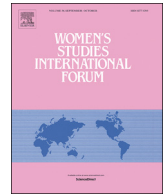


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Constructing professional services: For-profit care and domestic work agencies in the Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the developing market of care and domestic work in the Czech Republic, a former socialist country. While the research on paid care and domestic work is growing, less attention has been paid to the patterns that emerge when the services are demanded and supplied by intermediary, bureaucratized, for-profit placement agencies. Although the delegation of tasks through agencies has many similarities with the situation outside the market, it is in other regards quite different, generating different questions and challenges. Drawing upon 20 qualitative interviews with the owners of for-profit care and domestic work placement agencies, we illuminate how bureaucratized paid care and domestic work is organized in the post-socialist Czech Republic. We focus on how the agency owners create professionalism and the ways that care and domestic work services are professionalized in the social, cultural, and historical context of the Czech Republic. Based on our research, the praxis of the care and domestic work placement agencies is more about the professionalization of the service than the professionalization of the work itself. This professionalization is achieved through processes of de-personalization and bureaucratization.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, paid care and domestic work have become global issues. Scholars from around the world report a growing demand for these services in developed countries and their increasing supply from developing countries (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001). In each socio-cultural context, different markets are emerging to offer domestic and care work and satisfy the demand. The mainstream scholarship usually focuses on migrant women from developing countries working for rich families in developed countries. The experience of this global phenomenon in post-socialist countries is still under-researched, with some notable exceptions (Tkach & Hrzénjak, 2016). This article addresses the development of the market for care and domestic work in the Czech Republic, a former socialist country.

The research on domestic work thus far has usually focused on the constellation in which the care and domestic work is bought and sold directly between two persons, employer and employee. Less attention has been paid to the patterns that emerge when the services are supplied through an intermediary, bureaucratized, for-profit placement agency (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; England & Stiehl, 1997; Mendez, 1998). Although the delegation of tasks through agencies and without them shares many similarities, e.g. the gender distribution, ethnic and class stratification, public-private configurations, it is in many regards

quite different. First and foremost, the praxis of agencies generates questions related to the formalization (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001), qualification (England & Stiehl, 1997), and professionalization (Lutz, 2011) of the performance of household tasks.

The aim of this study is to explore the ways that care and domestic work services are professionalized. Drawing upon our qualitative research on care and domestic work provided through for-profit agencies, we illuminate how the bureaucratized paid care and domestic work is organized in the post-socialist Czech Republic. In particular, we investigate the construction of professionalism by the agency owners and the way that they distinguish between their services and the services provided in the irregular market. What is the character of the services the agencies offer? How is the supply of the services contextualized in the social, cultural, and historical context of the Czech Republic as a former communist country? We observe the continuing presence of the socialist legacy in the work of agencies and in the ways they promote their services and respond to the newly-emerging demand for such services. Given the history of the country and the directions in the development of family policies, a quite distinct market of care and domestic work, as compared to Western countries, has been created in the Czech Republic since the fall of Communism in 1989.

With its focus on the professionalization tendencies in the private care and domestic work market, the article contributes to the current

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scholarship on this topic. In addition, by providing a perspective from the post-socialist context, which is still marginalized in the scholarly debate, the article illuminates the specific nature of the local response to a global issue and to the social problems it generates. We introduce the conceptual background of our study, putting together the sociological work on professionalization generally and on professionalization of care and domestic work particularly. Then we describe the methodology of our research and analysis and discuss the strengths and limitations of our research. In the third section, we define the main aspects of the Czech market for paid household work. The findings of our analysis are presented in the fourth section, which focuses on the issues of qualification, trust, human capital, and interpersonal relations.

2. Conceptual background: professionalizing paid care and domestic work

Since the time of Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, there has been a long tradition of sociological discussions on the concept of “profession” and the concept is still disputed and unclear (Sciulli, 2005). The understandings have changed over time; scholars have identified three distinct and crucial concepts: *profession*, *professionalism*, and *professionalization* (Abbott, 1988; Evetts, 2003; Larson, 1977).

Evetts defines professions as “essentially the knowledge-based category of occupations which usually follow a period of tertiary education and vocational training and experience” (Evetts, 2003:397) and Campbell notes that “on the majority understanding, a profession is especially skilled, regulated, and autonomous” (Campbell, 2015:35). What these two conceptualizations show is that one of the core characteristics of the professional is possession of *special knowledge and skills* (Larson, 1977).

In the Campbell definition, *regulation* also frames those special competences in the profession: “the vast majority of professions have a central regulatory body whose role it is to guarantee performance standards among individual members” (Campbell, 2015:35). This regulatory body guarantees a distinction between those who are professionals and those who are not and thus it creates *trust* in the skills and knowledge of the professionals. Evetts further argues that one of the core principles of professionalism is “to be worthy of the trust” (Evetts, 2014:32) of clients and prioritize their needs. This establishes confidentiality in client relations and brings professionals authority and high status (*ibid*), which in turn gives value to the status and image of the profession. Professionalization is the effort “to achieve the status of profession” (*ibid*:34).

The status and image of a profession are what scholars call professionalism. Fournier points out that the image of professionalism can be used as a marketing strategy – especially when non-professional labor is caught in the “discourse of professionalism” (Fournier, 1999:281). Many scholars (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017; Evans, 2008; Evetts, 2014; Horn, 2016) assert that professionalism tends to be linked with the concept of (neo-)liberalism. This connection is based on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017; Fournier, 1999). As Fournier points out, “the professions, as one of the carriers of the art of liberal government, seek to govern in the name of something outside of themselves (Foucault, 1989) – e.g. the public good, truth” (Fournier, 1999:285). In this perspective, professionalism establishes “connections between clients, truth, competences, and conduct of the practitioner” (Fournier, 1999:288) and the professionalization is the effort to acquire an image of professionalism. This image conveys high status, and it is often used as a marketable product and managerial tool (Evetts, 2014:43). The notion of professionalism builds client confidentiality and thus, especially for low status labors like manual or domestic work, conveying professionalism is a crucial marketing strategy to increase status.

The current scholarship on paid care and domestic work uncovers the ambivalent character of the delegated household tasks in terms of the process of professionalization. Two issues are particularly important

for our research and analysis: the role of for-profit agencies in the marketized care/domestic work market and their efforts towards the professionalization of the services. In an in-depth analysis of bureaucratized domestic work, Mendez (1998) sees the differences between the “traditional” (employer-to-employee model) and bureaucratized domestic work in that in the latter case, “the work process is not controlled by an individual employer who is purchasing the labor of the worker, but by an organization that makes a profit from this labor. In certain respects, then, the addition of a profit-extracting organization to the employment arrangement transforms domestic work from being reproductive to being productive labor” (Mendez, 1998:118).

Another perspective is proposed by Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001), who writes that the agencies do significant work in formalizing (or *regulating*, to use the vocabulary of professionalism) the informal when they try to set rules for employing domestic workers. She shows how the racial preferences of clients enter the process of recruitment and the practices of the agencies, writing that: “The agencies that place the white nannies do the most to educate their employer clients about the parameters of the job: they select their clients through careful screening, they place restrictions on the job tasks and hours, and they urge employers to use written contracts to formalize the jobs” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001:112–113). This shows the efforts of the agency owners to ensure good working conditions for the white middle-class nannies. At the same time, the agencies ensure the quality of the service for their clients, as Bakan and Stasiulis (1995) argue. In their research, they observe how agencies emphasize the necessity for the professional screening of potential domestic workers and nannies. This professional screening is the main advantage of the praxis of agencies aiming to turn domestic work into a *trustable* service for the clients (for trust, see also De Ruijter, Van Lippe, & Raub, 2003).

The research on care/domestic work placement agencies shows that the ethnic stratification common in the “traditional” models of hiring domestic workers is also incorporated in how agencies work. MacDonald shows that care placement agencies in California, USA, specialize in recruiting young US women, “farm girls” from “young, white America” who are associated with “family values” (MacDonald, 2010:52–53). The research conducted by Stiehl and England (1997) in Canada reaches a similar conclusion—clients demand “educated European nannies” on one hand and “domestic workers from the third world countries” on the other. The articulation of ethnic and national identities is an essential part of the construction of the qualification of the services—and ethnicity becomes one of the main criteria for qualification. England and Stiehl (1997:205, *italics added*) conclude that these “[ethnic] identities are represented both in terms of their *suitability* for different types of domestic work and in terms of their *ability* to provide quality care.”

For-profit agencies are an arena for the tendencies towards the qualification and professionalization of domestic work. However, such tendencies are quite problematic, as care and domestic work are highly gendered activities (Lutz, 2018) and they are seen as something that women “just do” as part of their motherhood (Murray, 1998) or femininity. In a recent article, Helma Lutz argues, “Female care work can be considered as not only a gendered form of capital, implicit in the social construction of femininity and therefore an asset for employment, but also as a gendered obligation – if not burden – interlinked with the moral economy of kin” (Lutz, 2018:583).

Consequently, Lutz (2011) finds three reasons that the idea of agencies has not yet been successful in Germany. First, customers are not ready to pay the high prices for the services. Second, there is a need to theoretically draw “a clear-cut distinction between person-related and object-related services in order to value the work to be done” (*ibid*:187); examples are situations in which care is provided for a sick child or services are provided at unusual times of day. Third, professionalized care work challenges the identity work of women. This argument was proposed earlier, in 2000, by Anderson, who asked: “If the domestic worker must be trained for her employment, how can

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