

‘Filthy’ Homes and ‘Fast’ Women: Welfare Agencies’ Moral Surveillance in Post-Second World War Melbourne

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Quiet suburban streets, white picket fences, Mum, Dad and the kids: these are the most popularised images of Australian domesticity in the post-second world war years, yet one must not forget that in the midst of the postwar prosperity that permitted increasing portions of the population to attain economic security, there were many Australians whose lives did not fit with this idealised notion of the ‘suburban dream’. The case files created by welfare workers provide some insight into the conditions faced by families in crisis, but, more particularly, the case files are also suggestive of the ways in which caseworkers perceived these families and the various pressures they exerted upon their ‘clients’¹ to conform to the basic expectations of mainstream discourses of domesticity. This article is based upon an examination of a sample drawn from twenty years’ worth of case records produced by three Melbourne welfare agencies: the Citizens’ Welfare Service (CWS), the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC), and the Children’s Welfare Department (CWD).² Approximately twenty case files from each agency for every year from 1945 to 1965 were examined. The sample was limited to cases of clients who were living in Melbourne or one of the city’s suburbs at the time of their first contact with a particular agency. Each of the three agencies was distinct, both in terms of the services they sought to provide and in the casework methods used in the pursuit of their goals. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of uniformity among agencies in terms of the norms against which ‘clients’ were measured.³

The casework techniques of the CWS, SPCC and CWD were fundamentally influenced by the principles expounded by such early advocates of the professionalisation of social work as Mary Richmond, who outlined in detail processes of collecting information leading to ‘social diagnosis’. These processes, she claimed, eliminated bias in casework by applying ‘scientific’ techniques of investigation and assessment.⁴ Like Richmond, all three agencies emphasised the importance of the home visit in gaining a complete understanding of ‘clients’.⁵ By the late 1950s the influences of casework methodologies informed by psychoanalysis, akin to those presented by Florence Hollis,⁶ and theories of childhood psychological development such as those of John Bowlby,⁷ are evident.⁸ This transition was marked by changes in the language of the files, attempts to provide more details of contacts with ‘clients’, a growing emphasis on the role of counselling, and a decline of interest in the institutional placement of children in favour of foster homes and adoption. It did not, however, constitute a fundamental shift in the norms of gender and domesticity that will be explored here.

The research for this work was conducted solely on 'family casework' files, within which it is women who feature most prominently.⁹ There are a number of reasons for this predominance. Family casework was primarily focused on the domestic environment of the family and provisions made for children, both of which were considered to fall within the woman's sphere of responsibility. Thus an initial goal of the home visit was to determine any 'failures' in, or disturbances to, women's routines and habits. It should be noted that in many instances it was most practical to conduct home interviews with women. Caseworkers conducted the majority of their home visits during the day; since women were far less likely than men to be in full-time employment, they were more likely to be home. Nevertheless, the insistence upon interviewing women in their homes had more to do with the belief that there was a connection between a woman's ability to 'make a home' and her 'character', than with mere convenience.¹⁰ The high representation of women within these files must also be understood within the context of the ways in which people became 'clients' of agencies. The majority of the 'clients' of the SPCC and the CWD were reported to these agencies by other people, most commonly for neglect or 'unfit guardianship'. Women were more likely to be considered to be placing their children in moral danger by consequence of their own 'immoral' behaviour, they were more likely to be held responsible for the physical welfare of children, and of course single mothers were more likely to be without the means to provide their children with constant supervision and the material trappings associated with 'good mothering'. The CWS and, to a lesser extent, the SPCC established casework relationships with people who presented themselves at the agencies' offices. While men and women are quite equally represented in cases of people seeking material provisions, it was most typically women who approached agencies seeking assistance with domestic or marital difficulties. The combination of these factors resulted in the production of family casework files that reveal a good deal about the ways in which women were evaluated. An analysis of these files indicates that the two primary poles around which women's 'morality' or 'character' were judged were 'sexual propriety' and 'cleanliness'.

The fear of 'fast' women

The twenty years following the second world war saw a marked shift in caseworkers' attitudes toward sex. This was particularly pronounced within the work of the CWS, whose immediate post-war files coyly avoid the topic, only overtly addressing the issue in relation to accusations of sexual 'perversion'. Yet by the 1960s this agency's files indicate that caseworkers and medical professionals believe that, within marriage, 'abstinence from intercourse ... was not very healthy',¹¹ and notes of interviews frankly record inquiries into couples' sex lives. This transition must be situated partially within a longer history of an increasing emphasis placed upon romance and sexual compatibility within marriage,¹² but is more directly attributable to the influence of psychology on the field of social work. In true Foucauldian style, caseworkers adopting psychosocial techniques expected 'clients' to 'confess' their most intimate thoughts and secrets, asking intimate questions that many 'clients' would not have been comfortable answering to their friends, let alone an unknown professional.¹³ Even in the

agencies less affected by psychological theories, the files reveal a growing acceptance of irresolvable incompatibility within marriage and a liberalising of attitudes toward divorced people pursuing new sexual relationships. Nevertheless, all of the case files measure the behaviour of 'clients' against the ideal that sex should be confined to the marital bed.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the discovery of a man's extramarital sexual activity had no bearing on the caseworkers' impressions, as men who conveyed the impression of fidelity were able to gain the favour of caseworkers far more easily than those who did not. However, men's sexual behaviour and, more importantly, sexual history were not considered to indicate information about their 'character' in the same way it did for women. This was reflected in the interviewing process. A sixteen-year-old mother who made herself a state ward when she was six months pregnant was questioned as to the events leading up to her pregnancy. She told the caseworker that she had met the father 'casually in 1949 and associated with him up to about a fortnight before her committal', the report adding that she 'admits sexual intercourse with men since about 14 years of age'.¹⁴ The putative father was questioned only in regards to intercourse with this woman, a common pattern across the files. A man's sexual past was not taken as a marker of his respectability, although the 'character' of women with whom he was currently 'associating' could be used as an indication of his moral standards. On the other hand, women who were found to have violated expectations of sexual propriety were viewed in an extremely negative light, and there were often significant consequences of such perceptions.

The extent to which a woman's violations of norms of sexual behaviour were considered a reflection of her basic 'character' depended upon the nature of her transgressions. Where acts could be dismissed as the consequence of mere 'foolishness', women were able to significantly improve caseworkers' perceptions by demonstrating sincere and adequate repentance. This concept of 'foolishness' was used to describe acts that were considered to reflect a poor decision or judgement but not to signify a fundamental rejection of the conventions of female sexual propriety. A number of situations fell into this category: failed *de facto* relationships where the woman had been left without support; isolated sexual acts characterised as an expression of love or with a partner the woman believed she would marry; rapes in which the woman was viewed as partially responsible by consequence of having unwisely placed herself in a position of vulnerability; and sexual activity evidenced by a single illegitimate child.

In response to discovering or suspecting more serious violations of sexual propriety — such as women believed to be 'associating' with more than one man, or a woman whose history of such behaviour was evidenced by the presence of children by multiple fathers — caseworkers became more proactive in applying behaviour-modifying pressure to their 'clients'. Both the tone caseworkers adopted and the actions which they were prepared to take indicate concerns about the consequences of these sexual 'improprieties'. For instance, it was not uncommon for a woman to be 'warned ... that because of her association with various men she would be likely to lose the children unless she ceased her questionable mode of living'.¹⁵

Sex was to be concealed from the public consciousness and, furthermore, to be something of which children were to remain blissfully unaware. The post-war

housing crisis meant that even the homes of Melbourne's relatively affluent faced problems of overcrowding. Lack of space was a fact of life for a large proportion of the families appearing in the CWS, SPCC and CWD case files, and caseworkers demonstrated a tolerance for the far-from-ideal reality that children might have to share bedrooms with adults, yet in such cases there is intense anxiety about the nature of the sexual activity to which the children may be exposed.

Caseworkers were guided by theories of 'the family', such as those of Talcott Parsons, which stated that 'the basic and irreducible functions of the family' were to provide 'the primary socialization of children' and 'the stabilization of the adult personalities of the population'.¹⁶ In Parsons's writing 'the family' referred to a nuclear family headed by a married couple, but his general theories were often applied to less rigidly defined 'families'. Caseworkers of the post-war era were quite prepared to accept that a de facto relationship could perform the same role within society as a marriage, yet the associated sexual activity was considered to be potentially more threatening to children, and this was particularly true of couples who were not both the biological parents of the children concerned.

A woman found to be sharing a bedroom with her children and a man other than their biological father would not be forced to part with her children on these grounds alone, but it was certainly a circumstance which caseworkers were eager to attempt to alter. As one inspector wrote: 'I pointed out to Mrs Y that the child should not live with her under those conditions, the room was filthy apart from all the rest'.¹⁷ Although the author avoids naming it, 'all the rest' refers to the fact that the mother is living in a de facto relationship with a new partner. Mothers would be summarily dismissed if seeking the return of their children and proposing such accommodation. Based only on a written description of a home, stating that a mother, her new partner and her child would have the use of 'Part of a house consisting of two rooms, namely a bedroom and kitchen ... with the use of a bathroom', the SPCC determined that:

the conditions, both moral and material, to which Mrs K's son would have to return would not appear to be satisfactory, and this Society would not feel prepared to approve of the boy's removal from his present satisfactory environment [an institution].¹⁸

The exposure of children to environments where non-marital sex was apparently 'habitual' could lead to their removal, particularly where parents demonstrated little intention of altering the situation. A policewoman visiting one home discovered that three children were sharing a bedroom with their mother, an unmarried couple and a visiting sailor, in addition to a second unmarried couple occupying the front room. The file notes that the police had visited the house and 'on two different occasions found two couples living together there, both unmarried', adding that 'all the children were reasonably well cared for and it was only the circumstances in which they were found which led to their committal'.¹⁹

Situations where caseworkers had reasonable evidence that children were exposed to more aberrant sexual conduct offered them a legal basis for taking immediate action. In 1955 an inspector for the SPCC made the following statement regarding a visit to an inner suburban home:

I said to Mrs M, 'Where is your husband?' She said, 'He went to Bendigo yesterday with his step-mother ...' I said, 'Why did he go to Bendigo with her?' Mrs M said,

'Oh, he is on with her. He told me he has put her in the family way ... I said, 'How long has Mrs M senior been staying here?' Mrs M said, 'For four months, ever since her husband died' ... I said, 'Where did Mrs M senior sleep when she stayed with you?' Mrs M said, 'She slept in the same bed as myself and my husband — he slept in the middle'.²⁰

This family, by consequence of the 'filth' of their home, the father's failure to remain in regular employment, and suspicions of the mother's sexual promiscuity, had been considered 'a most unsatisfactory case' for some time. However, it was not until the discovery of this 'deviant' sexual activity that the inspector 'told Mrs M that the children could not remain any longer at home under these conditions'²¹ and that it was deemed appropriate to charge the children as being 'in need of care and protection' — a term that replaced the older category of 'neglected' in 1954.²²

While it must be acknowledged that the ability of the SPCC and the CWD to take formal action against families was restricted by the requirements of legal evidence, it is equally true that caseworkers were not obliged to take action simply because the evidence could support a charge. However, parents were far more likely to find themselves being separated from their children when the nature of the allegations was sexual.²³ Furthermore, women were taken to be the measure of a family unit's sexual mores, and thus it was women whose sexual activity was most closely monitored and scrutinised.

The danger of 'filthy' homes

All three agencies placed a strong emphasis on conducting inspections of homes, or home visits, as those more influenced by contemporary social work theories less transparently referred to them. Based on an assumption of a fundamental connection between people's 'characters' and the environments in which they lived, the conscious purpose of home inspections was to provide caseworkers with information that would assist in the assessment of the individual as a whole,²⁴ and observations made were considered particularly pertinent in relation to women.

From the perspective of caseworkers, the most fundamental requirement of homes was that they be 'clean'. Numerous works have explored the ways in which discourses on 'dirt' and 'filth' have been constructed and operated as social controls in colonial contexts.²⁵ While the racialised dimension of colonial discourses certainly magnifies the extent to which discourses of 'dirt' and 'domesticity' may be used to construct and control social 'others', there are many parallels between such processes in colonial societies and those that define social hierarchies within cultures. The very nature of the casework relationship imposes a power dynamic that establishes the authority of the caseworker.²⁶ Furthermore, the vast majority of the CWS, SPCC and CWD 'clients' were both politically and socially disempowered. Consequently, they faced extreme difficulty in expressing and exerting their wills within the casework environment. This discussion of the dynamics of post-war discourses of 'cleanliness' makes few explicit references to colonial discourses; nevertheless, the colonial is a significant element of the foundations upon which this article is based.

It is virtually impossible to give a universal description of what caseworkers considered a 'clean' space, not least because expectations varied according to the purpose for which the space was used. Nevertheless, the examination of case files

from all three agencies reveals common understandings of the terms 'clean', 'dirty', and 'filthy'. 'Clean' and 'dirty' are constructed as binary opposites, while 'filth' is a more offensive and quite specific manifestation of 'dirt'. Women with 'filthy' homes were viewed as morally culpable; considered to have failed, at the most basic level, to 'make a home' for their families. As Leonore Davidoff has argued, the most important function of cleaning is the creation of an order that separates out the primary constituents of the environment and makes 'clear the boundaries between them'.²⁷ The boundaries that housework was supposed to establish and guard varied according to the intended use of a household space. It is by examining the particular conditions that led to caseworkers to determine various spaces to be 'filthy' that it is possible to generate an understanding of the expectations and anxieties associated with various areas of the home.

Post-war programs of assimilation assumed that Indigenous Australians and, to a lesser extent, non-English-speaking immigrants were largely ignorant of 'acceptable' standards of 'cleanliness' within homes. Cultural and racial stereotypes used to construct these groups as social 'others' validated the condescending educational approaches instituted to 'clean-up' their homes. Although the postwar immigration flux did result in rising numbers of European immigrant families contacting welfare agencies in the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of the CWS, SPCC and CWD 'clients' were white Australians. Especially in a post-war Australia that imagined the middle class was open to all who emulated 'the Australian way of life',²⁸ explanations predicated on rigidly defined class characteristics, which had their origins in eugenic theories of 'moral inheritance',²⁹ were becoming less palatable. Therefore, caseworkers were forced to find other reasons why members of their own culture were seen to be violating its norms.

This discussion will focus on the three areas of the home for which the case files provide the most detailed accounts: living areas, kitchens and bedrooms. Evidently the caseworker's task of establishing the nature of a particular space was often difficult, as an area's intended purpose was not always clearly delineated. Shortage of space in many homes meant that rooms could be bedroom, kitchen and living space all at once. To complicate matters further, variances in culture between classes meant that caseworkers' expectations of how a home would be inhabited did not always coincide with those of their 'clients'. For example, Mark Peel has argued that while working-class families considered their kitchens to be living spaces, the middle-class professionals who designed and inspected their homes did not.³⁰ Caseworkers' evaluations of spaces can be seen to reflect their own assumptions about the 'proper' use of space rather than those of their 'clients'.

'Filthy' living areas were considered a 'public' display of non-compliance with the most basic expectations of cleanliness, and the women responsible for the care of these areas were assumed to be either incapable or unwilling to do so 'properly'. Women judged incapable of maintaining basic 'cleanliness' were generally labelled 'sub-normal', a word taken from the terminology associated with psychological testing but which caseworkers regularly applied without any such foundation. 'Sub-normal' women could be forgiven many transgressions of 'cleanliness' boundaries; however, caseworkers took extra care to keep such families under regular supervision. On the other hand, women evaluated as having

'filthy' living rooms purely as a consequence of unwillingness to adhere to norms with which they were believed to have familiarity were condemned as 'lazy', 'irresponsible' or quintessentially 'dirty'. Such women were viewed as demonstrating through their 'filth' a lack of 'motherly' love and responsibility towards their children.

Caseworkers tended to declare living areas 'filthy' when conscious of the sorts of 'dirt' they felt may be contaminating to them as visitors, especially when they found it difficult to avoid making contact with such 'dirt'. Frequently, descriptions of 'filthy' living areas explicitly note the objectionable conditions of couches and lounge suites upon which caseworkers would have expected to seat themselves while conducting interviews. Caseworkers who were compelled to make contact with 'rubbish' left on floors would also be induced to evaluate a room as 'filthy'. Upon visiting a house in which 'Most of the rooms' contained 'rubbish', an inspector from the SPCC wrote

The home was in a shocking state of filth ... and not fit for habitation ... it was necessary to walk through dirt, papers and food scraps about six inches deep ... There is very little that can be done with this family, they are just dirty and careless.³¹

As suggested by this example, the term 'rubbish' referred to items such as waste papers and food scraps but also encompassed things such as tins, wrappers, boxes, rags and, indeed, any article for which the caseworker could see no use; for which there was no appropriate place but a bin. Living areas were expected to project the image with which a woman wished her family to be associated. The presence of 'rubbish' in living areas constituted a 'public' display of a woman's disregard for the most fundamental social customs associated with 'domesticity'.

When used with reference to kitchens, the term 'filthy' implied the discovery of conditions that suggested habitual disregard for the 'proper' routines and rituals of kitchen 'cleanliness' designed to vigilantly maintain the boundaries between food and 'dirt'. In one kitchen, a social-work student on a field placement recorded finding:

a table on which was a half tin of powdered milk, an empty jam tin, a small amount of butter and a couple of end[s] of stale bread. This was mixed up with dirty rags, heaps of clothing; baby's milk bottle which was caked with grease. The food cupboard was in a filthy state, containing crusts, spilt flour, orange peel and the peels of various vegetables.³²

As well as indicating a person's ongoing failure to guard boundaries between food, food refuse and 'non-kitchen' items (such as the clothing, in this example), applying the word 'filthy' to kitchens often also implied the presence of rotting organic matter.

The discovery of 'filthy' bedrooms prompted more aggressive action from caseworkers than any other violations of 'cleanliness' standards. In describing bedrooms, the term 'filthy' was almost exclusively reserved to refer to rooms where there was a notable presence of excreta, most especially faeces. The following example is typical of the descriptions of 'filthy' bedrooms found within the case files.

The bedroom ... absolutely stank ... The double bed mattress and the bedding were saturated with urine and excre[ment] was also present. A large area under the bed (of the floor) was also very wet from the bed.³³

Upon discovering faeces in bedrooms, caseworkers were swift to not only declare these rooms 'filthy' but to accord more significance to 'undesirable' conditions in the rest of the home than would have otherwise been the case.

While there were a number of levels on which caseworkers found the presence of excrement in bedrooms offensive, the sexually charged nature of the bedroom was surely significant. The presence of excreta in bedrooms was not troubling in and of itself. The use of chamber pots was not uncommon, particularly in many of the poorer homes visited by caseworkers, and the reports do not reflect a particularly strong sense of disapproval when caseworkers found them unemptied during early morning visits. A chamber pot, although located within the bedroom, was an 'acceptable' location for excrement. However, excrement found outside of such 'acceptable' vessels (most typically found smeared on bedclothes) indicated that the room's occupants had an 'abnormal' intimacy with the wastes of their own bodies, and the intensely sexual nature of the bedroom caused onlookers to posit the possibility of a connection between this intimacy and the occupants' sexuality. As Kaja Silverman argues, 'perversions' such as coprophilia — the gaining of sexual pleasure from contact with faeces — are considered dangerous because they constitute a fundamental rejection and subversion of the binary oppositions upon which forces of social control and order are based.³⁴ Thus discovering even the possibility of such a fetish was of immense concern.

While not a single report of a 'filthy' bedroom makes an explicit link between the observation of such conditions and anxieties about sexual 'perversion', ignoring the sexual component fails to provide adequate explanation of two significant phenomena. Firstly, it becomes difficult to satisfactorily explain why there were areas of the home where displays of excrement were less troubling. The disgust in the tone of the caseworker who described a toilet area covered with faeces and urine as 'nasty'³⁵ is evident, yet the discovery did not impact negatively on the overall evaluation of the house and family in the manner which a 'filthy' bedroom would have; in this instance the caseworker wrote that the home, though 'very old and dilapidated', was 'reasonably clean and tidy'.³⁶ Secondly, it cannot explain why 'unsatisfactory' conditions in bedrooms other than the presence of excreta elicited quite different tones in caseworkers' reactions. For example, an inspector recorded her response to finding that one family's three children were sleeping on rotting mattresses:

I instructed Mr + Mrs Q ... to see that the beds were fixed up and I would call again within a fortnight to see if my instructions had been carried out.³⁷

The authoritative and didactic tone of this response stands in clear contrast to the sorts of reactions often evident subsequent to the discovery of excrement in bedrooms. Here the language invoked has much in common with that used to record parents and environments that were feared to be placing children in contact with sexual 'immorality'. Thus it would be difficult to sustain the argument that the fundamental object of welfare workers campaigns for 'cleanliness' within homes was the promotion of physical wellbeing.

'Dirty' and 'filthy' homes were those that failed to comply with social expectations of how space should be used, rather than those considered a threat to physical wellbeing according to medico-scientific discourses. While there is a clear connection between certain types of 'dirt' and particular diseases, the pursuit of 'cleanliness' reflected in the case files was *fundamentally* a pursuit of morals, not primarily motivated by a desire to guard physical wellbeing. Caseworkers' willingness to assist families in escaping 'unhealthy' conditions depended far more upon assessments of the families' attitudes than on the quality of their housing. In one home deemed 'unhealthy' the walls were covered in mildew and the floor was constantly flooding, yet the caseworker concluded that this family 'deserve a great deal of credit for the way they try to live decently',³⁸ and strongly advocated the provision of housing assistance. By comparison, another family whose home was considered 'unhealthy' but who were not perceived to be making an effort to maintain sufficient levels of 'cleanliness' within the inadequate space they occupied were denied assistance. This report concludes that 'Mrs B is a stupid and apathetic woman'³⁹ and that this 'case was not an impressive one'.⁴⁰

The best examples of such assessments come from the CWS. Of the three agencies examined here, it was the only one in a position to provide significant housing assistance. Across the files of the CWS, SPCC and CWD, it was not the families with the 'dirtiest' or most 'unhealthy' homes who were judged most harshly but those who failed to embody the romanticised image of the working-class family who were 'unable to escape from their sordid surroundings, despite their intense and heroic struggle to maintain a state of cleanliness'.⁴¹

This article has not sought to portray Melbourne's post-war welfare workers as agents of social control who wilfully imposed their own middle-class value system upon the disenfranchised with the conscious purpose of perpetuating power differentials. Caseworkers do seem to have been motivated by a genuine desire to ease suffering, and even those who described their work as 'moral gelignite'⁴² argued that this was needed to provide protection for children. However, despite good intentions and theories and practices that attempted to 'scientifically' eliminate bias from their work, caseworkers inevitably required norms with which to compare their 'clients' in order to define the bounds of the 'acceptable'. Such norms can never be universally valid. They are inescapably socially, politically and morally constructed. The CWS, SPCC and CWD case files reveal that the moral standards with which caseworkers expected their 'clients' to conform were constructed with reference to popular discourses of sexuality, gender and domesticity. Thus this material conveys a great deal about the dynamics of mainstream social norms in post-war Melbourne as well as providing evidence about the restrictions and sanctions that were placed on those families who were discovered not to fit with these ideals.