



Hermeneutical injustice and outsourced domestic work

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that conceiving of paid domestic labour as ordinary work constitutes a form of hermeneutical injustice against domestic workers, whose work differs from other occupations in morally significant ways. Amongst other distinctive properties, outsourced domestic work inevitably rests on gendered and racialised asymmetries of wealth and social status, consists of affective labour which is not remunerable, and occurs in a necessarily private realm which cannot easily be regulated. The obfuscation of these features by discourses which cast domestic work as ordinary work obstructs attempts to form and respond to justice claims relating to domestic work, and prevents domestic workers from recognising the innate challenges of their work. The inadequacy of this discourse seems to counsel towards condemning the practice of outsourcing domestic work, rather than attempting to recuperate it.

1. Introduction

“[H]ow do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color?” Lorde (1979).

Domestic work is the labour whose demand is necessarily produced by life in the private sphere. It includes, but is not limited to: cleaning, tidying, food preparation, purchasing, laundry, care of dependents, handling relationships with friends, relatives, and other external parties, and the emotional labour of diplomatically managing the implementation of these tasks. Marxist-feminist accounts of labour in the 1970s (e.g. Dalla Costa & James, 1975), typified by the Wages for Housework campaign, made a compelling case for viewing domestic work as just another form of labour in need of remuneration, rather than a traditional, unpaid duty of women. Instead of being seen as a “natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character” (Federici, 1975, p. 2), scholars and activists argued that our conception of domestic work as unwaged was (and arguably remains) the “most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it” (*ibid.*).

There are compelling practical reasons to seek this reframing: (a) if domestic work is classified as conventional work, then those performing it may benefit from the rights and protections afforded to workers; (b) domestic work has always been undervalued on the presumption that it

is unskilled, unimportant, and undesirable; reframing it as conventional work may increase its visibility and legitimise its important social role; (c) such a view indicates that people who perform domestic work should be remunerated for it, providing many women with a source of income, which may break cycles of dependency and vulnerability; (d) governments and employers may be obliged to factor domestic work into their conceptualisations of labour in the public sphere, leading to welfare reforms, changes to care provision, and shorter or more flexible working hours.

Such a view promises to improve the conditions of many women globally, who continue to bear the burden of unpaid domestic work in their households, even where their participation in the paid workforce matches that of the men of their communities.¹ However, I will argue that we should be cautious in how this rhetoric is applied, as it seems to mask the uniqueness of domestic work, and is particularly specious in the case of *outsourced* domestic work, i.e. that undertaken by workers who are not members of the household. This is because there are several important senses in which outsourced domestic work is substantively different from ordinary work, both in its performance and in its social context. Ignoring or diminishing those differences may entrench extant lacunae in our collective epistemic resources, which could obstruct changes to the broader context of the work, and consign domestic workers to a marginalisation that is further confounded. The thesis of this article is straightforward: describing outsourced domestic work as ordinary work is inaccurate and obfuscating. It disguises from policy-makers, employers, and, mostly importantly, domestic workers *themselves*, that domestic work is founded on injustices, and that these

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¹ For UK data, see e.g. Office of National Statistics, 2016; for US data, see American Time Use Survey, 2016.

injustices are intrinsic to it.

To place this discussion in its broader context: most outsourced housework and care-work globally is performed within high-income settings by racialized migrant women from the Global South (International Labour Organization, 2015). The demand for domestic workers is rising (Tomei, 2011). There are almost twelve million migrant domestic workers globally, more than half of whom work in Arab states, North America, and Europe (Gallotti, 2015, pp. 1–2). Globally, migrant domestic workers experience a range of injustices, including: excessively long working hours, low pay, delayed or unpaid salaries, inadequate living spaces, physical and verbal abuse, sexual harassment and abuse, confiscation of passports, and lack of access to legal protections (Begum, 2016; Gemma, Mala, & Julia, 2016; International Labour Organization, 2013). Care-work and domestic work is the largest employment sector for migrant women working in the EU, and the majority of these workers are undocumented (Rodríguez, 2007, p. 65; Kontos, 2013).

Migration traces coloniality in that migrants tend to choose destinations with whose language and culture they are already familiar, often as a vestige of colonialism (Hooghe, Trappers, Meuleman, & Reeskens, 2008), while the immigration policies of those states are informed by neo-colonialism (Fassin, 2011; Tronto, 2011). Domestic work also instantiates postcolonial relations within the countries to which domestic workers migrate, where they are generally denied full citizenship, receive low pay, and are considered to be suited to what is constructed as low-status work. Relatedly, the social meaning of migrant domestic work in the Global North descends from domestic work performed by enslaved women, which provides an early example of the racialized domestic worker, a template which has since been replicated across the world. Hooks (1981, pp. 84–5) describes the stereotype of the “black mammy” figure of plantation and antebellum households: a passive, submissive woman, rendered unthreatening by her perceived asexuality, obesity, and poor hygiene, who was devoted to the white people she cared for. As Bakan and Stasiulis note: “One purpose of such ideological stereotyping has been to portray a fictive, universal non-white, female, noncitizen Other whose biological and ostensibly natural makeup ascribe as inherently appropriate for private domestic service” (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995, pp. 318–319).

While in the Americas and Europe, migrant domestic workers have replaced enslaved women and women of the servant class, in Arab States the genealogy of the profession is somewhat different. There, migrant domestic workers replace workers previously employed from poor, rural areas. The “kafala” legal system, which originates in customs of Bedouin hospitality (Vora & Koch, 2015), allows families to provide sponsorship for a domestic worker to migrate. The domestic worker must then reside within the employer's home, has no right to work elsewhere, nor recourse to national labour laws (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

States from which domestic workers migrate have typically undergone structural adjustment to repay debts to Global North states and institutions, resulting in the decimation of public services, which affects women—as primary caregivers—disproportionately (Afshar & Dennis, 2016; Sparr, 1994). Women migrate in order to earn higher salaries abroad as domestic workers, sending their earnings home to assist their own families. Sending states often encourage migration as their economies benefit from the remittances (Moors, 2003, p. 388). This has allowed receiving states to inexpensively address a growing “care deficit” (Parreñas, 2003) as increasing numbers of women have entered the public workforce, and Global North populations grow older. Sending states then inherit this care deficit as many primary caregivers make the pragmatic decision to serve foreign households (Kittay, 2009). This situation is premised on a substantial Global South–North pay/poverty differential, and the rigidity of gender norms across the world. Hochschild describes this extraction of care as a “global heart transplant” (Hochschild, 2002, p. 22), in which the value generated by emotional labour is mined from one world region in order to meet the

needs of another world region.

Unless otherwise stated, I use “domestic worker” to denote those who perform domestic work for pay in other people's homes.² I define domestic work to include any or all of the housework and caring work that takes place within a household for the benefit of the members of that household. The analysis presented within this paper is more pertinent to some situations than others; a live-in migrant domestic worker is differently positioned to a cleaner or carer who lives elsewhere. While I hope that my arguments could stretch to both, the first case is my primary target, and it is left to the reader to decide the extent to which the analysis applies to other arrangements of outsourced domestic work. I am also primarily concerned with *migrant* domestic workers, both documented and undocumented, as they constitute the majority of the workforce.

This paper is structured as follows: In section two I will introduce the idea of a hermeneutical injustice, and describe the way in which the “ordinary job” discourse contributes to a hermeneutical injustice in relation to domestic work. In section three, I detail the reasons why we should challenge this discourse and its concomitant hermeneutical injustice. I return to the idea of hermeneutical injustice in section four, and suggest ways in which the framing of domestic work could be redressed. Section five concludes.

2. Hermeneutical injustice

Miranda Fricker (2007) coins the term “epistemic injustice” to describe a particular sort of injustice that occurs when a person is wronged in her social capacity as a knower. We belong to epistemic communities, within which we produce, exchange, and use knowledge. Injustices occur when particular groups are marginalised within the knowledge community, so that members of that group are rendered: less able to *produce* knowledge, because they are excluded from spaces of knowledge production; less able to *exchange* knowledge, because the value of their testimony is deflated; or less able to *use* collective knowledge resources, because knowledge production is dominated by other groups, and the resulting knowledge either ignores or obscures their experiences.

This last species of epistemic injustice is “hermeneutical injustice,” defined as “the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization” (Fricker, 2007, p. 158). Fricker's paradigm example of hermeneutical injustice is the case of the sexual harassment of Carmita Woods in 1975, before the term and concept “sexual harassment” were recognised. Woods left her job as a result of the harassment, and struggled to claim compensation since she could not adequately describe the situation that had caused her to resign. By speaking with other women who had similar experiences, Woods and others were able to distil a meaningful common concept, and to give it a name: sexual harassment. The absence of this concept and term prior to the consciousness-raising work of these women, and the adverse consequences of being unable to make their experiences understandable, is an example of hermeneutical injustice.

Hermeneutical injustice therefore occurs when members of a marginalised group are unable to find, within the collective conceptual tools, a way to construe experiences that are critical to understanding their own situation. This paucity in the resources for apprehension of certain situations is not accidental. Hermeneutical injustices arise because the collective epistemic tools are developed within structurally unjust societies in which the interpretative resources are skewed in favour of understanding those phenomena that are useful to, and protective of, privileged groups. This bias arises because privileged groups

² I distinguish this from care-work or domestic work that is sought or provided for disabled people, or people with long-term medical problems, which I view as a form of welfare.

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