Rethinking the Concept of Care

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Departing from Carol Thomas’ (1993) essay, titled, “De-Constructing Concepts of Care,” in which she claims that care is not a theoretical category but only a descriptive concept that denotes the totality of society’s people-centered work, this paper tries to recover what is missing from Thomas’ conception of care—tension, conflicts, and the impasse that subjects encounter in specific caring situations in the form of burden, stress, and ethical collisions. The paper uses data from a qualitative research on elder abuse issues in the Chinese immigrant families in Toronto, and the script of a short play about a Chinese Canadian family as examples to demonstrate tension in caring relationships that is often unspoken or held in abeyance by the subjects. Narratives are interpreted as embodied in values and beliefs about the notion of care and burden that go beyond the discourse of labor, productivity, self-management, and scarcity of time and resources. An analysis of the impasse in these stories helps us rethink about the concept of care as an ethical problem that pertains to the subjectivity of the individuals and the value of life.