

## Revealing the Gendered Experience: The Complexity of Care Work in Loach's *Sorry We Missed You* and *I, Daniel Blake*

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In his films *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), Director Ken Loach uncovers the exploitation and inequality working-class members experience in the age of neoliberalism, when market values such as profit, efficiency, and competition overshadow the needs of the individual. Loach specifically highlights the expectations neoliberalism places on mothers who perform care work within the workforce and at home. This essay draws on Hochschild's description of the different kinds of work mothers carry out, Duffy's explanation of the expectations of nurturant jobs, and Berlant's argument of the working class's participation in cruel optimism, to discuss women's experiences in care work in a neoliberal economy, and then unpack the way Loach interrogates these challenges in his films.

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Director Ken Loach's objective to create films that illuminate the exploitation, precariousness, and inequality of the working-class in present-day society attracts both praise and ridicule from movie critics. Two of Loach's more contemporary films, *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), demonstrate the difficulties families face in the age of neoliberalism, when competition, cold efficiency, and the raised expectations of personal responsibility devalue the needs of the underprivileged. Though there

have been some exceptions—such as *Variety* contributor Owen Gleiberman's reflection of the impersonal behavior of welfare workers towards single mothers in *I, Daniel Blake*, and *New York Times* writer Wesley Morris's observation of care work employers' apathy toward their employees' humanity in *Sorry We Missed You*—most critics focus on how the male figures in Loach's films navigate these challenging circumstances. They tend to underrate Loach's consideration of the obstacles his female characters face, particularly regarding care work in the workforce and at home. In this paper, I will use Hochschild's representation of the second and third shifts, Berlant's description of cruel optimism, and Duffy's explanation of the expectations of nurturant jobs to discuss women's experiences in care work in the age of neoliberalism, and then unpack the way Loach interrogates these challenges in his films *Sorry We Missed You* and *I, Daniel Blake*.

Dr. Arlie Hochschild redefined the boundaries of labor with her books *The Second Shift* and *The Managed Heart*, in which she identified two shifts mothers perform in addition to paid labor in the workforce: the second shift and the third shift. The second shift refers to the unpaid labor of childcare and housework, and the third shift, known as emotion work, is the ability to induce or suppress feeling to maintain

harmony within the family. Hochschild contends that because of the sharply increasing number of women joining the workforce since the 1950s, more women felt the constraints of overwork as they labored in the second and third shifts in addition to their paid jobs. The distribution of work between spouses within the home failed to keep up with the rising employment of women, creating an imbalanced workload that relied on women to not only maintain childrearing and housework but also an emotional balance within the family (Blair-Loy et al. 437). In 2015, Hochschild contributed to an article addressing the transformation of labor and gender since the publication of *The Second Shift* in 1989, arguing, "mothers continue to do two to three times more routine housework than do fathers, spend more time alone with children, and do more household management and planning" (Blair-Loy et al. 440). In this context, household management refers to tasks that keep the house running in an orderly manner, though it arguably comes to include the management of emotional stability between the household members, as Hochschild addresses in *The Managed Heart*.

Mothers labor in the third shift, Hochschild claims, by controlling their emotions to foster a positive atmosphere in their homes, especially to "affirm, enhance, and celebrate the well-being and status of others" (165). Ultimately,

women's conditioning in the third shift encourages them to suppress their feelings to sustain the proper state of mind in others and maintain harmony within their families. The working class, however, participates in what Dr. Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism," or "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Those of the working class desire upward mobility, believing that "society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something" (3), what we call the good life or the American dream. According to Berlant, this optimism is cruel because precarity and exploitation erase the effectiveness of hard work leading to the American dream, resulting in overworked, underpaid, and mistreated people never seeing reciprocal benefits to their work or home lives, making harmony within families stressfully hard to maintain.

Suppressing emotions for the benefit of others within the home mimics the characteristics of workers in the care field. Feminist scholars have long recognized women's "domestic labor as work," categorizing labor within the home as essential to the continuation of society (Duffy II). But as Mignon Duffy notes in her book *Making Care Count*, the "gendered division of labor" extends into the workforce so that jobs within the care field resemble "paid versions of

the jobs [women] do at home" (II). Duffy identifies these care jobs as "nurturant" jobs that involve "feelings of affection or responsibility combined with actions that provide responsibly for an individual's personal needs or well-being, in a face-to-face relationship" (15). These jobs, such as teaching, nursing, and caregiving, not only require critical care that enhances a person's well-being, but also relational care encouraged through face-to-face interactions. Relational care depends on emotional responsiveness and meaningful personal relationships specific to the individual.

Despite the intimate connections nurturant jobs require, however, Duffy acknowledges that many care theorists "pose nurturant care as antithetical to market values" (13) like efficiency and profit. These ideals, often summarized as neoliberalism, impacted the care industry through "direct cuts to publicly funded care enterprises" and private care work, which redefined the organization of care by limiting worker control and "squeezing out the relational aspects of their jobs" as unimportant and uncompensated (Duffy 75-76). Neoliberalism's emphasis on self-reliance suggested families should provide relational care for their loved ones, cutting companionship and relationships from the necessary requirements of institutional care. A job that simultaneously promotes an extension of care women have been

conditioned for yet forbids this type of relational care either "creates conflicts for workers," damaging their mental health, or "becomes a mechanism for exploitation and the extraction of additional labor from care workers" (Duffy 89).

Loach examines the intertwining dynamic of care work in the workforce and at home throughout *Sorry We Missed You* and *I, Daniel Blake*, showcasing how the exploitive practices toward workers in the care field affect the precarious lives of working-class mothers. *Sorry We Missed You* in particular follows a Newcastle couple working tirelessly to obtain financial security despite the obstacles of their precarious jobs and the devastating impact of their jobs on their personal lives. While the father of the family, Ricky, works as a package delivery driver under the misleading guise of the gig economy, the mother, Abby, works as an in-home care worker for the elderly and disabled. Loach draws special attention to Abby's skill in managing not only her clients but also her family as she demonstrates the exhausting cycle of shifts mothers perform.

Many of Abby's scenes involve bus rides from client to client, as she was forced to sell her car so her husband could purchase a vehicle for his job. During these periods in between clients, she participates in the second shift despite being outside the home.

Loach purposely draws attention to Abby's phone calls to her children as she monitors the time her daughter spends on homework versus the computer and offers to look over her school projects when she gets home. She ensures her son is attending class and correcting his behavior problems. Even without including a specific scene of Abby cooking, Loach reveals Abby's dedication to her second shift through phone messages that inform her kids that food for dinner is ready in the fridge. In "Paid, Domestic, and Emotional Work in the Precariat," Zoe Goodall and Kay Cook point out that throughout the film, Ricky shows no signs of cooking, cleaning, or checking homework, "implicitly reinforcing that Abby is the rightful primary caregiver of their children" (7). Loach's consideration of the feminized existence of the second shift allows for an understanding of a true representation of the challenges working-class women face in the home.

Abby's work in the second shift extends to her work as an in-home care worker, for the cooking, cleaning, and care she provides for her clients echoes the work she completes in her own home. Loach's representation of her nurturant job validates Duffy's argument that domestic labor translates into the workforce as feminine jobs. In fact, during one of Abby's visits to a client, she gently wakes him up to

get him ready for the day, and then the scene cuts to Abby's daughter, Liza Jane, similarly waking her brother up so he can get ready for school. The two scenes provide a direct correlation between paid and unpaid care work and allow a basic understanding of the importance of relational care in the care field.

In addition, Loach's portrayal of Abby's care work job accurately aligns with Duffy's concerns regarding the organization of care work. The care field began to place more value on quantitative data than relationships with the clients, and to remain competitive with other companies offering in-home care, Abby's company requires every carer to spend a limited amount of time with each client, paying them only for the time allotted. Abby consistently tells her clients, "I don't have time," because, within her contract, she is only paid for her work. Relational care, such as exchanging pictures and doing each other's hair, is not included as a requirement by her company, emphasized when she claims, "I can't get friendly with the clients" (*Sorry* 37:21). Of course, Abby struggles to be completely objective in a nurturant job that requires intimate relationships. The film addresses this dissonance when Abby works extra, knowingly unpaid, to clean up a client after they had spread excrement all over themselves, their surroundings, and Abby during a mental breakdown. Abby

claims she had one rule, to "treat them like your mum and look after them," for "nobody" would leave their mom "in a state like that" (*Sorry* 48:06). Her maternal instincts to look after those who needed help clashed with the care sector's dismissal of relational work, allowing Abby's employers to obtain extra unpaid labor from her, revealing a specifically gendered exploitative practice.

Loach's critique of the corruptive nature of precarious nurturant jobs focuses not only on the organization of care work, however, but also on the hours and pay. Abby works on a zero-hour contract, a system regularly used by the care and hospitality sector (Ndzi et al. 5). In this system, an employer offers a predetermined number of hours to an employee every week, and an employee can decide how many hours they want to accept. Employers reason that allowing employees to choose their hours means that zero-hour contracts have a flexibility not available through other types of jobs. The Trades Union Congress (TUC), however, reports that zero-hour contracts routinely have problems with low pay, underemployment, income insecurity, and lack of employment rights (4-5). Although Loach chooses to focus on overwork as an exploitative practice of the contracts, Abby likely also experiences underemployment as a care worker, as an employer could

just as easily deny hours to a worker as they could overload them. In fact, the TUC acknowledges that employers of zero-hour contracts tend to punish those who do not accept the hours offered to them, claiming employers reduce their hours or dismiss them for "refusing or failing to be available for work" (8). Whether Abby feels the effects of this threat, she rarely denies the work given to her even as the long hours begin to disrupt her home life.

Abby's experiences as a carer in an exploitative working environment inevitably affect her mental health, her sense of stability, and her relationship with her children. As Duffy argues, the conflict between the nature of nurturant jobs and the practice of eliminating relational care creates tremendous pressure and conflict on the workers. In the "Report on the Use of Zero-Hour Contracts," professors at the University of Hertfordshire found that zero-hour contracts overwhelmingly increase anxiety, stress, and depression in workers, and they found a fifty percent relation between poor health and work under a zero-hour contract (12). Loach highlights that despite all her efforts to be an effective care worker and still maintain her duties as a mother, Abby "still feels guilty that she's an insufficient mother" (Goodall and Kay 8) for not being as present in her children's lives as she believes she should be. Her son's struggles in school and her daugh-

ter's responsibility to take care of herself at home feed her guilt because she feels her obligations to her job prevent her from being an effective mother.

Because the challenges people face in working-class jobs deeply affect the functionality of home life, mental health plays a clear role not only in the workplace but within the family. Loach depicts how both Ricky and Abby inevitably bring home the vicious consequences to their mental health caused by their jobs, prompting Abby to work her third shift: trying to promote an emotional balance in a family existing in precarity. Ricky's reaction to the corrupt practices of his job manifests in unrelenting anger, most notably as he yells, curses, and argues with his teenage son. Despite the equal amount of corruption she faces, Abby's response to his outbursts, asking Ricky, "Can we just talk instead of shouting?" (*Sorry* 40:26), signifies her labor within emotion work. She tries to de-escalate the argument between her husband and her son, warning Ricky of the damage he is doing to his relationship with his family. In addition, Loach shows how she further tries to maintain harmony within her home by hiding from her husband her daughter's bedwetting and the messages she receives about her son's misbehavior at school. She suppresses her feelings to protect Ricky's state of mind, shielding him from the negative aspects of their

lives that would further disrupt his emotional well-being and cause more dysfunction within the family.

One of the reasons behind Abby's labor in the third shift is her participation in cruel optimism. Abby and Ricky trust that with time, they will be able to pay off their debt and purchase their dream house for their family to live in. Abby works to prevent arguments in her family and protect Ricky's state of mind to help preserve relationships within the family and their mental health because she believes that if they could get through this difficult time in their lives, they would eventually achieve the good life they long for. Of course, Abby constantly performs emotional work due to the damaging consequences precarity has on mental health, which simultaneously chips away at her faith in achieving the American dream and forces her to realize the underlining cruelty of the optimistic hope of upward mobility.

As Loach demonstrates, the climax of Abby's character that signifies the damage exploitation has caused to her well-being is the phone call she makes with Ricky's boss in the middle of a hospital waiting room. Despite understanding that Ricky is severely injured after a run-in with thieves, his boss begins to list the things stolen or damaged that Ricky must financially compensate for, prompting Abby to take the phone from her husband and

exclaim, "How do you get away with this? How does your company get away with treating people like this?" (*Sorry* 1:33:22). Abby's breakdown is a realization of the reality of cruel optimism. Before this moment, her efforts in the third shift confused the conflicting relationship between precarity and familial harmony. Yet, Loach emphasizes that during the phone call, as she realizes the futility of her efforts in the face of precarity, as well as the full extent of Ricky's exploitation, her control of her emotions breaks and she expresses unrestrained anger. The audacity of Ricky's boss to demand money from her husband after Ricky had experienced such a traumatizing and violent ordeal rightly draws many movie critics' attention, yet Abby's realization that they will likely never experience a debt-free "good life" because of the exploitative and precarious nature of their jobs deserves equal consideration. Loach's viewers can feel the moment Abby's hope and optimism for the American dream vanishes as she curses and sobs in front of the other patients in the waiting room, highlighting the harsh reality of the working-class.

Loach recognizes, of course, that a mother does not have to be a part of a typical nuclear family to labor in the second and third shifts, experience the drawbacks of the care field regarding relational care, and function in a state of cruel optimism. In *I, Daniel Blake*, Katie

is a single mother who must take care of her two children and her home while she desperately searches for employment. Katie relies on the UK's welfare program to support her family, which allows Loach to provide the film with an example of the necessity of welfare benefits. After waiting in a women's homeless shelter for two years, Katie finally moves into a flat as authorized by her London council, transferring from her hometown of London to Newcastle. Daniel Blake, a widowed fifty-eight-year-old carpenter who suffered a heart attack on the job, meets Katie at the welfare office while trying to access his benefits through Employment and Support Allowance. The two become close friends as they navigate the tribulations of working-class experiences.

Unlike in *Sorry We Missed You*, Loach explicitly shows Katie's labor in the second shift as she cleans their living space: dusting surfaces, washing dishes, and scrubbing the bathroom tiles. Because the film begins with Katie's move to the flat in Newcastle, Loach critiques the state of homes provided by the welfare program once a tenant moves in by showcasing the filthy and damaged condition of the flat. Despite the place's disorder, Katie claims she will "make this place a home" (*I, Daniel* 18:42) and continually cleans to bring their surroundings to a livable condition. In addition to housekeeping, Katie prepares food for her kids and

Daniel and disciplines her children. Dylan, her lively and energetic son, requires constant attention, and Katie complains to Daniel, "I can't sit down for five minutes without him getting in trouble, can I?" (*I, Daniel* 18:05). Despite the differences between Abby's and Katie's families, both mothers unflinchingly labor in the second shift.

While her unemployment forces her to rely on welfare benefits, Katie desperately searches for a job to support her family in addition to the work she performs at home. She creates flyers that advertise herself as a "reliable cleaner" and distributes them to different hotels, cafés, and restaurants, as well as walking door to door in residential neighborhoods to drop them in mail slots. Unsurprisingly, Loach follows this scene that displays Katie's search for a job in housekeeping with the scene of her scrubbing her bathroom, deliberately connecting her domestic labor to a paid job in the workforce. Therefore, Loach clearly identifies the job Katie searches for as an extension of her care work at home.

Although Loach focuses less openly on the care field in this earlier film, he nevertheless demonstrates the importance of relational care in welfare work. While welfare is not strictly a nurturant job as described by Duffy, Loach illustrates how welfare workers must have an empathetic understanding of their clients in face-to-face interactions to

provide responsibly for their needs and well-being. As neoliberal ideals have successfully reformed welfare work, workers have displaced relational care to individual families, promoting familial independence outside of the government system. This shift of care from the welfare office to individual families has led to impersonal dealings from welfare workers in which their main objective is to urge independence in their clients by stressing the importance of finding a job regardless of their circumstances.

To reinforce the negative impact of impersonal care, Loach depicts Katie on the receiving end of businesses controlling the output of their workers by creating a cold, objective environment that encourages efficiency rather than a personable environment that produces quality relationships. Her first scene takes place in the welfare office after she learns she is being sanctioned, or receiving a reduction in benefits, for arriving a few minutes late to her appointment. Although she desperately tries to explain that she is new to Newcastle and was on a bus that made a wrong turn, forcing her and her two children to run to the office to try to make it to her appointment on time, the workers refuse to listen to her explanation and immediately have security escort her from the office, claiming, “We have rules here, rules that we have to stick to” and that she has “a duty to

be here on time” (*I, Daniel* 16:10). The workers’ emphasis on sticking to a strict schedule mirrors Abby’s care job in *Sorry We Missed You* as time restraints affect her ability to provide relational care. With Katie, Loach shows how the elimination of relational care forces the welfare workers to ignore Katie’s individual needs and stress the importance of self-reliance through sanctions.

Loach reveals how Katie’s decrease in benefits combined with her inability to secure a job prove to have disastrous consequences on her home life. She is forced to prioritize which bills she should pay, and unsurprisingly, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that “benefit sanctions” are a key factor “driving demand for food banks” (8). To ensure her children have enough to eat, she neglects feeding herself, relying on small portions of fruit to sustain her until she can attend her local food bank. As she waits in a dishearteningly long line to enter the food bank, Loach draws attention to her pale complexion, somber demeanor, and unsteady footing to dramatize starvation. After she enters the food bank, the camera follows her around the shelves as she begins gathering the items she needs, with the help of a volunteer, before she grabs a can of beans, opens the lid, and desperately shoves cold beans into her mouth with her hands. Once she comprehends her actions, she begins crying, apologizing profusely to the

volunteer and Daniel as they work to clean her up and get her some food. She admits to Daniel, “I can’t cope, Dan. I feel like I’m going under” (*I, Daniel* 54:50), expressing her guilt and disappointment with herself despite all her efforts to take care of her family at the expense of her well-being. Loach’s demonstration of Katie’s desperate attempt to secure essential needs for herself after being forced to deny them reminds his audience of the corruption of working-class experiences caused by neoliberal values.

Loach takes Katie’s desperation one step further, because not only must she deny herself food, but she is also unable to gain access to feminine products. The food bank did not supply feminine products, so Katie feels she has no other choice but to shoplift sanitary pads, razors, and deodorant from a local grocery store. The front security officer immediately apprehends her and takes her to the manager of the store, who graciously lets her go. In “Vulnerability, Care and Citizenship in Austerity Politics,” researchers Jacqueline Gibbs and Aura Lehtonen argue that regardless of the manager’s compassionate response to her effort to shoplift, her decision to expose herself to criminality and potential punishment is because of “the processes of being sanctioned and removed from previous modes of familial and social support in London” (54). Loach demonstrates how work-

ing-class experiences directly related to self-reliance and impersonal efficiency created a desperate, vulnerable mother trying to secure essential needs for herself after being forced to deny them.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation describes sanctions as a way to “require people to behave in a certain way” through the threat of “reducing, suspending, or ending” welfare benefits (1), yet the consequences of sanctioning include “unfavorable effects on long-term outcomes” such as reduced “earnings over time, child welfare, and job quality” (7). Despite her sanctioning that subjects her to abject poverty and the possibility of these long-term effects, Katie exists in a state of cruel optimism, claiming she is “gonna get a part-time job” and then “go back to me books” (*I, Daniel* 21:55). Even though she realizes poverty impedes her progress toward the American dream, she argues, “I’m not gonna give up” (*I, Daniel* 22:05). The more time Katie spends around Daniel, the more she is encouraged to continue her optimism, for he urges her to keep moving forward to “make her kids proud” (*I, Daniel* 1:08:15), yet the obstacles that inevitably surface in working-class conditions, including her desperate need for food at the food shelter and her theft of feminine products at the grocery store, continue to threaten the existence of her optimism.

To highlight the breaking point that leads to Katie's recognition of the reality of cruel optimism, Loach captures the moment Katie believes she has failed to adequately perform her second shift. One night, her daughter, Daisy, reveals that girls at her school are making fun of her because her shoes fell apart for the second time. Katie promises she will buy Daisy new shoes even though she lacks the money, but this last obstacle forces her to acknowledge that despite her good intentions, poverty holds her back from shielding her daughter from their precarious lifestyle, much less an opportunity to experience the "good life." She meets with the security officer of the grocery store, who offers a "nice girl" (*I, Daniel* 1:02:05) like her a job as a sex worker. Daniel, who had consistently persuaded her to hold on to hope, finds out what she is doing and tearfully tries to convince her to quit, telling her he built her a bookshelf for all the books she had intended to study. Loach shows Katie rolling her eyes and sighing loudly at Daniel's admission because she had already discovered that her attachment to pursuing schooling as a means to achieve the American dream was cruel in nature. Dreaming of college prevented her from finding the means to support her family. Daniel's insistence on trying to separate her from sex work in favor of existing once again in cruel optimism "jeopardizes Katie's efforts to support herself and

her children" (Gibbs and Lehtonen 55), revealing another harsh reality of working-class circumstances.

For a large part of the movie, Daniel participates in the third shift with Katie as they both try to emotionally support Katie's children. Yet, when Katie becomes a sex worker, she shields Daniel from the reality she discovered. She allows him to exist in his cruel optimism, protecting him from the avenue she needed to take to support her children even as she relinquishes her own hope for the good life. By protecting his state of mind, she labors in the third shift not only for her kids but for Daniel as well. As Daniel's health begins to deteriorate, she continues to care for him physically and emotionally, accompanying him to his appeal and trying to alleviate his anxiety toward successfully receiving his benefits. Loach depicts how she reassures Daniel that he has everything he needs to confront the board hearing his appeal, and then she mentions when he is done, he can "come to dinner to celebrate" (*I, Daniel* 1:31:22), demonstrating Hochschild's point that women manage emotion to "celebrate the well-being of others" (165). Despite her emotional turmoil, she suppresses her feelings to support her friend, displaying how one continues "living on" despite "visible experiences of precarity" (Gibbs and Lehtonen 55).

Although critics have tended to overlook Loach's consideration of the complexity of care work in the age of neoliberalism and its impact on care workers' and patients' personal lives, Loach highlights the gendered experiences working-class mothers face within the workforce and at home. His films *Sorry We Missed You* and *I, Daniel Blake* were made before the Covid-19 pandemic, but they reveal problems within the care field that have only intensified since the pandemic began. Because the pandemic has increased demand for care, care work has transformed to further encompass the lives of workers as they are forced to acclimate themselves to new ways of teaching, nursing, and caregiving amid the same neoliberal expectations of efficiency and personal responsibility. Despite the risk they face interacting with those they care for, care workers contend with their own economic insecurity and the pressure of market values, which forces them to continue caring for as many people as possible. To protect care workers and their clients, students, and patients, we must value qualitative care over quantitative, relational care over profits. As directors create new films to represent the impact of the pandemic on working-class families, they must continue to recognize the gendered experiences of women in care work as Loach did so that society may more readily recognize and find solutions to

the precarity and exploitation of working-class women.

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