

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

# Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif)

## Inferiorization and deference: The construction of social hierarchies in the context of paid domestic labor



Débora Gorbán<sup>a</sup>, Ania Tizziani<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Conicet/Ideaes- Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Parana 145, 5th Floor, Buenos Aires 1017, Argentina

<sup>b</sup> Conicet/Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, Juan María Gutiérrez 1150, Los Polvorines, Provincia de Buenos Aires, 1613, Argentina

### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 28 January 2014

### SYNOPSIS

In Argentina, domestic work is one of the main occupations for women from low-income sectors. As in other Latin American societies, it is one of the most paradigmatic forms of contact between the different social classes. As such, this labor relationship has been analyzed in numerous studies as a critical location for the reproduction of social differences and inequality. The interpersonal relationships between employers and workers mobilize categorization criteria and stereotyped images that reveal wider dynamics regarding the construction of social hierarchies. On the basis of a qualitative study, the objective of this article is to analyze, in the city of Buenos Aires, the processes of constructing social hierarchies that are implied by this particular labor relationship. This analysis seeks to reveal the operations through which employers construct a stereotype of social inferiority for domestic workers through which they legitimize their dominant position in the labor relationship, and to examine the tensions and ambiguities of this.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### Introduction

In Argentina, domestic work is, and has been historically, one of the main ways in which women participate in the labor market, particularly women from popular social sectors (Gogna, 1993; Pereyra, 2012). As in other Latin American societies in which this type of work is widespread, it is one of the most paradigmatic forms of contact between the working class and the middle and upper classes. As such, domestic service has been analyzed in numerous studies as a critical location for the reproduction of social differences and inequality.

In recent decades, domestic work has been the focus of renewed attention by social scientists. Although gender inequalities are the starting point for many studies, the importance of migratory flows in the structure of paid domestic labor throughout different regions has turned migration studies into one of the most relevant approaches for debating this issue (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Lutz, 2002, 2008; Parreñas, 2001). These specific migratory flows,

which are generally referred to as the “globalization of care work” (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002), bring women into contact across borders, creating asymmetrical relationships between employers from the central receiving countries and migrant workers (Anderson, 2000; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Ibois, 2012; Parreñas, 2001). However, other studies reveal that the origins of these hierarchical relationships do not lie exclusively in the South–North migration processes that exacerbated issues related to citizenship. Internal migratory dynamics, migratory flows between countries in the South, and class/race distinctions also create the conditions for asymmetrical relationships (Brites, 2001, 2007; Kofes, 2001; Lan, 2003, 2008; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002). When considering the particularities of paid domestic labor in Latin American societies, researchers have privileged this perspective (Chaney & García Castro, 1993). In these societies, this type of work has been the primary employment option for women from popular social sectors.

This article is framed by these perspectives, which revolve around the analysis of domestic work as one of the crucial spaces for the construction and reproduction of social hierarchies based on class position and racial belonging. From this point of view,

\* Corresponding author.

we maintain that domestic labor not only expresses the dynamics of social inequality, but also contributes to updating and reproducing these in day-to-day life. We aim to analyze, in the city of Buenos Aires, the way in which domestic workers and, above all, employers perceive and manage the interactions that take place within this labor relationship, paying particular attention to the emotional dimension (Lan, 2003, 2008; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002). The objective of this analysis is to identify the hierarchy and categorization criteria that come into play in these interactions, and the tensions, ambiguities, and conflicts present within them.

Different studies (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002) emphasize how the interpersonal nature of the interactions that are established through domestic work plays a central role in the way in which the dynamics of this hierarchy are organized. These studies suggest that the interpersonal rituals that unfold within the relationship between employers and domestic workers mobilize categorization criteria and stereotyped images that reveal wider dynamics regarding the construction of social hierarchies. In this article, we analyze some of these dynamics, through which a set of personal and social features attributed to domestic employees configure their social inferiority in the context of this labor relationship. This construction justifies the material exploitation of domestic workers while at the same time reinforcing employers' class identity. Such dynamics have significant effects on the way work is configured within the sector as a strongly undervalued activity in which the prevailing labor and salary conditions are particularly unfavorable for workers.

To analyze the hierarchy dynamics involved in day-to-day interactions between employees and employers, we turned to certain concepts elaborated by Erving Goffman in his study on social interactions, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in particular the concept of the "front." According to Goffman, the personal front is made up of the expressive features or elements that the performer identifies with. The features that characterize the personal front are the main components of the way in which those interacting define the social situation that brings them into contact: they provide information about the differences in social status that separate them and the role that each party plays in the interaction. In the case of domestic employees and employers, these personal features are central components of the way in which they perceive and handle the connection that is established through this labor relationship (Goffman, 2009).

We will develop our argument in five sections. After a brief discussion of methodology, our analysis begins with a description of this employment sector, which allows us to introduce the ways in which domestic employees characterize their experiences of work. We will show how workers emphasize that the highly undervalued nature of their work is one of the main occupational problems they face. In the following section, we seek to explore how this undervaluing of domestic employees' work is constructed from the point of view of their employers. Within this process, a series of characteristics (migration origin, poverty, ignorance) comes to define the workers' inferiority, in connection with the profound inequality of their social and economic situations. These features define a front for domestic workers that provides information about the subordinate role that employers attribute to them within the labor relationship in order to sustain their own position of superiority. In the

following section, we focus on analyzing the tensions and conflicts arising from these attributed roles. In effect, the social inferiority attributed to domestic workers leads to those hiring them perceiving them as a threat that must be managed and controlled. This threat mainly consists of the possibility that workers will not fit in with the subordinate role attributed to them, thus destabilizing the labor relationship.

## Methodology

The reflections in this paper are based on a set of qualitative data from different sources. During 2009, a series of twenty in-depth interviews with domestic workers was carried out in Buenos Aires. These workers were contacted via different organizations involved in the sector (unions and associations), where both interviews and observations of activities were carried out. At the same time, over four months, we carried out observations and a series of informal interviews at two city playgrounds, where we were able to make contact with workers who take care of children (in addition to cooking and cleaning).

The ages of the workers in question ranged from 16 to 65 years at the time of the interviews. Five of them were live-in workers, while the remainder consisted of "live-out" or day workers, that is, they resided in their own homes. Three-quarters of the workers interviewed were migrants: four came from different Argentinean provinces and eleven from other countries (mostly Paraguay, but also Peru, Bolivia, and Uruguay). Only in two cases were these migration experiences recent — the vast majority had been living in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area for decades. At the time the interviews were carried out, most had become legal residents in Argentina and many had started their own families in the country. However, as we will examine later in this paper, migration origin is one of the filters through which employers and employees perceive their class positions, and it plays a significant role in the processes of constructing the social hierarchies implied in this labor relationship.

The second data source is a series of twelve in-depth interviews carried out between 2010 and 2011 with people who employ domestic workers. The sample is made up of four men and eight women between the ages of 35 and 69. Three are single, two divorced and the rest married; nine have between one and three children. Most contract domestic employees as "live-out" workers, but four have live-in workers. All the employers interviewed belong to the middle or upper-middle classes: they are professionals (teachers, lawyers, psychologists, economists), civil servants, have management positions in large companies or run their own small businesses.

From our perspective, the study of this labor relationship cannot ignore the structural inequality that shapes it, a condition that also affects the relationship between researchers and interviewees. As Pierre Bourdieu pointed out, the relationship present in an interview is subject to the effects of the social structure in which that interview is carried out. This relationship is shot through with asymmetry (Bourdieu, 1993: 609):

It is the investigator who starts the game and sets up its rules, and is usually the one who, unilaterally and without any preliminary negotiations, assigns the interview its objectives and uses. (On occasion, these may be poorly

specified — at least for the respondent.) This asymmetry is reinforced by a social asymmetry every time the investigator occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy or different types of capital, cultural capital in particular.

To reduce the effects of these asymmetries, Bourdieu proposes the practice of “active and methodical listening” in order to incorporate the social logic that affects the construction of data into the analysis. This listening (Bourdieu, 1993: 609),

combines a total availability to the person being questioned, submission to the singularity of a particular life history — which can lead, by a kind of more or less controlled imitation, to adopting the interviewee's language, views, feelings, and thoughts — with methodical construction, founded on the knowledge of the objective conditions common to an entire social category.

Bourdieu's point is to create conditions so that researchers can “situate themselves at the point in social space from which all the respondents' views over that space emanate.” According to the author, social proximity and familiarity can help create the conditions for this type of listening.

In terms of the fieldwork undertaken for this research, this meant trying to place the social proximity between the researchers and the employers at the service of the investigation. The fact that we, the researchers, are professional, urban, middle-class women with current or past experience of hiring domestic workers undoubtedly facilitated access to the employers we interviewed and enriched the information obtained. During the interviews, the interviewees shared information, points of view and experiences that they probably would not have talked about had they not perceived our proximity to their own class positions. In contrast, in the case of the interviews with the workers, the possibility of our being assimilated to the social position of the employers led to the need to construct a degree of familiarity with the spaces through which they were contacted, by spending longer periods of time there and meeting repeatedly.

### **The racialization of poverty: towards the construction of social inferiority**

In 2009, domestic service accounted for the employment of almost 14% of all female wage earners in Argentina, which represents over one million workers.<sup>1</sup> In this highly feminized sector, women make up 98.5% of those employed. The education level of this population is lower than that of other wage earners. In socioeconomic terms, most women who make their living from domestic work come from sectors categorized as poor or destitute. More than 43% of them are migrants, of which 32.6% come from another province in Argentina, and 11% from other countries, particularly neighboring countries (Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay) and Peru. Until 2004, Argentina's migrant population from neighboring countries was affected by legal frameworks, which restricted and hindered them from obtaining legal residency status.<sup>2</sup> However, in 2004, a new law came into effect, enabling migrants from other Mercosur countries (Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela), and also Chile and Bolivia to remain in Argentina and obtain residency

permits.<sup>3</sup> In this context, an initiative was set in motion in 2005 to regularize the legal status of those who had entered Argentina prior to this date.<sup>4</sup> The initiative advocated the authorization of temporary and permanent residency permits and the flexibilization of requisites for residency applications. These changes implied that migratory status is no longer a determining factor for the working conditions of domestic service.

Domestic employees are among the groups with the lowest individual income levels in Argentina: in 2009, the average hourly wage for these workers was around 45% lower than the average salary of all other wage earners. With regard to modes of employment, according to official data, around 72% of those employed in domestic service work for a sole employer. The majority are “live-out” staff. Indeed, the proportion of domestic employees residing with their employers has decreased sharply in the last few years and accounted for only three percent of those employed in the sector in 2009. Domestic work is also an area of work with one of the highest levels of informal employment, despite the fact that there has been a trend towards formalization in the last decade: the proportion of workers listed with social security institutions has gone from five percent in 2003 to 15% in 2009.

However, domestic labor is characterized by the low level of social protection offered to those working in the sector and the limited rights to which they have access, in comparison to other wage earners (see Gogna, 1993; Machado, 2003). For the past fifty years, activities connected to domestic work have been regulated by a special regime (the Domestic Service Statute, Decree 326/56), according to which domestic employees are excluded from regular worker health and safety law, have no access to unemployment benefits or maternity leave, and have longer working days, shorter leave allowances and lower severance pay than other workers. In March 2013, a new law regulating the occupation was passed (“Regimen Especial de Contrato de Trabajo para el Personal de Casas Particulares” [Special Contract Regulations for Employees of Private Houses]). This law seeks to match the labor conditions of domestic workers with those stipulated for general salaried workers.

These features make domestic work one of the occupations with the least favorable labor and salary conditions on the Argentinean job market. In Argentina, as in most Latin American countries, it is also one of the most significant occupations for women from poor backgrounds (Valenzuela & Mora, 2009). As Avila points out in the case of Brazil, domestic employees are “led into” their occupation by the limits imposed by class, ethnicity and patriarchy. Domestic employment is the closest option on the horizon of possibilities for women from poor backgrounds, and presents itself as an opportunity for those who have little formal education and who move from the country to the city, or who live on the outskirts of major cities (Avila, 2008: 67). These unfavorable aspects of the work represent a major part of the way in which the domestic workers interviewed during our fieldwork tell of their experiences:

I had a pretty bad time there. My mistress treated me badly; she kept telling me I was good for nothing and that I would never get another job. On top of that they were really stingy about food. I was only given one cooked meal a day, in the

evening, and it was always spaghetti with just a tiny bit of olive oil, because it's very expensive, as she (her employer, a woman) used to tell me [...]. I would start my job very early in the morning and had a one-hour break in the afternoon; I would finish around 10 or 11 at night. Sometimes my master arrived later, around 12, and I would end up going to bed at 1 in the morning. On top of that they only used to pay me 500 pesos under the table!<sup>5</sup>

(Lidia, 26, "live-in" domestic employee)

Such accounts that reveal acts of mistreatment and discrimination are not the most frequent. However, other elements that appear in Lidia's account are also present in the experiences of other women we interviewed, notably the conditions that characterize their occupation: never-ending work days, low remuneration and no access to the rights and benefits established by the existing legislation. Nor are these conditions exclusive to live-in positions, as shown by the way Andrea narrates one of her experiences as a "live-out" domestic employee:

Later I got a "live-out" job... but I just couldn't take it because there were five of them. And that woman was so annoying, she was so annoying. Nothing I did was alright with her. Everything... she always found fault with something, and I would work like crazy from 8 in the morning to 5 in the evening. Besides, it was a lot of work; I had to cook and clean and all that. It was hell, I'm telling you, but the pay was good.

(Andrea, 42, "live-out" domestic employee)

As in Lidia's narrative, Andrea highlights the harshness of her working conditions. Her discourse reveals, in addition, two central elements of the way domestic workers talk of their experiences: the lack of recognition and the difficulties underlying the relationship with employers. Even though the experiences she referred to as "hell" may not appear frequently in such accounts, they significantly influence the way employees represent their occupation.

These unfavorable labor and salary conditions are closely related to the undervaluing of the work domestic employees carry out:

The work is very undervalued. I see it in my own case, you know, the pay is bad. OK, sometimes people aren't interested in learning, in some cases, not always, but it's like people take advantage of that... because someone hasn't been to school, because they're ignorant, because they're... you know, from another country or province. The thing is that people sometimes take advantage of that. People with money take advantage of that: "Ah well, this one's just another damn *negrita de mierda* [a commonplace racist expression that is discussed in greater detail below], we can pay her peanuts and that's that." And maybe they make you... I don't know... stay all day long, you know, and don't even give you a glass of water. It's totally undervalued.

(Dora, 59, "live-out" domestic worker)

In Dora's narrative, low salaries and never-ending work days reflect the fact that, within this labor relationship, the employer is able to "take advantage" of workers. This potential exposure of domestic workers to abusive situations is a reminder of the fact that it is the employer who defines, almost unilaterally,

the conditions governing the labor relationship, which is established through individual negotiation, with little external regulation.

The unequal positions of employers and employees in the configuration of the labor relationship are anchored, in Dora's discourse, in the profound inequality of their social and economic situations, in the distance separating "people with money" from the "ignorant" women "from another country or province" they hire. This description not only reflects the employers' opinions, but it also points to the way in which the least protected social sectors are characterized. The expression that Dora uses, *negrita de mierda*, is commonplace in Argentina and sums up a whole range of discriminatory opinions that are often used by those from wealthier backgrounds to describe those from poor social sectors. Roughly translated, it means "dark-skinned girl from the provinces or urban poor sectors." As we discuss in the following section, this expression invokes a process of racialization of socioeconomic status, through which "working poor" and "blackness" become one and the same thing, to which the condition of migrant is added, also in negative terms. This process is characteristic of the Argentinian context in which any differentiations by national origin or ethnic group tend to dissolve into an all-encompassing class-based label (Briones, 2008; Grimson, 2006; Margulis & Urresti, 1999).

The expression *negrita de mierda* thus identifies certain physical characteristics with an inferior position, not only in socioeconomic terms but also in moral ones. In this way, if domestic work is "undervalued," it is not so much because of the intrinsic characteristics of the activity itself, but because of the social features associated with those who carry it out. These features contribute to the construction of a stereotyped image of domestic employees, the lynchpin of which is their social inferiority.<sup>6</sup>

### Managing intimacy: the undervaluing of domestic workers and emotional labor

In the employers' accounts, hiring a domestic worker is no small matter. Expressions such as "If Perla wasn't here I'd die" (Cami), "When she appeared it was my salvation" (Elena), and "I wouldn't be able to survive without Mariela" (Julia) are commonplace. In these statements, the presence of the domestic workers is described using words such as "salvation", whereas their absence is associated with desperation and conflict: "I'd die" or "I wouldn't be able to survive." For many of those interviewed, hiring a domestic worker is not perceived as an "option," but rather as a "necessity." In this sense, the point at which they decide to hire someone is often characterized as a breaking point or moment of crisis. However, availing themselves of domestic and care services is not perceived as contracting a worker in the conventional sense, but rather as finding "help":

When I didn't have any help I did everything myself and I spent the whole time swearing and cursing... what a bloody mess they [my children] make, why can't they just do this, that, the other. But they didn't, and the one making sacrifices was always me. But then I got help and I stopped cursing.

(Elena, 50, company manager, divorced, three children)

Though in some cases, the employers share a minimum of domestic chores between male and female family members, a large portion of these were exclusively assigned to the domestic workers. However, it is paradoxical that the same tasks that employers described as insurmountable when justifying their decision to hire a domestic worker become less complex and important when transferred to the worker in question.

In effect, these discourses reveal a double operation in which tasks that are initially characterized as difficult for one person (the male or female employer) to carry out become nothing more than “help” when they are undertaken by a domestic worker. The testimonies gathered all refer to the work performed by domestic employees in similar ways, in that they do not actually describe it as being work. As such, they refer to “help,” to “someone being at home” or to “having someone,” all expressions that negate or conceal the labor relationship, as what the person “at home” is actually doing there is working.

All of this reveals a very specific way of characterizing paid domestic work; or rather, it underlines a particular feature of existing representations of this activity: the separation between the function being performed and the person carrying it out, in that tasks are characterized differently depending on who is performing them. In Elena's testimony, the use of the word “help” to describe the work carried out by her employee characterizes this work as being somehow incidental. At the same time, it differentiates between domestic tasks within the home, and between the helper and the person being helped. The distinction is fundamentally based on a differential valuing of domestic work according to who is performing it. In this sense, it is not so much about the men and women who hire domestic workers undervaluing the domestic tasks themselves, but rather the fact that they undervalue the person hired to carry them out.

According to Romero (2002), this differential valuing process suggests that the nature of domestic work is not intrinsically degrading or inferior. As Romero points out, the degrading nature of the activity arises from the interpersonal relationship between employers and employees; specifically, the practices through which employers structure their employees' work in order to include issues that inferiorize them (control over their food, the spaces they move in, the use of uniforms, etc.). These practices reveal the way in which structures of domination based on class position and racial belonging permeate interpersonal relationships within domestic labor. In effect, these degrading aspects of domestic work are connected with the behavior that employers expect of their employees in terms of their social, racial and ethnic characteristics. Romero (2002: 144) (among other authors) describes this expected behavior as “deferential interaction”, one of the nuclei that define the emotional work domestic employees must provide. This author notes that in addition to physical labor, the job also implies a significant amount of emotional labor.

This type of work is related to the way in which employees handle their emotions in order to respond to their employer's psychological needs (for company, to be listened to, etc.). However, this emotional labor is not reciprocal, in that employers are not there to respond to the

psychological needs of their employees. A large part of the emotional work that is involved in this occupation consists of the creation of deferential behavior on the part of the domestic workers in order to reaffirm, through their inferiority, class and racial differences and the status of the employer's family. In her terms, “the process that affirms the status of white middle-class women employers involves deferential interaction that treats non-white working-class domestics as inferior” (Romero, 2002: 162).

In the previous section, we saw how Dora, when describing her experience as a domestic worker, emphasized the situation as being one of undervaluing, in which “people with money take advantage.” The possibility of “taking advantage” is, in her account, directly related to the way in which employers represent workers as “negritas de mierda.” The expression suggests that the differential valuation of domestic tasks is anchored to this inferiorizing and discriminatory representation of workers. It also reveals the importance of the emotional dimension of the work carried out by domestic employees in terms of the effort they must make to handle the demand for subordination that this particular labor relationship implies, and that is experienced in their everyday interactions with employers.

### **Being migrants, being poor, being domestic workers**

In employers' discourses, the bases on which representations of domestic workers are built are a series of social and economic characteristics that are attributed to these women. One of the first such characteristics to be mobilized is that of employees' origins. In effect, when those interviewed reconstruct their experiences of hiring someone, the country or province of origin of the workers frequently represents a significant piece of information:

I've had a few people working for me. At one point, when the kids were very little, there was a girl who was with us for several years, Emma, who was from Santiago del Estero... She was good, but she had to leave, she had kids of her own, so she left. Then I went through several people and then came a spell with Carmen, who was Chilean, she was a lovely lady, she stayed with us for a few years. And then the last person, who's been with us for more than 11 or 12 years, Federica. She's a young girl, she's from Entre Ríos. No, I mean Corrientes. She's from Corrientes.

(Ana, 58, professional, married, two children)

More than the domestic workers' names, it is the reference to their country or province of origin that differentiates workers from one another in the employer's perspective and organizes the employers' narrative of their experiences of hiring domestic workers. Beyond the particular nature of their origins, these references in employer testimonies underline a social characteristic shared by all the workers: the experience of internal or international migration, specifically the fact that they come from regions marked by critical social and economic situations. The repeated mention of domestic workers' origins performs a double function in employer discourse. First, it reaffirms a crucial difference between the workers' origins and social characteristics and their own, which are linked to their belonging to the urban middle classes. Second, it associates the

workers' origins with certain predictable behaviors or ways of being:

What I've seen... is that women from Paraguay... I don't want to categorize this as something about the nationality. But what always happens to me is that the girls who've come to my house from Paraguay do things like this, they're there three or four months and then from one day to the next they say: "I have to go because something's happened in Paraguay". I don't know, I never know if they're telling the truth.  
(Julia, 34, professional, business owner, married, two children)

In the above quote, Julia associates women from Paraguay with a lack of stability or reliability. In other cases, women from Peru are valued because they supposedly are better educated than other domestic workers. Regardless of whether the characteristics in question are positive or negative, the reference to domestic workers' national origins helps construct a stereotype and define predictable behavior and ways of being.

These statements regarding workers' national origins are implicitly permeated by ethnic and racial characterizations. However, regardless of specifically national features, within the context of Argentina's migration dynamic, these classifications overlap strongly with class distinctions. According to Grimson (2006), since the 1940s, Argentina has been characterized by a process of invisibilization of racial and ethnic diversity and the primacy of a representation based on homogeneity: a "European enclave" with no "black" or "indigenous" populations. Given this context, the specific origins of these populations have become invisible at the same time as they were being socially and politically incorporated into the development of import substitution industrialization and the rise of Peronism. Migrants from neighboring countries were not considered as such within this context. Instead, they were absorbed into the mass of *cabecitas negras* (literally, "little dark heads"), a pejorative name used to stigmatize the working-class population with some indigenous ancestry who moved to Argentina's urban centers, mainly from the provinces in the north. In this context,

any differentiation by national origin or ethnic group tended to dissolve into an all-encompassing class-based label, although this was racially marked by "darkness". The poor were said to be "black" even though [...] they were not actually black in that they were not of African origin or descent.

(Grimson, 2006: 23)

In a similar vein, the recurring reference to the national or provincial origins of domestic workers within employer discourses seems to function as a powerful indicator of class difference.

This indicator is reinforced by the representation of the workers' places of residence. In effect, not only do domestic workers come from different places to their employers, but they also reside in spaces that are far from their places of work. The physical distance between the employers' homes in well-off neighborhoods of the city of Buenos Aires and the places where domestic workers live crystallizes, in the employer's discourse, the distance between their class positions. It is a social and geographic distance that creates difference and a hierarchy

between those involved in this labor relationship. The characteristics of the spaces where domestic workers live (shanty towns, slums or precarious housing) also constitute, in employer discourse, significant references to the position of domestic workers in the social structure.

This stereotyped image of domestic workers that employers construct through their discourse, marked as it is by precarious social and economic situations, is not just another reference to the social paths of the women they hire. It is a social, economic, and symbolic location that is associated with a series of features that are intrinsic to domestic workers. The stereotype is also linked to certain predictable ways of being and behaving that have important effects on the way employers configure their interactions with their employees. One of the features that recur most frequently is domestic workers' low level of formal education:

Because you even get the feeling, when you have a maid, they're generally ignorant, so it's as if I have a kind of educational commitment. You know, when you teach someone how to behave.

(Norma, 45, employer, two children)

Domestic employees' education levels are not mentioned merely as part of their social paths, but are instead presented as an essential feature of theirs. That is, rather than referring to the fact that women who do domestic work for a living have been unable to go to school, such comments designate a way of being: ignorant. This intrinsic characteristic is one more in a long list of features associated with different aspects that define the individual, like their ways of dressing and talking, their tastes and what they consume:

With the maid I had at that point, I could buy six packets of biscuits one day and the next there'd be none. Something was going on, I said. "No, I ate them", she said, "I ate them all". There was a voracity about her, you know? [...] What I mean is that it's a problem because their origins mean that when they see so much food they become desperate for certain things.

(Julia, 36, employer, two children)

In the discourses of the employers interviewed, these characteristics gradually outline the social inferiority ascribed to domestic workers, and thus play a central role in the legitimization of the subordinated position of workers within the labor relationship established through domestic service. In line with Goffman's analysis, these features seem to construct, from the employers' point of view, a "front" for the workers that situates them within the interaction. This front is made up of the features that are identified with the performer: "As part of personal front we may include: insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; postures; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like." In general terms, front includes both "appearance" and "manner" of the individual: the former tells about the individual's social status, the latter about the "interaction role the performer will expect to play" (Goffman, 2009: 24).

As Goffman points out, it is to be expected that appearance and manner confirm one another; that is, that the differences in social status between performers are expressed to a certain degree through the differences in the roles played by each in the

interaction. This is the case because performances “tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially credited values of the society” (1990: 35), particularly forms of social stratification and class differences. From this perspective, the stereotyped images of domestic workers play a central role in the way in which employers construct and legitimize their dominant position in the configuration of the labor relationship. In this way, they form part of a discourse, which, by highlighting differences in social status between employers and employees, seeks to put each performer in the labor relationship in her place:

Ana really knows her place. For example, Eleo, the one I had before, used to say things like, “I love those shoes, ooh, can I try them on?” I mean, she wanted to be like my friend or something. Ana never says things like that, she knows her place...

(Cecilia, 38, lawyer, married, three children)

### **“Not knowing their place”: the dislocation of roles in the employer–employee relationship**

This set of social characteristics attributed to domestic workers allows employers to construct and argue their dominant position in the labor relationship via a process that is not exempt from ambiguity and tension. In effect, if the social inferiority attributed to domestic workers is the condition that enables the labor relationship, this brings with it certain threats that must be controlled and managed.

I always talk to my friends about this. I always say that when they leave, they steal things, they take things from you, which for me is, how can I explain it... um... the relationship between the family and the maid is very paradoxical. It's paradoxical, because it's a woman who has a lot of needs and who sees a lot of things in your house, she uses them, she sees them, because she's in your house. So I really find it hard to see how a woman who comes to my house every day and opens my children's cupboard, if she has a daughter the same age, how can she not want to take everything? How does she manage that?

(Julia, 36, employer, two children)

One of the first references to the threat resulting from the social inferiority attributed to domestic workers is the possibility of them stealing something. As previous studies have analyzed (Brites, 2007; Kofes, 2001), the suspicion of theft seems to be an integral part of the link between employers and employees. This is frequently justified by the workers' “humble origins” and the contrast between what they do not have and what they see everyday at work. Faced with this threat, employers develop a series of practices that tend towards control over objects and assets, the definition of spaces to which workers have access, and the supervision of workers as they carry out their jobs. These forms of control, which appear “naturalized” within the accounts, also operate in another sense, in that they reaffirm the stereotype of the workers' social inferiority, as they are presented as being “self-evident” effects of inequality.

The potential for theft is not the only source of tension posed by this labor relationship. If theft can be seen as a component of the position of social inferiority attributed to

domestic workers, another, more troubling, source of conflict is linked to the possibility that workers might not fit in with the stereotyped images of them or perform the roles attributed to them. In effect, domestic workers frequently do not “know their place,” as some employers put it. In her testimony, Norma observes that “I don't like it if they're too clever. I mean if they're too cocky, over-confident, or if they seem to want to stand out from the rest.” The characterization of workers as “cocky” or “over-confident” refers to those who do not fit in with the performance of social inferiority expected by their employers.

As such, employees are supposed to “know their place,” to play their part, acting out inferiority and transmitting it through deferential behavior towards those who are in a socially and morally superior situation within the relationship. Knowing your place in relation to the employer's family implies that the worker is capable of upholding a convenient social distance, the limits of which are threatened in day-to-day coexistence. This can lead, on the part of workers, to an express performance of the role attributed to them. Goffman cites an example of this sort of performance (1990: 38):

The ignorant, shiftless, happy-go-lucky manner which Negroes in the Southern states sometimes felt obliged to affect during interactions with whites illustrates how a performance can play up ideal values which accord to the performer a lower position than he covertly accepts for himself.

This performance of inferiority is interesting for the way it displaces employees from the position of passive agents, lacking initiative, which has often been used to characterize them.

From this point of view, to perform the role of the employee is to sustain a front that does not disturb what is expected of those who work in domestic service: fulfilling their obligations implies doing so in such a way as to not call the social superiority of the employer into question. However, the testimonies gathered here reveal moments in which the front breaks down and the hierarchical relationship is subverted. “Not knowing your place” sums up the way employers characterize this new situation, in which the domestic worker stops fulfilling the role that has been socially assigned to her and, through this rupture, becomes threatening. The following account clearly reflects this situation:

At the weekends I would go to my club, and one day I came home at around three in the morning. I arrived and couldn't believe my eyes; the whole living room was totally turned upside down. I mean, the ironing board was in the middle of the room, the television was facing the wrong way, the table had been moved. It was bizarre. I had no idea what was going on. I went to the maid's room, um, Lali I think her name was, I remember her... she had dark hair... She always had her hair tied back and she wore glasses thick as bottles. What a face she had... poor thing. So I went to Lali's room, I used to let her sleep there at weekends because she had nowhere else to go. She didn't answer me, so I thought she must be with some man. But then a woman's voice answers and says, “Lali isn't here”. So I said, “Can you please open the door?” A

girl who I'd never seen in my life opened the door. So I said, "Where is she?", "She's gone out dancing..."; "And what are you doing here?"; "Sometimes I sleep here at the weekend." I... well... it was like I went away at the weekend and my house was... I felt awful, really awful, it was so invasive, so... so... they had taken over something of mine... it was... horrible. I had a window that looked onto the street, it was three or four in the morning and I stood at the window saying, I'm going to kill Lali. But always in the sense of giving her a good telling off, I'm going to kill her... out of sheer anger...

*As if you were telling off...?...*a child. And suddenly I see Lali coming up Avenida de los Incas, without her glasses. I mean... and her hair was all... you know? When someone lets their hair down and is radiant, beautiful. And it was me... my shoes, my jeans, my jumper, my jacket, my handbag. No, no... well... I swear you had to be there to see it. I couldn't believe it [laughs]. It was... She looked amazing, dressed up as me!

(Norma, 45, employer, two children)

Within Norma's account, Lali, stripped of the central components of her front that make up the deferential behavior expected of domestic workers, reveals her capacity to be like her employer. The image the worker offers to the person who has hired her, dressed in her clothes, without her glasses, with her hair down, "radiant, beautiful", is the image of an attractive woman and not of an inferiorized "child." That image challenges the superior position in which the employer has placed herself and reveals the constructed nature of the differentiation between the two and the possibility of discovering, in the other woman, an equal. When Lali is surprised by Norma, the employer's anger is not only due to the way her employee has used her house, but also for having transgressed the limits set out for her. Instead, her anger is mainly connected to the fact that Lali is discovered in a position of equality with those who hire her, which subverts the labor relationship.

Returning to the categories used in Romero's analysis, emotional work becomes central to creating the deference that confirms and upholds the employer's status. As we saw in this example, this status depends not only on the employee's social class, but also on her racial and ethnic origins and her physical appearance. The threat emerges with the possibility that the worker might stop carrying out the emotional work that sustains the hierarchies implied in paid domestic work. These processes of constructing hierarchies are the condition for the existence of this labor relationship, and they reproduce and update themselves in the everyday interactions between the parties involved in this relationship.

### By way of closure

Throughout this text, we have gradually uncovered different operations through which employers construct the social inferiority that permeates the way in which they represent domestic workers and manage their relationship with them. As we have seen, this process of inferiorization includes, in turn, different practices of control through which employers "handle

the threat" they suppose is implied by the presence of a worker in the intimacy of their homes. In effect, this is a labor relationship that has been made invisible, in which the connection between the two parties is defined by asymmetry, which is reinforced in the way the relationship plays out everyday.

The workers are not recognized as such, but are instead described as "the maid," "the girl who helps," and the person who "is at home." These ways of referring to domestic workers embody, in turn, certain features that make up the stereotypes within which those who do the job for a living seem to, or must, fit. As we have pointed out, these stereotypes reveal a process of social, economic and symbolic positioning associated with certain ways of being and behaving which make up the socially expected role which those working in domestic service are expected to fulfill. This role locates employees in an inferior position to their employers in the social structure and supposes that "appearance" and "manner" confirm one another. In other words, the very role of domestic employees supposes that they must act deferentially, "knowing their place" — namely, that of "maid." From the employer's point of view, "knowing your place" becomes a central feature when evaluating those who do domestic service for a living, as it supposes the upholding of convenient social distances.

These dynamics reveal mechanisms of constructing social hierarchies that are not only present in domestic employment, but also configure it as such. Through the way they handle the link with workers, employers put into practice the dynamic and conflict-ridden operations that have been analyzed throughout this article in terms of how they devalue and inferiorize employees. One of the main sources of tension in these processes concerns each party's ability to fit in with established roles. As we observed in the final example analyzed, when the behavior and image of workers fall outside the parameters expected of their role, this can disturb the connection between the parties, as it implies a dislocation of the roles socially assigned to each of them. If Norma was so surprised by Lali's transformation, it is because what she discovered through the scene was the fragility of the symbolic struggle unfolding at the heart of this relationship due to the negotiation of class-related positions. In short, what is revealed when the person who is perceived as socially inferior does not seem to "know their place" is the precariousness of the social construction of inequality as an essential feature of inter-class relations.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All statistical data presented in this paragraph and the next comes from the report *Caracterización del servicio doméstico en la Argentina* [A Characterization of Domestic Service in Argentina], created by the Subsecretariat of Technical Programming and Labor Studies of the Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security (cited as Contartese, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> In the first instance, this took the form of the Agreement on Residency for Nationals from Mercosur member states, Bolivia, and Chile, signed in December 2002. In turn, in 2003, a new Immigration Law, no. 25.871, was passed, "which implied a change of direction in policy discourse by incorporating two new features: a human rights perspective and a regional focus" (Pacecca & Curtis, 2008: 43). This law "establishes the right to migration as a human right and incorporates the right to the reunification of the family" (Pacecca & Curtis, 2008: 45). It also mentions the state's responsibility for ensuring that all foreigners legally residing in Argentina are treated equally and recognize the unrestricted right of access to education and healthcare, regardless of migratory status.



<sup>3</sup> This refers to the National Program of Migratory Document Normalization for nationals of Mercosur member and associate states, which includes immigrants from Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The program is known as *Patria Grande*, which translates roughly as “the greater homeland.” For an analysis of the program, see Gallinati (2008) and Pacecca and Courts (2008).

<sup>4</sup> This working experience corresponds to 2005 and 2006. In the latter year, the minimum wage earned by live-in domestic workers was 650 pesos.

<sup>5</sup> The origins of these stereotypes can be traced back to the social transformations of the twentieth century in Argentina, specifically those affecting the conformation of the middle classes. Various studies have explored these changes and the transformation of the models of domesticity associated with them, including Adamovsky (2009), Pite (2011), Pérez (2012) and Cárdenas (1986).

<sup>6</sup> There is extensive literature concerning the concept of emotional labor. Developed by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild, this concept facilitates the analysis of certain occupations that require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person through the manipulation and control of their emotions (1983). Although Hochschild did not develop this concept in connection to domestic work, it has been widely used in this field of study.

## References

- Adamovsky, Ezequiel (2009). *Historia de la clase media: Apogeo y decadencia de una ilusión, 1919–2003*. Buenos Aires: Planeta.
- Anderson, Bridget (2000). *Doing the dirty work? The global politics of domestic labour*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Avila, Bethania (2008). Algunas questões teóricas e políticas sobre emprego doméstico. In Bethania Avila, Milena Prado, Tereza Souza, & Vera Soares y Verônica Ferreira (Eds.), *Reflexões feministas sobre informalidade e trabalho doméstico* (pp. 63–71). Recife: SOS CORPO.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1993). *The weight of the world*. Stanford: University of California Press.
- Briones, Claudia (2008). Formaciones de alteridad: Contextos globales, procesos nacionales y provinciales. In Claudia Briones (Ed.), *Cartografías Argentinas. Políticas indigenistas y formaciones provinciales de alteridad* (pp. 9–38). Buenos Aires: Antropofagia.
- Brites, Jurema (2001). Afeto, desigualdade e rebeldia: Bastidores do serviço doméstico. *Tese de Doutorado, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Antropologia Social*. Porto Alegre: UFRGS.
- Brites, Jurema (2007). Afeto e desigualdade: Gênero, geração e classe entre empregadas domésticas e seus empregadores. *Cadernos Pagu*, 29, 91–109.
- Cárdenas, Isabel (1986). *Ramona y el robo: El servicio doméstico en barrios prestigiosos de Buenos Aires (1895–1985)*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Búsqueda.
- Chaney, Elsa, & García Castro, Mary (Eds.). (1993). *Muchacha, cachifa, criada, empleada, empregadinha, sirvienta y... más nada*. Caracas: Editorial Nueva Sociedad.
- Contartese, Daniel (2010). *Caracterización del servicio doméstico en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Subsecretaría de Programación Técnica y Estudios Laborales del Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, & Hochschild, Arlie Russell (2002). *Global woman: Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Gallinati, Carla (2008). ¿Inmigrantes o ciudadanos? La construcción del “verdadero” modelo de política migratoria en el marco de la “patria grande”. *Revista Pensares*, 5, 479–500.
- Goffman, Erving (2009). *The presentation of the self in everyday life*. London: Penguin.
- Gogna, Monica (1993). Empleadas domésticas en Buenos Aires. In Elsa Chaney, & Mary García Castro (Eds.), *Muchacha, cachifa, criada, empleada, empregadinha, sirvienta y más nada* (pp. 81–98). Caracas: Editorial Nueva Sociedad.
- Grimson, Alejandro (2006). Nuevas xenofobias, nuevas políticas étnicas en Argentina. In Alejandro Grimson, & Elizabeth Jelin (Eds.), *Migraciones regionales hacia la Argentina: diferencias, desigualdad, derechos* (pp. 22–37). Buenos Aires: Prometeo.
- Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Encarnación (2010). *Migration, domestic work and affect*. London: Routledge.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette (2007). *Domestica: Immigrant workers cleaning and caring in the shadows of affluence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ibos, Caroline (2012). *Qui gardera nos enfants? Les nounous et les mères*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Kofes, Suely (2001). *Mulher Mulheres: Identidade, diferença e desigualdade na relação entre patroas e empregadas*. Campinas, SP: Editora da UNICAMP.
- Lan, Pei-Chia (2003). They have more money but I speak better English!: Transnational encounters between Filipina domestics and Taiwanese employers. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 10, 132–161.
- Lan, Pei-Chia (2008). Migrant women's bodies as boundary markers: Reproductive crisis and sexual control in the ethnic frontiers of Taiwan. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33(4), 833–861.
- Lutz, Helma (2002). At your service madame! The globalization of domestic service. *Feminist Review*, 70, 89–104.
- Lutz, Helma (Ed.). (2008). *Migration and domestic work: A European perspective on a global theme*. Hampshire: Ashgate.
- Machado, José Daniel (2003). Acceso al ámbito de protección del decreto 326/56 para trabajadores del servicio doméstico. *Revista de Derecho Laboral*, 2, 277–317.
- Margulis, Mario, & Urresti, Marcelo (1999). *La segregación negada: Cultura y discriminación social*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.
- Pacecca, María Inés, & Courtis, Corina (2008). Inmigración contemporánea en Argentina: Dinámicas y políticas. *CEPAL Serie Población y Desarrollo No. 84*. Santiago de Chile: CEPAL United Nations.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar (2001). *Servants of globalization: Women, migration, domestic work*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Pereyra, Francisca (2012). La regulación de las condiciones laborales de las trabajadoras domésticas en Argentina. In Valeria Esquivel, Eleonor Faur, & Elizabeth Jelin (Eds.), *Las lógicas del cuidado infantil: Entre las familias, el Estado y el mercado* (pp. 163–196). Buenos Aires: IDES – UNICEF – UNPFA.
- Pérez, Inés (2012). *El hogar tecnificado: Familias, género y vida cotidiana (1940–1970)*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.
- Pite, Rebekah (2011). Entertaining inequalities: Doña Petrona, Juanita Bordoy, and domestic work in mid-twentieth century Argentina. *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 91(1), 97–138.
- Rollins, Judith (1985). *Between women: Domestic and their employers*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Romero, Mary (2002). *Maid in USA*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Valenzuela, María Elena, & Mora, Claudia (Eds.). (2009). *Trabajo doméstico: Un largo camino hacia el trabajo decente*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.