



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



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### 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.

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### 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,

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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

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