CHILD CARE CENTERS AS WORKPLACES

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with a subject of central interest for feminist economics: the working conditions of employees in a caregiving occupation that is low paid, female dominated and in an industry crucial for parents in the labor market. The qualitative research employed here is also of interest to feminist economics, which seeks to use a broader range of methodologies than is typically found in economics journals.

The paper examines the labor market and work environment for caregivers who provide care for young children in child care centers. It is based on twenty intensive interviews with child care aides, teachers and directors in four different types of large child care centers in Santa Clara County, California. Topics discussed are pay and benefits, adequacy of staffing (including matters of recruitment and retention), the directors' managerial roles, the effects on the workplace of center ownership and governance, opportunities for professional development and relations with children and parents.

The paper provides a model of the kinds of insights that can be had from paying attention to the words of economic actors. For example, the findings about the importance for job satisfaction of substitute teachers, managerial styles of directors, early childhood education classes and relations with parents have not been studied or reported in other research on child care workers. The detailed descriptions of the characteristics of workers sought by child care center directors have also not been previously reported. The reproduction of the exact words of the respondents enables readers to develop an appreciation of the difficulty and stressfulness of child care workers' jobs; this type of understanding does not emerge from quantitative work.

Based on the findings, the paper calls for the funding of demonstration projects to assess the cost effectiveness of several specific policies.

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KEYWORDS

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The child care occupation as well as the child care industry are of central interest to feminist economics. The occupation of child care worker is significant to feminist economics because it is so heavily female dominated, and low paid. From an industry perspective, feminist economics is concerned about the production of services that are vital to children and which enable parents to participate in the paid workforce.[2] Feminist economics also views the production of child care services as having significant external benefits, so that the performance of the child care industry has effects far beyond the current children and parents being served.[3]

Yet, while many economists have devoted their careers to becoming specialists in specific industries, few economists have examined the child care occupation or industry. Paying attention to the needs of children, women and families requires that we consider the child care industry not of minor importance but worthy of really central emphasis by economists. Its relative neglect up to now represents yet another manifestation of the devaluation of the importance of women's labor force participation and the needs of children as well as an insensibility to the importance of caregiving in our economy. See Nancy Folbre (1995).

The few economic studies on child care that have been carried out have been largely quantitative.[4] They have concentrated on estimating the price elasticities of supply and demand, the income elasticity of demand, the cost of child care and the relationship between price and quality of care.[5]

The purpose of this paper is to take a different kind of look at the economics of the child care center industry and occupations by focusing on child care centers as workplaces. Using a qualitative methodology, the paper represents the beginning of a serious study of the performance of the child care center sector of the child care industry.

Instead of collecting quantitative data and estimating regression coefficients to test hypotheses, we carried out an exploratory study to generate hypotheses by interviewing child care workers and allowing them to tell the story of the economics of their industry and occupation. Using this qualitative methodology, we learned a great deal about the industry and occupation that had been missed by earlier quantitative economics research (and also missed by qualitative researchers from other disciplines who did not ask the kinds of questions we did). Moreover, our reproduction of the exact words of the respondents enables readers to develop an appreciation of the difficulty and stressfulness of child care workers' jobs. This type of emotional understanding, which is complementary to cognitive understanding, simply does not emerge from quantitative work.

The paper does not seek to address the issue of whether or why market

failure exists in this industry;[6] rather, it takes some degree of market failure as given. Its purpose is to explore some of the consequences of market failure for the work environment from the point of view of adults who spend their working hours in that environment. Its qualitative methodology supports the exploratory nature of the research.

Also, the paper does not address the important macro-theoretical issues that clearly influence the structure, remuneration and market position of child care centers. (See Folbre, in this issue, for discussions of some of these macro-theoretical matters.) Rather, we seek to provide a model of the kinds of insights that can be had from paying attention to the words of economic actors.

Myra Strober (1987) has argued that economists need more frequently to "hobnob with their data," to *talk* to the people about whom they write. As a result of such hobnobbing, we have learned that some factors never studied or reported by other child care researchers seem to be very much related to the job satisfaction of child care center workers. Our interviews also uncovered detailed descriptions of the characteristics of workers sought by child care center directors; such information has not been previously reported.

In her article in this issue, Sandra Harding notes that feminist economists think about economic relations from the perspective of women's activities rather than from the conceptual schemes of economics. Such thinking underlies this paper. Rather than starting out with the conceptual scheme of supply elasticity, we have "given voice" to women's own understandings of the economics of their occupation and industry. We have constructed knowledge from people's lives.

The next section provides a brief sketch of the child care industry. Following that we discuss research design and methodology. Section three contains our findings and section four suggests matters for further research based on these findings as well as some policy implications of our work. In the conclusion, we return to some of the themes of the introduction.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE CHILD CARE INDUSTRY

Between 1970 and 1980, over 400,000 new jobs were created in child care – the fourth largest gain of all female-dominated occupations (U.S. Census Bureau 1986). Although precise figures are not available, it has been estimated that in the years just prior to our interviews the number of child care workers ranged between 727,000 (Martin O'Connell and David Bloom 1987) and 1,393,000 (Deborah Phillips and Marcy Whitebook 1986). More jobs are expected to be created in this occupation as the demand for child care continues to exceed the supply (Cheryl Hayes *et al.* 1990).

In addition to filling new jobs, child care workers are needed to replace the high proportion of workers who leave the field each year. For 1983–4, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1986) estimated the turnover rate for child care workers (excluding private households) at 35.9 percent. A 1988 study of child care workers in 227 centers in five cities (Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, Phoenix and Seattle) found the turnover rate to be between 37 and 41 percent (Phillips *et al.* 1991),[7] while a 1988 survey of teachers of preschool children in Santa Clara County, California, found the turnover rate to be 43 percent for teachers and 68 percent for aides (Santa Clara County Office of Education 1989).

Part of the explanation for the rather astonishing turnover rates among child care workers is their exceedingly low earnings, especially relative to their rather high average level of education and their job dissatisfaction (Whitebook *et al.* 1989). The occupation of child care worker is the lowest paid among the female occupations (Debra Viadero 1987). In Santa Clara County, California, where our interviews took place, a high-wage, high-cost-of-living area, the average starting salary for teachers of preschool children was $5.97 per hour in 1988; for aides, the average starting salary was less than $5.00 per hour (Santa Clara County Office of Education 1989).

Increasing demand for care combined with low wages and high staff turnover have led observers to talk about a staffing crisis in child care and early childhood education (Robert Granger 1989). The concern is about both availability of care and about its quality. High turnover rates are particularly detrimental to quality because continuity of care is of major importance in the psychological adjustment of young children (Edward Zigler and Sharon Kagan 1982) and because frequent change in caregivers may cause harm (Alison Clarke-Stewart 1977; Hayes *et al.* 1990). Also, high turnover increases the level of stress in the work environment, and negatively affects the job performance and quality of care provided by remaining staff (Whitebook *et al.* 1982; Martha Mattingly 1986; Whitebook *et al.* 1989; Suzanne Gerlach-Downie 1990).

Although the evidence on the relationship between the cost of child care and its quality is mixed (Bruce Fuller *et al.* 1993; Sandra Hofferth and Douglas Wissoker 1992; Mary Culkin *et al.* 1991; Ellen Kisker and Rebecca Maynard 1991; Hayes *et al.* 1990), there is wide agreement that the most important ingredient of quality care is caregivers who interact with children frequently and responsively (Hayes *et al.* 1990). An understanding of the child care industry, and particularly the working conditions of child care center workers, may serve not only to improve the quality of the work environment, but also the quality of care that child care workers provide to young children. In section four we return to the policy implications of our work and emphasize, in particular, that even if wages of child care center workers cannot (or will not) be raised, there are

several important steps, some of which are extremely cost effective, that can improve the job satisfaction of child care center employees.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Each of the four centers at which we interviewed had a different source of funding and we hypothesized, correctly, that we would thus obtain variation in race, ethnicity, and social class of both clientele and staff. Center 1 (referred to here as Statefare) was a non-profit center, subsidized by the state, serving 166 children whose parents were eligible for AFDC or who participated in state or federal job training programs; Center 2 (Communitycare) was a non-profit center, serving 115 children, subsidized by a local social service agency; Center 3 (Privateplace) was a private, for-profit, center, serving 163 children and funded fully by parent fees; and Center 4 (Childchain) was a private, for-profit center, with 186 children, that is part of a nationally franchised chain of centers.

The particular centers at which we interviewed were selected after we determined the four types of centers that we wished to study. We obtained the names of three of the centers from suggestions of friends and associates familiar with child care in the county.[8] From the phone book, we obtained the name of the center that was part of the child care chain. In each case, when we called the center and explained the purpose of the study, the director agreed to cooperate, several enthusiastically.

We asked directors to select two teachers and two aides that we could interview. The directors chose subjects who were going to be on a break at the time of the interviewing, or whose children were resting during nap time, or who for some other reason were able to leave the classroom without violating the mandated adult–child ratios for a licensed center. It is, of course, possible that the director used other criteria to guide her selection, but the workers interviewed at each center were quite heterogeneous and honest in their comments; we never had the impression that they were telling us what the director wanted us to hear.

Interviews with workers in the four centers were held in February and March of 1988. At Statefare, we interviewed two aides, two teachers and the director; at Communitycare, one aide (the only male in the sample), three teachers and the director; at Privateplace, two aides, two teachers and the director; and at Childchain, one aide, three teachers and the director. One aide and one teacher worked part-time, the rest were full-time.

After separate permission for the interviews was granted by each subject, we questioned her or him using an informal open-ended interview format. All respondents were guaranteed complete anonymity.

With permission, most interviews were tape recorded. The interviews took between thirty and sixty minutes to complete. All but one were conducted at the center in an empty room or at an outside play area. One interview was conducted in a teacher's home.

Respondents' answers to three types of questions are reported in this paper:[9]

1 *background questions* about themselves and their family – their age, previous job experience, professional affiliations, race, marital status, spouse's occupation and salary, and the number and age of their children (if any);
2 questions about their *education and training*, and particularly about the type of early childhood education (ECE) courses taken;
3 questions regarding their current *working conditions and degree of job satisfaction*, including their job description, salary and benefits, the number of hours of employment, the distance from home to work, the adult–child ratio, the age and number of children served, the opportunity for breaks and sick leave, their sense of budgetary constraints, frequency of staff meetings, staff relations, relations with parents, relations with children, their perceived input into decision-making, their perceived sense that their job is appreciated, and their perceived match between personal and center's child care philosophy.

To analyze the data gathered from the twenty interviews, we constructed meta-matrices to summarize all relevant material. As described by Matthew Miles and A. Michael Huberman (1984), meta-matrices are useful in assembling descriptive data into a standard format since they permit information to be partitioned as well as clustered. The names of the workers appear across the top, and the topics of interest about the workers are shown below the names. Using this technique allows contrasts and comparisons on variables to become clearer. The matrix included the thirty-two topics of interest detailed above. Thus, we had a 20 × 32 matrix that could be rearranged in any order, allowing us to compare data on each topic for all workers as well as to do within-site and across-site analyses. Not all of the data collected were analyzed in this paper. The methodology was designed to be exploratory, to generate hypotheses rather than to test them.

FINDINGS

Table 1 provides information on respondents' age, length of employment, race, marital status, number and age of children, spouse's income (if applicable), education, and courses in early childhood education (ECE). Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 50; the mean age of

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents

	Age	Salary	Race	Marital status	Length employed at center[a]	Units when hired	Additional units earned
Statefare							
Teacher 1	25	[b]	Black	Married	10 years	0	15
Teacher 2	40	[b]	Black	Divorced	6 years	0	15
Aide 1	25	$4.25	Hispanic	Single	7 months	0	0
Aide 2	22	$4.15	Hispanic	Single	3 years	0	0
Director 1	35	$1500/m	Hispanic	Divorced	9 years	0	27
Communitycare							
Teacher 3	33	$10	Anglo	Married	6 years	B.A.	0
Teacher 4	33	$8.89	Hispanic	Married	2 years	A.A.	B.A.
Teacher 5	33	$6	Anglo	Married	7 years	0	12
Aide 3	21	$5.50	Black	Single	3 years	0	6
Director 2	35	$2560/m	Anglo	Married	6 years	M.A.	0
Privateplace							
Teacher 6	22	$6.10	Anglo	Single	8 months	9	3
Teacher 7	37	$5.50	Asian	Married	17 months	B.A.	0
Aide 4	19	$5.50	Anglo	Married	11 months	0	6
Aide 5	18	$5.75	Anglo	Single	9 months	0	0
Director 3	[b]	[b]	Anglo	Single	6 months	A.A.	0
Childchain							
Teacher 8	22	$6.25	Hispanic	Divorced	8 months	8	6
Teacher 9	30	$6.75	Anglo	Married	9 months	27	0
Teacher 10	21	$6.25	Anglo	Single	10 months	12	0
Aide 6	30	$5	Anglo	Married	1 month	0	0
Director 4	26	$1400/m	Hispanic	Married	9 months	27	0

(a) Total amount of time at this center, but not necessarily at present position. Also, person may have had prior child care experience at other centers.
(b) Would not disclose.

teachers was 30.6, the mean age of aides was 22. Teachers had been in their jobs an average of 3.5 years (for several, part of that time was spent as aides) and aides had on average slightly less than a year and a half on their jobs.

PAY AND BENEFITS

As indicated in Table 1, earnings ranged from $4.15 per hour at Statefare for a 22-year-old aide who had been on the job for three years and still had no ECE units, to $10 an hour at Communitycare for a 33-year-old teacher with a B.A. who had been on the job for six years. The highest paid director ($2560 per month) was aged 35 with an M.A. in child development employed at Communitycare. At Childchain the director earned $1400 per month. She was 26, had 27 ECE units and had been on the job

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for nine months. At Statefare the director, who was 35, had 27 ECE units and nine years of experience on the job, although only a few months of those years had been as director. She earned $1500 per month. We were unable to ascertain the salary of the director at Privateplace.

As illustrated by these figures, not only are pay scales low, but the earnings hierarchy is exceedingly flat, with very small rewards for training and experience. National data show the same pattern (Whitebook *et al.* 1989). David Blau (1992) using data from the Current Population Survey, found that although the wage rate was significantly related to education for assistant teachers and aides, it was not significantly related for teachers. All of the interviewees mentioned low pay and poor prospects for pay increases as negative aspects of their job. They used a variety of strategies to survive. Some had husbands who earned a reasonable income, some kept their expenses very low, and still others sought additional work.

At Statefare, the center with the lowest-paid employees, many workers did not own a car and walked, took the bus, or shared a ride to work. Others saved money by living with relatives who charged them very low rent. The director at Statefare, a single mother of three children, explained some of the consequences of her low pay:

> We make it from paycheck to paycheck. My kids do without. They've gone without a lot. They're always going without. . . . I try to get them what they need but there is [*sic*] some things I just can't give that's really important to them but not to me. Like my son is in track and needs track shoes and I don't have fifty dollars for track shoes, so that's really important for him.

An aide at Statefare, who was happy with her job, but in need of additional income (she earned $4.25 an hour) was planning to take an additional part-time job.

To some extent the low pay was eased by the availability of fringe benefits. Workers who had young children generally were able to enroll their children at the center at reduced tuition levels. One teacher, age 33, who worked at Privateplace, earning $5.75 an hour with a B.A. degree in Elementary Education, said that one of the main reasons she stays on at the center is that she receives a 50 percent reduction of tuition and no registration fee for her child who attends there.

Although we did not include it in the sample for that reason, Communitycare in many ways turned out to be a "model" center that had already put into place many of the policies associated with employee job satisfaction. Communitycare had also initiated a request for designation as a high quality center by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

The best benefit package was at Communityplace, and the workers there were well aware of how much better their benefits were as compared to their counterparts at other centers. The benefits included a retirement program financed entirely by employer contributions equal to 8 percent of earnings; the contributions were vested after five years. The center also paid the full premium for Kaiser health insurance. Under their benefit plan workers also had a small in-house dental plan that paid $125 per year toward dental check-ups, etc. Workers were also able to obtain life insurance through a center plan.[10]

The lack of availability of health insurance and dental insurance at other centers was particularly important for some workers. One teacher at Privateplace told us that although medical insurance was not a concern for her because her husband had access to coverage through his job, it was a major concern for others.

Other benefits that were important to workers were paid vacations, paid sick days, and the opportunity to obtain ECE units at reduced cost. Workers who had these benefits were generally more satisfied with their jobs than workers who didn't.

ADEQUACY OF STAFFING

Respondents were almost as concerned with inadequate staffing at their centers as they were with low pay and absence of benefits. They found that inadequate staffing contributed to stress and difficulty in providing what they regarded as adequate care for their students. There are four aspects of staffing that we will discuss in this section: the staffing context at a large child care center, the difficulty of hiring staff, the issue of hiring substitutes, and the absence of paid time for preparation.

The staffing context

In the four centers we visited, directors, teachers and aides were in a perpetual game of musical chairs as they tried to cover classes and meet the adult/child ratios mandated by the state. Almost every day some adjustments in classroom staffing had to be made. Some of the staff members – usually the lead teachers – knew that when they came to work in the morning they would go to a particular classroom with a certain group of children, but many other staff members would not be assigned a classroom until they arrived for work. Or they would be asked to "float" between classrooms. If one classroom had several children absent due to illness, fewer adults were needed in that room to maintain the required adult-to-child ratio. A teaching assistant from that room might be asked to move to another where the number of children was "up."

Staffing patterns changed not only from day to day, but also from hour

to hour. Unlike most public schools, most centers do not have a uniform time of day for children to arrive and depart. Rather, depending on their schedules, parents can bring children in and take them out throughout the day. Moreover, while some children may attend the center five days a week, others come in every other day; while some children are at the center for eight hours a day, other children attend for only a few hours at a time. Further complicating the situation, the children did not all begin child care at the same time of year.

Between assuring that state-mandated ratios were maintained (ratios are different for different age children), accommodating to high levels of absenteeism among staff and adjusting to continuous transitions, staff members did a tremendous amount of moving back and forth. The director of Childchain said that she has had a complete staff for only one day during her four months' tenure as director. Her need to juggle personnel was evident:

> I had one person out today in my toddler room, and then I still haven't filled that two-year-old opening or my other infant opening. So I'm essentially three people down today. And it's just doing a little bit of juggling here and there. If I hadn't hired somebody earlier this week, I'd be four people down. Then I'd be crazy. I'd call the other centers. I'd go in the classroom. I'd let the phone ring off the hook.

A similar situation prevailed at Statefare. The director there illustrated the extent to which center personnel move from task to task:

> If the ratio is down in one area, we'll move a person from one area to another, depending on the ratios. Or during a naptime we'll ask a person to take a long break.... In fact, I cooked breakfast for the children yesterday because the cook was out.

Difficulty recruiting workers

The difficulty that all of the directors experienced in recruiting staff was a key contributor to inadequate staffing at the centers. At the time of our interviews, all of the directors reported problems in recruiting staff. Although Communitycare had the most stable staff of the four centers, they were experiencing difficulty replacing the assistant director who had recently left. Privateplace was in an awkward position because they had recently lost a half-dozen employees who left with the former director. Statefare and Childchain reported chronic shortages.

Even when directors did receive a number of responses to their advertisements, they found it difficult to select a potentially good teacher from the applicant pool. Rarely could they find someone with all of the

characteristics they sought: energy, enthusiasm, patience, understanding, stability, experience with young children, common sense, knowledge of child development and a sense of professionalism about child care.

The relatively new director at Childchain indicated to us that she thought her predecessors had compromised quality in some of their hiring decisions and feared she might have to do the same:

> Sometimes ... I wonder why – some of their personalities – you just wonder why the other person ever let them in the door [laughter].... And you've really got no reason to let them go, but golly [laughter].... I think they were always like that, and that someone [a director] was just desperate. So I don't want to ever get that desperate. But sometimes I think you do. You just settle for less when you have no alternative.

Part of the reason for the difficulty in recruiting is that working with very young children is exceedingly demanding. The director at Childchain talked of particular problems finding staff for the two-year-olds:

> I think the two-year-old room has got to be the most difficult.... Not only are they so busy and never stop, but there's a lot of them and they aren't [toilet] trained.... And you're not going to find a young girl who'll come in and change diapers and last more than three days.... I mean, you almost need to find a mom. Someone who's accustomed to it. And even then, it's difficult.

Substitutes

Another aspect of inadequate staffing is centers' difficulty in hiring substitutes to fill in when a teacher or aide is ill. Illness among both children and adults at centers is common; yet because there are no substitutes, teachers and aides told us they feel guilty about staying at home when they are ill. Several respondents told us their job satisfaction would be increased if centers employed substitutes.

One teacher at Communityplace indicated that the availability of substitute teachers is central to child care workers' job satisfaction:

> I [need to] know [that] if I'm sick that they are going to get by. You know, [that] I don't have to drag myself in when I feel real sick because no one is going to be there.

A teacher at Communitycare, who had already given notice of quitting, said:

> The largest complaint that people have is not having enough subs so when a teacher gets sick they [*sic*] feel guilty for staying home....

Part of the problem in attracting substitutes is that the job is harder than the usual teacher's job. But the rate of pay is not commensurately higher. The director of Privateplace said:

> The change for the children is harder, so the substitute has to have a real secure, OK feeling when going into the classroom. If she's nervous, the kids will pick up on it and have a free-for-all.

The net result of the difficulty of hiring staff and the lack of substitutes is a chronic short-handedness at the centers. This chronic short-handedness translates into stress for teachers who find they have too many children to care for. The comments of a teacher at Childchain are instructive:

> I can handle fourteen by myself, because a lot of my children leave at four o'clock. But if I get over fourteen . . . I say . . . "get somebody in here, because I can't handle it." I go berserk, because it's really hard . . . I don't think it's fair to me and to all the other teachers in the center. . . . If we need somebody, we should be able to have them [*sic*]. Because if the State came in, I mean we're dust.

Inadequate staffing also affects the teachers because they see the ill effects on the children and on the children's relationship with the overburdened adults. One teacher explained:

> . . . it's getting to me, you know. A couple of times, it's like, oh, I don't want to go to work. . . . It's not fun when you have to watch twenty kids. And it's hard to take care of them. Because they know that you're the only one. And my kids have been affected by it. I can see a change in their behavior towards me.

Preparation time

Inadequate staffing also meant that teachers did not have paid time for preparation. Not only were their hourly earnings low, but they put in several hours per week during which they were not paid at all because there was little time during the day when preparation could be accomplished. Teachers resented the lack of preparation time.[11]

One teacher at Childchain complained:

> We really have to have our boards nice looking. . . . Everything has to be labeled that you put on your boards, plus the name tags of the children that have to go up next to the art work or whatever it is you're putting up. So I take these home, I do them on my lunch hour, or I come in early and I do it then. Or I stay a little bit later and I do it then because, I mean, I don't have enough time during the nine hours that I'm here to get whatever I have to get done.

The absence of preparation time was particularly irksome to some teachers because they felt it symbolized the lack of professional regard by

their employers. Instead of being treated like teachers, who require preparation time, they were being treated like babysitters, who don't. One teacher at Communitycare felt that staff who were not paid for preparation time were being exploited:

> I think all child care workers need some prep time, which in child care you rarely get . . . the field is supported by a lot of people's backbone. You know, what they do on their own time.

MANAGERIAL SKILLS AND STYLE OF THE DIRECTOR

Much as a principal sets the tone and direction of a school, so a director has a major influence on quality of the workplace environment at a child care center. The satisfied workers we interviewed had a good working relationship with the director, and were appreciative of the supportive and professional environment she created or fostered, while those who were unhappy with their work often listed the director and her policies and management style as a cause of their dissatisfaction. Sometimes, of course, the director merely served as a symbol of the center and the factors that actually produced workers' dissatisfactions were not under her control. However, we were impressed with the scope that directors had for initiating and implementing policies and with the number of work satisfaction variables that were, in fact, a function of the director's style and skill.

Directors' responsibilities and skills

As chief operating officers, directors made key choices in translating the abstract philosophy of the center into a working environment with daily routines. They had a strong influence on everything from budgetary allocations and staffing to teaching methods and materials, styles of staff and parent communication and children's napping procedures. The job description for the director at Communityplace discussed nine areas of responsibility: the education program, fiscal matters and office procedures, parent relations, board relations, personnel, admissions, community relations, maintenance and food service.

At Communitycare and Privateplace, directors had more scope for decision-making than they did at Statefare and Childchain. However, even in these latter two centers, directors exercised important choices in terms of staffing and budget allocations and in terms of which tasks they would take on personally and which they would delegate.

None of the directors had received any formal training in management. They spoke of "falling" into their jobs or moving through the ranks over a period of years. All felt the lack of management training.

For example, the following are the comments of the director of Stateface, who had been an aide and then a teacher. She experienced difficulty in the managerial role and worried about the effectiveness of her leadership style:

> I'm very withdrawn about speaking with people. I can be assertive when I want to, but my problem is that I'm not used to telling people what to do, and they have to listen to me. That's my hardest thing about working.

Two other directors said they would like to learn to be confident in their leadership abilities. Additionally, they felt they needed classes in business administration and financial management along with the child development classes in order to become better directors.

Both Privateplace and Childchain had experienced a change in directors just a few months before our interviews. In the comparisons between the old and new directors that many of the workers made, we could see the importance of the director's management skills for workers' job satisfaction.

Directors' policies that enhance job satisfaction

One of the most important tasks of a director is to foster a sense of camaraderie and support among staff members. This was done most effectively at Communityplace by holding regular weekly staff meetings, with one meeting each month devoted to presentations by outsiders on topics of particular interest to the staff.

The topics for the regular staff meetings at Communityplace were varied. They included discussing individual children who were proving difficult for staff members, brainstorming ideas for funding proposals and exchanging views about what is "appropriate celebration" of various religious holidays in a culturally diverse community. Our respondents felt both supported and stimulated by these staff meetings. The presentations by outside experts received high marks from several staff members.

The importance of staff meetings as a means of increasing job satisfaction emerged from one of our interviews at Privateplace. There, the former director had not held staff meetings, but the new director had just initiated them. The response to the one meeting that had been held prior to our interviews was favorable, in part because staff members were paid to attend. One teacher commented:

> With the previous director we never had staff meetings because the teachers were never paid. But when —— [the new director] came we were paid overtime. So we had our first staff meeting.... We enjoyed it.

When the new director came into Privateplace, in addition to scheduling

staff meetings, she immediately made several other changes that enhanced the job satisfaction of the staff, she reviewed several staff members that were due for review and increased the hourly rate of one aide who had just begun to take ECE courses. She also hired an aide to dispense children's medications and give teachers short breaks, worked with a local credit union so that workers at the center became eligible to join and began to investigate the possibilities of providing medical and dental coverage.

Other policies of directors also had important implications for staff members' job satisfaction. One such policy concerned the ability to leave the center premises during the day. One of the teachers at Privateplace told us that at centers where she had worked previously staff members were not permitted to leave the center premises during the work day. At Privateplace, however, staff members could leave for one hour at lunch. This teacher felt that the policy of allowing time away in the middle of the day helped greatly to reduce stress and also permitted her to eat with other staff members who shared work ideas, and the joys and frustrations of the job.

A second important director's policy that made a difference for staff members was the availability of adequate materials for children's activities. The director of Childchain, talking about her own experiences as a teacher at a different center, said:

> I mean I can't tell you how often I had to, you know, get my own paint, make my own clay, do that kind of thing. And it was coming out of my pocket, and they didn't have petty cash.

Finally, one very important policy for child care staff was the director's willingness to be flexible in allowing teachers and aides to exchange tasks when the stress got unbearable. Highlighting once again the stress involved in the care of young children, a teacher at Childchain said:

> Here, there's the ability to call in another teacher and say, "Hey, I can't handle this situation. Can we trade for a few minutes? Come in here. See what you can do with these students, and then we'll trade back."

EFFECTS OF CENTER OWNERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

As noted earlier, we chose the four centers in our sample so that they would vary with respect to ownership and governance. These matters very much affected the director's managerial scope and style. And, in turn, the degree of autonomy faced by the director affected the center's staff.

The director at Privateplace had the greatest scope for decision-making. Policy at Privateplace was set jointly by the director and the owner of the center. There was no governing board. At the other end of

the spectrum was Childchain, where the director's autonomy was severely limited by the hierarchical structure of the national and local chain management.

The directors at Communityplace and Statefare were not as autonomous as the director at Privateplace, but had much more latitude for decision-making than the director at Childchain. Communityplace was governed by a board of directors, and staff members were appointed to both the personnel committee and the long-range planning committee of the board. Both the board and the center director also had a good deal of interaction with one of the local social service agencies. At Statefare, the director's latitude was limited by numerous state rules and regulations associated with the center's eligibility for state subsidization.

Because of space constraints, we cannot fully discuss here all of the ways in which the various forms of ownership and governance affected the director and, ultimately, the staff. However, using our interviews from Childchain, we briefly make two points: (1) in several cases tight supervision from national management interfered with the job satisfaction of center personnel; and (2) even though the director was ostensibly on a short leash, by disregarding certain directives from above, she could increase the autonomy and job satisfaction of her staff members.

The chain's style of management provided for centralized directives and guidelines in all areas: fiscal, personnel, curriculum, etc. To monitor these directives and guidelines, centers received frequent, unannounced, visits from officials of the chain who inspected classrooms and analyzed the center's operating procedures. Moreover, the office of the district supervisor for the chain was at the Childchain site.

Several of the teachers and aides disliked the close supervision by the district and national chain managers. One teacher was perturbed by the interruption to classroom activities that frequent, unannounced visits caused. Nor did she like feeling under constant scrutiny. She thought that often the officials' complaints were unjustified. Most of all she disliked the pressure to conform to a centralized curriculum:

> I know my kids. I know what their abilities are. And I know they're not going to sit there and paint by numbers or whatever it is they're telling me to do.... My kids are different from anyone up there in Alabama.

In this teacher's experience, the director determined the extent to which a center followed the recommendations put out by the national headquarters:

> She [the director] is the one that sticks to it, or bends it a little. See, our old director just sort of let us do as we thought was right.

As a result of the former director's willingness to ignore the directives, this teacher ignored them as well. Asked whether the national curriculum

directives made her feel that some of her professional autonomy had been taken away, she answered:

> Not really ... because I really don't listen to them [laughter].

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Opportunities for professional development were important to the job satisfaction of a number of our respondents. California law requires teachers at centers to have earned twelve units in early childhood education (ECE) or to be in the process of completing the units. Aides are not required to have any units, but they often take them in order to become teachers.

In general, our respondents indicated that taking ECE courses increased their job satisfaction because it taught them how to do their job; in particular, how to handle difficult situations with groups of children. Only one worker, a male who was currently a college student, thought the child development courses were not helpful.

An aide at Statefare said that when she was initially hired she thought the job would revolve around things like diaper changing and potty training. But, after the training she took she realized that she could help the toddlers to learn:

> The classes I took helped me. They taught me how to talk to them [the children]. I wish I could take more classes.

A teacher at Childchain said:

> I think the turnover is higher in teachers that have not been in the field and have not gotten all their units, simply because they have not gotten the management skills that they really need to deal with the children.

A teacher at Communitycare, who had a B.A. in art but no ECE courses before she began her job four years earlier, voiced a similar view. She felt that ECE courses had made her more effective:

> People say, "Oh, what a hard job. How can you do it? How can you work with all those kids." I say now, "Because I know how to do it." ... Now I know how to handle the kids.

Another teacher at Childchain said that courses were important for learning classroom management techniques:

> If you can't figure out a way to solve an argument going with two children and they just keep fighting, and you can't seem to deal with it, it's extremely stressful.... So, if you don't have those skills that you've developed over your many classes it's ... difficult to deal with.

Directors were aware of the difficulty some employees had in attending classes. Because people work all day, they have to take ECE classes at night. This often created a burden for workers, especially those with young children. One way to minimize the inconvenience was to have classes taught on site.

The director at Privateplace recalled that at another center where she had worked there had been on-site classes and that they were useful in providing a forum where staff members could "brainstorm any problem they have."

At Childchain, it was corporate policy to pay for in-service workshops. The director there felt that continuing education was important for maintaining staff motivation:

> Oh, yeah, it helps. And going to workshops and things like that. We'll pay for all of it. . . . And if they just go, they get really excited about it. If we finally could get some of the people who have gotten into a slump to get out there and go to some of those things again, it brings you back to life again.

The director of Communityplace believed that one reason her center's turnover rate was relatively low was that teachers regularly attended outside conferences:

> . . . we are very flexible and very encouraging of people attending conferences, continuing their education, visiting other centers so that the teacher doesn't feel isolated and they feel part of the bigger effort.

RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND PARENTS

Child care workers' relations with children may be summarized by the old nursery rhyme: when they are good, they are very very good, and when they are bad, they are horrid. During our analyses of the transcripts of the interviews, we were struck by how often workers mentioned the difficulty they had in dealing with some children in their classrooms, but we were also aware of the joy that many child care workers find in relationships with their charges.

First, the difficulties. One worker at Childchain told us:

> The stress I think sometimes is just from the constant battling. You might have a child that's a biter or a hitter. And you've tried stickers. And you've tried redirection. And you've tried everything under the sun to get this child to stop biting. And at this point the child just bit another child.

One of the teacher's husband, who himself used to work as a child care teacher, articulated what was simultaneously stressful, exhilarating and challenging about the occupation:

> I don't think people know in general what it takes to do that kind of job. . . . None of my jobs were as difficult as working in child care. It was a different kind of strain, emotional pressure. You see these kids that you're working with and find out about their home life—and, oh my God, what am I going to do? I mean, what the hell am I going to do to help this child? There is nothing I can do. The parents are divorced, the mother's an alcoholic, and the child comes in with all this pressure on him and you're trying to make him smile.

Some of the teachers and aides appeared to remain in the child care field not so much because they enjoyed being with children but because they felt that their leaving might be harmful to their students. For example, asked to predict how long she would stay at Childchain, one teacher said:

> I don't know. I really haven't thought that far into the future. But I do plan to stay here, because . . . I know what the kids feel when one teacher leaves . . . recently we just lost a teacher. And, right now, I mean we're having children wetting that never used to wet. And a lot of whining in the classroom these past few weeks, just because they feel that loss of the extra teacher. . . . So I think about that, and I go, God, I'm never going to leave here unless it's for something really, really, you know, that I just can't handle or deal with it.

But for many of the teachers and aides, the children are a major source of job satisfaction.

> . . . the best thing I like about this job is knowing that the kids care for you. You know that you got a kind of close relationship with them. It makes you feel like you are doing something right.

Asked what she liked best about her job, one of the teachers at Statefare said:

> Mainly just the kids. The attachment with the children. And going home and feeling like you did something good. And watching them grow. I think that's a main part.

And a teacher at Communityplace noted that some people would always remain in the child care field because of the rewarding aspects of the job:

> . . . When you start working in child care, it becomes part of you because it is rewarding. Being with children and with families, I don't think a day goes by where you don't laugh, that you don't realize how resilient children are and how resilient families can be. There is like hope and humanity that you see all the time in child care.

With respect to child care workers' relationships with parents, they were generally good, although, except at Communityplace, contact was limited. Interaction usually occurred in the brief time that parents were in the center to drop off or pick up their children. However, for some

workers, parents were an additional source of stress and frustration. Teachers and aides complained particularly that parents were sometimes not respectful of them and refused to believe negative feedback about their children.

A teacher at Statefare told us:

> Sometimes I run up against parents who put you down. Can't tell them anything. Not only when we tell them negative things about their children, other times. They just don't believe it.

One of the aides at Statefare also mentioned difficulties in dealing with parents about children who were disruptive:

> We have kids, that well I can't say they are terrible or nothing [*sic*] but they like to bite, they like to scratch and we try to tell the parents, "Your child is fighting a lot and scratching" and some of the parents say, "Well at home they don't do it." We try to explain to them he do [*sic*] it here. But sometimes the parents, they don't believe us.

At Communitycare, staff have been part of some in-service training to communicate more effectively with parents, and several of the workers we talked with thought the training was successful:

> One of our in-services we did is respecting the diversity of the parents and not letting your values, to put those on the parents. Because it's really hard ... when a child comes in on a stormy day without a coat to take the parents' point of view and not say, "That parent is so irresponsible, what were they thinking of?" ...

For this particular teacher, relationships with parents are an important source of job satisfaction:

> Part of the reason I stay at this center is because I like the parents so much as I do. I have tremendous respect for our parents because they are for the most part low-income families. But they are not families that are on welfare. They are the people who are struggling to do the best they can for their children and want their children to do the best they can ... I really respect that. They aren't people who have said forget it. They appreciate what you do for them. For the most part, they are pretty nice people.

The director at Communityplace, which in recent years has tried to improve teacher–parent relations, explained that they have come to realize that to wait to talk to parents until there is a problem is to wait too long:

> You have to be careful about coming down real heavy-handed without trust. If you've never said hello to this parent, or smiled at this parent, or never showed concern to this parent and all of a

> sudden you're saying that "your child has a problem" ... so ... we have meetings at the beginning of the year that are required by the staff to organize to have an informal meeting with the parents, to get a chance to meet the teacher to talk about goals for the year. They'll look at materials. We get a real good response from parents, a real good turnout.

The director at Privateplace said that working with parents was one of the aspects of her job that she liked most:

> A lot of parents don't have enough education or experience with their children, and it's hard, and there's a degree of helping them, and supporting them, and counseling them, and encouraging them because it can be rough when you're a parent and you don't know all the answers ... because a lot of parents just become parents and they aren't ready for it. And the person who pays is the child. And the parents pay, too. So, I just really enjoy it [counseling parents].

MATTERS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND POLICY

As our findings make clear, the child care workers we interviewed believed that their centers needed improvement both as workplaces and as deliverers of services. It is our view that, based on our work, several types of pilot demonstration projects should be encouraged to test their effects on the performance of child care centers. Some of these projects can be undertaken by centers themselves; others might best be sponsored by foundations, community organizations, community colleges, businesses or governments. That such research be appropriately designed and funded is one of our primary policy recommendations.

Although we wish it were otherwise, we think it unlikely that the wages of child care center workers will be raised significantly in the near future. Our findings indicate that job satisfaction of child care workers is influenced by factors other than wages. Because the job satisfaction of child care workers is critical both for the women involved and for the children they care for, we think it particularly important that, as a matter of public policy, we devote resources to funding demonstration projects that examine the cost-effectiveness of changing some of the non-wage aspects of child care employment.

Our findings about the importance for job satisfaction of substitute teachers, managerial styles of directors, early childhood education classes, and relations with parents have not been studied or reported in other research on child care workers. The effects of paying attention to these factors need further study.

Inadequate staffing is part of a vicious circle in child care centers. Limited funds, high turnover rates, high absenteeism, and the difficulty

of hiring substitutes, translate into chronic short-handedness. Chronic short-handedness produces stress, which then leads to still more turnover and absenteeism. It will not be possible for centers to more easily hire high-quality staff until the level of compensation is increased. But some of the stress that child care workers now face as a result of inadequate staffing could be reduced by hiring permanent substitutes. The cost-effectiveness of this strategy should be investigated.

The managerial skills and style of the director appear to be critical to child care workers' job satisfaction. Both staff members and directors told us that directors should receive training in communicating with, supervising, and reviewing personnel. The development and testing of training programs for child care center directors should receive high priority from foundations, community organizations and governmental agencies. The business community, too, might make a contribution to demonstration projects and research in this area.

Almost all of our respondents reported that they benefited by taking ECE courses because the classes and related readings taught them how to be effective in their jobs. Although some may believe that the ability to care for groups of children comes naturally (especially to women), our respondents indicated otherwise. The development of good relationships with children and parents is central to the job satisfaction of child care workers. They told us that by taking these courses they were better able to develop successful relationships.

Working with state departments of education and teacher credentialling boards, community colleges should be encouraged to inaugurate pilot projects in which child development classes are offered at child care centers in the early evening. The content of these classes also deserves experimentation. It may turn out to be particularly effective to use problem-based learning in these classes with the curriculum centered on the particular issues faced by teachers and aides in a center.

Often, when the subject of requiring more ECE courses of child care workers comes up, economists argue that such requirements will reduce the supply of child care workers. Their notion is that required courses are seen as a "negative" by workers and potential workers in this industry. However, our study indicates that the opportunity to take such courses is viewed as a "positive." States and counties considering increased course requirements should not simply assume a negative relationship between required courses and supply of child care workers. Rather, they should pay attention to when and where the courses are offered so that workers and potential workers find it possible to take them.

The director and the board at Communityplace had done a good deal of thinking about how to improve the staff's relationship with parents. Their efforts to form relationships and begin to build trust at the beginning of the year, before there was any trouble to report, seemed to

be paying off in better communication, and greater staff satisfaction. Having in-service workshops on relating to parents also seemed to be useful. Again, community colleges could be particularly effective in experimenting with the development of these types of in-service courses.

In all of this, feminist economists can work with other social scientists and with grassroots organizations, such as the National Center for the Early Childhood Workforce, to initiate, evaluate, keep track of, and report on research designed to enhance the pay, status and job satisfaction of child care workers. Depending on the questions being asked, both qualitative and quantitative research have roles to play. Feminist economists can do case studies and initiate or evaluate demonstration projects as well as analyze large data sets and develop theories.

In addition, feminist economists need to investigate questions about child care not discussed in this paper: Why are child care workers paid so poorly? To what extent does the gender composition of the occupation contribute to its low pay and status? What are effective means of raising the pay of child care workers? How can the internal labor market in child care centers be changed to provide an increased return to educational attainment? How does the racial composition of employment in a child care center affect pay, benefits, status and job satisfaction? How should child care be financed and subsidized?[12]

Also, this paper looked at only one sector of the child care industry, child care centers. The kind of work reported here needs to be repeated for family day care providers and for private household child care workers (often called "nannies"). The hours and working conditions in those sectors of the industry are quite different from those reported here and the remuneration is more complex and less well understood. Detailed, qualitative research on these matters and on job satisfaction would be quite useful as a basis for policy.

CONCLUSION

The child care industry is of increasing importance for children, for parents, for the career decisions of young women, for employer productivity and for our collective economic future. It is of particular concern to feminist economists.

This paper has examined the performance of the child care industry by looking at one sector, child care centers, from the point of view of the women who work there. In terms of developing knowledge, its work is in keeping with what Sandra Harding (1995) has termed "standpoint epistemology."

Our findings indicate the usefulness of this technique and of detailed micro- and ethnographic studies in general for the purpose of targeting research and policy. Economic incentives, subsidies, and other policy

interventions to improve the performance of the child care industry, caregiving, etc., can best be designed after the kind of micro-data and information from studies such as this one have been made available. The policy suggestions that come from the abstract application of microeconomic theory or from econometric studies cannot substitute for the understanding that comes from listening to those "in the trenches." Rigor requires more than mere quantification. It requires information.

Those who fear the entry of qualitative methods into economics fear that our "science" will be made less "objective" by such methods. In her article in this issue, Harding argues that the old positivist methods of "ensuring" objectivity were in fact hopelessly flawed and produced what she calls only "weak" objectivity. Far from debilitating our discipline, allowing child care workers to speak in their own voices to economists provides us with important information about the child care industry that we cannot obtain from any other source. Allowing such information into our collective heads leads our discipline closer to what Harding calls "strong" objectivity. It gets us closer to what is happening out there.

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NOTES

[1] The occupation, child care worker (except private household), includes both family day care workers and child care center workers. In 1989, it was 96.3 percent female (U.S. Department of Labor 1990). In the National Child Care Staffing Study, which examined 227 child care centers in five metropolitan areas, women were 97 percent of child care center workers (Whitebook *et al.* 1989).

[2] In the Fall of 1991, there were 56.1 million children under age 15. About 55.4 percent of these children, 31.1 million, had mothers who were employed. Of these, 9.9 million children were under 5 and 21.2 million were 5 to 14 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1994).

[3] External benefits of child care include: enhanced social, emotional and cognitive learning for young children which would reduce public social and educational expenditures for remediation later in childhood and in adulthood; improved ability for women to plan their education and employment with the expectation that market work can realistically be a permanent feature of their adult lives, even if they choose to have children; and increased productivity for employers as they experience decreases in employee turnover and absenteeism. See Strober (1975). Also, see Folbre (1994).

[4] The major economic studies of the child care industry and the child care occupation may be found in David Blau (1991) and a special issue of the *Journal of Human Resources* (1992, 27(1)).

[5] For a summary of these studies, see Strober (1994).

[6] We do not ask, for example, why wages for child care workers do not rise in the face of a shortage of workers and high turnover rates. Nor do we discuss the reasons for the gender segregation of the occupation or the lack of return to educational attainment for employees in this field.

[7] Center directors reported an average annual turnover rate of 41 percent; the six-month follow-up calls to the staff yielded a turnover rate of 37 percent.

[8] Inevitably, when a sample is chosen in this way, there is bias. Had we asked other friends and associates, we would surely have obtained a different set of centers within the three categories we outlined. Although we cannot "prove" that a different sample would have not produced different findings, we do know that on the topics that were covered in both our study and the larger study by Phillips *et al.* (1991), there were no differences between our results and theirs.

[9] We also asked questions regarding their *decision to enter the field of child care and their decision to take their current job*; and questions regarding their thoughts about *alternative jobs and occupations*, including perceived desirability of child care as an occupation, frequency of thoughts of job termination, perceived ability to find another job or occupation, and perceived family support for their current job and occupation. However, responses to these questions are not included in this paper.

[10] In their work, Phillips *et al.* (1991) found that turnover was negatively associated with level of benefits. Not surprisingly, the length of employment of respondents at Communityplace was higher than at Privateplace or Childchain. However, the greatest length of employment was at Statefare, where benefit levels were poor.

[11] Phillips *et al.* (1991) also found that preparation time was a factor in job satisfaction.

[12] See Kenneth Yeager and Myra Strober (1992).

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