

Obscuring the child caregiver: historical explanations of the political and social erasure of young carers in the United States

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Outline

- Setting the stage: young carers in the US
- Back to the Progressive Era: public health and infant mortality
- Lifesaving children: the Little Mothers' League
- The persistence of historical structures: from Little Mothers to future mothers
- Significance and some notes from North Carolina



Participatory research with young carers
Edinburgh, Scotland 2011

Searching for support





Olson, forthcoming. 'The Largest Lifesaving Corps in the world...'
Social & Cultural Geography

Public health, infant mortality, and the modern nation

‘[t]he country which first recognizes its responsibilities to the child, and tries to fulfil (sic) those obligations will receive the recognition of the world as being the foremost civilized nation’.

*S. W. Newmayer (1909), Director of Child Hygiene, Philadelphia.
Address given at the founding meeting of the American Association
for the Study and Prevention of Infant Mortality.*

The problem of the little mother

No one had to tell me about the little mother of the New York slum. I had seen her much too often myself - a scrawny child of eight or nine, dirty and disheveled, lugging a dirtier and more disheveled baby [...] But I could not dodge the issue by merely agreeing [...] that there should be no such thing as a little mother, innocently and ignorantly killing her thousands of children a year [...]



Since thousands of poor families were in an economic situation which made the little mother necessary, we had to turn her into something that suited our purpose.

Josephine S. Baker (1939, p. 132-133)

By 1915:

- 25,000 girls were enrolled in NYC Leagues
- Additional 25,000 girls enrolled in other states
- 44 American cities, with interest from overseas
- Still largely focused on immigrant children



A LITTLE MOTHERS' LEAGUE

From Little Mothers to future mothers: 1927 and domestication of women's work

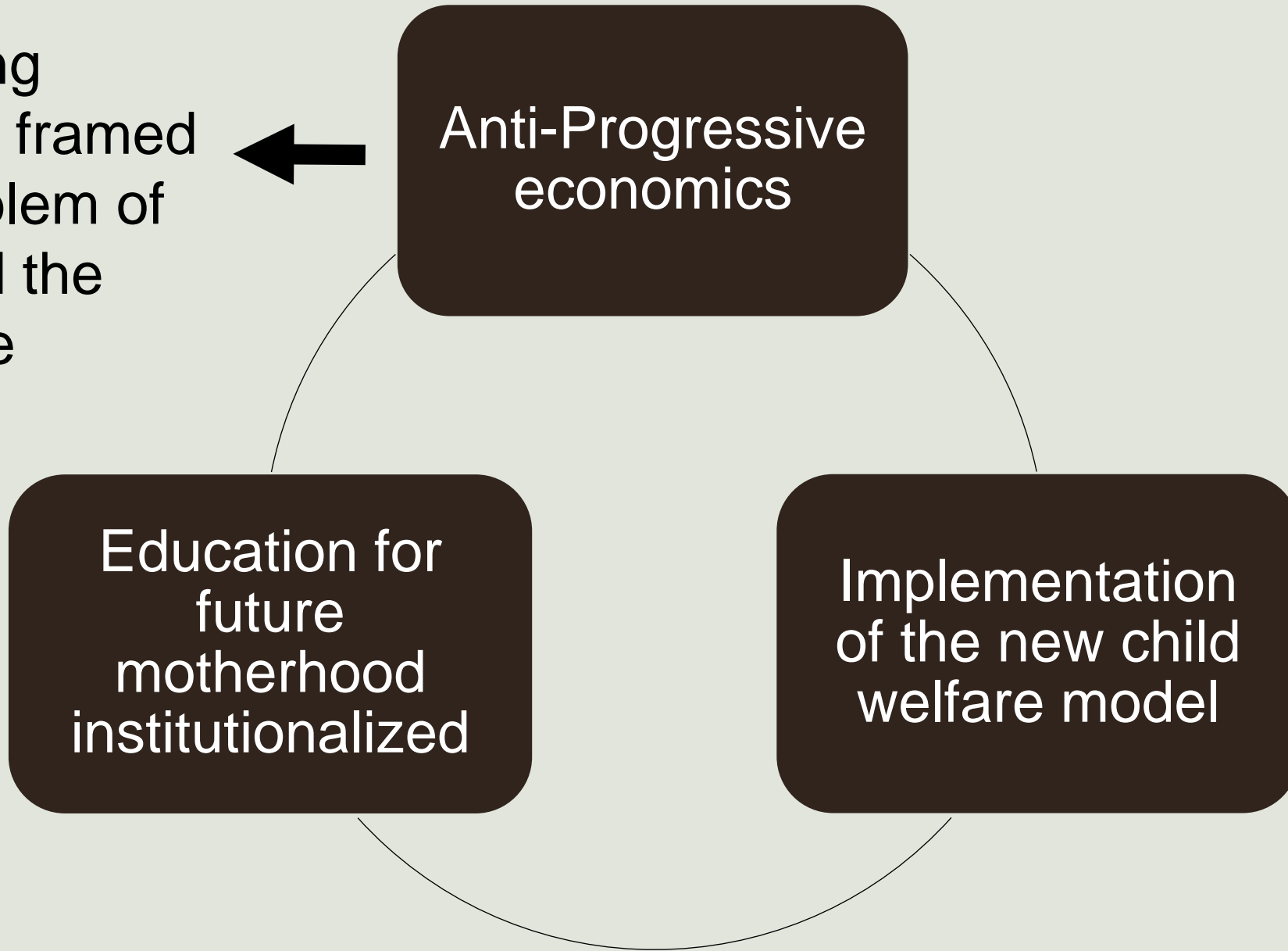
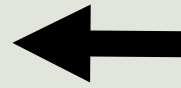


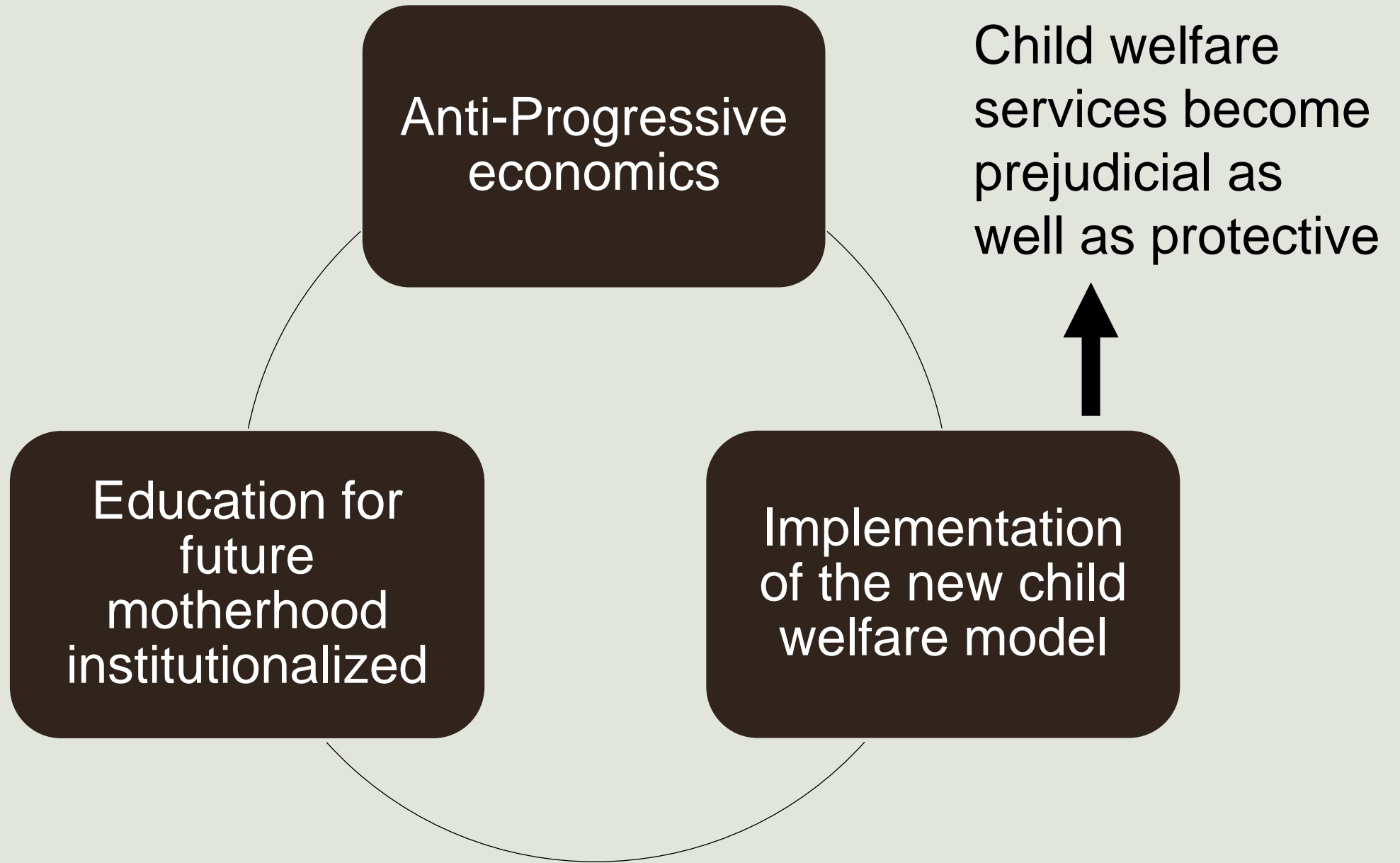
Caregiving
becomes framed
as a problem of
labor and the
workforce

Anti-Progressive
economics

Education for
future
motherhood
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Implementation
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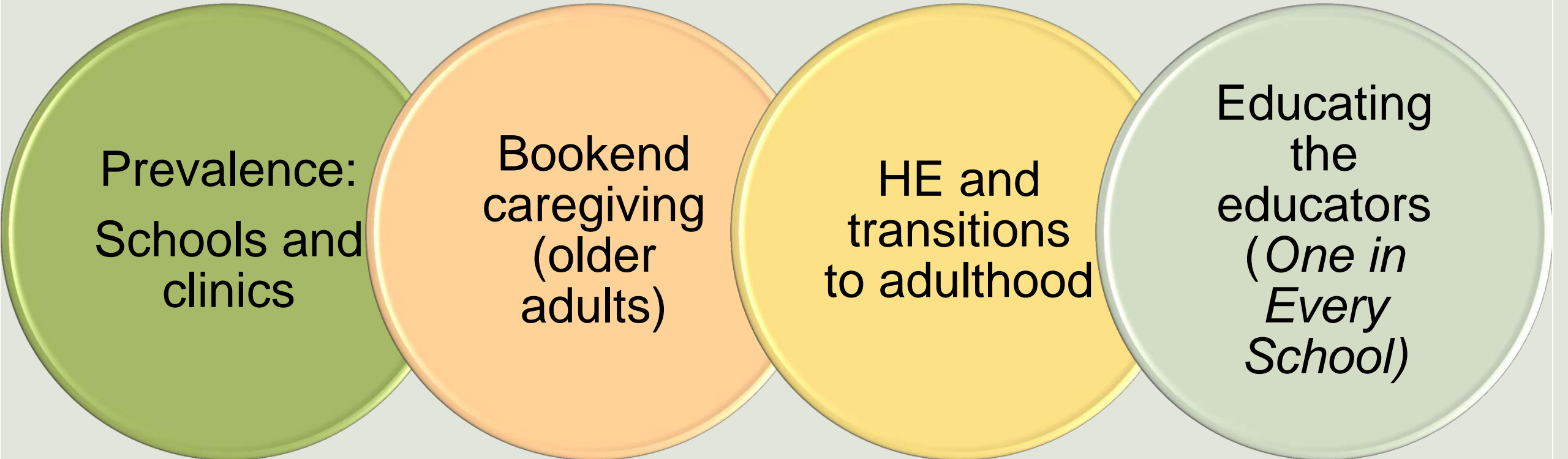


Youth professionals no longer
trained to see children as
lifesaving caregivers

Structures and why history matters

- I. Caregiving a problem if it removes labor from the workforce
 - II. Caregiving by children is hidden to avoid child welfare solutions
 - III. Youth oriented professionals across the discipline not trained
- Intrinsic – it is important to tell a full history of care (Dyck)
 - Explanatory - these structures persist, and they have to be understood as part of our social landscape
 - Instructive/prescriptive – though constraining, they also suggest some opportunities

Contemporary projects out of UNC, with many partners:



Prevalence:
Schools and
clinics

Bookend
caregiving
(older
adults)

HE and
transitions
to adulthood

Educating
the
educators
(*One in
Every
School*)



<http://bookendcaregivers.web.unc.edu>

Thank you!

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