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Lisa Flower

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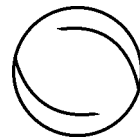
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Book Reviews

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Clare L. Stacey

The Caring Self: The Work Experiences of Home Care Aides

Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 2011. xii + 199 pp. ISBN 987-0-801-47699-0 (paperback), \$19.95.

Reviewed by: Lisa Flower, *Lund University, Sweden*

With *The Caring Self: The Work Experiences of Home Care Aides*, Clare L. Stacey presents a convincing and engaging account of the work conducted by home care aides in the United States. By delving into the blurred landscape between formal and informal settings, between private and public space and between familial and professional interactions, Stacey describes how home care aides create meaning and identity in the face of inequality: the caring self. This is an identity which enables home care aides to minimize the stigma attached to ‘dirty work’ by focusing on the relational and dignifying aspects of the job. The legal, occupational and emotional blurring of boundaries is described succinctly by one of the home care aides interviewed in the study in relation to performing tasks outside of the formal training: ‘It’s not in the agreement with the agency, but they know we do a lot of things personally for our clients, because once you’re with a client for four or five years, you know, you establish a kind of rapport with them, a friendship and trust’ (p. 53). Stacey aims to humanize and de-stigmatize this ‘emotional proletariat’ (p. 9) of the service sector and questions the prevailing feeling rules and emotional norms that are set in place by home care agencies. The goal is to raise the profile of companionship in home care by incorporating this relational aspect into policy-making and home care agencies’ guidelines in order to redefine the feeling rules. Stacey thereby hopes to reduce the risk for burnout and high turnover.

The book is divided into two parts: the first half focuses on the constraints facing home care aides while the second part looks at the construction and consequences of the caring self identity. The introduction outlines the current crisis in care prevailing in the USA where a growing number of home care aides are entering the workforce and the homes of the elderly, disabled and chronically infirm to provide both physical and emotional assistance. The book draws on Hochschild’s (1983) work on emotional labour, along with previous studies conducted on care workers and service workers, looking at the negative and positive consequences of emotional labour and the structural factors and outcomes. Stacey intends to switch the current focus from the material (i.e. monetary) to the non-material (i.e. emotional and relational) gains of frontline workers, in particular those at the lower end of the caring spectrum (as previous research has focused on the middle of this scale: nurses), an aim which she ultimately succeeds in achieving.

Chapter 1 begins by summarizing the (limited) material benefits of working as a home care aide (low wages and no benefits) along with other occupational disadvantages such as high turnover and burnout rates, poor job mobility and inadequate training. For many of the home care aides, the construction of the caring self develops in conjunction with their caring trajectory, beginning with the informal caring of family members and developing into paid caregiving. This caring trajectory

accrues emotional capital, which Stacey considers to be a resource that is currently undervalued by workers and other stakeholders. Stacey goes on to describe how all these factors lead home care aides to create identity in the context of structural inequality. Instead of refuting gendered understandings of their work, Stacey points out that ‘women themselves call on very traditional, gendered understandings of caregiving to establish their social value and preserve a sense of self on the job’ (p. 42).

Chapter 2 gives a detailed description of the work conducted by home care aides, highlighting the physical, emotional and financial strains encountered resulting from the blurred lines of the workplace, limited training and bureaucratic hassles and leading to burnout, turnover and stress. As one home care aide states, ‘I actually dropped out of the field for a couple of years ... When you do this job right, you leave a little piece of yourself with everyone you encounter, and it gets to the point where you can’t leave them anymore’ (p. 72). The main focus of this chapter is on the emotional labour employed by home care aides. Stacey identifies four areas where it can have negative outcomes: client stressors, family stressors, alienation and surplus care.

After delving into the relatively dark aspects of the job, Stacey then moves on to the rewards of caring, focusing on the importance of meaning making and identity construction in Chapter 3. The creation of the caring self identity is seen to stem from three sources: natural ability; service to others; and distancing from ‘uncaring’ others. Here I find it possible to discern a fourth category, which may be labelled ‘self-validation’, as many respondents report positive feelings originating from the work. For example, one home care aide states: ‘The reward is actually, how good do you feel about yourself and what have you done for the day’ (p. 115). The section on fictive kinship, which refers to relationships formed with clients as a result of home care aides filling in for absent family members, also lends support to this fourth category. Although this angle is mentioned (p. 106), it could have been developed further.

Chapter 4 looks at organizing home care in terms of unionization. This chapter appears to be an attempt to fill a gap in the current literature regarding the unionization of home care aides in the USA, but it falls short in terms of breadth and depth. It could have benefited, for example, from a discussion surrounding the concept of emotional energy which is briefly mentioned in the previous chapter (p. 90) along with the notion of interaction rituals (see Collins, 1993) as a way of promoting solidarity and belonging.

In the conclusion Stacey argues that home care aides need assistance in learning how and when to erect familial/professional, public/private boundaries. However, it would appear that such lines are fairly fluid, varying from client to client. This consequently makes it difficult to create clear guidelines for what may or may not be included in the concept of companionship, which Stacey considers to be important.

The emotional labour carried out in the care and service sectors, as well as identity creation in the face of dirty work and boundary construction, are relevant subjects that have many applications. Stacey is a medical sociologist, yet this book stretches well beyond this domain. *The Caring Self* straddles various branches of sociology such as organization studies, employment relations, and emotions; the book is also relevant for other disciplines, including social psychology and social work. The book weaves the experiences of home care aides with clear and concise theoretical concepts and pertinent previous research. Such a style of writing lends itself to a broad audience and its accessibility opens it to those outside academia. It would serve well as course literature at the higher education level. The contemporary relevance of *The Caring Self* lies in its depiction of workers, many of whom I consider to belong to the ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011), a new social class facing employment insecurity and high flexibility.

While the book is informative and engaging, there are weaknesses which are largely centred upon the use of the terms *emotion work* and *emotional labour*. Emotion work is the management

of feeling in order to produce the desired effect in another (Hochschild, 1983). When emotion work is defined, demanded and paid for by an employer, it is characterized as emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). While it would appear that emotion work is conducted by home care aides there do not appear to be any directives given by home care agencies to aides regarding the regulation or maintenance of outward emotions (which would thereby turn emotion *work* into emotional *labour*). Instead, guidelines given by agencies concern relationships to clients, not feelings (incidentally, the directives given is an interesting area for future research). Ergo in my opinion, emotion *work* or *relational work* (defined by Stacey as ‘emoting, listening, providing companionship’ p. 167) are more appropriate characterizations, as opposed to emotional *labour*.

Furthermore, Stacey claims that negative consequences can arise from the blurred boundaries in the unique dyadic relationship and home environment in which aides conduct emotional labour. However, once again, it appears to be relational work, not emotional labour to which Stacey is referring as the regulation of outward countenance is unmentioned; thus negative outcomes stem from relational work, not emotional labour (for a brief discussion see p. 66). A final weakness linked to this is the lack of clarity surrounding feeling rules. It is possible to pick them out. For example, grieving for clients who have passed away is frowned upon. However, while the feeling rule of not grieving is palpable, it is not highlighted by Stacey.

This leads me to suggest that such confusion could be solved by reframing the concept of ‘companionship’ to include relational work, emotional labour and emotion work, thereby creating a more pragmatic, overarching concept. Another solution to this dilemma can be found in the literature released after *The Caring Self*, where a more suitable conceptualization of emotion management can be found, that of ‘preferred emotional management’ (Cranford & Miller, 2013, p. 790) which is based not on explicit social or organizational rules but on feeling signals communicated by clients to aides which are contingently supported by home care agencies.

A further quibble is the interpretation of emotions which Stacey provides directly without affording the reader support for such findings, for example, ‘Lete grew noticeably emotional’ (p. 77, see also pride, p. 118; frustration, p. 121). While Stacey is adept at acquainting the reader with the home care aides, more analytical weight could be achieved with the inclusion of ethnographic descriptions (body language, linguistic indicators, and so on). Although Stacey conducted extensive fieldwork, there is little mention of this in the book. A related point concerns the empirical basis of several findings, for example, that religious conviction reinforces the idea that women are naturally predisposed to caring (p. 110). While Stacey cites previous research to bolster her claims, the data in her own study is limited.

Finally, it must be said that the caring self is a non-sexualized self with no mention of sexuality in the book. This could also be an area for future development, along with a gender aspect which also remains hidden.

All in all, this is an easily digestible, informative read. The overall content and the engaging style of writing outweigh any thin spots that might be found for those wanting a more thoroughgoing analysis of the emotional labour conducted by home care aides.

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