

The Mother Menagerie: Animal Metaphores in the Social Work Relationship with Young Single Mothers

By

Merlinda Weinberg, Ph.D, MSW, ACSW, RSW
Assistant Professor
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada

Abstract

In a qualitative study, social workers compared young single mothers to animals. I believe the metaphors illustrated some of the paradoxes and tensions in the helping relationship. The analogies served to deal with workers' ambivalences about aspects of power inherent in their positioning as agents of disciplinary practices. Despite evidence of empathy, the animal metaphors also exposed worker disapproval and emotional distance. The clients were viewed as out-of-control, with poor judgment, difficult to engage, and unable to protect themselves or their children. By these comparisons, the differences between workers and clients were polarized, reinforcing an existing hierarchy of morality, normalcy, and worth.

Theoretical Framework and Method

In a qualitative study, social workers compared their clients, young single mothers, to baboons, guppies, dogs, porcupines and wild animals. I believe that the metaphors illustrated some of the paradoxes and tensions in the helping relationship, revealing clues about what positions the workers' thought they should take as helpers and their perceptions of the young mothers. In particular these analogies served as justificatory mechanisms to deal with workers' ambivalences about aspects of power inherent in their positioning as agents of disciplinary practices. Despite evidence of empathy for their clients, the animal metaphors also exposed moral disapproval and/or emotional detachment on the part of the workers. The significance of the use of such analogies is that since language is not only reflective but constitutive of social reality, by comparing young single mothers to animals, the differences between workers and clients are polarized and intensified, delineating and reinforcing an existing hierarchy of morality, normalcy, and worth.

The metaphors were produced in a qualitative research study I conducted with five front-line social work practitioners in Ontario, Canada. The practitioners came from the spectrum of social agencies that provide social services to this population, including a maternity home, a Section 19 1 classroom, and an outreach programme for homeless pregnant and parenting young women. The participants were recruited through letters to the agencies that were part of an umbrella organization formed to meet the needs of young parents in Ontario. The workers all identified themselves as white, were between 30 and 40 years of age, with extensive experience in the field, from a variety of educational backgrounds, but offering "social work" in their agencies.

I deploy feminist post-structural analytics to analyze the metaphors because of the emphasis in post-structural theory on examining power and language as a site where relationships are both defined and contested (Weedon, 1987). Feminism contributes a critical perspective on the position of the helper and a spur towards political change in practice. I rely particularly on two post-structural notions: subjectivity and discipline. Subjectivity is a post-structural term that rejects identity as the liberal humanist notion of a unified and fixed self. Instead the individual is seen as a site of on-going conflict, "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak," (Weedon, 1987, p.32) leading to the differing subject positions or "ways of being an individual" (Weedon, 1987, p.3). I find it a useful theoretical concept because it allows one to view the complex, changing and contradictory ways a worker sees herself and her clients rather than assuming a rigid and coherent notion of the self. In this article, the use of animal metaphors represents linguistic opportunities to glimpse workers' struggles with possible subject positions. This was particularly the case when the social workers were seen as fulfilling the social work functions of discipline. By discipline, I am referring both to "acts of punishment and correction and to fields of knowledge that diagnose deviance from the norm and intervene to remove it" (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999, p. 271). Given the mandated authority to evaluate and determine the adequacy of parenting and the potential risk to children in child welfare work, this is an unavoidable aspect of social work. An analysis of these metaphors uncovers aspects of the dynamics of power in the helping relationship, the complexity of workers' feeling about the disciplinary components of their practice as both necessary and troubling, as well as their ambivalences about young single mothers as clients.

Although the metaphors did not occur frequently, generally, they arose at points when the workers were uncomfortable and struggling with issues that came to light in our interviews. When the workers drew on metaphors, they seemed to be attempting to make a "case" for some aspect of their involvement with the young single mothers. I would speculate that the workers were

experiencing “outlaw emotions” those “emotions, according to hegemonic view of the situation, one is not supposed to feel” (Jagger, quoted in J. Nelson, 2001, p.180). The workers’ discomfort and need to justify their actions represented accessible moments in which conflicting feelings and attitudes about the helping relationship are more apparent, signaling the possibility of contradictory subjectivities.

Post-structuralist theorists suggest that there are no fixed meanings in language and what something means is always open to contestation and reinterpretation. Consequently, even if the intention of these workers was not to polarize (which I think was often the case), because language in some ways has a life of its own apart from its author, the connotations of clients as like animals transcends the intent of the speaker of these metaphors to create divides of value and humanity in social relations. This is especially serious given the historicity of discourses of young single mothers as “fallen women,” “feeble-minded,” “delinquent,” or “maladjusted” (Kunzel, 1993; Luker, 1996; Schlossman & Wallach, 1978; Stephen, 1995; Strange, 1995; Valverde, 1991). So extreme were the views of the dangers of single mothers during the early part of the twentieth century, that eugenics was practiced to prevent weakened, polluted, genetic “stock” from diluting the race (McLaren, 1990). Therefore metaphors that frame these young women as less than human are particularly salient and problematic for a population historically viewed in dehumanized ways.

I utilized critical discourse analysis to examine the meaning of these metaphors. Fairclough (2001, p. 231) describes critical discourse analysis as asking how language figures as an element in social processes. It is a critical theoretical approach in its emphasis on relations of power and ideology in constructing the social world and in the sense that its theoreticians are committed to social justice (Fairclough, 2001). Critical discourse analysis includes examination of both the relationship between subjects and the language that speaks them into existence, as well as the relationship between language and cultural, social, and historical contexts (Patterson, 1997, p. 426). It allows for close analysis of text (Fairclough, 1992).

One element of critical discourse analysis is an assessment of metaphors. “Metaphors being the daily bread of all conceptual thought” (Arendt, 2003, p. 13) they are an important vehicle to understand the processes by which social workers understand what constitutes a client and the nature of the helping relationship, at the same time that the use of these metaphors contributes to the construction of those relationships. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define a metaphor as a conceptual mapping from one semantic source domain to a different semantic target domain (Santa Ana, 1999, p. 194). Through comparison or analogy, two disparate domains are reduced to shared characteristics (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In this paper, the two domains that are compared through metaphor are young single mothers as clients and as animals.

One risk in using the case examples that follow is that readers may totalize the portrayals of the clients and workers. These case illustrations are not meant to represent a larger constituency of social workers, or reflect the sum practice of these particular workers. Workers’ understandings of the helping relationship and their clients were more complex and multi-faceted than can begin to be addressed in a paper such as this. This was a very small and modest study, and these vignettes are only one dimension of a multiplicity of facets in the workers’ characterizations of the helping relationship and their clients. At the same time, employing metaphors of clients as animals is a very powerful linguistic device and deserves exploration because language is constitutive, not simply reflective of reality, and thus the practice of comparing young single mothers to animals has ongoing significance for the construction of the relational space. My key concern is that its usage may contribute to the production and maintenance of relationships between social workers and clients that exacerbate the hierarchical imbalance of power relationships, and that support the constitution of these clients as “Other,” less human than those who offer the help.

Three themes will be addressed: how the practitioners perceived their clients as mothers, what positions the caseworkers believed they should take as helpers, and the general implications of using animal metaphors to describe the social work relationship.

Young Single Mothers as Out of Control with Poor Judgment

The first vignette came from my interview with Jannie3, a white woman in her early 30s, who worked in an urban agency whose primary programme was a Section 19 classroom for young mothers. One aspect of the services adopted, was a “trusteeship programme” in which workers were responsible for monitoring the distribution and expenditure of social assistance cheques. Following a discussion about the young women’s skills in budgeting, the animal metaphor was used. Jannie stated that it was her responsibility to “sit down with the moms at least an hour once a month and go through their budgeting and see ... how [they] spent [their] last cheque.” She felt that these young women “[did not] have the information on how to budget.” Although she did not perceive all the young mothers as needing help with budgeting, from her perspective, “the majority d[id] need a lot of help.” Her explanation of why they needed the help was that “they’re teenagers.” She supported this observation by asserting, “a lot of our moms [the clients] have cell phones and they pay for forty and fifty and sixty dollar packages on their TV. Those are luxuries.” She elaborated that “our moms want cell phones ... teenagers like to watch MUCH music [a music channel] and BET ... and ... you don’t [have those channels] in the basic cable package.” When I questioned what BET was, she responded, “Black Entertainment Television.” She elaborated,

you need to pay for those and these are teenage, young, ... you know music’s important to them. Music is important to me but don’t have cable. I just listen to the radio or I buy a fourteen dollar CD and that’s a lot cheaper ... so I ... share [this way of thinking] with them.

It was in the next section of our interview that the metaphor of a baboon was used to describe her clients:

M: ... you said, “I don’t have cable TV and I like music.” So what’s the difference between you and them [her clients]?
J: ... maybe I’m willing to do without the visual of the MUCH music ...

M: And why would you be able to and they wouldn't be able to?

J:...I think as teens, they're very much into appearances and knowing the right clothes to wear and the ... in way to dance which is terrifying on that MUCH music.

M: Why?...

J: Oh it's horrible

M: Why?

J: Oh, just the way they're gyrating anyways.

M: Oh really?

J: Yeah.

M: So it's very suggestive?

J: Very. ... yeah it reminds me of those, are they baboons? J: Very. ... yeah it reminds me of those, are they baboons? with the red butts, that's what it reminds me of....

M: Because?

J: ...because it is, as you said, suggestive ... the way these entertainers and these models are dressed in these videos is very suggestive, the way they're dancing. I think that just promotes um a really unhealthy sexual image. I think it just over sexualiz everything. ... I think it promotes violence ...I think it promotes ... verbal aggression ... now I'm really sounding old but.

M: Why do you say that?

J: Because as a teenager I would have said ... oh you're just old, you don't understand and I'm sure that's what... a lot of the young women think if I was to talk about it in that way. ... I do listen to their music. I do listen to Eminem ... so I think in some way that does kind of give me an in with them and rather than say, "oh, that's just disgusting," instead I'll say, "so what do you think about Eminem when he sings about killing his mother?" Or "wow, you think he's a good dad. Isn't it interesting that he's got an entire song about burying his wife with his baby right there?" ... the good thing out of the music part of it is then we can talk about abuse, we can talk about parenting, we can talk about other social issues that might come up.

Jannie characterized the young women as ignorant of the information needed to fulfill the tasks of budgeting and not having the requisite tools required to make good decisions. More significantly than a lack of information, however, was Jannie's sense that this behaviour represented poor impulse control and poor priorities that were explainable by her clients being teenagers. They were portrayed as profligate spenders, unlike herself, who was able to do without.

The next strip of talk linked the lack of impulse control in spending to out-of-control behaviour in other areas: sexuality and violence. It was at this juncture that the animal metaphor was utilized. She declared that her clients' dancing and music promoted "a really unhealthy sexual image" and that the music videos "oversexualize[d] everything." Pairing the young women with baboons suggested an animality, overt physicality and lack of civility or restraint in teenage music and teenagers as a group. In Western society, the colour "red" is often associated with passion and flamboyance. Tying passion to "big butts" may imply a crude conception of passion and sexuality, as well as perhaps suggesting that the sexuality is unruly or undisciplined.

The music videos are glossed with sex, irresponsibility, and poor impulse control, implying that the decision to be a single mother is representative of promiscuous and out of control behaviour in other areas as well. The music videos were joined with the "promotion of violence" and "verbal aggression" as Jannie described Eminem's videos of killing his mother and burying his wife with his baby. Eminem, is a hip-hop rap music entertainer, who is renowned for his shocking and violent music videos. While I would agree with her concern about Eminem's lyrics, her choice of one of the most extreme artists embraced by young women signals an anxiety that requires her to emphasize an excessive example to justify her position. When she stated in relation to Eminem's videos that "the good thing out of the music part of it is then we can talk about abuse, we can talk about parenting," she may also be implying that these young mothers are vulnerable to abuse, requiring protection from either themselves and from their partners. It is unclear who is the abuser and the abused; whether the young women are more prone to abuse their children, or whether they themselves are in danger of abuse from partners or parents. Fine (1988) identified three dominant discourses of sexuality in school settings for adolescents: sexuality as violence, as victimization, and as individual morality. All three of these are represented in Jannie's talk.

Notably, Jannie also linked these images to race. She began this part of the interview by explaining to me that BET was, Black Entertainment Television. So it is not any teenagers, or even single mothers, but racialized others or at least those individuals who watch BET that she has in mind. According to Webster's Dictionary, (1966, p. 156) baboons also represent individuals who are "foolish, coarse, ape-like, and uncouth." The description in the dictionary continues to suggest the word "baboon" signifies "great physical strength with low intelligence and brutish appearance." These connotations support the classic racial stereotype of Blacks as being physically strong, highly sexed, but not very intelligent. In her comparison of her clients to baboons, we have the typecast of single Black welfare mothers who are a drain on society because of irresponsible and promiscuous behaviour, having babies before they are ready to manage the responsibilities of motherhood.

One of the functions of the social work profession, exemplified here by Jannie, is discipline which works to regulate morality (Gil, 1998, p.82). Discipline provides an organized way of managing and responding to behaviours that the society evaluates as unhealthy, immoral or otherwise problematic (Nathanson, 1991, p.10). Baboons are seen as lower on the evolutionary pyramid, requiring handling by keepers who know better. As a social worker, Jannie perceives her positioning as needing to help these clients manage and control their excesses, as well as providing modeling of other ways of operating, for example by illustrating to her clients that she buys CDs or listens to the radio, rather than spending the money on cable TV. Jannie's discomfort with being perceived of as "old" represented her awareness that these views were not "politically correct". A term she used later in the interviews to explain her opinions, evidence of the existence of an "outlaw emotion" on Jannie's part.

Why are young single mothers disciplined for their behaviour? Pillow, quoting Wilton, states that it is "precisely because their ability to mother that women's bodies (and their political and social selves) have been so rigidly controlled within all patriarchal political systems" (1995, p. 201-202). Gendered bodies are central foci for creating "common-sense" notions about the family, parenting, and sexuality because women, as the child-bearers of the state, through their mothering, educate their offspring about particular ways of being in the world. Mothers' responsibilities to the "health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society" (Foucault, 1978, p.147) make them prime candidates for sexual and moral regulation. The societal response seems related to a moral panic with a key goal being to bring unruly desiring subjects back into line.

The spotlight is on youth who are seen to be at the crux of their reproductive decision-making and capacity. Young mothers are understood to be the future guardians of the nation. But not any group of teenagers, rather young women who come under the gaze of the social service profession. These are often the young women with a paucity of material and social resources, who may be the "more discouraged of the disadvantaged (Luker, 1996, p.115)." Having had premarital sex and/or choosing to be mothers outside the institution of marriage make their sexuality seem both endangered and dangerous to the status quo. Consequently, these young single mothers are seen as a social threat (Chant, 1997). Their "choices" to have children decoupled from marriage raise anxiety both about young women as sexual beings, and producing so that their sexuality is plain for all to see, but further to have the temerity to raise children contrary to conservative notions of the "traditional" family: within marriage and with a male partner. Mothering concerns here appear to be both classed and raced as well, implying that working-class and/or ethnically diverse mothers represent an even greater risk to the social order.

Young Single Mothers as Hard to Connect With, Angry, and Difficult To Treat

A second worker used the metaphor of a client being like a porcupine. A white woman in her early 40s, Charlotte worked in a maternity home in an urban area. In a discussion about choosing not to suspend a client who had been involved in a physical altercation with another resident, I asked:

M: ... why did you choose not to suspend Janice? C: Because I think this is a young woman that I've identified as being ve invisible. She's just a porcupine. The quills come out to protect herself ... her anger ... it used to be a daily thing about wh somebody was doing and that we weren't doing anything [to respond to her grievances]. That was just her being invisible and recognize that ... the staff really wanted me to [suspend her] because she's also the type of person that can really, really, really cau a lot of disturbances....

Charlotte explained that this client felt "invisible" and her quills came out to protect her from that feeling. Later she further clarified her thinking:

C:... she doesn't feel like she's there, she doesn't feel like she's being heard and then all of a sudden she comes out with t porcupine to defend herself, although she's been invisible. Like no one's noticed her up until now. Everyone is going around her over her or through her and she's not part of the equation and then all of a sudden she's this porcupine that has to raise the quills protect herself.

M: Okay.

C: So it's almost from being invisible to what some [other workers or clients] might see to be aggressive, for every reason to be li that.

The context of Charlotte using this metaphor is to provide an explanation for this client's aggressive behaviour and Charlotte's rationale for not suspending her for this out-of-control behaviour, despite the wishes of other staff and despite the severity of the young mother's behaviour which caused "a lot of disturbances." While this analogy arises from some empathy for the struggles of this young woman, it is hardly a flattering image. Porcupines are rodents. They are solitary creatures, living in burrows. When attacked, a porcupine presents its backside to its enemy, attempting to drive its tail, with its quills, into the attacker (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1982, p. 125). The association is to a wild animal that can attack sharply and aggressively, albeit for a reason. Charlotte suggests the prickly, defensive stance is a consequence of her client feeling invisible, unheard, and unseen by others in the maternity home, as well as due to her client's complaints not being addressed.

The possible legitimacy of the anger of this client, which Charlotte acknowledges, is undermined by the use of this metaphor. Anger from those dominated and the emotions they evoke in others, is a complex phenomenon. Often there have been oppressive circumstances that have led to a justifiable sense of being invisible and without a voice. Yet if clients respond with anger and if workers maintain the focus on an individual, without reference to the structures and circumstances that led to that sense of impotence and rage, the conduct may be analyzed as evidence of pathology. This is especially true for women in a society that is intolerant of women's assertion or aggression. Bernardez, suggests that often there is confusion and censure from therapists for behaviours that

do not conform to traditional role prescriptions of women, particularly in areas of anger or rebellion and this condemnation is “sometimes in moralistic terms” (1987, p.29). The good client (especially female) is one who expresses anger in a middle-class, white Anglo-Saxon fashion, namely with restraint or not at all. Self-governing subjects are expected to monitor and contain their own aggressive impulses. Yet the milieu continuously produces anger, particularly for those most marginalized (Miller, 1991).

A third participant, Patricia, a white 40 year old worker whose agency provided outreach and support services to homeless youth, many of whom were young mothers, referred to her clients as “wild animals.” For her, the context was her struggle around the discrepancy between her wish to be providing more psychologically-based services, and her clients’ needs for instrumental resources. There is a hierarchy of status in the types of services provided to clients. When the focus is on the delivery of concrete resources, the work, and consequently the worker, are viewed as less significant than those dealing with interpersonal or intrapsychic issues. When we first began our interviews, Patricia saw providing concrete supplies as a means to an end, although that sentiment shifted during the course of the research. Early on, she explained: “somebody that I worked with used the analogy of feeding a wild animal. ...so you kind of put the goods out and they [the clients] get a little bit closer and a little bit closer each time....”

For Patricia to offer the types of services that she felt were most meaningful required ensnaring these young mothers first through the provision of material resources. The wariness of the clients, the fragility of the connection, and the delicacy of the technique she had to utilize to engage these young women are implied in this metaphor.

In both of these vignettes, Charlotte and Patricia’s message was that their clients needed to be tamed. These young mothers were viewed as having little trust, being difficult to join with and hard to manage. They were not humans, but animals, who needed to be domesticated through the assessments and techniques of their handlers, the social workers.

Young Single Mothers as Unable to Protect Themselves and/or Their Children

In another case example, Charlotte compared the young women to guppies. The context was a discussion about an ethical conflict for her in the disparity of scrutiny of clients living in the community versus those living in the maternity home. Regarding a particular client in the residence whose mothering had been observed and found inadequate, Charlotte commented that had this same woman “been in the community, nobody would have known the difference.” I asked:

M: What’s that like for you knowing that you work in a setting where you’ve got this kind of surveillance on the young women a that the sorts of things that would go unnoticed and would allow them to keep their babies ... doesn’t happen when they live in residence...?

C: This is going to sound very odd but I have a little tiny fish tank because I love fish and they are two little tiny guppies and I take such great care of them but I’m so respectful of them because they have nowhere that they can go and nothing that they can do. A I’m always around and I can see their every move and I almost feel that I ...try as hard as I can to be empathetic with the young women I work with because all eyes are on them. ...

M: So in terms of my question of what’s it like for you, you gave me the example of the guppies.

C: Um-hmm.

M: So are you saying that because you have to be this all watching eye, the way you handle it is to try and be respectful?

C: ...I really ... say look at the bigger picture, and be VERY careful what you’re [she’s] saying. I almost quit [her agency] because of it, [I] went through a really bad period where I said we are playing God here and I’m not comfortable with this role. ...

C: And ... I really really, really, really don’t want to judge. But yet I get pulled because I’ve got a responsibility and I know what’s expected of me....

What is significant about Charlotte’s metaphor is that her image of her clients being so small and enclosed in a tank represents their powerlessness and inability to escape. She states that they have “nowhere that they can go and nothing that they can do.” This view overstates the reality since this is not a closed institution. Her clients do have the agency and could choose to leave the maternity home. Nonetheless, there is some accuracy since often there are few realistic alternatives available for them. Clients in a maternity home often represent the most unsupported and desperate of the young women having babies on their own. To fully understand the constraints on the clients requires an examination of the organizations in which the work occurs. Charlotte’s metaphor is reminiscent of Bentham’s Panopticon. The Panopticon according to Foucault (1977, p. 200) was an architectural space that allowed guards to continually monitor inmates by allowing maximum visibility of the prisoners while the guards were potentially watching but not verifiably so. This is what Charlotte is suggesting when she proposes, “all eyes are on them.” The consequence of the Panopticon arrangement was that it created in the prisoners’ “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assured the automatic functioning of power (p.201).” Outright force was less necessary because the effect of this state of potential continuous surveillance had the effect of indirect coercion because prisoners became self-regulating, not requiring the same level of direct intervention. A similar dynamic operates in a maternity home, one of the central institutions through which help is provided to young single mothers. The constant surveillance, like guppies in a fish bowl, results in the young women regulating themselves. Consequently, overt power by the workers is less often required than it would be if the young women did not monitor and regulate themselves.

In her metaphor, Charlotte refers to her clients as “little, tiny” implying that she is big in comparison. Furthermore, fish would die if

they were removed from the fish bowl. Conceivably there is the implication that the young mothers cannot protect themselves and as a worker Charlotte is responsible to ensure their safety. But safety from what? Perhaps, in part, it is to protect them from themselves, since Charlotte is also responsible for the safety of their children and these mothers are under surveillance precisely because of concerns about their capacity to parent adequately.

The reality of responsibility simultaneously for more than one client whose needs and rights may diverge, leads to a significant and unavoidable paradox: intervention with one family member that is helpful may be harmful to another. This is particularly the case in work with mothers because the needs of the young child legitimately trump those of the mother. Intervention can result in the most painful of processes, that of apprehension in which mothers are prevented from being permitted to parent at all. Apprehension, in Ontario, is the action undertaken by mandated agents to remove children from the care of their parents when the parenting is seen as inadequate and the children as in danger. As a society, we have entrusted social workers with the authority to make judgments to ensure the protection of those most vulnerable, and small children fall into that category. Consequently as Karen Swift argues, "help, in the form of authority, is provided to mothers but is actually for children" (1995, p.160, italics in the original). Unlike the vignette with Jannie, Charlotte is aware of and struggles with her understanding that this positioning of the social worker who sees all and "protects" is not entirely benign. Her discomfort in this positioning, but need to justify her actions, comes through in her preliminary statement, "This is going to sound very odd." She lamented that she felt like she was playing "God", and that she really did not want to judge. And yet, she is aware of her mandate when she expressed, "But yet I get pulled because I've got a responsibility and I know what's expected of me." I believe a civil and a just society does need to have mechanisms in place to protect its most vulnerable citizens. This paradox is one of the fundamental complexities of social work with mothers. But how does one practice in an ethical and emancipatory fashion for a client when one is also responsible to another more vulnerable family member whose rights and needs should take precedence more of the time? How should those judgments be made? In this instance, Charlotte details some of her strategies: being respectful, being empathic, looking at the big picture, and being careful about what she says. But are these sufficient? Under what conditions should the mothers' needs take precedence? Do workers consider broader structures and institutional strictures in their understanding and practice with clients?

On another occasion Patricia, described a client as like a wild animal. The context was witnessing an apprehension of her client's baby. Patricia conveyed the pain for mothers who lose their child, at the same time justifying the need for that intervention:

I really understand that kind of unconditional love for your child and wanting the best for your child. Even though it might not be the best, what YOU [that is the mother] want, isn't always the same as what's best for your child and kind of understanding that ... for a of women it's giving up their child [is] the best and how difficult that would be. I can't even imagine ... I have a ... client that I've been working with who's ... lost her child recently [through apprehension] and this is a kid that's never cried in front of me.... that particular day she ran from the Children's Aid office [the mandated child welfare agency in Ontario] into my office and I have NEVER heard anybody CRY like that, it's like what you think a wounded animal would sound like. ... I will NEVER forget that.

In another instance, she described the anguish for the mother of having her baby taken away: "she just, it was just wailing ... it sounded like something had been hit by a car, like a dog." Patricia's empathy comes through in the suggestion of how primary and primitive a core loss this would be for a mother. She is suggesting there is no societal politeness or civilizing influence that can cover the rage and despair. At the same time, by couching her concern in a metaphor of a dog, I think Patricia distances herself from this young woman by an objectification of her as like an animal. At first her client is only a thing, then a dog. Dogs have to be domesticated by human beings who train and own them. By comparing the young mother to an animal, a boundary is maintained between the worker and client, with the worker higher in the evolutionary chain, justifying the actions taken and perhaps warding off the worker's own distress at being an agent of these disciplinary measures. I would speculate that perhaps the judgments and decisions Patricia is required to enact necessitate a psychological mechanism to make them more tolerable. The use of these metaphors may be an indicator of the emotional numbing workers employ to cope with the stressors of these positions.

Implications and Conclusions

Five animal metaphors were analyzed to explore dimensions of the helping relationship between front-line practitioners and young single mothers. While these case illustrations in no way exemplify the range of subject positions for helper or client, they are instructive in understanding some significant aspects of the construction of help. The paradoxes and complexities of social work help were illustrated by the justificatory mechanisms of metaphors used to deal with the workers' distress about aspects of their positionality. The power inherent in the workers' positioning as agents of disciplinary processes emerged in their involvement in trusteeships, maternity home surveillance, and apprehensions. As a society, the mandate of social workers is to use their power to protect children from inadequate or dangerous mothers, even when to do so results in the disciplining of these young women. The responsibility to more than one family member with differing needs and rights is one of the central paradoxes of the positioning of social workers. To protect one may lead to harm of another. This dilemma leads to the unavoidability of ethical trespass, "the harmful effects ... that inevitably follow not from our intentions and malevolence but from our participation in social processes and identities" (Orlie, 1997). There is no escape from this conundrum for front-line workers. One wonders if that dilemma contributes to the use of metaphors such as these. Perhaps the use of these metaphors also helps to assuage workers' guilt or discomfort about their positioning as agents of discipline.

However, I believe comparing clients to animals disparages and denigrates young mothers, despite expressions of sympathy and concern. The young single mothers were viewed as out-of-control, with poor judgment, difficult to engage or help, and unable to protect themselves or their children. Metaphor "is not merely a figurative linguistic expression: it is a conceptual framework" (Santa

Ana, 1999, p. 217). By these comparisons, an ideology of clients as less than human, requiring handling by experts is maintained and replicated. Polakow argues (1995, p. 268) that "the language of pathology ...constructs another world of otherness- of definers and the defined." Once learned and accepted, this language can become taken-for-granted, representing notions that are subconsciously accepted as fact. It is through "language that differences acquire meaning for the individual" (Weedon, 1997, p. 73). Do clients accept and adopt these interpretations, internalizing these pejorative descriptions into their psyches and contributing to their own oppression? Does the use of these analogies fuel the hierarchical relationship and sustain, perhaps unwittingly, a justification of the power in the social work relationship?

Earlier I queried how judgements should be made in the complex paradox of two clients with differing needs and rights. Comparisons between clients and animals have no constructive place in those judgments because ultimately, language structures and influences actin (Moser, 2000, para 1) and such talk degrades clients while elevating workers as models of virtue and health. I believe it is imperative that social workers be acutely aware of how their use of language either contributes to maintaining those divides, or fosters more emancipatory and egalitarian directions in the helping relationship. If the profession subscribes to social justice as a fundamental core of its mission, there is no place in the language of social work for the use of the dehumanizing language of young mothers as like animals.

¹ Section 19 classrooms are collaborative, multi-disciplinary settings provided when a student's need for treatment is so severe that a regular day school classroom or special education classroom cannot fulfill the need. They were established between Ontario district school boards and government or non-profit non-governmental agencies (education programs in care, treatment, and correctional facilities, n.d., pg. 1).

² It will utilize the feminine form of pronouns as both a corrective to the dominant practice, which privileges men, but also because the workers and clients in my study were females.

³ All names are pseudonyms

⁴ Capitalized words represent words that were emphasized in the narrative

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Merlinda Weinberg, Ph.D can be contacted via e-mail at:
merlindw@sympatico.ca (<mailto:merlindw@sympatico.ca>)

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