

Generational Conflict: Intimacy, Money, and “Miniskirt” Feminism

In 1970, the Ontario Economic Council (OEC)¹ declared that the “cultural mosaic model” had failed to integrate immigrants into the wider Canadian community and attributed the supposed failure to the persistence of both self-contained ethnic communities that perpetuated “different” values and the cultural “gap” between immigrant parents and their children, particularly those of Southern European origin. Foreshadowing the racist backlash against the seventies-era immigrants, the OEC report also predicted a worsening of the gap as immigration from South Asia and the Caribbean increased, possibly resulting in violence.² It came close to advocating assimilation with its call for “a new approach somewhere between the traditional Canadian cultural mosaic and the U.S. melting pot.”³

The report’s author was Edith Ferguson, a social worker who in the 1960s had led two community projects undertaken by the International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto. Aimed at improving, respectively, the health and the occupational profile of Southern European immigrants, the projects reflected a mix of community organizing and liberal uplift. Ferguson’s progressive pluralist agenda had included proposals intended to improve the material lives of low-income immigrants and to foster multiculturalism. Correctly predicting that the wives and mothers of formerly peasant families would become lifelong workers, she had, for example, advocated more training programs that would increase skill levels and improve wages. She supported heritage and language classes for all children on the grounds that it would encourage a greater respect for all cultures and foster a pluralist society (see [chapter 8](#)).

Four years after leaving the Institute, and one year before Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau would adopt multiculturalism as official state policy, Ferguson was calling herself a “middle-of-the-roader” in the melting pot vs cultural mosaic debate. Asked to elaborate, she said she saw “no real harm in the fact that many ethnic groups continue to hang on to their own cultures and values long after they come to Canada.” But, she added, “it wouldn’t upset

her” if they “took on a more Canadian aspect” because “the development of a strong Canadian identity” was essential to “maintaining democratic institutions and liberal cultural traditions.”⁴ Ferguson’s 1970 report coincided with growing public awareness of a “third force” vision of multiculturalism being promoted by ethno-Canadian leaders during the recently completed proceedings of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism.⁵ Ultimately, however, her ambiguous reply reflected less an abandonment of her principles as the tendency within Institute pluralism to blur the lines between integration, Canadianization, and assimilation.

The OEC’s proposals for a “comprehensive” program of integration, such as English classes and counselling services, were not new. But the OEC did claim as innovative its rejection of “the popular concept that immigrants enrich Canada by maintaining their cultural identity in ethnic communities.” In other words, multiculturalism. The newspaper coverage homed in on the “special integration problem” posed by immigrant youth on account of the separateness of their ethnic communities from Canadian life. Journalists focused on parents from “remote” rural villages who disapproved of their children adopting a “Canadian style of life.” They wrote about boys made to quit high school in order to earn money. And how the pressure to direct their earnings towards the family mortgage rather than a much-desired car or motorcycle led them to commit “auto theft” and other crimes.⁶ As for teenage girls, they wanted “to wear cosmetics and mini-skirts,” attend parties and date without supervision “as Canadian girls do,” but instead were cloistered, chaperoned, and forced by parents to marry men whom they hated.⁷

Did such media portraits fully capture the range of generational conflict in immigrant families? What role did the International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto play in mediating such conflicts? Drawing on newspapers as well as confidential case files, this chapter examines how Institute counsellors understood and responded to the “problem” of generational conflict within immigrant families in late 1960s and early 1970s Toronto. It highlights parent-teen tensions, but also considers conflicts between parents and older children. I probe the counsellors’ observations of their clients’ emotional state as well as their own sometimes emotional reactions. The primary focus, however, is the counselling staff’s differing response to the teenagers facing parental dictates to leave school and earn money to help support the family and to those accused of transgressing the transplanted moral codes of their parents. In playing ally to teens in the first instance, and to parents in the second, Institute workers responded in both prescriptive and contradictory ways to the embattled immigrant teens they encountered. In the first case, they sought to mediate and reduce parental influence and encourage, albeit within limits, the youngsters’ participation in an urban modernity that promised them more individual freedom, self-realization, and the accoutrements of a more affluent life. Many of the

relevant case files contain professional Canadianization narratives of potential redemption, or modest upward mobility, that ultimately foundered in the face of parental opposition. In the second, counsellors supported parental efforts to exert control over teenagers who challenged their parents' moral and social codes. Told of an alleged or court-deemed "incurable" son or daughter, workers turned into sleuths who (indiscriminately) gathered evidence of bad behaviour from various sources. These files took on the character of detection tales characterized by a contradictory mix of facts, gossip, and hearsay evidence that might nevertheless hold sway in juvenile court.⁸ Significantly, in handling both types of parent-teen conflict, female counsellors' actions did not differ from those of their male counterparts.⁹

Scholarship and Cases

Historians and other scholars have approached the issue of generational conflict in a variety of ways. A large and diverse literature produced by family historians and historians of women and sexuality has examined the conflicts and negotiations between parents and adult children over money, property, and customary obligations, including those with respect to courtship and marriage, amid periods of continuity as well as change.¹⁰ While sympathetic to the immigrant generation's strategies of survival and security, particularly through homeownership, feminist histories of urban working-class immigrant families have explored the struggles, modest workplace mobility, and cultural aspirations of the sons and daughters negotiating conflicting cultures.¹¹ A key focus of the theoretical and historical research within moral regulation studies and on the socialized justice meted out by family and juvenile courts is youthful transgressions of parental and societal moral and legal codes of behaviour.¹² Studies with an immigrant focus, such as Mary Odem's *Delinquent Daughters*, highlight the roles played by the rural codes of immigrant and migrant parents and by Anglo-Protestantism in shaping understandings of delinquency and parental interactions with the courts.¹³ Also important are analyses that highlight social work theories and interventions with pregnant teens.¹⁴

Bringing together insights from these various literatures, I highlight both the range of conflict within immigrant families in late-sixties and early-seventies Toronto and the differing social work responses they engendered. My analysis of the popular media portraits of immigrant youth in conflict with their parents, and deemed in danger of acting up, breaking down, and dropping out of high school is informed by an assessment of a subset of 150 case files related to the theme from my Toronto Institute database of 7,000 case files. In contrast to the media focus on Southern Europeans, the subset represents twenty-two ethnic groups, though Portuguese, Italians, and Greeks, along with Hungarians, account for two-thirds of the clients. There is also a sprinkling of German,

Yugoslavian, Czech, and Slovakian cases, but, again, few non-European ones.¹⁵ Two-thirds of the parent-child conflicts involve teenagers (100) and one-third (50) adults¹⁶ between their mid-twenties and early forties. Four-fifths of the teen-related cases concern wage-earning, while one-fifth deal with transgressions against parental codes. A dozen different counsellors handled the subset of cases under review. The Portuguese-, Italian-, and Greek-speaking workers handled close to two-thirds of them while the Eastern and Northern European workers covered most of the rest.

The Institute became involved with most of the families because one or more members turned to its Department of Individual Services for assistance, but a few of the “juvenile delinquency” cases are Family Court referrals. Female clients slightly outnumber male ones. Most parents are married, but some are widowed, divorced, or separated. Mothers or mothers-in-law slightly outnumber their male counterparts. Most cases involve recent arrivals, but the presence of families with longer Canadian residency reflects conflicts that arose as the children grew older.

Adult Children and Older Parents

Some conflict was bound to occur within Toronto's many multi-generational and financially strapped immigrant households. One type not captured in the media's focus on youth involved adult children and the parents they supported. Feelings of guilt, worry, or sense of personal diminishment led some of the parents in this cluster of one dozen cases to ask the Institute for help in finding a job or securing welfare support so they could better contribute towards their own upkeep. The relevant entries contain descriptors such as “worried” or “anxious” and note tears and crying. As with the three mothers over the age of 60 who asked about applying for a Canadian widow's pension or welfare support in order to help a daughter or son with the rent, the strategy usually failed because either the parents were the sponsored “dependants” of their adult child or they did not meet the specific residency requirements.¹⁷ The one reportedly “optimistic and cheerful” parent in this group was also the youngest: a 56-year-old Hungarian man living with the daughters who sponsored him wanted to find work so that he could in turn sponsor his wife and youngest child. He was placed as a dishwasher in a hotel restaurant.¹⁸

The narrative contents of the files reveal the toll that the emotional and physical stress of supporting parents took on certain adult children. At one end of the age spectrum, a 25-year-old Italian son who for three years was breadwinner to his unemployed father and sick mother ended up hospitalized for ulcers attributed to prolonged stress. In terms of educational achievement, he was an unusual Italian client, but his family troubles killed his dream of being a teacher when the hospitalization forced him to abandon teacher's college. At

his request, the Institute supported an application for a scholarship for him to begin a program in social services work at Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. This dutiful son's plans did not mean abandoning his customary family obligations: the letter notes that "illness and overcrowding at home" adversely affected his marks in teacher's college, but that he was now healthy and employed (in a store stockroom), and ready to return to school part-time. At the other, a 42-year-old Greek married father of two who had supported his parents for a decade turned to the Institute after his father had a stroke and he lost his own job. The parents' lengthy residency in Canada did qualify them for welfare support, but a small glitch in the application process perhaps underscores the son's emotional state. He reported on his father cashing an additional Department of Welfare (DPW) cheque that did not belong to him out of fear that it would jeopardize their support. The problem was resolved.¹⁹

Similar cases involving single mothers and single daughters shed light on how the emotional (feelings) interacted with the material (money) to produce different scenarios. In an example where mother and daughter evidently wished to stay together, the Hungarian mother, age 64, explained that, unless she could come up with a little more than \$10 per month, her divorced daughter would be "forced" to rent to someone who could. With a teenager as well as a mother to support, and an ex-husband reneging on his child-support payments, the daughter, who was enrolled in a training course and so receiving only a modest weekly stipend (\$55), was struggling to make ends meet. The mother, having fled an abusive marriage, wanted to stay put. The sympathetic European male counsellor suggested she ask the DPW office for some additional support, but no outcome is recorded in the file.²⁰

The two widowed mothers who claimed they could avoid being evicted by a hostile daughter only by paying more rent offer a sharp contrast. The first case ends with a call to a mission shelter, suggesting the worker thought the Hungarian mother might end up homeless.²¹ In the second, lengthier, case from 1967, the conflict between mother (a university-educated Czech refugee who came to Canada a decade earlier) and daughter was compounded by a diagnosis of schizophrenia and competing narratives of the mother's actions. The European female counsellor immediately noted the woman's odd behaviour – she notes that the woman kept accusing the Czech Masaryk Hall, a community centre where she had worked, of pocketing the bingo profits, a major source of hall funds, and other nefarious activities – and went into detective mode.²² She reports that investigation into the woman's claim that she left a long-term typist position after being refused a salary increase revealed that she was dismissed for perennial lateness. Then, she reports, the DPW staffer contacted said she had illegally cashed some UIC (Unemployment Insurance Commission) cheques while working as a casual typist. In pursuing the woman's request to be shifted to a psychiatric outpatient clinic offering one-on-one therapy because she

disliked the hospital's group therapy approach, the worker gathers more damning evidence. A different DPW official claimed the woman was interested "only" in "weeping" for more money, not dealing with her mental health problems or applying for a medical "disability" certificate that might qualify her for long-term welfare support. He added that he had wasted his time visiting the mother about a DPW application because the daughter, who had earlier intimated that her mother used her illness to avoid work, had "slammed the door in his face, saying that she does not need assistance." When the Institute worker followed up with the daughter, she reportedly used "spiced vocabulary" and "called her mother a beggar, etc.," but agreed to let her mother sign the DPW form.

The counsellor grew increasingly exasperated with her difficult client. After hearing she did not show up for job interviews, she writes "I am not able to help her." Told she had approached an Institute co-sponsor for funds, she lectures the woman about "not expect[ing]" money from other agencies when she is already collecting welfare. She then writes, "the idea that she should work is just not understood." The remaining entries suggest a further deterioration in the shaky social welfare relationship. When the woman begs off the latest interview (claiming toothache), the worker writes that "she has every time another excuse," and that "she slammed the telephone at me as she did many times already." Also imbedded in the motley collection of details and opinions, though, is a competing narrative about the woman not getting the medical attention she needs. Her psychiatrist admits to the counsellor that the hospitals have turned to group therapy because it is cheaper than individualized therapy and no one seems to have helped her to become a clinic patient. Meanwhile, she continued to repeat the bingo-related allegations against the Masaryk Hall and, when referred to them for long-term casework, made allegations against Catholic Family Services. And then, to the worker's surprise, the woman secured a "small loan" from a senior Institute female staffer, though this not uncommon break in professional protocol is never explained. As the case ends, the woman appears to have left her daughter's place for a small government-subsidized apartment obtained through the Ontario Housing Corporation.²³

Property Feuds

The high degree of debt assumed to purchase homes and the steep payments required to pay off mortgages led to inevitable generational tensions over money. Like the issue of wage-earning teens submitting their paycheques to the family patriarch (see below), property-based feuds involved negotiating customary expectations in new contexts. One of the two examples that evolved into legal cases involved a Croatian mother and two adult sons who lost a lawsuit against the husband/father for ownership of the family home on the grounds that he had abdicated his family obligations and not helped with the mortgage

payments. The judge had ruled in his favour and ordered the mother and sons to pay him \$7,500 plus legal expenses. When they asked the European male counsellor at the Institute whether they should follow their legal aid lawyer's advice to appeal the decision, he told them to keep in mind that, when the 70-year-old man died, "they'll receive the house anyway."²⁴

In the second case, which, like the first, occurred a decade after the family's arrival in Canada, a Hungarian mother and her married son fought over a farm they inherited from the now-deceased husband/father. After going into sleuth mode, the counsellor shifted her opinion of who was the troublemaker. The mother came to the Institute seeking legal help in a dispute with her son, who she claimed had reneged on his responsibilities towards her. Both had inherited the farm in 1955 and, a few years later, she purchased a house in Toronto with her son despite his marrying "against her wishes." They signed a legal contract giving the son possession of the farm in exchange for guaranteeing her permanent accommodation and other expenses. The conflict erupted eight years later, when the son "got mad" over his mother's refusal to co-sign his application for a hefty loan (\$11,000) and "threw her out of the house," in the course of which he "kicked her," possibly breaking a finger. She retaliated by trying to get the contract revoked in order to take possession of his share of the property.

The case file includes references to mental illness and competing versions of events. The European male caseworker observed that the mother "expressed a great deal of anxiety" about her son plotting to place her in "a mental hospital," adding that it had taken three sessions to help her "overcome this fear." But as the dispute continued, the worker grew impatient with the woman, who also alienated the lawyers with constant threats to fire them unless they produced immediate results. Shifting to the son, who had initially refused to sweeten what he claimed was an already generous live-in contract, the counsellor brokered a new deal. The son agreed to add to the original terms of the contract an entitlement to her own private quarters (a kitchen and two other rooms) and coverage of "quite high" medical bills, and a lump sum of \$3,500, "provided she would not interfere in his way of handling his family." The mother claimed to be "touched" by the son's offer and apology for the kicking, but still wanted more money, first suggesting \$5,000, then \$7,000. She also wanted to change lawyers again.

The mother returned a year later to tell the new counsellor, also a European man, assigned to her case that she was suing the son for lack of support despite her lawyer's warning that it would fail because she had continued to live with her son and daughter-in-law. Even if she did win, the lawyer explained, she would recover only a one-half interest in a farm with no running water or electricity and back taxes owing on it. She accused the lawyer, who had proposed an out-of-court settlement, of plotting with her son to commit her to a mental institution, adding that she had letters attesting to her sanity. She then claimed

that her husband had once tried to poison her and asked the worker to help her sponsor a son still in Hungary. In response, he referred her to a family service agency, indicating that he thought she needed long-term institutional help.²⁵

Meddling Mothers-in-Law

Institute counsellors, not unexpectedly, encountered cases in which married adult children, in a quest for privacy, were motivated to ask or demand that parents or in-laws leave their household. Like marriage and family experts, they advised newlyweds to find separate quarters that would afford them the intimacy needed to get to know and truly understand each other, to grow into their respective roles as wife and husband, and to prepare themselves for parenthood. The ideal itself was of course punctuated with contradictions, not least of them the claim that the modern companionate marriage was an egalitarian relationship in which husbands enjoyed ultimate authority.²⁶

All but one of five such cases capture the feelings of abandonment harboured by older mothers even when they accepted some blame for the conflict that led to their ouster. A 71-year-old Estonian refugee renting a room in a private home since getting “into trouble with her daughter-in-law” said she “felt very lonesome.” She especially missed her grandchildren, whom she now saw only occasionally when her son brought them over. A heart condition also made it “very difficult” for her to walk up the hill where the house sat, though kind drivers sometimes stopped to give her a lift. The European male worker found her the ground-floor unit she wanted in the vicinity of Estonian House, a community centre where she could meet other Estonians and take English classes.²⁷

Generational conflict cases, unlike the Institute case files on marital conflict (see [chapter 5](#)), sometimes contained explicit engagement with social-cultural perspectives. Of a Portuguese widow, age 66, facing eviction from the home of her married son, one of the Portuguese female counsellors wrote that, as a rural villager accustomed to dense family networks, she “enjoys spending most of her time” with her son and daughter-in-law. But that, since her son said he “wishes to spend his time alone with his wife,” she has felt “depressed and lonely.” She tried to help the woman accept the situation by referring to the aspirations of newlyweds in Canada in terms of working hard to realize their nuclear family dreams. The son, she added, wanted to spend his very limited leisure time with his wife. The mother evidently got the point as she accepted a live-in babysitting job. In an effort to cheer her up, the worker noted the benefits of making “her own money,” but was silent on the job’s disadvantages, including, ironically, a lack of privacy. She does not comment on whether the daughter-in-law played a role in this family drama, though that did apply in other cases.²⁸

In a twist to the tale of the ousted meddling mother-in-law, the conflict between an older Polish woman and her daughter-in-law resulted in the son

leaving with his mother. The case also offers a rare glimpse of the trust that developed between a male worker, in this instance a European immigrant with social work training, and his male client. A Polish refugee who came to Canada with his parents a decade earlier, the man was referred to the Institute by a psychiatric clinic that thought his "problems" were "related primarily to culture." By then, he had spent eight years with his sick widowed mother in Toronto while his estranged wife and children lived elsewhere. The file entries present a textbook example of casework resulting in diagnosis and solution. First, the worker's assurances that Institute personnel possess an "understanding of his feelings and difficulties" encouraged the initially hostile man "to express his feelings and concerns." Next, a social-cultural analysis explains the man's refusal to heed the hospital's recommendation that, upon her imminent release from psychiatric care, the mother be placed in a home for the elderly. The worker explains that, "according to his cultural values," children are "responsible" for their parents' welfare while "old age homes are ... for the 'poor and rejected' people." In other words, a clear case of (European) group culture "dictating" immigrant behaviour despite the presence of "new" options, namely, modern homes for the aged.

The mother's passing shortly afterwards then allows the focus to shift to family reconciliation. Once the client admits that his wife has asked him to come home, but that he felt "ambivalent" about it, the worker focused on convincing him to do so. In attributing the positive outcome to the "case work" provided, he highlights two factors: expertise ("our counsellor was a former immigrant himself and aware of his culture") and appropriate counselling that considered "past and present cultural environment, ego support and assisting forces of repression." The last point referred to having gotten the man to reflect on and overcome his fear of returning home. In this instance, though, the claim is borne out by the man's cards and letters, which also report on his improved relations with his wife and children.

While the Institute's pro-family approach explains the satisfaction expressed over a patriarch's reinstallation in the family home, equally noteworthy is the wife's apparent role in initiating the reunion and the male bonds of trust that developed between client and caseworker. The mail sent to the worker over the course of a year reflected the client's emotional investment in continuing a now long-distance relationship. The worker's response offers a mix of the professional and the personal. Explaining that he "purposely" held off responding to allow the man "time to solve [his] own problems, without outside help," he reminds the man to be patient and applauds the family for possessing the "courage to tackle the problem." (He also listed some local family agencies just in case.) Obviously replying to the man's personal questions, the worker adds, "We have a lovely time in Europe and enjoyed it to be with our relatives once more" and witness Europe's return to "prosperity." The personal exchange both

blurred the private/public line normally drawn between institutions and their clients and underscored the relationship forged.²⁹

Parents and Teens

The handwringing that, by the late 1960s, focused on the conflicts between parents who held to “traditional” mores and expectations and their more rapidly Canadianizing teenagers occurred within the wider context of the era’s alarmist discourses of spreading juvenile delinquency, with its focus on boys’ petty crimes and girls’ sexual promiscuity. But immigrant youth were also singled out for special attention.³⁰

As social-culturalists, the Institutes viewed the conflict in terms of a clash between different “group-defined” lifeways. The children’s entry into the host-land’s school system, a major institution of socialization, introduced them to values and behaviour that differed markedly from their parents’ moral and social codes, so that by the time they reached puberty, they felt embarrassed by and resentful towards them. The explanations juxtaposed model (middle-class) North American parents, who raised children to be curious and confident, and gave them the freedom to pursue interests and relationships beyond the family, with immigrant parents whose “patrocentric family” model emphasized obedience and discipline. Other contributing factors included the challenge of learning a new language, the inability to maintain friendships because of the family’s (local) transiency, and the “acting out” associated with the raging hormones of teenagers. While acknowledging that not every conflict in immigrant families was “caused” by “cultural elements,” pluralist social workers, including Institute consultants, argued that the frequency of disputes due to the clashing values of parents and children underscored not only the need to interpret the host society’s standards to the parents but also the families’ absorption of its core values.³¹ In Ontario at least, the experts disagreed over whether television contributed towards immigrant youth alienation (Ferguson’s position) or might help in their family’s adjustment to modern life.³² Unlike the Institute’s multicultural events, which showed an appreciation for cultural hybridity (see part 4), the sources under review here reveal a pathologizing of rural immigrant cultures and the adoption of a remedy that stood closer to assimilation than to integration.

The media coverage of parent-teen conflict in the wake of the OEC’s 1970 report was extensive but varied in tone from the lighthearted to the voyeuristic and foreboding. The focus was on Southern Europeans, but Asian and Caribbean families were also discussed. For example, an early-sixties article featured 19-year-old Victor Chung, who had arrived from Hong Kong with his parents a dozen years earlier. It delivered the oft-made point about immigrant teens who had learned English but, having failed to advance in their “mother-tongue,” could not discuss “complex” matters with their non-English-speaking parents.

Using a jocular tone, the reporter notes that Victor "is a full-blown Canadian" who "loves folk singing, movies, hamburgers, long hair and Canadian girls," but that he needs an interpreter (an older brother) to discuss dating non-Chinese girls with his parents, who "still cling to many of the old ways of their country."³³ But the media's main focus was, as liberal journalist Sidney Katz noted, on the conflict "between parents reared in an ancient, impoverished European rural environment and children raised in a modern, affluent North American city." An Italian-born female social worker (Nada Costa) interviewed by Katz for the *Toronto Star* noted the resentment of Italian parents towards the Canadian school system for lacking the rigour of schools in Italy, where "religion, discipline, respect for parents, and other social and moral values are taught as part of the regular curriculum."³⁴

The parental practice of turning high school teens into wage earners so they could help pay off the mortgage in a family-linked strategy of homeownership attracted much criticism. While focused on Italians, Costa's explanation of how a corporatist family ethos transplanted from Europe's villages to urban Canada produced generational conflict was seen to apply as well to Portuguese and Greek families. The basis of childrearing in rural village societies was to prepare the child to cope with a hard and insecure life, the safeguards against which meant working collectively, living frugally, and complying with parental demands. In Toronto, however, parents were "dismayed" by their children's "extravagant tastes" in clothes and viewed the Canadian custom of giving children "a regular allowance with no strings attached" as "spoiling" them. Describing a long-standing source of generational conflict within working-class immigrant families, Costa added that young wage-earning Italians resented the expectation that they hand over their entire paycheque to the father, who then provided a small allowance and covered the cost of clothes and other necessities out of the "family treasury." (She failed to note the mother's role as the family's frugal shopper.) An Institute staffer cited an example in which the financial pressure that parents, determined to pay off a mortgage in five years, exerted on their son, who preferred instead "to finish his education," could lead to his "mental breakdown."³⁵

The problem of the early (underage) school-leaver caused particular consternation. Under Ontario law children were required to attend school until age 16. In the public and Catholic school systems in Toronto, principals and school board officials frowned on the special work permits that, until 1970, allowed parents to take their 14- and 15-year-olds out of school mainly to earn money. But they often approved the request because of the family's depth of need. Because of Italian concentrations, it happened more frequently in the Catholic schools. The process was also gendered. Given the choice of issuing a permit to a son or daughter, they tended to give it to the girl, whose childminding released the mother to work and allowed the boy, a future breadwinner, to stay in school and complete the Grade 10 required for entry into a trade.³⁶

Teenage Workers

Institute counsellors found teens part-time or summer jobs on farms, golf courses, and other workplaces, but full-time work was another matter. Four-fifths of the parent-teen cases of conflict concern a teen's full-time wage-earning. Despite the media trope of the immigrant girl stuck at home until married off, girls slightly outnumber boys. All but five cases involve Southern Europeans.³⁷ Most youths visited the Institute one or two years after arriving in Canada, had some Canadian schooling, and reportedly spoke "fair" English. Together, the cases show that while counsellors might appreciate the parents' financial struggles, they openly accused them of forfeiting a child's chances for a better future in order to achieve their goal of homeownership. As social workers who by inclination (given their urban middle-class backgrounds) and training promoted the modernization of rural immigrants, they sought to protect their teenage clients from parental dictates sure to doom them to the lowest rungs of the workforce. But there were also class limits on the degree of social uplift they envisioned for them.

Like other historical sources on poor and working-class children, the Institute files on the teens who said "I want [or need] a job to help the family" appeared to adopt a matter-of-fact tone. The boys often invoked their father (as in my father needs my help) and the girls their mother. But we cannot naively read a teen's motive from a counsellor's notations as the phrasing may have reflected a parental directive, even wording, rather than a teen's desire.³⁸ Some of the teens' families are large, with four to eight children, and in one case, eleven, but many of them are smaller, with two or three children. Reference to large debts, particularly mortgages on a recently purchased house, is common, but hospital bills also come up. The recorded explanations of teens who claim a dislike of school as the reason for wanting to work – such as "lacked confidence in English," "difficulty with teacher," and "laughed at by classmates" – indicate feelings of vulnerability, rejection, and low self-worth. Other narrative traces in the files suggest some teens thought, or hoped, they could use a portion of the earnings for themselves. Overall, the recorded outcomes in these cases aligned with media depictions of parental objectives trumping children's schooling.

The professional narrative shaping the fragments in many of these files is one of potential redemption, or uplift, through Canadianization that fails to materialize because of short-sighted parents. In keeping with US social work cases that tracked and endorsed the Americanization of immigrant teens, the road to redemption is captured in the workers' many recorded attempts to entice the teens (and their parents) into staying in school with the promise of a better working life and future attained through a vocational education. That is, a skilled trade for boys and "nice, clean" office work for girls.³⁹ At the Institute, it proved a tough sell with parents.

Counsellors were most likely to disparage the parents who yanked underage teens from school in order to help pay off mortgages. A file entry like “but he is only 14” turned a pragmatic strategy to achieve security despite low levels of income and education into a morally reprehensible act.⁴⁰ Those tricked by parents skilled at using evasion tactics with outsiders expressed annoyance. The scenario captured in the relevant files went like this. With a sense of professional satisfaction, a worker would record that, during a phone call with a teen’s parent, the mother or father would agree to allow them to complete Grade 10 and apply for a government-subsidized training program. Then, in a follow-up call made days, weeks, or months later, the worker would learn, usually from an adult other than the parents, that the teen was working in a factory. The final notation usually referred to the worker having told the relative on the phone to tell the parents that their actions “did not help” or “would hurt” the child’s future.⁴¹

The counsellors’ efforts at uplift dominate the case files on older teens age 16 to 19. A European female counsellor advised a 17-year-old Portuguese boy with four siblings who said “he has to work and help his family” because “they bought a house and the father is not earning enough” to remain in school as he already spoke “fluent” English and acquiring a trade would “prepare” him for life. A family member later reported that he was “working in a restaurant and is happy.” Even if the positive emotional descriptor accurately conveyed the boy’s (as opposed to the parents’) feelings, the counsellor’s reaction would have been one of disappointment. The effort of one of the Portuguese female workers to try to scare another Portuguese boy, age 17, by asking, rhetorically, “what will be his future if [he] does not learn a trade?” also failed. He said he wanted to “earn money.”⁴² Her efforts to persuade the father of a boy in Grade 10 who wanted to complete an apprenticeship in motor mechanics was only slightly more effective. He agreed to let his son attend the Institute’s nighttime English classes in order to improve his job prospects if she dropped the apprenticeship idea. The boy entered a wood factory.⁴³

Institute counsellors understood that the daughters of these struggling families – despite the media image of the housebound immigrant girl – would become wage-earners, and sought to elevate them into the ranks of white-collar workers. Just as they encouraged boys to surpass their father’s labouring jobs through acquisition of a trade, they urged girls to advance beyond their mothers’ “dirty” factory or cleaning jobs by completing clerical or commercial courses that could lead to respectable office jobs as secretaries, bookkeepers, and bank tellers. As a Portuguese female counsellor explained to one client, training to become a secretary or bank teller “will prepare her future much better than in working in factories.” She told another to “finish school” in order to get “a better position” than factory or cleaning work, and yet another to “learn a trade and eventually gain a better salary.” As evidenced by the case of a Greek girl who agreed to enrol in a clerical course but then quit school and found a factory job,



Institute counsellors encouraged their young female clients to aspire to a white-collar office job like that held by these two tellers, who worked at a branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. A sign indicates that the bank can serve clients in Italian. 23 February 1962. York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, Toronto Telegram fonds, ASC09105.

counsellors could be equally blunt with the parents. This girl's Greek female counsellor called her home and told the relative who picked up that she "will make better in this country if she will go to school first and then go for a trade." This counsellor, like others, would have also looked for evidence that the girl in question possessed the office job's gendered requirement for pleasant and accommodating personalities.⁴⁴ Over time, mothers and daughters would often adopt similar language in describing the latter's advancement.⁴⁵

Among the success stories were the few older teens (ages 18 to 19) who appeared keen to learn a trade. In one such case, another Greek female worker actually advised an anxious Greek boy to "quit" school and attend English classes so he could return to school with the English needed to earn the Grade 10 diploma needed to apply for an apprenticeship course. As the case ended, the strategy appeared to be working: the boy was completing his English program and had been promised a spot in an air-conditioning course in a local high school.⁴⁶ Applying a strategy that some teens used to convince parents to allow them to learn a skill, one Portuguese girl told her Portuguese female counsellor

that her father would let her complete her high school clerical course if she got a part-time job. A few days later, the girl was back in school.⁴⁷ In a similar case, the Portuguese girl reported that she “was taking secretarial, and very happy,” providing the emotional descriptor herself.⁴⁸ These promising outcomes were nevertheless outnumbered by those where clients quit a program because they felt ill-prepared or overwhelmed by the workload.⁴⁹

Consumerism and Streaming

In a few exceptional cases, the parents' educational ambitions for a teen surpassed those of their teen. The best examples, all of which involve boys refusing to complete Grade 10, speak to the points made by journalists and experts about young immigrant working-class men's attraction to the allure of modern urban culture. A Grade 9 student, Pino, age 17, admitted to being interested in a radio and television repair course, but despite parental and Institute pressure, he refused to complete the Grade 10 requirement. He told his male counsellor, a European immigrant, that he wanted to make money because “so many of his friends work and drive their own cars.” The era's car culture promoted modernity under various guises.

The image of cruising in a stylish car, the radio turned on to the latest pop songs, appealed to many teenage boys in North America, including urban immigrant youth, even if it meant buying older used models. But unlike the media portraits, and like many other immigrant boys, Pino was prepared to toil at low-skilled jobs for a paycheck that, provided he could keep some of it, allowed him to participate in an affluent culture that also included fashionable clothes and nightclubs.⁵⁰ Ironically, as Gilberto Fernandes notes, these young men were applying the strategy of their parents, who achieved material security not through formal education but “extensive labour and meticulous saving strategies” in order to participate in a consumer culture their parents frowned upon. The greater constraints on girls meant they were less likely to purchase cars or frequent nightclubs, but going to the movies and wearing make-up and fashion items like the miniskirt offered them ways of asserting themselves. Like the Catholic girls who hiked up the skirts of their school uniforms after leaving home, many hid their small but meaningful acts of resistance to Old World restrictions from their parents. But at least some of them did not (see below).⁵¹

Pino's case, like others, reflected a wider concern about the high rates of high school dropouts among Southern European (as well as Black) teens.⁵² Changes began to occur during the seventies era of ethnic revivalism, as the promotion of European-focused heritage language schools and curricular reforms meant to foster a pride in culture and a sense of affirmation eventually translated into lower dropout rates and higher levels of academic achievement.⁵³ There is also evidence to suggest that daughters of Southern European immigrants would



The allure of car culture extended to motorcycles as well as the convertible in this photograph of young men arriving at a campground at night, August 1965. York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, Toronto Telegram fonds, ASC05661.

become more successful than sons at completing high school and a college or university education.⁵⁴ Also by the seventies, a new generation of left-leaning social workers and activists who came of age in the turbulent sixties brought to their organizing efforts among the Portuguese and other immigrant communities the ideals of feminism, the civil rights movement, liberation theology, and/or labour campaigns aimed at redressing immigrant women's low wages and precarious work.⁵⁵

The final exception to the main pattern captured in the cases involving teen wage-earning is the two Greek fathers, both of them skilled workers, who asked about a son's potential for university. Each time, the female worker dampened their hopes that higher education would give a son access to a middle-class income, by stating, categorically, that a vocational, not university, education was the feasible option.⁵⁶ While exceptional in the context of my cases, these two

files flag another controversy: the streaming of low-income immigrant and racialized high school students. In the 1970s and 1980s, journalists cited reports and interviews with parents that highlighted the predicament of inner-city Southern European and of Black children and spoke of the racial bias in the school system. Already in the 1970s, Black mothers were lobbying the Toronto Board of Education to hire more Black teachers and address systemic racism, but the problem festered.⁵⁷ The 1980s saw some gains for Italian and Portuguese children, as outspoken critics like New Democrat Rosario Marchese, an Italian immigrant who earned a university degree in the late 1970s, became a teacher, and was later elected to the Toronto School Board (and later still to the Ontario Legislature), campaigned against streaming. But this and related practices rooted in systemic racism remain to this day.⁵⁸ Eighties-era (and later) research documented the disappointments of low-income immigrant parents who learned too late that the child they thought was university-bound had been placed in a vocational stream.⁵⁹

The Institute's emphasis on vocational training, with its gender-based focus on male trades and low-level white-collar female office-service work, also speaks to the limitations of its liberal pluralism. Despite being applauded for adding "value" to industry, nation, and the prospects of young trainees, vocational education has always suffered from low prestige. From the Institute's liberal perspective, it promised to produce skilled workers for Canadian industry and provide the children, just as it did the parents of low-income families (see [chapter 8](#)), with better-paying jobs that would offer them greater protection during periods of economic stagnation. In terms of the "mental-manual divide" that distinguishes an academic from a technical education, the Institute's objective also reflected and reinforced the notion that disadvantaged immigrant youth lacked the potential for more intellectual or rigorous schooling. Not that the universities beckoned. Notwithstanding the democratization of post-secondary education in these years, the Canadian university was at this time still an institution of class, gender, and racial-ethnic privilege. These immigrant youth may have been born around the same time as Anglo-Canadian baby boomers, but they were not necessarily "born at the right time."⁶⁰

Transgressive Teenagers

Alongside the popular image of the carjacking or joyriding Mario or Miguel was that of the cloistered and chaperoned Maria or Rosa whose life offered a stark contrast to the sixties image of the emancipated young woman. In the Toronto newspapers following the release of the OEC's report, social workers and popular pundits alike invoked the miniskirt to highlight the gulf between these immigrant girls and women and their Canadian counterparts. An Institute spokeswoman noted the confusion and resentment of teenage girls whose

parents forbade them from wearing miniskirts and make-up only to see their teachers donning the latest fashions. Unable to dress and act like their Canadian friends, she added, they become depressed, as do the boys and girls who cannot accompany their classmates on school activities and other social events.⁶¹

Explanations for this “girl problem” focused on an honour/shame moral code transplanted from the Mediterranean to Canada. Social worker Nada Costa’s version of it went like this: men possess powerful sexual impulses and demonstrate their masculinity through conquests of women, hence, women, being by nature “weak and defenceless,” must be placed “under constant surveillance” whenever they are out with a man. The male sexual threat is so strong that even the good girl’s virtue “is in jeopardy.” As the “carriers of family virtue” (to quote anthropologist Wenona Giles), the woman who engages in premarital sex brings shame to her entire family and disqualifies herself from the marriage market. Regarding marriage, Costa noted that many daughters now selected their own marriage partner but were still obliged not to marry anyone the parents do not approve of. Parental attempts “to impose this code of behavior” on their girls enrolled in Toronto high schools, she added, prompted teachers to ask her “to intervene with Italian parents so that their daughters can attend school dances.” She also relayed a disturbing anecdote about an Italian father who cautioned his daughter against being “a loose woman” after one boy walked her home from school, and then called her a “fallen woman” after a second one did, the anger and shame prompting him to sell the house and change neighbourhoods. Writers like Katz noted the situation of the boy who could not date a girl within his ethnic group without her parents assuming he intended to marry her. He also emphasized the plight of girls like the 14-year-old who responded to her father’s beating for attending a school dance unescorted by taking an overdose of pills. She was taken to hospital to have her stomach pumped out.⁶²

The small number of Institute files related to youth transgressions of parental codes or “delinquent” behaviour reflects in part the tendency of non-English-speaking immigrant parents to deal with such matters privately or within their community.⁶³ Fathers might mete out corporal punishment, though mothers also did, particularly with daughters, and emotionally distraught mothers might turn to traditional healers such as midwives and sorcerers.⁶⁴ Together, the cases include a wide range of European groups as well as Italians and Portuguese. One-third of them were Family Court referrals. As in the cases involving wage-earning, failure to resolve the conflict looms large. But whereas counsellors tried to prevent parents from exercising their right to end prematurely their teens’ formal schooling, they supported parents trying to rein in disobedient teens, particularly daughters. Paradoxically, the counselling staff expressed concern about but did not openly advocate for immigrant youth who challenged what they themselves (as middle-class urbanites) thought were overly strict “rural village” codes.

The larger number of girls (13) than boys (7) in the cluster of delinquency cases might well reflect these parents' tendency to view a daughter's transgressions as more serious than a son's, hence the willingness of certain parents to consult outsiders. But misbehaving sons were not given a free ride. Parents who turned to the family and juvenile courts often did so at the suggestion of the school authorities who reported on the problematic behaviour, or at the insistence of police officers who may have caught a teen stealing or who returned a "runaway." Theories of juvenile delinquency drew on a mix of psychological, social, and environmental factors, such as poor parental skills, unstable and transient families, and poor neighbourhood relationships. Counsellors emphasized the role played by ill-adjusted and overly strict parents whose opposition to their children's acculturation to the hostland culture produced hypersensitive, anxious, hostile, and defiant teens. A case in point is a Family Court referral of a 14-year-old Italian boy charged by his father with incorrigibility after a third school, within a period of less than a year, expelled him for disruptive behaviour. This Institute file also illustrates how the application of a social-cultural perspective could confirm rather than challenge theories of delinquency.

The European male counsellor who carried out the court-requested social history on the Italian boy and his family was one of the Institute's multilingual and trained social workers. The boy's incorrigibility was not in doubt, which explains why the focus was not on gathering incriminating evidence to make a case but instead on collecting a life history and on that basis arriving at a diagnosis and solution. Based on interviews conducted with each of the parties, the worker concluded that the family, which had remigrated to Canada for the third time in 1960, fit the juvenile delinquency profile to a tee. The father's shoe repair shop, he noted, was in decline and he was "emotionally" troubled by his reliance on funds sent by an eldest son living in Italy. His preoccupation with his financial difficulties had also made him "withdrawn and irritated." A victim-blaming assessment attributed his failing business to his lack of English and consequent dependency on Italian customers, but said nothing about whether "Canadian" customers would visit the shop even if he spoke English. He also described the father as an "affectionate" but ill-informed parent, and a strict but inconsistent disciplinarian who even admitted that a psychiatrist in Italy had once told him to be less strict with the boy. The mother fit the stock portrait of the Southern European mother who is "very permissive" with her young children, but whose "neurotic possessive relationship" with them means that "she resents their growth." Affectionate towards her youngest children and elderly parents-in-law, she was reportedly "quite submissive" in relation to the husband.⁶⁵

As for the boy, the detailed life history revealed a history of problematic behaviour, from the temper tantrums thrown as a toddler in Italy whenever he was disciplined to the recent cruelty shown towards animals: cutting up a dying dog and a sick cat. While he enjoyed a "good" relationship with some of his

siblings, the “very poor” one with his parents explained the repeated lying, refusal to obey his father’s demands, and misbehaviour at school. In his defence, the boy, who said he barely understood his teacher, though he claimed to have friends among his classmates, explained that the reason for his most recent expulsion – failing to stay after school to clean up a mess that he and another boy had made – was due to extenuating circumstances. The other boy had gone straight home after school and he was also afraid that his father would “scold him for coming home late.”

The caseworker concluded that the boy’s problems stemmed from “his emotional deprivation from early childhood,” a possible birth injury (he was delivered with forceps), and “a history of disease in the family,” a reference to the father and grandfather having contracted syphilis, and that these were compounded by his immigrant family’s ill-adjustment. The recommendations included in-depth casework for the parents to help them to improve their “economic and social adjustment” and their parenting skills. Adding that child experts “agree that sometimes deficiency is accompanied by a singular skill in a special line,” the caseworker also proposed that the boy’s apparent “mechanical ability” – he reportedly showed “some aptitude and interest in automechanics” – be encouraged.⁶⁶

The senior probation officer who requested the life history was pleased with the “excellent” report and the Institute staff was delighted with the endorsement. Both sides agreed that, as the court official put it, “one should avoid speaking of “a New Canadian problem,” but “recognize that there are problems which are peculiar to New Canadians” who are “handicapped in receiving service because of language and cultural barriers.” Noting that his caseload included other immigrant boys (including Russians, Greeks, and Italians) charged with malicious damage or petty theft whose family circumstances, including a strict father, mirrored the one under review, he proposed a closer relationship.⁶⁷ Had the Institute been better-resourced, its staff would probably have conducted many more life histories.

The remaining cases under review, two of which involve 15-year-old boys who left home, are frustratingly brief. The first involved an exceptionally adventurous Ukrainian boy who, having returned from a trip to Britain and Istanbul, wanted a job so he could save for “a trip to South America.” At the counsellor’s request, he agreed to contact his parents about returning home, but it is not clear that he did so. By the time the second boy, a runaway, and his Jamaican immigrant parents met with the Institute counsellor in the only teen case involving a racialized immigrant boy, he had agreed to return home.⁶⁸ Whether closer ties with the court would have improved the Institute’s track record is debatable, however, given the Family Court’s own paradoxical history of separating racialized and Indigenous families (through a child’s removal into a foster home or reform school) rather than “saving” them.⁶⁹

Problematic Fiancés

The cluster of cases involving “transgressive” teens that involved parental disapproval of a “fiancé” featured four daughters and a daughter-in-law; they also capture the emotional reactions of their female counsellors. One Greek girl, age 17, who had booked an appointment to discuss a hairdressing course, reportedly blurted out that she “left home [a] week ago and rejects to see her family” (though she was living with a brother) because the parents disapproved of her fiancé. The female counsellor immediately called the Greek boy’s home and spoke with his mother, who said her family “likes” the girl, thus confirming the seriousness of the matter. After speaking with the girl’s aunt, who confirmed the marriage plans, she called the girl’s mother and advised her “to accept” the situation and return the birth certificate she had hidden in the hopes of preventing the nuptials from taking place. (The daughter met the minimum consent age of 16.) But she also wrote, confidentially, that she “feels sorry” for the distraught mother, thereby indicating her own disapproval of a girl marrying so young.⁷⁰

One of the Portuguese female counsellors was frankly flabbergasted to learn that the man her “very nice” and “mature” 17-year-old Portuguese client was talking about marrying despite her parents’ disapproval was an older married father of three. (This case also quickly shifted from a job to a fiancé-related one.) Expressing her feelings of incredulity, the worker writes, “she is not even sure if he is divorcing his wife on account of her.” She advised the young woman “to discontinue” seeing him,” suggesting a visit to Portugal so she could “be far away from him” and work on forgetting him. A feeling that the “appreciative” girl will follow her advice is erased by the mother’s report in a follow-up phone call that “she has tried everything to stop her daughter from loving this man but without success.”⁷¹

The file on the young Korean woman at the centre of the only non-European case of generational conflict involving a slightly older daughter captures her emotional reaction to a broken engagement as well as the European female counsellor’s attempt to narrate a potential redemption tale. Her plan to marry the man to whom she became engaged a year earlier in Korea was sabotaged because the fiancé’s father and aunt, both of whom arrived in Canada shortly before she did, opposed it. Whether under duress or not, the fiancé broke things off. The worker’s observations of her client as “a very nice young girl” who “is unhappy at present and wept bitterly about her situation” speaks to her client’s emotional state. They also refer to the cultural reasons for it, specifically a strict code that disadvantaged women within Asian cultures: “she is heartbroken and tells me that she can not marry anymore according to her custom and she can not return to Korea. Her family would not take her back.”

Because she was sponsored by her relatives, not her fiancé, this young woman was less vulnerable to the possibility of deportation owing to abandonment and indigency, but the fact that a legal aid lawyer had referred her to the Institute for

confirmation of her legal status (as a landed immigrant) suggests it was not an irrational fear.⁷² Evidently accepting her status as a single woman, she wanted to move on. At her request, the counsellor registered her for English classes. To help with “socializing,” something her lawyer also mentioned in the referral, the counsellor gave her an Institute membership and urged her to contact two Korean nurses, described as “pleasant young ladies” who belonged to a small circle of Koreans at the Institute that included group worker Catherine Lee. A note about the client’s appreciation of her efforts contains as well the sort of clichéd “chin up” and “silver-lining” advice that Anglo-Canadian advice experts offered lonely, exploited, and abandoned immigrant women. This client’s non-Western origins prompted her worker, an Eastern European who counselled on Canadian values, to declare the superiority of Western culture despite having witnessed the damage done to many women of Western origins. “We are able to explain,” she writes, “that she can look forward to more pleasant things if she remains here” because “in this culture she is a free individual and nobody is going to hurt her, or her feelings.”⁷³

Delinquent Daughters

Despite the media focus on Southern Europeans, the cluster of cases featuring scenarios of exasperated parents seeking to rein in a rebellious daughter suspected of sexual promiscuity by turning to outside authorities is evenly divided between Eastern and Southern Europeans. Most cases were initiated by parents who turned to the Institute, though since counsellors sometimes encouraged parents to contact the police or Family Court, some of these cases may have ended up in the juvenile justice system. This was the advice given to the three fathers, one Yugoslavian, the other Slovakian, and the third Hungarian, who reported on a “missing” teenage daughter. The counsellors sympathized with the fathers, though the European female worker who dealt with the Yugoslavian father and his wife, whom she knew, was better at recording her views. Attributing the girl’s delinquency to psychological problems, she described the father as “a nice person” willing to take on any job, the mother as “very upset,” and the daughter, who had abandoned a job that she had once found her, as “a very disturbed young girl” who posed an ongoing problem for the parents, who had three other children. But there is no follow-up.⁷⁴

Turning to a case that attracted media attention, the news that a Czech teenager died after jumping in front of a subway train while “high on speed” offered a cautionary tale about the dangers of giving teens too much freedom. For the female counsellor of the teen’s mother, it also underscored the need to be vigilant in stamping out unhealthy anxieties bred under Communism. The mother, who was divorced, claimed that she knew her daughter and boyfriend were experimenting with drugs and had even noticed needle marks on their arms, but

that she was “too afraid to go to the police” because, having lived in Communist Czechoslovakia, she “did not realize Canadian police actually helped people.” Initially, the worker, also Eastern European, thought her client a schemer trying to secure patents for never-explained inventions. When she returned after being fired from her job in a dental lab, the worker observed her altered emotional state, writing that she “was crying all through our conversation” and was “in a very bad condition with her nerves.” The woman blamed the instructor of the training course she had taken for not properly preparing her for the job, and the worker referred her to the local employment office. The next time she returned, it was to report on her daughter’s tragic death.⁷⁵

In a 1968 Family Court case involving a Hungarian family torn apart by incest, the distraught mother asked the Institute for help in securing visits with her 13-year-old daughter, who had been placed in a foster home after being caught having sex with her 14-year-old brother. At the court’s request, the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) had placed the son in a foster home. A former secretary now toiling as a hotel chambermaid, the divorced mother told her counsellor that the girl’s grandfather had sexually abused her daughter in Hungary when she was 10 years old. Thus, like so many so-called delinquent girls, this daughter was a victim of sexual abuse. The mother was frantic because the CAS would not let her visit her daughter. She was also anxious about her son, who, she said, had been so “scared by the doctor” who assessed him that he subsequently took an overdose of sleeping pills and ended up in hospital for three days. He was given some tranquillizers and sent home. The European male counsellor managed to secure the mother some visits with her daughter, but there is no further follow-up.⁷⁶

The most complicated case of all featured a Hungarian family. The file contains competing narratives of the father who reported his daughter missing and of the 15-year-old teen’s alleged transgressions. As soon as the unemployed tradesman and single father (whose estranged wife had remained in Hungary) reported that he had not seen his daughter since she left for work at a local restaurant six days previously, the European female counsellor went into detective mode. She phoned the restaurant and spoke with an employee who said the girl had not worked there for three weeks, but that, a week ago, a girl claiming to be her sister (though she did not have one) collected her pay. Another employee claimed to have seen her the day before walking along the street. The worker then called the local police station and arranged for an officer to come to the Institute to interview the father while she interpreted. Offering a rationale commonly used by parents to explain a teen’s delinquent behaviour, the father blamed his daughter’s bad behaviour on “bad” influences. He singled out an older “Italian driving a Cadillac” whom he claimed had earlier “tried to befriend his daughter” as the one most likely responsible for his daughter’s disappearance.

Many stereotypes contain a bit of truth and the father's story of an Italian man in a fancy car cruising for girls like his daughter initially played nicely into what proved to be his performance as the anxious parent. Told about an aunt, the worker got hold of her, too, and her stories placed both father and daughter in a different light. At age 22, the aunt seemed more like a cousin than an elder to the teen and her anecdotes also cast a shadow on her own moral status. She said that her niece had spent a few nights with her, usually arriving around midnight and then disappearing again. She noted that, when the two of them had worked together at a different restaurant, her niece had been "in [the] company of Italian and Yugoslav speaking men." She said, too, that the restaurant manager, whose name was distinctly Italian, had promised to "secure them better positions" than waitressing "should [they] be his girl-friends," and then intimated that they had agreed to the deal by saying they had gone to Hamilton to work as saleswomen. She added that they then received a "proposition to go to Montreal," the sexual innuendo implied by the city's late-night club scene, but claimed that neither of them did so.

The aunt's story fit with a history of young working-class women who encountered pleasure and danger in the urban spaces they inhabited, including workplaces, and the sexual bartering involved.⁷⁷ Then came more explicit claims about the girl's history of sexual deviancy. The aunt said that the girl, at age 12, had run away from home and several months later was picked up by the Hungarian police and hospitalized "to be treated for venereal disease." During the 1956 revolt, she was allegedly partying with friends in Austria. After tracking her daughter down, the father stayed with her in Austria "where apparently all had gay times – the father had friends amongst her girl-friends." The concerned father thus morphed into an unfit father who, according to the aunt, had also found "girl friends" from among his daughter's friends in Toronto. The counsellor did not record her thoughts on the father's alleged behaviour, but her notes on a meeting she held with the police following the girl's return home a few days later reveal a disciplinarian determined to stamp out the bad behaviour. Upon hearing of the girl's return, she walked over to the police station to provide an update and had what she considered a useful conversation with a policewoman on the Morality Squad. Her reference to having "exchanged notes" on the girl with the "charming and very interested and concerned" officer probably meant that she told her everything she knew about the girl and the less-than-stellar father. As the counsellor surely already knew, the officer explained that the case would "take time to investigate" because the girl "would have to be caught in an unlawful [sexual] act," as she was a minor, before any action could be taken. She also reportedly promised to inform her sergeant of the case and keep the Institute informed of any developments. No outcome is recorded, but the case underscores the willingness of Institute counsellors to use the law to curtail delinquent behaviour, even if they did not entirely trust

the father, who wanted her back home. Being unemployed, he may well have wanted her back because she was the family breadwinner, thereby making this case about money as well as morality.⁷⁸

More than Miniskirt Feminism

Neither the few Institute case files on transgressive girls nor the newspaper articles that treated the subject comment on the “good girls” who, as historian Vienna Paolantonio shows with respect to Italian Canadians, participated in parish activities, both religious and secular, and did not openly defy their parents.⁷⁹ However, some journalists did offer nuanced portraits of girls who did challenge their parents’ strict moral codes. In his profile of Portuguese-born Filomena Pavao, age 16, the *Toronto Star*’s Joe Serge repeated a familiar narrative about a “pretty teenager” who was desperate to socialize, but who had “never attended a school dance, been to a party with other high school students or out on a date to a movie” because her parents would not allow her to date until she was ready to marry. He wrote about the “loneliness” of her first year of school because the “English-speaking students would not associate with me” and her inability to maintain friends once she learned English because she was prohibited from attending after-school activities. Her closed social life, he added, consisted of visits by relatives, short shopping trips to nearby Kensington Market, and attending church. One can, however, detect a muted expression of resistance to parental codes in Filomena’s admission that she did “do things without mother knowing,” though she also claimed she would never meet a boy without her mother’s approval.⁸⁰

The ruminations of a more rebellious Italian daughter appeared in an article that, like so many others, began by painting the west end Little Italy where she lived as being “closer to Sicily” than to the modern bank tower in the area. But it quickly became clear that, in addition to keeping secrets from her mother, this “girl” openly challenged her parents’ moral codes. Part of *Toronto Telegram* reporter Helen Singer’s 1971 series on “The Italians,” the article featured a conversation between Mrs Chiappetta and her daughters, Emily, age 22, and Ruta, age 19, one that relayed the “compromises” reached as a result of the girls’ lobbying efforts, as well as Emily’s continuing defiance. Noting that the parents allowed the girls to go out in groups, Singer’s additional comment, “or, at least they leave the house that way,” identified a common way by which immigrant girls circumvented restrictions. They left home with brothers or male cousins, split up, and then returned home together, swearing they had been together the whole time. The readers who saw this article alongside a related one that featured mothers of Danish, Polish, Italian, Portuguese, and Japanese origins who had taken a “YWCA” program on “Canadian” customs so they could better relate to their children, might have inferred that change was occurring within

these households. An Italian woman who explained that she completed the program, itself a response to the OEC report, because she no longer wanted her children to say “mummy is a dummy,” was a model subject who earned her driver’s licence and became an assistant to the Canadian social worker heading the project. For the daughters of such women, acquiring a driving licence and access to the family car signified a greater participation in a recreational life outside the family home.⁸¹

Singer’s essay on the Chiapetta women is most noteworthy for the public exposure it gave to the nascent feminist views of elder daughter Emily. A recent graduate of the University of Toronto, Emily was an exceptional Southern European immigrant daughter who had clearly won some of her battles for greater autonomy and self-actualization, though her embrace of modernity, or Canadianization, had not meant a complete rejection of her parent’s culture. In that regard, she resembled an earlier generation of Italian American daughters who, as Donna Gabaccia documented, showed respect for their mothers even as they opposed their traditional ways. In late 1970s Toronto, Giuliana Colalillo found a similar pattern among second-generation Italian Canadian women. As did Wenona Giles among now adult second-generation Portuguese women who recalled their years growing up in Toronto from the late 1960s until the 1980s.⁸²

That Emily is negotiating what some scholars have called a “third space,”⁸³ somewhere between “traditional” homeland and “modern” hostland cultures, is evident from her answer to Singer’s question about the women’s views on feminism. Singer called it “women’s lib.” The mother replies first, saying she prefers her cultural traditions of courtship and marriage to the “wrong” ideal of independent women. Younger sister Ruta, who is also clearly trying to carve out a position, and identity, that can bridge a commitment to family and a desire for personal autonomy, says she expects to marry, but intends to date more than one man before choosing a husband. Emily does not identify as a feminist and says that she, too, will probably marry. But she insists that she will do so only if she finds the “right man at the right time.” In another nod to feminist-influenced notions of autonomy, she asserts that “the goal” of marriage “isn’t the man,” but “the act of becoming whatever you are.” Rejecting the code that bound young women to marry their first boyfriend (*fiancé*), she claims to have no compunction about upsetting her parents over a decision “to break it off” with a boy in whom she loses interest. “I can’t say they like it,” she says, “but there’s not much they can do about it.” Her position on employment equity, which also has a feminist ring to it, probably reflected her experience on the job market. She describes it as “a burning inside you when you know you’re as good as the man across the room, and he gets the job.” Of church teachings about women and procreation, she insists, much like a feminist, that women are “good for more” than procreation, and expresses disdain towards “a tradition that woman has dragged behind her for thousands of years.” Again, however,

she rejects the feminist label by declaring that tearing down church-sanctioned sexism will need more than “carrying a Women’s Lib sign down the street.”⁸⁴

Clearly pleased to have found a complex subject, Singer attributes Emily’s nascent feminist views entirely to a “WASP university education” that has allowed her to break out of a cultural island on which others were still stranded. No doubt, her university education played a major role in shaping Emily’s still-developing views and identity, though, like the Portuguese women interviewed by Giles, “household politics” also mattered. The rebellious acts recalled by two of them ranged from resistance to housework to running away, living on their own, and having a child out of wedlock, while the parental responses included threats and beatings. As Giles observes, these women saw their later choice of non-Portuguese partners as “a rejection of a *machismo* that does not fit with the more equitable visions of gender relations to which, as second-generation Portuguese women, they aspire.”⁸⁵ Emily’s declarations of independence were bolstered by the respectability offered by a university education. We do not know what ultimately happened to the girls, and boys, who are referenced in the Institute case files under review, but they belong to a broader history of immigrant working-class youth whose engagements with urban modernity occurred within highly circumscribed contexts.

Conclusion

The era’s newspapers did not fully capture the range of generational conflicts erupting within Toronto’s immigrant families during the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s. The focus on the growing number of Southern European immigrant families and the honour-shame code that was said to have crossed the Atlantic without modification both reinforced stereotypes of patriarchal Mediterranean cultures and sidestepped similar tensions within other European newcomer families. It also ignored generational conflict within Canadian families. Nor were these complexities fully captured by Ferguson as author of a 1970 Ontario government report that critiqued the mosaic model. Her self-description as a “middle-roader” in the integration-assimilation debate did not signify an abandonment of the pluralist principles that were on display during her time with the Institute (see [chapter 8](#)). Rather, in significant respects, the ambiguity she expressed with respect to where she stood on the continuum between integration and assimilation – for the two, as Werner Sollors and others note, are not simple opposites⁸⁶ – was a constitutive element of the international institute movement’s paradoxical pluralism.

Indeed, the (often frustrated) efforts of the Toronto Institute counselling staff to mediate and intervene in conflicts between immigrant parents and their children illustrate the contradictory character of an Institute pluralism that blurred the lines between integration, Canadianization, and assimilation. In advocating

for adult children who resented parental intrusions, front-line workers might be sympathetic to older parents but they urged them to appreciate and adapt to Canadian models of nuclear family life. They effectively advocated an accelerated program of Canadianization for the parents of teens who viewed them mainly as family wage-earners. But in neither case did they distinguish between total conformity to and degrees of adaptation to dominant Anglo-Canadian norms. The notations of the mainly European counsellors who handled these cases were often written in broken English, not only because they themselves were new to English. They also had to translate ideologically complex ideals into concrete examples for their clients. In plenty of cases, both counsellor and client were speaking in a language (English) that was not their mother tongue. The result was often simplistic-sounding solutions to complex situations.

The paradoxical nature of Institute pluralism also influenced how front-line workers sought to apply the casework methods central to social work practice (even in brief counselling sessions) – with its repertoire of professional narratives that, in the cases under review, mainly shifted between tales of potential redemption, or mobility, thwarted by backward rural parents – with detective work. The workers' efforts to entice teens into staying in school with the promise of better or cleaner jobs and a more affluent life than their parents reflected the possibilities, but also limits, of a vocational education. Their "tough-love" approach to transgressive teens, particularly girls, suggests the limits of a position that allowed these daughters, and sons, to resist Old World ways through prescription to dominant Canadian gender models that were also, if not equally, confining. It was the handful of articles that featured young Southern European women negotiating a highly fraught moral and social terrain, and in one case articulating a nascent feminist position, not the Institute's social workers, that offered concrete attempts at negotiation and mediation.