

Care as a Common Good

Sarah J. Tracy
Arizona State University

I recently unearthed an audiotape of my eleventh birthday. With the sound of boiling fondue popping in the background, my father interviewed me, asking about my sticker collection, the boy who passed me folded up notes at school, and my favorite song—Kenny Loggins's Caddy Shack theme, "I'm Alright" (Loggins).

As a culminating centerpiece to the interview, my father asked: "Sarah, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Without a beat I answered confidently, "A famous actress or singer." Dad, always a realist, responded, "Well, yes, a lot of people might want to be famous, but if that doesn't work out, what would you like to be?" I paused, and answered in a decidedly less definitive tone, "I might be a mother . . . or a teacher."

Twenty-six years later, how might we judge the accuracy of my prepubescent life predictions? In short, I was partly right. I am a teacher. I am not a mother.

As I consider my subjective position as a childless, unmarried, white, serially monogamist, heterosexual, tenured associate professor at a research-intensive university, the lyrics of, "I'm Alright," continue to swirl in my mind—sometimes as a statement of surrender, sometimes in response to real and imagined judgments from others, and as I grow older, increasingly as a statement of affirmation and agency. Many times over the course of my thirty seven years, though, the lyrics have been punctuated with a question mark: *Am I "alright"?* And if I (and others) feel pulled between the demands of academic work and expectations/desires to be married and have children, then how might this dilemma best be addressed or managed?

Female academics hold the highest rate of childlessness amongst professionals at 43% (Hewlett), and those who secure a tenure track job

Sarah J. Tracy (PhD, University of Colorado) is Associate Professor and Director of The Project for Wellness and Work-Life in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University-Tempe. She is grateful to Angela Trethewey, Kendra Rivera, Loril Gossett, Brad Hendron, Karen Ashcraft, Catherine Ashcraft, and Jess Alberts for their insights and feedback on the topics explored in this essay. Correspondence to: The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, PO Box 871205, Tempe, AZ 85287-1205. E-mail: Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu

before having children are less likely than others to ever have children or get married (Mason and Goulden). So, has my job discouraged or prevented me from fulfilling the relational roles of wife and mother? I teased out my own status and shared initial reflections with a handful of friends and colleagues, several who hold remarkably similar subject positions to my own.

Through these initial reflections and conversations, a number of issues emerged. For instance, my girlfriends and I discussed the heterosexual bias of our own concerns and the work-life discussion in general. Furthermore, we discussed the privileged status most academics hold in even having the choice to delegate care work and housework to others. To be afforded a forum like this one to discuss our work-life "dilemmas" is a luxury when we consider the significant concerns facing employees who do the undervalued and underpaid work of taking care of other peoples' babies, doing lawn work, or cleaning toilets.

We talked about the role of geography as we have pursued committed relationships and good academic jobs. Women often trail men who go to graduate school and take academic jobs. Meanwhile, a man is much less likely to follow his female partner, even if she makes significantly more money (Hendershott). Our experiences echo existing research that suggests that when men do follow women, the relationships face significant challenges. Male partners become disenchanted and resentful as they struggle to find a job in the new location and face friend and family member reactions that suggest they are lazy and incompetent. Meanwhile, women trailblazers not only provide material financial support, but simultaneously report feeling guilty, managing reactions from others that they are cold and calculating, and face difficulty as they attempt to reassure and build their partners' identity (Hendershott).

A third theme that emerged through our discussions was the devaluation of care work and the inequalities that come with marriage and children. Married women, on average, do much more housework than unmarried women. Baxter's study of cohabiting couples versus married couples concluded that "It is not just the presence of a man that leads to [women] spending more time on housework . . . but it is the presence of a husband" (318). Once children enter the equation, sex differences in domestic work become even more pronounced (Sanchez and Thomson) and women's salaries plummet (Conaway).

While a number of factors—only some of which I have the capacity to identify—have surely played a role in my single, childless status, one

factor is that I am not shy about my feelings that men should engage in a fair share of care and domestic work. When I shared this expectation with one charmingly forthright ex-boyfriend, he said, "Uh, you might want to avoid telling guys that when you first start dating them." When I was engaged to a man who desperately wanted children, I asked about the modifications we would both need to make in our (50-hour a week) jobs so that we could accommodate their care. Through our conversations, I learned that he wanted children, but did not believe he would actively watch them for more than an hour or so each evening, and perhaps for several hours on the weekend. He was bewildered and somewhat offended by my suggestion that his desire for children should be coupled with a consideration of changes in his lifestyle and work patterns.¹

Of course, who can blame him? My friends and I occasionally have joked about how cool it would be to "be a dad." While it is something we have discussed in jest, I cannot help but occasionally envy the prototypical father role—where it seems I could keep a semblance of the other facets of my life, including my job as a professor, my community service and leisure time, yet still experience the joy, fulfillment and responsibility of having my own children. Of course, this simplifies it all, and as I'm reminded every time I see a life insurance commercial, there are many parts of this same traditional father role that I feel fortunate not to shoulder.

Care: A Private or Public Issue?

So, the question remains, is it the academic job that makes it difficult for women to marry and have children? Or is it something else? In my conversations amongst unmarried childless girlfriends, we talked very little about the constraints of the job, the tenure clock, or work-life policies when discussing the dilemma. Rather, our discussions largely revolved around larger gendered structures and practices, such as the difficulty of finding male partners who want to engage in significant relational maintenance, geographically follow their female partners, or engage in housework and care work. While these issues seem "private," and are traditionally off-limits to organizational policies and structures, I believe that organizations can and should critically consider their role in valuing the work of caring for others.

Some might think it unseemly to talk about care and love in terms of organizational policies and rewards. Care is held up as having a value too

precious to put a dollar value on. Many individuals, including myself, would attest that care is among *the* most important and human parts of our paths on earth. However, as documented by scores of research studies, our societies and organizations bestow little material value on the work of caring and nurturing others human beings—whether in the public or private sphere (Daly; England and Folbre). Care work is undervalued because it is associated with private, unpaid work that women have always done for their family. In the prototypical case of women caring at home, such work is not credentialed and is considered natural and instinctual rather than due to education or skill. Adding to its lack of perceived worth is also the fact that caring for others is not considered a scarce or specialized commodity.

This devaluation of care has a number of results. When care work finds its way into the public arena (e.g., when caring is part of the job, such as the case with nurses, correctional officers, or day care providers), it accords low economic value (Tracy). Another result is that women have increasingly escaped the private sphere, where they care for their family, to find better pay, higher self-worth, and prestige in the public sphere. Indeed, women frequently find more pleasure and identity-enhancement at work than they do at home (Hochschild).

While women have flooded the workplace and educational institutions in the last thirty years, this change has not been paralleled with a compensatory flooding of the domestic sphere by men. Women continue to spend about twice as much time as their husbands on household chores—whether they are stay-at-home moms, primary breadwinners, or work the same number of hours as their male spouse (Alberts & Trethewey; Chethik; Greenstein). Unfortunately, a primary effect of the devaluation of care work is that the good people who do this precious work are materially penalized and under-rewarded. As such, I would like to open up a space for discussing how organizations could better value care and incentivize the sharing of this work more equally among all people.

Combating Problematic Assumptions about Care Work

If one goal of work-life policy is to help create an even playing ground for both men and women in organizations, we must acknowledge and point out problems with assumptions that maintain the status quo. Radio talk show host Tom Leykis brashly gives voice to several assumptions that

underlie resistance to work-life policies. On a recent episode, he suggested that if organizations allow women go home to take care of sick children, they should also allow him to leave and go bungee jumping—as having children and going bungee jumping are both lifestyle choices, and who is to say that one is any better or more important? In his Leykis 101 life lessons, he advises men to avoid working in organizations that allow flex-time for moms. Flex-time is framed as a zero-sum game where the men and single women must compensate for the whiny breeders (aka moms) who slack at work because of their kids. And, when single mothers call in and try to explain the difficulty of working full time and caring for children without help from the father, Tom drowns them out, intoning sentiments like, “NOT MY PROBLEM” (Leykis). As given voice by Leykis, popular arguments against work-life policies rest on the myths that 1) having children is a lifestyle choice entered into rationally and deliberately, and 2) work-life policies unfairly benefit mothers. Fundamental weaknesses mark both assumptions.

Just as I cannot delineate all the reasons for my single and childless state, the decision to bear children—like most decisions (e.g., where to live, where to work, where to go to college, whether to get married)—simply is not a result of deliberative rational processes (Simon). Popular voices attempt to argue against work-life policies by framing child-birth as one of many lifestyle choices. However, it is mythical to suggest that procreation, on a mass scale, is singularly linked to individual rationality, or that we can effectively deal with the responsibilities of caring for human beings by systematically penalizing the women whose wombs are responsible for carrying new generations. Furthermore, children themselves obviously have no choice in their own appearance in the world.

Even if we were to argue that child bearing *should be* the result of a more deliberative and rational process, problems nevertheless remain with the idea that work-life policies only benefit those who have children (and primarily, women). Being cared for and caring for others encompasses and affects *all* individuals despite their individual childbearing decisions. Care is a universal need that everyone benefits from at some point in their life. We were all cared for as children, we all face situations in which non-children others (e.g., friends, parents, siblings, community members) could use care, and most of us will need care as we age. When organizational policies are framed as “family-friendly” and when care work allowances are called “parental” or “maternity leave,” this fuels resentment among non-parents and glosses over the fact that care is important

for everyone and therefore should be a shared goal and responsibility among all members of society.

As such, I propose reframing organizational policies as allowing for and promoting *care as a common, collective good*. The proper care and nourishing of human beings, whether they be young or old, healthy, or ailing, has an effect on a number of people in addition to the individual parents who brought that person into the world. Care and nurturing, like other collective goods, should be treated by organizations as one more facet of corporate/institutional social responsibility.

We might consider other types of corporate social responsibility, such as organizations' policies for protecting the environment. All employees must engage in practices that uphold their organization's environmental protections, even if some employees, for instance, never go to the local park most affected by that organization's water treatment protections. And, the organization's environmental protections benefit everyone in the community. The clean water makes the community more attractive to a variety of folks, and therefore, its real estate is more valuable, the restaurants are better, city services are improved, and so on. In other words, the company's environmental policies and practices result in a collective good.

Similarly, organizational policies that value care result in a collective good. Among other ways, well cared for and nourished children result in better future employees, the availability of elder care provides a safety net, and good care and nourishment of all members of society is likely to result in less crime. In short, well-cared-for individuals are fundamental to creating a developed and ethical society.

Revaluing Care as a Common Good Through Organizational Policy

I believe that organizations, and academic institutions in particular, have a unique opportunity to reframe care work as a common good and engage in practices that 1) motivate and reward care that is practiced by and for all people, and 2) incentivize the sharing of care.

How might they do so? Some organizations provide "matching gifts" when their employees give money to charity. Other ways they invest in their employees and communities are by providing paid time off to volunteer or engage in further education. What might it look like if organizations provided incentives for all individuals, whether single or

married, male or female, with or without their own children, to engage in human care work? Employees could choose whether to care for elderly individuals, those with handicaps or disabilities, or for children. The message would be: We value the care and nurturing of human beings who need assistance in caring for themselves. Caring for such individuals is a significant human, global responsibility that benefits society as a whole.

Academic institutions are also well-poised to help educate young people about the value and difficulty of care work. Most universities require various types of general education classes and could offer courses and internships that focus on care, where students would be trained in human caring and engage in care for individuals who are not blood related. Such an experience would imbue care with material worth by granting college credit, educate students so they personally experience the difficulties and joys of care, and encourage the notion that caring for others is a basic common good rather than a private choice that is only relevant to moms. Furthermore, such courses would provide training so that all individuals would be more skilled in care and thus might motivate men and women to more equally share in care responsibilities.

To encourage more sharing, organizations could also consider Scandinavian work-life models, where part of parental leave is reserved for the father, and is lost if he does not take it (Lewis). While such policies in no way guarantee that domestic sphere work is more equally shared, they frame care work as the responsibility of both mothers and fathers. And, until such time that private care work is rewarded just as much as public paid work, organizations can promote gender equality by developing policies that encourage men to do a larger share.

Some will say that providing such incentives is inconvenient, utopian, and inappropriate. However, empirical evidence suggests that material incentives and punishments are successful for encouraging organizations to engage in a whole range of corporate social responsibility activities such as environmental protections, hiring under-represented groups, and product safety practices. Others might argue that commodification and material motivation will undermine the altruistic motivations that inspire care. But, as Lewis so aptly articulates, "If care is not valued, it is degraded and exploitative" (73). Despite potential objections, I believe that when a certain group (e.g., women) is systematically disenfranchised because they do more of a certain type of work (care), it is time for societal institutions to consider the ways they can structurally ease or counteract this inequity.

Final Reflections

In closing, I would emphasize that every life choice and subjective position is fraught with advantages and disadvantages. While I have focused this essay on women, men who act as caregivers face their own significant obstacles in terms of negative reactions from friends and families and material punishments from organizations. *Anyone* who acts in a nurturing role—by taking time off, working part-time, or displaying what is perceived as less devotion to the firm—will experience negative wage effects (Conaway). Furthermore, even those men who take traditional organizational paths are not immune from the constraints of gender stereotypes. Breadwinners often feel boxed in by societal expectations that their worth is proportional to the size of their paycheck.

Unmarried and childless folks also experience their own fair share of work-life dilemmas. One single colleague explained how she has found her PhD to be “its own personal dating liability . . . its own unique kind of birth control in the non-academic single world.” Furthermore, single childless folks are often expected to willingly volunteer for more demanding work schedules, including night classes and travel obligations. As this same friend noted, doing these things is a good way to *stay* single. Added to that are issues of loneliness, celebrating very quiet holidays, fears of dying alone, and facing enduring societal biases that suggest unmarried childless individuals are “unfinished” or “incomplete.”

As I noted in the introduction, my unmarried and childless status is still occasionally accompanied by qualms of whether “I’m alright.” Despite years of practice, I expend considerable energy thinking about how I should act during the wedding reception bouquet throw and whether I really belong at baby showers. While I continue to grapple with my journey of work and life decisions, I (usually) do not feel sorry for myself. Even more so, I do not want others to view me as a victim. Pity is just a sliver away from contempt, and those who are unmarried or childless (as well as those who do care work) should command neither.

However, I do hope that in the future, we might live in a society where care work is more equally shared by men and women. To do so, I encourage my colleagues, especially those who do not currently spend much time tending to others, to consider ways they may engage in care. For me, this has included once-a-week visits to my grandmother (who recently passed away), gifting “Sar Care” babysitting to friends, and serving as a volunteer coach for a team of third-fifth grade “Girls on The

Run." For others, this might consist of various types of community service, pitching in to help family, friends and neighbors, watching a colleague's child, or volunteering for extra advising at school. While individual initiative is important, I believe institutions also have much influence on individual, "private" pursuits. I therefore challenge organizations, and academic institutions in particular, to develop work-life policies and practices that encourage care as a common good.

Notes

¹For a number of reasons, several months after this conversation, we broke off the engagement.

Copyright of *Women's Studies in Communication* is the property of Organization for Research on Women & Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.