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## **Personal Qualities and Civic Virtues: Care, Values and the Future of Welfare**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents and discusses some of the findings of programme of research conducted by members of the ESRC Research Group on Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) at the University of Leeds. It is the first step towards an examination of the light these findings throw upon the debate between proponents of a feminist ethic of care, and what may be termed covenantal communitarians. Both of these sets of ideas are grounded in an understanding of the interdependence of human beings and the relational self. Both are dismissive of attempts to demarcate the public from the private, and both speak of commitments rather than choices. Both view morality as grounded in social practice rather than adherence to external norms, although they differ in the degree to which it should be understood as the product of negotiations or as something acquired through habitual behaviour. Their understanding of what these commitments are, however, is framed and structured by radically different perceptions of gender, sexuality and the proper regulation of intimacy. The studies undertaken by members of the CAVA research team at Leeds revealed the ways in which people make morally informed responses to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Nevertheless important questions remain about how public policy should respond to those who do not act in this way. If personal qualities are civic virtues, then is the converse also true?*

This paper presents and discusses some of the findings of programme of research conducted by members of the ESRC Research Group on Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) at the University of Leeds. It is the first step towards an examination of the light these findings throw upon the debate between proponents of a feminist ethic of care, and what may be termed covenantal communitarians. Both of these sets of ideas are grounded in an understanding of the interdependence of human beings and of the relational self. Both are dismissive of attempts to demarcate the public from the private<sup>1</sup>, and both speak of commitments rather than choices, covenants rather than contracts. There are, however, two central points of debate between them. The first is whether or not agreed commitments or covenantal obligations can be fulfilled outside of traditional family forms. The second is the degree to which individuals are accountable to the communities in which they live, and what role public policy should play in upholding and in enforcing such commitments and obligations.

This paper is in four parts. The first provides a brief review of the differing analyses of commitment and moral practices that can be found in the writings of covenantal communitarians and theorists of an ethic of care. The second summarises and discusses some of the key findings of the CAVA studies. The third and fourth sections then raise further issues that arise out of this debate, and do so from two contrasting approaches.

### **The debate about commitment**

Eva Feder Kittay has recently observed that 'feminists have had an uneasy relationship to communitarianism' (2000, p. 523). Despite this, she argues that communitarian ideas still provide a 'plausible starting point from which to formulate a feminist position that I call a "public ethic of care"' (p. 526). The principal reason for this is that both reject the notion that 'the founding obligations of a social order are derived from the voluntary association of equally situated and empowered individuals' (Kittay, 1999, p. 73). Communitarians, she acknowledges, share her desire to 'find a knife sharp enough to cut through the fiction of our independence' (1999, p. xiii).

For Jonathan Sacks that 'knife' is the notion of a covenant: a relationship that is 'not predicated on interest, but instead on loyalty, fidelity, holding together even when things seem to be driving you apart' (1997, p. 63). Such relationships are not coercive, but nor are they voluntary. Their binding quality derives from the fact that they grow out of our affiliations and attachments. In Sacks words, we 'owe duties to others because they are a part of who we are' (p. 62). Similarly James Q Wilson argues that the 'relationships of parent to child, friend to friend, or comrade to comrade', can be understood only in terms of commitments. When people exercise choice, reach agreements or decide what is the proper thing to do, they do so 'in a world that has already been organised and defined by a set of intuitively understood commitments' (1993, p. 234).

It is common ground that if people are to accept and sustain such commitments, then they have to possess certain qualities or virtues. For Sacks these are unselfishness, compassion, loyalty, fidelity, and what he calls an 'accountability to rules and truths that I did not create' (1997, p. 145). For Tronto they are attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness (1993, pp. 127-134). It is also common ground that these virtues are not derived from religion, or from tradition. Instead they are acquired and developed through moral practices and habituation. It is through their repeated expression that moral sentiments become moral habits and moral habits come to constitute what

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise the distinction between the 'public and the private' is too simplistic. Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2002) have argued persuasively for a division between the public, the private and the personal.

Wilson calls persons of good character and what feminist theorists call creative moral agents.

In an important passage, for example, Wilson writes that when a person of good character faces a difficult decision or dilemma he (sic) 'looks for ways to force himself to do the right thing'

Among these are habits: routing ways of acting, each rather unimportant in itself, but, taken together, producing action on behalf of rather important sensibilities. For example: the habit of courtesy (which over the long run alerts us to the feelings of others), the habit of punctuality (which disposes us to be dutiful in the exercise of our responsibilities and confirms to others that we have a sense of duty), and the habit of practice (by which we master skills and proclaim to others that we are capable of excellence) (1993, p. 241).

This argument that moral ideals 'arise out of habitual human behaviour' draws upon the work of the British philosopher Michael Oakshott. As Wilson notes, Oakshott's central claim was that the 'capital of moral ideas has always been accumulated by a morality of habitual behaviour'. It appears in the form of abstract ideas 'only because [or when] it has been transformed by reflective thought into a currency of ideas' (p. 241). For his part, Wilson says that his own influential book The Moral Sense is

in part an effort to explain the apparently irrational attachments of family members and to draw from those attachments the argument that they rest on a moral sense (p. 17).

There are obvious commonalities between this and Janet Finch's equally influential discussion of the way in which 'the sense of obligation' that people have towards their kin develops through a process of negotiation. The 'binding quality' of this sense of duty, she writes, 'derives from commitments built up over time between real people, not from an abstract set of moral values' (1989, p. 242).

Where feminist theorists of care and communitarians diverge is over the importance of the traditional family as a forum in which these qualities and virtues are nurtured and sustained. For Sacks it is the 'stable family' that is the 'crucible of much that matters in later life' and it is marriage that is 'the supreme example of the moral bond' (p. 193). Marriage breakdown is to be understood as the product of irresponsibility and selfishness, and to have dire consequences for children.

The case stands or falls on this: are we prepared to accept some limit on the pursuit of private interest? If we are not prepared to do so for the sake of children, then we are not prepared to do so *tout court* (p. 193).

Similarly Wilson dismisses the idea that gay or lesbian couples, or even cohabiting heterosexuals, constitute 'families of choice' (Weeks 2002). They cannot do so precisely because they are voluntary. The family is not and cannot be simply one of a number of 'relationships from which people could choose so as to maximise their personal goals'.

This line of argument could be sustained only by people who believed that human nature is infinitely plastic (we can be socialised to accept

anything) and human wisdom is infinitely profound (we can design whatever sexual or child-rearing bond we want) (p. 234).

### **The CAVA research programme: findings and policy implications**

Research from the ESRC Research Group on Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) provides material which is relevant to this debate in at least two ways. First, its empirical findings shed some light on the relationship between family form and the sustaining of commitments; second, its policy implications are informed by writings on the ethics of care. This section summarises these two elements (for elaboration see Williams, 2004 and Deacon and Williams, in press).

#### Background

The following questions were behind our research:

Given families were changing – more divorce, cohabitation, lone parenthood, mothers going out to work, acknowledgement of same-sex relationships, more people living on their own, an ageing society and a multicultural society - we asked what this meant for so-called ‘family values’?<sup>2</sup> A strong theme in public debate is to suggest that because of these changes there has been a loss of commitment, a self-seeking individualism, a parenting deficit and moral decline. However, another influential thesis in academic writing has been the thesis of individualisation -that changes in family lives and intimate relations are seen to herald the emergence of self-actualizing men and women, less bound by obligation and duty, who have greater independence to pursue more satisfying and democratic relationships. Could either of these ideas be confirmed through empirical research? What does actually matter to people in their parenting and partnering relationships, especially as they undergo change? This question of ‘what matters’ framed the five main projects that were part of this programme: when people are faced with new situations or dilemmas in their family lives and personal relationships, we attempted to find out what influenced them in working out how to manage the situation. Each project took a significant element of change which was pursued using in-depth qualitative research methods.<sup>3</sup>

- life after divorce;
- motherhood, work and care;
- non-conventional partnerships;
- transnational kinship;
- collective groups and organizations who mobilize around parenting and partnering issues.

We were also concerned to use our findings about what matters to people to provide guidelines for future policy around parenting and partnering. In this respect the policy context in which we were operating is one where New Labour has introduced much more needed and more explicit policies for parenting and partnering, but in which there are some key tensions.

First, in moving away from the assumption of the male breadwinner family, policy has importantly recognized mothers’ needs and wishes to be in the labour market, yet the idea of the adult worker model of family life has also reified the *ethic of paid work* – it is seen as the basis to independence and self sufficiency, it’s seen as providing the financial imperative to get people ‘off welfare and into work’, and the moral imperative to turn

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<sup>2</sup> Accepting of course that there is and has been a divergence between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ of family lives and personal relationships.

<sup>3</sup> See appendix 2 in Williams 2004 for explanation of methodology. Other projects carried out earlier contributed to our overall findings – in particular those by Smart and Neale (1999) and Smart, Neale and Wade (2001) on children and divorce, and Duncan and Edwards (1999 *inter alia*) on mothering and employment.

people into better citizens, as well as the solution to poverty, and the role model to offer children. But does this focus on paid work reflect the priorities of people's lives? There are real tensions especially around how we balance work and care, and how we give value to care as much as work.

Second, policies have had a much greater focus on parenting through parenting orders, responsibilities for the education and behaviour of one's child, as well as support for parents through organizations such as the National Family and Parenting Institute. There is nevertheless a tension between the inherited deficit model of parenting which focuses on constructing sanctions in order to rein in those few parents who parent badly and a universal support model for parenting.

In all of this the child has become the central concern of welfare and welfare reform especially in areas of poverty, education and employment, and community development. Sure Start has been a major and important initiative aiming to tackle these issues. In addition the best interests of the child is now a fundamental requirement of policy and practice. But this is open to interpretation and there are real tensions in the balance between punishment and protection (Williams 2004a). We know that *Every Child Matters* but, for what – as an investment for the future as an educated well behaved worker citizen, or as a respected participating citizen of the present?

Finally, there has been much more acknowledgment of the diversity of family lives; the commitment to civil partnerships same-sex relationships is a marker of this. But this coexists with assumptions that emerge in policy documents that divorce, single and teenage parenthood are intrinsically problematic. Furthermore, families with a disabled member and minority ethnic families often lie beyond the fold of support services. How is it possible to have universal policies that respect diversity and do not reinforce inequalities?

#### *Sustaining Commitments in the Context of Change*

Overall, we found that the idea of moral decline was not borne out. Although relationships may be changing in shape, these changes have not undermined people's sense of commitment to one another. When faced with dilemmas, people generally negotiate 'the proper thing to do' in and through their commitments to others, especially with reference to the well-being of their children. There is, in the in-depth interviews we did, far *less* evidence of overweening self-centeredness than there are stories of the variety of fine tunings people perform in order to balance a sense of self with the needs of others.

On the other side, the decisions people make in their family lives and personal relationships provide little evidence the individualization thesis - of atomized individuals exercising unencumbered lifestyle choices. People are embedded in relationships that matter to them. There may be more blurring in these relationships between those that are given and those that are chosen. But we would be cautious about overstating the extent to which individualization has taken place, or about the extent to which families have broken free of older hierarchies and gendered inequalities. Changes have been uneven, and where there has been change it is possible to find continuity too. Nevertheless, aspirations about the quality of relationships, about fairness and mutual respect in relationships, and the meaning of people's personal relationships with children, partners, kin and friends for their sense of identity and happiness are important.

Take, for example the situation of lives after divorce. The effect of the 1989 Children Act was to emphasize shared parenting after divorce. Doing this is not always straightforward – certain conditions make it especially difficult: where there has been violence, or where

trust has completely broken down, or where divorce runs counter to a family's faith. However, Carol Smart and Bren Neale's research showed that many divorced parents, usually but not exclusively women, would take it upon themselves to perform an active 'kin-keeping' role after divorce in order to sustain relationships, not just with the other parent, but with ex grandparents and in-laws as well (Neale and Smart, forthcoming). Mason's research on 'transnational' families – in this case families of Pakistani origin now living in Britain shows how the visit the family makes back to Pakistan when they can afford it is a vital part of kin keeping and support and the forming of a transnational sense of belonging (Mason, in press) . Commitment, mutuality and interdependence extend beyond blood and marriage; they also extend across continents and they can override the disruption caused by migration or divorce.

Again, in relation to the living and re-partnering arrangements of divorced or separated parents Neale and Smart found that this could take the form of living without a partnership, having a partner who retains their own residence, co-habiting with a new partner, as well as remarrying (Neale and Smart forthcoming; Smart, 2003). Crucially, these 'choices' were about taking into account what was best for children, and how to sustain on going commitments to relationships which matter. This challenges the assumption made by Wilson, referred to above, that living arrangements outside the heteronorm are part of the achievement of personal goals. In our research, separated or divorced parents chose to live in different ways in order to fulfill their commitments in the ways they felt best.

These negotiations over living arrangements tended to confirm the significant change occurring in family lives and personal relationships identified by Irene Levin when she talks of three shifts since the 1960s (Levin, 2004). Sex and marriage became uncoupled in the 1960s, marriage and parenthood followed in the 1980s, and now it is likely that many people will spend some time in their lives living alone or living with someone who is not their sexual partner. Indeed, generally, as Roseneil and Budgeon's study showed, friends play a more important part in people's networks of support than has been recognized in the provision of formal support services (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). They found that among those who live and love without a co-resident partner (who may, in a sense, be regarded as highly individualized) many were embedded in networks of care, commitment and support. And where they were, then friends were valued over lovers, kin or sexual relationships for their emotional and practical significance. What was also significant in practices of friendship was the blurring of friendship and lover relationships. Lovers became friends and friends became lovers.

It is perhaps a marker of the importance of these relationships in people's lives that 'friendship' has become a key metaphor invoking the quality of a relationship marked by closeness, confiding, sharing and mutuality, whether with older children or with kin. At the same time, however, Wade and Smart's ' research into children's perspectives of the actuality of relationships between adults with children meant interrogating further how far democratic aspirations about family life do are inclusive of children's views (Wade and Smart, 2003). They found that while the concept of 'fairness' was important to divorcing parents and their children in sorting out how to share post divorce parenting, nevertheless often it meant fairness *to parents* in that both would have equal access to their children. Fairness *to children's needs* involved taking into account whether the child felt equally at home in both homes, whether the arrangements were open to review and could be flexible in the light of a child's changing friendships or school routines, and so on. They found that split residence worked much better where children were included in the definition of fairness. In this sense, it was the nature of the existing relationships between parents and children that was as significant as the fact of divorce.

The diversity of care and commitment does not only attach itself to living and loving arrangements, but is influenced by the continuing effects of class, ethnicity and locality. In this way, the notion of what Wilson calls 'the moral sense' in practice can mean different things to different people, on the basis of who, what and where they are. In Simon Duncan's research on mothers' decision about combining paid work and child care, he found, first, that while there are differences in whether mothers work full-time, part-time or not at all, and in what kind of childcare support they prefer, there are some things that are held in common (Duncan, 2003). With or without partners, mothers' decisions are based, first and foremost, on doing *the right thing for their children*. Central in this is their mother/worker identity. So, if your understanding of being a good mother means being a provider for your child, you are more likely to find full-time work an acceptable option. But if being a good mother means 'being there' for your child, then you are more likely to want to work part-time or, for pre-school children, not at all. These understandings of what it means to be a good mother are influenced by social networks, class, ethnicity and culture, as well as by local conditions and customs.

When it came to choosing care for their children many of these women, especially working class women preferred relatives as carers rather than formal nursery care because they thought they provided better quality care. Some black women distrusted formal care because they felt anxious that their children would not be respected properly.

The important point of Duncan's studies is that what impelled women's decisions was the affective quality of care for their children over and above the possibility of financial betterment. Money did matter of course but was not necessarily primary. Nor were these simple 'lifestyle choices'. It was an ethic of care as much as or more than an ethic of work or self-actualisation which influenced them.

We found that this ethic repeated itself in the many situations we researched. Grandparents, for example, in Smart and Neale's post divorce study often had had to face difficult situations where they morally disapproved of divorce. And yet faced with this as a reality in their own children's lives, they found it difficult to condemn their children in these blanket terms (Smart, 2003). The value which guided them through the dilemma they found themselves in was that of commitment and support: of standing by their children in times of trouble. For some, it made them reflect again on their generation's experiences of marriage, of people who had stuck it out and been unhappy, and of family members who faced a lifetime's disapproval for breaking the moral code. In practice, in working out how to be supportive they were prepared to withhold judgement on their children's behaviour. Being non-judgemental was one important way of enabling the relationships after divorce to be maintained.

This process was not dissimilar to the one found by Smart and Shipman in the study of families of Pakistani and Indian origins (Smart and Shipman, 2004). The 'proper thing to do' when faced with a dilemma over, say, whether an adult child should have an arranged marriage or not, was not simply determined by a set of fixed prescriptions based in Islam or Hinduism, but drew on the value of the commitments they had to the people around them, as well as the context in which they found themselves. They found considerable variation in the expectations younger adults had in following an arranged or negotiated marriage. Some felt it was a commitment they owed to family in Pakistan or India. Others felt it was more an individual decision: one mother said she felt that if her children asked her to arrange a partner she would, but equally if they wanted to choose their own she would let them, but she would not want them to marry out of their religion. In so far as

arranged marriage is an expression of cultural belonging, some interviewees felt that this could be followed in other ways, such as ensuring that their children learned and became proud of their cultural heritage. In other words, in common with the grandparents facing the divorce of their children, how people managed new situations which may have conflicted with deeply held beliefs about divorce or marriage outside the faith was by weighing up how best to sustain the relationships with people who mattered to them. Culture was not fixed, but dynamically re-constituted itself in the context of caring commitments.

### Implications for policy principles

So what does our research add up to? And what are the implications for the tensions in policy outlined earlier?

Central to our findings is the idea that people's commitments may be different, but this does not mean there is a loss of commitment itself. Moral reasoning based on *care* informed the way people attempted to balance their own sense of self and the needs of others. What it means to be a good mother, father, grandparent, partner, ex-partner, lover, son, daughter or friend is crucial to the way people negotiate the proper thing to do. Of course this does not mean everyone behaves well or is successful in negotiating these things, nevertheless we found that in working through their dilemmas, certain practical ethics emerged for adults and children. These are the ethics which enable resilience, which facilitate commitment and lie at the heart of people's interdependency. They constitute the compassionate realism of 'good-enough' care. They include:

- fairness,
- attentiveness to the needs of others,
- mutual respect,
- trust,
- reparation,
- being non-judgmental,
- adaptability to new identities,
- being prepared to be accommodating, and
- being open to communication (Williams, 2004: 74)

However, what is lacking in the current policy debate is a recognition of these ethics and of their importance in people's lives. The emphasis on work overshadows care; interdependency is the poor relation of economic self-sufficiency; and education frames child-centredness. These practical ethics of fairness, attentiveness and so on cannot simply be transposed into the political arena, but we could use them to develop a *wider political ethic of care*.

At a basic level this would involve policies that provide *time, space* and *financial security* for people to balance their work and care responsibilities and for children to flourish. It is these that can help break down older inequalities and provide a context to enable people to meet care commitments. At a very general level this implies two things for policy.

- First, there should be less anxiety that diverse living arrangements in themselves give rise to moral decline, social instability or lack of social cohesion.
- Second, policies need to focus on the practical support for people to carry out their commitments, and to respect and recognize the diversity of commitments people have. But as we found in our interviews with self help groups this has to be the right

sort of support: non-judgemental, fair, respectful and practical (Williams, in press; Williams and Roseneil, in press).

At a wider level, and with reference to the four tensions we outlined in New Labour's policies, we propose that current policy for parenting and partnering needs to involve four rebalancing acts (Williams, 2004) :

- *Balance the ethic of work with the ethic of care.*
- *Balancing parental responsibilities with support and voice;*
- *Balancing investment in children with respect for childhood;*
- *Protecting diversity from inequality*

Balancing the ethic of work with the ethic of care is the broadest of these rebalancing acts. The ethic of paid work which has been at the heart of New Labour's welfare reforms is not broad enough to meet the aspirations which people have around time and the quality of their relationships. We need a political principle about care which is equivalent to that of paid work.

- Care is as central to a notion of citizenship as paid work. Where the work ethic elevates the notion of independence and economic self-sufficiency, an ethic of care demands that *interdependence* be seen as the basis of human interaction.
- Care of both the self and others are meaningful activities in their own right. They are also *universal* and involve us all, men and women, old and young. We are all, at some level, the givers and receivers of care from others. It is an activity that binds us all.
- In providing and receiving care and support in conditions of mutual respect we learn and enact the practical ethics of attentiveness, of responsibility, trust, being adaptable and accommodating to others' differences, tolerance for our own and others' human frailty, and how to sustain and repair relationships. These are not just personal qualities, they are civic virtues and therefore are part of what it means to be a citizen. *Care is part of citizenship.*

Instead of starting from how to fit care around work, policy-makers need to think much more as the parents we interviewed: how do we fit work around our care needs. Thinking like this would start to break into the gendered responsibilities for care and work which limits what many men want to be able to do as much as women. It would enable us to challenge the devaluing of people who need care, the devaluing of those who provide unpaid care, and also of those who provide paid care who are amongst the lowest paid and least valued.

In relation to balancing the emphasis on the responsabilisation of parents with support for parents, state support needs to overcome mistrust and provide support that respects, is non-judgmental, practical and gives its users a voice. Some groups remain relatively unsupported locally and nationally, especially minority ethnic families and families with a disabled family member. Support should be based on an understanding of the existing moral basis to people's commitments and their sense of responsibility rather than of the conditions of 'no rights without responsibilities'.

Balancing investment in children with respect for childhood: current policies for children are framed in terms of the contribution they will make to society in the future. This is important, especially where this is tied to an anti-poverty strategy, but we need to respect

childhood and give children a voice in the here-and-now too. A care ethic recognizes that good quality care and support brings dividends for the present in terms of improved relationships, creativity, sociability, emotional well-being and greater self-determination for both carer and cared for be they children, older or disabled people. It would favour protection and support over punishment. It would be about developing the capabilities for care – of self, others and the world.

Protect diversity from inequality: in seeking to respect the diversity of people's family lives there is a danger that we ignore those differences which sustain inequalities. We know that support minority ethnic families and families with a disabled adult or child are not well served by mainstream services. Specialist support services in those areas are often the first to have funding withdrawn in cutbacks. The point of specialist services is not that they are optional extras, or that they segregate but that they recognize differences in needs and bring people to a par with others. Similarly, by elevating care we need to be sure that we do not simply reinforce women's responsibilities to care. This is why care has to be seen as part of a long term vision of universal citizenship.

### **Further Questions from the 'Bad Apple' Perspective (AD)**

The findings of the CAVA studies, then, provide compelling evidence that while the shape of commitments may be changing, there is no loss of commitment itself. They provide no support for the belief that public policy should actively promote marriage, or the two parent heterosexual family<sup>4</sup>. This, however, does not necessarily preclude a discussion of whether there are more specific commitments that people have as partners and as parents that can be properly enforced through public policy. Iris Marion Young, for example, has argued that 'the state can properly intervene in or punish particular actions or inactions within families', and that this is quite different from punishing or favouring families based on their composition alone' (p. 553). The question is, of course, what 'actions and inactions' and what forms of intervention?

This brings us back to the other central difference between theorists of an ethic of care and covenantal communitarians. What role should public policy play in ensuring that people accept and honour their commitments, and what specific commitments should be fostered and sometimes enforced? Communitarians such as Sacks are unequivocal in calling for a new politics of responsibility, which 'would establish, through both law and social policy, clearer connections between rights and responsibilities, effort and reward, punishment and blame, action and consequence' (p. 233)<sup>5</sup>.

In stark contrast Kittay is adamant that public support for those who care for others - whom she terms 'dependency workers' - is 'not an open ticket to intrude upon the relationship or to regulate the life of the dependency worker' (1999, p. 144). This argument, however, is open to the objection that it rests upon a distinction between the public and the private domain that is at odds with the understanding of interdependency that infuses her other arguments. She writes that 'an individual in need of care is like a stone cast in the water'. The 'larger society' may 'delegate the responsibility for the care' – but 'cannot evade the moral responsibility to assure that care is provided'. It is difficult to see how this moral responsibility can be discharged by providing a cash allowance and leaving be. Stuart White, for example, has argued, that parents are entitled to financial and other support

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<sup>4</sup> This evidence would not, of course, persuade Wilson. For him the CAVA respondents are paying lip-service to the idea of commitment whilst insisting that they can define the nature of those commitments.

<sup>5</sup> The case for such a politics is often made on the grounds that it is best for children. Wilson, himself for example, argues that governments ought to care about families 'for this reason and scarcely for any other (p. 249).

from the community, but in return they should see themselves as responsible 'for raising children in ways that serve the public good'. They have, he says, 'a duty to work to provide for the basic material needs of their children' and the state 'may rightfully enforce this duty' (2003, p. 146).

Certainly if the state, on behalf of the wider community, supports parenting in view of the contribution it can make to specific public ends, then it is appropriate to expect those receiving such support to commit themselves to these ends (p. 111).

More specifically, he has recently argued that a government that is making a serious attempt to lessen inequalities of opportunity is thereby entitled to insist that parents do not obstruct this attempt by failing to ensure that their children attend school (2004 p. 9).

This is, however, just one illustration of a broader challenge to theorists of an ethic of care. In essence there are two parts to this challenge.

- If the ethic of work is to be balanced by an ethic of care, and if the responsibility to care and to respond to the dependency of others is as central as the duty to work, then is it not the task of public policy to foster and if necessary enforce the obligation to care as well as the obligation to work? Can it not be argued that welfare has to play a dual role. It has to be a mechanism through which support is provided and resources redistributed, but it also has to delineate, reaffirm and at times enforce the obligations that people have to their families, to their neighbours, and to the wider communities in which they live (Deacon, 2004, p. 22).
- If personal qualities are also civic virtues, then is not the reverse also true? Williams, for example, argues that the 'practical ethics' of care - such as responsiveness, attentiveness and tolerance - are not 'just personal qualities, but contribute to social cohesion. They can be seen as civic virtues, and therefore part of what it means to be a citizen' (2004, p. 76). Similarly Selma Sevenhuijsen argues that there is a profound difference between the ethic of care and the contractualist ethics that underpin the 'third way discourse'. In the latter, notions of obligation and responsibility 'serve to bridge the gap individual and society and to forge a new relationship between individual and community'. A feminist ethic of care, however, denies such oppositions between individual and society in the first place'. It is characterised by a relational ontology, encapsulated in the 'idea that individuals can exist only because they are members of various networks of care and responsibility'. It therefore takes 'the idea of self in relationship as the point of entry for thinking about obligations and responsibility' (2002, p. 131).

Because it starts from a relational ontology, it focuses primarily on the question of what politics could mean for the safeguarding of responsibility in human practice and interaction. Policy making needs a more sophisticated insight into the way in which individuals frame their responsibilities in actual social practices and how the moral dilemmas that go with the conflicting responsibilities of care for self, other, and the relationship between them are handled. It would gain this insight from an attitude of initial trust in the moral capacities of individuals, and thus from an attitude of listening as a practice of democratic citizenship' (p. 133).

Can it not be argued, however, that many of the dilemmas that confront public policy arise because such an attitude of initial trust is felt to be dangerous (the 'smacking' debate), or where it has proved to be unfounded? Does the 'ethic of care' not have to address more explicitly the problem of 'bad apples'?

### **A response from the 'Nourish the Vine' Perspective (FW)**

This final section sketches out a response to this question with reference to historical context, organisational principle and practical politics.

We have reached a new stage in the history of social policy in Europe and the US where unpaid care of women is being given recognition. It is not as though the issue has not raised its head before either in this country (Campaign for Family Allowances etc) or in the Nordic countries where aspects of care and gender equality have been on the political agenda since the 1960s. Nonetheless, what appears to be the irreversible movement of mothers into paid work along with the widening of economic inequalities between children has given the issue an economic and political urgency. What has happened in the last hundred years, in Britain at least, is that the relationship between work and care has become inverted. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by demands around the 'right to work' (for men) and accompanied by an expectation of the 'obligation to care' (for women). Both were accompanied by measures of support but these were far more extensive for the right to work (NI, pensions, invalidity benefit, unemployment benefit etc.) than they were for the obligation to care) The struggle was always about making the conditions of work better in order to uphold work as dignifying and ennobling for men. The pressure from the state and employers was to ensure that, given that work was not a universally dignifying experience, then there was a necessity to regulate the supply and ensure that people did not avoid work. The regulation of care was by contrast, less to ensure that women did it, but to ensure that they did it properly.

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century however, marks a difference: as work becomes more and more a universal *obligation* (men and women), then people (mainly women but increasingly men and women) demand the '*right to (exercise their) care (commitments)*'. Increasingly this government has introduced many more supports for care and, as they have done so, increasingly the state has been exercised about the regulation of care commitments, through, for example, more punitive penalties to ensure that children are well behaved, that they attend school, etc. However, in the light of the CAVA research, this is the wrong emphasis.

To go back to work and care as two integral parts of our lives: we can see both in terms of being an obligation, a right, and as requiring support from state, as well as regulation from the state. Essentially both spheres of activity have two sides: we can call these self-regarding and /or socially responsible and also ennobling and/or oppressive. Thus the parochial, self regarding aspects of work are that it emphasises self-sufficiency, competition, individualism etc. Similarly to elevate care is to elevate a sense of 'looking after one's own' (an extended individualism in neo liberal thinking) or sticking by 'people like us' and therefore not necessarily conducive to social cohesion. On the other hand, to extend the right of work to all is to encourage autonomy and undermine unwanted dependency. In addition, the ethic of work can be a collective one – it contributes to a social good beyond the private, it takes place (usually) in the public domain; it necessitates contact with others not necessarily of one's own choosing. Similarly, care produces a social good, it involves interdependence and is other oriented. But care can be oppressive and ignobling for those involved in its practice, as can work. Both can also be intrinsically satisfying, dignifying and ennobling. It seems to me that state intervention or support (in

broadest sense) for both activities has to keep all this in perspective and it has to respond to where people are at. Its intervention has to minimise the oppressive aspects of work and care (whether they are created by individuals or organisations) and it has to sustain the ennobling aspects of work and care through regulation/ intervention. The crucial thing is which becomes the dominant form and principle of intervention. The central question is not whether the state enforces an obligation to care but *how far society supports a commitment to care*. Enforcing an obligation to care is irrelevant to the majority of parents who have a sense of their commitments; in addition, enforcing the obligation to care reinforces the fear that parents have of the state which is that they have the ultimate power to take their children away. Third, enforcing the obligation to care does not create conditions in which those who are cared-for – in the CAVA research these were mainly children, but there are also older frail or disabled people – can exercise their right to be cared for in conditions of *their* choosing.

Enforcing the obligation becomes a secondary issue and one that can only be properly entertained once we have established the first (supporting the commitment to care). The regulation of bad apples cannot be the organising principle around which care is supported as it takes from care its satisfying and ennobling aspects. That is not to say that bad apples should not be dealt with – the removal of children from parents who neglect and abuse is currently part of the state's duty in terms of the interests of children's wellbeing, and of course conditionality has its place, but this has to be on terms which resonate with what makes for good enough caring, and not as an organising principle.

To deal with this slightly differently – what CAVA has established around parenting care is the overriding desire of people to do the right thing by their children, in particular, their close ones in general. People try hard to meet their commitments - to be able to be a good mother, father, partner, and so on. In addition, the practices and beliefs about meeting these commitments were often underscored by assumptions of gendered responsibilities and influenced by class, ethnicity, religion and local connections. This suggests that policies that are introduced around parenting, care, and work life balance have to be framed in these terms: how do we cherish children? What do we need as individuals and collectivities to fulfil our commitments to others? To make the imposition of conditions for receiving support to do this a central plank of policy assumes that parents are self-regarding unless reined in, that parenting is something parents 'do' to children, and that the best interests of children is held entirely in the hands of parents. This is at odds with the way our interviewees understood their commitments. The question of conditionality and accountability of parents in return for state support cannot be resolved until we address three more urgent issues.

The first is the acknowledgment that any intensification, regulation or support of parenting generally affects mothers more than fathers because of the well-documented gendered inequalities that attend most caring practices. It is not possible to discuss 'parenting policy' without recognising this<sup>6</sup>. Thus, if, as Stuart White has argued, parents are entitled to financial and other support from the community, as long as they see themselves as responsible for raising children in ways that serve the public good, then that public good has also to include gender equity which is itself shaped by class, ethnicity etc. One form of conditionality with this aim in mind is the 'use it or lose it' paid paternity leave introduced in Sweden (see Pascal and Lewis, 2004 and Daley, 2002 for measures for supporting unpaid care work and how far they enhance gender equality).

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<sup>6</sup> All of the well publicized ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders placed upon parents because of the behaviour of their children) have been about mothers.

Second, the proper thing to do may have moved away from honour and obey to mutual respect and fairness, but it is still a mix of gendered assumptions/ practices and democratic aspirations/practices, as well as class, locality influences and constraints. The big dilemma for policy makers is this: if we support parents' existing commitments and create policies which parents want, we risk reinforcing the inequalities inherent in gendered assumptions and socio economic constraints. For example, a grant for parents to care for their under 3s at home might meet the immediate needs and preferences for many parents (especially mothers) because of the difficulties of juggling care and work at this stage of a child's life. In the long run, however, it may reinforce the gendered inequalities in work and care which also contribute to the difficulties mothers face. A careful assessment of what sorts of policies are supportive to parenting and the common good in both the short term and long term is therefore as important as policies to ensure accountability. In this respect, Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) argue, on the basis of analysis of qualitative and quantitative data on working mothers' work and care preferences, that the *nature* of measures introduced to support mothers' paid work opportunities is crucial in influencing long-term behaviour and attitudes. They distinguish between coercive policies to get women into work and enabling policies to combine work and care in the way they feel most fits with their identities.

At a social level, behavioural change is less likely to be interpreted as signalling a change in attitudes if it is known to be the result of coercive policies, rather than a chosen behaviour made possible by an enabling policy (mothers choosing to take employment and to use childcare who had the option to do otherwise may influence others to consider that option; that mothers on workfare are in employment is unlikely to have such an influence). (2004:472)

What they suggest is that enabling policies have a greater long-term 'multiplier effect' – that is there is a dynamic between enabling mothers to carry out what they want and reinforcing that as the proper thing to do for them and others. Coercive policies may have a short term effect but not a multiplier effect. Further, the more universal the target group for particular policies (*all* mothers, rather than just lone mothers) the stronger the feedback dynamic. In addition, policies need to be based upon mothers' own understandings of what matters to them. In this way policies which treat child care as a benefit to children and parent-child relations, have better opportunity to influence decisions than childcare measures which are presented as simply enabling employment.

The CAVA research was one way of trying to understand what matters to parents and partners. More important than research is the third issue: what are the democratic means to determine what is meant by 'good-enough parenting'? Listening to what matters to parents and children has not been the top priority of recent policies around parenting (e.g. the Green Paper *Every child matters* made little reference to parents' views), yet it is only through democratic deliberation that the needs of parents and children can be articulated and can therefore shape policy and how it is delivered. The intensification of parental responsibilities threatens to heighten anxieties and disempower parents' capacities to meet their commitments unless it also gives them, and those for whom they care, a voice to articulate what matters to them and what support they need.

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