

Domestic Employment: Making Visible an Invisible Relationship

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Abstract

Globally, millions of women and men are employed to care for children, adults with physical or mental disabilities, and/or households. The outcomes of paid domestic work go far beyond the private households within which it occurs; yet, this work is most often economically and socially invisible. In this article, we detail the distinct nature of this work by bringing attention to four aspects of domestic employment: physical space, power, purpose, and emotional experiences. We also identify emerging macro-level issues that may help advance our knowledge of workers' and employers' experiences. In doing so, we raise questions that may enable scholars, employers, and policy makers alike to better understand and elevate the well-being of millions of workers globally.

Keywords work family conflict/management, careers, diversity/gender, domestic work

Although it is challenging to capture the full scope of domestic employment, the International Labour Organization (2015) estimates that there are more than 67 million domestic workers globally. Such work takes multiple forms including nanny, home attendant, and house cleaner, and the vast majority of people filling these jobs are women (Kennedy, 2012). Domestic employment relationships, which involve employers managing and financially compensating domestic workers in exchange for on-going work in employers' private homes, are pervasive, with far-reaching social and economic consequences (Luebker, Simonovsky, & Oelz, 2013; see Kennedy, 2012). These relationships can be highly interdependent and shape the ways in which both partners (worker and employer) define, evaluate, and situate themselves in society (Andersen & Chen, 2002). In addition, domestic employment relationships are deeply embedded in histories of societal power disparities based on gender, race, and social class

(Calás & Smircich, 2011; Hoobler, 2016; Kennedy, 2012): “For centuries, a woman’s social status was clear-cut: either she had a maid or she was one” (Bloom, 2015). Today, these relationships exist as a common means for households to manage the many, often competing work and family demands (Hochschild, 2012). In this way, domestic employment relationships are the linchpin that “makes all other work possible” (National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2018). Individually, the dynamics of these relationships can profoundly influence the health and well-being of both the worker and employer (Bick, 2017; Malhotra et al., 2013; Seierstad & Kirton, 2015). Collectively, they have implications for major societal issues including women’s economic and career mobility, work–family management, and transmigration issues (Calás & Smircich, 2011; Raijman, Schammah-Gesser, & Kemp, 2003; Spector et al., 2007).

Despite the pervasiveness and impact of domestic employment relationships, they are “invisible” in many ways (Peterson, 2007). From a public policy perspective, most domestic workers are not granted the same rights as those employed by organizations (Luebker et al., 2013; National Domestic Workers Alliance & Center for Urban Economic Development, 2012). In fact, an estimated 30% of domestic workers are excluded from national worker protections and 90% do not have access to their country’s social security systems (International Labour Organization, 2018). At the household level, many women who hire domestic workers do not see themselves as formal employers. Instead, they view themselves as consumers of household services, referring to the women who work in their homes as “the help” (Hoobler, 2016; Kennedy, 2012). Or, dismissing the documented power differential between employer and worker, they may describe domestic employees as “part of the family” (Anderson, 1997; Galvaan et al., 2015; Kennedy, 2012). Such factors culminate in the majority of domestic workers being treated as invisible socially, economically, and under (outside) the law.

To advance our understanding of the theoretical, empirical, and practical issues surrounding domestic employment relationships, examination is needed from multiple perspectives. On the surface, management scholars and practitioners alike tend to view domestic workers as a means to help employers achieve “ideal worker” status (i.e., those who prioritize work more than family), as domestic workers are a critical support for work–family management (e.g., Aycan & Eskin,

2005; see Williams, 2001). Yet, a deeper consideration of domestic employment, focusing equally on workers' and employers' experiences is warranted. In this article, we bring attention to four aspects of domestic employment: physical space, power, purpose, and emotional experiences, which may serve as fodder for future research. Ultimately, consideration of such issues may challenge scholars, public policy influencers, and employers to elevate the well-being of millions of people globally engaged in domestic work.

Physical Space

By definition, domestic work is structured such that an employee's place of work is also the employer's home—"the shop floor is in the living room" (Kennedy, 2012, p. 643). Because the cooking, cleaning, and caring for household members occurs in the employer's home, the physical space simultaneously serves multiple domains: work for the employee and home for the employer (and, in some situations also for the employee, as in the case of "live-in" workers). An issue at the fore of the International Labour Organization's (2013) agenda is that the physical space of an employer's home is not regulated by governmental bodies as are most workplaces. Therefore, it falls outside national workplace safety and health protections. Quality of working conditions is left to individual employers, with a large potential for exploitation of employees, especially in developing nations where unemployment rates are high and dependency on domestic jobs are tantamount to economic survival. Often a domestic worker feels isolated, or in extreme cases trapped, in the employer's household and her job is subjected to the whims of the individual employer (Hodges, 1994). Another issue is that employers' homes offer domestic workers little privacy compared with what one might expect in traditional workplaces, for example, a desk of one's own or a place to privately take a phone call from home. In many cases, especially in countries with high income inequality, domestic employees may "live-in" with little to no physical distance between one's home and workplace. The absence of privacy may threaten an employee's desire for control in her work (and home) environment (see Vischer, 2008). Issues of physical space raise questions such as the following, "How can the physical household be structured to meet both workers' and employers' desires for privacy, particularly for 'live-in' employees?"; "How can employers and workers respectfully navigate the intersecting physical

domains of each other's home and work?"; and "How do workspace designs and boundaries shape domestic workers' experiences of job stress?"

Power

Domestic employment relationships most often exist in a context of high power distance, where the worker defers to the employer, and both parties feel this is the natural order of things. Power distance, or the degree of inequality between two people, is a common way of characterizing the relationship between people (Hofstede, 2001), and specifically supervisor–subordinate relationships (e.g., Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012). It can be a facet of national culture but also influenced by relational position in an organization as well as by occupation (James, 1994). Although the management literature has focused a lot on power distance in traditional supervisor–subordinate relations, much of this literature would not necessarily generalize to domestic employment relationships. The distribution of resources and power is likely even more unequal between a domestic worker and her employer due to, for example, the absence of formal human resource policy (compensation, scheduling) and sometimes a lack of adherence to local wage and hour laws (Baxter, Hewitt, & Western, 2009). Second, power distance comes from differences in race and socio-economic status between relationship partners (Hoobler, 2016). In the United States as well as many countries in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the majority of domestic employees are female immigrants from poorer countries (Mattingly, 2001) who are ethnic minorities in their host countries and/or of lower social class than their employers (Baxter et al., 2009; Duffy, 2005). Yet, at the same time, these relationships can be incredibly intimate, particularly when they are between two women. A study of urban Indian domestic workers concluded that domestic employment relationships are settings where class differences are “reproduced [yet] challenged on a daily and intimate basis” as these interactions are the most “intense, sustained contact with members of other classes” that most people will encounter (Dickey, 2000, p. 463). Employers invite employees to work in the private spheres of their lives and engage in highly personal tasks (Lan, 2003; Lutz, 2002), such as assisting in personal care and hygiene of family members, and employees have knowledge of the quality of relationships between household members. As one employee in South Africa states, “I make their beds every day . . . I wash their underwear every day . . . I answer their phone and take messages . . . I know everything about . . .

their lives” (Patricia Kubu in Ally, 2009, p. 96). These issues of power elicit questions around, “What social, household, and individual factors influence whether employers and workers view themselves as equals?”; “How may domestic workers leverage their employers’ positions of power to help advance their own personal and economic well-being?”; and “When are power dynamics most likely to arise over the course of the employment relationship and how do employers and workers manage such challenges?”

Purpose

Many domestic workers spend their lifetimes helping to lessen their employers’ work–family conflict—that is, they are hired to address employers’, most often women’s, home demands (e.g., child care, house cleaning) so that these responsibilities do not interfere with employers’ abilities to fulfill their own work demands (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Hochschild, 2000). Managing work and family responsibilities has arguably never been more difficult, particularly for dual-earner households. In the United States, for instance, national policies scarcely address child care assistance nor paid leave after the birth of a child (Gerstel & Armenia, 2009). So this can be considered a primary purpose of domestic work—to fill the open gaps national and organizational supports leave in the domestic employer’s time and energy resources. On one hand, both employers and domestic workers may view themselves as partners in a complex, taxing work–family balancing act (Hoobler, 2016). In fact, Macdonald (2010) calls nannies, that is, in-home child care providers, mothers’ “mediums”—extensions of mothers’ own selves and the way in which they may transmit their own wishes and values onto childrearing when they are not physically present. On the other hand, the partnership is premised on lessening the *employer’s* home demands, often characterized as enabling the employer to “have it all.” Moreover, the worker’s role in supporting the employer’s management of work and family can come at the former’s personal peril. That is, domestic workers whose efforts ease their employers’ work–family conflict correspondingly have less time and energy to spend with their own families (Nadasen & Williams, 2010). Migrant and live-in domestic workers experience this to an even greater degree. Hoobler (2016) positions this as a work–family conflict trickle-down effect—from employer to employee. Moreover, beyond a lack of resources for the employee, in extreme cases, domestic workers are the victims of employers’ physical and mental abuse

(e.g., Tizon, 2017), working excessive hours for minimal pay—exacerbating employees’ work–family conflict as well as leading to other detrimental individual and family outcomes. This issue of the purpose of domestic work raises questions such as the following: “How can the relationship be structured to accommodate both employers’ and workers’ work and family demands?”; “How can employers reduce domestic workers’ work-family conflict, and more positively, help create opportunities for workers to improve their lives across both work and family domains?”; and “What are the different ways in which domestic workers conceptualize the purpose of their work? For example, do they see themselves as partners with their employers in the work–family balancing act, or is this simply a job for a wage?”

Emotional Experiences

This last aspect of domestic employment we present is that of emotional experiences, which acknowledges the intimate interactions between domestic workers and the people for whom they provide care. Domestic workers often develop strong feelings of love and attachment to those for whom they care (Hochschild, 2000), with many nannies viewing themselves as “other mothers,” raising their employers’ children as if they were their own (Macdonald, 2010). In many developing nations such as South Africa, adults from privileged populations often remark they were, in effect, raised almost solely by their family’s “helper” (Cock, 1989). Despite less than desirable employment situations, many domestic workers will hesitate or decide not to pursue other work due to their deep love and concern for their employers’ children (Lutz, 2002). However, despite this connectedness, domestic work, can at the same time, feel lonely (Feliciano & Segal, 2018; Hochschild, 2002). Employees are most often a household workforce of one, engaging in many daily routines alone. And, as sociological research has documented, taking a domestic job may require the employee to live hundreds or even thousands of miles away from her own family members (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Parrenas, 2001). That is, millions of domestic workers make great personal sacrifices to migrate to foreign countries for jobs that are seen as an economic vehicle to improve the standard of living for their families (Anderson, 2000). These emotional experiences generate potential research questions, such as “How do love and loneliness, separately and in combination, influence domestic workers’ well-being?”; “How do domestic workers resolve the

psychological tension of caring for others while distant from their own families?"; and "How can domestic employers help employees navigate opposing emotions that can arise on the job?"

Macro-Level Themes

In the spirit of examining domestic employment from multiple perspectives, here we bring attention to some emerging macro-level issues that may help advance our understanding of workers' and employers' experiences. For example, we know that domestic work tends to be more prevalent in countries with higher income inequality (Milkman, Reese, & Roth, 1998) and in post-Colonial nations (Rodríguez, 2007). But we know less about how changing societal attitudes and collective efforts can improve the jobs and lives of domestic workers as a group. As domestic work is on the rise internationally, there are indicators of cultural shifts in awareness and understanding of workers' well-being. For example, in the United States, Ai-jen Poo, Executive Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, was in the national spotlight when actress Meryl Streep brought Poo as her guest to the Golden Globe Awards in 2018 (Berman, 2018). And, the recent film "Roma," which tells the story of a domestic worker's journey in Mexico, has received international attention (Barnes, 2019). At the same time, many questions remain regarding how public discourse and societal attitudes about the rights, value, and status of domestic workers can trickle-down to affect domestic employment experiences formally (i.e., policy) and informally (i.e., household practice). Second, there is evidence that collective organizing in many nations is attempting to make this type of labor more visible and improve the status of those who engage in it. Public, organized forms of advocacy, for example workers' collectives that formalize and monitor employment terms between workers and employers, have won rights for domestic workers (e.g., California Domestic Workers Coalition in the United States). Formal collectives have gained hold mostly in locations with solid histories of unionization such as in the United Kingdom and North America (Anderson, 2010). But Pande's (2012) work documents that even in Lebanon, a country where this type of organizing is illegal, "meso-level" forms of collectivism exist. She found that small groups of three or four domestic workers have been successful in joining together to share information on their rights and support one another psychologically and financially. Examining the formation, activities, and network composition of such collectives

may further help our understanding of the conditions under which (e.g., where, when, and why) employers grant workers access to fair wages and safe working conditions.

Conclusion

Domestic workers fill a critical, yet often undervalued, need in households globally. We believe this employment relationship that is mostly “invisible” in management conversations and the established management literature, is worthy of future investigation. In this article, we identified four aspects of domestic employment—physical space, power, purpose, and emotional experiences—in an effort to pique scholars’ curiosity and stimulate the development of studies that carefully consider the distinct nature of such work. We also offered emerging macro-level factors that may influence the quality of domestic workers’ jobs and lives. In particular, we encourage research that acknowledges that domestic workers are not simply resources to be used and exchanged for the benefit of employers. Through more detailed investigations, domestic employment relationships may be improved and serve as a source of material, physiological, and psychological well-being for employers *and*, importantly, domestic workers.

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