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Narrating the New World Domestic Order

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo

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My primary research on this topic is based on Mexican and Central American domestic migrant workers in Los Angeles, California. My talk strings together some general observations about the global picture of things domestic, and then ends with narratives of “caring” and the kinds of desired work relations that domestic employers and employees told me they would prefer.

Introduction

A few decades ago, no one predicted that we would see a resurgence of paid domestic work, and that this resurgence would not only be played out on global scale, but that it would depend on mechanisms of globalization and international migration. Most observers confidently declared that nails were in the coffin of paid domestic work.

Not only have we seen a resurgence of private paid domestic work in the United States, England, in Europe and Canada—“the old industrialized North”, but also in the more newly industrialized, or post-industrial nations of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan; in the oil rich nations of the Middle East, in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates (Israel has come on line as well). Particular parts of the globe have emerged as the places producing migrant domestic workers. We have witnessed internal and

international migration of female domestic workers in and from Latin America, Asia, South Asia, and now the formerly Soviet Eastern European countries. Not only as paid domestic work not gone away, we see that today it relies on the global migration of women, among whom are many women who leave their families to do the work.

There appear to be new transnational regional of migrant domestic workers. Mexico and Central America (particularly the nations of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) are tightly interwoven through social networks of domestic worker migrants to the United States. Brazil and the Dominican Republic are connected to the United States too. Ecuadorian and Peruvian migrant women go to work as domestic workers in Spain, Italy and Israel—but not to US. Why? My guess is that these migrations developed relatively late, in the late 1990s, after migrant domestic worker social networks were already firmly embedded as Central American and Mexican in the United States. The financial costs and social capital costs of migrating from South America are great, so these workers have rationalized the expense by going to less saturated labor markets. Meanwhile, other regional circuits have emerged linking Asian, Eastern European and African domestic workers to places such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Canada, Israel and western Europe. Geography is not destiny—migrant domestic workers are not necessarily going to the most proximate post-industrial society.

Narrating Domestic Work: Who Cares About Us?

A good deal of literature has rightly identified care work as encompassing "caring about" and verbal intimacy. Care work is not just bodily care, feeding, bathing, nursing, but it is fundamentally about emotional connection and nurturance. This is expressed, in part, through talking and listening, activities which may have nothing to do with the physical, bodily mechanics of caring for another person.

What kinds of relationships should prevail among domestic employers and their employees? What do the debates on personalism offer us? Below, based on interviews with domestic employers and employees in Los Angeles, I offer some clues.

First, it is important to acknowledge two alternative frames in the literature. Most of the scholarly literature casts close, personal employee-employer relations as key mechanisms of oppression and labor control. This is true in the work of historian Katzman, and the sociologists Judith Rollins and Mary Romero. According to this view, benovolent employer maternalism mandates employee rituals of deference, which reinforce inequality and hierarchy. Maternalism carries quid pro quo obligations, blurring the line between paid work and unpaid favors. Employers may expect employees to reciprocate with deference, gratitude and extra hours of work.

A minority view holds that close employer-employee relations may serve domestic workers as tools of empowerment. This is best summarized by the sociologist Bonnie Thornton Dill:

"The intimacy which can develop between an employer and employee, along with the lack of job standardization may increase the employee's leverage in the relationship and give her some latitude within which to negotiate a work plan that meets her own interests and desires."

With my research in Los Angeles in the 1990s, which was reported in the book Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence (2001), I found no one uniform set of guidelines for employer-employee relations. But a general pattern prevails: Employer maternalism has declined, and most Latina employees say they would prefer employers who interface more closely, and personally with them. This was especially true of nanny/housekeepers, and less so of house cleaners.

How do we make sense of this finding and reconcile it with the literature?

I did so by distinguishing between maternalism and personalism. I see the former as involving a unilateral positioning of the employer as a benefactor who receives personal thanks, recognition, validation from employee in a top down fashion. Personalism, alternatively, I see as a bilateral relationship involving two individuals, recognizing each other not only with respect to the role or office (cleaner or clerk), but

rather as persons embedded in unique set of social relations, with their own aspirations and needs. Below I present segments of narratives that appeared in Domestica.

There are different types employers, including those who work outside of the home, and those who don't. I found that employed employers who worked outside of the home and had young children were caught in a time bind. They wondered how they could have personal relations. As one woman said, would she develop this on "my time, or her time?" But even employers afflicted with working mother syndrome find that when hiring someone to take care of their kids and home on a daily basis, some time and effort must be expended on a personal relationship.

Karla Steinheimer had come to resent some of the time and emotional energy she had to spend with Filomina, but increasingly, she saw it as a "necessary evil." In her circle of busy working women, this was a common pattern. "I think it's always an issue-- everyone I know faces this," she explained. "It's "a lonely job, so when we are home Filomina will follow us around and you know, will talk because she's alone in the house all day. But we're usually in a hurry to get out the door or otherwise. So, there's always that issue."

Karla Steinheimer had experienced this with a previous house cleaner, but that was easier to ignore. Now, she felt obliged to reciprocate with Filomina because of the child. "I think it's very important to spend the time talking to your child care provider because if you don't, you don't know what's going on," she reasoned. " I always have a lot of questions I want to ask Filomina about how the day went. What did he (the baby) have to eat, you know, was he constipated....you know, all those issues but then it always

turns into a whole thing about Filomina's cousin's friend's brother who did this and on and on and on."

"So, how do you deal with that when it gets into the cousin's friend's brother?" I asked.

"Just, the best I can. I don't mean to be ungracious or unkind but I try to limit it if I'm running out the door to an appointment or have things that I need to do in the house." Employers like Karla may shift their schedules, rearrange their furniture and even momentarily confine themselves to one part of the house in order to minimize these annoying verbal interruptions to their own work. In fact, Karla herself had tried all of these tactics. Most recently, she had moved her home office into her small bedroom, she explained, because "that's an area that I can be shut off from Filomina. The desk was (previously) set up in the baby's room, but if I went in there, then she was going in and out all the time. So now if I have to work and make phone calls I go in my bedroom and shut the door and then there's no disturbance." In this instance, the traditional image of the domestic worker relegated to invisibility and confined to the "backroom" kitchen of a large home is replaced by the employer, now in a much smaller house, seeking to establish privacy by sequestering herself in a makeshift bedroom office. Both scenarios result from the employers' privilege to search for and maintain her own privacy, but in this contemporary example, it is the employer who winds up with confined spatial mobility.

Instrumental personalism characterized the Steinheimer's relationship with their nanny/housekeeper. In order to assure good care for her son, Karla felt obliged to participate in some personal conversations with Filomina. She contrasted this to the type

of non-relationship she and her husband had maintained with a house cleaner who worked for them for approximately ten years, before the birth of their son. Karla recalled literally fleeing the house cleaner, whom she and her husband perceived as overly chatty and needy. "If we were at home by any chance with our cleaning lady, who used to absolutely follow us around, you know, it was impossible to do anything when she was there. When I was in my first three months trimester of pregnancy and I was feeling so sick, come hell or high water, I was out of that door at 8 o'clock because I didn't want to run into her or her incessant questions." The house cleaner often asked for advice on how to deal with credit problems, but Karla and her husband preferred "very little contact." "To be honest," she confided, "we would try to stay out of the house, because you know, she would drive us crazy--talk, talk, talk."

It is easy to blanketly condemn this, but these instrumental interactions rule a good deal of contemporary society. Women engaged in full-time employment find little time often to invest in relations with their family member, let alone the nanny. If, as Arlie Hochschild found, working mothers and fathers find it hard to pull back from their jobs to provide hours to devote to their kids & spouses, they are even less inclined to find time for personal exchanges with their employees.

Homemakers and House Cleaners: Generational Divides and Distances

Well-to-do homemaker women who have weekly cleaners generally have more discretionary time on their hands than do employed women. Even if they are busy with provisioning, chauffeuring children to their various activities and appointments, and doing charitable volunteering, they are more likely than the employed woman to be home

and have the time to casually stop and chat with the house cleaner or the nanny/housekeeper. Life stage and generation, however, differentiate the extent of personalism among today's homemaker employers.

Women who are homemakers in their thirties and forties, members of the baby boom generation, seem to feel less the tug of personalistic domestic relations than do older homemakers. Homemakers in their late fifties and sixties, whose children are now grown, often seek close relations with their house cleaner, although they are not always able to mandate these. In my book, I summarize the situation of women in this context. I also found that there were important class distinctions. Very wealthy employers often prefer more distance, and they also hire staffs of 4 to 5 people to provide round the clock service. One such employer that I interviewed, whom I refer to as Jenna Proust, was employing four women of color to ensure that her large home ran smoothly. One Guatemalan woman performed most of the cleaning Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 2 p.m.; on weekdays at noon, a young Salvadoran woman arrived to clean, cook, grocery shop, drive the children home from school or to appointments, and look after the children until 8 p.m. On Saturday evenings, an African American woman served as the baby sitter for the two elementary school-aged children, and on Tuesday evenings, and Sunday afternoons, a young Chicana--who had previously worked as their live-in--came to work as a nanny. Jenna Proust and her husband paid approximately \$4000. a month for these women to take care of their 6700 square foot home and their two children.

As we sat down in her cavernous living room, Jenna propped her feet up on the distressed, antique coffee table and offered, "I think I've gotten to the point where I'm hiring more passive people." She was referring to Latina immigrant women whom she

perceived as more reserved and demure, as opposed to Martha, the U.S.-born Chicana whom she had previously hired as a live-in and now hired only two days a week, or European au pairs that she had employed in the past. Although she perceived Reina, the young Salvadoran woman who worked from noon until 8 p.m. to be completely incompetent at mediating public interactions with the children's' orthodontist or household repair people, she was, for the time, willing to overlook these instances . She overlooked incompetence in favor of Reina's quiet, deferential manner. By contrast, she had complete confidence in the abilities and judgement of Martha, a Chicana from the rural area of Oxnard, California. She could be counted on to purchase the right kind of coffee filters when she did the shopping, or to know that a child should not have an allergy shot while on antibiotics, but Jenna Proust found Martha loud, brash and too familiar.

"For instance," she explained, "I've been trying to lose weight this year and exercising a lot, and Martha has trouble with weight too. I don't want to share that with her but she has taken it upon herself to burst onto the scene, like last night telling me exactly how many pounds she lost, like a child almost, and more like a close friend. This is where I would like a little distance." Martha had not only incorrectly assumed that it was okay to reciprocally exchange dieting successes and struggles, ones that perhaps highlighted the employer's failures, but she had also refused to act submissively, and this too bothered Jenna Proust. "She'll say, 'Don't say anything to me or I'll bite your head off, I have PMS!' And that to me is just, well, I just don't like living with someone who's put me on notice, especially someone who works for me and I won't pull the class thing, but excuse me, I'm the one who is paying the bills here." Although Jenna Proust believed

that when hiring for the care of children, it is important "to know who this person is a little bit," she also found herself preferring to have more distant relations with the domestic workers, ones that were "more business like than previous relationships. My children are older, and I think I am getting to be less interested in the level of involvement I had because I'm asking the people to be less involved in our family life now."

Employees: "I want them to know who I am"

"My ideal employer? Someone who would talk with me about her family, who would ask questions about mine, about what I did in Mexico before I came here. Someone who would be considerate of my time."

Marisela Ramirez

Here's the paradox: Employers who hire someone to clean and look after their children in their home want some distance from the women who do the work. For the most part, employers are busy with their own time compressed work and family schedules, or they simply feel awkward about having someone perform cleaning and child care in their home. They want some breathing space, but the Latina women they hire want more intimacy. Why do we see this mismatch?

The structure of the job, the extent to which care work tasks (as opposed to cleaning) are involved, and the organization of domestic workers' lives as newly arrived immigrant women prompts many Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles to prefer personalistic employer-employee relations. These are women who have left their homes,

jobs, friends and family members in Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador. Many of them have left their own young children behind in their countries of origin, and have not seen them for years. Some have left behind middle class lifestyles, ones that had given them social recognition and public status. Some of them grew up in homes where their families employed their own domestic help. Now, they may spend very long hours, days and even nights on the job, doing intimate, care giving. Some of them hold down second jobs on weekends or evenings. When they do have some time off, they are busy doing their own household chores, going to the coin-operated, public laundry or taking English classes. In short, they make many personal sacrifices and have little time for socializing as they try to financially establish themselves in Los Angeles. The relative anonymity of their lives, the quality of their jobs, the larger political context of racialized nativism, and the rushed pace of life in Los Angeles leaves many domestic workers feeling bereft of belonging and in want of some personal recognition.

Latina immigrant women who do domestic work for pay are not, of course, a homogeneous group. They are distinguished by many different factors, and among these, is the relative degree of social incorporation in the United States. At one extreme are recently arrived immigrant women, women who lack nearby family and close friends and who may know only a handful of acquaintances in Los Angeles, women who do not speak any English, who do not drive and who do not know their way around downtown's *el centro*, the swap meets or other commercial centers. At the other extreme are women with well-established local ties, women who navigate about the city on their own, either on the bus or in their own cars, who have their families and strong social circles surrounding them, and who may participate in church or community organizations. As

we have already seen in chapter two, the former are more likely to be employed in live-in nanny/housekeeper jobs, and the latter in weekly house cleaning. Not only job arrangements, but the level of social incorporation also determines the degree of personalistic relations anticipated. When it comes to personalism, recently arrived women working in live-in jobs are generally more solicitous of personalistic employer-employee relations--and more critical of their employers who deny them this--than are more established women working as house cleaners. Still, Latina women in both groups express

Nanny/Housekeeper vs. House Cleaner Jobs

Women who do strictly house cleaning have lower expectations for personalism than their nanny/housekeeper peers, in part, because of the type of work they do. Nanny/housekeepers who care for young children feel most poignantly the disjuncture between the nature of the tasks they perform and the way they are treated. After all, they work in a familial work site, and unlike their house cleaning peers, they are paid to do activities--nurturing, singing songs and reciting nursery rhymes, coaxing children to bathe, nap or eat--that are emotional, intimate and particularly tailored to each child. They often develop strong, genuine, emotional attachments with the children as they perform intimate tasks day in and day out. When they are treated coldly or as if they were invisible by their employers (the children's parents) who may stand in physical proximity, they find it insulting and alienating. As one nanny put it, "Here I am caring for their children, and look at how they treat me!"

Some nannies believe that if nothing else, instrumental self-interest should motivate employers to treat them well. Some of them said that if employers treat their employees well, they can expect that their employees will provide better care for the children, and will remain on the job for a longer period of time.

In short, because their work is so intimate and personalized with the children, the Latina women who work as nanny/housekeepers want verbal, personalistic recognition from their employers. There are other factors that shape these preferences, such as the experience of downward class mobility, the extent of social incorporation in the United States and the job structure. I discuss these in my book.

Conclusion: Distinguishing Maternalism from Personalism

In the vast and theoretically sophisticated literature on paid domestic work, employer maternalism is roundly, and I think rightly, identified as a principal source of exploitation.¹ An alternative, most clearly advocated by sociologist Mary Romero, are businesslike, contractual relations that remain largely devoid of interactions not having to do specifically with job tasks and schedules.

---The ideal of contractual, client-customer relations may be realizable in house cleaning work, which is, not incidentally, the form of paid domestic work on which Romero's primary research has focused. When care work is involved, however, emotional connection is an integral part of the job and the clear-cut, contractual relation is harder to come by.

Both Latina nanny/housekeepers and house cleaners report that when employer-employee relations remain devoid of personalistic interactions, they feel disregarded and

¹ Rollins 1985; Glenn 1986; Kaplan 1987, Clark-Lewis 1994; Romero 1992.

disrespected. We can understand this only if we distinguish between maternalism and personalism. Employer maternalism is a one-way relationship, one defined primarily by employer gestures of charity, unsolicited advice, assistance and gifts. Personalism, by contrast, is a two-way relationship, albeit one that occurs in an asymmetrical context. It involves employer recognition of the employee as a particular person, and without this recognition and *consideracion*, dignity and respect cannot be realized.

In the absence of fair wages, hours and job autonomy, personalism alone is not enough to upgrade domestic work. But its absence virtually ensures that the job will be experienced as one lacking in dignity and respect.

Latina house cleaners and nanny/housekeepers see cold, impersonal employer-employee relations as blatant, in-your-face reminders of societal disregard for them. They experience this personal disregard on the job as treatment continuous with the social annihilation promoted by various anti-Latino immigrant campaigns in California during the 1990s. Racialized nativism sets the stage through which these relationships or non-relationships acquire meaning.

On the other side of the coin, many employers would prefer to have more distant, impersonal relationships with their paid domestic workers because personalism requires an obligation to "care about" on their part. As time becomes a scarce commodity, many employers find it difficult to invest time, emotional energy and even verbal exchanges into relationships with their domestic workers. As we have seen, many contemporary American employers are not quite comfortable with having someone do domestic work in their home. The image of darker, poorer, Spanish-speaking women toiling away in their

home doesn't quite fit with the image they have of themselves, or of the United States as a democratic, classless and color-blind society. Finally, the absence of personalism gives employers more implicit power and flexibility to control their employees.

Regardless of their preferences, these relationships are negotiated between two individuals, albeit in asymmetrical fashion and with tension. Not everyone gets what they want. Both employees and employers may wind up participating in more personalistic or more sterile, distant relationships than they would prefer. As we have seen, the social characteristics of employers and employees, as well as the structure of domestic jobs affect the degree of personalism in employer-employee relations.



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