Women's Studies International Forum 46 (2014) 63–71

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Domestic service, affection and inequality: Elements of subalternity

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 29 April 2014

SYNOPSIS

In this paper I intend to present an ethnographic description of the movement of things, people, and affection in the context of domestic service in Brazil. Looking at everyday interactions, I explore the sociological dimensions (family organization, gender relations, and class structure) and the symbolic constructions (concepts of motherhood, childcare, reciprocity, care, and affection) as well as the political and infra-political dimensions (domination, subordination, and rebellion) of domestic service in order to better understand the elements at play in the Brazilian context.

Introduction

Domestic work[1] provides a good starting point for an analysis of Brazil. It has existed since the early years of Brazilian society and was based on the exploitation of slave labor during the colonial period. Although the country's constitution now recognizes domestic work as a profession, and domestic workers enjoy the same rights as other workers, the sector is still predominantly composed of women who are poor, mostly Black and have little schooling. My aim in this paper is to unravel the social configurations that contribute to maintaining domestic work as a space of the reproduction of inequalities.

Employing ethnographic research methods, I describe, on the one hand, the differences in the daily organization of workers' families and employers' families, suggesting that a stratified complementarity makes domestic work functional for both parties. On the other hand, taking the feelings expressed by the people I researched, I would suggest that the inequalities reproduced in the course of domestic service are sustained largely through affective ambiguities. I draw a connection between the accusations of theft against domestic workers and the possibility of extra-wage payments common in these situations, because both are agreements that occur behind the scenes. I investigate these elements in terms of the transmission of a certain heritage in which things and values circulate, serving to maintain the relations between employers and their employees as spaces of subordination, rebellion, and resistance.

This study is the result of intensive ethnographic experience over the past ten years in Brazil, including episodic research in the homes of employers, two months of live-in fieldwork in the home of a domestic worker in Vitória (Espírito Santo), and daily involvement in the domestic workers' syndicates in Juiz de Fora (Minas Gerais) and Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul), in addition to over one hundred semi-structured interviews composed of open-ended questions with domestic workers in these three states.

Following an analytical tradition typical for contemporary (and post-colonial) anthropology, I insist on two points. The first concerns situated knowledge, demanding that the researcher assumes the limited vantage point implied in his or her particular position within race/class hierarchies (Brah, 1996; Spivak, 1994; Strathern, 2006). Like nearly all other researchers in Brazil, and the majority of people who are not considered poor, I have extensive personal experience as an employer of domestic workers, and this fact – which involves a structural inequality in the relation between researcher and informant – should not be omitted.

Nonetheless, the second point concerns the insistence that our partners in debate are sophisticated, multidimensional characters who are not so easily "dominated" by the dominant classes. Members of so-called subordinate groups have any number of ways of, at least symbolically (and,

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.03.009
0277-5395/

in certain circumstances, politically), reshaping the power relations that permeate their existences (Ortner, 1995; Scott, 1990; Thompson, 1998). My article aims to highlight this complex creativity among domestic workers in Brazil.

Although residing away from my own home, at the house of domestic workers, sharing their everyday life, struggling to maintain non-hierarchical relationships, my social standing as a "boss" was hardly ever forgotten. I was offered many concessions on a daily basis, for example, choosing the menu of the day or sitting in the only chair of the house. I was, however, expected to pay for my privileged space. People asked me to buy all sorts of things: new showers, lice medicine, or anything that could be sold to help enhance their income. At any rate, precisely by not hiding that I was a wealthier person, I enjoyed much intimacy and friendship. I heard confessions, secrets, and complaints. I read and discussed my final composition with the research subjects collectively on a number of occasions. Even though they could read, it was difficult for them to understand an academic manuscript. With key informants, I negotiated how some issues would appear in the research. It was hard, for instance, to persuade them to change their real names. They wanted their stories to be recognized and their names printed in the text. However, we reached a deal that would not put them in excessive exposure, and to compensate for the absence of their names, I organized photographic exhibitions that dealt with their life stories so their reputation would be safeguarded (Brites, 2000).

In this article, my paradoxical position in the field is especially apparent when I describe theft. I suppose that being able to listen to the domestic workers' stories and then comparing them with the situations/versions within my own social network was advantageous for showing the usefulness of Clifford Geertz's proposition: "Finding our feet, an unnerving business which never more than distantly succeeds, is what ethnographic research consists of as a personal experience" (Geertz, 1973: 21).

Domestic service and "stratified complementarity"

In the Brazilian middle and upper classes, family relations are routinely permeated by the presence of domestic workers who normally take care of all the housework as well as childcare. In the performance of these tasks, just as in the wages and relationships that go along with them, one can observe the reproduction of a highly stratified system of gender, class, and race (Azeredo, 1989). The domestic and family organizations of employers, as well as the chances of economic improvement and social prestige for them and their families as a whole are based on a division of tasks that involves another woman (generally not a relative). This second woman may have other notions of family, male/female and mother/child relations, but eventually these notions adjust as they grow to complement those of the employer. By observing daily interactions, practices, and values in these different settings, I began to realize that the different patterns of family organization were mutually reinforcing, interacting in a sort of stratified complementarity. By this, I mean the imbrication of social patterns deriving from different sorts of lifestyles, family organizations, and values that, although based in different positions within a social hierarchy, act in a complementary fashion, reproducing social inequalities.

My analysis is largely inspired by Colen's (1995) studies on Caribbean nannies and domestic workers in the United States. Colen coined the concept of stratified reproduction to describe how "reproductive" tasks have been distributed according to hierarchies of class, race, ethnic group, and gender. The author observes that relations of political inequality and economic exploitation within various forms of family organization and gender experiences end up being functional for both parties. In Brazil, the inequalities between employers and domestic workers are evident. Differences in class, ethnicity, and access to consumer goods, education, and better jobs are recognized and broadly discussed within specialized literature (Goldstein, 2003; Mori, Bernardino-Costa, & Fleischer, 2011; Organização Internacional do Trabalho, 2013).

Furthermore, the hierarchical system underlying domestic service has been bolstered, in particular, by emotional ambiguities in the relation between employers – especially children and women – and domestic workers (Goldstein, 2003).

In the negotiation of extra-wage payments, in the exchange of services completely outside any contract, in the gossip between women, and in the relations between workers and children, it is impossible not to recognize the existence of a large amount of affection. This fact, however, does not impede a hierarchical relationship, with clear demarcations between employers and subordinates, i.e. between those who can buy domestic services and those who, by offering their services, manage to access one of the less severe alternatives of survival in Brazil.

Domestic workers are usually considered the country's poorest-paid women. They have little formal education, are mainly migrants, and their cultures and ethnicities are stigmatized by the hegemonic system of values. According to official data from 2008, 61% of the domestic workers in Brazil are Afrodescendants, 38.2% are Caucasian, and 0.4% are Indigenous (Fraga, 2010). There are very few studies on the employing families (Brites & Picanço, 2013).

According to the IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), 2009), domestic service in Brazil represents 17% of female employment, constituting the second largest professional category in the country. This is a massively female activity — about 92.4% of domestic workers are women. This category also registers very high levels of informality. Only 26% are formally employed, versus 58% of other workers, and 27% earn less than the minimum wage. In April 2013, the Brazilian Congress granted domestic workers the same rights as other workers. However, changes in the law, although desirable, do not signify an immediate end to inequalities and prejudices. Domestic service may not be considered a preferred occupation in the spectrum of career choices for workers. However, when other options for entering the labor market are beyond reach, domestic service appears as a ready alternative for work on the informal labor market.

Nevertheless, one of my ambitions is to show that, despite the negative aspects of domestic service, infra-political relations[2] between employers and workers, though at times undemocratic, still make this activity interesting for workers. This was one of my most bewildering discoveries during fieldwork.

The domestic workers I listened to found advantages in those elements of domestic service that feminist intellectuals who study work and gender tend to denounce as instruments of subjugation: extra-wage payment and the possibility of