

Grappling with ‘Good’ Care: Narratives from Kyoto’s Nighttime Nurseries

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Abstract

Care is instrumentally shaped by where and when it is situated. Through the close reading of a care worker’s narrative, the paper explores the contextual care practices and the emergence of situated care ethics in nighttime nursery settings. Moral and emotional negotiations of what *good care* is are central to this process, and the commitment to continue caring amidst ambivalence arises here. Care workers attend to various interests and ideals for care in looking after children outside the home at night, rather than prescribing what spatio-temporal arrangements of care are better or worse.

Keywords

Feminist ethics of care; night; nursery; childcare

Introduction

Care is inextricably shaped by the place in which it is generated and experienced (Milligan and Wiles 2010). Extending this contribution that geographers have made in the interdisciplinary study of care, this paper demonstrates how the ethics of care and its enactment are also situated in particular spatial *and* temporal contexts. The emergence of ethics of care is contingent upon cultural environments and historical trajectories (Raghuram 2016, 2019). *When* care takes place is essential to how it is made sense of, especially in its moral understanding. By exploring nighttime nurseries in Japan and the cultural ambivalence surrounding the practice of caring for children outside the home at night, I delineate the negotiation of various moral and spatio-

temporal ideals of what *good care* might be, that is central in this context and the ensuing emergence of situated care ethics. Nighttime nurseries in this paper refer to nurseries open beyond 8 pm that care for children whose parents work at night.

In what follows, I first briefly trace the feminist scholarship on the ethics of care and denote its place-specificity that geographers have called attention to. Then, the geohistories of nighttime childcare in Japan and the moralising discourse on this form of childcare are outlined. The following part turns to an analysis of a narrative by a care worker, to explore the situated emergence of care ethics specific to her practice and experience of caring for children at night. It is essential to note that this is not an exhaustive attempt at theorising *the* care ethics of nighttime childcare, but rather an

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exploration of the situated emergence of the ethics of care in this setting. I conclude the paper by suggesting the significance and implications of this exercise for care studies.

Situated ethics of care

Originating in Gilligan's (1982: 74) seminal psychological work *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, the ethic(s) of care 'evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent'. Standing in contrast to the emphasis on independence and autonomy in liberal ethics permeating second-wave feminist arguments (Sevenhuijsen 1998: 37-38), the feminist ethics of care conceptualises individuals as 'dependent upon one another for their survival, development and social functioning' (Engster 2007: 7-8), contesting the expectations of self-sufficiency (Held 2005), to instead foreground human vulnerabilities and conceive of a relational social ontology. While the initial conception of the ethics of care explicitly drew on women's experiences, it has been developed and advocated for as a feminist practice rather than an exclusively feminine morality. The feminist ethics of care advocates for the centrality of care in public life, de-gendering care as women's work and morality (Sevenhuijsen 1998; Tronto 1993, 2013).

Parvati Raghuram asserts that such a dislocation of care ethics from women's bodies and experiences needs to be accompanied by a further dislocation from the Global North (2016) and 'the normative white body through which much care is theorised' (2019: 629). Geographers' interest in differences across place can contribute to the studies of care ethics by spelling out the locational specificities of care through a close attention to the geohistories of care (Raghuram 2016). Care is 'strongly based in practice' (Raghuram 2016: 512); hence care ethics is 'continuously being produced and enacted through its located practices' (525). Her arguments highlight the universalising qualities

of the ethics of care and urge scholars to critically reflect on how care ethics may arise and take shape differently in different places. This is particularly pivotal considering how the theorisation of care ethics originates from the Global North, the West, and white bodies, but has been mobilised as universally applicable and relevant, when in fact care is racialised, and the world is racially unequal (Raghuram 2019: 630). Greenhough et al. (2023)'s call for a scholarship on 'cultures of care' further emphasises the variegation of care among different groups. What is considered *good care* is highly contingent, and they are also always negotiated and changing, as 'each culture of care is a complex network through which care is expressed, extended, audited and at times undone' (Greenhough et al. 2023: 6).

Geohistories of nighttime childcare in Japan

The question of what constitutes *good care* recurs in the narratives of care workers providing care at night. The sociopolitical histories of nighttime childcare in Japan underlie this constant negotiation of care ideals that characterises their work. From the 1950s to the 70s, Japan experienced a period of high economic growth, and the demand for infant care and nighttime childcare surged as many women started taking up paid work outside the home (Nakata 1982: 21). The heightened demand for nighttime childcare was largely met by unregulated private childcare providers, often called baby hotels. These baby hotels came under public scrutiny in the 80s, when a journalist covered the poor conditions in which children were cared for (Domoto 1982), and many injuries and accidents, some of which were fatal, were reported at these facilities (Asano 2019: 24-25). While this has prompted governmental provisioning and licensing of nighttime nurseries, much of nighttime childcare needs remain fulfilled by private providers (Ohe 2019).

Ohe (2019, 2023) further suggests that the ambivalence around leaving children away from their family and home at night, and the negative prejudices around parents who work until late, are essentially discouraging public provisioning of nighttime childcare. Furthermore, the unsubstantiated claim that nighttime childcare adversely impacts children's physical and cognitive development remains an influential discourse in portraying nighttime nurseries in a negative light. Developmental psychologists have refuted these claims by demonstrating that the length and the nocturnal setting of childcare are not the factors that determine children's developmental states, but rather the qualities of the home environment in which they are cared for and the parents' lack of childcare support and confidence that play a strong part (Anme and Oh 2000; Anme et al. 2010). Hence, care workers play a key role in providing daily support to families by encouraging children's exposure to positive social interaction and acting as counsellors that parents can consult (Watanabe et al. 2010).

The geohistories of nighttime childcare in Japan, particularly of its moralisation in popular, public and scientific discourse over the past five decades, signify the ambivalence and anxieties surrounding the practice of caring for children at nighttime nurseries. The negotiation of such ambivalence is not incidental but central to the experience and practice of care workers at the nighttime nurseries I visited. In the following section, I analyse a narrative from an interview with a care worker, Ajisai (pseudonym), to examine the tensions she encounters in detail, and how she navigates them and narrates this process of navigation. Through this focused analysis of Ajisai's accounts, I attempt to experimentally build care ethics back up rather than drawing them down to this context (Raghuram 2016: 524). My intent is not to theorise *the* ethics of care of nighttime nurseries in Japan, but rather to demonstrate how geographers might carefully engage with a

specific care culture to explore the situated emergence of care ethics.

Analysing Ajisai's narrative

Ajisai is a lead care worker at Nursery E, a licensed nighttime nursery in Kyoto, Japan, open from 7 am to 10 pm, consisting of a daytime class (until 7 pm) and a nighttime class (until 10 pm). Children have dinner in the nighttime class, and those staying after 8:30 pm also sleep until 10 pm. Ajisai has worked at the nursery for over thirty-five years and became the lead care worker seven years ago. I met her in February 2024 and interviewed her during my fieldwork in Japan from September 2023 to March 2024, where I visited 11 nurseries and interviewed 41 parents and care workers. All participants were interviewed in Japanese, and the English translations of the interview transcripts presented here are mine. The interview with Ajisai took place in a small office across from the nighttime class. It was past 5:30 pm, just before dinner time for children.

In the interview, I mentioned the negative public opinion that I often hear regarding nighttime childcare to ask what she thought. In response, she described her experience of suggesting to some parents to consider signing up for the nighttime class, as she noticed they were often late for the pick-up time at 7 pm. Noting how parents often decidedly reject these suggestions, she explained that she senses the parents' hesitance in depending on nighttime childcare. While expressing her understanding of such sentiments, Ajisai cautiously narrates how nighttime childcare may be helpful:

Ajisai: But, um, you know, well... I think that's also a way to support the parents, um... you know the children don't have to eat dinner at the nursery every day, but at times when it's hard for the mother, when their work overruns beyond 7 pm, they rush, they rush for us, but you know you can't be late because the daytime class does end at 7 pm
Sieun: Right

Ajisai: So then, if you were registered for the nighttime class, for times when the mother is busy, um, the children can eat at the nursery. Then, well, after they eat they can go home and have plenty of relaxed time to play together, that's a benefit of it, so then, um, for that, um the mums, um, for when the mums are busy or tired, it helps them, um, I think they should use it whenever it's hard for them, and there's lots of children in the nighttime class! Yeah, and um, it's not like they (the children) are lonely
[...]

Ajisai: There are people who feel like that, certainly

Sieun: Hmm, yes

Ajisai: You know they feel sorry for the kids? Because it's so late at night. But you know about that, um, hmm, I think maybe I feel that I want to cherish the mum's job as well, and um

Sieun: Right, I see

Ajisai: Yeah, yes, and, you know, um we, for meals, uh, um, we have the meals, and um the play times as well, we have that...yeah, we do these things in a way you wouldn't feel bad for the children just because they stay here till late.

In this narrative, Ajisai recognises and negotiates the reluctance expressed by the parents and in cultural discourse, around the fact that children stay at the nursery until late. While she demonstrates her sympathy and understanding for such feelings and ideals surrounding childcare and familyhood at night, she simultaneously troubles the negative assumptions of nighttime childcare, such as the imagination that children are lonely while waiting for their parents at night. She does so by accounting for the ways nighttime nurseries can support busy mothers and their relationship with their children, by alleviating the time pressure that permeates their family lives. She further denotes her reassurance that children are not lonely, or rather that she makes sure that they are not lonely at the nursery, as they are with their peers, and their dinners and play times are taken

care of attentively. Her narrative works to delineate how the practice and experience of nighttime childcare contests normative ideals of *good care* that expect children to be home at night, without dismissing the parental hesitance fuelled by it.

While Ajisai's narrative outlines how care workers make the nursery a fun and caring space at night, its narration as a *defence* against the criticism of nighttime childcare delineates her ambivalence. In our dialogue, Ajisai does not dismiss the negative remarks made towards nighttime childcare that I raise, and instead further elicits the anxieties expressed by the mothers and legitimatises them. She then narrates a defence against the critique rather than a dismissal of it by attending to these emotions and describing alternative views on how nighttime childcare may be helpful and portraying the nighttime class as lively rather than lonely. Earlier in the interview, Ajisai explained that the care workers working during the day now leave without saying goodbye to their colleagues working at night. While they used to announce their departure, this change was made so that children do not feel left behind. She expressed her intention to avoid the case where some children become bothered that their parents have not arrived yet. The care that she pours into arranging the atmosphere of the nighttime class in such ways further demonstrates her worries around how the nighttime class might be affecting the children, and the power of normative ideals for children to be at home at night.

Such ambivalence around nighttime childcare is negotiated as Ajisai speaks. She holds onto her worries towards nighttime childcare and narrates her care for the mothers and their jobs, as well as her efforts to provide *good care* for the children at the nursery. Instead of determining *the* right way to care for children, and where children should be at night, she continuously negotiates how to protect different interests and understandings of *good care* together. As Mol et al. (2010) compellingly

assert, '[r]aising an argument about which good is best "in general", makes little sense. Instead, care implies a negotiation about how different goods might coexist in a given, specific, local practice' (13). Ajisai's care demonstrated in and practised through her narrative produces a corresponding situated ethics of care that is committed to continuously negotiate and care for varying interests, expectations and experiences of children and their parents without prescribing what *good care* might be. The normative diurnal ideals of childcare that portray nighttime childcare in a negative light are reworked through this attention to diverging moralities of care and responding to care needs with various physical, emotional, and discursive care practices.

Conclusions

By attending to the place-specific histories and scientific discourse surrounding nighttime childcare in Japan, this paper has brought the culturally specific moralisations of care to the fore. Through this I have demonstrated the importance of the temporalities of care in how nighttime childcare is morally made sense of and experienced. Care workers at nighttime nurseries grapple with normative ideals of *good care*, in response to popular anxiety surrounding nighttime childcare, fuelled by historical stigma associated with baby hotels and moralised reluctance of caring for children outside the home at night. Through the close reading of a care worker's narrative, I have explored the contextual emergence of care ethics. The navigation of ambivalence around nighttime childcare is central to the practice of care workers. The commitment to continue negotiating different ideas around what *good care* is, and the different interests of children and parents were characteristic in the practice and ethics of care at nighttime nurseries. Rather than determining the correct and righteous way to care, and prescribing such ideals to this context, care workers physically, emotionally,

and discursively attend to the plurality of *good care* in their setting. Through the detailed analysis of one care workers' narrative, the paper responds to Raghuram's (2016, 2019) calls to account for the inductive conceptualisation of care ethics at an exploratory capacity. In doing so, the paper also exemplifies how geographers may attend to the spatial *and* temporal specificities in the production of care practice thus ethics, illuminating the moral and discursive work that often underlie practices and experiences of care.

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