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Preliminary Research: The politics of the paid domestic housecleaner: Rural versus urban laborers

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH
PROBLEM

My first experience with domestic work was within my own family—my mother is a paid domestic housecleaner. For the past ten years my mother has been employed as a domestic housecleaner in Northern New Hampshire. When interviewing her I was actually surprised to learn that she had been employed within this work for so long. Her employment career has varied over her lifetime as she has taken many “pink collar”, odd jobs, and part time positions (e.g. bank teller, cashier, childcare, coin factory worker). Mirroring traditional family values my father has always been the primary “bread winner” and my mother’s employment has always been to supplement his income.

My mother began her employment as a domestic housecleaner through the encouragement of a friend who is a domestic housecleaner. My mother’s friend, Tina was looking for help to support a three to four person housecleaning team. My mother began employment with this woman and then decided to work independently to earn

more money. Most of her initial employers were through networking through Tina and her employers.

I was first introduced to domestic work as “dirty work” through the *Domestica* reading assigned in class. At first I was shocked. I was shocked because how these domestic workers were being exploited, from long hours (averaging 11 hours in one day p. 146) to the low pay (79 percent below minimum wage, which was \$4.25 in the early 1990s p. 35), and the constant loneliness that these women experience. The reading became personal because the domestic housecleaner was my mother. I immediately felt some form of defensiveness as I knew that my mother was not subjected to these types of working conditions and treatment that Hondagneu-Sotelo describes in *Domestica*. I was also concerned because I did not know if she felt the same type of humiliation and degradation that the *Domestica* women did from their choice of work. I had also never considered my mother’s work as “dirty work.” An ambiguous statement “dirty work” is negative in nature and is roughly defined as the person who is employed in the most undesirable “worst” working positions. I had categorized my mother’s domestic housecleaning with that of other “pink collar” positions.

THE CURRENT STUDY

These feelings raised important questions concerning the complexities of domestic housecleaning in rural versus urban communities and the importance of defining “dirty work” within the context of the community. Current research focuses specifically on the urban domestic worker and preliminary data was collected through an informal interview with my mother to investigate the experiences of rural domestic

workers. Throughout the interview my mother, Fey recounts her own experiences as a domestic housecleaner, as well as describes the general experiences of domestic works within the context of a rural community.

ENTERING DOMESTIC WORK

I found that rural and urban domestic housecleaners enter the domestic work force for similar reasons, including lack of alternative employment opportunities, the convenient hours, and the preference for this type of work. Two other common characteristics specifically among urban domestic housecleaners are their mother's having been domestics and their rural and small town background (Rollins, 1985). As Fey (my mother), explains "The work is flexible and I am not going to find another job that will pay between fifteen and twenty dollars an hour...probably the best I could find (an hour) would be between ten and twenty. I do it for the money." Marisela, an urban domestic housecleaner expresses a similar experience, "it is a job that is quit compatible with having a family life of one's own" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Although rural and urban workers appear to have similar reasons for entering these positions there are important differences within the economy and ethno-racial populations within these communities. Research suggests that domestic housecleaners in urban communities are often women of color, immigrants, and illegal citizens (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Some of these domestic housecleaners have previously been live-in nannies/housecleaners (Rollins, 1985). Rural communities lack the ethno-racial diversity found within large urban areas and immigrants do not typically immigrate to rural areas. The economy within rural areas is also slower and employment opportunities and advancement within these jobs is limited. Within rural communities there is no market for live-in situations

because the economy is so drastically different from urban areas. For example, my mother a domestic from a rural community is white, a citizen, and (as mentioned previously) has been employed previous to her domestic housecleaning position in many “pink collar”. This profile of my mother is similar to most of the women she knows who do domestic work.

BREAKING INTO HOUSECLEANING

Rural and urban domestic housecleaners “break” into housecleaning in similar ways through informal networking of family and/or friends and continue to primarily recruit new employers through this type of networking. Urban domestic housecleaners also use another method of advertising through newspapers and door to door advertising to increase their house load (Rollins, 1985). Women in urban communities describe breaking into domestic work to be challenging (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001) while this does not seem to be the case for women in rural communities. My mother describes her experience as a fairly easy transition as she was employed by a friend who was already a domestic worker. This difference may be accounted for because employers within rural communities are of the same race (white) as their employees and the complexities of racism diminishes. As employer, Jennifer Evens from the Boston area states “I don’t want any more colored help. They don’t do everything they’re supposed to do. They’re lazy, you know. I used to work with a lot of them at the hospital and they think nothing of not showing up if their children are sick or something...Do you know any place where I could get some help that wasn’t colored (Rollins, 1985)? Other employers within urban areas prefer women of color and foreign born because of their docile manner and subservient manner (Rollins, 2001). The difficulty of being hired within urban

communities seems to be fairly dependent upon their ethno-racial identity and language barriers which is virtually eliminated within rural communities.

THE WORK

I also found that rural and urban domestic housecleaners perform similar types of work, including cleaning the bathroom, kitchen floor, laundry, ironing, vacuuming, etc. I also found that they describe their domestic work similarly to be monotonous and boring. As an urban domestic worker describes her experience, “cleaning a house was challenging for the first two times but after a while it became monotonous” (Rollins, 1985). Other domestic workers in urban areas who speak little English describe their experience as being difficult. Erlinda Castro, a middle aged who had already run her own household and raised five children in Guatemala explains, “Learning how to use the chemicals and the liquids” in the different households was confusing. Erlinda describes how friends and employers had to instruct her for which products to use and on what surfaces (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Domestic workers in both rural and urban communities also experienced the stress involved with constant variety within each day, as my mother explain “the houses are different and the needs of the costumers differ.”

Working alone and while the employer is out of the house are other shared experience between rural and urban workers. Domestic workers in both communities expressed that working alone was difficult and as my mother described, “it can be hard on a person.” Urban workers expressed feeling uncomfortable and the sense of being invisible when their employers were home while they cleaned. Judith Rollins, a researcher who went undercover as a domestic worker in the Boston area describes

experiences of being locked within the houses once the employers left, as well as employers lowering their heat to as low as 50 degrees when they left for the day (Rollins, 1985). Contrastingly, my mother's experience varies significantly describing that "sometimes her employers are there when she cleans but it doesn't matter."

Similarly rural and urban domestic workers also express that the work is hard work but in a way satisfying—as my mother notes "domestic work is like a trade...but finishing cleaning a house has an accomplishing feeling." As Dorothy Aron an urban domestic explains, "When I switched from physical work to mental work, I had to deal with my own self—because I couldn't measure what I did for the day. You know, mentally I was tired, and I seemed to have done a lot of work, but I couldn't measure it like you can measure housework. When you can go back and see the bathroom clean, the kitchen clean, you get the feeling of satisfaction" (Rollins, 1985). There is a sense of completion that domestic workers pride in doing their work.

THE EMPLOYER—EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP

Another important theme among domestic workers in rural and urban communities is the relationship that they have developed with their employer. Judith Lincoln an urban domestic explains that "how you get along with your employer is everything. If she treats you bad, your job's impossible" (Rollins, 1985). Significant differences are apparent between rural and urban employer—employee relationships. Due to the lack of ethno-racial diversity within rural communities as mentioned previously typically employer and employee are of the same race, which is white within rural communities. The elimination of racial differences has many advantages. The

advantages that I found when interviewing my mother was that she sets her own hourly wage compared to urban workers who typically work for a certain amount for a job. This can be problematic because the employer continues to add more tasks to the housecleaning position and assumes that the domestic worker will be able to finish these additional tasks for the same amount of money. Another obvious difference I also found between rural and urban workers is my mother's direct communication with employers. For example, when she first meets with a new employer the employer takes her through the house to show her what she would like cleaned. My mother makes mental notes and suggests to her potential employer how long it would take and the approximate cost, as well as asks about previous housecleaners, etc. This did not seem to be the case with urban workers who had "fleeting contact with their employers." As noted in *Domestica* just about all the domestic workers Hondagneu-Sotelo interviewed suffered 'inconsiderate persons' "who exhort them to work faster, humiliate them, fail to give raises, add extra cleaning tasks without paying, extra, or unjustly accuse them of stealing or of ruining a rug or upholstery" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

PRIVELEGE & "DIRTY WORK"

The obvious exploitation that the urban domestic worker encounters compared to that of the rural domestic worker appears to be directly related to the ethno-racial identity and/or citizen status of urban domestics. The "dirty work" is not only a matter of the work itself being less desirable but the "dirtyness" of the person doing the work. This "dirtyness" is related directly to the person's ethno-racial identity as well as their citizen

status. “Dirty work” also appears to be intertwined and relative to other jobs that are offered within that community.

Naïve my research question aimed to understand obvious differences between rural and urban domestic housecleaners but in reality this question was the wrong question to be explored. It is evident from my research that the significant differences between rural and urban workers are based upon race and citizen status rather differences between communities. Although this conclusion seems fairly evident I think that further research needs to explore this idea further investigating the hierarchical relation of race within domestic workers. I think that this concept is important to fully understand the complexities within employee-employer relationships and the extent of the exploitation within domestic work.

I think that the organizing and policy change that Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) mentions (e.g. labor rights) within the last chapter of her book are realistic but these efforts can only be maximized by understanding and being inclusive of all domestics. The inclusion of the white domestic worker is important because the use of her privilege is strengthening for the domestic workers cause.

Cited materials

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