

Theorizing Care: Braverman, Labor Process Theory, Gender, and Care Work

Donna Baines

The University of British Columbia

Theoretical Resources

Braverman's (1998) seminal text, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, precipitated discussions around the globe that helped move generations of scholars toward a closer understanding of the pressing issues facing labor today. Equally importantly, as an activist researcher, the Braverman debates shed light on ways to successfully understand, challenge and resist the many faces of capital. Debunking the myth that class struggle was no longer relevant, Braverman drew attention back to the dynamics underlying the capitalist model of production, namely the ongoing struggle for power between workers and capital, or in the case of emerging white-collar workplaces, between management and skilled employees. In the tradition of Marxism, Braverman (1998) showed that when capital (or their agents) employs workers, it employs their capacity to produce. Under capitalism, this capacity needs to be activated through the organization of work processes and enforced through supervision. To successfully maximize profit, the employer must keep the costs of labor extraction and activation at their lowest, which involves controlling all possible costs and imposing discipline and productivity measures on the workforce.

In contrast to many studies of work at the time of the writing of *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Braverman (1998) showed that rather than being lib-

erated from exploitation, the often highly educated, technical and white-collar workers of the time were subject to the same deskilling and degradation of work as blue-collar work. This propensity towards degradation lies principally in the tendency for scientific advances in the labor process to separate conception and planning of work from its execution (Carter, 2021). This marked separation leads to a deskilling as the execution of the work becomes increasingly standardized to control costs and extract the maximum profit. Standardization requires less skill and experience and permits employers to hire lower waged and lower credentialed workers to do the same work for lower wages. The work is intensified alongside ongoing and often increasing profit-making. Through deskilling and standardization, the work is degraded with workers experiencing not greater emancipation, but increased proletarianization.

Though a pivotal advance, various gaps in Braverman's theory remained to be further theorized and debated. This included: subjective factors in the labor process, principally worker agency including misbehavior and resistance; gender; and service work. These three elements will be discussed briefly here and returned to for analysis in relation to care work. Early critiques of Braverman's work often pivoted around his focus on the objective conditions of labor

processes as wholly separate from the subjective conditions of production (Davies, 1985; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Marks and Thompson, 2010). However, the labor extraction process necessarily involves the interactions of workers, managers and other agents of capital and are inseparable from the so-called objective conditions. A considerable body of literature emerged aimed at understanding the subjective conditions of the labor process including worker agency and identity, as well as the constantly shifting individual and collective power struggles between management and workers (Burawoy, 1978; Carey, 2007; Carter and Choonara, 2022; Marks and Thompson, 2010).

This led to an extensive literature analyzing resistance and misbehavior within workplaces, and further debates about the ever-changing dynamics of power between management and workers (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022; Knights, 1990; Previtali and Fagiani, 2015). Worker resistance involves the struggle for worker autonomy and some degree of self-determination in the face of management's attempts to exert workplace control. Resistance can be formal or informal, it may be collective or individual self-organization (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022; Knights, 1990), and is frequently referred to as the autonomous organization of workers, outside of management control and approval (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022).

Marx (1867; 2019) argued that the labor process never happens in the abstract but in the social relations of specific societies. Not surprisingly, the society Braverman (1998) studied was highly gendered as reflected in gendered workers, gendered work, gendered work organization, gendered organizations, and gendered resistance (Acker, 1990; Beechey, 1987; Bruegl, 1979). Unfortunately, neither Braverman nor most of his critics or colleagues engaged with gender.

Instead, it was the early work of feminists and post-structuralists that brought gender into the labor process analysis (Beechey, 1987; Knights, 1990; Bruegel, 1979; Pollert, 1981; Williams & Lucas, 1989). These contributions highlighted subjectivity, power, identities and resistance. Post-structuralists formed a distinct strand of labor process (Knights, 1990; Knights and Willmott, 2016; O'Doherty and

Willmott, 2001), while a larger group continued to explore the structural aspects of gender and work (Armstrong and Daly, 2016; Baines, 2016; Bolton, 2009, 2000; Glucksman, 1995; Martain, 2023; O'Neill, 2015; Rubery and Hebson, 2018; Van den Broek, 2004, 2017). The balance of this commentary addresses itself to the latter.

Theorizing Care Work

Care work, as an obviously gendered and exploitative enterprise, demanded further theorization within the Braverman tradition and beyond. Labor extraction within care work hinges on naturalized assumptions that women will provide endlessly expanding care regardless of whether they are at home, work or the community, and paid or unpaid (Charlesworth and Malone, 2017; Daly and Armstrong, 2016; Kaine and Ravenswood, 2019). Indeed, care work is a highly gendered form of work with women forming most service users, workers, and volunteers, who are often expected to meet the gendered assumption that they will provide care for low or no pay, and will work under difficult conditions, including workplace violence and abuse. These inequitable assumptions makes the pay and conditions difficult to improve as the work is so closely aligned with normative expectations of female caring, however labor process theory has been an effective way to explore and expose norms, systems and structures that perpetuate exploitation within this arena of work, as well as the ways that workers and their unions resist.

Service Relationships and Power Dynamics

Within the labor process tradition, the further theorization of public and nonprofit service work was an important entrée into understanding the dynamics of care work. Cost-savings and efficiencies in public and nonprofit services play a similar role to profit making in private firms, as both provide employers a strong incentive to control costs and the labor process. Rather than a two-way power struggle between workers and employer, the service relationship involves a three-way or often four-way dynamic. In private sector service work the service triangle involves shifting power between the employer, the worker and the customer (Subramanian and Suquet,

2018). In the case of public and non-profit service work funded and regulated by the state, a four-way struggle for control involves the employer, the worker, the service user and the state (Baines, 2012; 2016). These three- and four-way power dynamics have been closely analyzed in care work, or the many forms of work required to provide care to humans across their lifetimes.

Deskilling and Degradation in Care Work

Braverman's foundational concepts of degradation and deskilling have been vital to studies of care work, permitting a fine grain analysis of ongoing changes in the care labor process, particularly under neoliberalism and permanent austerity and various forms of managerialism associated with New Public Management (Baines, 2014; Cunningham, 2008; Rubery and Urwin, 2011; Van den Broek, 2017). Managerialism and other pro-market management models tend to standardize work in order to reduce or remove inefficiencies and prevent cost overrun (Cunningham, 2008) thus contributing to the degradation and deskilling of the work.

Increased work intensity leads to a reduction in higher-level care skills as each step of the labor process is broken into the smallest possible component pieces. Speed up leads to increased worker injuries and workplace stress, which leads to higher levels of staff absenteeism and turnover (Baines and Cunningham, 2011; Kaine and Ravenswood, 2019; Martain, 2023). The tendency to deskilling and proletarianization has been observed and analyzed across a range of care workers including social work (Carey, 2008; O'Neill, 2015), aged care (Charlesworth and Malone, 2017; Daly and Armstrong, 2016; Martain, 2023), home care (Kaine and Ravenswood, 2019), and nursing (Bolton, 2009; Van den Broek, 2004, 2017), with higher pay, higher-skilled professionals being replaced by lower pay, lower-skilled workers, or even replaced by unpaid workers and volunteers.

Workplace Violence in Care Settings

This deskilling plays a role in workplace violence, a highly common feature of care workplaces, as vulnerable service users react to a changing sea of unfamiliar care givers who may inadvertently trigger challenging

behaviors and cannot be expected to know the best ways to dissipate tensions or keep themselves and other service users safer (Baines and Cunningham, 2011; Martain, 2023). Overworked care providers are frequently put in the position of rushing and controlling service users to meet tightly scripted time frames and key performance indicators. In the process, they struggle to meet complex and difficult-to-service needs and may leave some needs unmet (Banerjee et al., 2012; Martain, 2023). These dynamics repeatedly produce angry and desperate service users, who sometimes lash out at their female care providers (Brophy et al., 2019).

As with violence in the home, workplace violence is gendered with the majority-female victims being blamed or self-blaming for the violence, and required to interact again with the perpetrator(s) soon after the abuse (Baines, 2006; Banerjee et al., 2012). These effects are magnified by bureaucratic and inadequate institutional responses and an ongoing lack of effective preventive strategies (Brophy et al., 2019; Martain, 2023). Labor process analyses have shown that though the state does not directly commit these acts of violence and abuse, the state sets minimal funding levels and requires the adoption of pro-market managerial models thus setting up the highly retrenched and rationalized conditions under which the violence happens and solutions are not found (Baines and Cunningham, 2011; Baines and Van den Broek, 2017). In effect, neo-liberal states and the care organizations they (under)fund reproduce systemic injustice and violence against workers in the form of a societal tolerance for the neglect of those in need of care and of violence against the largely female workforce who are expected to continue to provide ongoing care under conditions of work intensification and abuse (Baines and Van den Broek, 2017; Banerjee et al., 2012).

Resistance and Emotional Labor

Concerned not only with oppression and exploitation, but also with worker agency, labor process theory has generated a robust literature on individual and collective resistance among care workers (Baines, 2016; Daly and Armstrong, 2015; Martain, 2023; O'Neill, 2015; Reininger et al., 2022). Some

of this theorization drew on Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, a management strategy for speeding up the service encounter in which workers are required to use emotional content to control the service user or customer. In the gendered arena of care work, emotional labor is a form of management control as well as the main source of meaning and satisfaction for workers (Bolton, 2000, 2009). Management in care work regimes encourage employees to incorporate a vocational calling approach to their work and identities (Daly and Armstrong, 2015; Martain, 2023; O'Neill, 2015) and care workers often value the emotional content of their work.

As Bolton (2000, 2009) argues, care workers often contest management control in this part of the labor process, viewing emotional labor as an open-ended, altruistic gift that cannot be quantified and rationalized (Bolton, 2000, 2009). Baines (2016) argues further that forms of formal resistance (for example, social unionism) and informal resistance (for example, bending rules, encouraging service users to advocate for themselves, performing unpaid work in the workplace) constitute a particular form of resistance unique to care work or a 'gift-solidarity'. Gift solidarity is simultaneously a form of emotional labor as well as a way to challenge management control of the labor process. Unpaid care work in the workplace is endemic to care work, with workers providing many hours of unpaid work and in effect subsidizing the workplace with no recognition or increase in pay. However, when this unpaid work is accompanied by oppositional identities, shared or individual dissenting narratives, and may lead to collective action, it is a form of self-exploitation as well as a conscious moral choice on the part of workers, and a unique form of gendered resistance, peculiar to the social organisation of care work (Baines et al., 2024; Martain, 2023; O'Neill, 2015).

Moral Economy and Future Theoretical Developments

In terms of further directions in labor process and care work, a fruitful inter-weaving of moral economy and feminist labor process theory successfully captures the complexity of care workers' personal and

shared norms and values at play in the dynamics of work, resistance and solidarity. Bolton and Laaser (2020) argue that moral-economy forms of solidarity humanize the labor process and challenge unjust workplace regimes by encouraging social connections between and among workers and those they serve. This theorizing permits an analysis of how leaning into the work, for example by providing additional unpaid hours of work, can be a form of solidarity and oppositional practice that nurtures social connectivity, pro-social values, and dissenting identities and shared emancipatory narratives. This dynamic operates in a liminal space between self-exploitation and resistance, and generates further opportunities to challenge employers and a larger uncaring society (Baines, Brown & Cabahug, 2024). Further research and analysis are required, but early outcomes are promising.

Future Directions for Theorizing Precarious Employment and Global Care Work

The expansion of precarious employment in care work has also benefitted from the Braverman tradition and subsequent labor process theorizing. Precarious work expanded rapidly in the global north following the introduction of individualized funding programs for disabled people and older people. These government-funded programs aggressively restructured social care labor markets, promoted the expansion of precarious employment and precarious service organizations, and pitted the rights of service users to self-determination and human rights against the rights of workers, in a zero-sum game (Baines et al., 2021; Baines and Young, 2020). The insecure, low pay conditions of work resemble those of the global south where care work has long been privatized and largely outside of academic inquiry (Hammer and Ness, 2021) with much more work needing to be done on gender and resistance in these contexts (Reininger et al., 2022).

Racism, Coloniality, and Global Care Chains

Similarly, further theorizing is necessary in the areas of racism and coloniality in the care workplace and labor process. Work-based struggles around shared and individual identity and culture intensify and

expand in the context of global care chains and globalized care corporations. Care workforces in the global north are increasingly racialized, which intersects with struggles around gender, class, immigration status, and ongoing coloniality. This demands the kind of complexity that labor process theory can provide and be strengthened by. Understanding how racialized workers experience deskilling, workplace violence, and exploitation differently from their white counterparts requires careful attention to intersectionality within labor process analysis. Similarly, the colonial legacies that shape care migration patterns and create hierarchies within care workplaces need explicit theorization that connects historical patterns of exploitation to contemporary labor processes.

As the social relations of specific societies continue to confront capitalism's destructive tendencies and the privatization of social reproduction in all its forms, a labor process analysis of care and care work will be of increasing importance to struggles for equity and social justice both within and well beyond the workplace.

References

- Acker, Joan. 1990. "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations." *Gender & Society* 4, no. 2: 139-158.
- Ackroyd, Stephen, and Paul Thompson. 2022. *Organisational Misbehaviour*. London: Sage.
- Baines, Donna. 2012. "Restructuring and Labour Processes under Marketisation: A Canadian Perspective." In *Voluntary Organizations and Public Service Delivery*, edited by Ian Cunningham and Philip James, 168-184. London: Routledge.
- Baines, Donna. 2016. "Moral Projects and Compromise Resistance: Resisting Uncaring in Nonprofit Care Work." *Studies in Political Economy* 97, no. 2: 124-142.
- Baines, Donna, Catrina Brown, and Francis Cabahug. 2024. "The Shifting Labour Process in Professional Care: Recreating Dominance and the Managerialised Mental Health Social Worker." *The British Journal of Social Work* 54, no. 1: 475-493.
- Baines, Donna, and Ian Cunningham. 2011. "'White Knuckle Care Work': Violence, Gender and New Public Management in the Voluntary Sector." *Work, Employment and Society* 25, no. 4: 760-776.
- Baines, Donna, Ian Cunningham, Philip James, and Chandrima Roy. 2021. "Privatizing the Sacrifice: Individualized Funding, Austerity and Precarity in the Voluntary Sector in Australia and Scotland." In *The Changing Politics and Policy of Austerity*, edited by Stephen McBride, Bryan Evans, and Dieter Plehwe, 82-102. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Baines, Donna, and Doug Young. 2020. "Austerity, Personalised Funding and the Degradation of Care Work: Comparing Scotland's Self-Directed Support Policy and Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme." In *Working in the Context of Austerity and Work: Challenges and Struggles*, edited by Donna Baines and Ian Cunningham. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Banerjee, Albert, Tamara Daly, Pat Armstrong, Marta Szebehely, Hugh Armstrong, and Stirling Lafrance. 2012. "Structural Violence in Long-Term, Residential Care for Older People: Comparing Canada and Scandinavia." *Social Science & Medicine* 74, no. 3: 390-398.
- Beechey, Veronica. 1987. *Unequal Work*. London: Verso.
- Bolton, Sharon C. 2000. "Who Cares? Offering Emotion Work as a 'Gift' in the Nursing Labour Process." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 32, no. 3: 580-586.
- Bolton, Sharon C. 2009. "Getting to the Heart of the Emotional Labour Process: A Reply to Brook." *Work, Employment and Society* 23, no. 3: 549-560.
- Braverman, Harry. 1998. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: NYU Press.
- Brophy, James, Margaret Keith, and Michael Hurley. 2019. "Breaking Point: Violence against Long-Term Care Staff." *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* 29, no. 1: 10-35.
- Bruegel, Irene. 1979. "Women as a Reserve Army of Labour: A Note on Recent British Experience." *Feminist Review* 3, no. 1: 12-23.
- Burawoy, Michael. 1978. "Toward a Marxist Theory of the Labor Process: Braverman and Beyond." *Politics & Society* 8, no. 3-4: 247-312.
- Carey, Malcolm. 2007. "White-Collar Proletariat? Braverman, the Deskilling/Up-skilling of Social Work and the Paradoxical Life of the Agency Care Manager." *Journal of Social Work* 7, no. 1: 93-114.

- Carter, Bob. 2021. "Defending Marx and Braverman: Taking Back the Labour Process in Theory and Practice." *International Socialism* 171: 171-196.
- Carter, Bob, and Joseph Choonara. 2022. "The Continuing Value of Harry Braverman's Labor and Monopoly Capital." *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 43, no. 1: 171-208.
- Charlesworth, Sara, and Jenny Malone. 2017. "Re-imagining Decent Work for Home Care Workers in Australia." *Labour and Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work* 27, no. 4: 284-301.
- Davies, Linda. 1985. "Social Workers' Experience of Work under Changing Administrative Forms: An Empirical and Theoretical Critique of Braverman." PhD diss., Polytechnic of North London.
- Glucksmann, Miriam A. 1995. "Why 'Work'? Gender and the 'Total Social Organization of Labour'." *Gender, Work & Organization* 2, no. 2: 63-75.
- Hammer, Aaron, and Immanuel Ness. 2021. "Informal and Precarious Work: Insights from the Global South." *Journal of Labor and Society* 24, no. 1: 1-15.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kaine, Sarah, and Katherine Ravenswood. 2019. "Employee Voice in Practice: Aged Care in Australia and New Zealand." In *Employee Voice at Work*, edited by Margaret Andersen and Maurizio Atzeni, 183-200. Singapore: Springer.
- Knights, David. 1990. "Subjectivity, Power and the Labour Process." In *Labour Process Theory*, 297-335. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Knights, David, and Hugh Willmott. 1989. "Power and Subjectivity at Work: From Degradation to Subjugation in Social Relations." *Sociology* 23, no. 4: 535-558.
- Knights, David, and Hugh Willmott, eds. 2016. *Labour Process Theory*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Marks, Abigail, and Paul Thompson. 2010. "Beyond the Blank Slate: Identities and Interests at Work." In *Working Life: Renewing Labour Process Analysis*, edited by Paul Thompson and Chris Smith. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Press.
- Martain, Sandra. 2023. "I Had to Bear the Brunt"—The Impact on Worker Bodies of the Marketisation of Aged Care." *Labour and Industry* 33, no. 1: 160-177.
- Marx, Karl. 2019. *Capital: Volume One*. Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications.
- O'Doherty, Damian, and Hugh Willmott. 2001. "Debating Labour Process Theory: The Issue of Subjectivity and the Relevance of Poststructuralism." *Sociology* 35, no. 2: 457-476.
- O'Neill, Laura. 2015. "Regulating Hospital Social Workers and Nurses: Propping Up an 'Efficient' Lean Health Care System." *Studies in Political Economy* 95, no. 1: 115-136.
- Pollert, Anne. 1981. *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*. London: Macmillan.
- Previtali, Fabiane Santana, and Cibele Cristina Fagiani. 2015. "Deskilling and Degradation of Labour in Contemporary Capitalism: The Continuing Relevance of Braverman." *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* 9, no. 1: 76-91.
- Reininger, Taly, Gianinna Muñoz-Arce, Cristóbal Villalobos, Camila Morales Torres, and Camila Campillo. 2022. "Pandemic and Social Work in Chile: Precarity, Precariousness and the Quest for Resistance in an Uncertain World." *The British Journal of Social Work* 52, no. 8: 5105-5123.
- Rubery, Jill, and Gail Hebson. 2018. "Applying a Gender Lens to Employment Relations: Revitalisation, Resistance and Risks." *Journal of Industrial Relations* 60, no. 3: 414-436.
- Subramanian, Dilip, and Jean-Baptiste Suquet. 2018. "Unpacking the Service Triangle: Arranging Power Relations between Frontline Occupations." *Work and Occupations* 45, no. 1: 38-81.
- Van den Broek, Diane. 2004. "Globalising Call Centre Capital: Gender, Culture and Work Identity." *Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work* 14, no. 3: 59-75.
- Van Den Broek, Diane. 2017. "Perforated Body Work: The Case of Tele-Nursing." *Work, Employment and Society* 31, no. 6: 904-920.
- Williams, Claire, and Judy Lucas. 1989. "Gender and the Labour Process: Review of the Recent Literature." *Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work* 2, no. 1: 145-161.