

## Reconfiguring Care and Family in the Era of the 'Outsourced Self'

**Abstract:** *This paper will attempt to theorise a cultural shift in our understanding of the affective dimensions of care, dependency, family and mothering as represented in contemporary social transformations, namely, the trend toward the outsourcing of complicated feelings and emotions and new discourses around technology and care. Using an interdisciplinary approach that draws on sociology, policy studies, discourse analysis and a feminist ethic of care framework, I will argue that these developments alter prevailing understandings of what it means to care for infants, children, the sick and the frail elderly and moreover, that these changes somehow alienate us from the weighty, embedded and often conflicted emotions that such caring engenders. At their most extreme, some of these developments risk transforming human intimacy and the role of the family in social reproduction.*

**Keywords:** *feminist ethic of care, mothering, outsourcing, life-course, neo-liberalism, post-maternalism, social reproduction.*

There has been a dramatic acceleration in the use of paid care services by dual income families over the last two decades. The social impact of this escalation has been much debated by sociologists (Hochschild, 2005, 2012; Zelizer, 2005, 2010), consumer researchers (Epp & Velagaleti, 2014), political philosophers (Fraser, 2014; Sandel 2012), economists (Friedman and McNeil, 2013) and feminist and labour historians (Boris & Parreñas, 2010). While new and ever varied forms of consumption have grown in all sections of society, of specific concern is the rapid expansion of paid care in 'intimate settings', what Boris and Parreñas call 'intimate labour' (2010, pp. 3-4). According to Zelizer (2005, 2010) and Hochschild (2012), intimacy can now be purchased and much of the emotional caregiving that previously took place in families and homes can now be outsourced to a commercial market. What does the buying and selling of emotional labour mean for the 'psychological and socializing functions that are performed by families' (Cook, 2014, p. 2) and for our understanding of care in general and maternal care in particular? Moreover, what are the implications for family studies research?

Several shared assumptions appear to underpin current literature about the outsourcing of care. Firstly, that there has been a long history of the transfer of emotional services, both paid and unpaid, associated with women's traditional role in homemaking, childcare and sex. Secondly, that this exchange is premised on and shaped by particular race, class and gender relations and that such labour would always have had an emotional dimension to it (for example, wet-nurses, nannies, ladies maids or general domestic servants). Thirdly, that what is different today is not the nature of the transfer of intimate labour from the poor to the rich but its global dimensions. Interactions between paid caregivers and recipients of care have taken on a transnational character. This is best

documented in Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild's (2003) *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. The authors highlight a global 'care deficit' in the wealthy parts of the world where care is produced less and less and consumed more (p.5). There is also the related global 'care drain', defined as a one-way transfer of emotional labor, where the love and care usually provided by women to the young, the old, and the sick in their own poor countries is transferred to the young, the old, and the sick in rich countries, whether as maids, nannies, or day care and nursing home aides (p.17).

The fourth area of consensus in debates about emotional outsourcing is the recognition that there is a new configuration in the care that some dual-income, affluent families are purchasing. This has led, some would argue, to the penetration of market values into private life in an unprecedented way (Schor, 2004; Manne, 2008). According to this view, the international commercialisation of services such as human surrogacy or the trade in organs represent different kinds and more troubling forms of consumption (Wilkinson, 2003). The problems posed by this kind of commercialisation are easily visible and indeed occupy much public debate. However, the buying of emotional relationships like friendship, love, neighbourliness, or surrogate kinship, the 'Rent-A-Mom' phenomenon (Hochschild, 2005) for instance, receives less attention even though it marks a similar 'new tendency in capitalist commodification', to borrow Thrift's (2008) phrase. Paying someone to toilet train your child or to conduct what in the US is terrifyingly called a 'potty training boot camp', or to teach your child to tie their shoelaces or to ride a bike, or to write greeting cards for you, represents a cultural shift in the way caregiving, fathering and mothering, or in short, the way family and home is conceptualised.

Agreement about the nature and extent of these developments breaks down when it comes to conclusions about what this outsourcing may mean for the quality of caregiving, for conceptions of the self (Hochschild, 2012) and for family life. Some view marketization as opening up new opportunities for different kinds of human relationships and connections (Zelizer, 2010), or as providing more quality family time (Thompson, 1996). Others see the use of paid experts in our private lives as a profound cultural shift in 'the commodification of intimate life' (Hochschild, 2012, p. 12) or as a transformation in our ideas of maternal care (Stephens, 2011) and producing a displacement of affect (Vora, 2010). According to Nancy Fraser, the tensions around care or 'affective labour' under global neoliberalism is nothing less than one of the key crises of our time, constituting a 'crisis of social reproduction' itself (Fraser, 2014, p. 542).

Amber Epp and Sunaina Velagaleti (2014) provide an illuminating account of two competing cultural discourses on the outsourcing of care. One is based on the idea of 'hostile worlds' (p. 912), a perceived dichotomy between family and the market, the realms of love and money. According to this view, the market is cold and unfeeling and the private realm of family and home is the affective domain that provides a love and support. By contrast, the 'connected lives' perspective is based on the notion that people blend intimate relationships with market activities in positive and productive ways (p. 913). However, as far as family is concerned, the 'connected lives' paradigm not only

ignores the gendered, classed and racialised nature of caring labour but also current global neoliberal directives for there to be no limits to market encroachment into the private sphere or to what can be bought or sold.

This paper will argue that the commercialisation of certain forms of intimate labour promote disengagement and distance rather than 'connected lives' and that the displacement of affect in emotional outsourcing amplifies current cultural anxieties around the maternal. By investigating interdisciplinary discourses and debates about what it means to care for infants, children, the sick and the frail elderly, and relating these to new developments in technology and care, the aim is to draw together some of the complex implications of the 'outsourced self' (Hochschild, 2012).

For family studies research the question of social reproduction would seem crucial. Can social reproduction and care be fully outsourced and if so, what are the likely consequences? To return to Fraser (2014), care and 'affective labour' in her view are in crisis under neoliberalism (p.542). This threatens the very possibilities for social reproduction, which she defines as:

the human capacities available to create and maintain social bonds, which includes the work of socialising the young, building communities, of reproducing shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social co-operation (p. 542).

This broad definition of social reproduction mounted by Fraser (2014) will underpin the analysis to follow. Employed in combination with a feminist ethic of care, the aim is to throw a different light on the outsourcing of care to the market or to technology and to raise socially relevant and difficult issues about motherhood, feminism and the future.

### **Paying not to feel**

There are a myriad of ways now to purchase services that provide relief from strong or difficult emotions. In the ever-expanding definition of what can be bought and sold, there exists an array of dramatic examples. Many of the most vivid of these are documented by Michael Sandel (2012) in *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. He describes 'hired line-standers', homeless people or retirees paid to queue for you so you do not have to experience the emotion of frustration or the patience of waiting for a theatre ticket or a an amusement park ride (pp. 21-22). Indeed there is a burgeoning business in line-standing in the US with new companies appearing that also cater for lobbyists in Washington who want to attend congressional hearings (p. 22). There are also professional apologisers who can be hired to say a 'sincere' sorry if someone has wronged or offended you (pp. 96-97). Shared meanings about what it means to give or receive an apology are fractured by such developments and the intense emotions associated with this experience are displaced or diminished.

Hochschild (2012) provides equally unsettling instances of this new form of commodification and its potential impact on the 'life-course', what sociologists view as a

culturally defined sequence of events that people pass through from birth to death (Elder Jnr, Johnson & Crosnoe 2003). From baby planners and nameologists to services that take care of the gravesite of a loved relative, Hochschild (2012) shows how this type of outsourcing reaches 'into the heart of our emotional lives' (p. 11).

A love coach guides his shy client on what to do and how to feel at each step of on-line dating. A wedding planner helps select a suitable 'memory' to set the theme of the ceremony, the inscription on place cards, and the subject of a heartfelt speech. A marriage counselor helps couples shut their BlackBerries in a drawer to enjoy a romantic evening together. A paid carer offers to visit and love an elderly parent. A wantologist helps a woman figure out if she really wants a dog. A dog walker offers to 'relate' to a dog. Attached to each practical step of dating, wedding and divorcing are the subtle issues of *what, how much and when to feel* (p. 11, emphasis mine).

In these intimate but fundamentally commercial exchanges, one interview with an employee and an employer stood out. Rose, the employee, worked as a live-in household manager for a well-to-do family. Her role included trips to the vet, helping children with homework, various airport pickups, managing and driving to appointments to hairdressers or dentists, organising children's schedules, volunteering at their schools, baking cookies for school fundraisers, and tucking the children into bed at night (Hochschild, 2012, pp. 158-159). In the course of the interviews, it became clear that what had been purchased, among other things, was her employer Norma's 'right to keep her distance from anyone who might have unnerved, irritated, or upset her. Unwittingly, Norma had outsourced sympathy itself' (p. 170).

Paying for the privilege not to feel is a form of consumption that challenges many of our existing cultural assumptions about care and its role in family and community. Many of the outsourced tasks are associated with maternal care and maternal labour. Others replace the functions usually taken on by the family. Services for hire include packing school lunches, teaching babies to sleep through the night, toilet training, throwing a Frisbee with a child, teaching table manners or helping a child to learn to control their temper or stop sucking their thumb (Hochschild, 2012, pp. 109-110). These are all activities that impart values and systems of belief, reinforce family bonds and help constitute the moral universe of a child. To return to Fraser (2014), they play a vital role in the social reproduction of 'shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social co-operation' (p. 542).

Critics of this position might argue that what is being purchased is simply 'time' and that buying such intimate labour allows affluent parents to spend better time with their children and in family pursuits. This view is reinforced, perhaps unwittingly, by Epp and Velagaleti (2014). In an otherwise nuanced study of 'how families and the market co-exist and draw upon one another in both conflict and partnership' (p. 913), the authors fail to challenge the dominant market ideology that 'families outsource less significant tasks (e.g., cleaning) to create more quality family time' (p. 913). While their research highlights some of the tensions in family decision-making around outsourcing, and the

different line that people draw between what is a market and a non-market relationship, they do not explore adequately the wider social implications of these developments.

Much more is at stake than simply buying time. Stark evidence of this can be found in the comments made by some US mothers who employ live-in nannies who have migrated from poorer parts of the world. These nannies are seen to be more naturally 'maternal' than the time-stretched, professional women employing them. They are imagined as being more patient, gentle, relaxed and loving (Hochschild, 2012) and 'just being able to enjoy' the children in their care (Ehrenreich et.al., 2003, p. 24). They are also depicted as coming from more 'family oriented cultures' and therefore provide an experience of family that the parents employing them feel that they cannot give (Stephens, 2011). Notably, the language used by the buyers of this labour is not a commercial one. Unease with paying for love and care seems to be expressed by depicting the exchange as an affective rather than a commercial one. Strangely, in different empirical studies, 'foreign born' carers (to use American terminology) are identified as being like a surrogate self for their employers. One interviewee, Joann says of the Nepalese care worker she hires to perform all the intimate and emotional labour required by her elderly father, 'She is another me, or rather a different me, a stand-in for the me I wish I could be' (Hochschild, 2012, p. 177). In another confessional piece about a Bolivian live-in carer called Mimi, her employer writes: 'Mimi is not just an employee. She is my mother. She is me' (Masterson, 2008, p.29).

Aside from the puzzling psychological aspects of such identifications, they represent both a discomfort with the merging of the market with the personal and a paradox in the outsourcing of emotions. On the one hand, purchasing care is a way of buying distance from complex feelings and emotions, yet on the other it is seen to enable the purchasers to become 'better' mothers or parents. In this respect, the idea of good care becomes linked to detachment and remoteness from the weighty, embedded and often conflicted emotions that such caring engenders. What happens then to the family as an affective domain? The paradox is resolved by shifting the 'affect' to the commercial relationships that provide care for infants and the elderly. This in turn alters our understanding of social reproduction, in particular the socialization of the young and our shared meanings about love and care. Care is reframed as a transferable commodity. Similarly, beliefs and ideals about the family and family rituals and routines are more comfortably imported from somewhere else and given over to the paid labour of strangers (Hochschild, 2012).

### **The techno-maternal**

There is a powerful and growing discourse about the future of caregiving being an electronic, technological one. In the forms of outsourcing, discussed above, the use of new information and communications technology is uncontroversial. Live-in caregivers SMS and upload photographs throughout the day to their employers and those hiring them use webcams to check up on how their infants, children or the elderly are being looked after. High-income professional women can help their children do their homework via Skype without having to leave the office and without having to forgo notions of what being a good mother may mean to them. For those more comfortable with complete

outsourcing, a variety of 'homework help on-line services' have emerged. Videoconferencing with children is viewed as a boon for the divorced dad and it would appear that shared parenting has never been easier due to new global technologies (Saini, Mishna, Barnes & Polak, 2013). Ethnographic studies of this process identify something they call 'intensive mothering at a distance' (Madianou & Miller, 2012). However, perhaps the starkest example of the technologisation of care is the discourse on advances in social robotics. Social robots are 24/7 multi-sensor monitoring systems using sophisticated algorithms for reading human micro-expressions. According to this discourse, they are viewed as the answer to the care deficit and to the problem posed by an ageing population. According to this scenario, care in the future will be able to be outsourced to a machine.

Both the home and the aged-care industry are targeted for these innovations. Social robots are designed for household care work like toilet-training children, preparing meals, cleaning and sorting clothes, helping children dress and other aspects of childcare and the care of the elderly. Currently, there are animated robotic baby seals already being used in dementia care in Japan and in parts of Europe. Japan, with a rapidly aging population, is leading the way in robotic care of the elderly (Sharkey & Sharkey, 2012, p. 28). The extent to which in future, socially assistive robots will care for those most vulnerable is presented as 'an increasingly likely' development (p. 27). While the truth of this prediction is yet to be determined, nevertheless, the discourse on social robotics and their purported emancipatory potential reveals many of the tensions and contradictions in our culture about dependency, vulnerability, ageing, care, and even notions of community and personhood itself (Metzler & Barnes, 2014). The discourse also highlights issues about the social meanings given to maternal care, to feminism and to the family. In fact, proponents of the benefits of robotic assisted care turn to feminism to find a rationale for outsourcing care to machines. In 'Love in a Time of Machines: How Robots Will Transform Human Intimacy', social philosopher Thomas Wells (2013) rejects notions of care-work and dependency as having any moral significance. He invokes a dominant and second-wave version of feminism that focuses on the burdensome aspects of care and the gendered nature of caregiving. Wells uses this position to suggest that robotic care releases women in particular, from the drudgery of wiping bottoms, 'whether they belong to babies or Alzheimer's sufferers' (Wells, 2013, 'Robots will economise on love', paragraph 10).

The discourse on social robotics and care goes a step further than the discussions on outsourcing, analysed so far. Human assistance and attentiveness in cases of adult dependency is viewed as being less desirable than that of an unthinking, detached technological device. Metzler and Barnes (2013) conduct an engaging philosophical dialogue about this, adopting different positions and debating various ethical and social consequences. In relation to elder care and the possibility of nurses being replaced by social robots, they raise the following question:

If robots can furnish behaviour that residents [in an aged care facility] accept as empathy, then residents already are receiving empathy, because empathy *is* simply nothing more than dispositions to behave in certain ways. Caring that the residents receive from robots is no less authentic than caring that they receive

from human nurses (pp. 5-6).

Wells (2013) puts this position slightly differently, suggesting that empathy is the problem for human carers. The lack of empathy of social robots, ironically, will make them better carers according to this logic:

At least, robots will be able to simulate care. They will be able to perform care *behaviour* in attending to the needs of children, the sick, the disabled and the elderly without actually caring. They will be able to offer companionship to lonely people without being companions, to listen and smile along to senile people's stories without understanding them, to help the hospitalised with their pain and distress without actually empathising with them. And so on. (Wells, 2013, 'Robots will economise on love', paragraph 2).

According to Wells (2013) being cared for, and being dependent is also an 'indignity'. Apparently, dignity can be restored by having a social robot taking an elderly patient to the toilet, or helping them to dress.

The position that these technological developments will liberate women from the 'unpaid drudgery', like the washing machine, tells us a great deal about competing discourses around care, intimate labour, gender, and not to mention the logic of neoliberalism. It is interesting to reflect on how this care may be characterised. Obviously, with an aging population, an economic discourse will come into play, as in the example of Japan. Machines doing the caring will be presented as saving on labour costs, more reliable than human care, tireless, undemanding and only require mechanical maintenance, not emotional support. If in the popular imagination, the idea of being old, dependent or vulnerable becomes even more culturally abhorrent then perhaps assistive robots could be portrayed as a win/win situation. As Fraser and Gordon (2002) have pointed out, human vulnerability and dependence is no longer seen as normal but instead a deviant condition, shameful and blameworthy (pp. 26-27).

Caring for the very young and for the elderly is both challenging and emotionally complex. Yet, the desire expressed by many of those who sub-contract intimate labour out to others is a desire for 'entanglement free support' (Hochschild, 2012), to purchase relief or release, from strong emotional entanglement and connectedness. As the outsourcing examples show, people are paying to be distanced from their feelings. The displacement of affect, or affective detachment has a high market value but it is also something that creates discomfort if the depersonalisation of the market is seen to penetrate too deeply into family life. Hochschild (2012) documents different ways people try and re-personalise what has been outsourced (p. 225). A question remains, however, about whether this can be done in the event of robotic care? For emotional outsourcing to function smoothly, it must be perceived to be so much more than just a financial arrangement. While, in moments of clarity, hired caregivers might be described by those purchasing their services as being 'worth a million dollars', as we have seen, more often, nannies, housekeepers, life-coaches, baby whisperers, elder-carers, rented friends and even human surrogates are portrayed as selfless, naturally caring, genuinely loving, as

sharing a precious gift or as being 'part of the family'. While the substitute of simulacra for genuine social interaction is becoming more and more acceptable, would this extend to socially assistive robots and if so, what are the wider social consequences for the way care is being reconfigured?

The caregiving that is usually done by mothers, the everyday tasks required for babies and young children to thrive would be further diminished and made invisible by these changes in pre-commodified, shared social meaning of care. If such demanding and emotionally rewarding care-work is only viewed as 'undignified', menial, distasteful and degrading, then this will impact on our understanding of and thinking about the maternal, not to mention the lives of mothers themselves. Feminism is both a problem and a potential solution here. A feminist politics that aligns itself with the extreme individualism of neo-liberalism, defined as a system of belief that idealises the 'entrepreneurial citizen engaged in paid employment' (Gavigan & Chunn, 2010, p. 7) risks reproducing the idea that dependency is shameful and deviant and care-giving a denigrated role. This kind of feminism will always be in tension with ideas and values associated with the maternal. It is a feminism that taps into a form of 'post-maternal thinking', namely, a widespread cultural hostility to certain expressions of the maternal and to the values and rich ethical meanings associated with the principles and practices of nurture, care and protection (Stephens, 2011).

Other strands of feminism may offer alternative conceptions of care that can challenge both the less visible forms of emotional outsourcing discussed above, and the future predictions about the disembodiment of care represented by social robotics. Returning to the pioneering work of Sara Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1995) highlights some of the contradictions in contemporary debates about care, mothering and feminism. Two decades ago, Ruddick argued that to claim a maternal identity was 'not to make in an empirical generalisation but to engage in a political act' (Ruddick, 1995, p.56). Ruddick expanded the category of the maternal by recognising the special cognitive capacities, metaphysical attitudes and ethical conceptions that arise from mothering. One focus of intense commentary at the time was her view that men could also be maternal thinkers and that not only women could be mothers (pp.40-41). She theorised mothering as a form of practice-based reasoning rather than an intuitive, emotional or natural state. This form of reasoning emerged from the everyday practice of caring for the vulnerable. Ruddick's conception is fundamentally social in its implications. Maternal thinking is posited as an intentional, thoughtful and social practice that will 'reveal the greater safety, pleasure, and justice of a world where the values of care are dominant' (Ruddick, 1995, p.135). Such an ethos, when extended to society as a whole, challenges the reduction of care to a transferable commodity that can be bought and sold.

Feminist care ethicists have further developed the proposition that caring generates a distinctive kind of moral rather than a market ethos. Notably, Eva Feder Kittay (1999) in *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* argues against extreme individualism in favour of a relational conception of the self. She refuses essential notions of women having a special relationship to care and nurture while acknowledging that most of the care of children, the ill and the frail elderly is done by



women. Unlike Ruddick, who universalises a particular understanding of the maternal, Kittay contends that we are universally linked by our inevitable human dependency and vulnerability. Care is not more or less desirable but simply indispensable in the human life cycle. These feminist perspectives provide a counterpoint to prevailing economic and social ideologies and they contest the neoliberal ideal of the individual as self-sufficient. They also offer the possibility of raising different kinds of questions about the outsourcing of emotional labour to the market or to machines.

## Conclusion

The trend toward the outsourcing of complicated feelings and emotions and new developments in care technology will no doubt increase and receive further sociological attention. This paper argues that these changes represent a cultural shift in our understanding of the affective dimensions of care, dependency, family and mothering. While the purchasing of emotional services may not be new, the rapidity of the expansion of paid care in intimate settings, the global dimensions of the exchanges, and the ever more varied market services penetrating private life all signal a dramatic reconfiguration of care. This reconfiguration may be less visible as a new tendency in capitalist commodification (Thrift, 2008) than the international commercialisation of services like human surrogacy, but it is no less profound in its potential social significance. Both emotional outsourcing and social robotics are a way of paying 'not to feel' something. The simulation of a tie or bond is promoted and increasingly experienced as being better than face-to-face, embodied and engaged social bonds. Wells (2013) looks forward to a time when technology will release us from mutual dependency and the use of love to establish solidarity and moral obligation. By contrast, feminist care ethicist view the recognition of human dependency and vulnerability as the basis for different and more just forms of social organisation that reinforce and strengthen social bonds and community.

The campaigns of the social movements of the seventies advocated reducing the paid working week, so that people could have more leisure time and more time for their families and communities. Today there are similar demands for time but often to have more time away from family in order to fulfill work commitments. Many dual-income, affluent families purchase emotional services within the family in an attempt to resolve this dilemma. The past decades of neo-liberal dominance have witnessed an intensification of work and economic conditions that, according to Anne Manne (2005), are 'inimical to a flourishing family life among both overworked elites and the working poor' (p.234). It is within this context that ideals of 'detached care' have been advanced and normalised. Yet, the promise that distance from weighty and complex emotions can be provided by commercial or technological services, threatens to have a social impact far beyond the emancipation or 'freeing up of time' predicted by market advocates. Fraser (2014) places this crisis in care alongside the environmental crisis and fiscal disasters that face the twenty-first century (p. 541). She argues that we lack a conceptual framework in which to interpret, let alone to resolve the strain on social reproduction under neo-liberalism in relation to care (p. 542). This paper suggests that a feminist care ethic may assist us in attempting to think conceptually about some these changes in our cultural understanding of the affective dimensions of care. What we used to call a 'labour

of love', a notion intimately tied to definitions of the family and maternal care is in danger of being emptied of all meaning and content if care *without* affect becomes a new ideal. Human intimacy, family, and care as we know it could be transformed by these unsettling cultural developments.

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