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Dress, Address and Redress

The Relationships between Female Domestic Workers and their Employers in Cape Town, South  
 Africa

Tanja Bosch and Caitlin McLeod

**Abstract**

*This study draws on in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore the relationships between black female domestic workers and their white, female employers in Cape Town's wealthy Southern suburbs through the lens of culture, class, race and gender. The majority of domestic workers in South Africa are black women and formalizing work conditions has been difficult because they work in private households. Despite the birth of democracy with the country's first non-racial elections in 1994, South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal societies. The study is particularly concerned with the personal nature of the relationship between the so-called 'maids' and 'madams,' which is explored via a convenience sample of pairs of employers and employees who were interviewed. The article concludes that there are three categories of relationship: distant, maternal and friendship. These relationship categories are examined in terms of the aesthetic features of the relationship such as dress; the diction employed in verbal interactions, such as how parties address one another; and redress, which involves the manner in which employers attempt to deal with apartheid-wrongs. The article also explores issues related to perceived cultural differences. The study revealed a wide variety in the types of relationships between 'maids' and 'madams', informed in varying degrees by issues of class race and culture, unique to the South African context. While employers were very conscious of their power and status as 'madams', and in some cases consciously sought ways to compensate for the unequal power relationship, the study reveals that domestic work by black women in white households continues to reinforce social constructions of the household as a feminized and racialised space, while distinct power asymmetries reflect ongoing issues of race, class and gender in contemporary South Africa. This kind of racialised domestic labour arrangement thus represents in some ways the last 'bastion' of apartheid, with the construction of difference shaped by racial prejudice.*

**Keywords:** *domestic workers, char, maids and madams, South Africa*

**I. Introduction**

Despite the birth of democracy in South Africa with the country's first democratic non-racial elections in 1994, the country still sees high levels of inequality. Domestic workers are one sector of the workforce who have seen greater legal protection (Ally, 2009). However, while domestic workers are protected by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the institution of a minimum

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wage, there is often only partial compliance of the law. The domestic worker industry employs 18% of all women, and 80% of domestic workers are women, with poorly educated black South Africans making up the vast majority of these women (Dinkleman & Ranchod, 2010). While domestic workers comprise one of the largest sectors of working women, formalizing domestic work has been difficult because it takes place in private households (Fish, 2006).

In post-apartheid South Africa, there is growing inequality between an increasingly multiracial upper class and everyone else, but also between a middle class of mostly urban workers and a marginalized class of black unemployed and rural poor workers (Nattrass & Seeking, 2001). With an enormous gap between the wealthy white and poor black sectors of South African society, the relationship between the domestic worker and her employer acts as a crucible for an intimate confrontation and a microcosm of class, race and culture issues in contemporary South Africa. Study of these relationships is important because the nature of the domestic service sector is concealed by its private nature. As King (2007) writes:

Institutionally, in moving from a system of apartheid, South Africa has challenged overt racial practices. The onus therefore now must reside in the 'individual will' to remove the more covert racial prejudices ... the nature of domestic work makes it difficult for labour legislation implementation to be monitored and enforced and the interrelationships between employers and servants are enacted behind closed doors, away from public view (p. 32).

This study is not intended to provide a conclusive or broad understanding of the domestic worker/employee relationship in South Africa but rather seeks to add to the existing work by King (2007) and Cock (1980). The study researched a small sample of women from a particular socio-economic group – middle class English-speaking South Africans located in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. The study provides an account of the relationship between black female domestic workers and their white female employers in order to examine the role of gender, race, culture, dress and verbal address.

## **II. Background**

There is a growing body of literature on domestic workers internationally, exploring how the globalization of paid domestic work results in large numbers of women from poor countries in the global South living in a form of servitude (Cock, 2011). Research on South African domestic workers is more limited. Benit and Morange (2006) celebrate the improvements in the quality of life for domestic workers in South Africa and, in particular, the decrease in live-in positions in favour of live-out and 'char' work since the fall of apartheid. Anderson (2000) looks at degradation and vulnerability as well as gender dynamics in both the 'maid' and 'madam' families while Gibson-Graham (1991) explores how caring has been categorized as an unpaid feminine work and how that changes when the work is paid for.

Ally (2009) addresses the issue within South Africa and examines the vulnerability of the workers first in the apartheid state and now in relation to trade unionization. King (2007) replicates Cock's (1980) often cited research, with fieldwork in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. This was the same location as Cock's study and many of the same subjects were interviewed. King included nine pairs of 'maids and madams' in her study and selected a diverse group that included employers and employees of different ages and races whilst Cock's study examined only white employers and black employees. King (2007) attempts to explore whether the end of apartheid improved working conditions for black South African women. The key research question was the degree of racism in the 'maid/madam' relationship through an ethnographic understanding of the manner in which these two women interact.

During apartheid, domestic work was performed under harsh conditions with women working up to 12 hours per day and being subjected to physical and verbal abuse (Ginsburg, 2000). The institution of black domestic labour socialized white South Africans into the dominant ideological order of race exposing workers to humiliating practices, though white women were also dependents within the patriarchal structures of capital (Cock, 1981).

### **III. Methodology**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 pairs of domestic workers and employers. The same questions were asked of each interviewee, though the set of questions differed slightly for employees and employers. Questions differed from interview to interview following the convention that “ethnographic interviews are more custom-tailored to particular respondents, rather than being consistent for everyone” (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1992). Interviewees were encouraged to speak openly and deeply about their experiences, and the interviews took place in the employers’ homes. Employee and employer were interviewed separately and the interviews were recorded with participants’ permission and later transcribed.

A convenience and snowball sample of white, English speaking employers living in the southern suburbs of Cape Town were selected. Employer subjects were limited to women with children at private schools in the area. The sample was also limited to women who worked from home, worked part-time, or were stay-at-home moms. The intention behind this limitation was to ensure that employers were likely to have some kind of extended contact with their domestic workers during the day. The employees were black working class women from townships around Cape Town, mostly in their forties and fifties. Many of them had young children and spoke mainly isiXhosa. They have been with their current employer for a minimum of a year, though some worked with their employers for up to 25 years. The employee sample was not otherwise limited and employee subjects differed in home language, birthplace and marital status. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of participants.

One challenge to the study was self-reporting, potentially problematic in that aspects of communication are unconscious and unintentional and so may be omitted by the interviewee. The interviewee may provide a dishonest account in order to control the way in which the interviewer perceives them. Employers of domestic workers in post-apartheid South Africa would wish to be viewed as fair in their treatment of their employees and may take particular care not to mention anything that might be construed as racist. Memories can become distorted over time for various

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reasons, and so questions about the past can produce unreliable answers through no fault of the interviewee.

However, self-reporting does have advantages. Interviews “allow researchers to ask about communication events too time-consuming or private to observe” (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1992). In this particular study, some of the participants engaged one another sporadically and then only for short periods. In these cases, participant observation would have required large periods of observation, which would yield very little information. Interviews were useful to gain information about the relationships between participants over the length of the domestic workers’ employment with a particular employer, without requiring extended periods of observation.

The relationship between domestic worker and employee is a relationship that takes place in private spaces in which observers are an uncomfortable intrusion (King, 2007). It would be difficult to gain access to the private conversations in these relationships using an observational method, and even if access were granted, there would be concern that the presence of an observer may alter the behaviour of the participants. Furthermore, ethnographic interviews are essential for getting ‘below the surface’ and discovering what people think and feel about particular communication events (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1992). In this particular study, the researchers aimed to understand to what degree interviewees felt certain characteristics played an important role in their relationship, given that the qualitative research process is concerned with the processing and comprehension of the discourse from the participant’s viewpoint (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984).

Another challenge centered around optional and voluntary participation. Employers approached as possible participants were sometimes unwilling to be interviewed, and the findings are therefore skewed towards those who were comfortable with the relationship with their employee and willing to talk about it. Although consent was sought from the employees as well, there is a risk that they felt pressured to participate due to the asymmetrical power relationship.

The location of the interviews also presented a potential challenge. Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1992) note that people are more likely to express themselves naturally on familiar ground.

The employer participants were interviewed in their own home whilst employee participants were interviewed in their place of work. Moreover, several employers arranged for the interview to take place in a public space within the house: the living room or dining room. In all except one case the employer was in a separate part of the house during the interview of the employee, but certainly in that case, and perhaps in the others, employee subjects may have felt uncomfortable expressing negative views on their employer. One employer lowered her voice during parts of the interview to ensure that her employee did not hear her responses to questions. Location may, therefore, have hampered the frankness of the interviewees' responses.

All interviews were carried out in English, often the second or even third language of the employee participant. Some employee interviewees were more proficient in English than others. Questions often had to be rephrased before the interviewee responded or provided an answer that indicated an understanding of the question. Other interviewees displayed no hesitation in conversing comfortably in English. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of respondents.

#### **IV. Discussion**

##### *A. Gender*

All the subjects interviewed said that interaction between the domestic worker and the employer was the exclusive territory of the female employer, and there was unanimously no interaction between the domestic worker and the male employer. This raises questions about the degree to which gender is central to the manner in which employee and employer interact at home and whether gender is a common unifying characteristic. In the context of domestic work, the gender of the employee can affect the position, tone and dynamics of the relationship (Rollins, 1985).

Thornton Dill (1994) writes that while the worker's relationship to the household is distinctly different from that of her employer, the nature of work and its position within society at large affect both the housewife and the household worker in similar ways. Domestic service is women's work because housework is women's work. The wife, in her role as supervisor of the domestic worker,

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occupies a space in society similar to that of her employer. In this way, there is a level of commonality between the two women. Molly was observed laughing with Carla at Carla's husband's poor attempt to cook pasta. His inability to complete this household task amused the women who were united in their knowledge of cooking.

Secondly, many women employ domestic workers to do only a portion of the domestic work and complete the rest themselves. Subjects represented a range in terms of the portion of housework done by their employees and also indicated a decrease in the amount of work done by their employees since the fall of apartheid. Mary-Jane who has since chosen to dismiss her domestic worker, Rebecca, notes, "My mother never did any housework. I like doing some myself." She gives the impression that housework was a shared responsibility. For example, she says, "I'd be working with her in the kitchen, and I would talk a lot so we would discuss many things."

Louise employs Agnes three days a week but recalls that her mother employed a live-in housekeeper. Alta (employer) says of Esther (employee) that she mainly does the washing and ironing. Esther was a full-time, live-in nanny and housekeeper when Alta had a young son and twin baby girls and did much of the cooking, but now Alta prefers to cook herself and Esther is only working part-time. Janine employs Bee full-time as a nanny and Thelma part-time as a housekeeper, but Bee helps out with cleaning where necessary. Lilly similarly employs Sindiswa as a full-time nanny and cook, and a second part-time employee takes care of cleaning. Janine and Lilly both have young children.

It is clear that employers' choice to not have a live-in domestic worker, as was the social norm pre-1994 (Cock, 1980), is in part ideological and demonstrates a shift in attitude. Lilly notes that Sindiswa is not a live-in because she has two children of her own, and Janine says Bee will sometimes sleep over if she is babysitting, but that they keep that to a minimum because "of course" Bee likes to be home with her own children. Mary-Jane recalls advising her employee, Rebecca, to work as a charwoman rather than a full-time housekeeper because she thinks that Rebecca will earn more money per day if she works for multiple employers. There is a sense that the change in the

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employment structure of domestic workers is informed by an empathetic understanding of the employee's situation rather than a change in demand or in legal requirements. Mary-Jane's response suggests an element of guilt in employing someone else to do domestic work. She said:

I actually never felt comfortable with a maid doing everything. I don't feel comfortable sitting down when she's running around. You feel as if you're doing the wrong thing. That was one of the reasons I decided not to have a maid anymore. I didn't want to confront that guilt all the time. I remember thinking this is just another person bringing me down.

The shift from live-in to live-out domestic workers was delayed in South Africa in comparison to the rest of the world. Thornton Dill (1994) notes that the shift in emphasis from a live-in to a live-out system of employment and the rise of the system of day work took place between 1870 and 1920, with the change to living in the employer's household being a major contributing factor in the low social status of the work.

Moreover, domestic work is not the only thing that can unify women. Each woman was asked "Would you be able to have such personal conversations with a man?" All interviewees said they felt the relationship would be less personal if one party were male, though some used the terms 'probably' and 'maybe' whilst others said 'definitely.' Esther responded, "It would be different if it was a man. I prefer a woman. I wouldn't have as many personal conversations with a man." Louise responded:

We have a guy who comes and does the garden and I do talk to him, and ask about his family, that's just me I like to talk. I talk a lot more to Agnes, probably because she's in the house but maybe the female aspect.

Lilly said that she would not trust an 'African' man enough to leave him alone with her children. She argued that 'African' men are culturally very different to 'ours' and that she did not trust her gardener. Each woman was asked "Do you think there are things that you talk about with your employer/employee that only women can talk about?" All interviewees responded in the affirmative. Mary-Jane responded, "We spoke about dealing with children and dealing with life,



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religion...” She said that the two women spoke extensively about and compared notes on how best to raise children with themes such as nutrition, academics and alternative medicine. Alta responded, “Seeing that she’s a woman I can discuss female things with her. Anything from how I’m feeling, emotional things, with respect to her emotional things. I am involved in her life too.” Most women mentioned discussions about marriage and motherhood, which can be considered ‘female’ issues. Another manner in which gender seems to inform domestic employer/employee relationships is in the interpretation of these relationships as mother-daughter or sister-sister relationships.

### *B. Power and Status*

The boundaries established between employer and employee in common workplace, such as in an office or factory setting, are loosened in the domestic space, which is far more private. Different relationships establish different boundaries and therefore some are more intimate than others. The relationships examined in the research can be placed into three general categories: distant, maternal and friendship.

#### *1. Distant*

The distant relationship can be described as resembling that of the non-domestic workplace. The relationship between Lilly and Sindi and between Louise and Agnes can be categorised as distant. The amount of interaction between the two is minimal. On a standard day, Lilly greets Sindi, tells her what to cook for dinner and says goodbye to her in the evening. There may be one or two exchanges of a minute or two during the day and when a problem arises, longer conversations take place. SMSes and phone calls are used only when Sindi needs to inform Lilly that she is running late. Lilly knows Sindi’s marital situation and who lives with her. She does not know exactly where Sindi lives or how long it takes her to travel to work. When Sindi asks for money, she does not tell Lilly what it is for. Sindi will share her problems with Lilly when it is relevant to work or she wants advice. Lilly does not share her personal problems with Sindi. There are two facts that call into question the categorisation of the relationship as distant. Lilly notes that she cried when her

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previous employee passed away. She also notes, “When things arise I try to talk to her. I try to teach her a little bit because she’s half my age so I try to advise her a little bit.”

Louise is busy during the day and has often already left to drop her daughters at school when Agnes arrives. Maybe once a month or so, Louise will be in the house with Agnes for a period of several hours, and they will talk whenever in the same room. Louise knows Agnes’ marital situation and the names of her children. She does not know exactly where Agnes lives or how long it takes her to travel to work. Agnes has told Louise that her son is struggling to find a job, but they do not share intimate concerns. Louise and Agnes do not advise one another. Louise says of her previous employee, “Rose had 2 kids the same age as ours. We’re still putting Rose’s kids through school. And helped towards Rose’s daughters university.” The assistance she describes is financial and she has no face-to-face interaction with Rose’s children.

## *2. Maternal*

The maternal relationship can be described as an unequal relationship. The two parties are close and share personal information. The employer gives assistance and advice to the employee and not the other way around. The relationships between Janine and Bee, Mary-Jane and Rebecca, and Molly and Carla can be described as maternal. Janine and Bee have coffee every morning when Bee arrives at work. Janine says they have personal conversations daily, which include things like, “Are you tired? How was your weekend?” Janine says, “We don’t have an in-depth (conversation) every day. We just discuss things in our lives as it arises ... only give advice if she asks ... She never gives *me* advice.” Janine says of Bee’s living situation:

It changes. Sometimes I’m not always aware. Recently she’s had some marital issues. She’s separated. She might not tell me but I might be aware that something’s happening. Then when the dust settled she tells me. I have a fair understanding. I wouldn’t say I have a detailed knowledge. There is probably more that I should know.

Conversely, Bee says of Janine:

She is giving me more than I can give back. She's such a nice lady. I used to have eczema. When I started working here it suddenly spread. I was feeling bad in my skin. The clinics couldn't help. I had only just started working here. I thought I would be isolated. But she took me to her doctor. No paying back. It's more like your mother. More like your sister ... She is more than a boss to me. She is like a mom. She bought me sewing lessons and she was driving me there and letting me use her sewing machine so I wouldn't have to carry mine on the taxi. Even if I am late she first wants to know, am I okay?

Mary-Jane helped Rebecca to buy a house and gives her and her children birthday gifts and cakes every year. Mary-Jane says:

She was my best friend because we spent every day together for 15 years. She used to call me her mom .... I gave her so much, emotionally ... I spoke to her like she was my sister but I still expected respect ... I visited her home ... I was close with her children ... I told her to put pressure on her children to succeed academically and I told her how to feed her children so they would be healthy... she didn't advise me.

And Molly says of Carla:

She gives me a medicine when I am sick and tells me how many times to take it. She is always buying me gifts. In winter she gave me a nice warm blanket and she knew that I needed a new kettle. Last year she moved house and she found lots of things she didn't want so she drove me there to my house in Paarl because I couldn't carry them ... She doesn't tell me personal things but she knows about my family... She is younger than me but she is like a mother.

There are many examples of this type of pseudo-maternalistic (King, 2007) relationship. Bakan and Stasius (1997) write that what lies at the core of the contemporary relationship between female domestic employees and female employers is maternalism. Rollins (1985) argues that maternalism is a more appropriate term than paternalism because the majority of contemporary employers of domestics ... are women, and because women have altered the dynamic of paternalism in distinctly

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gendered ways. In the context of unequal power relations between employer and employee, the apparently caring, nurturing, and empathetic values of female employers become double-edged. They offer a potential for mutual emotional benefits but also for curtailing the rights of adult employees.

The employers interviewed offer money, advice and sympathy for their employees, and these actions are motivated by benevolent intentions. It is also, however, certainly the case that in playing the role of mentor, employers reinforce a power structure that has implications not only for the workplace hierarchy but also for the socially perceived race and class hierarchy. The terms 'maternal' and 'paternal' both refer to parent-like behavior, but the differences between the words seem to extend beyond the gender of the actor. The connotative meanings of the words differ. Paternalism is associated with power, colonialism, slavery and control. Even the most critical exponents of paternalism have seen it as an ideological system fraught with contradictions, stemming from the mix between domination with benevolence (Jackman, 1994). A paternal attitude towards an employee could be seen as an attitude that disguises subjugation as concern and protection.

Maternalism is a concept associated with warmth, mentorship, nurturing and affection. Maternalism seems to imply a desired mentorship whilst paternalism seems to imply the treating of an adult like a minor, perhaps as a result of latent racism. Certainly, the advice and assistance offered by employers was desired and appreciated in every case. A maternalistic relationship with an employee has an inherent power dynamic which is reinforced by words like 'mother,' which create positive connotations with this kind of relationship. There is a professed self-effacement on the madam's part, yet in reality by assuming a maternal role in relation to her 'servant', it is a reaffirmation of her 'superior self' in relation to 'the other' (King, 2007).

### *3. Friendship*

Alta and Liebet represent the single relationship that can be classified as a friendship. It can be classified as such not only because both parties identify the relationship as a friendship, but because

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the relationship is horizontal in nature. Alta said, “Esther is a friend to me ... Esther is part of the family,” and Esther said of Alta, “She’s almost like a sister ... We’re definitely friends.” As in the case of the maternal relationships, according to both women, Alta gives advice to Esther and is her confidante. However, unlike in the maternal relationships, Esther also advises Alta and is her confidante. Alta said that she immediately called Esther when a friend was brutally attacked in her home. This implies that Esther plays a supportive role in Alta’s life. Alta and her husband bought Esther a house “to try and uplift her.” Every morning, Alta and Esther sit on the stoep of Alta’s home, drink coffee and talk. The content of the conversations is personal rather than work-related. There is a horizontal rather than vertical relationship between the two women, which is what categorises this relationship as a friendship. This is an unusual relationship, which is not the norm. Mutual dependencies or jealousies between white family members and black workers often result in a fragile symbiosis that could work to the disadvantage of the employee (Ginsburg, 2000).

### *C. Race and Redress*

Employees were asked if they would prefer to work for a black employer and whether they thought that might be different. One respondent answered, “She can be black and white and she can be harsh or bossy. I think it’s not to do with colour.” While several interviewees felt that race was not a problem, others responded with financial concerns. Sindi said that black employers do not pay wages on time. This was reflected by Agnes who said:

Black employers give less money and sometimes don’t pay on time. It’s not because they can’t pay but they just don’t want.” Molly said, “It’s very difficult to work for a black lady. I have heard. It’s bad. Sometimes she didn’t give her wages because they don’t care. I cannot work for a black lady.

The answers imply that, like Bee, these employees do not have an inherent problem with working for a black employer. Rather, they have made generalisations based on anecdotal evidence. Financial concerns were always at the centre of the response and race is an incidentally correlated characteristic rather than a cause.

Several other interviewees argued that it was inherently problematic to work for someone of the same race. Esther said, “I think white people are better [as employers]. I don’t think it’s comfortable to work for people like me. I won’t be comfortable.” It is Esther too who prefers to call her employer ‘Madam’, despite their friendship and despite Alta’s request that she call her by her first name. This is reflective of the apartheid dialogue of difference, the so-called ‘separate but equal’ philosophy of the National Party (King, 2007). Despite how much Alta and Esther share, Esther still considers race as a defining characteristic. She considers herself and Alta to be friends but still says, “It is like she isn’t even a white lady.”

#### *D. Verbal Address*

The manner in which employers and employees address one another is significant given the historical context. There are two sets of terms that are worthy of examination: firstly, the names by which women in the relationship directly address one another; secondly, the terms used to describe the job of the employee. Many accounts describe the linguistic entrenchment of hierarchy embodied in the names by which domestic workers and their employers are called. Asymmetrical naming practices – where workers are called by their first names or referred to as ‘girls’ regardless of their age, yet are expected to address their female employers as Mrs. Miss, or Ms – is a common form of linguistic deference in domestic service (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1997).

The title of Cock’s study ‘Maids and Madams’ or of the popular South African comics ‘Madam and Eve’ are indicative of this asymmetry. Every employee and employer interviewed in this study noted terms of address when asked how the ‘maid/madam’ relationship evolved over time. Janine said that she and Bee address one another by their first names. I asked her if it was the same between her mother and her nanny. She laughed and then said, “It was a madam one way and a first name the other way.” Esther said of Alta, “She wants me to call her by her first name but I prefer to say ‘Madam.’ I don’t feel comfortable to say ‘Alta’ because she’s my boss so I don’t feel so good.” However, it is unclear whether employees have had to adapt their names to make them more pronounceable for employers. Lilly calls Sindiswa ‘Sindi’. Janine calls Boitumelo ‘Bee.’ Esther has

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a Xhosa name, but she is always called Esther by Alta's family or Ez for short. There is a history of black workers in South Africa being required to provide a 'white name' for employers to call them by, because white employers could not, or perhaps would not, pronounce their real names. Sindiswa, Bee and Esther all say that they like their nicknames, and they do seem to be terms of endearment, but it is unclear whether these nicknames have developed through familiarity or were provided by employees so that employers would not have to learn their given African language names.

In terms of the second category, employees were asked what term they preferred to use to describe their job. Esther called herself a housekeeper but did not mind being described as a 'maid' or 'domestic.' Sindiswa said that 'maid' and 'domestic' are offensive descriptions. She said that she describes herself as a nanny because she cares for children, and that 'housekeeper' and 'char' are suitable terms for women who clean full time and part time respectively. Employers used the term 'maid' conversationally, but when asked how they describe their employee's job they thought carefully and used instead the terms 'nanny', 'housekeeper' and 'char.'

#### *E. Space (The Physical Address)*

Asante and Davis (1985) note, "Localities have built-in constraints on the communication between any people." The most obvious difference between the working situation of the domestic worker and any other worker is that their work is located within the home. The workspace in, for example, a factory has a clear hierarchy, but there is an additional visual symbol of status and difference inherent in the home of the domestic worker's employer. The domestic worker is exposed daily to the wealth of the employer and knows, more than the factory worker, what groceries are bought, what clothes are worn and how many overseas holidays are taken. In the home, "Space conveys power and in this way participates in the total metaphor of power that is involved in modalities of situations" (Asante & Davis, 1985).

The power of space is historically evident in the context of the Apartheid Separate Amenities and Group Areas Acts which divided space along racial lines. Louise recalls apartheid era living

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conditions for domestic workers as follows: “The facilities that they had, the outside room with a toilet was like really old and dirty and not really well maintained whereas I make sure the facilities they have are as good as I would use.” Domestic workers in the study were given access to the toilet and other facilities used by their employers at home such as the kettle and food in the kitchen. During the apartheid, the structural space of the live-in domestic worker’s quarter, known commonly as the ‘backroom’ or ‘servant’s quarters,’ was (and remains) a common fixture on the property of middle class homes in white neighbourhoods. These rooms represented a form of accommodation for black South Africans during a severe housing shortage and allowed black women to shift the balance of power in their domestic arrangements (Ginsburg, 2000).

Space and visual symbols, like the desk in an office, have a clear impact on communication. The traditional ‘maid’s uniform’ of the South African domestic worker clearly differentiates the worker from the employer and institutionalizes rather than individualizes the worker. Of the women interviewed, only two domestic workers, Sindi and Agnes, wore a uniform. Both women are in relationships categorized as distant. There were no questions specifically about dress in the interviews, but several women mentioned uniform as a key issue. Bee said:

I feel at home here. Sometimes I forget that I am at work and feel that I am in my home. Look at me. If you came in here and saw me you wouldn’t know that I am cleaning here. I am in my casual clothes, just the same as Janine. Even last year at the end of the year we had a Christmas party, a picnic here outside, and it was me and Alma [the char] and Janine and Janine’s husband and the girls working for them in their office and we all sat together at the same table.

The demarcation of space, resources such as food, and visual markers such as uniforms are indicative of the kind of relationship shared by employers and employees. Of all the women interviewed, Bee and Janine had the second closest relationship and very little spatial and aesthetic separation at home. Janine eats the same lunch as Bee who wears very similar clothing to Janine. Alta and Esther, the closest pair of women, share coffee and breakfast on the stoep on each day that



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Esther works. This sharing of space and partaking of the same food is evidence of the closeness of that relationship.

#### *F. Culture: Cultural Differences*

When asked, all but one of the subjects did not feel that cultural differences caused communication difficulties. Mary-Jane was the exception. She said, “The day I said that she didn’t care about me, she was devastated and we were both in tears and she said I’ve given you my life and I thought, ‘Oh really?’ I think she couldn’t speak to me because of culture, because of language.” Several employers noted, however, that they thought their friends and contemporaries experienced such difficulties.

When asked whether they were aware of cultural differences, employees were reluctant to say anything at all and said very little on the subject. Employers attributed a wide variety of differences with their employees to culture. Most commonly identified was marital relations. Janine said, “The spousal relationship is very different, and what is tolerated by each spouse. Issues of domestic violence are tolerated where I might not have”. Alta said, “She was never married. For her it’s quite acceptable that the father of her child will have children with other women. She’s learned to accept that fact. It’s very different. She had difficulty understanding my divorce and I had to explain my feelings to her.” Of course this highlights a degree of perception of the ‘other’ and their lived reality, which may or may not be accurate.

Janine also mentions family structure and parenting as being culturally different. She responded to the question saying, “How they support each other, who finances whom, how many people in a house. They allow their kids far more reign and freedom through necessity. There is less pressure on schoolwork and performance ... different styles and approaches to discipline.” Mary-Jane describes the ‘African mother’ as “allowing the child to live much more according to their own rhythm.”

When asked to describe cultural differences that they were aware of in their relationship with their employees, employers tended to describe the culture of the ‘other.’ King (2007) notes that the

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“act of construction of differences is shaped by racial prejudices.” She describes the creation of the self/other dichotomy as follows, “It is ‘I’ that determines difference, that is, I gaze at you, I decide what I see, I will judge you” (King, 2007). In noting her divorce, Alta undermines the self/other dichotomy in which Esther’s behaviour is strange and Alta’s normal and instead suggests that each has behaviour that is strange to the other party. Janine said, “I understand that everyone is different. I never have given advice on how marital things should be handled in any relationship like if you choose to have an open relationship and go and bonk whoever that’s fine. I mean it’s not how I would do it. I support them in their decisions.” Janine implies, by saying that “everyone is different,” that the differences between hers and Bee’s approaches to marriage are individual rather than cultural. Alta and Janine note their differences from their employees but apply no judgement to those differences and treat them as individual rather than cultural traits. It is significant that the undermining of the self/other dichotomy is present in the testimony of employers belonging to the friendship category of the study.

Despite descriptions of cultural differences, employers tended to describe their employees as ‘Westernised.’ ‘Western’ in this context implied similarity to the white South African employer.

### *G. Culture*

Employers in the study attributed a successful relationship to personal compatibility, on the one hand, and good English, knowledge of Western or rather ‘white English speaking’ culture and a higher level of education on the part of the employee, on the other. Janine notes, “Culture could create misunderstanding but it doesn’t, because both these ladies are fairly Westernised and educated.” When asked how the relationship differed from that of her mother and her mother’s employees, Lilly noted, “Linguistic communication is better from a language point of view. I can communicate more openly. They have a more advanced education and better English – the people I remember growing up with spoke no English – exposure to western ways, especially in cities, far more westernized, less cultural gap.”

The employers' preference for 'westernised' employees implies that there is an economic incentive for cultural assimilation on the part of domestic workers. King (2007) argues that the expectation of assimilation is one of the subtleties of racism because "implicitly, there is a conception that my difference to you is indicative of my superior way of life." Employees noted a preference for employers who show a greater awareness of the employee's situation. Molly said:

Sometimes I would tell the other lady I worked for that there was a bus driver strike or I would say that I must go to a funeral and she didn't care. She just told me, "Be on time. I don't care."

Been says of Janine, "The best thing is that she understands. If I'm saying to her, 'Janine, I need to go to the clinic' she says, 'how long does it take? I know there can be a long line'. So she knows and she tries to learn also."

The more information known by each party about the lifestyle and living conditions of the other, the more successful each party seems to perceive the interaction to be. Interestingly, employers in the study were not always very aware of the living conditions of their employees, but all had an awareness of transport issues. Cellphone communication is primarily used in the employee-employer relationship when employees need to inform employers that transport issues are causing them to run late. Employers unanimously noted that this was not a problem, and they were not upset by late arrivals so long as they were informed via SMS or Whatsapp.

## **V. Conclusion**

Even within a relatively small sample, the study revealed a wide variety of relationships between domestic workers and their employees. These relationships differ in formality, intimacy and equality, but they are distinctly gendered and informed to varying degrees (and in complex ways) by issues of class, race and culture. There is an active effort towards redress on the part of the employers who sometimes provide financial assistance in the form of loans and gifts to their employees and their employees' families. However, at the same time they often have very little knowledge about the material conditions of their employees, so this could be seen as a form of paternalism. Employers indicated that they attempt to make conscious choices about the ways in

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which they deal with their employees and display a sensitivity and awareness to the concerns of the past, but these remain highly unequal relationships based on racial privilege. These relationships are highly complex and though some are reported as intimate and fulfilling, domestic work by black women in white households continues to reinforce social constructions of the household as a feminized and racialised space. The sharp power asymmetries reflect the issues of race, class and gender in South Africa today with this kind of domestic work the 'last bastion of apartheid' (Fish, 2006).

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