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# The Role of Maternalism in Contemporary Paid Domestic Work

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Various studies of domestic work have identified close personal relationships between domestic workers and employers as a key instrument in the exploitation of domestic workers, allowing employers to solicit unpaid services as well as a sense of superiority (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002; Glenn, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Likewise, other scholars have pointed out that close employee-employer relationships may actually empower domestic workers, increasing job leverage (Thornton-Dill, 1994). Ultimately, these lines are blurry and ever changing as employers continuously redefine employee expectations. Drawing from a larger study involving thirty interviews with white upper middle class women who currently employ domestic workers (mostly housecleaners) this paper explores employers' interactions with domestic workers. Through these interviews this research elaborates on how employers and employees interact, how employers feel about these interactions, and explores to what extent these interactions are informed by the widely reported maternalistic tendencies of the past, while also considering the consequences of this.

*Keywords:* Domestic Work; Maternalism

The rapid increase of middle class women entering the work force in recent decades (Anderson, 2001) coupled with growing income inequality (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001) has caused an increase in the demand for paid household labor. In 2010 just over 58% of women over the age of sixteen were in the labor force (DOL, 2010), and since 1975 the number of women working with children under the age of eighteen has increased from 47% to 71% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). By 2010 women comprised 47% of the labor force and 73% of these workers were employed full time (DOJ, 2010). While it is clear that some women have long worked in wage labor (working class women, poor women, and women of color), recent decades have shown a large influx of class privileged women into white collar and professional sectors. This movement of upper and middle class women into the workforce creates a demand for others to take on "caring labor" in the home (Hochschild, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

The current rates of paid domestic work are difficult to ascertain given the large numbers of under-the-table transactions. However, it is clear that domestic workers are disproportionately women of color (Duffy, 2007). Until the 1970 census, domestic service represented the largest occupational category for Black women in the US. Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many Black American and Mexican American women left domestic work for jobs in the public sector (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Around this same time, the percentage of foreign-born Latinas working in domestic service jumped. Gender, race, and class divisions have always been instrumental in determining who performs both paid and unpaid domestic work, however today nationhood and citizenship are also increasingly central issues. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas' (2001) analysis of paid reproductive work emphasizes this shift, highlighting that glob-

alization has transformed the politics of reproductive labor into an "international transfer of caretaking". Class privileged women in receiving countries purchase the labor of immigrant women, while migrant workers purchase the labor of even poorer women left behind in sending countries or depend on unpaid family care.

## Maternalism and Domestic Work

Various studies of domestic work have identified close personal relationships between domestic workers and employers as a key instrument in the exploitation of domestic workers, allowing employers to solicit unpaid services as well as a sense of superiority (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002; Glenn, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). These scholars argue that personalized relationships blur "the distinctions between paid and unpaid housework and weaken workers' ability to maintain contractual agreements" (Romero, 2002: p. 160). Building on this, the prevalence of what scholars have referred to as materialism, a "unilateral positioning of the employer as a benefactor who receives personal thanks, recognition, and validation of self from the domestic worker" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001: p. 172) is often cited as a primary mechanism by which employers exploit domestic workers and maintain labor control (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 2002).

Maternalism is related to the historical tradition of paternalism in domestic service occupations, however is distinct in the ways in which maternalism "is a concept related to women's supportive intrafamilial roles of nurturing, loving, and attending to affective needs" (Rollins, 1985: p. 187). It is this specific gendered manifestation that many scholars point to in explaining exploitation, Rollins explains:

The maternalistic dynamic is based on the assumption of a superordinate-subordinate relationship. While maternalism may protect and nurture, it also degrades and insults... The female employer, with her motherliness and protectiveness and generosity, is expressing in a distinctly feminine way her lack of respect for the domestic as an autonomous, adult employee (186).

These scholars suggest that maternalism mandates rituals of deference in addition to “quid pro quo obligations” in which employers expect employees to reciprocate employer favors with extra work. In contrast, Thorton Dill (1994) suggests that close employee-employer relationships may actually empower domestic workers, increasing job leverage.

Maternalistic tendencies in domestic work have declined (although not disappeared) and some research has suggested that domestic workers actually prefer employers who interact more personally with them. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) makes sense of this preference by differentiating maternalism from what she refers to as personalism, “a bilateral relationship that involves two individuals recognizing each other not solely in terms of their role or office (such as a clerk or cleaner) but rather as persons embedded in a unique set of social relations, and with particular aspirations” (172). Using narratives from her research, she points to the ways in which the workers in her study, Latina women working as domestics in Los Angeles, in some cases want more intimacy with employers, while employers want more distance. She writes:

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 (Lecture Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2006).

Janet Arnada’s (2003) work, which explores “mistress-maid relations” in the Philippines, builds on this, suggesting maternalism is a continuum of support and control, “ranging from the ‘part of the family ideology’, emotional labor, utang na loob system of obligation, to control and exploitation of the maid’s body, time space and relationships” (157).

While scholars may disagree on the consequences of types of working relationships, they all emphasize the importance employer and employee interactions have on the structures and inequalities of domestic labor. Clearly employer/employee relationships are central in all types of labor exchanges, however in paid domestic work this importance is magnified given both the emotional demands of this labor (including the ways in which it is often structured to replicate unpaid labor) and the informal labor market structure of the occupation. Elaborating on this, domestic workers are often expected to do not only physical labor but also emotional labor, with employers expecting them to treat their paid labor as a labor of love (Romero, 2002).

Likewise, domestic work is void of many legal protections that traditional employment offers. Although both minimum wage laws and social security laws have been extended to cover most domestic work positions, many employers do not meet these standards. Instead, domestic work positions are often negotiated within the informal labor market, regulated by community norms and values (Romero, 2002). Most employers and employees remain unaware of the legal regulations governing domestic work, most obviously because there has been no sub-

stantial effort by the government or media outlets to inform domestic workers or employers about these regulations (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

The nature, structure, and relationships in paid domestic work are constantly evolving. Economic forces, immigration patterns, and domestic workers themselves are extremely instrumental in these shifts. For instance, Black women in the North and South have been largely responsible for the large scale move from live in to the often more preferable live out positions, as Mexican American women transformed the profession in the Southwest to the common contractual arrangement found today (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Mary Romero uses the term job work to refer to those arrangements where housecleaners are paid by the job rather than by the hour. She argues that the shift represents a critical locus in domestic workers’ struggle to transform the occupation. Having a different employer every day, or in some cases as many as three employers in one day, reduces employer control and increases job flexibility. Charging by the house places boundaries on the job expectations, employers purchase labor power rather than labor service. This structural shift to “job work” is critical in making sense of employee/employer relationships. For instance, in this sample, all but two of the employers hired someone to come in and clean once a week or once every two weeks, and paid “by the house” rather than by the hour. Clearly this minimizes the amount of time workers and employers spend together, especially when compared to full time cleaning or childcare positions.

Given these shifts, understanding how employers and employees negotiate domestic work relationships is of central importance. As this research demonstrates, these relationships have implications for the actual structuring of such labor including for instance job security and wages. Ultimately, these lines are blurry and ever changing as employers continuously redefine employee expectations. Drawing from a larger study involving thirty interviews with white upper middle class women who currently employ domestic workers (mostly housecleaners) this paper explores employers’ interactions with domestic workers. These relationships are dynamic and ever changing, constantly being renegotiated within the intersection of domestic work as paid labor and traditional notions of “women’s work”. Through these interviews this research elaborates on how employers and employees interact, how employers feel about these interactions, and explores to what extent these interactions are informed by the widely reported maternalistic tendencies of the past, while also considering the consequences of this.

## Data and Method

This study focuses on women because of the historical implications of housework as “women’s work” and in order to explore the dynamics between women across different social locations. Various studies have demonstrated that these transactions of labor tend to be “between women”. Rollins (1985), for example, found in many employer households it is women who are entirely responsible for seeking out and hiring domestic workers. Focusing on middle/upper class heterosexual white women allows for an in-depth exploration of privilege and how it shapes interactions with domestic workers, typically women who do not have the same racial and/or class privileges. Class and racially advantaged heterosexual women have been privy to

certain protections of a patriarchal society that many lesbian, poor women and women of color have not.

This work utilized qualitative active interviews for data collection. Thirty interviews were conducted with participants for the purpose of exploring perceptions of paid and unpaid domestic work, how one negotiates decision making and hiring domestic workers, the gendered roles of housework in this context, the relationships between employer and employee, and the class and racial politics that are involved in hiring domestic workers. The researcher also asked specific questions such as actual payment, how they make contacts with possible employees, and specific stories of relating to domestic workers in this context. Interview data was collected until saturation. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, analysis began by coding incidents within the data into categories. Integral to the process of inductive qualitative research, analysis did not begin with a predetermined coding scheme. The coding and themes were allowed to emerge from the data rather than be transposed onto it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The coding process consisted of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Once open coding identified categories, axial coding was used to find connections between categories. When the links between categories were established creating concepts, selective coding was used to contextualize the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

All participants were upper or middle class heterosexual white women who employ domestic workers. The median family income of participants was \$200,000, however there was a significant disconnect between participant's household income and their personal income. The median personal income was between \$11,000 and \$20,000. Clearly, the majority of participants were reliant on male partner's earnings to maintain their lifestyles. Twenty-seven of the participants were married; one was single, one in a committed relationship and one separated going through a divorce. Four participants were childfree and twenty-six had children. The median number of children was two.

### **Worker/Employer Interactions in Paid Domestic Work**

As various scholars have noted, domestic work relationships entail a significant negotiation of public and private boundaries and the blurring of lines between personal and business relationships. On one hand employers are looking to hire ideal "employees" who will fulfill their work expectations, on the other, these work expectations go beyond jobs tasks and often workers are judged more on their personalities than job performance (Romero, 2002). Furthermore, this tension reflects an attempt to structure a business relationship in an environment that is traditionally thought of as outside the public space, one's home.

Employer/employee interactions are foundational to this structuring of the labor and understanding the ways in which maternalism continues (or does not to continue) to function as part of the work relationship. In this sample, there was a large range in terms of how employers interacted with workers; however, the majority of participants seemed to have cordial, friendly interactions, casual conversations. Consistent with past research, however, very few would be characterized as maternalistic. The personal interactions seem mostly limited to casual conversations that included comments about family, vacations, etc. Dolores explained,

Uh, oh, she's very sweet. Yeah, you know, we talk. I'm not very friendly with her, but she's, she's... You know, we know about each other's kids, 'cause they're in college. And, you know, we swap stories. You know, she tells me about her vacation and her mom 'cause she's met my parents...

These casual conversations were very common; however these interactions were often limited by the structure of work. Rosita for example made the following comments,

Uh, I call her... I mean, I've come home a couple of times and she's here um, and we talk, um... Yeah, like her sister had a baby. You know, like we talk about this and that. But then again she's got, you know what I mean, which is another reason it's the same thing. She'll stop cleaning as she's talking to me for twenty minutes. You know what I mean? And now my house is being rushed 'cause she probably got another place to go do.

While they have some conversational interchange when Rosita is home, she feels as though this interchange jeopardizes the cleanliness of her home because Adrienne (the woman she currently employs) is then rushing to finish. The fruitfulness of the conversation was weighed against participants' interest in getting as much labor for their money as possible. When asked, the majority of participants claimed that they preferred a professional exchange, however their reasons for preferring professionalism and ideas of what was professional varied considerably. In terms of keeping the relationship business oriented, Molly made the following statements,

Like a business... Yeah, no I treat it, I find that myself, I always make things too personal and then I end up getting hurt in the end, you know like, I always try to help people, that maybe aren't as fortunate as me, and I think I always get burned. So, no, it's just strictly business relationships, she comes in, she does the job, she gets paid, and that's that. You know I don't want to help her do anything; I don't want to give her anything you know extra, because then it becomes personal. Yeah, and like if you start to give somebody maybe that's less fortunate than you like clothes or you know things that maybe you're not using, then if they really needed something then they're going to feel more comfortable to come to you and ask for it, and then that puts you in an awkward position.

She seems to think that making the relationship too personal would in effect open her up to getting "hurt", although in all likelihood she actually has significant control over the structure, type and length of this working relationship. Molly also seems to fear the possibility of being taken advantage of. She conceptualizes the potential for a personal relationship in a material sense. For instance, personal would be her making "charitable" contributions to workers rather than an actual reciprocal relationship. Molly's comments demonstrate a self-conscious rejection of a maternalistic role within the relationship.

These interchanges (with the exception of Molly) seem to reflect what Hondagneu-Sotelo refers to as personalism, "a bilateral relationship that involves two individuals recognizing each other not solely in terms of their role or office (such as a clerk or cleaner) but rather as persons embedded in a unique set of social relations, and with particular aspirations" (172). However, similar to her findings, employers often attempt to limit

these interactions either because of discomfort, perceived time constraints, or fear that their house is not being cleaned as well as it should be. Focusing on the latter, what emerges in this case is that employers almost view these personal interactions as something that is at a cost to them; that is on their “dime”. This is not to say that employers did not place emotional demands on workers (Moras, 2009) but rather instead of viewing personalized interactions as something that “would get them more” in the traditional maternalistic sense, it was more of a friendly obligation weighed against getting the most for their money. It is important to note here, that while these relationships might not have been traditionally maternalistic they were always asymmetrical with employers maintaining a huge amount of control over the working relationship. The following section will explore this in depth.

### Not Maternalism But Still Unequal

Domestic work is fraught with these asymmetrical interactions reflected at times in the stories participants tell and how they talk about this relationship. Phrases such as “my cleaning girl” “my girl” “her girl” “my neighbor’s girl” “the cleaning lady” were common. Often times I was not told the name of the woman who worked in their home and had to explicitly ask for the purpose of the conversation (these names were changed in analysis). However, none of the participants perceived themselves as being “bad” employers or spoke of desiring “servitude” like relationships. In fact, most described a relationship or interaction that they might consider largely egalitarian. However, the guilt some women expressed towards watching domestic workers clean might suggest a questioning of the ideological implications of hiring someone to clean their families’ home although it often seemed to reflect the gendered expectations they had of themselves as wives and mothers (Author, 2009).

Furthermore, several participants alluded to how certain interactions could reinforce a subordinated position. Francesca recounted the following story about how her partner’s children treated Sandra in their home,

The, um, the kids come from like, you know, a house where their mother expects people to wait on them, on her, and do for her hand on foot. And, when I introduced the kids to Sandra I said, Jenny, Brian, say hello to Sandra. Sandra’s going to help us with the house cleaning. Help us, you know, keep things homey and things like that. And they said, no she’s not, she’s here to clean our house, she’s the maid. So, at that point, I said to them, you can excuse yourselves and say I’m sorry to Sandra and say hello Sandra. Because that was beyond rude. So, that’s what they did. And then after Sandra had left I had sat them down and spoke to them about it. And, I asked them if they refer to mommy’s maids as the maids, and they said no, that her name’s Heather. And I said that’s how to refer to Sandra. And don’t expect to treat people like that again in your lives. That’s really rude. I spoke to them and then I said I sat them down, and then they said why, that’s her title. That’s, that’s Sandra’s title, she’s the maid. And I said, right, and that’s Heather and Maureen’s title, but do you call them the maid? And they said no. I said your mom’s a housewife; do you call your mom a housewife? And they said no. And I said, right. So, people had different jobs and different titles and you respect them no

matter what their job and their title is. So, they went into that whole thing.

Francesca was clearly upset by the incident and felt that calling Sandra the maid in front of her was disrespectful and privately apologized to Sandra afterwards:

When I walked her outside after it, everyone said it, I said, I’m, I’m sorry about the kids don’t understand certain things in life because they have no discipline. And, um, she said, its ok, its ok, they’re young, they’re young. So, they’ll understand one day. They’re sweet; they’re beautiful. And, um, so, she never lets anybody belittle her or make her feel like her job was worthless. Because she knew that it wasn’t in a way. She, she totally just didn’t understand that this woman was going to create the house that they live in and make it really beautiful and clean. And that they wouldn’t ever appreciate that until they were older, but she knew that they would one day appreciate it.

Another way in which these asymmetries played out in interactions was through language and nation. While most insisted that race did not matter, speaking English did, which was informed by issues of class, race, nationhood and citizenship. Furthermore, in these relationships language interaction was constructed in an asymmetrical manner (Author, 2010). For example, when asked the name of the women who work in her home Emily responded,

I don’t, uh, honestly, I call her Mary, but I don’t know if that’s ‘cause I can’t pronounce it the way she says it. Marique or something like that. I just say Mary and she answers to it. And Mary’s sister.

She seems to not know the names of the two women who work in her home and this is attributed to her inability to pronounce it the way “Mary” says it. Therefore she calls her Mary. This illustrates the advantages employers have in controlling said interactions. For instance, while they supposedly do not speak English, it is unlikely that “Mary” and “Mary’s sister” do not know how to say Emily’s name. This reflects one of many paradoxes in domestic work. While Emily likes both women very much and in her own words said, “I love them both. Yeah, they’re really nice girls,” she does not know their names. In most other types of personal or professional relationships this would not be possible.

In the earlier cited examples we arguably see a turn away from maternalism, demonstrating employers desire to maintain some distance from domestic workers. I include these excerpts from the interviews with Francesca and Emily, however, to demonstrate that even without these maternalistic relationships interactions continue to be constructed in an asymmetrical manner shaped by race, class and nation. There is nothing intrinsically demeaning about domestic work; rather these structural inequalities of race, class, gender and citizenship shape the asymmetry of these transactions. The racial and ethnic stratification of domestic work persists today and privileged women’s displacement of housework has always been intertwined with racial and class politics. Employing immigrant women and/or women of color reinforces the power dynamic of race and racism in households, separating the tasks of “dirty work” along race and class lines (Anderson, 2001).

## Negotiating the Personal: Rethinking Maternalism

As the previous sections demonstrate, most participants did not engage traditional maternalistic roles, even when relationships were slightly more intimate. However, there were a few obvious exceptions, employers who felt particularly close to workers and who then negotiated the work relationship through this. One such example is Christina. Christina has been employing Laura for about eight years now, and prior to this she had employed Laura's daughter. She feels particularly close to Laura as she explained,

Uh, let's see, well, I trust them beyond belief. Um, I feel as if Laura is part of our family. Um, um, when my in-laws died, she would come over and give me flowers, and bring me a meal. And I, um, just, my mother said once, it's like the—what is that expression from the Bible about some, something might—anyway, that she just, the widow's might or something. She just bends over backwards, and I just cannot forget that, and want to reciprocate her generosity.

Reciprocating this generosity was important to Christina, and she actually pays better than most employers (one hundred per cleaning) and also gives Laura an additional one hundred dollars at Christmas. However, her "contributions" go beyond traditional job benefits,

... and then I give them, like, all sorts of stuff. And, and they always ask me questions about healthcare and how to do that, so I tell them all about that... Well, how do they get healthcare, without insurance. I tell them about the good neighbor clinic in our community, about Laura went through a divorce, I helped her with that, and, you know, how to, who to contact. And just would listen to her, and say that wasn't right... well I have a bag of things, of clothing, an on-going bag of, things that I donate to the what is sort of the equivalent of the local United Way. And, you know, if I think that, you know, I just, it's kind of not, you know, if I just want to give something up, I put it in the bag, and then I say, Laura, if you see anything that you want before I send this off. Listen, please you know, help yourself, anytime. And, so she just, so I just keep that bag going, and then she goes through it. And then after the week, I bring it to the community center.

Offering advice and used clothing are reminiscent of traditional maternalistic interactions; however throughout the interview it was clear that she was thoroughly involved in the lives of both Laura and her daughter. She had knowledge of their families, divorces, boyfriends, to whom and how often they sent money home, career aspirations etc. However, this knowledge was shared in an asymmetrical manner. She explained that she does not tell Laura very much about her own life, with the exception of telling her that she and her husband were getting a divorce. Related to this, Christina actually felt quite hurt that Laura was continuing to clean for her soon to be ex-husband,

Well, I, I actually, after what I heard, first heard that, that she was doing that, I felt kind of betrayed in the sense that she didn't realize that I was the one who supported her, and that she sort of went where she thought the big money was, where my husband was... But, but it, it bothers me,

quite frankly. I felt like I supported her and then, and then, you know I continued to pay, keep her on, and then and then, you know, kind of crossed a boundary to the other side... I guess, you know, my feelings were hurt that, you know, she went to the place where she thought the male version of the household, thinking that's where the economic power is, was, but it was me who like really stood up for her to always have her come to my house. He would always complain, like, oh, you know, Laura's stealing from us; oh, you pay Laura too much money; this is ridiculous, you know, we should fire Laura. And I was always like, no, no, you know, I always stuck up for her.

Laura no longer works for Christina's soon to be ex-husband; she stopped after he refused to pay her for her labor. Christina's comments suggest that she herself is also personally invested in the relationship, evidenced by the hurt she expressed. However, is her hurt reflecting a unilateral contradiction of loyalty or a genuine feeling of betrayal out of care? As this example demonstrates, the lines between maternalism and personalism are unclear, and the meanings and consequences of each are contested territory. Is Christina constructing herself as a benefactor who receives some kind of unilateral validation of the self, or rather seeing both Laura and herself as persons, "embedded in a unique set of social relations?"

In addition to Christina, several other participants also spoke of having close personal relationships with domestic workers, relationships that went beyond an employee/employer orientation and were rather "like friends" or "like family". However, being like friends or like family is an extremely complex statement based on the asymmetry of domestic work relationships. Given the likely differences in class and racial backgrounds it is quite possible that many of these women would not have met each other if not for this employee-employer relationship. Furthermore, as referenced in the following statements, this closeness was still associated with how well one did their job. Jane explained,

... I would think that people would get attached to these, you know these people that come in, like I kind of feel like, when we heard when Sylvia's father passed away, not father, husband, we just felt bad, and we had a discussion about like you know, do we need Sylvia, that's why I did like every two weeks. I just didn't want to let her go because I felt, I felt, I just felt you know bad for her, cause she's so nice. But you kind of have an attachment... (So it's not just a business relationship, its personal?) Oh no, no, no, yeah it does, I think so. I think for more though, more, out of all the ones I've had more with Sylvia. And even though I'm not there a lot of the time, you know it's, she's a very warm lady, sweet. (Is that why you think you've gotten closer to her, because she is so sweet?) Yeah. And I'm very, you know I trust her. That's the whole thing, if, I think it has a lot to do with trust. And the work they do too... I really really love her. She works, she's a hard working person and she's got, I think she's got a really good family values, you know that's nice.

Jane demonstrated a particular attachment to Sylvia that seemingly went beyond their work relationship, as least more so than most participants. She emphasized here and also at other times during the interview how sweet Sylvia is and how

close she feels to her as a result. However, when asked about this she also mentioned trust and “the work they do” as factors in terms of why she felt this closeness. Daryl’s comments also spoke to this association between close personal relationships and quality of work. When asked about the interaction between her and domestic workers she stated,

Oh, they’re like my friends... I, I mean, I can’t say that about these new ones ‘cause they’ve only been here for a month, but the last one, she was my friend. Oh, we talked about everything. We talked about her kids, we talked about her husband, we talked about my husband, my kids, you know, everything. (And how did the relationship get like that?) Um, I just think over time. You know, the same with the one from Brazil, I mean from Portugal, the one from Newark. She was, I was the same way with her too.

When then asked if she thought the new relationship would ever be like this past relationship she responded,

I don’t, I, I don’t know, I don’t know. I mean, I, I do talk to them. I talk to them to see how she’s doing ‘cause they hear from her and stuff. Um, I, like I said I’m just not a hundred percent happy with their job, I’m maybe seventy-five percent happy with their job, and I’m sure that if I talk to them about it they will do what they, you know, do what they can. But, if I say, you didn’t clean the windows this week, well, they’ll clean the windows next week, but they might forget something else.

She judges the “friend” potential of the relationship in terms of how happy she is with their cleaning. She was asked about interactions and she responded in terms of their cleaning. These examples illustrate how the personal aspects of these relationships can almost never be divorced from the structure and exchange of labor. Furthermore, the asymmetry of these relationships limits the capacities in which participants were able to perceive relationships with workers.

Nancy was one of the only (if not the only) cases in which it seemed that the employer/employee relationship extended beyond the work environment. For instance, while several participants stated that they interacted “like friends” very few actually spoke of having domestic workers in their homes outside of scheduled cleaning times. In contrast, Nancy had employed the same woman, Joan, for many years; ever since her son was born (her son is now in college). Her children call Joan “Grandma Joan” and in Nancy’s words, “she became part of our family, she still is.” Even since Joan retired she continues to go to the house for tea or lunch and remains close to Nancy and her two children. However, while Nancy remembers this as a really rewarding experience and still has a “great relationship” with Joan, it seemed that the highly personalized aspects of the relationship at times interfered with aspects of the work,

What made, what was difficult was that if things weren’t being done. You know, over the years she got older, and you know she couldn’t clean, you know, the way she used to clean. But I could never, I would never, approach her with it, ever... As a matter a fact, I really could have used somebody maybe five years before she decided to retire but I would never ever get rid of her. So I kind of just waited until she retired. I wouldn’t do that.

Their personal relationship made it difficult for her to hire

someone new, even when she felt the work wasn’t being done the way she wanted it to be. Contrary then to the women who dictate the friendly aspects of the relationship according to the “quality” of work, Nancy and Joan’s friendship dictated the work relationship. Several other participants also mentioned feeling a commitment to workers because of some personal connection. For instance, earlier Jane mentioned that while she and her husband didn’t think they “needed” Sylvia anymore, they continued the work relationship because of Sylvia’s recent loss and the attachment she felt to her. Dawn similarly continued hiring Monica even though she was unhappy with her cleaning,

She’s an older woman. She probably, you know, doesn’t clean like I would like her to, which I’m sure a lot of people say. But, you know, she doesn’t do windows, she doesn’t do a lot of the other things. It’s, she vacuums and cleans the bathrooms, and, you know, she’s, she really doesn’t do heavy work, or under sofas, or anything like that, or, you know, kind of dusting blinds, or fans. You know, I probably should start to look for somebody else, but she’s an older woman. Actually, she used to help me out a little with my mother. You know, I could send her to the nursing home and she’d go through my mother’s clothing, you know, she used to do, you know, things like that for me too, so...

The help Monica offered with Dawn’s mother (who recently passed away) prompted Dawn to feel a certain loyalty to her. These examples echo Thornton-Dill’s argument, suggesting that closer relationships may give workers more leverage in the relationship. At the same time, it is important not to romanticize these relationships either. It is difficult to explore how these “friendships” are actually organized, specifically the power relations involved and the level of reciprocity. Do Sylvia, Laura and Joan feel as though they are treated as friends or employees? This research cannot pretend to answer that question; however the selective ways in which participants interact with domestic workers suggests an intricate balance of employee and friend roles. For example, when Jane was later debating her preferences about being home or not being home while Sylvia was there she had mentioned that she loves Sylvia and loves to talk to her, although prefers not to be home all the time because the talking interferes with Sylvia’s work. She is clearly balancing how she feels about Sylvia personally with her desire to have her house clean. Therefore, while the personal relationship may increase workers’ leverage, employers continue to have control over the nature and definition of said relationship.

The type of domestic work relationships studied further informed how participants conceptualized the personal aspects of this labor. It is very likely that had this research focused on live-in or full time positions participants’ responses would have been quite different. In addition, cleaning is traditionally thought of as intrinsically less intimate than childcare and several participants’ comments reflected this ranking of intimacy. Given the increasing popularity of “nanny” cams it is clear that hiring someone to care for children implies not only more personal connections, but increased supervision or policing of this labor. One participant actually had cameras installed in every room of her home except the bathrooms and bedrooms as a means of supervising her childcare provider. These same extreme meas-

ures of supervision were never engaged in policing house-cleaning. However, many participants did maintain some form of labor supervision (Moras, 2009).

### **Making a “Better” Life: Maternalism and Bridging Opportunity**

Returning to the earlier cited definition of maternalism, as “unilateral positioning of the employer as a benefactor who receives personal thanks, recognition, and validation of self from the domestic worker” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001: p. 172); very few participants seemed to seek this validation. In the afore mentioned cases, while participants recognized the personal lives of workers, few saw themselves as benefactors. That said, domestic work has long been thought of as a bridging occupation, providing an entry-level position for immigrant women facilitating social mobility. “Reformers and scholars praised the work experience for furnishing rural, traditional, immigrant women with exposure to the modern world in a protected, supervised environment... In this model, the mistress-maid relationship was depicted as one of benevolent maternalism, inculcating ‘new work disciples and middle class norms and values’” (Romero, 2002: p. 57). Under this logic, employers construct themselves as providing opportunities for domestic workers, opportunities that would not be found in countries of origin. These opportunities may be construed as economic or as services of cultural assimilation. This thinking has informed various Americanization efforts that tracked Mexican women into paid domestic work positions.

While rare, a few participants demonstrated their own understandings of this supposed bridging process through an emphasis on workers’ desire for a better life. Brianne explained,

Well, um, I think, like, most of the, most of the people come here because of the money that they make here is so much more than they get there. So they can have all their families; they can build a home. Uh, back in their own countries, like in Mexico, practically nothing. The money, the value of the dollar over there is like ten, fifteen times greater than it would be here. And another reason, when they buy their homes, they own the homes and there’s very little, uh, taxation and maintenance, you build it, it’s practically yours. Some of the countries, in like Guatemala, they don’t even charge tax. Once you buy the land, that’s it.

These comments reflect somewhat incomplete understandings of what the economic struggles involved in immigration might be, for example, when Brianne was asked if she perceives workers to have to struggle economically here, she responded,

I don’t think so, no. Mostly, um, they adapt to a different kind of a lifestyle that they might live three or four people in one apartment. And what they do is they block off rooms, you know, ‘cause they’re happy like that, they like, you know, being together. And, uh, they only have, like, separate sleeping quarters and there’s one living area and one dining area where everybody eats and one kitchen. So, I, I think most of them do pretty well here. Most of the girls that I’ve had working with me, they go to school. They learn English, and, you know, they try to better themselves. They all have dreams too when they come

here. They also, you know, if they have children, they want their children to become bilingual and some schooling here. They bring their parents; they bring their brothers and sisters, you know, if they have them. Working maybe siblings then they’ll try to bring them over here. So they can earn money.

She romanticizes these living situations, citing their happiness, although she simultaneously shows an appreciation and respect for these “dreams”. Emily similarly romanticized this immigrant experience,

She’s still cleaning too ‘cause, but it’s a family affair, I, I think, you know. I mean from what I can gather, they, they’re, it’s a very, very close knit family. Um, they all kind of live together. They probably all have a large house someplace and they all kind of live together, or in close proximity. ‘Cause she was telling me about her son’s fifth birthday party and, um, she said he didn’t want a regular children’s party, like other kids. He wanted grandpa to come and play the, play the accordion. And we all sang and we all had fun. And was like, wow, and I told her, your kids is, um, actually privileged because there’s so many kids in America that don’t have that. They have split families and, you know, they don’t have that grounding. So, I think, I think we’re all, we all come from immigration families. My, my husband’s father was born in Germany. Um, my family came from England. You know, and we all came in as blue-collar, hardworking people who make it.

This romanticization obscures the vast disparities of wealth involved in paid domestic work and depoliticizes the asymmetrical relationships between employer and employee. Using another example here, Francesca actually spoke of preferring not to hire to American workers because she would rather reserve job opportunities for new immigrants:

... I would never, I would never hire an American worker to come in and clean my house, and the only reason would be because I feel like American workers have an opportunity to work, not at something better, but they have an opportunity to be something other than a, other than a cleaner. And I don’t think there’s something wrong with being a cleaner, but I, I want the people that come to this country to have a job. So I wouldn’t want them to be out of a job... I just feel like that the people that come here they want to be something, and they want to learn, and they want to educate themselves and make their lives better for them wherever that may be. I’m not saying here in America, but anywhere that their life can be better and I would want to give that opportunity to somebody. And I would hope that they would learn from me and I would learn from them, you know, bringing somebody in here from another country and they can see, that, you know, I’m a single woman living on my own, and, and trying to make ends meet on my own. And, you know, that I can do it on my own, and, you know, that she could do it on her own. And you know, I just feel like it’s very different to convince American woman that she can do it one her own, or, you know, she’s always looking for sympathy, or empathy...

For many women of color domestic work has not necessarily



been a means of social mobility. While white women have typically been considered “help”, the labor of women of color has been treated as servitude. This manifests itself through differences in working conditions and the lack of egalitarian opportunities to move up the occupational ladder. White women are also more likely to be employed as nannies rather than expected to perform all housekeeping tasks and are paid higher wages (Wrigley, 1996). They receive job preference and often view domestic work as a stepping-stone to other occupations and/or marriage. Historically Black women could not rely on marriage as a guarantee that they would not have to work. Racial discrimination excluded Black men from many economic opportunities, forcing many Black women to work in domestic service while married and raising children (Thornton-Dill, 1994; Hill Collins, 2000). In our contemporary economic structure, there are very few opportunities for upward mobility out of domestic work today. As Hondagneu-Sotelo points out, “We live in a society that is increasingly characterized by an occupational hourglass, without a booming industrial sector for Latina domestic workers or their husbands to latch onto in the United States” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001: p. 240). Therefore, the availability of domestic work opportunities while important economically is not always a means of economic empowerment.

### Discussion

Making sense of household labor requires an intricate analysis of not only gender relations and sexism, but also, household structure, family interactions and formal and informal market economies. Recent scholarship has emphasized how housework reflects understandings of family, love and personal fulfillment while also structuring relationships of gender, race and class. Women continue to do two to three times more housework than men, and yet most men and women consider these arrangements fair (Coltrane, 2001). Almost without exception the women interviewed did the majority of housework in their home and hiring a domestic worker was clearly replacing their labor rather than their male partner’s. While most participants did not explicitly refer to housework as “women’s work” their statements implicitly suggest that for most, housework is largely conceptualized as women’s responsibility. For instance, Dolores, a 49-year-old married nurse, shared that her husband “gave” her a “cleaning lady” for Christmas. This has been an ongoing gift ever since, as she puts it, “The gift that keeps giving.” Another participant Jane explained that her daughter was going to get “one” for mother’s day. Clearly the assumption that a “cleaning lady” would be a gift to these women implies that cleaning is their responsibility.

How employers and domestics interact is not a side effect of the labor, it is a primary structuring force underlying the labor. Paid domestic work is organized in an asymmetrical manner, which is manifested through the interactions between domestics and employers, likewise, the asymmetrical interactions between domestics and employers organizes domestic work in an asymmetrical manner. They mutually reinforce one another. It is obvious that paid domestic work encompasses a variety of contested territories. Definitions of women’s work, family relationships, and race, class and national hierarchies structure such labor in a dynamic and continuously changing manner.

The relationships between domestic workers and employers are especially important to understanding the exchange of domestic labor. Whereas traditional domestic relationships were

arguably maternalistic, as both this research and past research demonstrates many contemporary employers attempt to maintain personal distance between themselves and employees (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). However, as noted earlier, there is considerable disagreement among scholars of domestic work regarding what types of employer/employee relationships produce the most exploitive situations. This research does not offer a final conclusion, and in fact reflects the complexity of these questions.

For those participants who had close relationships with domestic workers, those close relationships were often asymmetrical and arguably voyeuristic. Those with more personal relationships, however, rarely terminated the work relationship, even when they were dissatisfied with cleaning. Instead, they would comment on other aspects of the relationship that were more important, for example trust. Therefore, those relationships with very little personal interaction could also be seen as potentially exploitive, offering little to no job security. Complicating this question further, how participants characterized and defined personal relationships was informed by perceptions of domestic workers, evaluations of labor and assumptions about racial difference and foreignness. For example, a supposed language barrier was one of the most commonly offered reasons for why employers did not interact personally with domestic workers.

Characterizing these personal relationships as maternalistic would be a misnomer however; even in those more personal relationships very few employers constructed themselves in the traditional role of a benevolent benefactor. There were a few exceptions, but these were rare. Instead, even in those cases where there was some “care” on the part of the employer it seemed to be more reflective of personalism, with employers recognizing aspects of employees’ lives that existed outside of the work relationship.

That said, this engagement was far from “sisterhood” and any feminist ideology that unproblematically conceptualizes wage work as liberating is fundamentally flawed in addressing women’s labor issues. The negative effects and subordination of capitalism and patriarchy are by no means equal for all women. Dependent upon one’s social location and privilege, they can engage in and even perhaps benefit from such arrangements (Chang, 2000). However, patriarchy and the expectations and effects of capitalism inform all such relationships. For instance, if “women’s work” was not devalued by a patriarchal society, paid domestic labor would not be such an exploitive occupation and if reproductive labor was not considered “women’s work” many of the exploitive conditions discussed would not be so primarily grounded in exchanges between women (Thornton-Dill, 1994). Furthermore, the gendered division of labor in homes, particularly women’s responsibility for unpaid care work, contributed to women’s confinement to low-paid, caretaking and servile paid work (Amott & Matthaei, 1996; Nakano Glenn, 1992).

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