SEVEN KINDS OF WORK - ONLY ONE PAID: RACED, GENDERED AND RESTRUCTURED WORK IN SOCIAL SERVICES*

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the literature as well as themes emerging from interview data collected as part of a multi-year, three-province (Alberta, Nova Scotia and British Columbia), qualitative study (81semi-structured interviews) of the restructured social services sector, this article explores discernible types of caring work delineating *seven kinds*, *only one of which is paid.* The social service workers description of their changing worlds showed that they carried an extremely heavy workload, and also that their paid, volunteer, community, union activist work involved many of *the same* skills, tasks and mind sets thus blurring the lines between professional and non-professional identities as well as the lines between work and leisure. More over their paid and their unpaid social services work was highly gendered and significantly racialized.

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INTRODUCTION

While feminist writers have asserted that it is women who have taken on the servicing and care giving tasks previously provided by their paid counterparts within human services (Meyer and Storbakken, 2000; Neysmith, 2000; Bakker, 1996), little is know about the changing kinds and conditions of paid and unpaid work performed in the restructured social services sector. In addition to the off-loading of services through funding cuts and closures, new forms of organization within private, public, and non-profit social services agencies have facilitated an increase in the use of unpaid labor within social service agencies and the wider community (Baines, under review). Drawing on the literature as well as themes emerging from a larger pool of interview data collected as part of a multi-year, three-province qualitative study of restructuring in the social services, this article explores discernible types of caring work delineating seven kinds, only one of which is paid. Drawing on the intentionally diverse sample, the article also provides insights about the racialized character of this work, which has long been seen as highly gendered and classed (Carniol, 2000; Mullaly, 1997; Fook, 1993). The analysis in this article is part of a larger study exploring the many facets of restructuring within the social services.

SEVEN KINDS OF WORK: ONLY ONE PAID

The findings in this study indicate that paid and unpaid work within the changing world of the public sector and non-profit social services worker has expanded significantly including: paid employment, volunteer assignments, community work, union activism, informal care for relatives and neighbors, as well as service and policy development. Most of this work involved many of *the same* skills, tasks, and mindsets thus blurring the lines between professional and non-professional identities as well as the lines between work and leisure. All but one of these kinds of work was unpaid.

1. Paid Social Service Work

Paid employment in the social services has been restructured, in part, through a general leaning of the workforce so that fewer workers must do more work with fewer resources. This is facilitated by a process in which work is broken down into small components and standardized, so wasted movement and activities can be eliminated, and work processes can be completed quickly with little deviation or error. Standardization limits the types of skills that workers use, the tasks they undertake, and the relationships that form with clients and supervisors. Lean staffing often means that the volume and pace of the work has increased to a point that workers reported that they did not have time to get to know or relate to clients beyond standardized formats.

Paid social services work is significantly racialized in the social services sector with workers of color having only recently gained access to the better jobs (HRDC, 2000; Bernard, Lucas-White and Moore, 1993). Ironically, downsizing has diminished the numbers of workers of color in many of these hard-won jobs while standardization has decreased the satisfaction

once gained from this type of employment. As one worker of color noted, “we got access to these jobs just in time for the jobs to turn ugly and lay us off” (Interview A-11).

2. Unpaid Overtime Work

Most workers, including multiple jobholders, reported working through their lunch hours and coffee breaks as well as in the evenings and on weekends. For most social service workers, their unpaid overtime social services work was entirely *unreported, unauthorized, unrecognized,* and *unpaid*. Most of the participants in this study were motivated to take on unpaid overtime out of a sense of moral outrage, “it’s people’s right to have this service even if the government seems to have forgotten that” (Interview A-13). The managers interviewed for this study confirmed that they knew that workers performed unpaid overtime. They viewed it as necessary, given the heavy caseloads. While some of the managers displayed concern over the heavy workloads carried by their staff, none of the managers proposed that this excess work be paid, decreased, or formally recognized.

One woman of color, who received pay for 20 hours per week, reported working at least 40 hours per week with management’s explicit support (Interview C-19). In this case, the agency received full-time work from someone that they paid only part-time, in effect cutting the wages of this worker and her part-time colleagues by 50 percent. As the social services system continues to be downsized and full-time jobs are restructured into part-time and temporary employment, the extraction of large quantities of unpaid labor from precarious workers is likely to increase.

3. Formal Volunteer Work

Reflecting the racialized and gendered character of unpaid social services work, the workers of color who participated in this study tended to have more volunteer jobs (up to nine), while white women had less (two to four) and men had one or less. Some of these jobs were very short term (two or three visits) while others continued for years. All the female interviewees lamented that they “really should do more” (exact wording in Interview B-24, B-3, A-11, A-24, C-2, C-5, C-28). The use of volunteers in social service agencies was prolific in Alberta, where funding cuts have been the deepest (Stanford, 1998) and integration of neoliberal, public sector management strategies is quite advanced (Baines, Forthcoming). These volunteers were not merely enhancing the work of the agency, as was the norm in the past. In some cases, volunteers were replacing paid social service workers as providers of core, professional services.

4. Policy and Service Building Work

Women of color were highly involved in unpaid policy development and service building work. The past fifteen years of downsizing and leaning out generated greater need within racialized communities, hence the women of color involved in this study reported that unpaid policy and service building work had become much more time consuming and intense. Unpaid policy and service development work often focused on initiating multi level projects aimed at

sensitizing large public institutions such as schools, hospitals, child protection or family services to the needs and issues of people of color. Workers of color also worked in an unpaid capacity to develop new services aimed at unmet, "culturally"-specific needs.

5. Informal Unpaid Social Service Work

Workers reported participation in a relatively new area of work, namely the provision of *unpaid social service care* to neighbors, members of extended families, and even far-flung and little known contacts. In their paid social service work and their unpaid, informal social service care, workers generally used the same skills and undertook very similar tasks. Informal, unpaid social service work would start when the participants in this study would be made aware of a neighbor or relative who needed someone "to check in on them" (Interview B-5). Generally somewhat reluctantly, the interviewees reported that they would make an initial visit to this person and "before you know it" (Interview B-5) they would be working on the situation as if it were a case assignment at their place of employment. After conducting an initial assessment they would agree to make a referral or two to help the person out and promise to "check back soon" (Interview A-3). When services were not forthcoming or proved inadequate, workers would become involved in advocacy, locating new services, negotiating bureaucracies, and building support networks around the individual in need. They would also counsel, advise, intervene in crisis situations, as well as educate individuals and families about their rights, their options, and ways to resist oppressive conditions and situations. In short, the workers often made use of many of the skills and values they felt they had lost within their paid social service work.

In addition, workers reported that they were called upon to provide professional-like services within their formal volunteer roles, even when those roles had no direct connection to social service care. For example, one Girl Guide leader was called upon more than once to "just talk with" an unhappy child who ended up requiring major familial and personal care as well as follow-up with a public system that was very difficult to access (Interview C-8). Hence, even where their volunteer assignments were not located within the social services, by virtue of their skill and sense of professional and community responsibility, some workers found themselves using their social work skills to find and retain appropriate assistance for people in need.

6. Union Activist Work

Taking on pivotal roles such as union president or picket captain, most of the women in British Columbia, and significantly less in Alberta and Nova Scotia, were or had been intensely involved in their unions. Wages were not the central issue in most of their union struggles with employers. Instead, struggles were about keeping client-worker ratio low or how to maintain work quality and relationships. The women saw their union work as a way to "take better care of everyone" in the sector - - clients, communities and workers (Interview B-7)(also Baines, 1999).

7. Unpaid Work in the Family

While unpaid work was a major question in the study, most interviewees spoke extensively about the forms of unpaid social services work discussed above, and not about unpaid work in the home. Only with prompting they would expand on unpaid family care giving. It was as if the private realm of family was separate in their minds from forms of unpaid social services work that more closely resembled their paid work. Family work, in contrast, was naturalized as "just something us mothers have to do" (Interview A-9) rather than understood as a form of work that has also been impacted by restructuring (Luxton, 1997).

Careful probing and follow-up questions showed that the research participants were experiencing an increase in the amount and intensity of unpaid, hands-on caring in the family ranging from childcare to elder care to care of distant relatives. Luxton (1997, 1980) has noted that an intensification of domestic work occurs during economic down swings as women attempt to subsidize and extend family budgets through the use of their unpaid labor. Intensification of child care work among the research participants reflected cuts to services for children as well as a growing shift of responsibility from schools to parents in relation to responsibility for educating and engaging children. Many workers responded to these changes by taking on shift work so that either they or their co-parent could be available to care for children around the clock. All parents reported increased levels of stress as they tried to balance the demands of home and work life. Research participants spoke of the expansion of unpaid family care giving in terms of emotional rather than moral compulsion. They reported that they could not bear to have their loved ones suffer or that their children needed them and "so, what can you do?" (Interview B-20) In other words, this work was as freely chosen as is any other aspect of the highly emotionally, ideologically, and socially charged realm of parental and familial relations.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The absolute volume of paid and unpaid caring work performed by the women in this study is stunning. Moreover, it shaped and limited the amount of time and energy they had for other forms of resistance, political action, or leisure. The women in this study were not passive; they were active in formal and informal volunteer roles, as well as in union activism in ways that helped sustain the dignity and hope of other people and themselves. While some of their unpaid work certainly subsidized and legitimized an under resourced system, their work simultaneously provided a small sense of social solidarity and resistance to the callousness of an atomized, uncaring, neoliberal social system.

The data discussed above, reveals the unevenness, arbitrariness, and classed nature of many forms of unpaid social service work. Clients with workers who can and will perform large amounts of unpaid over time, people with generous and skilled neighbors who happen to be social workers, and Girl Guides with troop leaders who are professional care providers may be able to parlay these conditions into better access to care and services. Those individuals who are poorer and less well connected must negotiate an under resourced and uncaring system alone.

Many of these less well-connected individuals will have a more difficult experience or simply fall between the cracks. This situation is criss-crossed by class and race, as it is middle-class, white people who are more likely to have neighbors, Brownie troop leaders, and community members who are trained social service workers and hence better access to services within the formal social services system.

As long as unpaid social service work remains known only to those performing and receiving it, it will remain an invisible subsidy to a system designed to be smaller and less caring. Stories, such as those told by the workers in this study, need to be brought into the public realm and counted within national and international valuation schemes as such as those articulated by Bakker (1998), Waring (1999), and Drescher (1999). A full economic valuation of this work will reveal the gross underestimation of the economic costs of caring, as well as the need for policy development and funding levels that reflect the enormous care deficit. Any struggle for the economic valuation of women”s unpaid work must go hand-in-hand with a larger struggle for democracy and social justice in which the reasons for women”s daily resistance can be redressed concomitant with a reduction in their larger-than-life, everyday workload of care.[1]

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