“We shall show…that class models become more plausible when major occupational categories are disaggregated to the unit occupational level…detailed occupations are convenient signals of more fundamental properties (e.g. working conditions, life chances)…occupations are often gemeinschaftlich communities as well as positional sources of exploitation and inequality.”

*Can Class Analysis Be Salvaged?*, Grusky and Sorensen
March, 1998

“Central to the mission of the federation is to stimulate and focus on union organizing activities to bring the maximum number of workers together along industry or occupational lines. Workers identify with each other according to their industry or occupation, and the impact of worker economic action is increased as the percentage of union members is increased within an industry or occupation.”

*Restoring the American Dream*, proposal for reform of the AFL-CIO
July, 2005

In recent decades, there has been an ongoing and often heated debate in the academic world about the utility of the concept of “class” ((Grusky and Sorensen 1998; Grusky and Weeden 2001; Birkelund 2002; Goldthorpe 2002; Adams 2002; Portes 2000). Scholars have argued about the meaning of class in a modern economy, and in particular about what we should think about as the boundaries of modern classes. Some have argued that traditional class divisions should be replaced by groupings of workers by occupation or industry (Grusky and Weeden 2001), aggregates that have more social meaning and cohesiveness than larger categories. The years of this debate at the academic
level have also seen a downward trend in the membership and influence of labor unions, the form of social organizing most closely associated with class. This year, several of the largest labor unions in the country publicly broke with the AFL-CIO at its summer convention. While there are a range of reforms that the new union federation created out of this schism plans to focus on – including expansion – one of the matters of contentions in the debate was at what level to advocate the merging of individual unions within occupation or industry. The new federation states that one of its goals is to organize workers within occupations or industries in a coordinated way to take advantage of worker identification as well as the potential for collective action (www.ChangetoWin.org). So, in an ever-changing economic landscape, how to organize workers becomes both a conceptual and a practical question. In this paper, I will examine how research and scholarship about care workers can contribute to understanding the implications of how we decide to answer this question.

**Who are care workers?**

My own research grew out of a feminist body of scholarship that unites researchers from various disciplines in a study of care

My particular interest is in paid care workers

The definition of care work varies within the field, but generally includes a range of occupations that involve direct nurturing of other individuals (nursing, teaching, nurse’s aides, child care workers, etc.). Some scholars conceptualize care more broadly, including other occupations that have traditionally been considered reproductive labor, such as cleaning and food preparation and service jobs. (See (Duffy 2005b) for a more detailed discussion of the conceptualization of care.)
What makes paid care work relevant in a discussion of labor organizing is the activist ethos of this growing body of scholarship. Numerous scholars have called for a political or social movement based on care (Stone 2000; Folbre; Harrington 1999). And, in the context of paid care, the creation of a “care movement” is intimately connected to organizing care workers.

So, who are these workers? Figure 1 shows that paid care workers make up a significant and increasing proportion of the economy. For the purposes of this illustration, “nurturant care” refers to those occupations considered in a more narrow definition of care and “non-nurturant care” adds in those cleaning and food service occupations that are variably included by care scholars. One can see that in 2000, care workers (defined broadly) made up 20 percent of the labor force.

Figure 1: Care workers as a percentage of the labor force, 1900-2000

Percentages calculated by the author using data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Samples (IPUMS).

No sample was available for 1930 at the time of the study. For more information, see (Duffy 2004).
The category of care work brings together a group of occupations that are dissimilar in many ways, including wage levels. Table 1 shows the median hourly wage for the more detailed occupational categories included by a broad definition of care work. Wages range from a low of $6.70/hour to a high of $50.75/hour. Even if one leaves out the cleaning and food service workers, the gap between health care attendants and nurses and child care workers and teachers is still notable.

Table 1: Median hourly earnings of care workers by occupation, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Median hourly earnings 2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dentists</td>
<td>$50.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians and surgeons</td>
<td>47.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optometrists</td>
<td>37.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiropractors</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologists</td>
<td>23.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapists and healers</td>
<td>20.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses, professional</td>
<td>20.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>17.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and welfare workers, except group</td>
<td>14.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical nurses</td>
<td>12.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergymen</td>
<td>12.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious workers</td>
<td>10.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care attendants</td>
<td>9.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Public cleaning occupations</td>
<td>8.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Laundry and dry cleaning operatives</td>
<td>7.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Food preparation and service</td>
<td>6.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendants, professional and personal service (child care workers)</td>
<td>6.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Median hourly earnings calculated for all individuals who reported working in 1999. For more information, see (Duffy 2004). Amounts in contemporary (1999) dollars.
The occupations unified by the concept of care are stratified by race and gender as well as wage level. The jobs at the lowest level of the wage spectrum – health care attendants, cleaning, food service, and child care workers – are disproportionately made up of racial-ethnic women, and in some cases, men. The more professionalized occupations such as nursing and teaching are overwhelmingly white women. And the highest paid and highest status jobs in this list are overwhelmingly male and white.

*Care Workers of the World Unite*

Care scholarship has been working to unite these disparate groups of workers under the banner of care, both conceptually and practically. Most scholars agree that one of the analytic dimensions of class analysis is the degree to which workers identify subjectively with the group or class.

One of the arguments for a more disaggregated model of occupational groupings rather than traditional class divisions has been that workers do not readily identify with a “class”, as defined in the traditional Marxian sense. However, workers do readily identify with their occupational group. (Grusky and Sorensen 1998)

Subjective identification is recognized as important by labor organizers, some of whom have also argued that it makes sense to coordinate unionization efforts by occupation and industry to maximize the sense of worker identification and therefore the potential for collective action (www.ChangetoWin.org).

Care scholars generally agree that workers in the category do not readily identify as “care workers”. Part of a care movement would be to build this sense of identification by drawing out similarities in the content and purpose of these jobs. Importantly, the
premise of solidarity is occupational similarity rather than similarity in economic position. This is a rather radical shift from more Marxian class-based analysis.

I have argued elsewhere that the strategy of developing a theoretical understanding and political strategy based on care has multiple potentially critical pitfalls (Duffy 2005b; Duffy 2005a). In this presentation, I want to really focus in on a somewhat different aspect than I have previously discussed, and that is this issue of subjective identification.

*Solidarity and Mobility*

If one of the goals of a care movement is to encourage subjective identification among care workers as part of this larger group, where is that going to happen most easily, and where are there going to be barriers? One of the challenges to organizing workers is that workers are not static. There is quite a bit of movement in and out of different occupations. Traditional analyses of class consider mobility as a long-term possibility, sometimes even from generation to generation. But if one looks at the level of the occupation rather than at some larger aggregate level, “mobility” becomes a much more prominent phenomenon with a meaning that is much more difficult to assess.

It is a well-known that the low-wage end of the labor market does not offer stability and security to its workers. Care work is no exception to this pattern. There are important differences in levels of movement in and out of occupational categories related to the position of occupations in the larger economy.
Just as an example, among women who were registered nurses in 1991, over 30 percent were still registered nurses ten years later. By contrast, among those who were child care workers, only eight percent were still child care workers by 2001. Some of these had “advanced” within their field – about nine percent were elementary teachers, and one percent were in school administration. But the vast majority had moved into other relatively low-wage positions in the labor market. Almost fifteen percent had moved into secretarial or clerical positions, occupations that clearly fall outside the realm of what most consider care work. Others were scattered in health aide positions, cleaning, food service, and other low-wage jobs.

So, while it may be plausible to work to build a sense of subjective identification as care workers among those nurses who have stayed in those jobs, it is much more difficult to argue this possibility for those child care workers. The question is, do workers at the low-wage end of the labor market identify primarily according to their occupational group – or is that a phenomenon that is more prevalent in the more professionalized segments of the labor market? Given the amount of lateral mobility that low-wage workers experience, it seems that at least for a large number of these workers, their subjective identification would be as likely “low-wage worker” as “care worker”. So, is grouping workers occupationally conceptually sound or strategically viable? I am not sure that it is for those workers who need the most in terms of representation and change. And this problem becomes even more pronounced if one looks at the more detailed occupational level as some scholars have suggested we should (Grusky and Sorensen 1998; Grusky and Weeden 2001).

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1 Calculated by author from data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID).
Strategies for Sustainability

In an increasingly bifurcated labor market, the challenges of organizing for sustainable jobs at the low end of the wage distribution is a daunting prospect. Union organizing has a long history of successfully organizing particular occupational groups – and there is no reason that cannot continue. However, the instability of the workforce presents a significant challenge to this strategy in leading towards long-term change. It is a circular problem – as long as jobs are not sustainable, it will be hard to keep a stable enough workforce to organize in that arena to push for more sustainable jobs.

Some scholars have argued that contemporary economic conditions provide an opening for a resurgence of “social movement unionism,” in which unions take on broad political and social issues (Turner 2005). In her first statement as president of the newly formed Change to Win Coalition, Anna Burger sounds very much like a woman on a mission to build a social movement: “We are going to walk our talk. We are going to get into the streets, together. Hotel maids and Wal-Mart clerks. Child care providers and waste haulers. Farm workers and carpenters. The workers who build the buildings and the workers who clean them” (Anna Burger 2005).

While the SEIU, one the members of the coalition, organizes nurses and doctors as well, it is of note that they are not mentioned. This is not an appeal based on the occupational solidarity of a care movement. Rather, this is an appeal that seems to call for unity among occupationally disparate groups of low-wage workers who share a similar economic position.

One of the challenges that faces both scholars and organizers as we confront the increasing inadequacy of many jobs to sustain their workers at a basic quality of life is to
discover where workers feel that sense of subjective group identification that is the basis for collective action and social change. This question – whether the base of that solidarity is primarily economic or broadly occupational – is a critical part of finding answers to that central dilemma. And it is an area that calls out for cooperation between researchers and activists.
Reference List


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