

Commitments to Care
Moving from Public Responsibility for Care to Care as a Public Value
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Martin Jacques, a commentator on the left, wrote last year of a 'profound malaise' at the heart of Western societies: 'The very idea of what it means to be human – and the necessary conditions for human qualities to thrive – are being eroded...the intimacy on which our sense of well being rests – a product of our closest, most intimate relationships, above all in the family – is in decline...We live in an age of selfishness'. The worst casualty has been the deterioration of the parent-child, especially the mother-child, relationship because of women going out to work and couples' reluctance to make financial sacrifices.

These are familiar arguments from left and right: loss of commitment, self-seeking individualism, a parenting deficit. For some it's godlessness, for others, capitalism has corroded community and moral character, or it's consumerism that has fostered individual acquisitiveness, infecting even the closest of our relationships. But research we have conducted over the last five years at Leeds University leads me to believe this argument is quite mistaken and that it provides no basis for the changes we need in political thinking and in social and public policy. It too readily collapses the moral economy of capitalism into the moral agency that people exercise in their close relationships; it underestimates the nature and extent of people's resistance and resilience as they struggle with dilemmas in their everyday caring.

Resistance and resilience

This is not to say that consumerism has not invaded the domestic sphere. The food industry has damaged the health of a generation of children, but this does not mean that parents' have simply swallowed this and regurgitated it through take-away, throw-away relationships with each other and their children. The public support for a campaign in for state intervention to raise the nutritional standards of school dinners saw to that.

The organization of working life places enormous strains on family life, but this does not mean that it inevitably corrupts what people seek from their relationships. Take the example of the strike in 2003 by check-in staff – mainly women workers - at British Airways. the nub of the grievance was that rosters had been changed without warning and threatened to disturb the very carefully negotiated child care plans that many of the mothers had in place. These involved complex, time-managed connection points for mothers and fathers and grandmothers to exchange child care responsibilities. The women's actions chimed with one of our research findings on how mothers with young children make decisions around work and care: working mothers' investment in employment is based upon their own and their networks' moral reasoning about what is right and proper for their children. Money matters of course, but they don't act as individualist 'rational economic actors' where financial costs and benefits determine decisions.

People care a great deal about doing the right thing by the people they cherish. Far from a loss of commitment, they are anxious to carry out their commitments in the ways they think fit given the different pressures in their lives. That was one of the main findings in our in-depth interviews with almost 400 people from different localities about the things that matter to them in their experiences of parenting and partnership (ref survey) . As well as looking at work and care, we focused on other areas of change – what happens to relationships with the wider family following divorce, who do people turn to when they live in 'un-familiar' ways, and how do people maintain kinship commitments when these

are in different continents? We also looked at what values are important to community and self-help groups who organise around these issues, and to larger voluntary organizations. Given the degree of change, we were interested in getting a grass roots view of 'family values'.

We were also concerned that much of the debate on changing family lives takes place with little reference to empirical research. This is as true for the view of family-in-moral-decline as it is for the 'individualization' thesis of 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. While we found some evidence for aspirations towards democratic relationships between partners, and also between children and their parents, it is also the case that change and continuity co-exist and interrelate in complex ways: families may negotiate their responsibilities but within a frame of gender inequalities in the division of labour in the home or children's lack of voice.

Just as important, the notion of self-actualising men and women underestimates the degree to which people are deeply embedded in the relationships that matter to them, continually negotiating how to balance a sense of themselves with the needs of others around them, especially their children.

Balancing commitments

The way people re-partner after divorce also provides an interesting example of how, while the shape and texture of commitment might be changing, this does not mean that commitment itself is being abandoned, rather that people are working out different and new ways of meeting those commitments. One option which has attracted a lot of media curiosity is what are called LAT relationships (living-apart-together) where partners are in committed relationships but live apart. At first sight this option might support the moral decline argument (flight from commitment; pursuing self interest), or it might provide evidence of a single-minded search for self-actualization. However, looking more closely at why people opt for this arrangement, and the financial disincentives it involves, it is much more to do with attempting to find an equitable way of being with a new partner but sustaining your relationships with your children, or with their father or mother, or with their grandparents and your ex-in-laws. In fact, it is *all about* commitment, and balancing that with your own needs.

The value of friendship

Friendship has been until recently little acknowledged in the mesh of care, connection and commitment. Our research studied people who live and love without a significant or co-resident partner – those who might be regarded as highly individualized. Yet here too, while some were emotionally quite isolated, many were embedded in networks of care, commitment and support. And where they were, then friends were often valued over lovers or kin for their emotional and practical significance

The metaphor of friendship is commonly used to talk about the quality of relationships in families, by teenage children of their parents and vice versa. 'Friendship' says much about what we might seek in a good relationship: confiding, sharing, fun, non-judgmental, reciprocal, if not equal. Talking recently to mothers with young children who use Sure Start services – one of the more innovative programmes introduced by New Labour in deprived areas – they told me they valued the services because the staff treated them 'like a friend', not judgmental, and sharing knowledge rather than handing it down. I found similar views in interviews with self-help groups for parents who had particular experiences, such as having a child with drug problems, or having lost a child,

or having a child with a learning disability. The mutual support they valued was based on informality, trust and non-judgmentalism.

There are important political implications here. The first is about the nature of reciprocity and solidarity in society. The political right have looked to families and family values as a way of preserving individualism and self-interest – ‘looking after one’s own’. The more collectively minded left have sought to maintain kin ties as the building block to social cohesion, as strong kin ties are assumed to lead to strong communities, and strong communities to equal a strong and stable society. In either case, any weakening or changing of kin ties is seen as portending social disintegration. Both views fail to grasp that connectedness operates in more various ways than simply through conjugality, sexual intimacy and blood, and that the affective boundaries of reciprocity are fluid and are not fixed by kinship alone. It is not that ‘the family’ is the solidaristic base of society, it is that the practices of care and support that go on inside *and outside* of families constitute an important moral sentience which receives scant political recognition. Instead, it is as workers and consumers that politicians attempt to appeal to voters. Secondly, when people look to give and receive support from others – close others or statutory others - they want it to involve mutual respect, trust and non-judgmentalism. I shall come back to this, but first, how have New Labour framed their policies around family lives and personal relationships?

New Labour’s policies

In many ways, it is the first time Britain has had an explicit family policy with the recognition that child care for working parents is a public and not simply an individual responsibility, and a goal of eliminating child poverty. At the liberal end New Labour has promoted measures to equalise legal and social conditions for lesbians and gay men; at the disciplinary end, they have introduced the enforcement of parental obligations in relation to children’s behaviour, and we are the most punitive country in Europe as far as children are concerned. A new normative family is emerging which appears, in some respects but not all, to leave the male breadwinner society behind. It revolves around the adult couple whose relationship is based on their parenting responsibilities, and whose priorities are rooted in work, economic self-sufficiency, education and good behaviour. There have been three main themes in New Labour’s policies affecting family lives and personal relationships: support for ‘hardworking families’; investment in children, especially through education, and emphasizing parents’ and children’s responsibilities but these have given rise to pressures and tensions – between work and care, between investing in, protecting and punishing children, and between regulating and supporting parents. How do we cut through these and move the agenda on?

The compassionate realism of ‘good-enough’ care

The answer lies, I believe, in developing a politics that gives value to the meaning and practices of care, love and support in people’s lives. Overall we found in our research that 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. These meanings are shaped by the identities and resources wrought through class, gender, ethnicity, local practices and social networks. 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 emerge for adults and children. They included notions of *fairness, attentiveness to the needs of others, mutual respect, trust, reparation, being non-judgmental, adapting to new identities, being prepared to be accommodating, and being open to communication*. These are the ethics which seem to enable resilience, which

facilitate commitment and lie at the heart of people's interdependency. These constitute the compassionate realism of 'good-enough' care. What is interesting is the thread that ties these ethics of informal relationships to those of more formal paid care giving – in their study of care work in Europe, Claire Cameron and Peter Moss point to similar – not same requirements and competences attached to care work.

To put this in a broader context: when we interviewed senior representatives from twenty four national voluntary organizations who campaign and advise on parenting and partnering issues, the majority looked to an ethos of welfare which emphasizes holistic, accessible, affordable user-centred support for parents and children and which places value on care as an activity, on interdependence and on state support for financial adequacy. This ethos is underpinned by notions of social justice. In this they placed special emphasis on valuing care and respecting childhood.

What I am arguing then is that the ethic of paid work, and the identity of consumer, on which many recent welfare reforms have been argued and recent elections fought, are not broad enough to meet the aspirations which people have around time and the quality of their relationships. The emphasis on work overshadows care; interdependency is the poor relation of economic self-sufficiency; and educational achievement frames child-centredness. These practical ethics of fairness, attentiveness and so on, cannot simply be transposed into the political arena but we can use them to develop a wider political ethic of care.

Developing a Political Ethic of Care

First then we need to *rethink citizenship*. Because what we need is a political principle about care which is equivalent to that of paid work - that 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.

Second, caring for yourself 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. Care is not an activity which is exclusive to women, but it is only by giving it public validation as a social good that it can be presented as an alternative to the breadwinner model for men and boys.

Third, care contributes to social solidarity. Of course, relationships can be unequal and oppressive, but 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 as part of what it means to be a citizen. In other words, care is part of citizenship.

In this way I think that the universalism of care, and this thread that connects its practices with known others in the domestic sphere to those with unknown others in the public sphere exemplify more widely Titmuss's analysis in the Gift Relationship of the universalism of blood and the social enabling of right to give.

The idea that care is a *universal* need and activity is important because it places those with particular needs for care and support, because they are very young or disabled or

frail, on a universal spectrum of needs rather than set apart by their dependency. It also recognizes that those who are 'cared for' have the capacity for agency.

The political and policy questions that flow from this concern the *recognition* and valuing of care activities and, in terms of social justice, their *redistribution* – how should care be shared between the state, market, local communities and families, but also by individuals within (and without) families? (And, considering the use of migrant workers to provide care work, how is this shared globally?) Now it is commonplace to think about these questions around three issues:

- *Time* : creating time to care and be cared for (maternity leaves etc) ,
- *Financial support* – care allowances, GMI, decent pension etc tied in to anti poverty measures
- *Services* - practical support for caring activities – childcare services, home care, residential, advice etc

But I think we need to go further than this – these provisions require a more fundamental shift *towards a social environment of care* and this would frame our rethinking of things.

- To begin with we would *rethink the physical environment*: space and its relationship to time. Extending the example of the disability movement this would involve applying the principles associated with the removal of disabling barriers to the needs of those who require particular caring support. Local authorities would be required to assess planning and the development of commercial and public space in terms of how children and their parents, young people, older people, disabled people and carers define their needs. These would place a premium on safe and accessible public spaces with affordable transport; they would develop local strategies which integrate issues of work, time, care, space and welfare services.
- But they would absolutely depend upon the development of local (and national) *deliberative democracy* to ensure that the different voices of those most closely involved in the care exchange were determining local agendas of care. A social environment of care would shift the focus on children and young people from 'investment' to respecting them as citizens of the present. The argument for investing in children provides little rationale for attending to the needs of those who may not have an educational future – older people, disabled people and children with learning disabilities.
- It would encourage a *rethinking of education*: It seems to me that with the movement of children's services into the DfES, and with Schools becoming central to the provision of children's services, we need to raise the question as to what is education for? This involves reframing the testing and target-centred culture of education towards broader values such as supporting children to develop their emotional, physical, intellectual and creative capabilities
- It might lead to a *rethinking of families* so that our modus operandi was the practices of care and support rather than particular family structures. I heard an exciting paper recently given by a socio-legal expert arguing that 'care' should replace family as a legal concept in Child and family Law. As far as parenting is

- concerned the central principle would not be about whether the state enforces parents' obligations to care but *how far society supports a commitment to care*.
- *A rethinking the whole framework of the social security system*, as Jane Millar and Donald Hirsch have suggested, so that the distinction between in work and out of work becomes less fixed, and that activities such as caring or volunteering are recognized as contributions to society which require support.
 - *Rethinking the care workforce* : need strategies to enhance paid care work in order to establish and formalize career paths into care work: developing training for care work that is person-centred rather than task-oriented and based on the practical ethics of everyday life as well as the experiences of those who require support . Recognising care work as one involving geopolitical social justice of the relationship between poorer and richer countries.
 - *Rethinking our economic arguments*– we need a robust defence of why we can afford quality care – Sue Himmelweit has produced excellent work on this
 - The ethics of care should not simply be about care relations and services, they need to influence the organization and management of work and even of markets, in the manner of ethical environmentalism

What I am saying is that we need to develop and defend political principles which relate to people's own practical ethics to underpin a new social environment of care. These need to take the leap that's been made from care as a private issue to care as a public responsibility to recognizing care as a public value and good. This is why I am arguing that care has to be seen as part of a long term vision of universal citizenship for adults and children. Such a vision would contribute to a more egalitarian, inclusive, interdependent and solidaristic society.

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