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To Gender or Not to Gender:

An Analysis of Economic Impact Reports of the Child Care Sector

By Shira Adriance, April 2009

A series of studies on the economic impact of the child care sector have paved the way for a new definition of caring labor in the U.S. economy, by emphasizing the economic as well as developmental value of child care. Most of these studies attempted to conduct a gender neutral assessment of the role of child care in society. We found that despite this attempt, gender stereotypes were unintentionally reproduced in the language and presentation of the studies.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, child care advocacy organizations in more than 70 states, counties, and cities in the United States and Canada studied the economic impact of their local child care industry. Their aim was to better understand their industry's economic contribution, and to increase its value in the eyes of the business and economic development leaders.

By highlighting the economic value of care work, they make a radical claim for the societal re-valuation of care and caring labor, challenging longstanding and persistent gender stereotypes. In the process they are forced to struggle with existing stereotypes and assumptions about women's work. These can range from political struggles, such as resistance on the part of policymakers and businesspeople to take child care seriously, to methodological struggles, such as difficulty in defining the child care sector due to a lack of appropriate data.

In my research, I attempted to unravel how the child care community experiences gender in relation to their work, and how this has affected the economic impact studies. What I discovered was surprising information about the ways in which language and gender stereotypes can impact our world.

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METHODOLOGY

In the summer of 2004, through the Linking Child Care and Economic Development project at Cornell University, a team of researchers conducted lengthy interviews with over 30 key informants from state and regional economic impact study teams in order to document the process of creating the studies. We wanted to determine the story behind the study: how, why, who was involved, key challenges and successes experienced, and resulting changes in thinking and talking about child care and the economy. We documented our qualitative findings in case studies that outline the particular stories of each region, as well as a summary paper (Adriance et al. 2009). These case studies can be viewed at <http://government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/reports/childcare/matrix.asp>. My analysis is based on these interviews, as well as on the text of the economic impact studies themselves.

ANALYSIS

A Tool for Communication

The economic impact studies typically describe the child care industry in terms of its size and composition, measure its linkage or multiplier effects on the regional economy, compare it to other industries in the region, and make policy recommendations. More than reports, these studies are communication tools through which the child care community can transform the descriptive language, values, and images associated with their field, and hence alter the definition of their work.

Departing from the sectors' traditional language of child development, the studies use economic and business concepts to describe child care. They remind their

audience that they are an *industry*, that their employees are *early childhood educators*, and that part of their value is as a building block in the *social infrastructure for economic development* and a key component of *workforce development*. This method of re-labeling is called frame change. The frame change process is an attempt to alter the ways in which we view and define our reality, and was developed by sociologists to help explain how individuals and groups construct meaning around events and experiences, guiding and legitimizing action (Benford and Snow, 2000:614). There is enormous power in labeling and describing. As we define concepts such as “work” and “economic contribution”, we create, categorize, and limit the way we interpret our world. Often, frame change is undertaken to win over a more powerful, mainstream group, in this case the business and economic development communities. In the process, child care professionals gained a sense of importance and worth, and began to take themselves more seriously, both as child development specialists and as economic contributors.

“These are terms that resonate with the business community; supply and demand and what’s the gap between supply and demand? And that’s what they hear. That’s the frame that business people look at things through. We have to use that frame in order to even catch their ear. And I really love putting childcare in that frame of a social infrastructure.”

Vermont

“This report really did give the childcare community a little bit more empowerment, it also gave them the confidence to approach that business person with a childcare message. At this point they [the child care community] know that they’re an important part of their community, and they know that they bring value to it, so I think it did give them a boost of confidence that ‘Hey, I can approach you because I’m important and my message is important..I think you’ll want to know about this because of the results.’”

Florida

Talking about Gender

To begin my research, I asked members of the child care community whether, in creating their studies, they were challenged by the fact that women are most frequently the parent in charge of child care responsibilities. I found that the child care community was often reluctant to discuss gender concerns. This point of view is understandable. Frustrated with the relegation of their work to a “special interests” category,

the economic impact studies stand out as a rare opportunity for the child care community to speak more broadly about its impact. As I discussed gender issues with this group, three predominant perspectives emerged:

“Gender issues don’t belong in an economic analysis!” Many people felt that in talking about the “economics” of child care, they were dealing with a side of their industry that reached beyond gender concerns. Their reluctance to link their economic analysis with gender issues is perhaps an indication of how often they must address gender in other aspects of their work.

“Child care shouldn’t be just a women’s issue!” At least a third of the interviewees responded to my question by stating that child care shouldn’t be labeled as a “women’s issue”, implying that talking about gender would create such a link. Many felt that discussions about gender inequality would lead to further marginalization of the child care industry, as well as increased inequality between the sexes. They argued that child care should be a community-wide concern.

“We have to talk about gender!” A few of the interviewees felt that mentioning gender issues in the context of the economic impact studies was important. These interviewees were noticeably more willing to speak on gender, and equity issues. However, as a member of this group explained, looking at child care in a gender equality and social justice context can be “subversive”. A common thread running through this small group of interviewees was their access to mainstream power, which probably made it safer and easier for them to engage in such “subversive” discourse. One interviewee had access to an influential individual from the Commission on the Economic Status of Women, as a part of the study team’s advisory board. Two of the respondents in this group held PhD degrees, and of these, one was an Associate Professor. She was also funded by Status of Women Canada, a governmental organization promoting gender equality through public policy. Access to mainstream power made their discussion of gender issues less risky for them and for the outcome of the economic impact study.

Power Relations

As I tried to understand how the child care community experiences gender issues in their work, the theme of power emerged again and again. While they were reluctant to speak about gender issues, the child care community was very open about the realities of power relations. **Interviewees spoke about the power that the child care community lacks, the power that the business community has, and the reality that this is**

often power held by men. A few respondents said that their target audience in creating the economic impact studies was male, as men are the ones with power. One particular image which emerged from the interviewees' language was the concept of a 'glass ceiling', through which they saw the child care industry held back while other business sectors moved ahead.

The child care community's lack of power not only decreases their access to community resources, but can also impact their self-esteem as an industry. Throughout our interviews, interviewees used negative language to refer to their former child development frame, which they saw as having been ineffective in reaching the business community:

- "‘Bleeding-heart’ kind of thing"
- "Feel-good"
- *Imitating the business community's typical response:* "Just another social service welfare program" and "Don't give me all the rhetoric."

At the same time, they praised the values intrinsic to their new business/economic development frame:

- "Everyone's for economic development"
- "Fact-based"
- *Imitating their business audience:* "Tell me the hard facts."

The child care community's effort to alter their language and values in order to gain legitimacy and power speaks to their awareness of the 'glass ceiling' which holds back their industry.

Gender in the Economic Impact Studies

Following our conversations with those in the industry, I looked at the language, data, and images used in the economic impact studies to see how they addressed gender in the publications. What I saw was in contrast to the intentions voiced by most of the child care community, who had advocated for a gender neutral presentation. **These studies clearly broadened the scope of the discussion about child care. However, in an effort to avoid any discussion of gender issues, they unintentionally replicated gender-biased conceptions about their work.**

Language and Data

To assess whether the studies were gender neutral, I counted the number of times words describing men (man, male, father, dad) and women (woman, female, mother, mom) were used in each study. A few studies, such as the Kansas and San Mateo County, CA studies, made no references to either men or women. These studies referred solely to "parents", thereby achieving gender neutrality. Most studies, however, referenced women many times, but referenced men few or no times. Analysis that referenced only women covered such topics as:

- Female labor force participation rates

- The role of child care subsidies, tax incentives, or child care availability in women's labor force participation
- Characteristics of those mothers most sensitive to changes in child care costs
- Demographic trends for working mothers
- Percentage of children with working mothers in different types of care

If the studies mention "women" more often than they mention "men", they reflect the burden women face in providing caring labor. Rather than striving for gender neutrality, I would argue that the economic impact studies should acknowledge the differential child care burden placed on women, while framing this as a broader community issue.

Most studies did break down data by gender in a few specific contexts, such as when they discussed the role of child care for single male and single female parents. When labor force participation rates were discussed more generally, they were either gender-neutral (referred to as "parents"), or, most commonly, *only* discussed in terms of female participation. Jefferson County, KY, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Connecticut were among the few studies that discussed both male and female labor force participation. This was a particularly challenging issue for most teams, as it is standard for labor economists to measure the labor productivity effects of child care for just one parent. However, business members of the teams recognized that child care supports both parents who work (Warner 2006).

Images

One aspect of presentation that did align with the child care community's intentions of gender neutrality were the images used, perhaps because this aspect was so visible and overt. The studies that used images often mixed photos of children with images related to business, such as city downtowns, construction sites, computers, and money. Those studies with photos of adults presented a balanced mix of both men and women in a variety of roles, such as business person/worker, child care provider, and parent. Vermont developed buttons showing men and women dropping off their child at care on their way to work, to show how child care keeps Vermont working.

Spokesperson

At least a third of the studies had male spokes-persons featured at the roll-out of their publication, and half of those said they *deliberately* choose male, rather than female, spokespersons to represent the group. The male spokespersons were almost always representatives of the business community. The remaining two-thirds of the studies either did not specify

the gender of their spokesperson in our interview, or had female spokespersons from the business or child care communities. Those key informants that deliberately chose male spokes-persons said that they did so in order to make it easier for their target audience (business and economic development) to identify with the speaker, and to have a speaker who projects power, influence, and credibility.

"...whenever I go make presentations, I have a male board leader or business leader with me. I think that you have to know your audience, and if you're addressing a civic club, for instance, where there are no female members..."

Rowan County, NC

"We wanted a male keynote speaker for the rollout. We wanted the Chamber and the Federal Reserve Bank to sponsor it, because those are two male-dominated organizations. So... yeah, that is a definite concern and strategy. How do we get men to care about this in a big, furious way?"

Seattle, WA

"...We chose men...in the news releases...because unfortunately in a lot of circles we're still a good ole' boy system and so we used the people that we know are in power."

Florida

"...there are a lot more men who are coming to [the events we're holding], because that's the type of people we're inviting. Mostly men are in those leadership positions."

North Carolina

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the child care community redefines the way we see their work, it's worth looking at the lessons learned from other frame change processes. Scholars have argued that **frame change is both highly effective and dangerous, in that it can seduce a target audience without adequately challenging the harmful norms and stereotypes that are at the root of the perceived problem** (Prentice 2007). Therefore, the child care community should engage in the frame change process deliberately. A heightened awareness of their communication practices can help avoid inconsistencies between their expressed goals for child care, and the traditional gender norms and stereotypes reinforced by some of the economic impact studies. It can also help shape the message to be delivered; many of our interviewees said that as they embarked on this new and radical process, they hadn't adequately developed or articulated specific "asks" to bring to the

table.

This research was motivated by the question of whether gender is relevant in child care economic impact studies. I found through my analysis that it is – gender inequalities in resources and power prompted the frame change process; existing norms and stereotypes shaped data and language in the economic impact studies; and the child care community was sensitive to gender impact in marketing the studies. Even so, the topic of gender was a difficult one for the child care community to discuss. This is perhaps because the larger question, that of our caretaking responsibilities, falls under the difficult topic of gender differences. With all our advances towards women's rights, many structural constraints – differences – still exist, particularly in the realms of reproductive and caring labor. This issue is especially relevant to child care, as societally-created constraints (such as a lack of affordable child care, or insufficient parental leave time) can impact equality of opportunity.

While this is a difficult discussion, it is one the child care community has begun to have in states and cities across North America through the economic impact studies. These studies pave the way for a new definition of caring labor in our economy. This definition provides the childcare industry with new, powerful arguments and tools to reach its goals. As economic impact reports receive renewed interest as part of the economic stimulus, careful attention should be given to considering gender differences in the analysis.

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