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Caring Labor

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Transcription of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Amherst, U.S.A., 20 min., 2003

My name is Nancy Folbre. I am an economist, a feminist economist.

Most of what I work on is the concept of "caring labor." I am defining "caring labor" as work that involves connecting to other people, trying to help people meet their needs, things like the work of caring for children, caring for the elderly, caring for sick people or teaching is a form of caring labor. Some kind is paid; some is unpaid. It has some really important characteristics that I think economists don't pay enough attention to and that we need to understand better.

What is really distinctive about caring labor is that it is usually intrinsically motivated. People do it for reasons other than just money, even though there is often money involved, like you need to get paid to work, or you are exchanging the care of a family member in return for a share of another's family members wage. Still, we always think of care work as something which involves a sense of commitment or obligation or passion for the person who is being cared for. That intrinsic motivation is a really important

part of what makes caring labor so valuable and what insures it is being provided at a pretty high quality. But, it also means that it is very hard to organize caring labor in a market, and that the market wage that you pay for care work is almost always quite low. Historically women have done a very large proportion of our care work, and that is still true today. Even though many people work fulltime for pay, a lot of the jobs they are being involved in is caring for other people. Most of these jobs pay less. And the fact that women are in these jobs does a lot to explain why women in general are paid less than men. There is also a kind of penalty that is imposed on women for taking on care responsibilities at home. If you take time out of paid employment to take care of a child or an elderly person, that often not only reduces your wages in the present moment, but over your entire lifetime. So, mothers in general earn a lot less than women, and there is actually, in terms of pay in the U.S., a bigger difference between women who are mothers and women who are not, than between women who are not mothers and men who are not fathers. So it is a pretty important dimension of inequality. The big question, from an economic point of view, is: If caring work is so poorly paid and involves a penalty, why are women willing to provide it? Where does the supply come from? And I think the answer to that question is that it is supplied through a kind of social construction of femininity and a relationship between femininity and care.

There is a kind of paradox of the weakening of the patriarchal control over women. And the paradox is, that it is a great thing in terms of choices for individual women, it is a great thing for women who want to have more room to express their own individuality and to be less constrained by traditional concepts of femininity. But the paradox is, now that there is no longer pressure on women to provide their care work, there is really no pressure on

anyone to provide it. A result could be a reduction in the overall supply of care to other people within the home and in the market. If you are a conventional economist you don't worry about that, because you think the market will solve the problem: Care work will become scarce, the market will beat it up, the price will come up, and everything will be fine.

But if you think that care work does not necessarily succeed as well in a market environment, then you have to worry about it. And you have to think about ways that we could collectively ensure a greater supply and quality of caring labor, in ways that are independent of the market, or at least can help supplement the market provision that we use. That is where the need to think more creatively about social institutions comes into play.

One of the reasons that care is undervalued is just historical: We tend to take it for granted because it was traditionally provided by women at a very low cost, essentially outside the market economy. There are still a lot of women working in care jobs. And, because women in general are being paid less than men that helps lower the costs of care than if it were done by men.

There is also something in care work itself that contributes to its undervaluation. One thing that is relevant is that care workers care about the people they are taking care of. So it is harder for them to go on strike, it is harder for them to withhold their services unless they are being paid. They become a kind of hostage to their own commitments and their own affections for the people they are caring for. So, they can't bargain as effectively as other workers can, or threaten to walk out or not supply what is needed. That's one reason why it tends to be undervalued.

There is a second reason why it is undervalued that is kind of obvious: People who really need care the most are children, the sick and the elderly who have the least to pay. If you are a care worker, you provide a service that is not a luxury to rich people. Well, you can specialize in a luxury and care job, but most care work is being devoted to people who by definition need help and are not in a position to pay a lot of money for it, and very often require public support. And, with the erosion of public support, of course, there is going to be an erosion of the amount of money that we can pay care workers to provide that assistance.

And there is another reason, which I think is perhaps a little more technical and of more interest for economists: that it is very hard to measure the quality of care work, because it is so personal. I might be a very good teacher with one person, but with another person completely unsuccessful. To measure my quality as a teacher is much harder than to measure the quality of somebody who is producing some physical thing, whose characteristics are independent of the person producing it. Also care workers have these emotional dimensions: If I am a good teacher, I make students really like to learn, that is more important than just conveying information. But it is very hard to measure the success in doing that. Normally, in a market, the way you get higher quality is to pay more money for higher quality work. But, in care work, it is hard to do that because the quality is so variable and hard to measure. Care work always has to have some intrinsic motivation; people have to do it for reasons which have to do with their own feelings and commitments and obligations. That is like a natural resource, a natural energy that can provide good care, but needs to be respected and honored in order to keep flowing.

The most obvious prerequisite for a care economy is that you meet the basic needs of ordinary people, especially children, the elderly

or people who are sick or hurt or discouraged in any way. But, of course, all the rest of us, also require some care. Somehow, you have to have an economic system that creates a space and a time in which the principles of care are respected and rewarded. It is very difficult to do that in a market economy in which people are competing so fiercely with one another – just to stay alive, to get a job or to meet their subsistence – that they fear if they take time out to care for others, they will be punished and left behind.

It may be true that markets can have good effects on people under certain circumstances. A little bit of friendly competition can really bring out the best in people. But this is not true if the market is so completely unrestrained that it leads to a kind of destructive winner-take-all-competition. And, I think that is the direction the market economy is taking in the world today and that is what many people feel very disturbed and anxious about.

All alternative economic systems are about organizing labor. That is the big question: How do we organize ourselves? And the point I am making is that when we answer that question – whether we are coming from a corporate capitalist point of view or from a socialist point of view – we have to recognize that there is this kind of labor that is different than other kinds, that this labor is not as reducible to the logic of exchange or to the logic of central planning and bureaucratic administration. It is an intrinsically personal, intrinsically emotional kind of exchange that requires long-term relationships between people. And, that is not something that the grand theoreticians of capitalism thought about. And, it is not something that the grand theoreticians of socialism thought about either. So, it is in the middle, it is kind of neglected by both sides. You really see this very clearly in people who have a vision of market socialism. They think, “Oh, markets work fine, as long as we have a equal distribution of wealth, then some rules of the game

will allow market competition to take place in a context in which people's basic needs are met", and so on. Well, I am sympathetic to that vision of market socialism, but not if it organizes care on the basis of markets. Because I don't think care quality can be protected in a market. And there is something about the market competition that can erode it. I spend a lot of time trying to persuade leftist economists and utopian visionaries to pay more attention to the ordinary work that women do and to learn from it.

Isn't that a kind of metaphor: to get rained on and to talk about this [Editors note: The interview was conducted outside and rain began falling.]. This is my life, standing in the cold, getting rained on, saying the same things over and over.

The family itself has always been a kind of metaphor for socialism. Socialism is really a family at large; we take care for our brothers and sisters. That's the interesting thing about feminism: That feminists always had to challenge the traditional family, the idea of the patriarch, the male-led household, telling all the younger generation what to do and sending the wife to the kitchen to cook the meals and scrub the floors. But, at the same time, there has always been something about the family, the solidarity, the love and affection for one another, that is so central for family life, that feminists have tried to lay claim to and to think about how one could take that sense of mutual affection and mutual aid and generalize it to the society as a whole. It doesn't seem that far fetched, if we can do it on the microeconomic level, we should be able to figure out how to generalize it.

A society could and should be like a really healthy happy egalitarian family, where people have their own responsibilities. They might go out and earn a living or might specialize in different kinds of work, but they all come home to a set of shared priorities and

goals, and they have made a commitment to work together and to respect one another in a really profound way. In a way, it is utopian and visionary; but, in another way, it is very old-fashioned and very traditional.

I think there is a lot of evidence that caring for other people is a little bit like a skill; if you practice it, if you do it, you enjoy it, you take greater pleasure in it. It is also something that grows out of a personal connection with other people. And if you never put into that connection of responsibility for other people then you never become aware of or develop that sense of connection. It should be a central part of our educational process for people to take on responsibilities for other people, and to do it in ways... you know, not just going down one day per month and work at the soup kitchen and come in contact with a new group of people every time. But, to really make a long-term connection with people who are different than us: Who are not our next-door neighbors or the people who go to our church or the people who attend our university, but the people outside of that system we might not otherwise come into contact with. We could plan a kind of labor exchange and reciprocity on a larger level that could develop those skills and would really benefit us tremendously as a society.

People don't like the idea of mandates. They think: Oh well, that's fine, if you want to go and care for other people you should be free to do that, but don't make me do that. I am a big believer that we have some obligations to one another and that we can't realize these obligations just by paying taxes or by sharing some of our income: We have to share some of our time and our energy and some of our affection.

I don't know if John Rawls has some impact in Europe; but, in the Anglo world, as an English-speaking philosopher, he has. He

developed this metaphor of a "veil of ignorance": Somehow you take people out of their daily context and you put them behind a veil or a curtain, in which they don't know their own identities. And so they can't act for their own interests and so they make decisions that are truly in the interests of all, because they don't know who they are and who they will be. This would be a wonderful plot for a science fiction story: To develop a global system, pick citizens from all around the world and put them behind some kind of veil of ignorance, where they don't know whether they are American or Chinese or Australian or from Botswana. So they would just look at the world from a completely neutral point of view and think: What should our priorities be? Where should our efforts go? I think that is a very powerful metaphor, even though we have not got the technology to do it.

I am a big fan of science fiction. I like Marge Piercy's science fiction and that of Sherri Tepper, Kim Stanley Robinson; that's where the social imagination first takes hold. In a way, what I am doing is just a sort of coming behind these more imaginative visions and trying to figure out and think about, how we might actually put it together and how we could adapt some of our existing economic institutions to move in that direction. Economists are kind of engineers of the utopian; our job is to take care of the nuts and bolts of that alternative economic system and I think we depend on artists and writers to help us see where we want to go.

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