



## Book Review: *The Shape of Care*

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Mindy Fried (creator and host), Helen Barrington (executive producer) *The Shape of Care* [Audio podcast]. Whiskey Lane Productions, 2019. 22 episodes. <https://theshapeofcare.org/>  
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*The Shape of Care* is a podcast about caregiving. It explores paid and unpaid caregiving from the perspective of care workers, family and friend caregivers, and the people who need care. Now in its second season, with a total of 22 episodes (18 in season one, 4 in season two), the podcast shares personal care stories, programs, and policies in order to highlight sociological and policy issues related to the long-term-care (LTC) system in the United States. The podcast is relevant to a broad range of sociology courses at all levels, including courses on gender and feminist theory, medical sociology, labor, health policy, family systems, long-term care, aging, and disability studies, as well as courses on race, class, status, power, and inequity in the health care system. In each of these courses, the implications of an inadequate LTC system may be discussed.

The podcast is created and hosted by Dr. Mindy Fried, an applied sociologist and former family caregiver. The personal experience of caring for her father provides a rich and solid foundation for the exploration of home-based and nursing home care and furthers her goal of bringing “sociological theory and research methods out of the academy and into the world.” *The Shape of Care* first aired in 2019 and is described as a dynamic podcast that “explores the world of caregiving through storytelling and information sharing” (Fried n.d.). It is conceptualized as a platform for caregivers, experts, and activists to talk to each other publicly about the problems they struggled against individually. This approach matches current care-related advocacy that values and centers storytelling as a method for culture change and policy development. This approach has value in the classroom because students are exposed to stories that will help them

utilize the sociological imagination to recognize LTC as an urgent social problem rather than a private and individual challenge.

The first two episodes of season two take an in-depth look at home- and community-based care, especially the relationship between the person who requires care and professional home care workers. Episodes three and four explore nursing home care. Key contributions of this podcast are that it brings the listener intimately into the homes and lives of people in need of care, rendering visible lived experiences and complexities of relationships between care workers and those in need of care in a way that isn't often available. In doing so, the audience is exposed to the difficult realities of caregiving and receiving, but also to the joys and beauty of these interdependent relationships. In addition, it examines important features of the LTC system while informing about government programs, such as Medicaid, Social Security, and Section 8 ("Episode Two: Making a Difference: From Care Work to Home Care Activism"); state and federal LTC policy, such as WA Cares ("Episode Two: Making a Difference: From Care Work to Home Care Activism") and the Nursing Home Improvement and Accountability Act of 2021 ("Episode Four: She Calls Me Her Three C's: Compassion, Caring and Comfort"); and labor and advocacy organizations, such as SEIU, National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), and Caring Across Generations. Furthermore, episodes discuss the low wage, gendered, and racialized care workforce as well as racism and negative attitudes about care workers. In addition, specific episodes discuss the love that is "like family" that develops as people get to know each other ("Episode One: From Fear to Love: An Evangelical Christian and a Muslim Home Care Worker"). Quality of care, or lack thereof, in nursing homes and alternatives, such as the Green House model ("Episode Three: Nursing Assistants: The Heart and Soul of Nursing Care"), and the current lack of comprehensive LTC policies in the United States ("Episode Two: Making a Difference: From Care Work to Home Care Activism") are also explored.

Sociologists have examined and questioned every aspect of this—what constitutes family, what tasks and services remain within the "private" sphere, which ones can or should be moved into "public" management, for which can one use hired services, and how race, class, and gender determine which people do which tasks. The podcast can be used to introduce these questions and the topic of caregiving and could also be used to illustrate and discuss theoretical concepts at both introductory and advanced levels. For example, at an introductory level, instructors could explore the impact of illness on family systems after listening to "Episode Two: Making a Difference: From Care Work to Home Care Activism," about the possibility of a husband's Social Security benefits being transferred to a nursing home, where he will be forced to live due to inadequate availability of home care. Institutional bias is emphasized, with Medicaid funding being available for nursing home care but not home care. In addition, the negative financial impact on his wife is highlighted. Furthermore, the precarity of aging in our society without proper social policy is underscored, pointing to the need for family-centered policy. Interdependence and awareness of public benefits becomes the focus because the ideology of the individual is problematized as we see the impact on a wife of her husband needing to move into a nursing home to receive care.

In more advanced courses, the podcast could be paired with foundational theoretical readings to discuss application of theory. Questions can be studied from the social constructionist perspective in the now-classic work of [Berger and Luckman \(1966\)](#), from the [Marxist \(\[1867\]](#)

[1971](#)) perspective on class relations, from the much-argued and often-critiqued Functionalist model offered by [Parsons \(1951\)](#), and of course, the increasingly acknowledged critiques contained in critical race theory and contemporary feminist analyses. It could also be used to explore research methods, especially gaps in the research as it relates to paid, family, and friend caregivers and the people they care for as a unit of analysis.

Episodes are less than 30 minutes long, making them excellent vehicles for supplementing weekly reading. The first two episodes focus on an at-home caregiver/care receiver dyad, and episodes three and four focus on a dyad in a nursing home. Episodes can be listened to as a series for a more comprehensive understanding or the first or last two together for a more in-depth look at either home or nursing home care. The episodes can also be utilized individually, based on topics of interest. The website provides resources for educators in the form of discussion questions related to each episode, which can be useful for classroom discussions, writing prompts, and other assignments.

The issues presented in the podcast have broad academic reach. For example, when paid caregivers both at home and in nursing homes are described as “like family” (“Episode One: From Fear to Love: An Evangelical Christian and a Muslim Home Care Worker” and “Episode Four: She Calls Me Her Three C’s: Compassion, Caring and Comfort), students could be exposed to feminist social and economic theory literature exploring the ways in which this narrative can perpetuate the exploitation of paid caregivers, who are often women of color. There is a wide literature on this topic, which students could be assigned to explore this topic in depth while connecting to the personal narratives in the podcast ([Dodson and Zinzavage 2015](#); [Folbre 2012](#)). *The Shape of Care* would be an excellent starting point or supplement to this important topic in the care work literature.

Dr. [Traci Levy’s \(2022\)](#) in-class activity, “The Challenge and Inequality of Care: A Role-Playing Game about Informal Caregiving in the US,” would be a useful and engaging addition to teaching about caregiving and LTC. Although the original version of the game focuses on “informal” (i.e., unpaid friend and family) caregiving while a patient is hospitalized, it could be adapted to explore community-based and nursing home care as well.

When using this podcast to teach about caregiving in educational settings, there are some things educators should be cautious of. Research and advocacy in the area of LTC often perpetuate the silos that create roadblocks to effective policy by focusing on *either* paid or family caregivers or the people they care for. When more than one perspective is included, it is often either paid *or* family caregivers, along with care recipients. Season two (2022) of *The Shape of Care* tends to do the same: focus primarily on the relationship between paid caregivers and the people they care for while excluding family caregiver perspectives. Although a triadic approach to caregiving has been called for ([Ornstein-Sloan 2016](#); [Talley and Crews 2007](#)), it remains the exception rather than the rule. *The Shape of Care* falls into a similar pattern, siloing perspectives rather than uniting them in their shared and overlapping experiences. For example, the focus of season two is on home-based and institutional care, both places where family caregivers provide a majority of care ([AARP and National Alliance for Caregiving 2020](#); [Coe and Werner 2022](#)).

However, this group is excluded from the stories that are told. The danger of this exclusion is the perpetuation of the dichotomy between paid and family caregivers. To correct this false dichotomy, [Ungerson \(1990\)](#) argues for the importance of analyzing formal (paid) and

“informal” (unpaid) caregiving together. Therefore, when using the podcast for teaching, it would be important to highlight these gaps in the literature while including episodes from season one and other material, such as the documentary *Care* ([Fishel 2017](#)), which incorporates family caregivers into stories that focus on the relationship between paid caregivers and those they care for as well as research that includes both paid *and* family caregivers when the main focus is either family or paid caregiver/care recipient dyads ([Iecovich 2010](#); [Reckrey et al. 2022](#); [Ungerson 1990](#); [Ward-Griffin and Marshall 2003](#)). Given the dearth of research focusing on triads in the United States, instructors will need to be intentional about pointing out the problems inherent in this approach, especially from a policy perspective. [Iecovich \(2010\)](#), [Ungerson \(1990\)](#), and [Ward-Griffin and Marshall \(2003\)](#) provide international perspectives on the importance of inclusion of triads in research and are excellent sources to introduce students to this viewpoint. Season two ends with a call to action and discussion of the need for a movement in order to pressure policymakers for social change. Political action is necessary and will be more powerful and effective with the collective strength of paid and friend and family caregivers, advocating together, along with those who need care. Given that family caregivers are the backbone of LTC, it is an ongoing conundrum that they continue to be left out of stories related to LTC.

The triadic nature of caregiving needs more attention, in general, and although season one focuses on family caregiving, bringing all caregivers together in one, inclusive narrative is an essential component needed to move this issue forward. [Talley and Crews \(2007\)](#) identified a triadic model of caregiving 15 years ago; however, little progress has been made in recognizing the interdependence of family caregivers, care recipients, and professional caregivers. While [Talley and Crews \(2007\)](#) stopped short of a more detailed analysis, only saying that these relationships can be impacted positively or negatively by structural forces, instructors might include their work to introduce the importance of this perspective. Additionally, the podcast does not provide much history into the racist policies that have created the current conditions for the poor wages and working conditions of paid caregivers. Therefore, instructors could use the podcast to highlight the personal stories of workers in conjunction with material related to the exclusion of this group of workers from labor protections, such as the Fair Labor Standards Act ([Glenn 2010](#)). Importantly, [Glenn \(2010\)](#) also explores both paid and family caregiving, which would provide the additional benefit of further highlighting the importance of these two perspectives simultaneously. Finally, the last episode includes a discussion of death, which may be triggering for some students. Instructors should consider providing content warnings and might include readings related to death positivity to ease students into important discussions related to the end of life, which are too often avoided.

*The Shape of Care* is an excellent resource for exploring the many nuances of the LTC system from the perspectives of the people most directly impacted by it. The personal nature of care and the stories shared prompt listeners to deep reflection, as we consider the type of care we want for ourselves and our loved ones as we age, increasing the likelihood of engagement of students outside of the classroom. The sociological imagination will surely be utilized as students consider their own family experiences and make connections to this urgent social issue while considering the social policy landscape at both the state and federal levels.

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