

THE VALUE OF CARE WITHIN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: This paper has adopted the form of a reflection on the impact that care –or the lack of it– has in the life of any human being from different points of view. It contains a brief description of the home environment and home-making, and also a reflection on the ‘paradox of homemaking’, which consists in the lack of social recognition for such a work that is so essential for human life and development. It finally investigates the conditions for this work to be performed –availability of time, qualification, and working conditions– with a mention to the case of Spain.

Keywords: homemaking, work-family balance, care

This paper has adopted the form of a reflection suggested by different disciplines that have –some times unknowingly– contributed to shed light on the work of the home. The International Conferences’ agenda followed by the Home Renaissance Foundation since the first one, back in 2006, has a close relation with this reflection. In fact, the first International Conference –*Balanced Life-Balanced Life*, in 2006– did not only deal with nutrition and health but also with gastronomy as an art and the cultural and social function of meals. The following –*From House to Home*, in 2008– revolved around the physical space and objects –architecture, technology, urbanism, design– and also on the notion of home as a space of relationships. The Conference in 2011 was titled *Professional Approaches to Housework*, and there the areas in discussion were law, economics, sociology and the teaching and learning of the home-making practice. The Home Renaissance Foundation also co-organized in Rome a Conference on *Home and Identity* in 2012, where this topic was analyzed under the perspectives of philosophy, psychology and sociology. The next one will be also co-organized, in November 2014, in Colombia, with the title *Development and Sustainability: Care in Daily Life*, around the topics of care, work-life balance, intergenerational relationships and care-related professions and occupations.

This wide variety of perspectives clearly shows the richness of the *home* as a subject of study, and here I will refer to this variety with respect to the main goal of home-making, which is *care*. To this end, I will use not only the sug-

gestions and ideas that emerged in the Conferences above mentioned but also some insights from a research I am coordinating along with *The Family Watch* about children's care within the home environment.²

I will focus my paper on the impact that care –or the lack of it– has in the life of any human being from different points of view. First, I will start with a brief description of the home environment and homemaking.

The Home Environment

"Care: 1. [Mass noun] The provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something." (English Oxford Dictionary, 2014, Oxford University Press)

"Home: n. [1-3 refer to the place where one lives]

4.

a. An environment offering security and happiness.

b. A valued place regarded as a refuge or place of origin." (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition copyright ©2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company)

Home environment is the environment in which people live and feel well tended, taken care of, and, therefore, at ease and comfortable to express and develop themselves. It is created by the relationships that people establish with other persons and objects and the physical space –one may live alone and feel at home. These traits make each home environment unique, even within the same cultural group. They also make the difference between a house and a home. The house is simply the physical space. The home includes both the physical and the relational space, which is created mainly by mutual care relationships. This has been confirmed by empirical findings. For example, in a research conducted by Susanna Pallini of Roma Tre University,³ on women living with their children in domestic violence shelters, some children asked to draw their home and family drew themselves with their mother outside their home and the abuser inside the home whilst others draw themselves inside the shelter with their mother and the abuser outside. With this, the first group detached themselves from a home where there was abuse and the second identified the place free from violence –i.e., the shelter– as their real home, thus transferring the home attachment to the shelter.

Homemaking, in turn, consists of all the activities addressed to create the home environment. Although it is used as equivalent to "housework", I believe that the latter emphasizes the material environment (house) and tasks (work), so it may convey a somehow fragmented and mechanistic notion of this work.

Homemaking consists mainly in taking care of oneself and the others by creating a home environment. It is impossible to study the phenomenon of homemaking without breaking it into its diverse facets, but by so doing we run the risk of fragmentation. Thus, keeping a holistic view requires taking a philosophical perspective, but then we run the risk of abstraction.

Some of the homemaking activities are directly applied onto a person (e.g. feeding a baby), and others are mediated by objects: making a meal, tidying a room, etc. Many of these activities respond to basic survival functions, such as nutrition or hygiene, whilst the others, in addition, seek the wellbeing and development of the ones involved (e.g., games, decoration, a reunion...). Given that just the survival level is not enough for living a full life, both types of activities are much relevant for the person who receives them. And here we find ourselves facing a paradox.

The Paradox of Homemaking

Given that homemaking by definition happens within the home boundaries, its effects are not directly observable from outside these boundaries, which contributes to the widely accepted idea that it consists of a bunch of activities that are irrelevant for society and economy, when not something abashing for the person who performs them, who is prevented from displaying his or her potential into the wide world. If we want to challenge this view, the contribution of homemaking must be made visible.

For example, Home Economics Professor Piorkowski, of Bonn University, highlights how the mainstream economics neglects household activities because there is no internal money flow involved and households are regarded as mere consumers and not producers. On the contrary, a whole microcosm of resources distribution,⁴ matter and energy transformation and commodities production, as well as recycling –just think about the food leftovers re-use and the passing of clothes from older to smaller children– happens inside a home.⁵ Another example is the relevance of the home as a source of human capital, especially considering it as a human relationships space, in which trust, conversation, cooperation or intergenerational relationships are built.⁶ Perhaps the modern distinction public-private, if carried to the extreme, does not allow for detecting the interchanges inside-outside occurring at the economic and social levels.

In addition, the notion of *care* itself is not free from suspect. *Being taken care* by somebody requires prior acknowledge of one's *need* or dependence, and modern culture is permeated by the principle of freedom understood as the complete autonomy of the subject—think about the self-made man myth. This means that my life is the more complete and perfect the less I owe to others, the less I need the other's help, the less, in short, I *depend* on them. This notion

has been disputed by Alasdair McIntyre,⁷ who highlights dependence –I would rather say *interdependence*– as one of the traits of human beings.

Also here empiric research comes to support these insights. For example, Maria Sophia Aguirre cites research regarding the correlation of family meals frequency with high relational levels and low levels of tension and problems such as substance abuse, eating disorders and other. According to her, well managed meals at home lead to a rational level of consumption, which avoids the waste of resources and unhealthy food.⁸

The Conditions for Care

But care needs time, and time requires a balance between time spent *outside* and *inside*, understood in a symbolic way. The distribution of these times and spaces has undergone an evolution in the last centuries. Sociologist Sergio Belardinelli⁹ describes how industrialization brought a radical separation men-women in terms of work outside and inside the home, respectively. Men had no time for their home, thus, women were entrusted the function of homemaking. With the access of women to the labor market with no correction of the previous situation, the result is even less time left for homemaking.¹⁰ Being both men and women engaged in long working hours, their (few) children must spend their time in extracurricular activities until late, or being taken care of by people other than their parents.

In this situation, it is not strange that *work-family balance* or *family-friendly policies* have been viewed as something highly desirable. What is more arguable is that these policies have often been proposed only for women: more flexible schedules, longer maternity leaves, and so on. It seems as if fathers did not need work-family balance and could go on with the same patterns as before. We argue, on the one hand, that the access of women to the workplace has only highlighted something that was not going properly well for a much longer time and that has the roots in the modern separation of public-private domains as proper to the man and women. On the other hand, the role of paternity is nowadays at the core of a debate that engages sociology, psychology and education.

Another focus of discussion revolves around the situation of *domestic workers*, understood as “paid household workers. They perform activities within the private household for compensation and in particular domestic activities that are necessary to maintain and sustain family life as well as a productive labour force.”¹¹ Professor Peggie Smith, of Washington University St. Louis, describes how these workers are mainly women, often immigrants and sometimes hired in unfavourable conditions.¹² Awareness of the value of homework requires also a change in these circumstances.

If we take, for example, the case of the work of taking care of children within the home in Spain, we can find an empirical confirmation of this description. From the policy and economic point of view, we find high housing prices, very low economic help for families, comparatively very short parental and other leaves,¹³ a poorly applied disability law, resistance of companies to hire young women, extremely long working hours –in some places, with two hours for lunch time– and misalignment between school and working hours. The family structure is still strong enough to work as a support for the care of children, but this has produced a social phenomenon known as the “slave grandparents,” and, in general, a reversal of the role that would be expected from them at their age.¹⁴ Domestic workers have lately undergone a change in the legal working conditions, but these conditions are not making things easy for employers in terms of bureaucracy and taxes. In Spain, many women still see having children as a hindrance from the social, professional and economic points of view.

We have engaged in this description even risking to seem too negative, but we would like to show that, without the appropriate conditions, it is very difficult to improve the quality of homemaking, as current society is demanding. And some of the required changes are indeed structural: they encompass the whole way of understanding the working market and also the contribution that households bring to society.

However, favourable conditions are not enough. First of all, it needs *willing* to. A recent study in Spain has shown that parents would like to devote more time to their children, and that they identify schedule issues as the main cause of their difficulties.¹⁵ Secondly, it requires *knowing how* to do it. It is commonplace to assume that ‘anybody can be a homemaker’, or that learning to become one is something that comes ‘naturally’, especially in the case of women. But the truth is that young couples struggle to combine their work and home life –in 46% of Spanish couples both are working¹⁶–, and also to organise the latter.

In the case of Spain, as well measures in laws and best practices in businesses, there should be also an offer of know-how in these matters, which are not anymore passed from mothers to daughters as in the old times. There have been some initiatives around the world, such as the Smart Home Management Program (HRE, UK), a University Diploma on Home Management (Kenvale College, Australia), HomeAdvantage Plus (US), and the Family Home Management Programme (Wavecrest College of Hospitality, Nigeria). It would seem that these initiatives and some others may be an attempt of revival of the old home economics movement that had so much success in the America of the 20s and 30s and had relevant promoters such as Catharine Beecher or Lil-

lian Moller Gilbreth. Yes and no. These old programs were designed for women who spent all their time homemaking and they taught them how to do it in an efficient –a scientific– way, how to use the home appliances that the market was inventing at the moment and, therefore, how to get time to take care of themselves. The demands now are higher: the issue at stake is how to combine work and home in a way that is beneficial for all the family and, secondarily, how to perform the homemaking tasks in a more effective way. Some of these programs are catching the attention also of men. If they really aim to help homemakers, my proposal is that they should 1) include contents regarding children and family development, and 2) be open to men. What I mean is that family development and home management programs should be designed in order to be integrated with each other.

Notes

² See <http://www.thefamilywatch.org/act-amaf-es.php>

³ Pallini, S. (2012)

⁴ Aguirre, M. S. (2007)

⁵ "Structural identity means that production and consumption is nothing else than the transformation of matter and energy which we get from the natural environment into investment goods, consumption goods, household commodities and all the residuals as waste, global warming etc. that goes back earlier or later into the natural environment. [...] as a result of this the fundamental function of the household and family sector for the macrostructure of the economy and society is neglected." Piorkowsky, M.-B. (2012), p. 64. Maria Sophia Aguirre, in *op cit.*, brings up the theory that replacing private kitchens by communal dinning halls caused the great famine during the Great Leap Forward. She also remarks how the distribution of goods within the family is traditionally carried out through the women, thus showing the importance of the

women's role in the economy.

⁶ Nahapiet, J. (2009) See also Belardinelli, S. (2012)

⁷ MacIntyre, A. (1999)

⁸ Aguirre, M. S. (2007)

⁹ Belardinelli, S. (2012)

¹⁰ Not a few feminists have highlighted the irony that the liberation of women from their homes entails and requires the introduction of other women into these same homes to perform the tasks they do not want or do not have time to perform.

¹¹ Smith, P. (2012), p. 25.

¹² See Feder Kittay, E. (2998)

¹³ Ministerio de Sanidad, Asuntos Sociales e Igualdad (2013)

¹⁴ Fundación Pfizer (2014)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.* In 26% of the cases, it is man alone who works, and in 12,5%, it is the woman alone. In the remaining 11,9%, both are unemployed.

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