support of the child. A scant 13 percent contributed regularly, with the remaining 22 percent contributing varying amounts on an occasional basis.⁶⁶

The author of the study was not primarily concerned with the income levels of the unwed mothers, but rather how their income levels affected the number of social service agencies the mothers came in contact with and how frequently they sought help. The agencies were divided into seven broad categories: child welfare, correctional,

⁶⁶ An interesting aside is the author’s conclusion that as others assumed responsibility for the support of the child, whether it was the mother by securing employment or additional aid from social welfare agencies, paternal contributions decreased or entirely stopped. Rather than improving her financial situation, in some instances the additional income from new sources actually negatively impacted the mother’s finances due to the withdrawal of paternal support, causing the mother to break even or earn less than previously.

employment, family welfare, health, legal, and recreational. The health care agencies were the most frequented, followed by legal, child welfare, and family welfare. The 35 mothers in the study collectively had 110 open cases at area social agencies, or, to phrase it another way, each mother on average sought help from three social agencies in addition to the guidance and/or financial aid she was receiving from the Child Welfare Board.⁶⁷

It is likely that the degree of aid mothers were receiving from individual organizations necessitated seeking help from numerous organizations in order to make ends meet. Moreover, the rather singular nature of many social welfare organizations during the interwar period, such as child guidance clinics or free health clinics, meant that mothers would have been forced to become clients at numerous clinics to see to the economic, health, and emotional needs of their families. While social workers were undoubtedly aware of the specialized nature of many agencies, this recognition did not factor into the above analysis. Social welfare authorities were more concerned with enumerating the extent of an unwed mother's reliance on aid rather than identifying why mothers were in need of it. Unwed mothers were often hastily and subjectively judged by caseworkers.

In a somewhat ironic twist, a small section of the social welfare community began to argue that aid to unwed mothers actually intensified their reliance on the system because it allowed them to shirk their responsibilities. As long as organizations were willing to support unwed mothers they had little to no motivation to discover methods of

⁶⁷ Margaret Sullivan, *A Study of Thirty-Five Cases of Illegitimacy under the Care of the Child Welfare Division of the Board of Public Welfare during the Fiscal Year 1935* (Master's Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1940): 35-44.

becoming self-sufficient, an argument that would gain prominence during the welfare debates of the 1960s and beyond.⁶⁸

One study that spoke to this belief was completed at Columbia University in 1936 by social worker Joanne Walsh. Using a group of 24 unwed mothers who chose to board their child, the author used mothers' initial willingness to pay board versus the frequency of the payments mothers were making as a bellwether for custodial outcomes and, secondarily, as a tool to understand the impact of aid payments on a mother's decision. All but two of the mothers (92 percent) expressed a willingness and belief that they could pay for the entirety of their child's board when formulating care plans for the child at the maternity home. Six months later, the author of the study found that 92 percent of the women were unable or unwilling to pay for their child's board. Thirteen percent paid partial board regularly, an additional 13 percent paid partial board irregularly, 21 percent paid part board regularly with the father's assistance, 29 percent did not pay any board, and 17 percent had board paid for them by relatives when they were unable to do so. The author of the study concluded that many of the mothers had means to pay for the entirety of the board (several of them had received large paternity settlements), but they consciously chose not pay because they knew the local child welfare agency would pay whenever they failed to do so.

Besides the obvious ethical connotations of this conclusion, the author of the study believed that the safety net provided by local agencies meant that the mother could

⁶⁸ For postwar histories of welfare in the United States, see Waltner Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*. (New York: Free Press, 1979): 304-388; Charles Noble, *Welfare as We Knew It: A Political History of the American Welfare State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 79-134; and Michael B. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

not “fully realize the responsibility facing her” because social welfare aid prevented the mother from assuming the entirety of her maternal responsibilities. In other words, agencies allegedly enabled mothers to act as mothers only when it was convenient because they knew that someone else (the social welfare agency, the foster mother, et cetera) would assume the role when they were absent. In this sense, aid to mothers was enabling them to escape motherhood.⁶⁹ Unwed mothers had to appear deserving of aid at all times.⁷⁰

Linda Gordon has analyzed this phenomenon in connection with declarations of child neglect during the Progressive era. Gordon found that single motherhood and impressions of child neglect were cyclical because “the very definition of child neglect arose as part of an ideology about proper family life that automatically conceived of single mothers as inadequate parents.” The social welfare response simultaneously blamed mothers for neglect while “declining to help them become adequate mothers” by offering appropriate levels of support.⁷¹ ⁷² This mindset is evident in the sociological studies of unwed motherhood considered in this chapter. Unwed mothers could not pass muster as “good” mothers without either sufficient paternity payments or a well-paying

⁶⁹ Joanne Mary Walsh, *The Unmarried Mother and Her Child: A Study of 24 Cases in the Foster Home Department of the Children's Aid Society* (Master's Thesis, Columbia University, 1936).

⁷⁰ For a discussion of financial responsibility and its role in determining “worthy” and “unworthy” mothers, see Elizabeth Feder, *The Elite of the Fallen: The Origins of a Social Policy for Unwed Mothers, 1880-1930* (PhD Thesis, The Johns Hopkins University, 1992): 304-305.

⁷¹ Linda Gordon, “Single Mothers and Child Neglect, 1880-1920,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1985): 174.

⁷² To some extent, however, this was a reflection of changing social work methodologies as much as it was a reflection of poor policy. Social work research was postulating that clients who received less help would enter into a pseudo-partnership with the caseworker, taking ownership of more individual responsibility and self-help than they otherwise would if ample assistance was free-flowing. See Beverly Stadum, *Poor Women and their Families: Hard Working Charity Cases, 1900-1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992): 129-130.

job with adequate childcare options, but neither of these scenarios was easy to achieve in a system that did not really prioritize child welfare or family welfare. Punitive social policies toward unwed mothers were not based on a desire to see single mothers fail, but rather on a belief system that could not distinguish between actual poor parenting and the appearance of poor parenting as the by-product of the inequities of single motherhood.

The notion that aid to unwed mothers somehow allowed them to escape the daily demands of motherhood likely led to a version of the experiential study where maternal adjustment was analyzed in terms of maternal happiness vis-à-vis custodial decisions. One such study, conducted by social worker Marian Mitchell in 1938, utilized the case histories of and interviews with fifty unwed mothers who were confined at the Florence Crittenton Home in Columbus, Ohio between 1934 and 1938. According to Mitchell, the goal of the study was to “see how the girls have fit in with the social and economic realities of the world, and whether the girl feels she would be better or worse off if the child were with her or whether she feels she made a better adjustment without a child to care for all of the time.” Of the mothers participating in the study, 19 placed their babies for adoption, 17 retained custody, 10 boarded the babies, and 3 of the babies died.

Mitchell asked the mothers who retained custody whether they felt that having their baby was “essential” to their current happiness and whether keeping the baby had “made it harder for [them] to get along. None of the mothers who answered the question could respond with a simple yes or no. Most of the responses were similar to the one given by a mother who said that “it might have been harder to get along with a baby to care for but it had been worth it.” The mothers who chose to place their babies for

adoption felt as though they “would have been much happier” if they had retained custody and would have had “a better sense of responsibility.”⁷³

In more specific terms, 96 percent of the mothers who either lived with their baby or boarded their baby did not believe their baby had made their life appreciably more difficult and the same percentage agreed that their happiness was dependent upon having their child with them. Sixty-nine percent of the mothers wholeheartedly agreed that their babies were the most important thing in their lives, although strong conclusions could not be drawn from this data because the remaining thirty-one percent of mothers with custody felt that their babies were “a detriment to their happiness and well-being.”

Mitchell was keenly interested in the feelings of the mothers who had placed their children for adoption. Thirty-three percent of this group thought they would have been much happier if they had kept their baby and believed they would not have found life to be more difficult from an economic standpoint. Only one mother said she did not care about her baby. Most of the mothers seemed to be in agreement with one mother who said she would have liked to have kept her baby, but doing so would have “only caused more heartache.”

Mitchell noted rather sadly that the women who placed their babies for adoption “really miss their babies more than one would think.” Ten percent of the mothers agreed with the statement that they would rather have their baby and all the struggles such a decision would have likely entailed rather than feel such a loss. Mitchell noted that the

⁷³ Marian R. Mitchell, *Relation of the Disposition of Illegitimate Babies to the Economic, Psychological and Social Conditions of the Mother* (Master's Thesis, The Ohio State University, 1938): 33-34.

vast majority of mothers in this group did not give a definite enough answer to enable her to place them in the above group, but “the least that can be said is that they feel the loss keenly with few exceptions, and would give anything to have been able to keep the child.”⁷⁴ The experiential studies of the 1930s demonstrated, however, how ill-advised advocating for such an outcome would be.

Conclusion

As in the quantitative studies considered in the previous chapter, the experiential studies of the 1930s offer little in terms of true scientific analysis. They were largely anecdotal in nature and designed without any true hypotheses. The studies shared essentially the same simplistic originating questions: what happened to unwed mothers after they left the maternity home or the reformatory? What did it mean to live as an unwed mother? How did they survive? The approaches to answer these questions were varied, but the methodology was standard. Social workers contacted old clients, reviewed closed files, or interviewed other social workers in order to gain their perspective. Like the quantitative studies, they extrapolated their conclusions drawn from considerations of a finite population to all unwed mothers. This was an application of Kammerer’s theory of commonality.

Social work leaders recognized throughout the interwar period that there was a gulf between scientific theory and its application in practice. Historians have typically attributed this gulf to a wide discrepancy between social work ideals and the training of the average social worker in practice, a training that was typically either devoid of or

⁷⁴ Mitchell, p. 34-36.

offered only a limited introduction to social scientific theory and models of scientific research. Moreover, historians have argued that even the social workers who received sufficient training in scientific social work suffered from too large of a case load to apply the training to their clients. Roy Lubove has noted that the “crucial development between 1880 and 1930...was the emergence of the belief that social work was heading toward a scientific understanding and control of behavior.”⁷⁵ This does not mean the field had arrived at such an understanding.

It is fair to argue, however, that the functional shortcomings of scientific social work extended to and permeated the studies produced by the field’s acknowledged scientific leaders, individuals who were arguably trained in scientific social work and who were somewhat immune to the caseload stresses experienced by the average worker. The proliferation of case histories being used to define the totality of the experience of unwed motherhood, the continuation of a statistical analysis of a small group of mothers that was extrapolated to the population as a whole, and the lack of substantive analysis within the experiential studies – which were written by the field’s acknowledged leaders and graduates of the field’s best schools – raises questions about how fully the rhetoric of science was integrated within the field’s practices.

In a 1931 study of social work practices, Maurice Karpf concluded that even the best trained social workers lacked skill in the use of social, psychological, or biological sciences. He argued that research conclusions were “largely subjective, individualistic, and unverifiable,” causing the studies to be based more on “common sense concepts and

⁷⁵ Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930* (New York: Atheneum, 1980): 106.

judgments” than scientific acumen.⁷⁶ Ironically, this conclusion was made at a moment in time when social work had arguably achieved full professional status with an array of professional societies, several professional journals, and the establishment of 25 master’s degree programs in social work, all with the stated aim of embedding science within the profession.⁷⁷ This patina of scientific expertise arguably validated the methodology of experiential studies. The belief that these studies were scientific was enough to justify entrenching their conclusions regarding the generalized failure of unwed mothers to independently thrive as fact. Far from actually capturing the intricacies of single motherhood and the variable notions of success the experiential studies identified maternal ineptitude and highlighted maternal incompetence, thereby “proving” that unwed mothers were ill-suited to the demands of motherhood.

⁷⁶ Maurice Karpf, *The Scientific Basis of Social Work: A Study in Family Case Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931): 352-353.

⁷⁷ John Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination: A History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985):78-79.

Chapter Five

A Peculiar Personal Equation: Psychoanalysis and Premarital Pregnancy in the Interwar Period

Lola became an unwed mother at the age of twenty-one in the early 1930s. No information on her familial background or her relationship with the baby's father remains. In fact, the only remaining record of Lola consists of her caseworker's musings on Lola's psychiatric state during the course of her earliest visits after being released from the maternity home. The records do not portray Lola in a flattering light.

In Lola's first interview after bringing the baby home, she explained that the baby worried her to death because he cried "a great deal." Lola noted that she could appreciate how her mother must have felt when she was a baby, "as she was probably as much trouble" as her son. Lola continued on, complaining that the baby "was a load" for her to carry, that she did not get enough rest, or spend time outdoors because of the work she had to do for him. "Things are the same day in and day out, one continual round of rising with the baby, feeding and bathing the baby, preparing his food. It is getting on my nerves." These are sentiments that most mothers would likely admit to feeling at some point during their child's infancy, especially during the first few weary weeks of motherhood. But in interwar America when an unwed mother expressed such feelings she was interpreted to be admitting to "extreme feelings of rejection" that raised concern about her maternal capabilities. Lola was likely oblivious to the fact that her honesty was hurting her chances of receiving any tangible assistance from her caseworker.

Lola's actions as well as her words were a cause for concern. The caseworker noted that Lola "brought the baby in, poised him on a corner of the desk, [and] showed considerable irritation with him, poking him, jerking at him, and making remarks about what a lot of trouble he was every time he moved." Another time when the baby was fussing, Lola "administered a gentle spanking" and then went on to discuss that babies should not be spared discipline or else they would get out of hand too easily. Lola allegedly displayed an air of being generally "irritated with the baby's presence" and she neglected to offer "any little marks of affection or solicitude toward him." These impressions were underscored by Lola's complaint that there was "no rest, no getting away from him. He [was] always there, always needing to be looked after."

Lola's worker soon began to wonder whether maternal custody was an appropriate resolution to the case, noting that Lola's rejection of her baby became "more and more obvious" as time progressed and theorizing that the baby was little more to Lola than "an object to bear the brunt of [her] resentment."¹

Lola's case illustrates a distinct trend in illegitimacy casework in the late interwar period, namely a belief that the root cause of maternal failure and illegitimacy itself was psychiatric imbalance. Psychiatric assessment of clients was thoroughly incorporated into social work methodology by the early 1930s. Social work and allied professions interested in human development were increasingly set upon "problematizing the normal,

¹Helen Casebier, *Some Attitudes of Unmarried Mothers: A Study of 25 Case Records of the United Charities of Chicago* (Master's Thesis, University of Chicago, 1938): 94-95.

psychologizing the deviant, and re-encoding certain cultural expectations for gender, race, and class differences and hierarchy.”²

The psychiatric studies of the 1930s built upon theories first expressed in the quantitative studies of the late Progressive period. They employed a similar methodology that produced equally similar results by isolating “strings of measurable characteristics.”³ Psychiatric analyses were dependent upon the same data points and typically reached the same conclusions as studies from a decade earlier. The studies can be viewed as a reanalysis of the same research questions expressed in psychiatric terms.

The key difference between the approaches was the language used to discuss the results and the significance of incorporating a theoretical approach into psychiatric studies that allowed for the medicalization of a social problem, an end result that logically implied the presence of a “cure” for the newly identified “disease” of psychiatric predisposition to illegitimate pregnancy. Psychiatric studies furthermore closed the loophole in Kammerer’s theory of commonality that excluded girls who did not fit the demographic profile of a delinquent. Psychiatry offered a mechanism with which to explain why both “good” and “bad” girls became pregnant – it was a result of a mental pathology. This understanding came to dominate professional thinking in the interwar period. In this sense, psychiatric approaches to illegitimacy erased the last vestiges of the pitiable versus committable unwed mother by locating abnormalities within the entire population subset.

² Crista Deluzio, *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007): 134.

³ Judith Sealander, *The Failed Century of the Child: Governing America’s Young in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 2-3.

This chapter will briefly consider the role of IQ tests in the construction of the pathological unwed mother, the mechanisms and motivations for the inclusion of psychiatric theory in casework, and the differential diagnoses assigned to unwed mothers. As this chapter will demonstrate, the psychoanalysis of unwed mothers was the final element necessary for the pathologization of illegitimacy. It offered a scientific explanation for undesirable behavior that transcended all considerations of class, environment, and (to some degree) heredity. Impaired psychiatric states became the ultimate, one-size-fits-all unifier of delinquent populations.

IQ Testing and the Feeble-minded Diagnosis

The IQ test was developed in 1904 by Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon as a tool to identify cognitively deficient children within the French school system by testing an array of mental faculties, such as memory and verbal facility. Mental age was a measurement designed in tandem with the IQ test to contextualize an individual's scores in relation to mean scores achieved by other individuals grouped by age. For example, if a twelve-year-old's IQ score matched the mean score from a set of eight-year-old children, then the mental age of the twelve-year-old would be eight years. While the raw IQ score could certainly function as and was used to determine normal or abnormal intelligence, the addition of mental age to the formulary made the significance of

numerical IQ scores comprehensible to the layman and contextualized the raw IQ score in relation to the norm.⁴

Henry Goddard, the author of the previously discussed study of the *Kallikak* family, brought Binet's tests to the United States in 1908 for use in his new position at the Training School for Feeble-minded Boys and Girls in New Jersey. The students' IQ results seemed to correlate with the experiential assessments of the students' mental functioning made by staff. Goddard began to use the tests heavily as a way to categorize delinquents and feeble-minded children, testing more than two thousand children by 1911.

Goddard noted that there were wide variations of functionality and mental astuteness in individuals who were deemed to be feeble-minded by their subnormal scores. Prior to Goddard's extensive experimentation with IQ testing, the term "feeble-minded" had been used to indicate a range of mental deficiencies and/or socially deviant behaviors. Goddard specified the meaning of feeble-mindedness by inventing new degrees of subnormal intelligence (idiot, imbecile, and moron) that could identify the extent of mental abnormality more clearly. The term "feeble-minded" then referred to individuals with an IQ lower than 75 who could be subdivided as idiots, imbeciles, or morons depending on their scores.⁵

⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996): 146-158; Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995): 54-61.

⁵ See Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985): 45-56; Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (New York: Humanity Books, 1998): 59-65; Gould, p. 158-171; Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981): 36-40.

Goddard was unsure whether mental deficiency was the result of an organic malformation of the brain that inhibited normal development or the absence of something needed to stimulate normal mental development, but by 1915 he was certain that intelligence followed Mendelian laws; feeble-mindedness was “a condition of mind or brain which is transmitted as regularly and surely as color of hair or eyes.”⁶

Historian Wendy Kline has called the transition of feeble-mindedness from an imprecise, catch-all term applied to any condition of slight mental impairment to a term that indicated genetic flaw a “radical redefinition.” Feeble-minded persons were considered to be a threat to the health of the population and, because its cause was hereditary, “no amount of education, training, or nurturing could alter the destructive potential” of a feeble-minded individual.⁷

The publication of Goddard’s results, combined with knowledge of the discovery of strains of feeble-mindedness and insanity within the Juke and Kallikak families, led to the widespread belief amongst professionals and layman that individuals with low grade mentality were the primary occupants of almshouses, asylums, and reformatories. Public alarm about the so-called “silent menace” of the feeble-minded person encouraged social workers to consider the possibility that illegitimate pregnancy was not due to innate moral laxity, but rather a subnormal mentality stemming from poor heredity.⁸ Indeed, one study of feeble-minded women concluded that “illegitimacy, attempted murder, theft,

⁶ Henry Herbert Goddard, *Feeble-mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences*, Reprint (New York: Ayer Publishing, 1926): 547.

⁷ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 24.

⁸ Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930* (New York: Atheneum, 1980): 67-68.

forgery, arson, prostitution, drunkenness, destitution and disease are [other] salient features of the social careers of these incompetents.”⁹

Because feeble-mindedness was viewed as the opposite of normal mentality and its diagnosis could be based in equal measure on behavioral transgressions as on low IQ scores, “normality became defined as much by moral purity as it did by mental capability.”¹⁰ By 1920, social workers posited that there was a substantial link between the occurrence of illegitimacy and feeble-mindedness. Winifred Richmond argued that the two situations “largely overlap” and thought that illegitimacy would be “materially lessened if mental defect could be eradicated.”¹¹

In Minnesota, all unmarried mothers were referred to the Research Bureau of the State Board of Control for intelligence tests; girls who scored below 75 were referred to the Department on Feeble Minded in county welfare boards, which would review the case and determine whether or not the girl should be committed.¹²

⁹ Stanley Powell Davies, *Social Control of the Mentally Deficient* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1930): 92.

¹⁰ Kline, page 26.

¹¹ Quoted in Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993):52.

¹² United Way of Minneapolis, “Community Survey of Social and Health Work in Minneapolis: Unmarried Mothers, July 1938,” United Way of Minneapolis Records, Box 87, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota.

The thoroughness of Minnesota’s testing program was rare. Elizabeth Feder has demonstrated that in most states mental testing was reserved for institutionalized mothers, both due to lack of resources to perform the tests and a suspicion of the test’s accuracy. Moreover, when feeble-minded mothers were compared with non-feeble-minded (untested) unwed mothers, their behaviors and attitudes were similar, a factor of great importance during the heyday of sociological studies of unwed motherhood in the 1920s. See Elizabeth Feder, *The Elite of the Fallen: The Origins of Social Policy for Unwed Mothers, 1880-1930* (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 1992):201-202.

Feeble-minded unwed mothers were committed to the state hospital at Faribault for sterilization and then returned to their home community. For an excellent study of sterilization practices in

Table 4.1

*Number of Psychiatric Exams per Biennial Conducted in Minnesota, According to Data Collected by the Minnesota Department of Public Welfare*¹³

1922	0 examinations
1924	3,500 examinations
1926	5,500 examinations
1928	6,500 examinations
1930	5,500 examinations
1932	8,500 examinations
1934	8,500 examinations
1936	11,500 examinations
1938	11,200 examinations

In 1926 the research bureau of the Minnesota State Board of Control conducted a psychiatric study of 344 unmarried mothers who were residents of Minneapolis maternity homes. All of the mothers were initially given IQ tests in groups of four or five; if the result of the group test was 80 or below, individual tests were administered. One hundred eleven girls, nearly one-third of the group, were given individual exams. The bureau compared the results of the study with a control group of 7,656 school children whose exams were administered in the same manner.

Within the group of school children, 38 percent had below average IQs and 37 percent had above average IQs, forming an almost perfect bell curve. In the unwed mother group, 66 percent had below average IQs while only 21 percent had above average IQs. Nearly one-quarter of the mothers were classified as feeble-minded, a percentage that was four times larger than the rate within the control group. The authors

Minnesota, see Molly Ladd-Taylor, "Saving Babies and Sterilizing Mothers: Eugenics and Welfare Politics in Interwar United States." *Social Politics* (Spring 1997): 136-153.

¹³ Data was taken from an internal memo found in Box 1 of the Department of Public Welfare Psychiatric Services Bureau Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

of the study noted that these results were “exactly what one might look for” when testing sexually delinquent populations. Exams administered at the Home School the previous year revealed a similar outcome, with 24 percent of the School’s students rating as feebleminded.¹⁴

Notably, the authors used the results of their study to recommend policy, a somewhat unusual occurrence in studies from this period. While they recognized that “perhaps many of the brightest as well as many of the dullest” unwed mothers never find their way to a maternity home, those who would “form the problem of the social worker, and the knowledge that almost 50 percent...are either feebleminded or border-line cases will give her some idea of what she can expect of them.” This study’s finding that most unwed mothers were mental inferiors was correlated with their failure to meet expectations in the experiential studies. It was therefore reasonable to expect that they could not function at an adult level and would not be appropriate mothers.

This conclusion was further verified by a chart that attempted to correlate intelligence levels with occupations held prior to the pregnancy. Eighty-six percent of the mothers worked at manual jobs that required some degree of supervision and little responsibility, such as bundle wrapper, mail sorter, housekeeper, chambermaid, or laundry worker. The median IQ for this subset was 85, a score indicating borderline

¹⁴For a similar analysis of the rate of feeblemindedness amongst populations of unwed mothers, see Clara Harrison Town, *What Happens in the Psychological Clinic? Report of Department of Psychology, Children’s Aid Society of Buffalo and Erie County, New York* (Buffalo, New York: Children’s Aid Society, 1927): 20-22.

mentality.¹⁵ Social work leaders interpreted data like this as evidence of delinquency, using a circular reasoning which held that rote occupations were attractive to women of low mentality because they were “unfitted for work other than the mechanical routine of the factory, or housework, and [were] therefore liable to lack self-control” and more likely to fall victim to the “pitfalls” of premarital sexual contact.¹⁶ Feeble-minded women were widely thought to be governed by the sex impulses that accompanied physical maturity, but simultaneously hindered by their low mentality that prohibited comprehension of moral and social standards.¹⁷

These results are one example of how traditional observations of illegitimacy, such as the acknowledgement that most unwed mothers came from working class backgrounds, were medicalized by scientific analyses that provided an explanation of causation, i.e., unwed mothers came from working class backgrounds because they were mentally incapable of other types of employment that would lead to a higher standard of living. Conclusions like these reinforced and contributed to the construction of the pathological unwed mother.

Social workers frequently used IQ scores as arbitrary markers of present and future functionality. By the end of the interwar period, a low maternal IQ score meant an automatic recommendation for adoptive custody of the baby. Mae was sixteen years old

¹⁵ Charlotte Lowe, “The Intelligence and Social Background of the Unmarried Mother,” *Mental Hygiene* 11 (1927): 783-794. For a similar study, see W.E. McClure and Bronett Goldberg, “Intelligence of Unmarried Mothers,” *The Psychiatric Clinic* 18 (1929-1930): 119-127.

¹⁶ Helen Sykes Troustine, *Illegitimacy in Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Studies from the Helen S. Troustine Foundation, 1919): 195.

¹⁷ George Mangold, *Children Born out of Wedlock: A Sociological Study of Illegitimacy with Particular Reference to the United States* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1921): 41.

when she gave birth to a son at the Home School. A mental exam administered a few weeks later concluded that Mae had an “IQ of 70 with moron classification.”

Poor personality rating and personal appearance, poor level of moral discrimination, somewhat emotionally unstable. [Mae] seems to have developed to about a ten year old level both intellectually and emotionally. She seems immature and childlike in conversation. She is inconsistent in statements and has many poor thinking and working habits...Apparently entire family has rotten morals.

Because of these conclusions, when Mae’s son was five months old she signed a document committing him to her home county’s child welfare board’s custody “so that [her] son may receive proper care and support.”¹⁸ In Mae’s case, the low IQ score combined with poor familial impressions indicated to social workers an inability to be a proper mother.

In other instances, IQ scores were manipulated to reflect social workers’ judgments of a girl’s functionality. Cassie, for example, was nineteen years old when she became pregnant. She was described as the usual “unspoiled, uneducated product of a mill town” who was “very childish and irresponsible in her attitudes towards social standards.” Although her IQ tests were scored at 95 and 100, the case psychiatrist believed a more accurate score would be in the 70-75 range because she was “a pathetic sort of person” who was “uninhibited in a childlike sort of way.” Case notes remarked that “the baby should be adopted away from this mother who is emotionally retarded and apt to be a serious social problem.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Sauk Centre Home School Case Files, Box 1.

¹⁹ Marcene Evelyn Pumphrey, *A Study of Environmental and Subjective Factors in the Cases of 53 Unmarried Mothers* (Master’s Thesis, Smith College of Social Work, 1934):64-65.

The arbitrary manipulation of Cassie's IQ score would not have raised any alarms or allegations of improper casework methodology during the interwar period because of the noted variability of IQ scores. The Minnesota Board of Control, for example, recommended that unwed mothers in state custody be retested every six to eight months to account for variations in intelligence.²⁰ Amongst populations of delinquent girls there was a belief that IQ scores might fluctuate based on emotional state, environment, and age, which meant that the scores were evolving measurements that might not always adequately reflect the mental abilities of the tested individuals. Scores were often lowered to reflect the tester's perception of the girl's true ability, but there is no evidence within the Home School files that scores were ever arbitrarily increased.

At the Home School IQ scores were sometimes redefined in order to justify custodial decisions, sterilization recommendations, or extended periods of confinement at the reformatory.²¹ Gladys, for example, originally received an IQ score of 123, but her case worker felt that she had "quite low standards." Gladys was described as being "lazy" and "untidy" with "an opinion of herself and her ability that are not truthful." A second IQ test was administered and Gladys' score was adjusted to 73. The School was then able to convince her that she was "capable of taking care of herself, but not herself and her baby."²²

²⁰ Untitled memo, 1934, Department of Public Welfare Psychiatric Services Bureau, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society.

²¹ For a discussion of other uses of the IQ test at state reformatories, see Ruth Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995): 88-101.

²² Sauk Centre Home School Case Files, Box 10.

In a similar instance, the Home School retested and subsequently reduced the IQ score of eighteen-year-old unwed mother Tillie when it became apparent she would be unable to financially support the child herself and familial help was not a possibility. Her original IQ score was 85, but when she refused to place her child for adoption she was retested and scored at 69. This new score allowed the Home School to arrange for the child's commitment as a dependent without Tillie's permission.

Tillie's case file had nearly a year's worth of notes prior to the custodial disagreement with Home School staff and there were no notations regarding impaired mental functioning during that time. After the retest, case notes began to describe Tillie as "an unstable girl; one who was vague and easily swayed." Social workers wrote that Tillie's new IQ score "merely emphasizes her inability to care for the child and we even wonder if she will be able to support herself." Four months later, against Tillie's will, her baby was placed "in a desirable home."

Tillie was paroled from the school a year after her child's placement. She eventually married, had a baby, and by all appearances was capable of functioning at a normal level. "Her home was well kept and shows that she takes an interest in doing handiwork. She has adequate furniture." But most telling of Tillie's true mental ability, "her baby was clean and looked healthy."²³ Nothing in Tillie's case record before or after the disposition of her illegitimate baby indicated any cause for asserting a decreased mental ability. It is quite clear that in Tillie's case the reduced IQ level was a deliberate manipulation of the score in order to affect the custodial outcome the state desired.

²³ Sauk Centre Home School Case Files, Box 16.

IQ scores were presented as impartial scientific barometers of mental ability, but in practice they were measurements that could be contorted for the expedience of social work goals, often at the expense of the unwed mother's custodial rights. The manipulation of such "scientific" measurements was adequately hidden by the expectation that unwed mothers would be mental inferiors whose IQ scores would naturally fluctuate with their emotional stability. As social worker Pauline Young argued, "There is no sharp line of cleavage by which the delinquent may be marked off from the non-delinquent" because delinquency was "a problem of degree, of a brighter or darker grey." Young urged social workers to understand that "the line of demarcation [was] thus an arbitrary line, not a natural."²⁴ IQ scores were merely one tool within the social worker's arsenal used to determine the particular shade of grey exhibited by individual unwed mothers.

Psychiatry and Social Work

For much of the interwar period, psychiatric analyses were the most used tool to distinguish between shades of grey within a delinquent population. Such analyses of unwed mothers began under the auspices of character studies, a social work technique employed to determine the morality of female clients and widely used during the Progressive era. Workers collected information on a woman's habits and character by going door-to-door and questioning a woman's neighbors, friends, relatives, and employers in a burst of intensive intelligence gathering. They focused on "eliciting

²⁴ Pauline Young, *Social Treatment in Probation and Delinquency* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1937): 7-8.

information, trading one bit of gossip for another, and in some cases sowing suspicion [of a woman's character] where there had been none" before.²⁵ The tidbits gathered from a client's acquaintances could either confirm or disprove generalized impressions of sexual promiscuity or moral turpitude.

The character studies of illegitimate mothers evolved to be more than a collection of neighborhood gossip, however, and more closely resembled a subset of the heredity studies of the 1920s. Psychiatrist Anne Bingham questioned in her 1923 study of female delinquents whether the standard hereditary and environmental factors analyzed in illegitimacy studies were pinpointing causative or contributory factors. She argued that "hereditary circumstances of development and environment, physical and mental conditions, when abnormal, should be regarded as contributory rather than as actual causes of sex misconduct." Instead, the causative factor related to illegitimacy was more likely to be "something in the make-up of the girl herself....a peculiar personal equation."²⁶

By the mid-1920s a psychiatric mechanism in instances of unwed pregnancy was an accepted hypothesis within the scientific community, albeit one needing additional research. Psychiatrist Henry Schumacher noted in 1927 that although there was not enough evidence to definitively assign a causal relationship between illegitimacy and mental defect, it was undeniable to those acquainted with unwed mothers that the "causes

²⁵ Lunbeck, p. 289.

²⁶ See Anne T. Bingham, *Determinants of Sex Delinquency in Adolescent Girls: Based on Intensive Studies of 500 Cases* (New York: New York Probation and Protective Association, 1923): 67.

[of illegitimacy rest] within *the individual herself*’ [emphasis in the original].²⁷

Schumacher advocated for an expansion of the types of unwed mothers whose mental state was being studied, noting that because existing data came mostly from institutions and clinics broad conclusions about illegitimacy in the general population could not be drawn.²⁸

The incorporation of non-institutionalized unwed mothers in psychoanalytical studies of unwed mothers was certainly needed to achieve a better sampling pool, but it was also needed to convince social workers that the mental abnormalities observed amongst institutionalized unwed mothers were common to all unwed mothers. As noted illegitimacy expert and psychiatrist Marion Kenworthy wrote in 1921,

The mere fact that a girl has engaged in illicit sex relationships does not justify the assumption that of necessity there need be any pathological mental situation involved...in saying that there appears to exist an important correlation between illicit sex practices and mental pathology, it would be folly to generalize and assert that this correlation is indicative that a definite relationship exists in all cases between illicit sex practice and mental pathology.²⁹

The studies conducted throughout the 1920s and 1930s, however, effectively changed prevailing social work opinion about the correlation between illegitimacy and psychiatric disorders until it was understood to be a given in the postwar period. Perhaps tiring of the endless statistical combinations of common attributes found in test

²⁷ Henry Schumacher, “The Unwed Mother: A Socio-Psychiatric Viewpoint,” *Mental Hygiene* 11 (October 1927): 775.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 776.

²⁹ Marion Kenworthy, “The Mental Hygiene Aspects of Illegitimacy,” *Mental Hygiene* v (1921): 499-500. Dr. Kenworthy was one of the first female psychiatrists in America and the first female president of the American Psychoanalytic Association, the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry and the American Academy of Child Psychiatry. Notably, she also collaborated with a social work colleague to introduce psychiatry into the social work curriculum at Columbia University.

populations of unwed mothers, by 1945 illegitimacy experts were expressing disdain that the field should be forced to accept that “any haphazard combination of motives and circumstances” may lead to unwed pregnancy. Psychiatric diagnoses provided a compact theory of causation to illegitimacy research.

Psychological instability, while not always easily defined, could be easily identified in unwed mothers. As social worker Leontine Young noted, “Anyone who has observed a considerable number of unmarried mothers can testify to the fact that there is nothing haphazard or accidental in the causation that brought about this specific situation with these specific girls.” She went on to describe the case of one unwed mother who traveled from another state to seek help at a specific maternity home that she had seen advertised several years earlier through a subscription letter to her employer. Because the mother remembered the name of the home, she told caseworkers that she believed she had experienced a “premonition” when initially reading the letter. Young naturally scoffed at this notion and instead argued that it was evidence of “the purposefulness of the girl’s behavior, her determination, however unconscious, to have not just a baby but specifically a baby out of wedlock.” The purposefulness Young believed the unwed mother displayed was an easily recognizable marker of psychiatric instability and was, moreover, a trait that she believed could be “duplicated indefinitely.”³⁰

The factors that were previously considered to lead to juvenile sexual delinquency – poverty, broken homes, immorality, and irresponsible parents – were downgraded to contributing factors. These factors may have increased the likelihood of girls to find

³⁰ Leontine R. Young, “Personality Patterns in Unmarried Mothers,” *The Family* 26 (December 1945): 296.

themselves in compromising situations, but the impetus for such behaviors was understood to be their existing “character” flaws. Personality and character were viewed as social products “in the sense that one does not have it at birth but acquires it in contact with others,” creating an interdependence between an individual’s environment, moral aptitude, and mental stability.³¹ The framework ran something like, “environment was a factor in producing mental abnormality, and mental abnormality was a factor in producing social disorder.”³²

Social work understanding of character problems initially failed to include reference to scientific theories of character development and mentality. Instead social work writings focused on the sense that there was something inexplicably “off” about unwed mothers as a group that went beyond poor heredity and environment. There was thought to be something intrinsically underdeveloped in their demeanor, although the social workers’ perception of unwed mothers’ personalities was clearly skewed by their own moral judgments of the mothers’ behaviors. One social worker alleged that there were very few unwed mothers in her charge “whose characters were organized into any other pattern than ‘getting’ and ‘hanging onto’ instead of the more adult pattern of ‘give and take.’”

They wanted to ‘get’ money, attention, interest and love for themselves from the agency, their family, foster families, or friends. Sometimes they were just as unreasonably demanding from their babies, identifying their babies with themselves. Their appetite for parental love for themselves

³¹ Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, *Social Situations and Girl Delinquency: A Study of Commitments to the Wisconsin Industrial School* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1928): 1.

³² Lunbeck, p. 63.

(which they sought in terms of interest, attention, and money) was insatiable.³³

A range of poorly designed studies attempted to quantify in what ways unwed mothers' characters differed from those of populations of "good" girls. One social work study performed in New York City in 1935 compared the self-described personality attributes of 25 mothers at a Salvation Army Home with 75 members of the Girl Reserves, a girls' club similar in nature to the Girl Scouts. The results showed that unwed mothers were 100 percent more selfish, 94 percent poorer judges of others' characters, 75 percent more secretive, 66 percent more careless, 50 percent more changeable, and 43 percent more suggestible than the control group of the Girl Reserves. By contrast, the Reserves were found to be 36 percent more obedient and 12 percent more cheerful than the unwed mothers as a group.³⁴

The author did not offer any interpretation of the meaning of the statistical differences, a fact that in and of itself offers interpretive guidance to the modern reader. This comparative study was not undertaken to see if unwed mothers' characters were deviant when compared to "good" girls, but rather to determine in what ways and to what extent unwed mothers differed from the "norm." The author expected to find evidence of pathological character flaws; the presence of these flaws did not warrant explanation, as the reader was likely to approach the study with a comparable mindset.

³³ Ruth F. Brenner, "Case Work Service for Unmarried Mothers, Part One," *The Family* 22 (November 1941): 214.

³⁴ Elinor Smith, *A Study of the Philosophy of Treatment in Unmarried Mother Cases in the New York Children's Aid Society from the Study of a Group of Selected Cases* (Master's Thesis, Columbia University, 1934): 71.

A similar study conducted in 1929 by a partnership of psychologists tested for “maturity traits” and ranked their prevalence and sophistication from very poor to good amongst unwed mothers categorized as normal, dull normal, borderline, and feebleminded. Even within the normal group, the mothers received a score of fair only forty percent of the time in such areas as language comprehension, moral discrimination, and associative processes. The feebleminded group received a rating of very poor in 84 percent of the categories. The average score among all the groups was poor, indicating “a retardation in maturity of from 2 ½ to 4 years.” The study ominously concluded that the results “did not reveal any highly developed trait common to the group”; the mothers all demonstrated some degree of developmental irregularity worthy of further investigation.³⁵

These character trends were also reflected in the social habits and preferences of delinquent girls. A 1931 psychiatric study that compared delinquent populations at two Ohio reformatories to a non-delinquent population derived from seven Cleveland public schools found a slightly higher rate of psychoneurotic responses to a “moral knowledge test” in the delinquent group even after standardizing for age and IQ scores. For example, when asked what their typical evening activities were, 45 percent of delinquent girls said they went on dates versus only five percent of non-delinquent girls.

The delinquent population’s responses stated a preference for dating as an activity above all other choices, their preference for boys as friends instead of girls, and claimed a higher frequency of dating than the control group. The non-delinquents engaged in or admitted to such preferences at a much smaller rate. The author of the study concluded

³⁵ McClure and Goldberg, p. 127.

that delinquent girls have a “love” for “activities connected with exciting pleasures” that “is less connected with the kind and amount of play opportunities given them than with their own emotional urges and cravings.” The home environment could not explain these urges; the explanation was hypothesized to be “that these pleasures satisfied a deeper need of an emotional outlet” than mentally stable girls needed.³⁶ Studies like these built upon Progressive-era observations of “dangerous” working-class girls by explaining such liberated behaviors as external displays of mental imbalance, thus creating a scientific basis for classifying and separating girls into “good” (normal) versus “bad” (abnormal) groupings. Character studies began the process of medicalizing sexual non-conformity and opened the door for the application of psychiatric diagnoses to unwed mothers.

The incorporation of psychiatric language and theory into social work was a long and somewhat halting process due to the competing demands of professionalization; the attempts of social work and psychiatry to professionalize overlapped chronologically and topically. Like social work, the expansion of psychiatry as a field relied on public acceptance of the profession’s definition of normality within the context of social relationships and emotional development, and acceptance of psychiatry’s authority as the appropriate experts. The early years of psychiatry’s incorporation into social work were marked by efforts to distinguish what aspects of diagnosing and demarcating social normalcy were medical and therefore psychiatric in nature and what aspects were sociological and properly within the domain of social work. Both professions recognized the need to differentiate their techniques and areas of influence, but the need was

³⁶ Andree Courthial, “Emotional Differences of Delinquent and Non-Delinquent Girls of Normal Intelligence,” *Archives of Psychiatry* 133 (October 1931): 55-85.

somewhat more pressing for social workers whose sociological traditions were less forthrightly scientific.³⁷

Roy Lubove has argued that the inclusion of psychiatry in casework methodologies had paradoxical results for the social work profession. On one hand, the patina of science elevated the professional standing of social workers and convinced social workers that they offered “a distinct and valuable service which required specialized skill and training.” On the other hand it also restricted the field’s autonomy by casting social work as a second-tier science due to its reliance on the techniques and theories from other scientific fields to formulate its research conclusions and treatments.

Social workers’ working relationship with psychiatrists was challenging in terms of the ability to stake out a professional realm that was uniquely their own, an arena that required “a social knowledge and technique that psychiatry necessarily lacks.”³⁸ While social workers welcomed the contributions of (overwhelmingly male) psychiatrists to their (mostly female) field, “the rules of professional hierarchy that explicitly rewarded licensing, training, and scientific knowledge and implicitly privileged male participation meant that social workers would always occupy the subordinate place on that team.”³⁹

Social workers’ response to this was to downplay psychiatry’s contribution to their methodology while highlighting the transfer and flow of knowledge through professions as necessary for the refinement and advancement of any scientific theory. To this end, social work journals struck a somewhat defensive tone when considering the

³⁷ Lunbeck, p. 37-38; John Burnham, “Psychiatry, Psychology and the Progressive Movement,” *American Quarterly* 12 (Winter 1960): 457-465.

³⁸ Lubove, p. 55-56 and 78-80.

³⁹ Kunzel, p. 166.

contributions of psychiatry to casework. Margaret Hagood wrote in a 1937 article that psychiatry could not claim credit “for all, nor even most of the contributions” to casework in recent years because the concepts had “evolved through the ages” and were a reflection of numerous disciplines that had only “most recently been formulated by psychiatry before passing on to social case work.”⁴⁰

The effort to distance psychiatry as a distinct field from social work was a professional battle that would extend into the post-World War Two period. It forced social workers to consider whether they were “assistants in psychotherapy” or whether they were “a profession in [their] own right, bringing into psychotherapy the *social* outlook and skills” that would place social workers “alongside the psychiatrist as another different but allied profession.”⁴¹ During much of the interwar period this professional imbalance was hidden by a more pressing need to discern how and when to apply psychiatric theories to casework practices, and attempts to understand in what ways psychiatric diagnoses could be beneficial for the formation of custodial recommendations.

⁴⁰ Margaret Jarmon Hagood, “Some Contributions of Psychiatry to Social Case Work,” *Social Forces* 15 (May 1937): 512.

The consideration of how different fields of science influenced social casework received much attention in the 1930s. The American Association of Social Work’s Annual Meeting in 1930 was dedicated to just this question. Social workers considered the contributions of sociology, biology, and other applied fields. See American Association of Social Work, *Official Proceedings of the Annual Meeting*, 1930.

And whether or not social workers were willing to strongly acknowledge psychiatry’s role in modern casework methodology, they were enthusiastic supporters of the field and the application of its tenets. A 1934 poll of members of the American Association of Social Work found that 93 percent of the membership supported mandatory inclusion of psychiatry courses in social work educational programs. See Erle Fisk Young, “Social Work and the Study of Social Sciences: A Study of Professional Opinions,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 39 (March 1934): 672.

⁴¹ Bertha Reynolds quoted in Kunzel, p. 166-167.

Psychiatric social work during the interwar period was an amalgamation of theories cherry-picked from an array of psychiatrists and behaviorists, such as Freud, John Dewey, and Lewis Terman, combined with impressions of the normal and abnormal as derived from every day experiences. John Ehrenreich has argued that psychiatric casework was “more an approach to labeling and manipulating than it was a source of techniques for treatment.” Like previous social work methodologies, psychiatry was really only another tool to “diagnose the social problems of the client, decide what should be done to solve them, and then manipulate the client and the social environment to achieve the desired result.”⁴²

In effect, the integration of medicalized theory into illegitimacy studies redefined professional perceptions of unwed mothers, quickened the pace of the mothers’ pathological transformation and allowed for easier manipulation of custodial recommendations by alluding to maternal mental defect as a basis for separation, a different kind of mental defect than low intelligence. It is important to note, however, that the impetus for greater psychiatric analysis of unwed mothers was not meant to be entirely punitive in nature, although psychoanalysis eventually became the preferred tool for identifying unfit mothers. There was also recognition that by virtue of their non-married status, unwed mothers may have experienced greater turmoil in pregnancy than the average mother, which theoretically could have been lessened by psychiatric intervention. As the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) argued, an unwed

⁴² John Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination: A History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985): 123.

mother's pregnancy became "the focal point around which she [saw] her difficulties in relation to other persons."

Her attitudes during this period often are not regarding a baby, but regarding a complication which has placed her in an inferior position, whereby she has lost status and individuality...Because of sudden insecurity and aloneness in which the unwed woman finds herself, and the fact that inner problems are more suddenly brought into relief, there is almost insurmountable difficulty for her in even making practical plans.⁴³

The idea that premarital pregnancy could expose "inner problems" that were previously well controlled became an enduring theme in psychiatric considerations of unwed pregnancy. Social workers accepted that the stress and stigma associated with being an unwed mother could lead to the development or at least the expression of latent psychiatric disorders. Even the conservative Florence Crittenton Association, which was relatively slow to embrace the new psychiatric approaches to illegitimacy, acknowledged that psychiatric problems could arise within individuals who would have failed to have been diagnosed as delinquent under Kammerer's theory of commonality. Psychiatry expanded the type of mother who could justifiably be diagnosed as abnormal.

Dr. Winifred Richmond told a gathering of the Association that she had intimate experience with just such a case. The young woman, who was "of quite good intelligence and had been a teacher in the high school," became illegitimately pregnant after her husband deserted her and their young child. She was sent to a Home in Chicago and became a favorite of the staff until she suddenly began "doing things that were against the rules of the Home, and when the matron remonstrated she threw an iron" at her. The woman was then transferred to a local psychiatric hospital where she came under Dr.

⁴³ "Essential Differences between Married and Unmarried Mothers," 1939, Child Welfare League of America Papers, Box 49, Folder 1.

Richmond's care. Dr. Richmond argued that the woman had likely been fighting mental illness "for a good many years, perhaps before she was twenty" years old. The upheaval in her personal life following her husband's desertion caused her disorder to intensify in an irreversible manner. At the time of Dr. Richmond's speech, the woman had been a patient at the hospital for "a number of years," during which time she continued to deteriorate until she reached a mental level of ten years old and had "no more intelligence than any feeble-minded girl."

Dr. Richmond warned the audience that there were "more girls of that type than people have any idea of." In her opinion, all unwed mothers would ideally be seen by a psychiatrist to screen for mental disorders. Psychiatrists could tell social workers "the particular type of personality, what type of intelligence [an unwed mother] has, what kind of work she may be able to do, whether or not she is capable of taking care of herself and her child, and whether it is going to best for her to bring up the baby."⁴⁴ Few social work agencies had the funding or inclination to have every unwed mother seen by a psychiatrist, however. Such a recommendation was an ideal; if ever achieved scant documentation exists to indicate that it was undertaken on a large-scale or on a long-term basis. Resources were too finite to justify such expenditure, nor were that many available psychiatrists. By and large, the unwed mothers who received psychiatric attention were the mothers whom social workers had already identified as being mentally abnormal. Social workers worked as screeners for psychiatrists rather than the other way around,

⁴⁴ "How the Psychiatrist Can Help Us with our Problems," National Florence Crittenton Mission, Box 2, Folder 8, p. 46-48.

meaning the lay person pre-selected the pathological mothers rather than the medical professional.

Psychoanalysis of Unwed Mothers

The use of psychiatry in social work was an attempt to understand the social environment that shaped an unwed mother's mental condition. Taking a cue from the earlier environmental studies of delinquency, psychiatric social work was based on the premise that the environment and interpersonal relationships shaped an individual's psyche, and that acts could be influenced by both conscious and unconscious thoughts. This realization was revolutionary to social work. As one social worker quipped, case work was "sterile" before the introduction of Freudian theories and "fertile" after his theories were woven into standard methodologies.⁴⁵ Social workers were convinced by 1930 that thorough understanding of a client's emotions and mental functions were essential to offering effective casework that could treat social maladaptation.

Many of the behaviors that were previously not understood to be psychiatric in nature, such as the mother profiled in the previous chapter who was waiting for a type of man the worker unequivocally deemed to be out of her reach, began to be recast as indicative of psychiatric turmoil. Ideas that were considered to be delusional in nature, either regarding the mother's own worth, the type of man who was interested in her, or a woman's maternal capacities, were commonly noted in case histories and research studies.

⁴⁵ Ethel L. Ginsburg, "Freud's Contribution to the Philosophy and Practice of Social Work," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* X (1940): 877.

Unhappy parental relationships and poor home conditions, two of the markers used in demographic analyses of unwed motherhood, were thought to be the genesis of delusional tendencies. As social work researcher Ruth Brenner noted, the unwed mother was often found to be “a lonely girl with no friends, cut off from her family, a household drudge, and naively expectant that men would be kinder and more loving to her than the unloving women in her life.” Psychiatric studies continued to reference broken homes, “low cultural standards,” and poor emotional adjustment within families as crucial pieces of information for adequately diagnosing unwed mothers.⁴⁶ One can clearly see the old standards used in statistical analyses of unwed mothers – home life, relationship with parents, social acumen – being turned on their head and used anew as proxies that would indicate likely psychiatric involvement in illegitimate pregnancies. As one researcher explained it, the socio-cultural factors derived from social diagnoses “may be influential in some cases but are not determining causes of illegitimate pregnancy...the social-environmental factors are the background and a part of the pattern which when put together may lead to unmarried motherhood.”⁴⁷

Brenner argued that the main culprit in dysfunctional parent-child relationships was the mothers, whose tendency to deprive their daughters of love and understanding resulted in love triangles between fathers, mothers, and daughters. Examples of these relationships from the cases under Brenner’s review included Beatrice, whose mother was described as “an unhappy person who had no affection or tenderness for her husband

⁴⁶ Brenner, p. 214.

⁴⁷ Miriam Powell, *Illegitimate Pregnancy in Emotionally Disturbed Girls: A Dissertation Based Upon an Investigation at the Jewish Board of Guardians, New York* (Master’s Thesis, Smith College, 1948): 28.

and regarded the infant Beatrice as ‘the homeliest creature she ever saw.’” Beatrice’s mother would often wonder aloud that she “didn’t know if she could ever love” Beatrice due to her appearance. Brenner also found much significance in the drawings of another unwed mother “who expressed herself with more ease...with drawing.” The woman painted a picture of “a woman hanging out baby clothes in her yard, but a woman bold and hard of feature, with massive, cruel arms and claw-like fingers – the very opposite of the truly feminine, compassionate, humane woman we think of as maternal.”

The fathers in these families of origin were understood to be oblivious to the family dynamics, making them unavailable to supply the necessary love and forcing their daughters to seek love “by turning to some other man for the affection [they] needed but which [they] could not permit [themselves] to take from [their] father.”⁴⁸ Brenner argued that due to the dull, love-starved home environment the typical unwed mother had been raised in, their perception of what romantic love should be was based on idealized parental love, an “all-giving, expectant of no returns kind of love” that was “a far cry from the mature give and take of mutual response to one another’s needs which is part of the love between an adult man and woman.”

The unrealistic expectations of romantic love harbored by unwed mothers made the slightest male attention akin to a marriage proposal. The study rather snidely noted that the unwed mother was “so absorbed and drugged by her own dreams and illusions that even before [a man] makes the first friendly gesture...he has already given her a home and a baby in her fancies.” This false sense of commitment and overinflated perception of a deep relationship meant that an unwed mother was more likely to

⁴⁸ Brenner, p. 217.

acquiesce to inappropriate sexual overtures immediately upon making a man's acquaintance because her romantic delusions had lulled her "normal self-protective instincts to sleep," implying that the woman's psychiatric problems directly led to her pregnancy.⁴⁹

While situations like the ones described by Brenner were sometimes classified as delusional tendencies, unwed mothers with similar symptoms were often diagnosed with Oedipal complexes instead. Perhaps one of Freud's better known theories, the Oedipal complex as expressed in women was rooted in mother-love as it was for males. However, because women do not possess a penis and could therefore not possess their mothers, women were thought to develop penis envy and redirect their sexual desires to their fathers. The eventual birth of a child fulfills the woman's penis envy and was construed as a symbolic psychosexual possession of the father.⁵⁰

The definitive study on Oedipal complexes in unwed mothers was presented by psychiatrist Dr. J.S. Kasanin in 1940 and was based on his experiences with unwed mothers at the Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago. The star of his study, for lack of a better word, was the young woman who prompted his exploration of the expression of the complex within illegitimacy. The woman had her first baby at the age of twenty and a second illegitimate child a mere sixteen months later. She attracted Kasanin's attention because she did not seem to fit the mold of the by then stereotypically delinquent unwed

⁴⁹ Ruth F. Brenner, "Case Work Service for Unmarried Mothers, Part Two," *The Family* 22 (December 1941): 269-271.

⁵⁰ For histories of Freud, see Peter D. Kramer, *Freud: Inventor of the Modern Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009); Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998); and Kurt Jacobsen, *Freud's Foes: Psychoanalysis, Science, and Resistance* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

mother. She was described as “a pleasant, friendly intelligent girl who cooperated well...a high type, not the kind to be promiscuous...refined, very much a lady.”⁵¹

During interviews with the hospital’s psychiatric staff, the woman explained that she rarely dated and had only a “vague” idea of who the fathers of her children were. She claimed to derive no pleasure from her sexual experiences and repeatedly asked that her father not be informed of what had happened. Her mother died when she was young and the woman had spent much of her adolescent years caring for her four siblings. Because the woman lacked the typical demographic factors associated with illegitimacy, the psychiatric staff argued that a new factor must be responsible for her condition. They ultimately concluded that the woman’s lovers were “phantom fathers through which she could act out her unresolved Oedipal desires.” They speculated that the woman had symbolically taken her mother’s place even before her death and the illegitimate pregnancies were an expression of “the unconscious [Oedipal] desire which was constantly within her.”⁵² The realization that the staff had explained the atypical presentation of this unwed mother prompted Kasanin to undertake a large-scale study of the psychiatric state of the population of unwed mothers at the hospital in an effort to determine the prevalence of Oedipal desires in select cases of illegitimate pregnancies.

Participants in the study were carefully screened. The mothers could not be feeble-minded or of borderline intelligence. They could not present symptoms of psychosis or derive from disorganized social or economic situations. All the women selected for the study were white and were not involved with the father of the child on a

⁵¹ J. Kasanin and Sieglinde Handschin, “Psychodynamic Factors in Illegitimacy,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 11 (1941): 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 67

long-term basis. By limiting the study population in this manner, Kasanin believed that he excluded cases where mental defect, ignorance, and social or economic pathology could be named as primary contributing causes to the pregnancies. The selection of cases was intended to isolate girls who possessed “a peculiar personal equation,” girls for whom “there seemed to be no outer reality reasons to account for their behavior.”⁵³

The study thus emphasized data collection related to hidden areas of the subconscious and focused on the unwed mothers’ attitudes toward their pregnancies and children, the fathers of the children, the mothers’ sexual adjustment and emotional attitudes, and their relationships with parents and siblings. Notice that the “hidden” areas selected for analysis incorporated many of the same topical areas originally used in social diagnosis, with the key difference being that the participants’ responses were understood in terms of psychoanalytic instead of social work theory.

Kasanin concluded that the Oedipal mothers possessed a range of abnormal psychiatric traits, but none of them could be appropriately described as “either immoral or amoral socially” due to the relatively low number of reported sexual partners. Instead, the study group was united by their “bland, unemotional” reaction to their pregnancies. They presented as calm and self-assured women who placidly accepted their condition; 62 percent of the women showed no emotional turmoil as a result of their pregnancies. In fact, some of the women were thought to exhibit a greater degree of emotional stability than they possessed prior to their pregnancies. Seventy-five percent of the participants were noted to completely lack any conscious recognition of guilt, which led Kasanin to

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

postulate that the women may be dissociating themselves from their actions in the manner in which they had to suppress their Oedipal desires from their conscious mind.

The unwed mothers' familial relationships were universally strained. Nearly seventy percent of the study participants were so conflicted as to the feelings they held for their fathers the only emotional attachment they had formed with them was detached ambivalence. Thirty percent of the mothers had not seen their fathers since infancy or early childhood and struggled with a desire to know their fathers, possibly as a reaction to (or rejection of) their mothers, whom the girls found to be "lacking in essential character." The preference for the male over the female carried through to sibling relationships as well. Of the unwed mothers who had siblings, they were "overwhelmingly hostile and jealous" of their sisters, but tended to be "protective and proud" of their brothers.⁵⁴

All of the women shared the "phantom father" phenomenon noted in the original case. The women's attitudes to the fathers defied all of the expected "normal" reactions. Eighty-eight percent of the women said "without question" that they did not wish to marry the fathers of their children and rejected all offers of marriage. An unspecified percentage of this group ceased all communication with the fathers once they discovered their condition, ostensibly because the phantom fathers had fulfilled their purpose. All of the relationships with the fathers were brief. The women knew very little about the men's lives and exhibited no desire to learn anything about them. The personal details were irrelevant to them. As Kasanin noted,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73-80.

They said over and over again in both words and actions that the men were of little to no importance, they did not want or need them, and the child would not miss them either. They showed a feeling of 'I am able to do it alone.' They said such things as 'he is weak,' 'a drunkard,' 'he is inferior to me,' etc.

In line with this, the girls showed as little hostile feeling toward them as they did positive feeling... This bland acceptance of the fact of pregnancy without in any way blaming the man in question seems almost to say that the girl wants the pregnancy to be all hers, thus giving the man neither credit nor blame.⁵⁵

The major concluding points of Kasanin's study can be summarized compactly.

As a group, the unwed mothers showed an extreme disinterest in their pregnancies, expressed no desire to marry the fathers of their children, and claimed to remember little about the fathers or the circumstances of their acquaintance. At the same time, the girls were not known to be promiscuous, expressed little interest in sex, and were generally frigid in demeanor. On the basis of this data Kasanin concluded that the pregnancies were the result of the mothers' expressing their Oedipal desires.⁵⁶

Kasanin's reasoning, however, was overly generalized at best and the methodology of his conclusions warrant a brief discussion, as most studies of unwed mothers followed a similar path. Kasanin's study was predicated on the belief that the mothers were afflicted by an Oedipal desire and his research was conditioned by this assumption. Data was manipulated in order to lend credence to his hypothesis. For example, Kasanin argued that the mothers as a group were "frigid in sex relations," but the specific data showed that only half the mothers were "frigid or derived very little

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵⁶ For an excellent summary of Kasanin's conclusions, see Lillian Ripple, *Social Work Studies of Unmarried Parents as Affected by Contemporary Treatment Formulations, 1920-1940* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1953): 142-151.

sexual pleasure.” Nearly one-third of the mothers did not comment on their feelings of sexual pleasure, but this group was cast together with the frigid group in order to create the stated majority.⁵⁷

Manipulations of this sort abound in Kasanin’s study (and in most of the psychiatric studies from this period) and represent an inherent research bias. Kasanin essentially questioned whether illegitimacy *could* be explained by unresolved Oedipal desires and not whether illegitimate pregnancy could be the result of other psychological or non-psychological factors. The study did not consider why some girls with similar backgrounds failed to become unwed mothers. Rather, Kasanin presented his findings in a standard “if-then” format that disavowed other potentially contributing factors in order to give primacy to a diagnosis of psychiatric imbalance; Kasanin’s conclusions were restatements of the basic psychiatric profile he had expected to find at the outset of his study.

In general in psychiatric studies from this period hypotheses rarely evolved to reflect the gathered data. The acceptance of these flawed, over-simplified studies as evidence of unwed mothers’ psychiatric imbalance set a low bar for the definition of abnormality. The lack of rigor displayed in psychiatric studies meant that *any* psychiatric diagnosis theoretically could be applied to unwed mothers equally well. They were constructed as individuals who were defined not by the positive presence of abnormality but by the relative lack of normality. The variable was merely naming the abnormality present in individual cases.

⁵⁷ Kasanin, p. 71-72.

Turning back to a more specific consideration of abnormalities assigned to unwed mothers, it is worthwhile to note that the line between delusional tendencies and Oedipal complexes was strikingly blurred during the 1930s, with the key difference between the two conditions seemingly dependent upon who diagnosed the mother. Some aspects of the case histories recounted by Brenner were clearly delusional in nature. Margaret, for example, described her baby's father as "tall, blond, and good-looking, with blue eyes," but when the case worker later met him he was "of only medium height, was decidedly bald, and had brown eyes." Brenner argued that most unwed mothers would exhibit some fantasy symptoms of either the fathers or their relationship with them. The women allegedly saw and felt whatever they desired, regardless of the reality of the situation.

Unwed mothers who manifested fantasy symptoms tended to stray into Oedipal territory, but were rarely diagnosed with the disorder unless interviewed by a psychiatrist. Brenner noted several additional elements common to delusional mothers that would have been familiar to Kasanin. She found that the women had a low number of sexual partners; many of the women claimed to be virgins prior to their pregnancy, but most did not express any feelings of tenderness toward the fathers, nor was there any indication that the relationships would have eventually progressed toward marriage.

The mothers moreover claimed not to have derived any pleasure from the sexual act, an admission that removed mothers from the delinquent category and into the mentally abnormal classification almost immediately. Also, like Kasanin's description of the phantom fathers, Brenner argued that for delusional women the relationship with the

fathers of their children was “dream like” and represented “an expression of some hidden need” on the part of the unwed mother.⁵⁸

The chief difference between lay social work analyses of delusional unwed mothers and Kasanin’s psychiatric analysis of Oedipal unwed mothers was the source of the hidden need – love that was specifically paternal in nature or a more generalized need to feel loved by anyone. Both types of analyses, however, determined that unwed mothers who did not express a need or desire to be taken care of by the father of their children, women who did not do the expected and cry themselves to sleep at night over the thought of a great lost love, were psychologically imbalanced and had never formed a true connection with the men (and were therefore also unlikely to connect with their babies). Unwed mothers who displayed a streak of independence when confronting an unplanned pregnancy were interpreted to be lost in an advanced state of detachment from reality.

The opinion that some unwed mothers struggled to come to terms with reality was reinforced by social workers’ experiences with mothers adjusting to the demands of motherhood. Like the mothers deemed delusional because of how they viewed the fathers of their children and their relationship with them, unwed mothers were also frequently cast as delusional, or at least unstable, when their attempts at creating a home for their children deviated from the course social workers advised.

Helen, for example, came in contact with the Children’s Aid Society in January 1934 when her baby was a few weeks old. She had previously been an art teacher, but she lost her job once the school discovered her pregnancy. Although Helen had found another

⁵⁸ Brenner, p. 270-271.

job, she could not afford to keep her baby with her. The worker offered suggestions for appropriate arrangements, but Helen rejected them all and walked out.

She came back two months later and explained that she had found a new job as director of art projects at a local museum. Helen wanted to board her baby until the fall, when she planned to rent “a house in the suburbs at \$25 or \$30 month rent and having a maid to take care of the baby for \$25.” The case worker questioned the plan and remarked that it would take “a rather large income” to support such a plan, but Helen quickly replied that she could manage it. The worker recorded in the case file that it seemed to her that Helen “was not really facing the situation and that consequently it was difficult to tell if she were sincere in her statement that she wanted to have the baby.”

The Society contacted the hospital where Helen had given birth and enquired whether the social work department remembered her case, which they did. The hospital told Helen’s case worker that while Helen was confined she was deemed “antisocial and unstable and [that Helen] should not be allowed to keep her baby because of her incapacity to offer the baby proper care.” The doctor and psychiatrist who tended to Helen during her confinement both thought adoption was the most suitable option.

Helen’s case worker had similar questions about Helen’s ability to raise her child, given her apparent inability to formulate a realistic plan for the future. At their next meeting, to the worker’s chagrin, Helen repeated her plan to rent a house in the suburbs despite the presumed financial impossibility. Showing some degree of empathy, the case worker noted in the record that she was hesitant to suggest adoption since Helen refused

to contact the father of her baby, making the baby her “only emotional tie.” Helen later placed the baby in foster care as a compromise in lieu of adoption.⁵⁹

Brenner would have understood Helen’s erratic behavior as an expression of her relationship with her mother. The problems unwed mothers were thought to have experienced with their mothers on an almost universal basis supposedly made them suspicious of all women in their lives and prevented them from forming appropriate relationships with their babies and their caseworkers. Unwed mothers felt “deprived” of the emotions they valued – “love, friendliness, opportunities to develop [their] talents” – and saw all women “as malevolent, grasping creatures, really birds of prey” who would rob them of the sole possession they desired, namely their baby.⁶⁰ The irony of this statement, the fact that most social workers did indeed try to separate mothers with supposed psychiatric instabilities from their babies, did not register with Brenner.

Studies of unwed mothers’ relationships with their parents eventually progressed from the “one parent is to blame” dichotomy to studies that more evenly distributed fault amongst both parents. Whereas Brenner’s study prioritized poor maternal relationships and Kasanin’s Oedipal study prioritized paternal relationships, later studies of parental relationships did not place primacy of fault on one parent over another. The later hypotheses regarding parental momentum toward illegitimacy simplified the gendered component and regressed back to an earlier standard which claimed that the unwed mother’s relationship with one or both parents was troubled and that a general lack of love was to blame for the resultant pregnancies. Unwed mothers were generally thought

⁵⁹ Smith, p. 5-11.

⁶⁰ Brenner, p. 218.

to have been rejected by their parents, indicating that “they must have received very little love and had to struggle for the little they got.” Illegitimate pregnancies thus occurred as a result of mentally unbalanced girls “seeking love.”⁶¹

A prime example of this type of study was conducted by social worker Leontine Young in 1945. Her analysis of one hundred unwed mothers between the ages of eighteen and forty years old revealed that almost all of the mothers had grown up in one of three types of families: homes where the mother was the dominant personality, homes where the father was the dominant personality, or homes that could be classified as broken.

Thirty-six percent of the unwed mothers came from a home where the mother was the dominant personality. The mothers “dominated [their] daughters’ lives to an unhealthy degree” and were usually “possessive and often rejecting and sadistic.” The fathers in this pattern were often meek in character and presented “all too often as a stranger, the man who paid the bills but was not allowed or did not attempt to share intimately in the lives and feelings of his children.” The unwed mothers did not resent their fathers for their lack of involvement, but instead idealized them and saw them in “vague shadowy terms” so that “except for brief flashes, their fathers never seemed real at all.”⁶²

Young theorized that the illegitimate pregnancies resulting from this type of home environment were the result of a love-hate relationship between the daughter and mother. Young wondered in her study, “What better revenge could [the unwed mother] devise

⁶¹ Powell, p. 33.

⁶² Young, p. 298.

against a rejecting mother than to bear an illegitimate child and place the responsibility for him upon the mother's shoulders?"

The fathers of the illegitimate children were often transient figures because the alleged motivation for the pregnancy was revenge. Half of the unwed mothers classified in this category claimed to have become pregnant after a one-night stand; one-quarter had known the father for a brief period of time, such as summer vacation, and the remaining mothers had known the fathers for a period of greater than three months and less than a year. Young did not believe that any of the mothers had a happy relationship with the fathers of their children and noted that it was rare for this group to speak of the fathers "as an individual [or] as a person who had any meaning" to them. The fathers were merely a means to end.

Because unwed mothers in this group were thought to use their pregnancies as a weapon against their mothers, their attachment to their children was thought to be scant at best. One mother from this group, "who was highly antagonistic toward her mother," spent months at a maternity shelter, trying to convince her mother to accept the baby. The maternity home eventually forced the mother to leave and she was forced to place the baby for adoption since she had no means to support it. Rather than viewing this incident as a possible reflection of the paucity of options for unwed mothers who lacked familial support, Young remarked that the mother "did not show any great conflict" about the need to place her baby for adoption because "the conflict did not lie primarily in this area at all." Like the father of the baby, Young understood the baby to be another pawn in the war between mother and daughter.

A smaller number of unwed mothers were thought to come from homes where the father was the dominant personality. Predictably, the personality traits of the parents were reversed in this scenario. The fathers were cast as stern disciplinarians who had no understanding of their daughters' needs and were often abusive. The mothers were ineffectual characters who had no inclination to stop the abuse, rarely tried to oppose their husbands' authority, and were emotionally distant. The result was that the unwed mothers in this group did not have a relationship with either parent. The illegitimate pregnancies in this group were not motivated by revenge, however. Young believed they were either attempting to flee their fathers by selecting men who were opposite to them, or selecting men who were similarly unavailable in an attempt to recreate their masochistic relationship.

As evidence of this, Young pointed to Jane's case history. Jane had a tyrannical father and dated a boy whom her father had forbidden her to see. The boy was "callous of her feelings and abusive toward her." He did not try to help her when she became pregnant. There was another boy who was also interested in Jane. He was kind and quiet; he came to visit her in the maternity home and offered to marry her. Jane denied his request because he was "too good" to her; she was in love with the boy whose personality more closely resembled her father.⁶³

Although Young's study recognized that the unwed mothers were shaped by forces beyond their control, blame still rested with the unwed mother. She was either a vindictive child who used those around her to seek revenge, or she was a careless woman who associated pain and male ambivalence with love. Both scenarios were recipes for

⁶³ Young, p. 295-299.

disaster from a custodial standpoint. Young argued that “all of these girls had fundamental problems in their relationships with other people” and that “none of these violent neurotic conflicts are helpful ingredients in creating a good mother.” Young approvingly noted that with guidance from their case workers, sixty-six percent of the mothers profiled in the study had placed their babies for adoption because “these girls must have recognized unconsciously that the baby was not the solution sought nor could ever be the answer to their torturing needs” for parental love.⁶⁴ Young explicitly articulated a link between recognized psychiatric disorder and preferred custodial outcomes that would permeate the justifications of social workers in the latter portion of the interwar period, an occurrence that will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

A final diagnosis applied to unwed mothers worthy of exploration was psychopathy, which was perhaps the most common diagnosis assigned to unwed mothers. As historian Elizabeth Lunbeck has explained, the psychopathy diagnosis originated in tandem with the social recognition of the delinquent, sexually liberated female in the opening decades of the twentieth century. The original population of so-called psychopaths was typically working class girls in urban areas who were judged to be hypersexual due to the more casual nature in which they approached sexual encounters compared to the idealized middle-class adolescent who was thought to avoid premarital

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

relations. The sexual freedom exhibited by these girls “was the most visible and disturbing manifestation of [their] social autonomy.”⁶⁵

Unlike delinquent girls whose sexual experimentation could be explained by a low IQ score and a subsequent diagnosis of feeble-mindedness, psychopathic girls tended to score well on IQ exams, much like Kasanin’s Oedipal population. Lunbeck’s analysis of case records from the Pennsylvania State Industrial School showed that psychiatrists could find “nothing remarkable” during mental examinations and typically described the girls as displaying “good-natured, pleasant, and essentially normal dispositions.”⁶⁶ But new psycho-social theories dictated that “if immoral women were too intelligent to be feeble-minded, they were still too defective to be normal.”⁶⁷ The psychopathic diagnosis was another attempt at medicalizing immorality, and it was assigned as a marker of moral misconduct more than a veritable diagnosis of mental disorder. Psychopathy, like many other diagnoses assigned to unwed mothers, was the modern equivalent of a scarlet letter.

Psychologist Ann Bingham defined psychopathy in 1923 as a condition in which an individual displayed “marked emotional instability, difficulty in dealing with new situations, and the tendency to blur situations rather than to deal with them head-on.”⁶⁸ Like the feeble-minded diagnosis, the psychopathic diagnosis implied that the deviant

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Lunbeck, “A New Generation of Women: Progressive Psychiatrists and the Hypersexual Female,” *Feminist Studies* 13 (Autumn 1987): 521.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 526-528.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 524.

⁶⁸ Cited in A.M. Knupfer, “To Become Good, Self-Supporting Women”: The State Industrial School for Delinquent Girls at Geneva, Illinois, 1900-1935,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (October 2000): 425.

sexual behavior was unconscious misconduct, an “inherent pathological condition that could be managed only through the implementation of external social controls.”⁶⁹

Psychopathy was particularly well-suited to reformatory populations. Dr. Esther Stone began to specialize in her study of psychopathic delinquents during her tenure as staff psychologist at a reformatory in Geneva, Illinois from 1914 to 1916. She would later describe the classic psychopathic delinquent as a girl who was “either exuberantly happy, furiously angry, or wildly sad, easily moved to tears or joy.” These traits were often masked by a psychopath’s ability to function normally within a community setting, as they “possess[ed] just enough mentality and superficial education and ability” to blend in, meaning their inevitable shenanigans would “be a continued source of annoyance to themselves and the community.” Stone advocated that the best response to psychopathic delinquents was not to focus on reform through education and individual psychiatric guidance, but rather to focus on containing the girls’ “aggression and rebellion.”^{70 71}

Elizabeth Lunbeck and Estelle Freedman have argued that the psychopathic diagnosis for sex delinquents receded by the 1920s due to the embrace of the sexual revolution by the middle class. Freedman notes that the sexual delinquent was replaced in psychiatric literature by new sexual psychopaths who were homosexuals and individuals

⁶⁹ Deluzio, p. 135-138.

⁷⁰ Knupfer, p. 425-432; Ruth Alexander, p. 88-92; Esther Stone, “A Plea for Early Commitment to Correctional Institutions of Delinquent Children, and an Endorsement of Industrial and Vocational Training in these Institutions,” *Institution Quarterly* (March 1918): 62.

⁷¹ For a similar study on psychopathic women in a reformatory environment, readers should consult Edith R. Spaulding’s study of women confined at the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills. See *An Experimental Study of Psychopathic Delinquent Women* (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1923).

with more deviant desires, such as sex offenders.⁷² This characterization may be true in a broad sense, but the life of the psychopathic diagnosis in cases of illegitimacy extended throughout the interwar period and arguably increased in the 1930s as psychiatric theory was more fully implemented into casework methodology.

The diagnoses of psychopathy within the unwed mother population were often textbook in presentation. Margaret, for example, was diagnosed with “constitutional psychopathic inferiority with paranoid tendencies” after her social diagnosis revealed disturbing patterns in her history. She was impregnated by a chance acquaintance working as a janitor in her neighborhood when she was a teenager. After being placed into foster care due to a poor family background, social workers discovered through subsequent interviews that she had run away from home as a young girl, been married and divorced, had three abortions before the age of twenty-one, served time in a state reformatory, and was a former drug addict.⁷³

A close analysis of the use of the psychopathic diagnosis, however, reveals that its use was much more indiscriminate than previous work indicates. Much like feeble-mindedness prior to Goddard, psychopathy functioned as a catch-all diagnosis that was applied to unwed mothers whose failure to conform to social workers’ expectations of their behaviors and attitudes could not be explained without the presence of a psychiatric disorder. Indeed, the psychopathic diagnosis had a long tradition of being

⁷² Estelle B. Freedman, “Uncontrolled Desires: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath,” *Journal of American History* 74 (July 1987): 83-106 and Lunbeck, p. 537.

⁷³ Monica K. Doyle, *Descriptive Analysis of 415 Cases of Illegitimacy* (Master’s Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1928): 23.

“exploited [in] its indeterminacy” by setting “its parameters broadly, branding all purported psychopaths with the qualities displayed by the worst.”⁷⁴

In some instances, the psychopathic diagnosis medicalized vague notions of hereditary defectiveness garnered from social diagnosis. Consider’s Holly’s case history. She was raised by her grandparents in an unhappy environment. Her case file noted that her grandmother “was a mental case and should have been committed,” but Holly’s grandfather refused to authorize the commitment. When he was later murdered, Holly publicly accused her grandmother before having “a nervous breakdown.” The results of the murder investigation were not included in the case summary. Holly was placed in the care of the state after her grandfather’s death.

Her caseworker noted that she felt she could “only rarely...penetrate the real girl.” Holly attempted to manipulate those around her by gaining their sympathy, which a useful tool to offset complaints about her “objectionable behavior” and “susceptibility to men.” The caseworker was unsurprised when Holly became illegitimately pregnant. She eventually had two children out of wedlock and attempted to support them by working a series of low paying jobs in hospitals or laundries. It was a struggle to care for two children on her own and she frequently contemplated adoption.

Holly decided that her children were “suffering from continued changes in boarding homes and that it was best to give the younger a chance, and try to offer something better to the older herself.” Her case history rather disapprovingly notes that Holly “showed no conflict in giving the younger child away.” Holly’s disinterest in her child was the primary symptom used to defend a psychopathic diagnosis a short time

⁷⁴ Lunbeck, p. 67.

later,⁷⁵ an extreme irony given the tendency of social workers to classify women who refused to place their children for adoption against social work recommendations as exhibiting symptoms of mental imbalance. Evidence of psychopathic disorder was in many ways based on nothing more than the extent to which unwed mothers heeded the advice of their caseworkers. Defiance of social conventions and expert advice was therefore the primary marker of abnormality.

Holly's case straddled two extremes of possible causation of mental imbalance that attracted much social work interest in the 1930s. Three possible scenarios garnered the most attention, namely whether an inherited mental abnormality motivated the actions that led to the illegitimate pregnancy, whether an inherited latent mental abnormality was expressed as a result of the pregnancy, or whether the stress associated with the illegitimate pregnancy could actually cause a psychiatric condition to develop. None of the studies that attempted to answer these questions could ever do so in a satisfactory fashion, allowing social workers to point to multiple pathways of causation for assigned psychiatric diagnoses and arguably thereby expanding the percentage of mothers who could be classified as mentally unstable.

A prime example of an effort to answer the question of psychiatric causation was published in 1933 by social worker Frances Curnick.⁷⁶ She studied ten women between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-six-years old who were admitted to the Worcester

⁷⁵ Winifred Hyslop, *An Analysis of the Factors, with Emphasis on the Psychological, that Influence the Unmarried Mother to Give Up Her Child for Adoption* (Master's Thesis, Columbia University, 1939): 23.

⁷⁶ For a similar study, see Betty Hutchinson, *Unmarried Mothers as Patients in a Psychiatric Clinic: A Dissertation Based Upon an Investigation at the Central Clinic, Cincinnati, Ohio* (Master's Thesis, Smith College, 1948).

State Hospital with a psychotic diagnosis. Curnick attempted to determine whether the emotional strain of illegitimate pregnancy was to blame for their “mental breakdown.” The majority of women had never been pregnant out of wedlock before and a similar percentage had no familial history of mental health problems.⁷⁷

Curnick began her study with a brief consideration of each girl’s case history, an approach common to most research studies of the period. Hattie’s history is representative of the type of material selected for its assumed importance for deciphering historical and current psychiatric states of unwed mothers. Hattie’s family had no history of mental disease, although Hattie had a “negative” developmental history. She was still in the third grade at the age of thirteen, the other children at her school called her a “dummy,” and her parents “could not understand her stupidity and scolded and punished her for her poor school work.”

Hattie did not show any interest in men until she was twenty-two years old. She suddenly began staying away from home at night and eventually disappeared for fourteen months. Police found her living with several men in a cottage, but Hattie defiantly said that she was “over twenty-one and would do as she pleased.” Her father insisted she return home nevertheless. Hattie’s behavior declined rapidly. Her family said she “thought only of men and talked of them continuously.” At Christmas 1931, she “became incoherent and would stop and glance about the room as if she heard something.” A few days later she became violent, tried to fight her family members, and began to break

⁷⁷ Frances Curnick, *Psychogenic Factors in the Psychoses of Unmarried Mothers: A Dissertation Based Upon an Investigation at the Worcester State Hospital* (Master’s Thesis, Smith College, 1933): 4-10.

furniture. She was taken to the state hospital where it was discovered that she was pregnant.

Hattie insisted that “she never had anything to do with a man even though she was pregnant.” After she gave birth in the summer of 1932, Hattie claimed she had never had a baby and refused to discuss the situation with social workers. Although she gradually accepted the fact that she had indeed given birth to a baby, “she never seemed to realize the social implications of her pregnancy.” Staff psychiatrists ascribed Hattie’s abrupt change in behavior as “compensatory behavior for her inherent inferiority and inadaptability and for her insecurity in her home environment.”⁷⁸

Curnick ultimately concluded that insecurity, which was “the only factor found in every single case,” and instability of personality that manifested itself in emotional extremes of violent tempers, conceit, inferiority complexes, and marked sensitivity were the primary causes of the mothers’ psychoses. Curnick wrote that,

These ten girls with psychoses associated with illegitimate pregnancies broke down not primarily because of the physical strain of childbearing nor because of the emotional burden of social disgrace. Poor inheritance, repressive discipline in the home and comparisons to more successful siblings seemed of primary import, the illegitimate pregnancy serving as the final factor in the breakdown.⁷⁹

Curnick argued that the unwed mothers were mentally imbalanced prior to their pregnancy and that “practically every girl in the group would have broken under any severe strain.” Illegitimate pregnancy was a particularly severe strain that many of the mothers failed to recover from. Forty percent of the mothers (four girls) in the study

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10-12.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41-42.

eventually went on to make a full recovery, but the remaining sixty percent (six mothers) experienced significant long-term psychiatric upset. Curnick described their conditions at the end of her study with brief descriptors such as, “Patient has never been able to leave the hospital since her entrance,” or “Patient became progressively worse and has not been able to leave the hospital.”⁸⁰ Attempts to study the long-term rehabilitation of unwed mothers who were diagnosed with psychiatric conditions, like Curnick’s study, were damaging for an unwed mothers’ custodial prospects due to the frequency with which studies concluded the conditions were chronic in nature.

The iteration of the chronicity of unwed mothers’ mental imbalances likely spurred the reinvestigation of previous questions of interest, especially inquiries into the causes of recidivism. Curnick’s study, for example, gave considerable attention to one patient who was allowed to leave the hospital for a brief visit with family, became pregnant again, and “again became psychotic.” The concern about the chronicity of psychiatric conditions made questions about whether unwed mothers’ could be “cured” and potentially fulfill their maternal obligation to their children increasingly important by the end of the interwar period.

A 1943 study conducted by social worker Ruth Riaboy examined a group of mothers who were not deemed feeble-minded or mentally abnormal during their first pregnancy, but who later re-registered with the same social agency with a second pregnancy between 1935 and 1942. Using a methodology that varied little from the recidivist studies of a decade earlier, Riaboy hoped to identify a set of factors that could

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, non-numbered appendix section of thesis labeled “Table II.”

be used to predict recidivism by comparing characteristics of the recidivist group with mothers who had yet to repeat premarital pregnancy.

Riaboy began her study by comparing age, IQ scores, occupations, home composition, and environment. She found no significant differences between the control group and the recidivist group, prompting her to prioritize “general personality structure” as the key difference. Riaboy concluded by positing that perhaps recidivist mothers possessed “emotional conflicts” that were “too deep seated to be within the province of social case work treatment,” or alternatively perhaps social workers were not yet “fully aware of all the psychodynamic factors involved not only in the recidivism of unmarried mothers, but in the problem of illegitimate pregnancy.”⁸¹ Riaboy’s conclusion was, therefore, not that this group of mothers was mentally stable, but rather that these mothers possessed a condition that had yet to be defined, creating another type of “silent menace” that could be associated with illegitimacy.

Riaboy’s conclusions represent a crucial development for the pathologization of unwed motherhood. Even when a psychiatric condition could not be identified within a group of unwed mothers, by the end of the interwar period psychiatric imbalance was nevertheless assumed. The act of becoming pregnant outside of marriage was in and of itself sufficient evidence of mental imbalance, a key conclusion that was necessary for the prominence of the belief that all unwed mothers were inherently flawed individuals who could never hope to be “good” mothers. Other studies of recidivist mothers added credence to Riaboy’s conclusions by noting that the mothers were not “slipping back”

⁸¹ Ruth Riaboy, *Prediction of Recidivism among Unmarried Mothers: A Dissertation Based Upon an Investigation at the Jewish Board of Guardians, New York* (Master’s Thesis, Smith College, 1943): 3-9.

into bad habits, but were rather cases with whom agency had never felt they had been successful with; there had been no reversal of maladjusted behavior despite “intensive psychiatric counseling.” Some unwed mothers were too deviant to be “cured.”⁸²

Conclusion

The psychiatric studies discussed in this chapter seemed to indicate by the end of the interwar period that a woman’s premarital pregnancy was in and of itself indicative of mental imbalance and/or intellectual deficiency, a belief that, would lead social workers to discourage maternal custody for fear of the mother’s effect on her child’s development and future happiness. There were two primary methods of testing for mental abnormality – the IQ test and psychoanalysis. Both techniques were popular because they seemed to offer incontrovertible, scientific evidence of abnormality that medicalized illegitimate pregnancy and transformed it from a primarily sociological problem to a bona fide individual illness.

This altered the dialogue about unwed mothers and effectively obliterated the Progressive era notion of the innocent girl who was lured into sexual promiscuity by promises of marriage and future happiness. In her place, the psychiatric reconceptualization of unwed motherhood created a mentally unstable woman who was driven by unconscious desires to purposely become pregnant out of wedlock. There was little acknowledgment of girlish notions of love and romance retained in this new narrative of unwed motherhood; if anything, the narrative emphasized the lack of romantic involvement between the unwed mother and the putative father and recast the

⁸²Powell, p. 40-42.

man as the victim of the woman's sexual machinations. The unwed mother was a woman to be feared and contained.

The psychiatric transformation of the unwed mother minimized the importance of other causative theories like poor environment or heredity. Psychiatric abnormalities could have been created or fueled by these variables, but the action of becoming illegitimately pregnant was in response to the psychiatric disease itself. In this sense, psychiatry expanded the definition of the unfit unwed mother by prioritizing the state of illegitimate pregnancy over all other considerations. "Good" girls from good families who became premaritally pregnant were equally diseased as girls from working class backgrounds with poor familial structures. The pregnancy was a symptom of a shared disease.

The removal of the victim paradigm from the construction of the unwed mother ironically made her more of a victim in her interactions with social workers. The belief that unwed mothers were diseased, psychiatrically damaged individuals amplified the pre-existing moral disapproval of unwed pregnancy that social workers had previously been able to disregard by framing the unwed mother as a victim of circumstances beyond her control. The psychiatric frame of unwed motherhood made the mother herself the perpetrator and the illegitimate child the only true victim, solidifying a shift that first began with the reconceptualization of illegitimacy as a child welfare issue in the late Progressive era. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the casework emphasis of social workers thus accordingly shifted to protecting illegitimate children from the diseased influences of their biological mothers.

Chapter Six

Measuring Illegitimacy's Stigma

Minerva came to the attention of child welfare experts at the age of five years old, shortly after her father deserted her mother. Minerva's parents eloped at a young age, likely due to an unplanned premarital pregnancy, and her mother's family had "always predicted disastrous consequences." Her development was shaped by her father's disinterest; he regarded Minerva and her younger brother as "inevitable nuisances" and was largely disinterested in his family, desiring instead to engage in "extravagant" behavior with his friends. Minerva internalized her father's rejection and, although she was described as being overly sensitive by nature, had a difficult time expressing any feelings. She would not cry when spanked, for example, but rather went quiet and sat by herself in a corner, "saying nothing and with her face a blank." She was described as being slow to react to friendly advances and unaffectionate. Her mother, quite simply, felt like she could not reach her.¹ Minerva was an enigma.

Her case study was included in a 1927 monograph produced by the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Welfare. The lead authors were child welfare experts who gathered a significant number of cases seen in their research clinic as evidence to encourage "improvements in the methods of handling young children." They stated that no one could read the accumulated cases without understanding that a child was the result of his home situation and, more specifically, of his parents and the stimulation he received from them. Repeating the call of the child guidance movement, the authors

¹ Josephine C. Foster and John E. Anderson, *The Young Child and His Parents: A Study of One Hundred Cases* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1927): 126-127.

argued that the behavioral modification of problem children was dependent upon the modification of parental influences.²

This argument marks the general theme of this chapter, which will consider the multitude of ways illegitimate status and the alleged diseased state of the unwed mother were thought to affect child growth and development. In contrast to previous chapters that were primarily concerned with the construction and evaluation of the pathological unwed mother, the overt emphasis of this chapter is on the child. However, the studies that will be discussed in this chapter are perhaps better understood as an extension or another expression of the studies that were explicitly concerned with the unwed mother.

These studies *assumed* a state of disease or abnormality in the unwed mother. As social worker Mary Brisley explained, the unwed mothers who came to the attention of social agencies were girls and women who had not “developed the essential protective sense which our culture requires for constructive maintenance.” Girls who were capable of taking care of themselves still may have engaged in premarital relations, but they either did not become pregnant, secured an abortion, married, or entered a hospital under a married pseudonym and made their own arrangements. “In other words, they [met] and solve[d] their problem realistically and usually without the help of social agencies.”³

The unwed mother who starred in the illegitimacy studies considered in this chapter was the unwed mother who was incapable, for whatever reason, of solving the problem for herself; making her, if possible, doubly defective: her initial wrongdoing of

² *Ibid.*, p. 5-12.

³ Mary Brisley, “The Unmarried Parent-Child Relationship,” Paper presented at the National Conference on Social Work, Buffalo, New York, 23 June 1939, Child Welfare League of America Records, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota.

becoming illegitimately pregnant was compounded by an incapacity to address the situation in an independent manner. Social workers wondered how these women who could not even resolve their own difficulties could ever hope to become adequate mothers. The studies of illegitimate children attempted to measure the depths of the unwed mothers' successes and failures. The questions researchers asked were attempts to highlight the extent to which an unwed mother's abnormalities affected her child and whether the results were acute or chronic in nature. The studies of illegitimate children also represent a distinctly new approach to social work in the interwar period. Children had previously been considered only in terms of their role in the broader familial unit. Studies concerned with children as unique beings originated in the 1920s and 1930s and considered "the mental health of the child, the maladjusted school child, the delinquent child, the placed-out child," and, of course, the illegitimate child.⁴

This chapter considers the scientific disciplines and social movements that informed the studies of illegitimate children, namely the disciplines of child development and mental hygiene and the child study movement, before moving on to a discussion of several benchmark illegitimacy studies. These studies illustrate how the pathologies associated with unwed motherhood were projected on to the children, but never attached to them. The goal of the studies was not to pathologize their child subjects, but to measure the depths of maternal failings and to examine how maternal abnormality led to childhood abnormality or dysfunction. In this sense, the studies examined in this chapter were interested in understanding whether and in what ways maternal pathologies could be

⁴ Jessie Taft, "Mental Hygiene and Social Work," in *Social Aspects of Mental Hygiene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925): 125-128.

transmitted to children. The insinuation that illegitimate children suffered the ill effects of maternal abnormality, and that these symptoms could be prevented by separation of mother and baby, would justify the nascent policy recommendations for non-maternal custody.

The Scientific Frame of Illegitimacy Studies

Before delving into a discussion of the science that informed studies of illegitimate children, a momentary pause to consider what is meant by the terms “child guidance” and “child development,” as well as the ways the subjects intersected and diverged, is warranted. The term child guidance (also called child study) is used to refer to the academic and social movement of the same name that strove to incorporate psychological principles into understandings of the development and proper parenting of children and adolescents. The scientific child guidance movement emerged during the 1880s; the social movement associated with the discipline is usually traced to circa 1900 and was active throughout the interwar period.

The field of child development arose during the 1920s and can be understood as an umbrella-term used to describe the work of experts in the disciplines of genetics, psychology, medicine, sociology, and social work who were concerned with the physical, emotional, and intellectual maturation of children into adults. The child guidance movement incorporated many of the scientific findings of child development researchers. Both fields relied on parental involvement to popularize their findings, but the child guidance movement was more zealous in its efforts to secure parental support and

adherence to its doctrines. Both fields produced scientific knowledge with the expressed aim of its dissemination to parents and professionals for practical application.

G. Stanley Hall, whose work on normal adolescence was instrumental for identifying juvenile delinquents, was also a pivotal figure in the child guidance and child study movements. Hall received the first Ph.D. in psychology granted in the United States in 1878 from Harvard University; after receiving his degree he followed the tradition of the time and traveled to Europe for additional exposure to and training in philosophy, psychology, and physiology before returning to the United States for academic appointments at The Johns Hopkins University and Clark University.

It was during his tenure at Clark that Hall began to develop the tenets of the child guidance movement. Hall argued in the 1890s that the chief goal of child study was to reconstruct psychology to encompass the study of children and frame their development using an evolutionary biology model. He was reacting against the new “scientific psychology” that originated in 1860s Germany and is currently known as experimental psychology. This laboratory-based psychology was “the product of interaction of evolutionary biology, the empirical psychological tradition within philosophy, and new physiological methods of perception and sensation based on experimental results.”⁵ However, experimental psychology by its very nature was not applicable to children. The field was interested in the contents of an individual’s unconscious mind and its experiments were constructed around people’s observed and reported reactions to touch, sight, sounds, and other sensory inputs. Test subjects had to be capable of articulating

⁵ Alice Boardman Smuts, *Science Discovers the Child, 1893-1935: A History of the Early Scientific Study of Children* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1995): p. 46.

their responses, which meant that animals, abnormal individuals, and children were automatically excluded from participation.⁶ Darwinian evolutionary theory offered Hall a construct in which to study children's development without regard to their ability to express their conscious thoughts, as Darwin had identified the origins of intelligence in plants and earthworms and further argued that the emotional states and cognitive processes of animals and children could be determined by careful observation of their actions.⁷

Hall's psychological considerations of children focused on the study of instincts, feelings, emotions, and unconscious processes. His experimental method was questionnaire-based and relied on lay participation, usually from teachers and principals, to gather data. His questionnaires were focused on a variety of emotional reactions, such as crying, laughing, pity, anger, envy, and jealousy.⁸ Although accurate data on the number of children who were surveyed in this manner does not exist, historians have estimated that Hall's questionnaires were administered to as many as 100,000 children during the decade in order to collect, diffuse, and increase scientific knowledge of childhood that could be generalized in order to articulate normative behavior.⁹

The bedrock of Hall's psychological theories was his formulation of genetic psychology, which, as previously discussed, was based on Ernst Haeckel's recapitulation theory. Simply stated the recapitulation theory argued that ontogeny recapitulates

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50-51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸ Ross, p. 263.

⁹ Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Anna Duncan Johnson, "G. Stanley Hall's Contribution to Science, Practice, and Policy: The Child Study Movement, Parent Education, and Child Welfare Movements," *History of Psychology* 9 (2006): 251-253.

phylogeny, or that individual development captures and repeats the evolutionary development of a species. Hall argued that human behavior was “largely determined by unconscious impulses inherited from distant ancestors.” The various impulses appeared in distinct phases of child development that corresponded to the “feelings and behavior experienced by primitive man during corresponding historical epochs of the primordial past.” Hall believed that studying children would produce greater understanding of phyletic changes while the study of animals, living primitives, and the fossil record would provide insight into the nature of children.¹⁰ He introduced the idea that childhood was not a singular life stage, but a progression of stages that each had their own moral, psychological, and social characteristics that required different environmental stimuli. The publication of Hall’s previously discussed opus *Adolescence*, in 1904 was the culmination of ten years of research into the recapitulation theory and represents the most complete synthesis of his genetic psychology. The purpose of child study according to Hall was “not scientific pedagogy, but the reconstruction of psychology in order to encompass the study of children of all ages.”¹¹

Hall’s theories sparked the establishment of local and state level child study societies, of which at least twenty-three were founded in the 1890s, and led to the development of the Child Study Association of America in 1908, which served as a national clearinghouse for the study and promotion of Hall’s ideas to parents, educators, and child welfare experts across the country. Aside from Hall, child study researchers were predominantly lay individuals without formal scientific training, usually women,

¹⁰ Smuts, p. 64-65; Ross, p. 89-90, 256-306.

¹¹ Quoted in Alice Boardman Smuts, *Science in the Service of Children, 1893-1935* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 36.

many of whom possessed a college education. Child study research occurred in the somewhat constricted environment of individual homes and schools, with scientifically curious mothers busily tracking their children's every move and discussing the rate of their development vis-à-vis other children and Hall's stated norms in informal child study gatherings. The women were reacting in part to the aspects of Hall's research that suggested that psychological capacities like intellect and cognition and psychological conduct like emotions and behavior were biologically determined to some degree. The question remained to what extent?¹² Scientific inquiries into childhood conducted under the broad auspices of child study proceeded "with a refreshed enthusiasm for looking at children, describing their activities in the most excruciating and relentless detail, and envisioning them as a distinct *type* of creature."¹³

The popular social movement of child study coincided somewhat ironically with Hall's fall from favor within the scientific community. Many of his detractors thought that Hall "loved life more than science" and alleged that he "rarely allowed a lack of reputable evidence to prevent his proclamation of ideas that were mere reformulations of familiar philosophical and religious concepts."¹⁴ Moreover, his methodology was the object of much scorn within the scientific community. Hall's contemporaries argued that the children often answered the questionnaires in the manner they believed the interviewers wanted, and that data from thousands of questionnaires administered by

¹² Hamilton Cravens, "The Historical Context of G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence* (1904)," *History of Psychology* 9 (2006): 176-179.

¹³ David Hoogland Noon, "The Evolution of Beasts and Babies: Recapitulation, Instinct, and the Early Discourse on Child Development," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 41 (Fall 2005): 369-370.

¹⁴ Ross, p. 260-262; Ross, "The Zeitgeist and American Psychology," *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 5 (July 1969): 260-262.

untrained individuals could not be collated and quantified.¹⁵ Hall's methods were out of step with other experimental psychologists, who were striving to make the field more quantitative, replicable, and reliable. His preference for using children in his studies at a time when child psychology was approached with great disdain was also problematic, as was his advocacy for the use of psychology to solve social problems decades before the field was willing to make similar assertions. By 1900, most psychologists refused to acknowledge Hall as one of their own.¹⁶ The lay practitioners of child study ignored these criticisms and instead clung to Hall's theories with increased fervor because they "formalized an existing middle-class propensity toward child-centered parenting."¹⁷

Because Hall's genetic psychology could be performed without a laboratory and with minimal scientific fluency, it could be practiced by middle-class mothers who were eager

¹⁵ Ross, *Hall*, p. 286-301 and 341-346; Smuts, p. 66.

¹⁶ Smuts, p. 68.

¹⁷ Julia Grant, *Raising Baby by the Book: The Education of American Mothers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): 41. Although the child-centric approach to ideal family relationships fell from favor in the 1930s in the wider child study movement, social workers continued to prioritize the child over the parents for the duration of the interwar period in the name of child welfare. Parental happiness and the stability of a family unit solely concentrated on the development of its children was less of a concern in illegitimate family groupings because the mother-child structure of many of the illegitimate families was not considered to be a true familial unit. Marriage and the formation of a nuclear family would have elevated the illegitimate child-mother unit to family status.

For information on the scientific basis of the child study movement and the 1920s family, see Grant, p. 1-44 and Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Practitioners of scientific motherhood and child study supplemented Hall's developmental theories with the theories of behavioral psychologist John Watson, which departed from Hall's emphasis on the inevitably unfolding development of children in favor of a construct that suggested that children could be molded. Both theories were present in child study literature of the 1920s, but by the 1930s Watson's more rationalist view rose to prominence. He argued that behavior was a response to external stimuli, which meant that bad behavior could be adjusted and controlled by tweaking the environment. Watson's theories made children akin to machines whose controls could be adjusted to elicit desired responses.

to increase the status afforded to childrearing by making good parenting a scientific pursuit.

The expert scientific study of children occurred most often within the new discipline of child development, which, although the field was hesitant to overtly acknowledge any debt to Hall and his child study research, was certainly informed by and reacting to Hall's theories of "normal" development. Child development research was closely allied to child study efforts to articulate proper childrearing techniques. Child researcher Cora Bussey Hillis advocated for the expansion of the field by primly questioning why if there were standards "by which chickens, calves, trees, and shrubs could be judged," why were there no similar standards available to understand the normal physical, mental, and emotional development of children? Hillis argued that children needed "the same scientific study by research methods that we give to crops and cattle" so that researchers could understand "how the normal child develops in body, mind, and spirit and gradually evolve a science of childrearing."¹⁸ Until science could establish what normal development looked like, parents had no way of judging their children or judging themselves.

Child development research during the interwar period was centered in research institutes instead of in academic psychology departments in order to encourage and sustain the interdisciplinary nature of the field. In the early 1920s child welfare research institutes were established at the University of Iowa, University of Minnesota, Columbia University, Cornell University, the University of California, and Yale University. By 1930 child development research departments had expanded to over 300 universities.

¹⁸ Smuts, p. 232.

Much of the research into child development was funded by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), a broad philanthropic fund with the objective of improving public welfare with research into child study, education, public health, race relations, religion, social studies, and social welfare. The LSRM became interested in funding studies of child development after a large number of men were found to be physically or cognitively unfit to serve in World War One, which raised questions about the health of America's children and the fate of the country.¹⁹

The LSRM funded eight child welfare research institutes, sometimes supplying all of the institutes needed budgets for a period of several years. The LSRM institutes were established at Yale, Columbia, the state universities of Iowa, California, and Minnesota, and a freestanding clinic in the Washington, D.C. area that had loose affiliation with the George Washington University and the University of Maryland. The institutes were designed to produce interdisciplinary research on child development with a particular focus on the development of "normal" children. Normal children were identified by the absence of physical or mental impairment, but in practice the designation of normalcy tended to be restricted to white children from middle-class homes.²⁰

The field of child development had no overarching theoretical basis during the 1920s, which allowed the studies to be performed without preconceived notions and to

¹⁹ For histories of the LSRM, see Elizabeth Lomax, "The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial: Some of its Contributions to Early Research in Child Development," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 13 (1977): 283-293; Steven L. Schlossman, "Philanthropy and the Gospel of Child Development," *History of Education Quarterly* 21 (1981): 275-279; and Theresa Richardson, *The Century of the Child: The Mental Hygiene Movement and Social Policy in the United States and Canada* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): 129-150.

²⁰ Catherine E. Daligga, *Claiming Legitimacy for Female Expertise in Motherhood: The Women of the Merrill-Palmer School in Detroit, 1918-1930* (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Michigan, 2005): 248-249.

allow practitioners from numerous disciplines to contribute to and shape the field's discourse. The discipline incorporated theories from all of the fields discussed thus far in this dissertation— sociology, psychology, genetics, eugenics – and allowed many of the theories of pathology associated with illegitimacy to be reapplied to mothers from the perspective of their children. Until the mid-1930s, child development research primarily investigated and defined the concept of “normal” development. Psychologist John Anderson justified this approach by noting that “norms are an essential base upon which psychology must be built. Without them one is never sure whether the particular phenomena studied are the results of development or the result of the introduction of the artificial conditions so essential to experiment.”²¹ The earliest child development studies therefore focused on physical development and physiological functioning.

By the end of the 1920s researchers were also beginning to consider mental and emotional development and the correlation between physical and mental growth, all in an attempt to consider “the complete social development of human beings.”²² This research fell into four distinct categories: physical growth and maturation studies, investigations of mental development through extensive programs of mental testing, laboratory research on children, and observational studies of childhood behaviors on the playground, at schools, and at home.²³ Most of the studies of illegitimacy's effects on child development were

²¹ Quoted in Smuts, p. 313.

²² Russell Sage Foundation, *1933 Social Work Yearbook* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation): 61-62; Hamilton Cravens, *Before Head Start: The Iowa Station and America's Children* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²³ Hans Pols, “Between the Laboratory and Life: Child Development Research in Toronto, 1919-1956,” *History of Psychology* 5 (2002): 135; Claire E. Cameron and John W. Hagen, “Women in Child Development: Themes from the SCRD Oral History Project,” *History of Psychology* 8 (2005): 289-316.

longitudinal in nature and attempted to understand if and in what ways the illegitimate status crippled normal development. These inquiries can be further subdivided into studies of the illegitimate child's external and internal environments. The external environment can be understood to address the physical environment of the home in addition to the attitudes and behaviors of the mothers; the internal environment referred to the illegitimate child's psychological and emotional reaction to the external surroundings.

Evaluating the External Environment of Illegitimate Children

The research interest in the illegitimate child's home environment (and indeed most research on illegitimate children) was performed in response to the nature-nurture debate of geneticists. Alice Smuts has argued that "the rediscovery of Mendel's laws, which explained how traits were transmitted and distributed from generation to generation [and] August Weissman's decisive rejection of the inheritance of acquired characteristics...seemed to imply to some that heredity was decisive in determining human capacities and behavior."²⁴ The nature-nurture debate concerned attempts to define to what degree particular aspects of behavior were acquired or inherited. The relationship of this debate to illegitimacy studies is of preeminent importance. The familial trees performed on sexual delinquents that were discussed in chapter two indicated that an array of undesirable traits could be found in multiple generations of the same family. For illegitimate children, the question was whether these traits would assert themselves regardless of environmental conditioning or whether a properly regulated

²⁴ Smuts, p. 260.

environment could suppress their expression. If illegitimate children were fundamentally diseased, then a prescriptive measure like separation of mother and baby would fail to interrupt the noted behaviors in family studies; but the opposite finding, that sexual delinquency and other socially deviant behaviors were acquired characteristics, held tantalizing possibilities for custodial policy.

Perhaps because of this, illegitimacy studies were predisposed to find in favor of environmental causation (nurture) rather than hereditarian causation (nature) when considering the pathologies of illegitimate children. This was an uneasy accord, however. Studies of unwed mothers contained a strong undercurrent of hereditary causation, which would logically exist in illegitimate children as well. Social workers therefore merely prioritized environmental theories rather than completely excluding hereditary arguments. Some children were defined as inherently diseased due to the degree of observed defect in their mothers, such as extraordinarily low IQ scores; other children, in fact most children, escaped this designation by studies that linked delayed development or behavioral issues to the external environment created by the mother and the observed emotional wasteland in unwed mother- child relationships. This arrangement allowed social workers to locate the disease primarily within the mother herself; the mother was both the creator and substance of the illegitimate child's environment. The child's poor development was then only a reaction to the diseased environment and not a symptom of inherited defect. As one psychologist explained, young children "mirror the home

situation” and their “difficulties, problems, and modes of response” are a reflection of it.²⁵

Studies on the effect of the home environment on children’s development combined psychiatric theory with heredity studies to create a multi-faceted analysis of causation. Analyses placed discordant emphases on variables and would include or exclude information based on perceived importance to the individual, leading to a methodology that was rife with inconsistencies from case to case. No single factor was always considered when evaluating the home environment of illegitimate children; positive factors, such as a stable living arrangement, were customarily excluded from consideration when they failed to align with variables that were deemed to have a negative effect on development. Analyses of home environments emphasized the negative in a manner similar to the selective incorporation of demographic and familial information in the social diagnoses of delinquents. The same strains of elitism that pervaded social diagnoses were duplicated in analyses of the home environment and the mother-child relationship.

Indicators of economic security received particular attention because “the type of house, its furnishings, and the neighborhood” a child grew up in were believed to have an effect on his or her social behavior. Social agencies typically graded the homes of unwed mothers from good to fair. A good home was “modern, kept in good repair and furnished with furniture that [was] not shabby and located in a good neighborhood.” Homes on the lower end of the suitability scale were smaller, “poorly constructed” with less desirable furnishings, and located in neighborhoods that were “usually poor financially and often

²⁵ Foster, p. 7

morally.”²⁶ Nothing, from the quality of the bedding to a mother’s work schedule, escaped the attention of case workers. For example, the University of Minnesota’s Child Welfare Institute published an extraordinarily detailed aid for workers’ use in evaluating living room furnishings. Workers were guided through analyses of floor material, floor coverings, window screens, and even the number and type of periodicals on display in order to scientifically grade a home.²⁷

Elizabeth Lunbeck has considered the importance of the domestic environment for social workers’ perception of domestic tranquility. As she noted, “a well-ordered home lay at the center of the social worker’s domestic vision.” Social workers recorded in minute detail the condition of the home’s furnishings, the state of the children in terms of cleanliness and behavior, and the tidiness of a woman’s clothing. Domestic orderliness indicated internal familial fitness and commented on the strength of a woman’s character.²⁸ Evidence of poor housekeeping was evidence of moral transgression, which in the specific instances of illegitimacy was equated to evidence of unfit motherhood

The emphasis placed on the home environment of illegitimate children was a hold-over from the Progressive era. In speeches advocating for the adoption of mothers’ pensions, Children’s Bureau director Julia Lathrop argued that “children are not safe and

²⁶ Rose M. Potter, *A Comparison of the Social Adjustments of Children from Broken & Unbroken Homes* (Master’s Thesis, Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, 1932): 22.

²⁷ “Scale for Rating Living Room Equipment,” *Publications of the Institute of Child Welfare* 2, January 1930. The scale was based on University faculty member Stuart F. Chapin’s recent publications “A Quantitative Scale for Rating the Home and Social Environment of Middle Class Families in Urban America,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 2 (February 1928): 99-111 and “The Measurement of Sociality and Socio-Economic Status,” *Sociology and Social Research* 12 (1928): 208-218.

²⁸ Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 279-289.

happy if their parents are miserable and parents must be miserable if they cannot protect a home against poverty.” Lathrop urged her audience not to be “deceived” by the simplicity of her argument and to acknowledge that “a decent family standard is the primary essential of child welfare.”²⁹ Children who were raised in undesirable neighborhoods were believed to be more likely to develop poor personal habits. Social workers had been employing such a theory for at least twenty years in social diagnoses before it was specifically applied to the study of the illegitimate child, but there was a key difference in its application. Whereas poverty in cases of premarital pregnancy was used to identify pathologies in unwed mothers, when applied to illegitimate children poverty and other markers of a poor home environment exclusively reinforced maternal disease. The dirt, so to speak, did not rub off on the children.

This scenario equated the condition of the home with the welfare of the children who dwelled within. Unwed mothers were held to a standard of housekeeping and home environment that they fundamentally could not expect to provide without consistent financial help. The inability of unwed mothers to qualify for mother’s pensions meant that they could not even compete with the home environment that other single mothers could offer thanks to government subsidies that prioritized the welfare of legitimate families. Whether unwed mothers were compared to middle-class mothers or other single mothers, their performance was likely to disappoint.

It is worthwhile to note that the use of such superficial environmental standards to evaluate child welfare was a step backwards for social casework methodology. Mary

²⁹ Julia Lathrop, “Standards of Child Welfare,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 98 (November 1921): 7.

Richmond's social diagnosis technique, which was still prominent in the 1930s, purposely de-emphasized environmental considerations and advocated for a more complete understanding of family relationships. While environmental assessments of the home environment remained a part of the sociological component of casework, Richmond advised social workers to place a greater emphasis on the psychological components that affected a client's internal environment. Illegitimacy studies did spend a great deal of time analyzing psychological aspects, but the studies of illegitimate children incorporated a more simplistic "if-then" aspect to their conclusions than Richmond would have advised (i.e., if the child had a bad home environment, then the unwed mother did not care for the child as she should). The external environment of illegitimate children was used to understand their internal environment.

This interpretation was likely fed by the rising popularity of scientific motherhood in the 1910s and 1920s, which was the social application of child study and child development research studies. Good motherhood was no longer a trait that women were thought to inherit by virtue of their sex. It required knowledge of scientific principles of child development and child psychology with which women could literally "train" their children to develop into the ideal adult form. Mothers were urged to develop a scientific understanding of normal child development and to learn the unique characteristics of each stage. Due to the heavy incorporation of psychological theory into parenting recommendations, "emotional considerations, not only related to fostering a rapport among family members but in preparing children to become self-sufficient and capable

adults, were becoming a central component of maternal responsibilities.”³⁰ The ideology of scientific motherhood prioritized middle-class values and norms and made deviations from its practice guidelines a violation of a mother’s commitment and responsibility to her child.

Social workers working with illegitimate children repeatedly expressed frustration that unwed mothers failed to embrace the teachings of scientific motherhood. This was somewhat of a double-standard, however. Middle-class mothers were encouraged but not expected to exemplify the doctrines of child guidance; they were judged by whether or not they attempted to apply the teachings to their parenting styles, not by how well they succeeded in its application. Sociologist and Smith College School of Social Work professor Helen Leland Witmer reminded social workers in 1934 that,

Research can never reveal what ought to be done...It cannot show what is the best mode of family life nor what is the most satisfactory personality to foster in children. The question, *Best for what?*, [emphasis in original] cannot be answered by science. That is a matter of values, and research can show only what the values are, not what they ought to be.³¹

This acknowledgement that values and family structure are idiosyncratic creations was not applied to judgments of unwed mothers. Although the rhetoric regarding the need for unwed mothers to atone for their actions had disappeared from illegitimacy discourse by the 1930s, it remained implicitly present by the selective application of scientific theories to illegitimate mothers and their children. Because the mothers were already assumed to be damaged, social workers demanded that their parenting skills rose to a level of seldom

³⁰ Daligga, p. 126.

³¹ Helen Leland Witmer, *The Field of Parent Education: A Survey from the Viewpoint of Research* (New York: National Council of Parent Education, Inc., 1934): 22.

achieved scientific perfection to counterbalance the stigma of illegitimacy that the mothers bequeathed to their children. It was not enough for unwed mothers to be good mothers. They had to be better than average mothers if normal development of illegitimate children was to be achieved.

Several studies attempted to evaluate the development of illegitimate children who remained in the custody of their biological mothers. The studies typically offered selected vignettes from case histories to achieve the critical mass necessary to convince readers of the assumed causal connection. Much of the data used for these studies was gathered at child guidance clinics staffed by psychologists and social workers, which meant that, like the creation of the pathological unwed mother, the children who were the test subjects for understanding adaptation to illegitimacy were children who were already known to be troubled. The guidance clinics were meant to adjust the machinations of child development by inhibiting “wayward tendencies early in their development” and creating interference methods that could “secure the character” of the child.³² The behaviors that resulted in treatment at guidance clinics were those that were classified as “bad habits” and could be altered through environmental change. Common conditions included lying, disorderly conduct, tantrums, quarreling, stealing, daydreaming, truancy, defiance of authority, sullenness, and jealousy.³³ Evaluations at child guidance clinics

³² For a discussion of the practices of child guidance clinics, see Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930* (New York: Atheneum, 1980): 89-100; Margo Horn, *Before It's Too Late: The Child Guidance Movement in the United States, 1922-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989): 53-85; Alexander W. Siegel and Sheldon H. White, “The Child Study Movement: Early Growth and Development of the Symbolized Child,” in *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, vol. 17, ed. Hayne W. Reese (New York: Academic Press, 1982).

³³ Smuts, p. 414.

involved four different examinations by three experts from the distinct fields of medicine, psychology, and social work. The impressions garnered by each expert were analyzed singularly and collectively in order to form a profile of the “individual delinquent.”³⁴

The professionals who staffed child guidance clinics had a tendency to see delinquency in behaviors that other professionals may have described as age-appropriate boundary testing. One observer noted that she “could not help feeling at times that there was a tendency to regard too many children as problem children.” The frequency with which children were identified as delinquent stemmed from the reformist background of child guidance research. There was a fear that even minor behavioral problems were signs of social maladjustment that would worsen over time if left untreated.

Environmental manipulation, at least in the instances of legitimate children, was a manageable preventive response.³⁵

Studies of illegitimate children based on data from child guidance clinics were specifically looking for evidence of poor environment, which was in reality a search for evidence of poor mothering. Child guidance experts freely admitted that, “strictly speaking,” proof that parental failures were responsible for the maladjustment of children could not be furnished since a “scientific and fully controlled experiment” was impossible. The best that could be hoped for was to “bring forward examples typical of

³⁴ Child guidance clinic procedures are discussed in detail in Kathleen W. Jones, *Taming the Troublesome Child: American Families, Child Guidance, and the Limits of Psychiatric Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002): 69-100. See also Marion Cohen and Ellen Davis, “Patients of the Treatment Division of the Judge Baker Guidance Center,” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 6 (1935): 9-24; Olympia Yeranin, “Juvenile Delinquents: Worcester Child Guidance Clinic,” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 6 (1935): 37-43; and Alice M. Fellows, “Juvenile Delinquents: Out-patient Department of the Boston Psychopathic Hospital,” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 6 (1935): 44-50.

³⁵ Smuts, p. 414.

the vastly great number that have convinced those most intimately acquainted with the facts that a causal connection exists.”³⁶ Pauline’s case history serves as a useful example of this type of data. Pauline became an unwed mother at the age of sixteen in 1934. The worker’s description of Pauline’s appearance triggers impressions of an unkempt, slow individual that played into stereotypes of the “average” unwed mother.

She is not attractive. She has a cowed look and seems to protect herself with an utterly blank expression. She is a sticky, shapeless, dull-looking woman of more than average height. Her skin is pasty and oily, and her blond hair is stringy.³⁷

This description primed readers to disapprove of Pauline. Her parenting skills were discussed in an equally unflattering light. When Pauline was asked about her children, she “said they are never around.” Pauline’s mother fed them dinner and then sent them to the movies every night; they went straight to bed when they returned home. The worker noted that when she said that this arrangement would not give Pauline much time with her children, Pauline slowly responded, “Oh, yes, I see them.” The worker “got the impression, however, that she shares little with the children.”

Pauline later began to discuss the struggles associated with being an unwed mother, especially the difficulties she was having finding a job that she could do and still manage to get the children to school. She began to almost speak to herself and said things like, “*His* mother [the children’s father’s mother] would just have to take care of them”

³⁶ Mary B. Sayles, *The Problem Child at Home* (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1928): vii.

³⁷ Rosa Wessel, *A Case Work Approach to Sex Delinquents* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania, 1947): 83.

for a change; “she can have some of the dirt too.”³⁸ The net impression of this history is of a deeply unhappy mother who resented caring for her children and who went out of her way to ensure she would have to spend as little time as possible with them on a daily basis. Many of the elements in the case history would have been familiar to social workers – the struggle to find adequate employment, feelings of bitterness or resentment, or Pauline’s overwhelmed air. The inclusion of frequently duplicated elements lent credence to the argument that this specific unwed mother could serve as a representative of *all* unwed mothers. Studies like these helped to create the impression that most unwed mothers did not care for their children and resented their maternal responsibilities; the likely effects on the children of such mothers did not need to be articulated. Other studies filled in the gap.

A cumulative review of the St. Louis Children’s Aid Society’s records of unwed mothers presented material similar to the observations made about Pauline, but on a grander scale. The Society found the reports to be full of “difficulties” caseworkers regularly encountered when working with the mothers. There were practical difficulties related to “extracting board payments from the mother” or “her succession of broken appointments;” and there were behavioral issues that stemmed from the mothers’ “tendency to over-excite the baby” or a propensity to consume the available time “in endless chatter about herself and her problems and to pay no attention to the child,” all of which were evidence of the mother’s “resistance to and rejection of her problems.” When

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 96-98.

caseworkers tried to raise these concerns with the mothers, their complaints “fell on very unreasonable ears.”³⁹

Unwed mothers, by virtue of their unfailing predilection toward self-involvement, were thought to be too disengaged to realize that there were problems with their parenting styles or issues with their children’s development. A study conducted by the Amherst H. Wilder Clinic in St. Paul argued that parents tended to believe that their children did not present any behavioral issues when in reality the children showed “every evidence of maladjustment and every prospect of getting into trouble in the near future”; the parents were just “too dull” to recognize the truth of the situation.⁴⁰

Social worker Margaret Sullivan studied 35 cases of illegitimate children with alleged behavioral problems brought to the attention of the Child Welfare Board in Washington, D.C. in 1935. After studying the children, Sullivan found slightly fewer than half of the children were believed to have “no behavioral problems” or minor problems such as restlessness or stubbornness. Within this group were children who “had a strong

³⁹ Mary Swain Brisley, *The Unmarried Parent-Child Relationship: A Paper and Two Discussions Given at the National Conference of Social Work Buffalo, New York, June 23, 1939. Committee on Problems Related to Unmarried Parenthood* (New York City: National Council Church Mission of Help, 1939): 213.

This comment is indicative of a wider theme present in many analyses of the social worker-client relationship in the interwar period. While social workers made diligent efforts to “guide” mothers along an appropriate path, they often felt as though their attempts to do so were rebuffed. One worker wrote about an experience with a new client who was being transferred to her. The mother asked her, “Did Miss R. [her previous worker] tell you that we use to fight?” When the worker responded that Miss R. had not mentioned anything about it, the mother said, “Well, I guess you wouldn’t really call it that. The trouble was that Miss R. wanted to do more for me than I could take. I know that now.” Social workers believed that unwed mothers would see the utility of their guidance eventually, but those who objected too strenuously were more likely to be labeled as mentally incompetent or unfit. See Brenner, p. 215.

⁴⁰ Jessie Wells and Grace Arthur, “Effect of Foster-Home Placement on the Intelligence Ratings of Children of Feebleminded Parents,” *Mental Hygiene* 23 (April 1930): 227.

desire to play with fire and matches” and children who were prone to temper tantrums. The remaining children, however, had “serious behavioral issues” such as sex delinquencies, truancy, stealing, running away, and destruction of property. Sullivan was struck by the fact that the destructive behavior of these children at home was often the opposite of what was displayed in the school environment; for example, one child from this group had received a medal of commendation for excellent attendance, behavior, and effort at school, indicating the precipitating factor for his poor behavior was something unique to the home environment.⁴¹

Sullivan was not alone in this conclusion. The Juvenile Court decided to commit all of the children in the study to state care. Sixty-six percent of the commitments were permanent commitments that represented a fierce condemnation of the children’s parental oversight and home environment.⁴² “Saving” the children meant punishing the mothers. Illegitimate children’s wishes for security, which could only be achieved through removal from their biological mothers in order to control their environments, were thought to run “like scarlet threads through the fabric of [their] lives.”⁴³

Lack of security in the home environment was commonly attributed to the working schedule of unwed mothers. As previously discussed, social workers identified a causal link between maternal employment and juvenile delinquency during the

⁴¹ Margaret T. Sullivan, *A Study of Thirty-Five Cases of Illegitimacy under the Care of the Child Welfare Division of the Board of Public Welfare during the Fiscal Year 1935* (Master’s Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1940): 22-23.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 16. The remaining children were committed for temporary amounts of time ranging from six months to one year with the possibility of extension.

⁴³ Georgia Frances McCoy, *A Study of the Removal and Placement of Dependent Children in Foster Homes and Institutions in Los Angeles County, California, with Special References to Boarding Home Removals* (Master’s Thesis, University of Southern California, 1937): 106.

Progressive era.⁴⁴ This belief persisted in the illegitimacy studies of the interwar period. Case records from child guidance clinics routinely noted the ill-effects of a mother's work schedule on her child's development. James, for example, was five-years-old when he was referred to a clinic. His case history noted that his mother was an "irresponsible woman with a questionable reputation and a violent temper." She placed James' younger brother for adoption, but she retained custody of James and supported him by working the night shift. When she returned home from work in the morning, "she was too weary to get his breakfast or supervise him at all until afternoon. The child would fall out of bed and play around on the floor, hungry and dirty."⁴⁵ It was assumed to be only a matter of time before James' regular neglect began to manifest itself in serious behavioral abnormalities. A substantial amount of research during the interwar period was dedicated to understanding the ways working mothers effected their children's development and whether the effects could be mitigated by social welfare intervention, a rather ironic area of study given the previously noted inability of unwed mothers to qualify for mother's aid programs.

A 1922 study of Chicago working mothers hoped to answer how a mother's work schedule "affects adversely the interests of the children, their health, school attendance, standards of conduct, [and] their chances of the normal life to which every child is entitled."⁴⁶ Participants in the study all had children under the age of fourteen and were

⁴⁴ S.P. Breckenridge and Edith Abbott, *The Delinquent Child and the Home* (New York: Charities Publications Committee, 1912); Linda Gordon, *Pitied but not Entitled: Single Mother and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴⁵ Foster, p. 47.

⁴⁶ Helen R. Wright, *Children of Wage-Earning Mothers: A Study of a Selected Group in Chicago* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Children's Bureau, 1922): 1.

chosen for their status as working-class families because “social problems connected with working mothers [were] most acute in this group.” Only nine mothers in the study admitted to illegitimate pregnancies, but it is likely a much larger number of unwed mothers were included in the group of divorced, deserted, or separated women, which composed 26.7 percent of the study population.

The number of hours a woman worked were of greater concern than the type of occupation because work schedule effected maternal fatigue and the amount of time available to spend with children. Nearly three-quarters of the mothers worked between eight and ten hours per day, an amount that was not considered excessive enough to endanger maternal health but was still “enough to affect their ability to care for their children.” Case notes published with the study were full of statements like, “Mother complained of being tired all the time,” “Mother nervous and overtired,” and “Mother stood at her work all day. Got very tired. Afraid she could not stand the strain.”⁴⁷ It is little wonder, however, that the mothers profiled in the study complained of excessive fatigue. The strain of working combined with the demands of maternal responsibilities must have been substantial. Consider for example the notes regarding the routine of a one mother with two children to support who worked eight hours a day beginning at seven in the morning:

She kept her house immaculately clean and in perfect order, but to do so worked until 11 o'clock each night in the week and on Saturday night she worked until 5 o'clock in the morning. She described her schedule as follows: On Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday she cleaned one room each night; Saturday afternoon she finished cleaning and put the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37-39.

house in order; Saturday night she washed; Sunday she baked; Monday night she ironed.⁴⁸

This mother's schedule was not any more demanding than that of the other mothers profiled for the study. While the herculean efforts associated with being a single mother were uniformly acknowledged throughout the study, the efforts were devalued because the mothers did not have an acceptable amount of time or energy to devote exclusively to childcare. The author concluded that mothers were not unconcerned with child welfare per se, but they failed to achieve the goals of child welfare that would be "acceptable to scientific students of this subject."⁴⁹

Child welfare authorities were uniformly skeptical of the mothering abilities of working women. Their judgments were often severe. One mother, for example, was called into juvenile court after her two sons were caught stealing. The probation officer testified that the home environment was "not good" because the mother had to spend "the greater part of the time" working. Neither the home nor the children were deemed to be adequately cared for, as evidenced by the officer's observation that "everything was on the floor, things in front of the house... The children were always dirty." The judge ordered the boys committed to the state school, but not before admonishing the mother that she could not expect "to bring children into the world and then turn them loose on the state." The judge concluded by telling the mother that the experts assembled in the courtroom were "all of one mind, and it is that you are the one that is at fault."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ J. Harold Williams, "A Court Hearing on Parental Neglect," *Journal of Delinquency* 7 (1922): 142-146.

The state set an impossible task for unwed mothers by expecting them to provide for their children financially while still creating a domestic life that mirrored middle-class values. It is in this respect that the full force of the sociological studies of unwed motherhood discussed in chapter three came to bear, as they offered data about the ability of unwed mothers to satisfy cultural expectations of “good” motherhood. It was an ideal they typically failed to achieve and its failure carried tremendous implications. A working mother meant that “almost inevitably...the home is cheerless and untidy, that the children have every opportunity to stay away from school and in that life of the streets which is at once so alluring and so demoralizing.” The absence of a mother during a child’s early years meant that there was “little hope that the nervous system of the child, started unfavorably on its career, [would] have its proper chance to mature into self-control, or the character to develop into dignified manhood or womanhood.”⁵¹ Working mothers were thought to quite literally set their children on the path of delinquency and immorality that they had previously walked.

Evaluating the Hidden Environment of Illegitimate Children

Experts from the child guidance movement were uniquely qualified to evaluate the emotional state and psychological development of illegitimate children. By 1930 child guidance was a “highly technical” subfield of child psychiatry, which was in turn influenced to some degree by the field of mental hygiene.⁵² Mental hygiene was the

⁵¹ S. Breckinridge and G. Abbott as quoted in Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995): 106-107.

⁵² Smuts, p. 430.

pursuit of positive mental health by efforts to preserve the mind “against all incidents and influences calculated to deteriorate its qualities, impair its energies, or derange its movements.”⁵³ Originally a reaction to the strict determinist view of the social Darwinists that mental disorders were indicative of hereditary deficiencies, the first mental hygienists in the nineteenth-century argued that early intervention and sustained treatment might reduce the severity and duration of mental disorders. In the Progressive era the mental hygiene movement gained a national platform through the establishment of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in 1910. Its stated purpose “quickly became nothing less grandiose than the prevention of mental illness and delinquency by reforming child-rearing principles.”⁵⁴ This objective was achieved mainly at the state and municipal level with the formation of developed departments of mental hygiene to oversee community based efforts to promote good mental health. Such efforts were undertaken in reaction to the theories of psychiatrist Adolf Meyer, who argued that mental illness was rooted in behavioral or social upsets that affected an individual’s ability cope with life’s changes. This understanding placed delinquency and other social ills under the purview of psychiatry because they were the expression or symptom of mental disease, a theory that was applied to unwed mothers with much vigor during the interwar period.

Historian Hans Pols has argued that the mental hygiene movement was a subset of psychiatry, if uneasily so, during the 1910s and 1920s, but by the 1930s the field was its own unique discipline. The sociological understanding of mental illness advanced by

⁵³ Ascanio Rossi, “Some Pre-World War Two Antecedents of Community Mental Health Theory and Practice,” *Mental Hygiene* 46 (1962): 46.

⁵⁴ Yale Kramer, “Freud and the Culture Wars,” *The Public Interest* 124 (Summer 1966): 40.

Adolf Meyer meant that psychiatrists had to expand their field of activities beyond the mental hospital and collaborate with other professionals who could help understand the social causation of mental disturbances, like social workers. Psychiatrist Frankwood E. Williams stated that social workers had by necessity become the “the extension of the psychiatrist in the community.”⁵⁵ This was a mutually beneficial relationship that expanded the reach of mental hygiene (and thus the prestige of the psychiatrists who practiced it) while simultaneously increasing the status of social work interventions. However, it was also the reason behind the field’s informal separation from traditional psychiatry. Mental hygiene’s preventive emphasis and broad community application alienated it from the standard psychiatric practice of identifying and curing mental disease at the individual level.⁵⁶ This changed emphasis also made it uniquely well-suited for application at child guidance clinics.

The new child guidance dream team was composed of the psychiatrist, psychologist, and social worker who collectively migrated away from the dictates of environmental manipulation to theories associated with dynamic psychiatry, or the study of unconscious motivations. The significance afforded to the unconscious mind prompted child guidance experts to focus their efforts to on children’s feelings more so than their

⁵⁵ Quoted in Hans Pols, “Divergences in American Psychiatry during the Depression: Somatic Psychiatry, Community Mental Hygiene, and Social Reconstruction,” *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 37 (Fall 2001): 376. For a history on the development of psychiatric social workers, see Joseph M. Gabriel, “Mass-Producing the Individual: Mary C. Jarrett, Elmer E. Southard, and the Industrial Origins of Psychiatric Social Work,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 79 (Fall 2005): 430-458.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 369-379; Christine Mary Shea, *The Ideology of Mental Health and the Emergence of the Therapeutic Liberal State: The American Mental Hygiene Movement, 1900-1930* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Illinois at Champagne-Urbana, 1980): 286-353.

behavior, although a recognition that feelings and behavior were inextricably linked remained.

Environmental manipulation was slowly replaced by a preference for psychotherapy. Psychiatrists George Stevenson and Geddes Smith noted in 1933 that treatment of problem children meant “the study and treatment of parent-child relationships.”⁵⁷ The emotional health of children was considered to be the cornerstones of their development. Children did not “understand their own emotions, nor the role those emotions played in personality adjustment and future happiness.” Children were “psychologically fragile and emotionally vulnerable.” Experts urged the necessity of parents who were attuned to the emotional needs of their children and nurturing of their emotional development. Failure to do so caused irreparable developmental harm. Emotional security through healthy familial environments was a prerequisite for the formation of a functional adult.⁵⁸ As psychiatrist George Pratt wrote, child guidance clinics were “stressing one great point, namely, that in most cases of nervousness, in some cases of insanity, and in almost all cases of child behavior of conduct disorders, the trail inevitably and directly leads back to the *home* and the *parents*.”⁵⁹

Sociologist Helen Witmer argued that the clinics performed “a kind of social service that seeks the origins of all the problems of child behavior somewhere along the axis where extremes are the rejection of the child by the parents at one end and

⁵⁷ George Stevenson and Geddes Smith, *Child Guidance Clinics* (New York: Garland Pub. 1987): 55-56.

⁵⁸ Jones, p. 140-147.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Margo Horn, “The Moral Message of Child Guidance,” *Journal of Social History* 18 (Autumn 1984): 25-36.

overprotection at the other end.”⁶⁰ The recognition that all mothers, illegitimate or not, could be the root cause of their children’s maladjustment threw child guidance in a state of flux. Therapeutic treatment of children often had to include by necessity therapeutic treatment of mothers “in order to help them understand the origins of their adverse feelings toward their children.” This almost doubled the patient load of child guidance clinics overnight, but there were not enough trained psychologists or psychiatrists to meet the demand. Between 1927 and 1933 the Institute of Child Guidance trained only thirty-two psychiatrists and fifteen psychologists in comparison to 298 social workers. The work of the child guidance clinics during the interwar period was predominantly shouldered by social workers, who were not necessarily trained to practice psychotherapy or evaluate psychological functioning. This reality did not, however, lessen the credibility granted to their evaluations.⁶¹

Meyer’s psychobiological understanding of mental illness remained a prominent feature of mental hygiene theory throughout the interwar period, although its construction changed slightly in the wake of the Depression. During the 1920s good mental health was thought to spring from adequate social adjustment by meeting societal expectations of comportment. The social upheaval caused by the Depression and the corresponding inability of many people to maintain previous standards of living meant that social adjustment focused became synonymous with emotional adjustment.⁶² This slight difference in approach meant little for the study of illegitimate children because their

⁶⁰ Quoted in Smuts, p. 434.

⁶¹ Smuts, p. 433-469; John Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination: A History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985):67-72; Lubove, p. 108-110.

⁶² Pols, “Divergences in American Society,” p. 379.

status was simultaneously an external social marker and an acknowledged source of emotional upset. Both models indicated maladjustment when applied to illegitimate children. Moreover, Meyer's approaches negated the need to try to control the source of the maladjustment. At a basic level this stemmed from the fact that mental hygiene was less interested in a cure than it was in establishing preventive social mechanisms. At a deeper level this meant that mental hygienists were also less interested in analyzing causation than in alleviating its consequences. When applied to custodial policy, both responses negated therapeutic interest in the unwed mother. Separation of mother and child could serve as a preventive and alleviative response to the maladjustment of illegitimate children.

The (in)ability of an illegitimate child to satisfy societal expectations informed the earliest studies into the "hidden," interior environments of illegitimate children, which focused on the effects of the stigma of the illegitimate status on the developing child. Social worker Frances Teagarden observed that it was "very hard, in most communities, for the unmarried mother to provide conditions that are desirable for the rearing of a child" because society was not "ready to receive such a child and such a mother on terms equal to those accorded to the child born of married parents, regardless of the worth or fitness of the unmarried mother to rear the children." Teagarden argued that even if a community could be located where illegitimacy was a "relatively accepted" social occurrence, as soon the illegitimate child mingled with legitimate children and became conscious of his "other" status he was "likely to be seriously traumatized."⁶³

⁶³ Florence M. Teagarden, *Child Psychology for Professional Worker*, Revised Edition (New York: Prentice Hall Inc., 1946): 245.

Statements like Teagarden's were a reiteration of late Progressive understandings of the illegitimate status and its possible effects. Teagarden's argument was essentially a restatement of Kammerer's 1920 observation that "many a useful life has been ruined by such inner stress of thought and feeling" a child was thought to experience when his or her illegitimacy was explained. Kammerer likened it to an extreme form of "humiliation" for a child to learn "that society looks at him askance."⁶⁴ The residual nature of such traditional views of illegitimacy is not in and of itself surprising so much as troublesome because the research into the adjustment of illegitimate children in maternal care tended to demonstrate adequate adjustment and development. Studies decrying the ill effects of stigma were not based on universal experiences.

Margaret, for example, was the illegitimate daughter of Alice. Alice would not consent to adoption, so Margaret was boarded during her earliest years while Alice went to work at a factory. Margaret grew up believing that her foster mother was her biological mother. When she was six-years-old, the foster mother explained to Margaret that she was not her mother. She took the news in stride and asked if perhaps Alice could be her mother then, and in that moment the bond between mother and child became "closer than ever." Margaret was not aware that her illegitimate status might be socially unacceptable to some, never showed any awareness that her mother was stigmatized, and never asked where or who her father was, despite the fact that her status was "quite generally known in the community." The social worker's analysis of Margaret's development was resoundingly approving.

⁶⁴ Percy Gamble Kammerer, *The Unmarried Mother: A Study of Five Hundred Cases*, Patterson Smith Reprint Series in Criminology, Law Enforcement, and Social Problems (Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1969): 179.

Margaret has a good mind, is very observant, does satisfactory work in school, and loves to read. She appears to be well liked by other children. The little daughter of a very respectable neighbor has for a long time been her chosen friend and playmate. She is invited to children's parties given by the neighbor.

Alice was noted to have made a similarly healthy adjustment. She went to movies, dances, and church on a regular basis. She had an assortment of friends. "Her life seem[ed] happy."⁶⁵

Margaret and Alice's case history appeared in a 1928 study conducted by the Children's Bureau. Far from being an outlier, the majority of the case histories included in the study recounted similar successes. Maladjustment of mother and child was uncommon in instances where economic security had been attained. Indeed, the lead researcher concluded that "the place in the community of the children included in this study may be regarded as similar in many respects to that of children of legitimate birth."⁶⁶

And yet the belief illegitimate children would be emotionally traumatized for a lifetime once they learned about and understood the implications of their illegitimate status persisted and strengthened during the interwar period. The reason for this is likely due to the types of researchers who were conducting studies on the development of illegitimate children. The Children's Bureau study cited above was one of the only studies to be performed without data from child guidance clinics, which explains the different understandings of adjustment and development. As previously discussed, child

⁶⁵ A. Madorah Donahue, *Children of Illegitimate Birth whose Mothers Have Kept Their Custody* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1928): 73-75.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

guidance experts were trained to identify maladjustment and easily identified it in illegitimate children.

The warnings child guidance studies issued were imprecise and ominous. Social workers warned of an “a peculiar restlessness and an unhappiness” in illegitimate children who were stymied by “an instinctive yearning...for a mother and a father and kin of [their] own – as other children have,” leading illegitimate children to see themselves as “marked and disowned, with some sort of social stigma upon [themselves], as though an outcast of society.” This “psychological condition” marked “the cause of so many of them going wrong.”⁶⁷

The emotional implications of the illegitimate status were thought likely to produce another generation of delinquents, who, by virtue of mental instability, heredity, or poor environment – a variable recipe for social disaster that should be familiar to the reader by now – would succumb to crime, sexual perversion, or other social ills. The emotional effects of illegitimacy could present at a young age or appear quite suddenly later in life, but social workers were united in a belief that the stigma of the “other” status was too great a burden to bear without ill effect.

A typical case history is represented by Dorothy and her mother Vera. They struggled to remain together as a family unit during Dorothy’s early childhood, often moving due to Vera’s changing employment circumstances and causing Dorothy to develop into a “fragile” child who became rebellious as a teenager. She complained that her mother was too strict and did not let her go out as often as her friends. Like many

⁶⁷ Julius Makowski, *Care and Treatment of the Unmarried Mother: A Study of Six Cases of the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau, Milwaukee, Wisconsin* (Master’s Thesis, Marquette University, 1929): 3.

teenage girls, Dorothy complained that she “wanted to wear silk stockings and high-heeled slippers and go out every night instead of one night a week.”

When questioned about the genesis of Dorothy’s attitude, Vera said she was incapable of disciplining Dorothy properly when she was a child. Vera primarily worked in domestic service and any crying disturbed her employers and threatened her position, so Dorothy was placated and indulged more often than behavioral boundaries were enforced. The caseworker noted that it was probable that Dorothy required more parental guidance than it was possible for her mother to give her. At the time of the interview, Dorothy had run away from home seven times, been to children’s court, and was known to two social work agencies. If her behavior did not change, the state reformatory was looming as a possibility. The worker concluded that Dorothy’s future did “not look very bright.”⁶⁸

Dorothy’s behavior was outwardly considered to be a result of poor parental oversight, but from an emotional standpoint social workers would have likely grouped Dorothy with other illegitimate children who were observed to become unruly as a symbolic rejection of their mothers and a response to their illegitimate status. Unruly behavior from illegitimate children was presented an expression of internal struggles that were rooted in their atypical family environment. Stigma originated from societal judgments and familial struggles; social workers presented stigma as a crushing vise that reached out to illegitimate children from all corners of their world.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Donahue, p. 69-70.

⁶⁹ See for example Helen Witmer et al, “The Outcome of Treatment of Children Rejected by their Mothers,” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 8 (March 1938): 187-234 and Gregory Zilboorg,

Bertram, for example, was Frances' illegitimate son. She maintained custody and lived with her parents for most of Bertram's early life, making ends meet with a small lump sum paternity payment. When Bertram was three-years-old, Frances married "a man of really superior mentality and tastes." Frances failed to discipline Bertram and at the age of eight he developed behavioral issues that threatened her marriage. He was "disobedient, dishonest, truant, [with] severe fits of crying and despondency, [and] stealing." When Bertram was ten, the case worker recommended temporary foster home placement to give Bertram a chance to receive psychiatric help and give Frances' marriage a chance to recover.

Bertram was diagnosed with "severe mental conflict." He did not know about his illegitimate birth, but at the age of eight his status became common knowledge at school and he was called names and heard "queer things" about himself and his mother. His grandmother allegedly called him a "bastard" during a fleeting fit of rage. These experiences "made him feel he was different from other boys, and he worried constantly."⁷⁰ The specter of illegitimacy had fundamentally altered his character. At the time the case study was published, Bertram's temporary foster home placement had already exceeded four years in length.

Bertram's behavior typified an oft identified pattern in illegitimate children. Robert, for example, "had an attitude of contempt toward his mother" due to comments about "her character and intelligence" he frequently overheard. By the time he was in his mid-teens, his attitude had hardened further and "become one of marked bitterness and

"Side-Lights on Parent-Child Antagonisms," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 2 (1932): 34-43.

⁷⁰ Donahue, p. 50-52.

manifested itself in deliberate rudeness and unkindness.”⁷¹ Yet another study commented on a case of juvenile delinquency where it was reported that the mother would “snarl ‘bastard’” in fits of rage, “as if the child were in some way to blame for the whole unfortunate affair of her birth.” The social worker advised other workers to ponder “whether *we* would have escaped delinquency if we had been reared under such circumstances.”⁷²

Many of the studies of the psychological well-being of illegitimate children were conducted in the context of personality studies, which were similar to the character studies of unwed mothers previously discussed. Personality studies had little interest in quantitatively defining the mental and emotional conditions of subject participants; rather, the studies relied upon close observations of a child over a several month period. The observations were supplemented with data on the child’s growth and physical condition and interviews with the parents about family background and household routines to produce a “quasi-clinical” assessment of the child’s personality.⁷³ The accumulated impressions garnered from multiple studies of children were thought to be capable of illuminating trends in normal development.

It is important to note that the studies of the (mal)adaptation of illegitimate children were not exclusively performed by child guidance experts. Assessments of the child’s development, or when the child was very young of the unwed mother’s maternal

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷² Teagarden, p. 245. See also Florence’s case history in Mabel Higgins Mattingly, *The Unmarried Mother and Her Child: A Fact Finding Study of Fifty-Three Cases of Unmarried Mothers who Kept their Children* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University School of Applied Social Sciences, 1928): 64-65.

⁷³ DaLigga, p. 165.

aptitude, were performed by caseworkers employed by maternity homes, hospitals, and social work agencies. By the time illegitimate children were brought to child guidance clinics, custodial decisions had likely been made years previously. Many of the studies that explored the adaptation of illegitimate children that were authored by social workers were written for use by the average social worker who lacked specialized training in child guidance theory.

Adele Aronson's 1937 study of children known to the Milwaukee Children's Service Association is an excellent example of a personality study performed by a social worker.⁷⁴ Aronson found that only thirty-two percent of her study group was aware of their illegitimate status. Most of the children were informed when they were between the ages of eleven and fourteen years old, "the period when they were going through all the difficulties of adolescence" and already struggling to make sense of new emotions. Aronson argued that those who were aware of their status engaged in antisocial behavior with "the underlying motive to reunite one's self with the lost father parent."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ For less focused studies with similar conclusions to Aronson's, see Agatha H. Bowley, *The Psychology of the Unwanted Child* (Edinburgh: E. & S. Livingstone, Ltd., 1947) and Shirley Harrison, *A Comparative Study of Behavior Problems in Legitimate and Illegitimate Children* (Master's thesis, Smith College, 1944).

⁷⁵ Adele Aronson, *A Study of Forty-Four Children Conceived out of Wedlock: A Dissertation based upon an Investigation at the Children's Service Association at Milwaukee, Wisconsin* (Master's Thesis, Smith College for Social Work, 1937): 25.

Table 5.1
Behavior Symptoms of Children who knew of Illegitimate Status as Compared to Children who Did Not

<u>Behavior Symptoms</u>	<u>Knowledge</u>	<u>No Knowledge</u>	<u>Total</u>
Stealing	9	2	11
Sex Delinquency	4	0	4
Lying	4	2	6
Truancies	5	1	6
Running Away	4	2	6
School Maladjustments	8	7	15
Disobedience	3	4	7
Masturbation	4	4	8
Eneuresis	5	4	9
Temper Tantrums	5	6	11
Stubbornness	3	3	6
Destructiveness	3	2	5
All Symptoms	57	37	94

Aronson divided the behavioral symptoms into two loose groupings of symptoms that were “interpreted as symptoms of the individual’s relationship and attacks on society” and symptoms “in which the individual gets pleasure or pain from his own bodily activities.” As the chart demonstrates, children who knew about their illegitimate status were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors than the children who did not know. Aronson interpreted the data as evidence that knowledge of illegitimate birth “precipitates behavior symptoms.” She further argued that the propensity of illegitimate children to display behavioral problems was “the child’s way of demanding attention and of getting power from his attacks,” all because “some way along the line of development

he has been deprived of love and the satisfaction and security he has needed.”⁷⁶ Although not directly stated, Aronson’s implication was that a child of legitimate birth would not have been deprived of such things and was therefore less likely to need behavior modifications.

Aronson offered multiple case histories to support her hypothesis that illegitimate children were not loved enough by their parents. One mother, for example, placed her son Teddy in a foster home at the age of six months old. She told workers that she would have preferred to place him for adoption, but she felt it was “her duty” to keep him. When Teddy was five years old, she said that she no longer wished to see him because “he represented a part of her life she wished to forget;” when she visited him she “displayed no emotion nor feeling but gave him many lavish gifts.” She married when Teddy was ten years old, but made no effort to remove him from the foster home.

Teddy’s behavior declined as the years progressed. At age six he was constantly asking why his mother never came to visit him; he was “very nervous, flighty, could not concentrate, enuretic, domineering with other children, and resented discipline and authority.” After his mother’s marriage, he wondered why she did not take him home with her. He began to ask to sleep in the same bed as his foster mother and “made many overt affectional demands.” Aronson linked the declining behavior to the mother’s declining interest in Teddy. Her infrequent visits “served to perpetuate his conflict about being separated and not belonging.”⁷⁷ Her refusal to place him for adoption even though

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26-27.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35-37.

she did not want to act like his mother prevented Teddy from severing his ties to her and left him in a state of custodial limbo.

Aronson quipped that “the most striking picture” to emerge from her study was one “of a child so deprived of life and affection that from the very beginning he is handicapped and limited in his effort to grow into a mature, well-integrated, self-sustaining individual.” She further noted that knowledge of the illegitimate status, “regardless of that age at which one learns of it, and regardless under what conditions one is told,” would create disturbance in behavior that will lead the child to “attack society or himself for the injustices that have been done to him.”⁷⁸

Aronson’s argument that illegitimate children had “problem personalities” because of their status was standard in most studies of the adaptation and development of such children. As social worker Charlotte Towle argued, illegitimate children “will resent [their status] and bring back his feelings of resentment to his parent who has deprived him” of legitimacy. Illegitimate children should be expected to engage in “aggressive attacks on society” during adolescence as a way to gain “a feeling of power that will compensate for his feelings of inadequacy.” Illegitimate children have to “hurt other people in order to revenge” their status.⁷⁹

Importantly, few children retained in maternal custody were thought to have escaped the development of undesirable personality traits. Even children who were generally acknowledged to have “agreeable and winning personalities” possessed unwelcome traits, such as one girl who was described as “courteous, thoughtful, neat, and

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷⁹ Charlotte Towle, Untitled Speech, Midwest Child Welfare Conference, April 1937, quoted in Aronson, p. 8.

clean,” but also “slow in making friends, untruthful, and extremely interested in winning favor from boys.”⁸⁰ Nowhere in any of the studies was there an acknowledgement that all individuals have a blend of “good” and “bad” personality traits; to do so would have undermined the argument that illegitimacy hampered appropriate development when the child was retained in maternal custody. As one study concluded, the children “who were rather aggressive in attitude and reaction were those who had been unwanted in their own homes because of their illegitimacy.” The children were thought to need ample amounts of affection and praise “in order to destroy at least partially their feelings of inferiority and insecurity” that maternal attitudes toward them had created.⁸¹ The undesirable personality traits observed in unwed children were presented as direct evidence of chronic rejection, which led to a demand for studies that analyzed the relationships between unwed mothers and their children.

One such study was completed in 1935 by social worker Katharine Bartlett, considered the November and December 1934 caseloads of the Cincinnati, Ohio Associated Charities. Bartlett analyzed 133 white women who were in need of family consultation services, focusing particularly on women who were single mothers due to illegitimate pregnancies, death, divorce, desertion, or separation. The unwed mother group, totaling fourteen women, was further analyzed as a subset group representing the normal behaviors of “women of low intelligence.” The IQ range of the mothers was estimated to be between dull normal to feebleminded, although these assessments were made without the benefit of a mental examination and were based solely on the opinions

⁸⁰ Sullivan, p. 24.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

of caseworkers. In addition to low intelligence, the unwed mothers were considered to share a similar personality.

Most [of these women] are of a friendly, happy disposition, enjoying crowds and talking incessantly and excitedly. They appeal to their friends and inspire pity and protection in those near them because of their dependent helplessness...

Since they have no insight into their situations due to their low intelligence, they are never depressed or worried, but content to drift unconcernedly and usually elated in mood. They trust to fate, or the case worker, to provide for them and their difficulties. When they do make plans for themselves the plans are usually foolish and ineffectual and the women waver in following them.⁸²

The happy-go-lucky, laissez-faire attitude exhibited by the subgroup of unwed mothers was a point of contention when evaluating their successfulness as mothers. They were accused of being “rather unsuccessful at controlling their children, resorting to yelling and whipping one moment, and then spoiling remorsefully the next.” The women’s erratic parenting style was a reflection of their low-grade intelligence as well as a commentary on the depth of feeling they harbored for their children. Normal maternal love was not observed amongst the group. Instead, the mothers either exhibited no true emotion towards their children, described as “protestations of fondness” that concealed “complete disinterest,” or the mothers viewed their children as chums or younger siblings, depending on their children for “affection and love, without however giving much in return.”⁸³

⁸² Katherine Blair Bartlett, *The Problems Presented to a Family Agency by Women with Broken Homes: A Dissertation Based Upon an Investigation at the Associated Charities, Cincinnati, Ohio* (Master’s Thesis, Smith College School for Social Work, 1935): 43-44.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

The mothers were not necessarily mentally incapable of carrying out maternal duties so much as they refused to accept the role in which they were placed. They had furthermore failed to leave behind an unhealthy preoccupation with men following the birth of their children. While over half of the women did not have unusually promiscuous dating habits, they still “occasionally” indulged in promiscuous sex because they were “receptive to men’s advances and easily led.” The remaining women in the group were judged to be “moral imbeciles” whose “lives center[ed] around men” and who showed no guilt over their promiscuous habits. “Their craving for constant contact with men mark[ed] their focal points of interest in life,”⁸⁴ an observation that disproved the Progressive hope that maternal custody would be morally redeeming. No matter the consequences of their actions, the unwed mothers studied by Bartlett were presented as suffering from a near compulsion for intimate relations. Their children were an afterthought to such needs.

Bartlett concluded that most of the unwed mothers in the case study had difficulties in forming or maintaining a parent-child relationship. The problems were thought to stem from “maladjustments and deep-seated conflicts” within the mothers themselves. Most of the mothers in the study were presented as being incapable of assuming the adult role necessary for a functional parent-child relationship, such as Mrs. H. She was a thirty-two-year old mother of a three-year-old illegitimate child. Previously married, her husband deserted her because “she was frigid in her marital relationship.”

Mrs. H. was described in some detail with a host of uncomplimentary modifiers: “schizoid,” “liable to break under too complicated an environment,” paranoid,

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

“withdrawn in personality,” “low intelligence,” and “a lack of willpower and direction.”

She was noted to have “almost no friends” and expressed a belief that “her relatives dislike her.” Overall, Mrs. H. was presented as a quivering, unstable, non-emotional woman. Nothing in her personality lent itself to the traditionally nurturing role of motherhood.

Mrs. H. became pregnant after being raped by an acquaintance, but even this occurrence was thought to stem from her own psychological issues. Her “extreme sensitivity” made her “very suggestible to the advances which she [felt] men [were] constantly making toward her.” Mrs. H. was allegedly “unresisting” when raped because “her childish nature [craved] dependence on a male provider, and she would like to have a husband to take care of her.” In this scenario, Mrs. H. was implicitly asking to be raped as a mechanism for securing male support and companionship; male support allowed Mrs. H. to persist in a childlike state of intellectual and emotional detachment from reality.

Her mothering skills were not highly rated. Caseworkers did not believe that she was “capable of being in love with anyone” due to her psychological issues, even her own child. Her parenting skills were erratic and wavered between “rejection and an over-indulgence” that was “motivated by guilt.” Mrs. H. was summarized as being unwilling to assume the responsibilities of parenthood in a pattern that was “consistent with her general pattern of withdrawal from any life situations which demand[ed] a mature response or stable activity.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56-59.

The belief that unwed mothers like Mrs. H. invariably suffered from psychological abnormalities that may or may not be controllable necessarily factored into considerations of appropriate custodial outcomes. Psychiatric disabilities in unwed mothers were dangerous to the development of the illegitimate child because they hindered the mothers' ability to create an adequate home environment and often prevented the proper expression of maternal love. Moreover, statistical studies of delinquents had demonstrated that parental psychiatric problems may have led to the delinquent behavior. One study of emotionally disturbed unwed mothers, for instance, found that only three percent of the girls had "well-adjusted" parents. The vast majority of the girls had parents who were considered neurotic, psychotic, or psychopathic. The author concluded that psychiatric difficulties of the parents inhibited their ability to "create emotionally satisfying homes for their children." In no cases profiled for the study were the parents of unwed mothers thought to have a warm and consistent response to their children; the most frequent parental attitude was rejection, the very emotion that unwed mothers in the late interwar period were accused of displaying towards their infants again and again.⁸⁶

Tracing the Custodial Shift

The accumulated weight of the illegitimate children studies certainly spoke to a need to better consider what the desired custodial outcome for illegitimate children should be, but if such studies had not occurred in tandem with studies of institutionalized

⁸⁶ Miriam Powell, *Illegitimate Pregnancy in Emotionally Disturbed Girls: A Dissertation Based Upon an Investigation at the Jewish Board of Guardians, New York* (Master's Thesis, Smith College, 1948): 27-33.

and other dependent children it is questionable whether they would have been forceful enough to effect policy change. The custodial shift occurred because there was a perfect storm of research data that seemed to indicate the undesirability of maternal custody. The studies of unwed mothers themselves (quantitative/demographic, heredity, sociological, and psychiatric), the studies of the adjustment and development of illegitimate children, and concurrent studies of dependent children all spoke to the perceived need for policy change. The studies also, by virtue of their chronological reach spanning the entire interwar period, both created, reacted to, and justified the change.

The emphasis on proper external and internal home environments that so characterized studies of illegitimate children collided with new strategies in the child welfare movement that sought to better articulate what well-being in childhood meant in practice. The 1932 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection resulted in the issuance of the “Children’s Charter,” a document that restated the child welfare movement’s commitment to ensuring that every child was cared for in an environment that was conducive to wholesome development. Most applicable to illegitimate children was the charter’s fifteenth provision, which stated that every child possessed the right to “grow up in a family with an adequate standard of living and the security of a stable income as the surest safeguard against social handicaps.”⁸⁷

The interwar child welfare movement questioned the Progressive emphasis on the elimination of poverty and the improvement of social institutions as the most efficient way to achieve a better society. By the late 1920s such an approach was viewed as

⁸⁷ Robert H. Bremner, *Children and Youth in America: A Documentary History*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971): 106.

ameliorative instead of preventive and, of course, prevention of social ills was the expressed goal. The movement's overall rejection of hereditarian constructions of development meant that human nature could be created by environmental manipulation; children could be "made," not "born."⁸⁸ Separation of mother and child was not explicitly acknowledged as a condemnation of the mothering skills of unwed mothers, but rather as an effort to protect the welfare of the illegitimate child, to "make" a child who was not burdened by the stigma of illegitimacy.

The studies of dependent children were broader in scope than the other types of studies previously discussed. These studies rarely explicitly considered illegitimate children, although they were typically present in populations of dependent children. The studies were less concerned with how specific subsets of dependent children (like illegitimate children versus orphans) reacted to the artificial home environment of institutions, boarding homes, and foster homes than in identifying universal experiences of placement in such environments. Like the Progressive era studies of delinquents, the purpose of studies concerned with dependent children was to map the terrain, identify possible areas for future research, and form broad conceptions of the merits and problems of such placements. Studies of specific populations, either by identifier (i.e., illegitimate) or location (i.e., orphanages) were more prominent in the post-World War Two period.⁸⁹

Despite their generalized nature, interwar studies of dependent children attracted the attention of social workers due to the frequency with which illegitimate children found themselves in such an environment. The pressures of balancing work and

⁸⁸ Smuts, p. 288-289.

⁸⁹ See for example D.M. Dyson, *The Foster Home and the Boarded Out Child* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1947).

motherhood meant that many single mothers boarded their children or, usually upon the recommendation of their caseworkers, agreed to foster home placement.

Institutionalization was common for children who were to be given for adoption as well; these children often spent a period of time at orphanages or homes for children supported by private philanthropies while they awaited placement. Importantly, at the beginning of the interwar period these facilities were viewed as desirable environments that shielded illegitimate children from stigma. As one worker wrote, in boarding homes “the stigma of damaging ancestry is unknown and the congenital physical and mental disabilities, unless acute, do not distinguish him” from others. “The child just ‘stays on’ in the boarding home, usually an arrangement much to its liking, without knowing why.”⁹⁰ In other words, they were safe environments where illegitimate children could blend in with other children who, for various reasons, were similarly living without daily parental interactions.

In instances where the illegitimate child had not been released for adoption, the length of placement in boarding homes and even orphanages could be substantial.⁹¹ Some mothers left their children in these locations for years on end, with no intention of relinquishing custody and yet possessing no means to be reunited with their children.

⁹⁰ Esther McClain, *Ohio Manual on Boarding Children in Private Homes* (Columbus: Ohio Division of Charities, 1928): 14.

⁹¹ The number of true orphans housed in orphanages dwarfed in comparison to the number of children who were boarded at them due to changes in familial composition, such as the death of a parent. For a history of orphans and orphanages, see, Lori Askeland, *Children and Youth in Adoption, Orphanages, and Foster Care: A Historical Handbook and Guide* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006) and LeRoy Ashby, *Endangered Children: Dependency, Neglect, and Abuse in American History* (New York: Twayne Pub, 1997).

Social workers eventually argued that far from protecting the child, such an arrangement caused greater harm than good. The anonymity of institutions meant that the sole source of emotional development and familial interaction was then dependent upon an unwed mother maintaining an interest in and the ability to visit her child on a regular basis.

A 1937 study of institutionalized children found that the majority of parents (70 percent) visited their children at least one time per week. But of the group who could not or would not visit their children more frequently, 43 percent visited the home less than one time per month.⁹² Long periods of isolation were therefore not uncommon for institutionalized children. Case histories like Peter's, profiled below, were alarming to social workers because of the depth of parental deprivation and the assumed likelihood of corresponding abnormal development.

Peter had spent seven years in the Boys' Home. During this time his mother visited him twice and only for a short time. She showed 'very little interest' and although he frequently wrote letters he seldom heard from her. In fact his letters were 'sometimes returned unopened.' She never visited him on any holiday or took him outside the institution for an outing or a vacation. She did not inquire about him or his welfare or his progress in school...⁹³

Institutionalized children were thought to suffer from a lack of stability and to harbor deep-seated impressions of parental rejection. In short, they suffered from many of the same emotional complications that studies pointed to amongst populations of illegitimate children retained in maternal custody. Studies performed by psychologists indicated that a desire for family was a common theme identified in studies of

⁹² Hubert Bisky, *A Study of a Selected Group of Graduates of Two Homes for Dependent Children* (Master's Thesis, The Catholic University of America, 1937): 29.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

institutionalized children. When asked what they dreamt about as part of a mental exam, the responses from children at a California institution indicated a “deep longing” for home and family. Some answers were simple, such as one five-year-old child who said simply he dreamed about his “mama.” Other responses were more elaborate, but indicative of a similar urgency. One seven-year-old said that, “I dream that I am going home and I wish I could. And I dream that fairies come and everything.” Another child said that, “Once I dreamed. I thought I was home and fell out of bed and my sister came and picked me up and another sister came and hugged me.” Still another nine-year-old noted that, “Sometimes you dream about your mother and she comes to see you and takes you away.”

Over 50 percent of the dreams reported in the study were about home or family. The researcher reported that “all of the children here may be thought of as suffering from the same misfortune, namely, a disrupted home.” Citing Freud, the researcher argued that the children’s dreams were “wish fulfillments.”⁹⁴

These studies prioritized and sentimentalized the environment of a middle-class home and its familial bonds as critical structures for the proper development of children and in turn led to the popularization of the foster home as a desirable locale for illegitimate children. The genesis of the foster home movement was therefore the rejection of the environment of institutionalized settings.⁹⁵ Foster homes could provide

⁹⁴ Kate Gordon, “Dreams of Orphan Children,” *The Journal of Delinquency* 8 (1923): 287-291.

⁹⁵ It should be noted that foster home placement was a rather dubious state of custody. In the 1920s, the homes were used as a mechanism to aid in maternal efforts to retain custody. They offered mothers a chance to make plans and create a stable environment independent of the demands of motherhood; eventual reunion of mother and baby was expected. By the 1930s, foster homes were increasingly a half step toward adoptive placement. Separation of mother and baby

such children with a proxy family capable of fulfilling the wishes of illegitimate children for love and security. This was, in fact, the articulated goal of family life by 1930.

Sociologists Edward Reuter and Jessie Runner argued that the modern objective of families was to “provide the best care for children, furnish a humanely satisfying affectional relationship, and contribute to the personality developments of parents and offspring.”⁹⁶

Social workers placed a similar emphasis on the importance of family life, but their approach differed slightly. Rather than advocating for the family unit because of its ability to foster spiritual and emotional development, social workers viewed the family as the “linchpin of social order.” The studies discussed in previous chapters demonstrated that crime, delinquency, insanity, and other social ills were all “associated with family disorder, generational conflict, the disorganization attendant upon urban migration, and inefficient socialization” linked to “the erosion of the family unit and the psychological maladjustments that accompanied it.”⁹⁷ The family thus became the cause of and prophylactic for social disorder. This emphasis placed on obtaining and maintaining a normative, healthy family life placed unwed mothers at an automatic disadvantage. When compared side-by-side to potential foster families, unwed mothers failed to measure up in the most important areas. According to one placement manual the ideal foster family, and

could theoretically weaken the emotional bonds and dampen the mother’s desire to confront the challenges associated with single motherhood. Many foster parents eventually became adoptive parents. See Catherine E. Rymph, “From ‘Economic Want’ to ‘Family Pathology’: Foster Family Care, the New Deal, and the Emergence of a Public Welfare System,” *Journal of Policy History* 24 (2012): 7-25.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 97.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98-99.

by implication the ideal environment for the creation of well-adjusted children, required adequate financial means, normative familial composition, middle-class standards of housing and housekeeping, high moral and ethical standards, edifying interests and social connections, and pleasing temperaments, all variables that were noted to be missing or in short supply in most unwed mother-child familial units.⁹⁸

Unwed mothers also struggled to compete with foster mothers on a personal level. The foster home mother was constructed as the embodiment of ideal motherhood, a figure in stark contrast to the personality traits associated with most unwed mothers. Foster mothers were typically

described in glowing terms as almost a super-being, who has no faults, who instinctively rises superb to every emergency, who instinctively knows all. [She] is patient and understanding. She took in every word the visitor said about the good work of the agency. She is mature but attractive, -- modern yet maternal. She belongs to many important lodges and clubs but is a zealous and successful housekeeper and homemaker. Her children are attractive, well-groomed, and well-mannered.⁹⁹

When confronted with a choice between placing a child in a biological mother's home, an institution, or in the manufactured, carefully chosen environment of a foster home, most social workers chose the latter by 1930. Foster home placements were envisioned as

⁹⁸ Ann Ulrich and T. Earl Sullenger, *Child-Placing* (Omaha, Nebraska: Bureau of Social Research, 1937): 18.

It should be noted that much research by social scientists and social workers was focused on what made a "good" family, which added to the notion that ideal families could be scientifically formulated. See for example Mabel Rasey and Helen Witmer, "Case Studies of Eight Well-Adjusted Families, with Special Reference to the Childhood of the Parents," *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 7 (1936): 46-91 and Chase Going Woodhouse, "A Study of 250 Successful Families," *Social Forces* 8 (June 1930): 511-532.

⁹⁹ Edith Lauer, *The Role of Substitute Parents in the Life of the Emotionally Deprived Child* (New York: Child Welfare League of America, 1937): 5. See also Danielle F. Wozniak, "Foster Mothers in Contemporary America: Objectification, Commodification, Sexualization," *Women's History Review* 6 (1997): 357-366.

wholesome environments with the all the traditional expectations and duties of nuclear family life cheerfully fulfilled by the doting foster mother and the industrious foster father. Elaine Tyler May has argued that in the postwar context the idealized nuclear family safeguarded and distanced individuals from greater anxieties stemming from the atomic age.¹⁰⁰ This assessment can be applied with equal alacrity to the foster home environment of the interwar period. The artificial family environment of the foster home safeguarded the illegitimate child from its past and the anxieties related to outsider status; the stigma of illegitimacy was cushioned by the luster of normality provided by the foster environment, allowing an illegitimate child to bask and thrive under the nurturing gaze of a substitute mother.

Despite the theoretical benefits of foster home placement, studies of children who were removed from maternal custody and placed in a foster home demonstrated that the children would have preferred to remain in the allegedly substandard care of their biological mothers. A 1937 study conducted by social worker Richard Fanning of fifty children between the ages of twelve and seventeen who had been placed in foster care for at least six months, of which illegitimate children made up ten percent of the study, found that the majority of the children remembered their homes and said they liked being at home. One child said that, "I like [home] very much because it had cheerful surroundings, and I was happy because I was living with my own mother. Mother treated me very kindly and tried to give me what she could afford." Despite limited financial circumstances, from the child's viewpoint her mother "tried to be and was almost always

¹⁰⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

cheerful and of course made me feel the same. She was a good all-round pal.”¹⁰¹ In all, sixty-two percent of the children expressed a desire to return home, noting such things as “I had my own mother there” or “I was happier there.”¹⁰²

Recognition of such feelings intensified in the social work literature of the post-World War Two period. Historian Laura Curran has noted that social workers often took these types of comments in stride because foster home placement was recognized as a traumatic event, one that caused children to be “psychologically in mid-air; children in two places at once, with the accompanying conflict and anxiety.” Foster home placement did not completely sever maternal-child bonds and the child’s feeling that “home” was someplace physically different than their new location was a problem in short-term placements like foster homes. Leontine Young, a social worker and postwar illegitimacy expert who began her consideration of the sociocultural effects of illegitimacy in the interwar period, readily admitted that “no child wants to leave his own home...even though in many cases it seems from our eyes that the home offers him nothing but unhappiness. Bad as it may be, this home offers him the only security, the only real sense of belonging he has ever known.”¹⁰³

Interwar social workers did not ruminate for long on the origins of children’s unhappiness once placed in a foster home, but when they did they tended to blame the biological mother for any discord in the arrangement. The relationship between unwed

¹⁰¹ Richard Fanning, *Catholic Children under Public Care: A Study of a Selected Group of Fifty Catholic Children Who are County Wards Living in Foster Homes under the Supervision of the State in Three Eastern Counties of Connecticut* (Ph.D. Thesis, The Catholic University of America, 1937): 80-85.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Laura Curran, “Longing to Belong: Foster Children in Mid-Century Philadelphia (1946-1963),” *Journal of Social History* (Winter 2008): 429.

mothers and foster parents was frequently presented in the social work literature as strained and tenuous. Unwed mothers were often accused of engaging in a turf battle with foster mothers. For example, Elsie placed her child in a foster home because she could not bring herself to place her baby for adoption, saying that “she had always wanted something she could claim as her own.” Her baby stayed in foster care for two years, during which period the relationship with the foster mother became increasingly strained. Elsie began to complain that the foster parents were becoming “too attached” and infringing on Elsie’s maternal role. Her complaints were dismissed by her case worker, who noted that it was “not surprising that jealousy should enter the relationship” when Elsie had to work all day and leave the raising of her child to the foster mother.¹⁰⁴

Other social work studies of the foster mother-biological mother relationship noted similarly contentious interactions. Alice, for example, was described as “over-anxious” with a tendency to give orders to the foster mother, who alleged that Alice over-visited her child, was inconsiderate, and prone to grand displays that would spoil the child. Lora encountered conflict with her child’s foster mother once she began to fear that she could never give her daughter the “security” that the foster family could. Security deepened bonds between children and foster parents and led to situations like the one Frances encountered, where she began to resent the foster parents “because they [were] as fond of the child as he [was] of them.” The foster parents eventually expressed a desire to adopt Frances’s son and were noted to be increasingly “critical” of Frances’ maternal

¹⁰⁴ Janet Reed, *Mutual Placement of Unmarried Mothers and their Children: A Study of 52 Unmarried Mothers who have been Placed with their Children in Boarding Homes* (Master’s Thesis, University of Chicago, 1938): 64.

capabilities.¹⁰⁵ Foster families who developed a desire to adopt the illegitimate children in their care had ulterior motives for denigrating the maternal fitness of biological mothers, but the complaints made by foster families of overwrought, inept mothers were echoed in scientific studies of the mothers' personalities. Instead of raising alarms that foster families were inventing or exaggerating maternal shortcomings, the complaints of foster families reinforced the belief that maternal custody was ill-advised.

Even so, social workers could not countenance strained relationships between foster mothers and biological mothers for extended periods of time because the child was observed to suffer from the back-and-forth accusations of two women vying for affection. Moreover, so long as the biological mother retained legal custody of her child she could request for transfer to another foster home as soon as her suspicions against a foster mother's motivations were aroused. The derisive nature of the relationship that eventually developed between many foster mothers and biological mothers made the arrangement transient instead of supplying a stable home environment, as social workers wished. A 1938 study of unwed mothers in the Chicago area found that maternal allegations of "poor care of the child" and "miscellaneous personal differences" were the main reason cited in transfer requests. The next most common reason was the "judgmental attitude of the foster mother."¹⁰⁶ For mothers who desired to retain custody of their children but were incapable of doing so in their own home, the foster mother quickly transitioned from a friend and ally to a source of competition for their children's love. As social

¹⁰⁵ Joanne Walsh, *The Unmarried Mother and Her Child: A Study of 24 Cases in the Foster Home Department of the Children's Aid Society* (Master's Thesis, Columbia University, 1936): unnumbered page.

¹⁰⁶ Reed, p. 59.

worker E. Lauer quipped, “It is far easier to place children whose parents don’t want them placed, than to place children whose parents do wish them placed.”

[The latter type of parents] are often too immature for the responsibilities that marriage and parenthood bring. Economically frustrated, they are beset by guilt and confusions they can neither face nor understand. They have bequeathed their children the proper environmental rights only to find that they, themselves, are bereft, and guilt and confusion yield to self-pity...Small wonder they cannot accept the agency-chosen foster parents of their children...”¹⁰⁷

Such strife made transition into new foster homes a regular occurrence for many illegitimate children. Social worker Margaret Sullivan found that in Minnesota replacement was frequently deemed necessary because of the child’s inability to adjust to other children in the home due to personality or behavioral difficulties, the decision of the county board to stop using a particular home, a necessity to place a child in a rural foster home instead of one in the city to prevent attempts to run away to home, or a need for special care. Sullivan contended that the rate of replacement experienced by the illegitimate children in her study was necessarily higher than would be found in a group of “normal” children due to their “low mentality, defective heritage, and inadequate training,” which made “school adjustment, behavior, and personality” more problematic.¹⁰⁸ Social workers struggled to force the formation of the happy family that careful screening of the foster parents and their home environment should have theoretically made possible. Some workers, like Sullivan, alleged that the wild card in the equation was not the social workers’ screening and analysis of environmental variables,

¹⁰⁷ Lauer, p. 9-10.

¹⁰⁸ Sullivan, p. 51-56.

but rather the illegitimate child himself. They were “problem” children who were damaged by their previous environments (i.e, maternal shortcomings and pathologies).

Table 5.2
Replacement Rate of 42 Illegitimate Children in Foster Care between July 1934 and February 1940

<u>Total Number of Replacement Homes in 5 ½ Years</u>	<u>Number of Children</u>
1 Replacement	6 Children
2	12
3	12
4	6
5	1
10	5

Louise’s pattern of placements in the foster home system was typical for many illegitimate children. She was removed from custody of her feebleminded mother at the age of nine years old after an interview with a psychiatrist, who found Louise to be “entirely uncooperative, showing a studied, planned type of negativism not usual in her children her age.” Louise’s mother, however, had “a laughing manner” that encouraged Louise’s negativity; continued maternal care would “mean that Louise’s behavior would continue indefinitely.”

At the time of the study, Louise had been in two foster homes. In the first home she was jealous of a baby and “behaved in ways meant to attract attention.” She was placed in another home where she would be the only child and seemed to be adjusting well. Any residual behavioral problems were ascribed to continued maternal influence. Louise’s behavior was supposedly “much worse” when her mother visited. She had

“temper tantrums and screaming spells,” which Louise’s foster mother said Louise’s mother enjoyed and seemed to initiate.

Louise’s mother was described in the case history as an individual who purposely tried to elicit an extreme emotional response to her presence as a way of confirming to herself that Louise missed her. The foster mother said that,

The mother seemed to want Louise to cry when she left and always prolonged the parting until Louise did cry. The mother would come back several times to say goodbye.

It did not occur to either the foster mother or the caseworker that these could be the actions of a mother who desperately missed her child instead of a mother intent on causing an emotional outburst. At any rate, the motivation for her actions did not matter because the foster mother further alleged that Louise “never mentioned her mother and soon after she left she appeared to have forgotten all about her.” The foster mother stated that it “didn’t seem to make any difference to Louise whether her mother visited or not.”

Louise’s mother eventually became illegitimately pregnant for a second time, at which point the foster mother forbade her to enter her home and effectively ended all contact between mother and daughter. Louise asked when her mother was coming to visit several times in the weeks following, which “rather surprised” the foster mother. When Louise commented that her mother must be too busy to visit, the foster mother did not correct her. Eventually Louise stopped looking for her mother.¹⁰⁹

The author of the study concluded that Louise’s case history and others like it represented the children’s need for “belongingness” to establish a personal identity, a

¹⁰⁹ Stewart Monaghan, *Expression of Some Feelings of Children about their Relatives: A Study of 28 Children in Foster’s Homes* (Master’s Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1944): 35-39.

need that was frequently supplanted by feelings of remorse about their failure to find acceptance amongst their natural families. Successful adjustment to foster home placement required children to recognize that their parents' interest in them would eventually fade, either naturally or by artificial mechanisms like those concocted by Louise's foster mother. Once children could distance themselves from their biological families, they would lose their desire to return to them and be fulfilled by their new environment.¹¹⁰ In this sense, "successful" foster home placement was dependent upon weaning mother and child away from each other by instilling a belief in children that their parents no longer cared for them.

Louise's case history is a powerful example of the marked shift in custodial policy during the interwar period. In 1924, a mere decade before the children profiled in this section were removed from their homes, the U.S. Children's Bureau remarked in a study on child dependency that "a family does not have the characteristic found in some forms of vegetable life which enables the broken segment to take root immediately in new soil." A child removed from his or her home environment was recognized to suffer "keenly" from having to "endure fears and uncertainties and questionings that are unanswered" about their families and their new home. The Bureau cautioned that "in general, the permanent or long-term separation of a child from his own kindred is likely to affect seriously the child's mental and emotional life."¹¹¹ By 1935 such considerations were secondary to the perceived harm an unwed mother could have on her child's development, making the emotional trial of foster home separation a fair trade for a

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72-83.

¹¹¹ Emma O. Lundberg and Mary E. Milburn, *Child Dependency in the District of Columbia*, Publication No. 140, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924): 6.

guarantee of eventual adaptation and healthy development of the illegitimate child. Short-term suffering was more palatable to social workers than the possibility of chronic behavioral and emotional dysfunctions. The observations of the development of illegitimate children who were left in the primary care of their biological mothers or placed in foster care indicated that both solutions had potentially harmful side-effects for normative emotional growth. But removing illegitimate children from the influence and reach of their biological mothers seemed to social workers to offer the best chance for healthy development. This was the final conclusion needed to achieve the ultimate custodial shift toward a preference for adoptive custody.

The movement toward adoption in cases of illegitimacy was premised on casework observations like the ones discussed above and scientific theories that promised successful adaptation to the new home environment if adoptive families and children were carefully matched. Despite the prominence of G. Stanley Hall and other developmental psychologists in the child study and child development literature of the interwar period, the theoretical foundation for the custodial shift was derived from the work of Arnold Gesell, who was fittingly Hall's protégé. A pediatrician and developmental psychologist, Gesell is often described as "a giant" in the field of child development. After his appointment to the faculty at Yale University, Gesell established the Yale Child Development Clinic, which he headed until his retirement in 1948. At the Clinic Gesell embarked on extensive study of "normal" development in infants and young children. He produced a series of films for parents to be used in child study groups

in the 1920s and 1930s before authoring numerous books on child rearing in the 1940s and 1950s.

Gesell articulated the physical, emotional, and intellectual milestones of child development. His work was able to temper the rhetoric of eugenicists who publicly worried that adoption might dilute familial stock and cause social unrest by placing a third-class child in a first-class home. Gesell argued that children could be tested and matched to adoptive homes with an intellectual and genetic composition similar to that of the biological parents, allowing science to “help the adoptive family approximate the biological family.”¹¹² The natural inputs could therefore remain constant, but the environmental stimuli associated with nurture would theoretically only improve with adoptive placement.¹¹³ Any transference of the biological mother’s pathologies to the illegitimate child could be negated by the child’s introduction to an appropriate home environment.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ellen Herman, “Families Made by Science: Arnold Gesell and the Technologies of Modern Child Adoption,” *Isis* 92 (December 2001): 684-715.

¹¹³ There was an inherent flaw to Gesell’s work and his understandings of the nature-nurture debate. His laboratory experiments with children convinced him that constitutional and genetic factors governed most aspects of an individual’s behavior and development. “While Gesell allowed that personality could be molded through training and socialization, he denied that the same was true of temperament or the potential for growth,” meaning that there were some aspects of nature that nurture could never trump. This is a problematic approach to be incorporated into scientific arguments for adoption and it was a contradiction in thought that Gesell could never satisfactorily explain. His hereditarian streak alongside his advocacy for environmental intervention was not unusual in the interwar period, however, and social workers were successful in diffusing the contradiction by arguing that not all children were appropriate subjects for adoptive placement. The prioritization of nature over nurture was therefore more a continuum of fitness than an absolute in placement policies.

¹¹⁴ It is important to note that this belief was thought to hold for any non-maternal placement. For example, a 1936 study conducted under the joint auspices of the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station and the state Bureau of Child Welfare found higher IQ rates among children in foster care “than would be expected for children coming from the educational, socio-economic, and occupational level of the true parents.” Moreover, the children’s IQ rates appeared to increase in

The custodial shift was also made possible by a cultural sea change in the way that families and children were constructed in interwar America. The traditional market for adoptive children had focused on older children who would be capable of lending a hand on the farm or in the home. In this sense, adoptable children were marketable only as a labor commodity. By the interwar period, babies began to be in demand for their sentimental value. Suddenly the motivation for adoption was not economic but social in nature. People were attempting to create a family in the truest sense of the word; “the only legitimate rewards of adoption were emotional.”¹¹⁵

Child placing agencies had a difficult time keeping pace with the demand for adoptable children, which traditionally had largely originated from the ranks of illegitimate babies. Specific tracking of adoption rates in the interwar period is a daunting proposition. Records are scanty and reporting is irregular; even the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) was forced to admit in 1938 that it was “difficult to obtain very exact information on adoption rates.” The evidence that is available, however, suggests that a shift in preferred custodial preferences was underway by the late 1930s. The CWLA estimated, for example, that in one area of New York state the annual adoption rate doubled in 1934 and demand for adoptable children had remained steady ever

direct relationship to the amount of time they spent in the home. See Harold M. Skeels, *The Relation of the Foster Home Environment to the Mental Development of Children Placed in Infancy* (Iowa City, Iowa: Iowa Child Welfare Research Station, 1936): 5. For a similar study, see Alice M. Leahy, “A Study of Adopted Children as a Method of Investigating Nature-Nurture,” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 30 (1935): 281-287.

¹¹⁵ Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 190.

since.¹¹⁶ Between 1934 and 1944, there was a three-fold increase in the number of annual adoptions nationally.¹¹⁷

More remarkable still, the caliber of adoptive parents was fundamentally different than it had been a generation before. A study by the New York State Charities Aid Association found that whereas nearly three-quarters of the prospective foster fathers known to the agency between 1898 and 1901 held semi-skilled, unskilled, or farming occupations, by 1921 the ratio had shifted in favor of men in business and office work. A similar study in Minnesota found that the adoptive parents of children from 1918 to 1928 employed in professional, semi-professional, or managerial occupations surpassed the rate of such occupations within the general population.¹¹⁸ The families lining up to adopt illegitimate children therefore hailed from a radically different background than the one assumed of the average unwed mother; the ramifications for the difference in life available to illegitimate children assigned to maternal custody versus adoptive custody were staggering to social workers. It was a rags to riches sort of fairy tale.

The taint of adoptive children that was applied with a broad brushstroke by the popularization of the eugenics movement was effectively diminished by the publicity surrounding new scientific childplacing principles a la Gesell that screened for possible genetic defect such as low intelligence or psychiatric abnormality. There is evidence from the Home School that some infants were deemed unadoptable due to the low IQ scores of their mothers, which in these instances were reported to be in the range of 40-50.

¹¹⁶ Child Welfare League of America, "A Study of the Adoption Situation in New York City," January-April 1938, Unpublished Report, Child Welfare League of America Records, Box 15, SWHA.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 191-192.

However, the reports of children being permanently committed to state institutions by reason of innate defect were a small minority. As this chapter argues, illegitimate children were rarely consciously pathologized by caseworkers. The emphasis on the scientific placement methods that screened for undesirable children was by and large a window-dressing campaign designed to reassure potential adoptive parents of the quality of the product.¹¹⁹

Adoptive practices in the interwar period, for all the bluster about the application of scientific expertise, were market driven. At the simplest level, babies were a desirable product. Adoption became more prevalent despite scientific interest in the subject, not necessarily because of the safeguards it purported to offer. People were suddenly hungry for babies to adopt and social workers, thanks to the pathologization of unwed mothers, suddenly found themselves with a significant amount of available babies. A 1938 study by the Child Welfare League of America argued that the increased interest in adopting children was “a significant development of the last decade.” Their discussion of the new trend focused on anecdotal assessments gathered from physicians, adoption agencies, and social work agencies in New York City. These experts suggested that there was a newfound “more liberal attitude” regarding the desirability of bringing up children not of one’s own stock; that the Depression had caused people to place value on the more permanent things in life, such as “more satisfying human relationships”; that there was a generalized feeling that more married couples were having difficulty conceiving children

¹¹⁹ For a discussion of scientific placement principles, see Claudia Nelson, *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America, 1850-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003): 151-155.

on their own; and a new willingness to adopt illegitimate children that stemmed from a greater acceptance of extramarital sexual contact.¹²⁰

However, it is unlikely that maternal custody would have faded from favor so quickly if there were not an economically expedient alternative available in the form of adoption. State assessment of the financial cost of non-adoptive custody for children of unfit mothers likely factored into policy decisions to prioritize adoptive placement. A November 1928 study found that the price of care per child on an annual basis ranged from \$491 to \$1412, depending on the institution. A more detailed consideration of the cost associated with the care of 89 children in five institutions concluded that the minimum cost was \$101,997, or \$1,146 per child. These estimates of cost did not include worker salaries, a figure that would have increased the cost per child to \$1,707 annually.¹²¹ In an ideal world the unwed mother would pay for a portion of her child's care, but this seldom occurred. The Lutheran Receiving Home for Children noted that as many as fifty percent of the children in the Home received no support from their parents or relatives, leaving the entirety of the child's expenses to be covered by the Home.¹²²

The Children's Home Society, which was funded to a great extent by the Minneapolis

¹²⁰ Child Welfare League of America, "A Study of the Adoption Situation in New York City," January-April 1938, Unpublished Report, Child Welfare League of America Records, Box 15, SWHA.

This more favorable view of adoption (and by implication the desirability of illegitimate children) did not translate to opinions of unwed mothers. One physician remarked that, "Only two types of girls have babies nowadays – those who are too dumb to know what to do, and those who are too afraid to risk an abortion."

¹²¹ Mildred Mudgett, "Dependent Children in Seven Minneapolis Institutions: Report of Subcommittee on Children's Homes," November 1928, Unpublished Report, United Way of Minneapolis Records, Box 80, SWHA.

If these figures were to be considered on a weekly or monthly basis, rates at most Minneapolis-St. Paul homes averaged to \$4/week or \$15/month.

¹²² Unpublished report on The Lutheran Receiving Home for Children, 1929, United Way of Minneapolis Records, Box 80, SWHA.

Community Fund, similarly noted that “the major part of fees” remained unpaid.¹²³ The Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies concluded that these figures meant that the care of dependent children was “a question of major importance”; it was an unsustainable economic model even before the financial ravages of the Depression. These economic models combined with scientific understandings of nature-nurture and a new consumer demand for babies to stimulate the custodial shift. The Minnesota Plan and related legislation in other states had, moreover, created a structure that was well-equipped to manage the transition. Ellen Herman has rightly described this shift as “kinship by design,” wherein the science of adoptive practices was the methodical formulation of families “on a foundation of empirical knowledge [that was] supported by the protective machinery of bureaucratic regulation.”¹²⁴

Ironically, social work literature of the period tended to present unwed mothers as the primary proponents of adoption instead of the agencies themselves. Social worker Sylvia Oshlag demonstrated the frequency of the occurrence by discussing the case history of Jane, who first made contact with the agency at the age of twenty-two years in the eighth month of her pregnancy. Jane was allegedly the first party to suggest the possibility of adoptive placement. Her caseworker notes that Jane’s request for adoption was “an attempt to reject the child and have her life go on as if this experience [had] not occurred,”¹²⁵ a comment that was in line with the construction of unwed mothers as self-absorbed, uncaring individuals who viewed their babies only as reflections of themselves.

¹²³ Unpublished report on The Children’s Home Society, 1929, United Way of Minneapolis Records, Box 80, SWHA.

¹²⁴ Herman, p. 685.

¹²⁵ Sylvia Oshlag, “Surrendering a Child for Adoption,” *The Family* xxvi (June 1945): 135.

Jane was described as a girl with “an antagonistic attitude” toward all her interpersonal relationships, which was expressed “in her posture, and in her disdain of her surroundings.” Jane explained that she had to adopt out the child because she was planning to return home after a long absence and could not do so with a child. She rejected suggestions for foster care because she planned to get married, even though she admitted that “she was not engaged, nor had she met the man she wanted to marry.” Jane went on to explain that the father of her baby was married and that she did not expect him to break up his family for her. Although she said she had been “very much in love with him,” her ready acceptance of his inability to marry her coupled with her desire for adoptive custody prompted the caseworker to suggest that Jane “had no real love for the father or the baby nor did she have the capacity to see them as individuals with needs of their own.”¹²⁶ Jane instead approached them as objects that could fulfill a personal need, a conclusion that echoed psychiatric analyses of unwed mothers and demonstrates the extent to which the pathological construction of illegitimacy pervaded all aspects of casework.

The caseworker eventually agreed to adoptive custody because she believed that the “child meant nothing” to Jane, an opinion that was reinforced by Jane’s demeanor when she signed the papers and told her baby goodbye. She “showed some emotion..., but was not unduly upset and seemed less tense than at any other interview.”¹²⁷

The response exhibited by Jane was a feature of all the cases discussed in the article; the mothers were unified in a sense by their alleged relief at being released from a

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

burden. Helen, for instance, had to be convinced that adoption was the best decision by long discussions with her caseworker, who convinced her that her “feelings of shame, remorse, and guilt, had clouded her perspective as to the wisest plan.” Despite the implied element of coercion in Helen’s decision, Oshlag commented that “she did not seem at all upset” when she signed the surrender papers and instead had rambled on about how “she had enjoyed her train trip and felt easy and relieved at placing [her baby] for adoption.” Helen signed the papers “with no sign of nervousness or anxiety.”¹²⁸

Oshlag noted in her concluding comments that it was obvious that neither Jane nor Helen “really want[ed] their children;” it was therefore the appropriate role of the caseworker to help mothers “understand what [the] child means to its mother and then help her see the reality of the situation in accordance with her feelings.” The motivations of unwed mothers for keeping their babies were to hold on to the father, to “use as a club” over their parents, or to have someone to cling to and love. Oshlag did not particularly believe that unwed mothers approached their children with any feelings that resembled true maternal love so much as they approached their babies “with a combination of feelings, resulting in ambivalence and confusion.” If the caseworker’s priority was to ensure that both mother and baby would lead “a happy, useful life,” then maternal custody was contraindicated in almost all cases due to the mothers’ inability to truly feel anything for their babies.¹²⁹

The generalized trends in custodial placement discussed thus far were also taking place at the Sauk Centre Home School. An analysis of placement rates for the period

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138-140.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141-142.

beginning in 1920 demonstrates that by 1940 eighty percent of unwed mothers were placing their children for adoption.¹³⁰ Impressions gleaned from case histories indicate that this was typically done against their initial desire and was a result of caseworkers coaching mothers into the decision. For example, Gertrude spent at least six months grappling with her emotions and her caseworker's expectations between October 1939 and April 1940. When first asked about possible adoptive custody for her little boy, whom she called Dickie, Gertrude "said that it was hard for her to trust her baby to other people. She felt he needed her constant care." The School suggested that she take some time to allow her emotions to recover from the shock of an unplanned pregnancy and sent her to Minneapolis to work as a nanny in a private home while Dickie stayed at the school.

Reports from her employer back to the School note that Gertrude talked "constantly" about Dickie and "usually [had] a spell of depression whenever she [heard] from one of the girls" at the School about him. In November 1939 "a girl wrote to her and talked at length about her baby. Gertrude rushed into her room and stayed for some time and came out with her eyes very red."¹³¹ Gertrude's file was incomplete and her ultimate custodial decision was missing, but the available evidence suggests that contrary to Oshlag's generalizations Gertrude was a mother who cared very deeply for her son. Separation from him was not a decision she was likely to have taken lightly.

More generally, state policy in Minnesota for *all* unwed mothers known to authorities (not just those confined at the Home School) held that when an unwed mother

¹³⁰ These statistical calculations are based on the information contained in the Home School's registry of births. See Sauk Centre Home School Birth Registry, Minnesota Historical Society.

¹³¹ Sauk Centre Home School for Girls Case Files, Box 6.

could not “show herself capable of providing security for her child within a reasonable time,” county welfare boards would file a petition with the juvenile court for the child to be committed to the general guardianship of the state Board of Control or a private agency. By 1938 the Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies could remark that custody was “therefore taken from the mother in an unusually large percentage of cases.”¹³² In Hennepin County, the “reasonable amount of time” in which an unwed mother had to prove that she could “furnish both emotional and financial security” on a permanent basis was “about one month.”¹³³

The child-centric nature of custodial policy in Minnesota by the end of the interwar period was acknowledged by social welfare leaders. In a study on the emotional support given to unwed mothers who chose to place their children for adoption, the Hennepin County Welfare Board found that there was near total “failure to understand and to help the mother with her emotional problems.” Cases were “promptly closed” once the mother signed the necessary legal documents because the Board considered the child to be “its only responsibility.”¹³⁴

Social work research in the interwar period was like a great, chugging machine that produced vast amounts of “scientific” data that convinced caseworkers (and which social workers used to convince others) that illegitimacy was an external symptom of an

¹³² Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies, “Community Survey of Social and Health Work in Minneapolis: Unmarried Mothers, July 1938,” Unpublished Report, United Way of Minneapolis Records, Box 87, Social Welfare History Archives.

¹³³ *Ibid.* Moreover, the financial security had to be achieved without the aid of government or private subsidy. Out of a caseload of 823 unwed mothers, only 20 mothers were granted any type of relief.

¹³⁴ “Community Survey of Social and Health Work in Minneapolis: Unmarried Mothers, July 1938,” SWHA.

internal disease, a disease that was chronic in nature and prevented unwed mothers from forming an appropriate bond with their children. This research created the pathological unwed mother who bore the full brunt of society's derision and was ultimately punished by the annulment of her biological claim to her child in the name of child welfare. The unwed mothers profiled in this dissertation likely never had a chance to rediscover the babies they said goodbye to as young women. In a political environment where women's reproductive autonomy is daily questioned, their struggles to be recognized as mothers may speak to a new generation in need of perspective about the meaning of motherhood, family, and a woman's right to navigate and define such life events on her own terms. Despite what scientific theories may suggest, motherhood never has been and never will be an artificial creation that can be defined and manipulated by experts. The pathological mother was created by those who wished to dictate normative family values and desirable family structures; unfit motherhood, like fit motherhood, is an intangible construct that resides exclusively in the eye of the beholder.

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Appendix One:

Home School Student Demographic Data,
As Reflected in the Board of Control's Annual Reports

Home School Student Demographic Data, As Reflected in the Board of Control's Annual Reports from 1921-1936							
YEAR	Admission Data				Ages of Students		
	Total # Admitted	# Returned from Parole	# Returned from Escape	Total # Inmates	Avg. Age at Admission	Youngest Age	Oldest Age
1921	137	87	7	559	15 years	11 years	over 20 years
1922	174	68	30	569	15 years	9 years	18 years
1923	168	51	77	646	14 years	10 years	16 years
1924	176	48	89	653	15 years	under 9 years	18 years
1925	162	53	26	565	14 years	7 years	18 years
1926	172	80	8	561	15 years	9 years	19 years
1927	152	92	19	549	15 years	11 years	18 years
1928	129	110	26	562	15 years	13 years	19 years
1929	136	82	41	523	15 years	12 years	18 years
1930	120	69	47	497	15 years	9 years	18 years
1931	130	70	38	507	15 years	10 years	18 years
1932	128	82	29	535	15 years	11 years	18 years
1933	98	104	24	538	15 years	9 years	18 years
1934	104	114	7	543	15 years	10 years	18 years
1935	101	97	38	293	15 years	10 years	19 years
1936	102	73	35	293	15 years	9 years	19 years

Home School Student Demographic Data, As Reflected in the Board of Control's Annual Reports from 1921-1936				
YEAR	Educational History			Employment
	% with Lower than Sixth Grade Education	% with Sixth - Eighth Grade Education	% with Above Eighth Grade Education	% Employed at Time of Admission
1921	14	66	17	80
1922	11	68	21	80
1923	8	61	27	69
1924	9	61	27	69
1925	11	66	23	77
1926	8	70	23	72
1927	7	63	30	73
1928	7	61	31	70
1929	10	57	30	74
1930	4	58	34	83
1931	5	62	27	70
1932	9	63	21	73
1933	5	60	32	66
1934	10	55	32	51
1935	--	--	--	65
1936	--	--	--	77

Home School Student Demographic Data, As Reflected in the Board of Control's Annual Reports from 1921-1936				
Parent's Marital State				
YEAR	% of Parents Living Together	% of Separated or Divorced Parents	% of Families with at least one Deceased Parent	% of Remarried Parents
1921	41	23	29	6
1922	41	15	40	2
1923	51	8	18	15
1924	45	18	34	0
1925	38	26	35	0
1926	43	19	38	0
1927	32	19	34	15
1928	43	8	37	10
1929	52	7	15	25
1930	45	10	24	21
1931	42	10	21	24
1932	40	9	23	27
1933	42	20	18	17
1934	36	14	20	27
1935	--	--	--	--
1936	--	--	--	--

Home School Student Demographic Data, As Reflected in the Board of Control's Annual Reports from 1921-1936						
YEAR	Alcoholism			Parental Character		
	% of Fathers Intemperate	% of Mothers Intemperate	% of Both Parents Intemperate	% with Bad and/or Weak Fathers	% with Bad and/or Weak Mothers	% with Both Parents Deemed Bad and/or Weak
1921	20	4	6	17	12	12
1922	24	2	4	21	9	14
1923	30	2	5	17	4	4
1924	27	2	4	16	10	5
1925	33	0	1	10	18	34
1926	34	2	5	17	12	28
1927	14	2	7	14	6	34
1928	24	0	3	3	5	34
1929	24	1	8	14	11	52
1930	36	1	8	10	8	52
1931	33	3	12	11	8	46
1932	28	2	6	10	17	50
1933	18	2	7	14	26	32
1934	21	2	2	6	10	56
1935	--	--	--	17	7	36
1936	--	--	--	13	13	37

Home School Student Demographic Data, As Reflected in the Board of Control's Annual Reports from 1921-1936							
	Home Environment			Parental Employment History			
YEAR	% Good Homes	% Fair Homes	% Bad Homes	% Father Employed	% Mother Employed	% Both Employed	% Both Unemployed
1921	1	25	48	46	9	23	6
1922	19	44	28	41	17	13	3
1923	26	34	19	54	2	29	7
1924	41	32	18	57	9	18	9
1925	13	46	26	59	12	20	5
1926	22	34	31	60	12	13	8
1927	24	32	29	62	8	16	9
1928	31	33	26	62	1	12	12
1929	16	40	39	69	2	16	4
1930	23	25	38	62	16	17	3
1931	24	26	37	56	11	18	7
1932	14	30	45	48	14	13	8
1933	30	25	40	53	4	12	17
1934	18	46	22	49	8	7	22
1935	10	46	41	--	--	--	--
1936	10	51	31	--	--	--	--

Appendix Two:

Sample of Modified Heredity Chart of Illegitimate Mothers, 1927

Table I
ILLEGITIMATE MOTHERS—Continued
INDIVIDUAL RECORDS

No.	Case No.	C. Age	M. Age	Diagnosis	Siblings	Home Conditions	Nationality	Sexual History	Disposition of Child	Disposition of Mother
28.	3608	17+	14+	Normal	3	Broken—Mother dead — S. M.	U. S.	Father man of poor reputation	Placed for adoption	Working at house work
29.	3318	17+	17	Normal	4	Inferior—Imm.	U. S.	Father a married man	Cannot trace	Ran away from maternity home—not traced.
30.	3333	17+	11+	Borderline	2	Comfortable—Highclass	U. S.	Father a boy companion	Orphanage	Returned to parents, working
31.	2922	17+	10	M.M.-I.C.	3	Inferior—Mother dead — Alc.—F. M.	U. S.	Father a married neighbor	Died	Committed to Rome
32.	3316	17+	15+	Normal	3	Inferior—Imm.	U. S.	Girl's father, father of child	Placed for adoption	Living at home
33.	3237	17+	15+	Normal	8	Parents separated—Alc.	U. S.	Girl had former sex delinquencies	With maternal grand-mother	Ret. to parents, later arrested, was pregnant—com. to Albion
34.	3132	18	10	M.M.-I.C.	6	Fair	U. S.	Second illegitimate child	Placed for adoption	Returned to parents—not doing well
35.	3193	18	12	M.M.-I.C.	6	Alc.—Imm.—Psycho.	U. S.	Father a casual "pick-up"	Died	Returned to parents
36.	3265	19+	12+	Dull	3	Broken—Imm.	Ind. & Irish	2 men involved—a married woman	Orphan Asylum	Another illeg. child born since; admits promiscuity
37.	2066	19+	Adult	Normal	8	Fair	U. S.	Man promised marriage—deserted	Placed with maternal aunt	Doing house work
38.	3211	19	14	Inferior	4	Poor	U. S.	Forced by brother-in-law. Former sex experience	With mother	Returned to parents
39.	3208	19+	10+	M.M.-I.C.	6	Mother dead—Alc.	U. S.	Man who offered automobile ride	Died	Working as waitress, twice arrested for sex offenses
40.	3699	19+	9+	M.M.	4	Father dead	English	Forced by married man	With maternal grand-mother	Returned to parents
41.	3085	19	13+	Dull	6	Broken—Mother dead — S. F.	U. S.	Father of child alcoholic—Girl sexually inclined	Placed for adoption	Living with sister—working
42.	2964	19+	Adult	Normal	4	Poor	U. S.	Previous sex experience	With mother	Working in family
43.	3110	20+	9+	M.M.-I.C.	11	Poor	U. S.	Forced	Orphan Asylum	Working in family—planning to be married
44.	2862	20	15	Normal	9	Good	U. S.	Girl highly sexed	Died	Irreg. sex life continued
45.	3306	20	12	Dull	6	Father dead	U. S.	Promiscuous	Placed for adoption	Another illeg. child born since
46.	3267	20	11+	Borderline	5	Disturbed—Alc.	Polish	Man who offered auto ride	Placed with maternal aunt	Returned to parents—working in factory
47.	2164	20+	14	Normal	5	Disturbed — Crim. — Alc. — Inst.	Polish	Previous illegitimate child	With maternal grand-mother	Working away from home—deserted baby.
48.	3076	20+	14	Normal	10	Broken—Orphan	U. S.	Previous illegitimate child	With maternal aunt	First lived with sister—later left and is living illicitly
49.	2847	20+	12	Borderline	7	Broken — Imm. — Adopted—S. F.	U. S.	2 previous pregnancies	Died	Working—supervised by Big Sisters
50.	3459	20+	12	Dull	5	Broken—Imm. — S. F. — S. M. — Inst.	U. S.	2nd illegitimate child	Boarding home	Married father of child
51.	3602	20+	15+	Normal	2	Broken—Parents dead	U. S.	With consent	Placed for adoption	Living with aunt
52.	2836	21+	Adult	Normal	1	Broken—Father dead—Ins. S. F.	U. S.	2nd pregnancy	Placed for adoption	Returned to mother

Excerpted from Clara Harrison Town, *What Happens in the Psychological Clinic? Report of Department of Psychology, Children's Aid Society of Buffalo and Erie County, New York* (Buffalo, New York: Children's Aid Society, 1927): 119.