

Unpaid caring work: telling the story of the glue that holds our communities together

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Recently, I had a couple of days away for work coming up. It meant my partner needed to take time off work to cover school pickups and drop offs, or we needed to find someone to look after the children. We had a bit of back and forward about who should that be, and how much would that cost. It's a conversation going on in families across New Zealand (and in much more stressful circumstances than ours). I mused that it will be a vast improvement for everyone when "unpaid work no longer subsidises paid work."

He asked what I meant by that. "Well" I said "caring work is vital to society functioning. Yet policy-makers, and workplaces ignore it in the main. This is despite people in the public and market sectors relying on it to enable their sectors to function. In effect unpaid labour acts as a subsidy."

"Interesting" he replied. "I guess I have always assumed that because having kids was a private decision, it's on us to manage the stress of it when work and money become issues".

And that is how many of us tend to think about caring work in society. Because that is the story we have most often heard told. Political philosopher Martha Fineman even gave this story a name: "The Porsche Preference". Having children, or caring for others, the story goes, is like choosing to buy a Porsche. So you wear the cost of the maintenance.

How easily my partner, and many of us, locate this story is indicative of how powerful a story it has become. Yet, if we examine it we see this story is far too shallow. Because 'choice' is an erroneous explanation for what is an inevitable (and wonderful) aspect of the human condition: our dependence on each other throughout our lives. From the start when we are little babies, through times of ill health, and on to the end of our lives, being cared for, is inevitable and is the stuff that enriches our lives. Caring is what connects us, it is the glue that holds us together as people, communities and societies.

Yet because the dominant story doesn't reveal these deeper truths, few people are responding to unpaid labour, especially caring work, as the critical economic and social issue it is.

Invisibility within our economic system often means exploitation

Caring for any person or community in a myriad of different ways is a foundational issue. Caring for people and the environment is as important as public sector or market-based work. As different types of work none can exist without the other. The data tells us that unpaid work remains [the largest productive sector in our economy](#). Despite this, people have designed our current economic and policy system to treat unpaid work as 'private' to individuals. Of no real value to our collective wellbeing. As a consequence, policy makers put little effort into understanding how it happens, the conditions of it, or the impacts.

And with invisibility comes harm. Housing costs have grown, wages stayed flat, and work has become insecure and poorly paid. Government investment in our health, social and disability services have [eroded over time](#). And so the huge amount of unpaid work, caring work, being done is stretching people to their very limits. While those in under-resourced and vulnerable communities, women and children especially, are paying to do this work with their health and wellbeing.

Missing the potential for wellbeing

Without formal recognition people in policy and business also fail to unlock the potential unpaid caring work offers our collective wellbeing.

Instead people's focus is on paid work. Even when it is of poor quality and eroding individual, community or environmental wellbeing in the long term. For example, when policy makers force sole women parents into low paid, poor quality work, outcomes for their children worsen. Yet paid work is still prioritised within our public and market sectors.

It makes no sense to prioritise one type of productive work over another to achieve a worse outcome for people and children. Yet we continue to do so. In large part because that shallow story about private choice obscures the evidence. How then do we overcome the problematic story?

Why facts don't beat the embedded story

Often when confronted with people who think caring work doesn't count, our strategy is to provide facts. We provide the financial value of it calculated by time use surveys, the hours, types of work, or negative outcomes when it is invisible. Facts makes sense to those of us who already understand the issues. We are on board, let's get this train steaming!

But cultural narratives are like a chain of information that links causes, effects and solutions to issues in our minds. They are forged over time, and with exposure and re-exposure to information, as well as experience. Presenting unframed facts about the problem of unpaid labour cannot break an embedded narrative. Nor do they help build a new narrative about causes, effects and solutions. Instead we need to understand the cultural narratives (sometimes called mental models) that inform how people think about caring work. And then use tested techniques to effect a better, deeper causal story. One that draws people into considering the evidence. I (and others) refer to this as the Science of Story.

Using the science of story

The science of story incorporates many principles; four critical ones to focus on are:

1. Understanding the cultural narratives that exist,
2. Providing a positive vision for people,
3. Leading with shared helpful values,
4. Using language, imagery, and facts that lead people through causes, impacts and towards solutions.

I will talk through each of these in the context of unpaid labour.

Understanding the cultural narratives

Earlier in this piece I highlighted two narratives we (society) share about caring work. One is very powerful. Our fast thinking brains, prone to shortcuts, and drawn to the concrete, simple and repetitive, reaches for that model (private choice) first. Another narrative is present, which I referred to. It is this: that interdependence is a fundamental experience of humanity. We all rely on others to care for us at different stages of our lives. That connections with people enrich our lives and is what really matters. Interdependence (and the work that comes with that) is the glue that holds us together. We people say “we don’t live to work”, they are drawing on that quieter narrative about the importance of others activities in our lives. We can frame these understandings in our communications about caring work.

Through research, we need to understand both the dominant stories and the quieter and deeper stories (as all co-exist in our complex minds). We then have a shared framework to base our communications about evidence around. And a good idea of the narratives and stories we need to avoid if we want people to think differently. Next build an alternative vision from the one that dominates.

Starting with a positive vision for people (and avoid long descriptions of the problem or policy details)

People respond to a hope and vision. It important that people can see in concrete ways how life will be different from what we currently experience in the system we have designed. What would it look like if all policy makers or work places recognised unpaid labour as fundamental to our society? Having our own well-articulated vision means we don't spend time telling people over and over again what we don't want. Or repeating a problematic story. Evidence across disciplines show positive vision making is effective in building collective action.

Find concrete examples of unpaid labour in communities. Draw out how this work would look different and better if policy makers acted on evidence. If I wanted more support for parents caring for babies, I would focus on describing what creating time for babies looked like in the first years of life. As opposed to talking about paid parental leave in detail.

I have analysed some of the [differences we would see in policy and practice in New Zealand](#) if policy makers recognised unpaid labour. That may provide some starting points.

Leading conversations with helpful values

Values, are the why of life. Values influence what we believe, and how we act. They are at the heart of our motivations. We share many common values, and so can be a key way to connect people to those things we all care about. The World Values Survey shows most New Zealanders highly prioritise taking care of other people, the environment, and creativity, curiosity and self-determination (collective values). Other research shows people find it challenging to live such values if we incorrectly believe most others don't share these values. Yet, if we start talking about the importance of being responsible for the wellbeing of children, older people, and those who are not well, people across all walks of life respond. Shared collective values are a side door to starting the conversation about unpaid labour. Though don't end it there.

Using language, imagery, and facts that lead people through systemic causes and towards systemic solutions.

The causes, impacts and the solutions people hear about unpaid labour depends on the language and the imagery that you use to frame the issue. Words, metaphors and images bring with them deep narratives of their own about how the world works. If I say the word elephant, you can only think of an elephant. And so if I use words, metaphors, and images that frame existing unhelpful narratives about unpaid labour, for example if I talk about choice, I am not reframing the issue at all. People will most likely be drawn to existing ways of thinking. Humans respond to repetition. Framing someone else's explanations (myth busting is a form of this), serves to reinforce that story. Work hard to avoid it.

Instead understand what words, metaphors, images orientate people to the story that highlight structural causes and solutions.

Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of research on framing unpaid labour. Based on theory and research from other areas, framing the richness of human endeavour, and the importance of the work we all do outside of paid work is a good start. Describe the complexity of human lives and relationships with loved ones. Tell inspiring stories of solidarity and commitment, and creativity that arise from caring work.

Researchers have found it helpful to talk about the "restrictions and restraints" policy and market structures put on people. And how that prevents them from thriving while doing caring work.

Facts are not a story, yet facts can be a character in the story. So only use data to advance a narrative. For example, describing the growth in an ageing population, the need for more caring work, and the mental and physical health issues unpaid carers experience, is using facts to advance a story. Below is such an example

“With an ageing population, and longer periods of our life with health issues, caring work is an essential part of the solution. But without good support from people in the social policy system or from workplaces, carers reach breaking point. Often there is a great personal cost”.

We can get tied up in talking about problems. Emphasise the better outcomes that occur when unpaid work is recognised and distributed equitably between groups in society.

Conclusion

We want to encourage a society in which people see the fundamental importance of caring for others and communities they love. To support new ways of working for collective wellbeing. For parents to spend time with their children, and for children to care for their parents. For people to develop their skills in work that they value and has meaning to them. This is what builds strong societies, alongside the market and public sectors.

The science of story can help connect us to the deeper understandings we have about the importance of caring work. Stories are the water we swim in, and we can embrace them knowingly to advance a world that is richer, and more just for all people.