



Reading and writing between different worlds: Learning, literacy and power in the lives of two migrant domestic workers

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Literacy
Gender
Domestic labour
Migration
Gender justice
Empowerment

ABSTRACT

Over the last decades, studies exploring women's literacy have highlighted the way in which literacy practices are embedded within social norms and structures of power. This article draws on research with a group of female migrant domestic workers from Nepal who attended literacy support sessions at the Migrant Resource Centre in London. It explores the way in which their engagement with literacy and learning interacts with the gendered relations of power they experience as they move between different transnational spaces and social fields. It suggests that a consideration of the opportunities and constraints that they experience as migrant domestic workers is critical for understanding their engagement with literacy, and for thinking about possibilities for greater gender justice in the lives of migrant domestic workers like them.

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"Now, when I go back to Nepal I want to sit and watch and relax. I want to have some lessons and I can help my nephews and nieces with their learning. . . My husband is so happy that I am going back. He says that he is counting the days. In my village everyone is waiting for me. . . to have celebrations at the temple I paid for."
Priya 23/12/08

"My employer asked how I learnt so many languages if I can't read and write. She said she has to write things down to remember. She uses her computer all the time. I told her "my brain is like a computer."
Sudha 25/08/09

Priya and Sudha¹ are two migrant domestic workers from Nepal whom, between June 2008 and January 2010, participated in an informal literacy learning support group, together with other migrant domestic workers from Nepal and India, at the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC)² in London. This paper draws on research, which stems from my involvement with the MRC, a centre which is open to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to receive advice, learn English or computer skills, meet with others, and come together to share ideas and concerns about issues that affect them. Between 2007 and 2010 I collaborated with the MRC under the

mentor scheme, which pairs up migrants wanting to improve their English with volunteers willing to support them, starting work with the group of women of which Priya and Sudha formed a part in 2008. While the women in the group did want to improve their spoken English, their main concern was with learning to read and write (in English). The "mentoring" sessions therefore quickly transformed themselves into an informal literacy support group.

In this paper I consider the experiences of Priya and Sudha, two of the original members of group. I draw on empirical data collected through participant-observation of the weekly literacy support sessions and records of informal discussions and interviews to tell their stories. Drawing on theoretical insights from the New Literacy Studies and an ideological model of literacy (Street, 1984) as a gendered social practice; recent work on literacy and transnationalism; and Lois McNay's consideration gendered power relations, agency and constraint, I explore the way in which their engagement with literacy interacts with the gendered power relations they experience as they move between different spaces. In doing so I suggest that a consideration of the transnational dimensions of their lives and the opportunities and constraints that they experience as migrant domestic workers is critical for understanding their engagement with literacy, and for thinking about possibilities for moving towards greater gender justice in the lives of migrant domestic workers like them.

1. Literacy, gender and power in local and global spaces

Over the last two decades an extensive body of literature has explored literacy in developing countries from the perspective of literacy as a social practice, drawing on an ideological model of

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¹ Both Priya and Sudha are pseudonyms.

² For more information about the work of the MRC, see <http://www.migrantsresourcecentre.org.uk/>.

literacy. Rejecting understandings of literacy as a neutral, technical autonomous skill, ethnographic research has instead examined the way in which literacy practices are embedded within social and cultural norms and gendered structures of power (see for example, Kalman, 2001, 2005; Robinson-Pant, 2001, 2004; Street, 2004b). Such studies have often focused on women – as primary participants in literacy programmes –, examining the multiple ways in which they understand and use literacy in particular settings. However, by situating their analysis of literacy within an understanding of the local social context in which it occurs, scholars have also enabled an examination of the way in which literacy practices interact with gendered power relations at the level of the family and community. They have highlighted, for example, how, in some communities, women's participation in literacy classes may be constrained or resented by husbands or fathers (Maddox, 2007; Robinson-Pant, 2000), or how such participation may be a way of resisting unequal relations within the family (Kalman, 2001) or collectively challenging male practices, such as the consumption of alcohol within the community (George, 2004; Khandekar, 2009).

Ethnographic studies of literacy and gender in particular local contexts have also problematised the relationship between literacy and “empowerment”, challenging commonly held assumptions about the “illiterate (and therefore “ignorant”/“passive”/“oppressed”) third world woman”, and pointing to the ways in which illiterate women are often highly knowledgeable and able to successfully employ a range of strategies when dealing with literacy demanding situations (Betts, 2004; Chopra, 2004; Robinson-Pant, 2000, 2004; Street, 2004b). Moreover, they have cautioned against assuming that participation in literacy learning automatically leads to empowerment, or that processes of empowerment associated with literacy can be understood narrowly in terms of enhanced economic opportunities (Ahearn, 2004; Bartlett, 2008; Robinson-Pant, 2000, 2001, 2004). Rather, they point to the need to understand how women may “take hold of” literacy in different ways and to consider what sort of literacy and processes of learning might be empowering to them in particular local contexts (Robinson-Pant, 2004). In doing so, they suggest the need for a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of empowerment as a process (see for example, Kabeer, 1999), which might, for some women, be associated as much with changes in terms of identity, self esteem, or social status and positioning relative to others as with changes in the economic sphere.

Meanwhile, within the New Literacy Studies, there has been an increasing concern with understanding not only the local but also the global dynamics of literacy and a number of recent articles have highlighted tensions between a focus on locally situated literacy practices, and a consideration of how literacy may be shaped by distant or global processes (e.g. Baynham, 2007; Blommaert, 2008; Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Maddox, 2008; Pahl and Rowswell, 2006; Reder & Davila, 2005; Street, 2004a; Warriner, 2007b). Empirical studies concerned with the global dynamics of literacy practices have considered the relationship between literacy and multi-modality (see for example, Pahl and Rowswell, 2006) and examined how texts become “recontextualised”, taking on different meanings and significance as they move between spaces (Blommaert, 2008; Kell, 2009). Elsewhere a growing body of research has focused on the relationship between transnationalism and literacy and the experiences of transmigrants: individuals who, despite having moved physically across national borders, maintain links and connections to their home countries and communities (see for example, Baynham, 2007; Bruna, 2007; Hornberger, 2007; Lam and Warriner, 2012; Sarroub, 2009; Warriner, 2007a,b). This research draws attention to the way in which literacy practices may be influenced by or facilitate transnational movement, how emergent literacy practices are affected by continued connections to home communities, and the role literacy may play in maintaining social

networks and connections with “home” (Lam and Warriner, 2012; Sarroub, 2009).

Lam and Warriner, in reviewing a range of research studies concerned with transnationalism and literacy suggest that the Bourdieusian concept of social fields (see for example, Bourdieu, 1991, 1992) might constitute a useful interpretative frame for considering literacy practices among transnational communities (Lam and Warriner, 2012). They use the term field to refer to a “relational, multidimensional space of activity in which people take up positions in relation to one another according to how much resources or capital they have” (Lam and Warriner, 2012, p. 192). Here forms of capital include not only economic capital but also cultural capital – such as for example knowledge, skills, educational and professional credentials, cultural goods – and social capital, including access to social networks and affiliations. Lam and Warriner suggest that reading and writing can be seen as “forms of capital production and exchange through which people are variously able to attain particular positions across diverse social fields” (Lam and Warriner, 2012, p. 192). They give the example of the way in which the bilingual skills of children of immigrant families, developed through interpreting dominant language texts for their families, are highly valued within the family and immigrant community and, when combined with other professional qualifications, a highly valuable asset within a globalising economy, but are not recognised in American classrooms. In this instance, the family, the school and workplace can all be seen as different – intersecting – social fields through which an individual moves and in which their literate cultural capital is valued differently “depending on the rules of recognition and conversion in those fields” (Lam and Warriner, 2012, pp. 193–194).

This use of social fields as an interpretative frame, while allowing for an understanding of the way in which literacy as a social practice is situated in particular contexts, also permits a consideration of movement between contexts – or fields – and of how what literacy means or does may change as individuals shift between different local and transnational spaces in which they are differently positioned in relation to others. Significantly the concept of social fields can also be used to highlight the centrality of understanding gendered power relations and how they may be configured in distinct ways in different spaces. As DeJaeghere, Parkes and Unterhalter discuss in the introduction to this issue, Lois McNay draws on Bourdieu's notion of social fields in her discussion of gender, identity, power and agency (McNay, 2000, 2008). For McNay, the concept of field, which “situates embodied agents within a given set of relations that comprise distinct spheres of social action” (McNay, 2008, p. 182), is particularly helpful for an analysis of gender as “it provides a way of conceptualising differentiated power relations which escape the dualisms of the public and the private” (McNay, 2008, p. 182). Meanwhile, she argues that the concept of habitus, which she defines as “the process through which power relations are incorporated into the body in the form of durable physical and psychological predispositions” (McNay, 2008, p. 12), facilitates an analysis of the way in which structural power relations and gender hierarchies become inscribed on the body through everyday practice. However, she suggests that habitus can be seen “not as a determining principle, but as a generative structure” (McNay, 2000, p. 25). It thus also enables the consideration of agency and the possibility of change. Drawing on the notion of “freedom in constraint” (2008, p. 193), she suggests a conceptualisation of agency as “as embodied practice that is realised in different ways through particular configurations of power” (2008, p. 195) as “cultural and economic forces play themselves out in daily life as constraints and resources for action” (2008, p. 156).

My research considers the literacy, learning experiences and lives of women who, in contrast to the locally rooted women

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