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# **Employer perspectives on domestic employment relationships in post-apartheid South Africa**

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**A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Mphil in Development Studies**

**Faculty of Humanities**

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This research was partly funded by the NRF. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the NRF.

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## **Abstract**

**This dissertation investigates the relationships between domestic workers and employers, as reported by employers, concentrating on food provision as a central dimension. It applies anthropological and sociological approaches that include 10 focus group discussions, 171 completed questionnaires (open- and closed-answer questions) and 10 home observation sessions. The employer sample group is almost exclusively white, middle class, female, English-speaking, tertiary educated residents of Cape Town, South Africa. The research starts from the premise that domestic employment is an illuminating sphere for analysing the intersection between race, class and gender at the present time in South Africa. It argues that, through an examination of the domestic worker employment relationship, particularly when viewed through the lens of food provision, it becomes possible to judge the extent to which these relationships have changed since the end of apartheid.**

**The research shows that, while a proportion of individual relationships have changed in positive ways, many remain determined by the habituated norms and codes of apartheid-era employment. The study found that the relationship is characterised by contradictions in the attitudes and behaviour of employers, exacerbated by ambiguous communication and employer discomfort and feelings of guilt about past, and present, inequalities. Employer unease and discomfort were particularly evident in the company of peers and in relation to the question of employer responsibility towards workers. The study also found that age and income influenced employer attitudes.**

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **WOMEN, FOOD AND POWER**

**“Once you know the food relationship, then you know the whole relationship”  
-Mertia, au pair commentator (Interview with Mertia in Cape Town, 7 September 2006)**

The content of this dissertation arises from research that pays close attention to negotiations concerning the provision of food to domestic workers by their employers in contemporary South Africa. The research examines aspects of the social relationships between workers and their employers in post-apartheid households in Cape Town and the social and political aspects of food provision are investigated to shed light on the changes that are assumed to have arisen within the sector since 1994. The data were collected from 171 employers who were almost exclusively white, middle class, female, English-speaking and tertiary educated.

This research forms part of a larger ethnographic investigation of domestic workers in the post apartheid state conducted by the Social Anthropology Department at the University of Cape Town. The study also constitutes a follow-up to Jacklyn Cock's seminal work *Maids and Madams* (1980), published 28 years ago. While the research presented here does not constitute a book length study it does begin to trace how relations between domestic workers and their employers have begun to shift in the post-apartheid context.

Internationally, the domestic employment relationship is a fruitful site within which to view power and class relationships in action (Hansen 1989). It gains additional interest when observed against the backdrop of social features that characterise South African society after the dismantling of the apartheid system. During apartheid, white and black women for the most part interacted mainly, often solely, within the white women's domestic domain. This space remains a major site of social interaction and intersection between contrasting race and class affiliations.

Even at the present time, fourteen years after apartheid's official end, most South Africans rarely socialise across the population categories defined by the apartheid state. Thus for

those able to afford to employ domestic workers, and for those with jobs in domestic employment, the domestic sphere is often the principal social space for inter-racial interaction. While such interactions also take place in many other employment situations, the latter are often more formal and thus less intimate than those within the close confines of domestic work. Under apartheid-enforced segregation, the household was an illuminating site in which to view race and power relationships. This study shows that it remains so in post-apartheid South Africa.

While some characteristics of the domestic worker/employer relationship are applicable to all employer/employee relationships, three key features differentiate domestic workers from other employees: intimacy, race and class, and levels of trust. A considerable degree of intimacy is unavoidable, given the nature of domestic work and the workplace being in the employer's home. Race is a second aspect since domestic workers are almost always not white (using entrenched South African classifications). While it has been legislated that race play no role in job acquisition (except in redressing inequalities through employment equity), it remains a determinant in domestic employment relationships today (Hickson and Strous 1993). This is true also for the majority of low-paid manual labour jobs in South Africa. Bound up with race is class: domestic workers are inevitably of a lower economic class than their employers. While a certain hierarchy exists in virtually all employment relationships with employees subordinate to more senior employees and to employers, workers' positioning within the hierarchy is directly related to the seniority and responsibility of the position. Domestic workers differ markedly from other employment relationships in that although treated as subordinates of the lowest rank, they are often accorded a very high level of responsibility and trust.

### **Class, race and gender relations**

The domestic employment relationship is a good access point to gain an understanding of race and power relations at the micro-level of society. It acts as a microscope, a lens through which to analyse both social change and continuity. While the household sphere is characterised by interaction and intimacy between employer and domestic worker, this

research indicates that the domestic employment site can also polarise domestic worker and employer by highlighting differences. These include differences between income and class, made apparent in the employer home through differences in purchasing power and lifestyle choices.

When Jacklyn Cock wrote her seminal work Maids and Madams in 1980 she asserted (as have Van Onselen 1982, Boddington 1983, Gaitskell 1984, Bernstein 1985, Makosana 1989 and Duffy 2005) that domestic workers were positioned at the convergence of three dimensions of social inequality, namely class, race and gender. The findings of my survey are that these divisions, embedded as they are in “relations of privilege and dominance” (Fish 2006:117), remain current, although less prominent today than under apartheid. Thus South African domestic workers remain in a particularly vulnerable social position. While legislation now exists to protect them, many domestic workers do not feel sufficiently empowered to access legal help. Furthermore, many employers have inherited a consciousness or belief that domestic workers are dependent on them. Thus apartheid history continues to be felt in the domestic employment domain.

Post-apartheid data give a confusing picture of domestic worker totals. The 1998 October Household Survey (OHS) and the 2000 Income and Expenditure Survey (IES) indicate that there are decreasing numbers of domestic workers employed in white households, but there were problems with the sampling for these surveys. Russell (2002) states that in 2002 one twelfth of employed people were domestic workers. Labour demographics indicate that domestic work remains the largest employment sector for black women in South Africa (Fish 2006).

An important development is that a black middle class of employers of domestic workers has recently emerged. In statistical terms the incidence of black employers in the total is low but because of the high numbers of black people, their actual number is high (Russell 2002). It is noteworthy that Russell's 1997 study of black domestic workers employed by black residents of Gugulethu, Cape Town revealed characteristics and trends in the nature of the

employment similar to those arising from this study of predominantly white employers in the southern suburbs of Cape Town. These include the findings that (i) the fewer the hours worked by the domestic worker, the higher the pay per hour; (ii) very few of the workers lived-in at their employer's residence, in contrast with practices of the past; and (iii) all workers received some meals and other forms of payment in kind (Russell, 2002). It is too early since the political changes of the 1990s to establish the extent to which race may have become, or will continue to become, less important as a predictor of social subordination in the domestic employment relationship. However, all domestic workers work in a social context that is deeply unequal. The potential exploitation of domestic workers irrespective of the race of the two parties is just one aspect of the wider issue of social differentiation within what is a highly specific work environment (Russell 2002).

In the international literature, domestic workers are identified as an occupational category functioning in a range of contexts. But that research still focuses generally on the same race, class and gender differentiations as in the past. Historically, Horn's (1975) investigation of women servants in Victorian England resonates with certain aspects of this research. As in South Africa today, domestic workers in Victorian England were positioned at the bottom of all hierarchies in terms of race, class and gender. In Hill's review (2007) of Light's book on Virginia Woolf and her servants, she notes that the female employers of the time used both professional and psychological distance to balance the inherent intimacy of the relationship. The recent literature on domestic workers explores more directly the social, political and economic forces that affect domestic workers. But little attention is paid to the characteristic features of the employment relationship itself.

There is also a dearth of work that explores the experiences, roles and rights of domestic workers and employers as well as their interrelations in circumstances of dramatic social change. While this study concentrates on food negotiation between employers and their domestic workers, other research dealing with the early changes in working conditions since the formal end of apartheid are also relevant and will be cited below.

Fish (2006) examines aspects of social conditions that impact upon domestic workers in South Africa in the post-apartheid period. Her focus on how domestic workers have collectively organised themselves through unionisation and coalition-building is different from that of this study but is pertinent since her research is recent and was also conducted in Cape Town. My findings confirm Fish's work: that progress towards greater equality in employment relationships in private households is slow and does not match the pace of equalising change in the private economy, in public spheres like voting, or in the racial complexion and conduct of government at various levels (Fish, 2006).

Shireen Ally's 2007 paper focuses on the post-apartheid state's building of political inclusion for domestic workers and the failure of the legislation to protect domestic workers (2007:3). My findings concur with Ally when she states that the positioning of domestic workers remains essentially unchanged. This study will show that employers still set terms and conditions of work at their own discretion. Furthermore, they do so, in Hansen's phrasing (1989:10) "subject to arbitrary and personalised domination", and with a "low tolerance of any confrontation". One major determinant of domestic workers' vulnerability is the chronic excess of unskilled women in the labour market.

After the formal end of apartheid in 1994, changes were immediately apparent in the political and state spheres but changes within the social dimensions of South African life have been more difficult to map. One aim of the present project has been to understand how political developments have affected the domestic employment relationship, if at all.

There has been a proliferation of 'guides' for employers in the new post-apartheid South Africa, seemingly indicative of employer fears that they might lose power in the relationship now that protective measures have been legislated. Basson, Louw and Strydom (1993), Bruniquel (2003) and Ward and Maree (1997) have all published books on the subject. Each generally entitled "a guide for employers", they are useful to this research insofar as their number indicate a perceived need by employers for rules on what constitute acceptable

working conditions. The guides range in content from aiming to exploit legal loopholes favouring the employer, through to instruction on how to be a responsible employer (although often marred by a rather patronising tone). In general, these books aim to provide advice on how to protect oneself from misbehaviour by the domestic worker and on how to avoid employment-related disputes.

Since democratisation in 1994, parliament has enacted legislation aimed at improving the working conditions of domestic employees. While the old legislative norms supporting segregation and oppression have fallen away, certain status codes of hierarchy and identity between employers and domestic workers have remained. The latter are of low status even as a labour category in the wider labour market, illustrated by the fact that domestic workers were the last category to be accorded minimum wage legislation, despite being extremely vulnerable by common agreement. New legislation containing equality clauses has been put in place to change apartheid-era interracial interaction more generally and some of its effects are visible within the microcosm of household employment. While the laws and norms which structured this relationship in the apartheid era have largely fallen away, certain presumptions and forms of interaction remain.

In the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1993) and the Domestic Worker Sectoral Determination Act (2001) there are provisions for a minimum wage and state-mandated annual increases, specific working conditions laid down, and other wider measures aimed at bringing this previously unregulated industry into line with other spheres of the economy. More than the labour rights, citizenship-rights were understood more broadly and domestic workers became beneficiaries of citizenship entitlements through their inclusion in the Unemployment Insurance Fund (Ally 2007). The mostly high-income earning employers of this study displayed good knowledge about labour regulations such as unemployment insurance, contracts, pension benefits and the minimum wage.

It remains to be seen what impact such provisions are having on the social and economic situation of domestic workers in the country at large. My data indicate that, despite these legislative measures, working conditions are still largely subject to the employer's perceived self-interest (see Chapter 4). Thus, relative to other workers, domestic workers remain extremely vulnerable or 'ultra exploitable' in Cock's words (Cock, 1980: 6). Jennifer Fish's (2006) recent research found that the extreme marginalisation of women employed in this sector and their limited representation in the national trade union federation render the new labour policies – as well as the ideology of gender rights asserted by pressure groups – relatively insignificant in the lives of these women.

In her comprehensive report on the relevant legislation, Shireen Ally (2004) includes sobering statistics on domestic workers and raises a number of concerns about the legislation. She is particularly critical of the wage determination procedure, agreeing with Ryklief and Bethanie's (2002) pronouncement that the minimum wage is a 'licence to exploit'. In terms of the other provisions applicable to this sector, Ally notes that domestic workers are still excluded from workmen's compensation, pension fund, comprehensive social security, and poverty eradication and job creation programmes.

Another reminder of how little we have progressed in terms of achieving equality for women in post-apartheid South Africa is made evident through Casala's and Posel's 2004 study on women's involvement in the country's economy since 1995. For the majority of women opportunities remain very limited and the gender imbalances in pay and job security continue. According to Casala and Posel, there has been some progress in extending the scope of labour legislation to all economically active females, but domestic workers "continue to earn an average income that is less than a quarter of what women, on average, earn in the country" (Casala & Posel 2004: 25). The physical location of domestic workers in private households makes the enforcement of these new labour standards and thus ultimate compliance difficult to realise.

Some literature has taken a historical approach to domestic service in South Africa (Boddington, 1984; Radebe, 1994; Van Onselen, 1982; Gaitskell 1984). Boddington's (1984) analysis of domestic work documents the changing means used in the appropriation of domestic labour on the 'cheapest' terms, and she highlights the fact that this process of cost minimisation is central to class oppression. Other liberal writers of the 1970s and 1980s include Whisson and Weil (1971) who proposed 'racial equality' as a solution to improve the lives of domestic workers. Marks (1996) conducted research on domestic workers in a suburb of Cape Town but explored only the race and gender aspects of the employment relationship and not the class aspect.

I have chosen to focus on domestic employment because it provides scope to analyse the consequences of these clear power differentials. On this topic, Gill (1994), Rollins (1985) and Romero (1992) all provide useful insights into the hierarchies produced through the characteristics of work and that need to be maintained in the domestic domain.

Although often about male workers, Hansen's (1989, 1990) work in Zambia highlights features of the post-colonial domestic service sector there that are applicable to South Africa, as is her analysis of changes in that service relationship over the last century. As Hansen (1989) shows, with postcolonial economic development there has been a widening of the economic and social distance between employer and worker. In South Africa, like Zambia, certain domestic employment relationships have been affected by resentment arising from the worker's failed expectations of a new and better post-apartheid life. Similarly in Namibia, Mwiya (1996) notes that in that post-independence society, the economic position of domestic workers has remained much the same and indeed some aspects of the working situation have worsened. My limited direct case material on domestic workers, gleaned during the home observation phase of the fieldwork, reveals that South African household workers experienced similar post-apartheid disappointments to those of their Namibian counterparts.

Much of the literature on domestic work and class is not local in content but its lessons and analytical considerations are clearly relevant to relationships in South Africa. Domestic work is carried out everywhere, and not just in South Africa by an economically and socially subordinate class. Schlegel (1989) found that German domestic workers have historically had a lot more power, choice and independence than their South African counterparts. Gill's (1994) research on domestic service in Bolivia highlights similar tensions between class and gender as are evident in South African situations. Katzman (1989) compares North and South America where the domestic employment relationship is differentiated by class and race in the North and by race and gender hierarchies in the South.

Cock in 1980, Van Onselen in 1982, Boddington in 1984, Abrams in 1986, amongst others, state that the relationship between race and class has implications in the analysis of the position of domestic workers in a number of hierarchies. While Boddington (1984 and 1983), Hansen (1989) and Whisson and Weil (1971) focus on class domination, and Abrams (1986), Walker (1982), Duffy (2005) and Meer (1990) on race and gender oppression, Makosana (1989) brings all three aspects together with her account of domestic workers' lives that focus on a gendered experience of race and class.

In addition to the relatively little research of direct relevance to this study, there is a dearth of literature on the domestic employment relationship from the employer perspective. The latter is the primary focus of this study.

### **Food as the research focus**

Food is the central lens through which I view the relationship between domestic worker and employer, not only because food transfers are usually an integral part of the complicated relationship between employers and domestic workers, but also because food provision points to a number of wider dimensions that characterise the household economy. There is a large body of literature on the anthropological aspects of eating and I consult this selectively for work on food and social relations. Here too little addresses domestic workers and food

directly, but rich data exists on the social meaning of food provision and food-sharing which can illuminate the domestic employment relationship.

According to Counihan (1992), research interest in food is probably as old as the discipline of social anthropology itself. Early anthropologists studied food because of its central role in many societies, and several wrote articles on *foodways*. Foodways can be defined as the supply and distribution of food between individuals within a range of groups including the family, the household, the community and the clan.

I have chosen to focus on food provision as a symbolic code that can reveal relations of power between individuals. Food sharing is a medium for creating and maintaining social inter-relations within the household. Food distribution is also linked to social hierarchies and power differentials within the home and wider social constructions. In South Africa, the household food situation is made more complex by the presence of domestic workers in many middle-class homes.

Mary Douglas has written extensively about food as an information code (1972, 1973, 1980, 1987, 1999), on the premise that the message of dependence encoded in food consumption will be found in the pattern of social relations it expresses. Davidoff (1976), also makes a noteworthy point, that "who partakes of the meal, when and where, helps to create the boundaries of the household, of friendship patterns, of kinship gradations...[so that] these eating patterns vary between and help to define the boundaries of classes...". What is conveyed via transfers of food comprises the different degrees of hierarchy, the inclusion and exclusion of individuals within groups, the boundaries between group members, and the nature of the transactions that take place across them. More recently a number of anthropologists including Mars (1997) and Sobal and Nelson (2003) have written on commensality, or shared eating, and in particular about how commensal patterns reflect the social relationships between the individuals concerned (Sobal and Nelson 2003; Symons, 1994; Mennell 1992). Sharing food signifies togetherness, a commonality among a group that defines and reaffirms insiders as socially similar (Mennell 1992). The partaking of food in the

household by non-kin persons involves different degrees of formality, different roles and social expectations. Domestic work involves the mixing of a variety of categories that would otherwise be kept separate, including class, race, ethnicity and gender. My research indicates that domestic workers are 'outsiders' in many of their employers' homes but the matter is not straightforward. Thus commensality reveals the social structure governing the everyday life of workers and employers in home employment in South Africa as elsewhere.

Control of food across time and space has often been a key source of power exercised specifically by women. Counihan (1992) shows that control over food production and distribution is central to women's status and decision-making power in many subsistence societies. Whisson and Weil (1971) explore the 'payment in kind' practices of employers. Mauss' (1954) points on the sociological and symbolic significance of gifts are also pertinent to the research.

Lambert (2000) writes that food sharing can create relatedness between persons simply as an idiom – one of especial importance to women – that facilitates the development and maintenance of affectionate and binding ties, especially those which are seldom acknowledged within dominant cultural and political ideologies. Janet Carsten (1995) experienced herself "becoming kin" through food sharing during her stay in a Malay household on the island of Langkawi. Margaret Trawick (1990:5) remarked of 'her' Tamil family with respect to their non-exclusive eating practices, "In this household, the defiance of rules of purity .... was a way of teaching children and onlookers where love was." The belief there was that bodily fluids (including saliva from eating out of common crockery and cutlery at one sitting) shared in love would not cause disease but would cure it.

Mary Douglas (1972) asserts that the food distribution system contributes to establishing the line between intimacy and distance. This is particularly true in the context of the domestic employment relationship. Questions of intimacy and how much "a part of the family" the domestic worker feels, how much "a part of the family" the employer perceives her to be, and how much "a part of the family" the employer actually treats her as being, are important

dimensions of this research and explored also by Whisson and Weil (1971). Hickson and Strous, in their 1993 study of domestic workers and mental health services in South Africa, found a high level of attachment and intimacy between domestic workers and other family members in many households. This present study finds similarly high levels of attachment, particularly, but by no means exclusively, where there are children in the household. One aspect of this attachment, which I explore in Chapter 4, is the correlation between levels of intimacy in the relationship and the quality and quantity of food the employer chooses to provide for the domestic worker.

Soliciting the stories and experiences of women on both sides of the employment divide by way of interviews and focus groups is a device for recording individual voices in forms amenable to the wider communication of the results. Authors such as Ames (2002), Gordon (1985), Radebe (1994), Makosana (1989), Goodwin (1984) and Le Roux (1995) have all drafted personal accounts of domestic workers through the collection of interview and focus group material. While a proportion of these accounts are relevant only at some remove from the concerns of this study, Gordon (1985) and Radebe (1994) both reveal the social distance and intimacy between employers, who are mainly white women, and domestic workers who are mainly black women. Study of this hierarchy is integral to my research.

### **Employer-related literature**

Both Gordon (1985) and Radebe (1994) tell stories about individual domestic workers, allowing them to “speak” for themselves in the process. In the absence of employer accounts of the work relationship, these personal interviews with workers are useful in that they provide a verbatim record of actual interactions with employers. By contrast, my research data consist mainly of reports by workers and employers of their perceptions about events and incidents they judged to characterise their common relationship. During the household observation stage of data collection, I did witness and record a number of interactions between employers and domestic worker. But these were limited in number and concerned only some of the responding individuals.

Cock's definitive 1980 study of domestic workers, Maids and Madams, proclaimed domestic workers to be among the most exploited groups in society at that time. Her study traces the history of domestic employment in South Africa with research that focused on 225 domestic workers in the Eastern Cape Province. Cock's study describes the structures that created the "ultra-exploitability" (1980:6) experienced by domestic workers and analyses how employers controlled many aspects of live-in domestic workers' lives.

Apart from Cock's study, I found only one noteworthy account of an employer's experience in South Africa. Frances Ames (2002) traces her relationship with her domestic worker, viewed with hindsight but interspersed with snippets of information from 2002 when she was writing the book. It is a moving and honest account of a relationship that spanned 30-40 years. While no mention is made of food provision and negotiation, the work is useful in that it locates domestic workers within a range of social contexts including historical events and the domestic economy. It also identifies and explores the power dimensions within the relationship and goes some way to make explicit the race, class and gender divisions that inhere in such employment in South Africa. Many issues raised by Ames are echoed in my case material, making her account a useful backdrop as well as any independent check.

### **How the employment relationship has changed**

Questions of whether, how and why the relationship between employers and domestic workers has changed are central to the research and change is therefore a theme addressed throughout the study as it pertains to each chapter. It seems that despite changes in a number of areas since the previous generation of domestic workers and employers, many aspects remained the same.

In the next chapter I describe the research methodology used in the study and explain the choice of employer perspective. Chapter three investigates communication within the relationship as seen through the lens of food provision. Questionnaire and book club data on what domestic workers eat at work are presented and communication between employers and domestic workers explored. Through chapter four I investigate the intimate nature of the

employment relationship as well as issues of power and hierarchy that arise within it. Chapter 5 summarises the findings of the research under the central theme of employer discomfort and guilt. This final chapter explores employer feelings of responsibility towards domestic workers and ends with some concluding comments and questions on the way ahead.

**TABLE 1 Employer profile**

<b>Sex</b>	
Female	94%
Male	5%
<b>Age group</b>	
25-34 years	20%
35-44 years	48%
45-54 years	17%
55+ years	14%
<b>Income group (monthly household income)</b>	
≤ R12,000	15%
R12,001 – R18,000	13%
R18,000 – R25,000	16%
R25,001 – R35,000	18%
R35,001 – R45,000	12%
> R45,000	9%
Unspecified	16%
<b>Tertiary qualification</b>	
Yes	68%
unspecified	31%

*Note: Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding off*

**TABLE 2 Domestic worker profile**

<b>Sex</b>	
Female	98%
Male	2%
<b>Age group</b>	
25-34 years	22%
35-44 years	35%
45-54 years	25%
55+ years	16%
Unspecified	2%
Mean age	42 years
<b>Length of employment in current job</b>	
Less than a year	11%
1 – 2 years	26%
3 – 5 years	25%
6 – 10 years	19%
11 – 15 years	7%
more than 15 years	6%
Mean years in job	5 years, 8 months
<b>Wages (hourly equivalent wage)</b>	
≤ R10 per hour	11%
R10.1 – R15 per hour	33%
R15.1 – R20 per hour	23%
R20.1 – R25 per hour	8%
R25.1 – R30 per hour	4%
> R30 per hour	3%
Unspecified	17%
Mean hourly equivalent wage	R17
<b>Responsibility</b>	
Includes child care	44%
Domestic work only	56%
<b>Mean hourly equivalent wage by responsibility</b>	
Includes child care	R14 per hour
Domestic work only	R18 per hour

*Note: Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding off*

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

**"I suppose you've really heard it all in these bookclubs? Don't be shocked: we're all very open about our households and vulnerabilities here"  
- An employer (7 March 2006)**

#### **Background**

As a student of development studies, I was drawn to the collective research project on domestic workers in post-apartheid South Africa at the Department of Social Anthropology because I am interested in the complexity of the relationship between household workers and employers. I think it is important to study the employer perspective as 'elite studies' have been a neglected area of ethnography (Nugent and Shore 2002). In 1972 Laura Nader (reported in Nugent and Shore 2002) challenged anthropologists to 'study-up' as she alleged that anthropologists "prefer the underdog". There has certainly been a lot more research done on domestic workers than their employers. I grew up under apartheid in South Africa and the relationship between white South Africans and people of other races has always interested me and the relationship between domestic workers and their employers particularly so. As a child my family employed a full-time housekeeper and nanny who is now semi-retired but still lives with my family and to whom I remain close. I retain an interest in the domestic worker perspective, and it developed further during the course of this project. But it is the attitudes of employers and their actions in relation to the domestic workers they employ that most intrigue me. As an employer myself, I am aware of the potential contradictions attaching to domestic work for employers with liberal political views. The challenges and ambiguities facing employers today are not only those of 'others' but also my own.

When I began this study, I considered (and dismissed) two ways of accessing employers, namely, approaching them outside a supermarket in two different suburbs, or simply knocking on doors in certain areas of Cape Town. I rejected both as the employers would have been too diverse to be able to make generalisations about them.

The research methods finally selected included 171 semi-structured questionnaires, ten focus group discussions at book clubs, 10 home observations, an interview with an au pair commentator and a (non-book club) employer focus group discussion. The questionnaire and focus group emphases were refined after conducting a pilot focus group, the results of which are not included in this report. Book clubs were chosen as a concentrated source of middle class (mainly women) employers as women interact most with domestic workers in households. In my experience, people speak openly and honestly at book clubs and as a book club member myself, I had access to my own club and those of many of my friends. I piloted the research at my own book club and the response was unequivocal: members embraced the opportunity to engage with a topic that is seldom discussed openly. My own position as employer, book club member, and friend of at least one person in each of the 10 book clubs facilitated entry and trust. Each chapter draws on data collected using all five methods.

I had one au pair commentator in Mertia, an experienced au pair, who has been watching relationships between domestic workers and employers for 20 years from her vantage point inside the households. She comes from a middle-class, Coloured family who themselves employ a domestic worker and she attended a private school. She is well-placed to make comments about employers as she has many years of experience in households, before and after the 1994 change in government. Her skin colour immediately makes her an 'outsider' in a white home but her status as an au pair means that she is not positioned at the bottom of the household hierarchy. Being middle-class and having attended a private school, Mertia is in the unusual position of being of the same class as most employers, but not treated as an equal.

### **Employer group**

Some details about the employer group are presented in Table 1 on page 15. Of the 171 white women employers of the study, 93% work outside the home. Few would be able to conduct their multi-faceted lives without the help of their domestic worker. Most participants in this research balance careers, children and sometimes further study, with the running of the household. They manage to do so because they have help with childcare, cleaning,

laundry and so on. As Cock (1980) writes, the institution of domestic labour presents a serious challenge to ideals of a shared gender experience among women. Some writing on domestic workers reveals aspects of hierarchy and mutual identity between employer figures, who are mainly white women, and domestic workers who are mainly black women. Romero (1992) bluntly asserts that middle class women's employment of working class women in domestic work accentuates the contradiction of race and class in feminism and allows them to escape aspects of sexism. Hence, 'liberal' and well-educated white women escape household and care work due to the presence of poor, non-white women. While Romero writes from her perspective in the United States, it is important to note that men in South African households are usually uninvolved in domestic employment relationships. In these households, the presence of domestic workers helps the relationships between the men and women in the house as possible conflict over gender roles and division of household labour are to a large extent averted with the employment of domestic workers.

### **Domestic worker group**

See profile of the domestic worker group, as reported by their employers, in Table 2 on page 16. Almost every employer (98%) reported that, in addition to wages, they assist their domestic workers with a wide range of items including food, clothing, insurance, children's school fees, personal loans, housing loans and driving lessons.

**1. Semi-structured questionnaires (171)** Semi-structured questionnaires (Appendix 1) were distributed to all willing book club members and completed and returned. Only seven book club members chose not complete the questionnaire. At no point did employers have access to other book club members' questionnaire answers, although the discussions at book clubs were obviously open. Fifty-one questionnaires were completed by book club members in this way.

A further 120 questionnaires were completed by other employers via the so-called "snowball method": I e-mailed friends and work colleagues who undertook to disseminate the questionnaires within their networks and return these to me. Thus 171 questionnaires were

completed in total. The questionnaires were anonymous although some employers identified themselves.

The questionnaire aimed to capture some of the demographics of the employer group, those of the domestic workers in their employ, and employment details such as remuneration and benefits. It also aimed to capture reported employment practices and opinions and employer memories of domestic employment relationships of their childhood. The questionnaire was not designed to be a comprehensive research tool but rather a device to capture useful information quickly. In each book club group one or two members tended to dominate the discussion so it was useful to have another way of recording respondent opinion. Use of the questionnaire also made it possible to capture the views of employers who were uncomfortable speaking in the group.

## **2. Focus group discussions at book clubs (10)**

Ten focus group discussions took place at book clubs over a period of eight months (February-October 2006) in different suburbs of Cape Town and one in Worcester. I recorded and transcribed the proceedings of all meetings. Fifty-eight employers attended and participated in the facilitated focus group discussions.

Since I was particularly interested in the practices and attitudes of middle class employers, tertiary-educated and self-identified as 'liberal', the use of book club membership offered not only relatively easy access but the 'sample' thus contained variables that were controlled to some extent (age range, class, education level, race group). The research findings therefore do not claim applicability to the wider universe of employers of domestic workers.

Jacklyn Cock (1980:18) notes of her discussions with employers that, "a considerable rapport was necessary for a satisfactory interview on the subjects covered, especially those which involved attitudes and emotions". Cock found that this rapport was established when both interviewers and respondents were themselves employers. Monaghan and Just (2000:23) concur in their assertion that the first step of ethnographic research is to establish oneself as

legitimate within the community. I thus felt well-positioned to conduct this research, being both an employer and a member of a book club. During the course of the research, it became evident that the characteristics I shared with respondents served to establish rapport and overcome their inhibitions so that they were honest and open about their domestic employment relationships. Those least like me - in terms of age, income, political attitudes – were least forthcoming and/or candid. These, however, were few in the total sample.

However, these shared characteristics also meant I lacked the “outsiders’ perspective” so desirable to an ethnographer (Monaghan and Just 2000:30) and I thus had to be consistently self-aware during all the phases of the research. I have remained aware of my role throughout the generation of the ethnographic data and its analysis, namely the dissection or “break up” of human action and the attempt through my recording to provide a “coherent representation of it” (Jacobson, 1991:7). For, as Jacobson notes, the selection and presentation of events in an ethnographic study is a result of deliberate analysis and interpretation and cannot be simply a description of factual observations made during the anthropologist’s fieldwork. Of course I am equally aware that it is my interpretation that is reflected in these pages. Furthermore, the recording and writing also invokes particular contingencies such as language, rhetoric, power and history (Clifford and Marcus 1986:25). It is difficult to assess one’s role as author and interpreter and Clifford and Marcus agree that such ‘contingencies’ in the writing of ethnography are determined by forces ultimately beyond the control of either an author or an interpretive community (1986:25). Such self-reflexivity, or conscious self-reflection, has, however, become a valuable in itself and I note in the final chapter that self-reflection impacted on my own employment practices. The dual consciousness necessary for successful ethnographic research has been difficult to achieve; the reader will judge its success.

Book club discussions were not without drawbacks. Clubs with greater membership variance regarding age, income and education seemed more concerned about adverse peer judgement than clubs with greater membership uniformity. In all the clubs, however, some participants were inhibited by open group discussion. The questionnaire thus proved valuable

for capturing the opinions of the less verbal club members whose opinions might otherwise not have been recorded, since the discussions focused on the same key item.

### **3. Home observations (10)**

At each book club meeting, I requested permission to conduct home observations and a written request was included on each questionnaire. I spent time in ten homes, observing behaviour and interactions and conducting separate discussions with the worker and the employer in each. In some instances I paid second visits.

Each interview began by mapping the previous working day with the employer and the employee in turn (in no set order). This method, known as the 24-hour recall data method, was adapted from Reynolds' research for her book *Dance Civet Cat: Child Labour in the Zambezi Valley* (1991) and is known as "instant records". Instant records are based on random visits to selected households. The technique is sometimes referred to also as "random visiting" or the "time allocation technique" (Gross 1984). I used two types of instant record methods. First, I adapted the time period of the 24-hour recall data method where the employer and the worker will both recall what they did on a designated workday. Thus, during each visit, the employer and worker separately recalled their activities, usually during the previous workday at that household. Sometimes the previous workday was the day before, in other instances the previous workday was several days earlier and once it was a whole week earlier. My visits were not random but scheduled with both employee and employer consent. Respondents were, however, unprepared for my questions. This method worked well as it took very little time and involved minimal imposition on the observed subjects. It also allowed minimal room for the subjects to alter their behaviour under observation, which is important for accuracy. Finally, it got the respondents talking about topics that were non-threatening to them.

I also used systematic observation during the home visits. This was time-intensive but essential for capturing context. From the moment of arrival, I recorded all interactions

between the household members present, particularly interactions around food provision. The records obtained produced a series of detailed metaphorical “snapshots”.

It needs to be said that my observations were selected “twice”, as Jacobson points out in *Reading Ethnography* (1991:7). My observations will inevitable have been “shaped” and then “filtered” through my personality, by my theoretical interests and even by the interests of the employer subjects since they selected the information they gave me (Jacobson, 1991:7). Again it emerged that the more employers perceived themselves to be like me, the more they revealed events and information directly pertinent to my research aims. However, what people chose not to reveal during home observations was also useful where I succeeded in identifying its absence.

### **Methodological principles and considerations**

As an ethnographic researcher, it was important that I conducted the research in the language of the people I worked with. While my English and Afrikaans are fluent, my Xhosa is not. This did not affect the book club discussion nor the questionnaire phases of my research. During home observations, where Xhosa was the domestic worker’s first language, my inability to speak Xhosa served to cement my status as an employer figure in the worker’s perception. However, even where I was able to converse in Afrikaans with Afrikaans-speaking domestic workers, I believe I was still viewed as an employer-figure, which might have inhibited workers’ responses to some extent.

I did not distribute money or “incentives” to the research participants. I did, however, give a bottle of wine to the hostess of each book club meeting. I consider this a courtesy rather than an incentive. In the same vein, I gave each domestic worker and employer the same small chocolate gift at the end of my home observation and distributed a small chocolate bar with each questionnaire.

I have also had to undergo an essential process of self-reflection on my own relationships, past and current, with domestic workers. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I have

been acutely aware of the fact that I would not have been able to undertake the project without the help of Nettie Ndabambi, the woman I employ as a childminder. As I sat at my computer, I could hear the sounds of Nettie and my young son tinkering around in the house.

I have also found that my relationships with both Nettie and Matilda Skeepers, who I employ as a weekly char, have changed during the research process. I have become uncomfortably more aware of my own rules and norms, and have changed certain of these. Similarly, many of the employer respondents have mentioned that their relationships, awareness and behaviour have altered as a result of completing the questionnaires and participating in the discussion groups. Amy, for example, noted:

Since I filled in the questionnaire, and again now, I suddenly noticed, "Oh, in the last couple of months, I've been cooking vegetable soup once or twice a week for my domestic worker!", and she loves it and even the gardener eats it. I don't know if he loves it, but – it's because of Sarah's study that I've actually done that!

### **Ethical considerations**

I have complied with the University of Cape Town's code of conduct and ethics applicable to researchers investigating human subjects, as well as the ethical guidelines set out by *Anthropology Southern Africa*. As with most anthropological research, I have an obligation to respect participant confidentiality and have done so. The methods used have occasioned the outpouring of much personal and intimate data and I have thus used pseudonyms for employers, domestic workers and the au pair informant in both my field notes and the final writing-up.

A number of employer subjects have made themselves vulnerable to peer censure and this has necessitated a sensitive exposition of my findings. I have obtained permission from all respondents to use the data, and I have ensured that they understand the research objectives and methods. I take seriously the requirement that respondent individuals not be made vulnerable by my research results, particularly, in this case, regarding the domestic workers whose jobs might be at stake if certain disclosures were divulged to their employer. I have therefore been careful not to endanger them in any way.

**TABLE 3 Domestic worker food arrangements, as reported by employer**

<b>Food type</b>	<b>Unlimited quantity</b>	<b>Limited / leftovers only</b>	<b>Not allowed</b>	<b>Other / not applicable (eg. DW not interested / diabetic / HH vegetarian / food type not available)</b>
Meat	19%	70%	5%	23%
Chicken	31%	64%	1%	4%
Fish	34%	48%	-	18%
Fruit	79%	12%	-	9%
Vegetables	58%	30%	1%	11%
Tea	95%	3%	-	2%
Coffee	92%	1%	-	7%
Jam	93%	3%	-	6%
Bread	95%	4%	-	1%
Samp	43%	7%	-	50%
Mielie meel	57%	3%	-	40%
Cheese	81%	9%	1%	10%
Eggs	81%	11%	1%	8%
Sugar	94%	4%	-	2%
Milk	94%	3%	-	3%
Biscuits	53%	35%	1%	12%
Cake	36%	42%	3%	17%
Sweets	33%	33%	6%	27%
Fruit juice	59%	16%	3%	22%
Cordials	75%	4%	2%	20%
Tinned foods	90%	4%	1%	5%

*Note: Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding off*

## **CHAPTER THREE COMMUNICATION AND CONTRADICTION**

**“They say ‘Eat anything you like’, but I know they don’t mean it”**

**-Mertia, au pair commentator (Interview with Mertia in Cape Town, 7 September 2006)**

This chapter provides research data on what domestic workers eat while at work and shows how this information can shed light on the broader employment relationships. I argue that the communication rules governing domestic workers’ access to food are reliable predictors of other aspects of the employment relationship. The research conducted for this study reveals communication between employer and domestic worker to be complex. I identify three aspects of communication that are present in the domestic employment relationship. These are:

- direct communication
- indirect communication
- silences and unspoken issues

### **Food provision**

Food provision is particular to the domestic employment relationship. Of 171 employers in the study, 170 provide food for their domestic workers. Whereas painters, plumbers and other such handymen bring their own food to work at private residences, employers provide domestic workers and gardeners with food. Respondents gave the following range of reasons why, as South African employers, they provide food for domestic workers whereas, in most other countries food does not form part of this employment relationship. Employer answers can be grouped into the following categories:

- food provision is part of a historical system and is therefore a habit;
- food is given in lieu of higher wages;
- food is given because of the “guilt” of apartheid;
- food is given to compensate for low income of employees.
- food is provided to supplement inadequate home diets

**Only one employer linked food provision to what she pays her domestic worker:**

**Aurelia:** For me, I must pay her enough so that she can afford to feed herself.

Aurelia, a working married mother in her mid-forties, was in many ways very typical of the women in a number of the book clubs I attended. Like many of the other respondents, she is married with two children, has two postgraduate degrees and works part- to full-time in a fairly demanding job. However, I observed that she was less concerned about her image than her fellow club members who were more 'politically correct'. Furthermore, some of Aurelia's comments made her peers uncomfortable, such as "I find 'they' like to be told what to do". Yet she made a number of connections that her more self-conscious peers did not. In the statement above, she was not indicating that she prohibits her domestic worker from eating at work (she provides basic food as well as a relatively generous wage). Aurelia simply made explicit the link between wages and food provision that many other employers did not.

Table 3 (located on page 25) details employer answers to food questions from the questionnaires. In approximately 37% of households in this study, limits are placed on employee consumption of 'luxury' foods such as chocolates, biscuits and cakes. A further 3% of employers reported that the domestic worker was 'not allowed' these foods. Questionnaire responses indicating that domestic workers have 'unlimited access to food' show that younger employers (aged 39 and below) are marginally less likely to give the employers unlimited access to foods than employers aged 40 and above.

When the food table is viewed by income group, the data reveal that employers (of all ages) whose household income is under R12,000 a month are less likely to claim that their domestic workers have unlimited access to a large range of foods than those whose households are more affluent. In summary, richer employers over 40 are more likely to report that they do not limit domestic worker access to foodstuffs than their younger and less well-off counterparts.

Food sharing between employer and domestic worker took place in few households of the study as most employers work and are therefore not at home for lunch. Furthermore, most domestic workers (97%) do not 'live in' so they are not together for the main meal of the day (supper). There were a few instances where employers reported that they ate lunch together with domestic workers:

**Shelly:** If we have something nice, we heat stuff up and eat it together.

**Miranda:** When I'm here we all eat lunch together, then we eat at the table, not the counter... we eat exactly the same food.

Of 171 employers, only one (Claire) reported that she does not allow her domestic worker to eat while at work: "Other than giving [the toddler] food, she doesn't deal with food at all... doesn't cook for me, doesn't pack my groceries away, nothing like that... she brings her own food with". This disclosure took place during a book club discussion group (and was corroborated in the employer's questionnaire). Claire's honest statement elicited both cries of protest and murmurs of disapproval. I observed that it caused some previously vocal employers to fall silent for the remainder of the discussion. Employers were at pains to distance themselves from Claire's attitude on food access which they felt was harsh.

No employer interviewed for the study indicated that she provided her domestic worker with food that was inferior in quality to that consumed by the rest of the household. The following statements reflect the narrow range of responses employers made:

**Cynthia:** I don't say a word. She eats what is in the house, whatever is there, she eats.

**Sally:** We cater for six, not for five. That's part of the deal.

**Meryl:** She eats *exactly* the same [as us].

Meryl and Sally make roughly the same point but Cynthia's approach is different in that her domestic worker eats what is available rather than being catered for specifically. While most employers claim that domestic workers partake of the same foods as the rest of the household, my examples below indicate that this is not true of all households.

Of the employer sample, 17% said they did not know whether the domestic workers liked the food but the remaining 83% all believed their employees did like the food provided for them at work. However, a number of comments made during book club discussions appear to contradict the questionnaire answers as they indicate that some employers are aware that domestic workers do not always like the food provided. In Jean's formulation: "She eats what we eat, whether she likes it or not. I doubt she likes our food all the time."

What this and similar responses of many others indicate is that domestic workers are under pressure to eat the same food as that of the family. Employer respondents generally indicated that domestic workers must eat what the family eats despite being aware, in some cases, that their employees might prefer different food. Rose noted:

Our domestic worker ... receives a portion of the meal that we prepared the night before in the fridge on a particular plate ... She never gets asked what she likes, ever ... we make an AIDS package every week [for donation] and she casts her eyes longingly at that very nice food that stands at the kitchen door and gets taken out to Khayelitsha ... it's mainly samp and pilchards ... and beans and basic, it's staple. I don't think she is hugely impressed by the lunches that we give ... she would definitely prefer that.

Rose voiced what many employers imply, namely, that food is part of the employment package but on the employers' terms. In this case, Rose appears to be a liberal and fair employer. Not only does she do good deeds for underprivileged people (as shown above through her reference to the weekly packages for HIV/AIDS sufferers) but she is a generous and understanding employer. An example of Rose's generosity, related at a book club meeting, is that at the request of her domestic worker, Nomsa, Rose regularly buys Woolworths cake which Nomsa likes to provide Woolworths cake at her tea parties with other nannies. By so doing, Rose displays both generosity (the cake is expensive) and understanding (she discerned that Woolworths cake is an important status symbol for Nomsa). Yet despite her generosity it is significant that Rose does not act on what she perceives to be Nomsa's food preferences.

Overall the study suggests that this employer, like most others, feels that the domestic worker should eat what the rest of the family eats for two reasons. Firstly, organising different food for one member of the household creates too much extra work; and secondly, many liberal employers want domestic workers to eat as their equals. Providing the domestic worker with food that is different (and, if it is the preferred familiar items as Nomsa indicated, usually cheaper) makes employers feel that they are reproducing apartheid-era practices:

**Nicky:** I couldn't possibly give her 'blikkieskos' like in the old days, even if she wanted it!

Employers like Nicky are concerned with their image in this respect, an aspect investigated in some depth in Chapter 5. They do not want to provide food that could be perceived as inferior to that of the rest of the family.

Another employer, Sinead, indicated that the domestic worker does not like the food: "The takeaways we offer her, she doesn't like that." Thus although Sinead is prepared to buy the worker expensive pre-prepared food, she is unwilling to find out the worker's preference and buy that instead. Like Rose, Sinead does not want domestic workers' food wishes to create additional effort for her.

It is important to note that it is not cost that leads Rose and Sinead (and many others) to act in these ways around food provision since most households in the study are financially comfortable. As most employers work and have children and most partners appear to play very little role in the domestic employment relationship it is understandable that these women employers want to simplify domestic arrangements and responsibilities where possible. From innumerable conversations during fieldwork, it seems that employers believe that asking the domestic worker about her food preferences will result in a never-ending flood of requests. I have encountered this attitude of reservation in employment dimensions other than food provision. Thus, food negotiations between employer and domestic worker are often mirrored in their broader working relationship. Charlotte, for example, made the

following assertion during a book club discussion: "I know it sounds terrible but I try not to ask her about her life. We're close but there are always so many terrible things happening to her, I have to listen for ages, and then I feel she expects me to follow up on these."

### **Direct communication**

The study found direct communication between domestic workers and employers around food issues to be fairly minimal. Where there is considerable communication about food, it is mostly from the employer side. For instance, in most households the employer tells the domestic worker if particular food has been allocated for supper and is therefore not for the domestic worker's consumption that day:

**Shirley:** She knows she's welcome to eat just about everything ... I tell her not to have what is for supper.

Employers such as Shirley communicate directly about food that they feel the domestic worker has no right to – food that has been bought for a specific event (for example, an evening family supper or a dinner party).

Anne too reported a lot of direct communication about food:

She drives me crazy! She won't eat lots of things. What we usually talk about is what she *won't* eat! She's very picky about what she will eat. She won't eat many vegetables. She won't eat cauliflower but she will eat broccoli. Avocado pear she loves but she won't eat apples, pears, some bananas. She loves peanut butter but only a certain kind: the one with the yellow top.

The data show that in general when there is direct communication around food, there is also directness in other aspects of the relationship. For instance, I observed the relationship between Anne and her domestic worker, Florence, at close quarters during a home observation over two days and the relationship is characterised by open and direct communication and affectionate tolerance of each other's foibles. The power is more balanced than in many other relationships of the study, reported or observed: the domestic worker feels empowered enough to say how she feels and the employer feels enough affection towards the domestic worker to label her 'picky'

and to comment that 'she drives me crazy'. Anne also feels sufficiently comfortable about the nature of her relationship with Florence to express it in public without reservation. Although Anne is not always at home, she is as familiar with Florence's food preferences as she is with those of her own family.

In contrast to Shirley's and Anne's experiences, many anecdotes of miscommunication on the topic of food for specific events were relayed to me. Alice, for example, reported: "I put meat out for supper and she thought it was for her so I didn't say anything [when the worker consumed it]. That's because I usually put stuff out for her." On this occasion Alice had not communicated adequately, resulting in confusion. Alice appeared annoyed with herself for not communicating in a more straightforward way.

Margaret's reported misunderstanding is similar: "I had made the most enormous amount of soup as I had people coming over for supper. So I said to the gardener 'Would you like some soup?' He said 'Thank you', took the whole pot of soup and disappeared!" The significant aspect of stories like these is not only that communication has gone wrong but that the employer feels she cannot then explain the situation to the domestic worker or gardener. Both Alice (55) and Margaret (73), members of different book club discussion groups, have long-term relationships (more than seven years) with their domestic workers. Both reportedly spend some time at home on the employees' workdays, which affords many opportunities for communication. Clearly, however, in these and other similar cases, opportunity alone does not ensure effective communication about food. Furthermore, contrary to these reported incidents, both Alice and Margaret responded in their questionnaires that they do talk to their employees about which foodstuffs they may or may not have. They also both came across as forthright and open employers.

Such situations also point to the unease employers, and most particularly the older employer grouping, appear to feel about certain aspects of the relationship. I argue that most of the reported examples of mis-communication convey (a) that the

employer does not act to explain the confusion as she is embarrassed that she is responsible for the confusion; (b) she is taken by surprise at the domestic worker's inability to 'read' social codes; and (c) her own surprise shocks her as it exposes and emphasises the class divide between employer and worker.

There was very little evidence of domestic workers communicating openly with employers around food. I found instances of direct communication in only two of the ten households in which I conducted home observations. Mandy, an employer, reported: "If there is something in the fridge she will say 'Can I eat it?'" Thandiwe, a domestic worker interviewed during a home observation, reported: "I didn't like the bread so I told Polly so she changed it for me." Thandiwe's statement indicates a straightforward interaction over food and since I came to know this household during home observations, I am confident the above interaction illustrates the broader characteristics of their relationship which is honest and comfortable. Polly makes an effort to include Thandiwe at all meal times, seeks her out to introduce her to visitors, and consults her opinion on the health of her children. Their relationship is characterised by mutual respect and this is reflected in the way they interact over food issues.

Tables of questionnaire answers detailing employer answers to communication questions are attached as Appendix 2. These tables indicate that only 32% of employers talk to their domestic workers about permitted foodstuffs while a large group of employers (68%) do not. A small majority (52%) believed it 'important' or 'very important' to set parameters around food, yet only 28% actually did so. This disjuncture between an ideal of boundary setting for at least half of respondents and the reality of silence around food sharing illuminates some of the tensions in the relationship. Cross-tabulations showed that age and income are not significant to the setting of parameters.

Most employers explain that they do not prescribe foodstuffs because, they claim, "everything is available" to the domestic worker. While many imply that boundary setting around food is a

non-issue most of the time, this is certainly not so for all. Employers' responses when they perceive domestic workers to be breaking certain unseen boundaries demonstrate that food boundaries are of great concern for at least some. Cheryl, for example, exclaimed in outrage: "I've never told her she can't have anything until she actually had the smoked chicken!" Cheryl had not set parameters but nevertheless assumed that certain unstated boundaries would automatically be recognised. When the domestic worker transgressed the invisible boundary, the employer reprimanded her. Cheryl's tone in relating this incident implied that the domestic worker had never again overstepped the mark. In several focus group discussions, employers displayed astonishment at the reported presumption of domestic workers who had broken unspoken rules. In one case the domestic worker asked if she could have some of the supper she had prepared for the household. The employer said: "I was so astounded that it happened more than once". This pronouncement was met with much laughter at the alleged cheek of the domestic worker and the resulting confusion of the employer. These examples mark behaviour characteristic of the overwhelming majority of these employers: parameters are most often not set until or unless there is a problem.

Some employers indicated an inability to set a food boundary, as reflected in Merle's statement that, " She knows she mustn't touch the luxury stuff but I would *never* be able to tell her so explicitly." Like Cheryl, Merle has very clear opinions about the parameters she considers appropriate to her domestic worker's access to food but has not indicated these directly. Merle shares the socio-demographic qualities described in that she has a degree, works and is demonstrably politically liberal. Elsewhere in the world it is taken for granted that most employer/employee relations will be hierarchical, not least in the domestic sphere, and in many places race may correlate highly with this class differential. But South Africa's history of apartheid and South African liberals' consciousness about apartheid's inequity and iniquity fourteen short years after democratisation, are not common elsewhere and together are the direct cause of the kind of 'intense' discomfort expressed by Merle and most others in this study. The lack of boundary setting implicit in Merle's statement is indicative of this employer discomfort. However, whereas Cheryl assumed that the domestic worker would know that luxury foods are out of bounds, Merle (and many others) believe she should set

parameters. However she struggles to do so as it makes more obvious her position of privilege within both the relationship and in society. The discomfort results in employers either communicating in a contradictory way or avoiding communication unless essential. I argue that this question goes to the heart of current domestic employment relationships.

While limitations are usually imposed only when food is purchased or prepared for entertainment or visitors, those employers who set limits indicated that they did so solely for the employees' benefit. Reasons given include that parameters make domestic workers feel more comfortable and 'free' to eat what they want as well as to let them know what the employer's expectations are. Very rarely did respondents acknowledge that such parameters were also beneficial to themselves.

While the question about *when* parameters were set was not asked explicitly in the survey, about half the members of each book club indicated *in the discussions* that they had set parameters at the outset, even though only 28% claimed to have set parameters around food at all. The following statement typifies these employers' comments regarding parameter-setting:

**Cecile:** It was part of the discussion around the terms of employment and when her tea break would be and when her lunch break would be. I asked her "what would you like to eat?" and "when would you like to eat?" so there is no tension in the house when people take a break.

In such instances the employer controls the communication. The power imbalance between Cecile and the domestic worker, Thoko, is embedded in this communication: Cecile is asking the questions and the 'tension' she refers to is her own. In Cecile's (age 37) relationship with Thoko (45), very clear parameters were indeed set by Cecile from the outset. This household was one of those observed at close quarters. Despite the employer's control of communication, the fact of a high level of communication with clear parameters made the relationship open and warm for both. In this household there were no unstated boundaries for the domestic worker to transgress inadvertently.

Nozolile, interviewed during a home observation, also indicated that a discussion about food provision had taken place at the outset: "She [the employer] said at the beginning, everything I want I must take, and if I want to take food home, she said I must ask." Despite the similar articulation of boundaries, the relationships within the two households were very different in other ways. In the household of Cecile and Thoko, the relationship was intimate but quite formal and characterised by a deep respect for the other's space and opinion, with little spoken communication. The long-standing employment relationship in Nozolile's household was just as close but it was characterised by familiarity and camaraderie between employer and domestic worker (both in their early fifties). I witnessed a number of loud exchanges and disagreements in Nozolile's household. Despite these differences, clear parameters had been set at the outset and both relationships appeared intimate. Overall, domestic workers are more empowered in relationships where parameters have been clearly set than where they have to guess the limits.

### **Indirect communication**

It was perhaps surprising that language difficulty did not surface at all in the book club discussions. Although I did not flag language in the discussions or questionnaires, I thought the topic would arise naturally, given that employers and domestic workers rarely share a first language and that the usual language of communication is the employer's first language. This must have an impact on communication and might account for some of the indirect communication. Thomas provided an example:

I sometimes suggest a range of things, as he won't help himself. So I'll put out peanut butter, marmite ... and I can tell when he's not going to have one of the things when I say "And there is fish paste" and he laughs. So I go "Oh, cool. That's a laugh; that goes away." It's one of his ways of responding.

The indirect communication - where the domestic worker laughs instead of saying 'I do not eat fish paste' - is recognised in this example and is present, albeit often implicit, in most other reports. Although Thomas was the only male among the book club employers and the domestic worker, Rodney, is one of only two men among the 171 employees group, gender does not seem to affect the modes of communication – or its lack – described here.

Rachel's comments also recognise (albeit, I suspect, unconsciously) the indirect communication style of her domestic worker: "I don't ask her about it [whether she likes the food] ... the only thing that she found a way to tell me [was] that she really didn't like this bread, you know, low GI." (Bread was the most talked of item in relation to domestic workers' food preferences.)

It is revealing of the complexities of employer/domestic worker interaction that employers like Rachel do not simply ask domestic workers outright whether they like the food. Even if the answer resulted in employers having to buy two loaves of bread, this could only make a marginal difference to the household grocery bill. But, as shown in the situations of Rose and Sinead earlier, it is not a question of money that leads employers to act in this indirect way. The research indicates rather that many employers simply do not want to have to engage directly with domestic workers over any issue that is not concerned with the specifics of work. Once again we see that food relations often reveal other aspects of the employment relationship.

Indirect communication by the employer results in the domestic worker having to second-guess what the employer thinks is appropriate for her to eat and/or take home, as well as quantities. Anya, for example, thinks she has communicated to the domestic worker that she may take food home: "I don't always give her food to take home for them [her family]. I am kind of hoping that she is taking some food home ... I mean, she knows she can." Presumably the worker is taking very little if Anya has not noticed but is only "hoping".

One illuminating comment on the question of indirect communication came from Connie:

When I had Mildred working for us and I was always, like, making a cheese sandwich because I love cheese sandwiches and eventually she had one but she had never had one before and then we were talking about this and she said to me friends of hers who are domestic workers had said, "You must never, even if you like cheese, you must never admit that you like cheese."

The domestic workers' rationale is that indicating disliking a luxury food item is best for the employment relationship because it both alleviates the employer's anxiety about the consumption of such foods and alleviates the worker's anxiety that she could be suspected of doing so. Covert rules are also often a manifestation of what domestic workers feel their employers would like, and which employers do like but would not admit, even to themselves.

Despite either not asking workers about their food preferences, or ignoring those preferences when known, a great many employers reported that their domestic workers, unless otherwise instructed, 'chose' only basic cheap foods such as bread, jam, peanut butter and eggs. A significant number echoed the sentiment that, "She prefers Ricoffy [because] *she* writes it on the shopping list".

**Samantha:** I give her what she wants to eat – she only asks for peanut butter and bread.

**Cheryl:** She said 'I am happy to eat only bread and jam'. So that's what she has; end of story.

Both Samantha and Cheryl, from different book clubs, are seemingly generous and fair employers. They apparently see no need to offer more varied foods or to discuss the matter further with workers. Such statements reveal that employers unquestioningly accept certain codes and norms of interactions that reinforce unequal power relations when they can claim them as the *worker's* choice. They seldom question their own role in the acceptance and continuation of these norms, and are often not open about the benefits to themselves in relationships structured along these lines:

**Adele:** She said she likes peanut butter and bread and tea. She said that's what she's used to and that's what she wants. She can have anything she likes but all she wants is peanut butter and bread, tea and eggs.

A lack of direct communication about what domestic workers may and may not eat can result in domestic workers assuming that they cannot help themselves to anything other than basic food types in limited quantities. Lauren noted:

Ja, I must say, since I first read your questionnaire [in the pilot book club discussion] I've noticed that Sissie only actually helps herself to cheap staples like bread, eggs, tea. I'm afraid I suspect it's because I didn't say "You can have the leftover chicken" and so on. Now I do, by the way! But she still waits for me to give her the go-ahead.

Lauren's retrospective statement is further proof of my observation that, unless otherwise specified, domestic workers assume they are permitted only basic foods, another relic of apartheid-era power imbalances. The unquestioning acceptance by domestic workers of self-prescribed restraints was apparent in other areas of the employment relationship too. For instance, during discussions about wages, a number of employers claimed they had never had cause to consider whether they paid a fair wage as they paid exactly what the domestic worker originally requested:

**Charlotte:** I give her what she asked for. I wasn't going to 'up' it if that's all she wanted.

**Sue:** She said she'd be happy with the wage she earned at her previous employer so I said "fine".

It suits Charlotte and Sue, as it did Samantha and Cheryl on the food question, to accept the wage requested, despite it perhaps being lower than what they might objectively believe is fair. During initial wage discussions, both employer and employee know that worker supply exceeds available jobs and the employer thus has all the negotiating power. It is therefore not unlikely that this power imbalance creates or at least affects the kinds of subsequent interactions described in this chapter.

Domestic workers are hesitant to seem presumptuous through food requests to the employer but through limiting these requests they in fact further their own subordinacy. Thus, the research data reflect that food can be treated as a code. As Mary Douglas (1972) writes, food messages are about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. Where employers do not offer them other foods, the domestic workers in such households request the cheapest foods available so as to avoid any possibility of employer censure through the crossing of a food boundary.

### **Communication rules and silences**

I argue that there are rules of hierarchy and respect in the relationship - some stated, many unspoken. The research reveals the ubiquity of unspoken rules in the domestic employment setting as a means of keeping the worker in her (subordinate) place. Such tacit rules can also be called 'silences', a remnant of the past that has continued into the post-apartheid present and serves to uphold the skewed power relations of apartheid-era employment relationships.

Furthermore, the covert nature of the rules means that employers do not have to acknowledge their role in the power imbalance. Covert rules and norms of behaviour can be seen, as in the wage and food examples, as an expression of what domestic workers feel their employers would like, and which employers in general accept.

Some rules are stated directly as overt policy. For example, Tiffany noted: "I have a rule that what is available to eat, we can all partake of. My mom taught me it is rude to eat something in front of someone without them being offered it." But even covert rules are not by definition bad; they are present in all modes of communication and in this context, employers and domestic workers often have shortcut codes of interaction. As Serena reported: "I know she also likes licorice. One time I asked her "Do you like licorice?" and then she said "yes". Now we both eat the licorice ... now I don't ask [offer] her every time ... she knows [she can take]."

Some employers convey partial rules but believe they have been very precise. Maya, for example, also says "she [the worker] knows" - "I sort of said "You can help yourself to anything" but she knows that she should also never open something." But Maya's confidence must come from the worker's behaviour because "help yourself to anything" does not contain the condition "only what is already open". Sarah too managed to communicate certain rules about food without actually stating them: "It was never discussed, it was communicated in other ways, I think it's understood that the normal range - cereal, toast ... [are allowed but] luxuries are not touched, an unsaid, understood rule."

Even in relationships where the employer is reportedly open with the domestic worker about what they can and cannot eat, some rules are not discussed at all:

**Francine:** I didn't want to say 'You can only eat this pie'. I think we did say to her that you can help yourself to anything in the fridge. But I think she understood that that wasn't really on.

Francine, like Maya, communicated a direct contradiction to the domestic worker. This kind of contradictory mode of communication is commonplace in many of the households of the study and raises a question about the hypocrisy of those self-proclaimed liberals who claim they treat their domestic workers well but simply do not state the rules overtly.

I argue that these areas of communication are deliberately ambiguous because the employer feels uncomfortable about two things: about discriminating/differentiating between food for the domestic worker and food for the family, and simply about the fact of employing a domestic worker. Unfortunately for the domestic worker, the resultant communication is contradictory and ambiguous. The findings of this research concur with an observation made by Steyn (2001b:2) about what she terms “white talk”. She writes that ‘white talk’ is linguistically the language “of inclusivity and non-racialism, of being forward thinking” but it is used by whites to “perpetuate inherited exclusive racial privilege”.

While unspoken rules mask issues of skewed hierarchy and differences in status, the covert nature of the rules means that the employer does not have to acknowledge her role in the power imbalance. Helen Lambert’s experience of households in North India (2000) presents restrictions on food exchange not only as expressing but also as creating degrees of social distance, what she terms ‘non-relatedness’. I have discovered through my research that employers unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) create distance between themselves and domestic workers by means of food ‘rules’.

In many households, the employer does not take responsibility for her role in the rule setting. Katinka, for example, explains her worker’s behaviour – appropriate in Katinka’s estimation - by reference to the worker’s upbringing: “She’s also got free reign but she will never help herself. It’s just the way she was brought up.” Katinka is either not being honest about her role, or she is not aware of her role in boundary setting around household food through the indirect and/or partial messages she conveys to her worker.

Such a situation pertains too to the household below where the worker is male. Freya, for example, claims about her male worker, “I don’t think he’d feel comfortable just going into the fridge and I don’t know what we would have to do to make him feel comfortable, but he’s just not.” Freya seems oblivious of her role in rule and boundary setting or that it is she who has not made the worker “comfortable”. Both Freya and Katinka claim to

despair over their workers' lack of confidence to take food freely without recognising that the power to change the situation is theirs.

These examples show how employers struggle to acknowledge their own role in perpetuating a relationship with inherently skewed power differences. This case material concurs with Hansen's statement (1989:37) that: "employers find it difficult to accept that they are "human social actors", aware of the constraints binding on their activity and through whom "conscious interaction and goal-directed activity" are crucially involved both in "making the world in which they are part and in changing it".

The employers in this study do not want domestic workers having 'free reign' over the food in their house but only Claire said so overtly. However, most of them (70%) indicated in the questionnaires that certain foods available to domestic worker are limited. The dissonance between what was declared in book club discussions and what was recorded in the questionnaires can partly be explained by employers' fear of peer censure in the group context. However, the evidence shows that employers are not always open with themselves about food provision and I argue that this applies in other areas of the employment relationship. Instead of being explicit and unambiguous about limits within the relationship, many employers use subtle and covert rules to indicate to the domestic worker what they want.

### **Silence that can hide exploitation**

Unspoken rules can work in domestic workers' favour but more often serve to increase their vulnerability to exploitation. Employer silence can serve to hide such a possibility, even from themselves. And while silence prevents criticism, it also prevents correction.

Many employers admitted that they do not talk about their relationship with their domestic worker with anyone, not even their spouses. The evidence presented here suggests that this is because employers do not like to acknowledge aspects of the relationship that make them uncomfortable or which might conflict with their declared political and social views.

Employers were certainly uncomfortable about disclosing both what they earn and what they pay their domestic workers. While very few employers were willing to disclose financial details in front of their peers, 16% of employers did not disclose in the anonymous questionnaire either.

Such silences include many unspoken aspects of racial and class inequities in South Africa. In the book club discussions, employers displayed considerable discomfort at any references (their own, mine or those of others) to markers of inequality within their own domestic employment relationships. In addition to potential shame before their peers, once such markers become public, employers are faced with the uncomfortable reality that it is their responsibility to utilise the potential for improvement within the relationship. Although I noted the inherent inequalities in domestic employment relationships at each book club gathering, few employers were prepared to engage with the issue. An exception was Mary, a new employer not raised in South Africa, and thus with little experience of either apartheid or domestic help. Mary outspokenly declared that the power imbalance within the relationship is due to the "potential for exploitation". Through not reflecting critically on the relationship, employers may hide exploitation, or its possibility, even from themselves.

Another type of silence is that of the domestic workers, a silence employers claim is indicative of domestic worker satisfaction with the relationship. As illustrated earlier, employers repeatedly noted that their workers were either silent about food provision or did not criticise it. The employers interpreted this as satisfaction with food matters. Such 'presumption of silence' takes place, according to Grossman (1995) when people (in this case employers) cannot or will not listen. There is no recognition of the power dynamics that structure the relationship and that within such relationships it might be difficult for the weaker parties to speak, particularly to assert themselves and/or express their needs. These rules and silences show how powerful a symbol food is, a symbol through which power relations are made apparent.

## **Changes**

### **(a) in food provision**

Nine out of the ten domestic workers participating in the home observations intimated that matters were much improved in the food sphere today compared to their experience in the past. Mavis, Nozi and Gladys have all experienced positive changes in their domestic employment circumstances over time, tracked here through the lens of food provision.

**Gladys:** She treat me as an equal. We talk about our madams in the trains. They say "Thank God things have changed". In [the] 80s we can't eat what we want, in [the] 80s they put your food in a certain way with different plate and cup.

**Nozi:** She gives me food that is so much more and better than in the homes before in the past, in the early times.

**Mavis:** The home feels nice, much nicer than the places I worked in the old times. She gives me much food and it is good stuff, sometimes from Woolworths!

Florence's work conditions are so good that even her children feel the effect of the employer's generosity: "Lola has made us feel free to help ourselves to anything; we have a very honest and loyal friendship. I forget sometimes and my children too, we forget we're workers!" Florence's statement was borne out during my home observation in this household where I observed considerable fondness and honesty between Lola and Florence.

Two further observations about food type and quantity available to workers past and present are necessary. The first relates to working hours. Whereas in the past most domestic workers lived in, the majority of domestic workers in this study (94%) did not. This has had an impact on food provision. The worker is no longer provided with a full evening meal, although a number of employers keep a portion of the evening meal for the domestic worker to eat the following day. Secondly, because women employers now often work the main meal is in the evening so that where meals are provided for workers during the day, they tend to be light. Workers consequently often receive less food in total than they did in apartheid times.

## **(b) in communication**

Almost all questionnaire respondents (82%) perceived positive changes in relationships between employers and domestic workers since apartheid. The following statements reflect perceptions about changes in communication:

**Myrna:** It is much more relaxed, more open

**Samantha:** Easier communication channels

**Phyllis:** Employees are now able to negotiate employment conditions of service

**Sandra:** Today they (domestic workers) are more confident to speak and be themselves

It is ironic that while increased communication is cited by many employers as a positive change within the domestic worker relationship, most employers nevertheless seldom talk about food with their employees. Furthermore, responses citing increased communication as a positive change from the past seem to be an extension of the common observation employers made that employer-employee relationships have become more equal and informal. If communication is linked to equality in the eyes of respondents then their silences around food, however, suggest a lack of equality in their own relationships with domestic workers.

While some employers feel much has changed in these relationships in the last 20 or 30 years, others feel little has changed in the one and a half decades since apartheid. The employers in this study all believe that in apartheid times clearer parameters were set for domestic workers. Celeste phrased it in generational terms: "My mom is definitely far more structured and she will discuss the parameters and what-have-you with her domestic worker as opposed to what I do." As shown earlier, many employers found it difficult to give orders and set parameters, although their counterparts in the apartheid era had no such reservations. Despite the inequities of apartheid, for some domestic workers, some households were easier to work in then, where parameters were clearly set and they were not at risk of transgressing unspoken rules unwittingly.

Communication about food has certainly become more open in some relationships:

**Marilyn:** We have conversations about 'darkie food' and 'whitey food'... I'll say "Nozolile, shall I put out the porcelain plates or the enamel plates?" and Nozi will say "Well, what's for lunch?" and I'll say "fish and chips" and she'll say "Oh, darkie plates" and if I say "pasta" she'll say "whitey plates".

**Sue:** I don't cook samp and beans and I don't cook maize ... but I buy it because Mildred cooks it for all of us ... and we eat it and we love it. On Mondays, its samp and beans and that's left there in the pot, when everyone comes home from school.

In these specific households, the acceptance and embracing of difference is indicative of the more equal relations between the actors in the relationship. Power differences are even deliberately overturned in this household:

**Maura:**She only speaks Xhosa to me. Even if I speak English to her, she speaks Xhosa back. Even if I'm in a hurry and we're discussing what foods there are for her and the kids for lunch as I rush out in the morning, she says "You told me to speak Xhosa so I am". Even if I'm in a hurry, I have to go to a meeting and tell her I'm going to fire her arse, she says "No. You told me I have to speak Xhosa to you!"

The domestic worker feels sufficiently confident about her own position within the relationship to challenge the employer to keep her word (about speaking Xhosa), irrespective of circumstances and the relations are sufficiently balanced for the employer to threaten to "fire her arse", without either party taking it seriously. Although many employers claimed their relationships with workers were balanced, and many certainly wished this to be the case, situations in which the employer learns to speak the language of the worker are a-typical of the employers of this study.

In many households much communication takes place around an array of topics unrelated to food. As Siree reported, "We talk too much. She says 'You must go back to work because I'm not getting any work done'." In this household, the domestic worker feels sufficiently empowered to tell the employer to stop chatting. Increased communication does seem to have transcended apartheid-era power relations in many instances:

**Kitty:** Sometimes I walk into the kitchen and Siphos and Miranda have been here for ages. I make a joke, look at the watch, clear my throat obviously. She enquires "teabreak over, huh, Madam?" She shares my humour.

In this household, both employer and domestic worker are able to parody the 'maid and madam' relationships of the past. Such a scenario is empowering to the worker and not disempowering for the employer. It is, however, not the norm for the employers in this study.

Female employers today see less of their domestic workers than in the past due to work commitments. In a few cases communication is mainly written and a number of employers prefer to communicate by writing even when they are present:

**Margie:** I write notes to Nomsa ... her written English is better, her hearing is bad.

**Stephanie:** I have a book where I specifically write things down, because she doesn't really remember ... I'll write the date ... I don't often go off to work but I like to write it down when I think of it.

This preference for written communication even when both employer and worker are present, suggests employer discomfort with giving orders. Not having to give orders directly makes it easier for some employers to do so.

Communication between employer and domestic worker has certainly changed since apartheid times. Employers report that more communication takes place today and the study supports this to some extent. However, the data also reveal a disjuncture between what employers believe themselves to communicate and what they actually do communicate. A further contradiction emerged through the research between an ideal (for at least half of employers) of parameter setting for domestic workers and the reality of silence and restraint around food provision. Furthermore, even when employers and employees do communicate, analysis of the employer responses suggests that sharp power imbalances often remain embedded in both the form and content of that communication.

Both questionnaire and observational data highlights a dissonance in the reported communication levels within these relationships, as well as inaccuracy and even some delusion in the perception of the respondents of their role. The many instances of

**contradictory communication described here illustrate the white employer's need both for inclusive non-racial communication and for limits, the expression of which ultimately results in keeping the domestic worker in a subordinate position.**

**Another finding in this area of communication and contradiction that I find significant is the lack of personal interest shown by employers in the employee circumstances and desires (including food preferences). This silence allows employers to remain distanced from the adversity they suspect is present in the workers' lives and would find difficult and demanding to confront.**

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **BOUNDARIES: ISSUES OF INTIMACY AND POWER**

**“I’m not generous with domestic workers I don’t like. I love our current domestic worker so I buy her lots of food”**  
**-An employer (29 February 2007)**

The key difference between the domestic employment relationship and most other work relationships is intimacy. Despite the limited communication around food between domestic worker and employer as shown in the previous chapter, many of these relationships are very intimate. In this chapter I investigate issues of proximity, intimacy and hierarchy in the relationship. I also explore the social geography attached to the conflicting identities of ‘home’ and ‘work’ for employer and domestic worker respectively. I argue that employers desire more equal and closer relationships with domestic workers than in the past but still want to assert their dominance. Food relations epitomise the blurred borders between equality and intimacy on the one hand and complete employer control on the other. These, mostly unacknowledged, rules of hierarchy and status between employer and domestic worker serve to reinforce the unequal power relations within the household hierarchy. Food provision and negotiation offers a particularly rich site for the investigation of such relations.

#### **The space of work**

The employment relationship is located within the private domestic space of the employer. Consequently, employer homes hold different and contradictory meanings for employer and domestic worker: the workplace of the worker is the place of relaxation for employer. Domestic workers work, and sometimes live, within the private space of a strange (in the sense of unrelated) family, caring for children and performing menial tasks.

In this setting, food sharing and where people eat can reinforce household hierarchies and identities: food and meals can articulate and define the boundaries between members and ‘outsiders’. Though domestic workers have freer access to food than in the past, they still eat in what Morreira (2005) terms “implicitly specified” areas. Of all the domestic workers of the study, 49% eat their meals in the kitchen, 24% in the dining room, 2% in the scullery and 6%

of domestic workers eat their meals in a family/TV room. The other 19% of employers did not know where domestic workers eat their meals. This finding echoes Morreira's (2005) observations that kitchens are still predominantly the places in which domestic workers eat and take a break. However, eating in kitchens is not necessarily a measure of household hierarchy as is demonstrated below.

Bell and Valentine (1997) explore the question of 'identity' in relation to the cultural location of 'home' and identify some of the complex ways in which individual and household identities are produced. The data confirm Bell's and Valentine's notion that the spatial dimensions of cooking and eating reinforce household hierarchy. To Shiree, the kitchen epitomised 'home':

To me ... the kitchen is the centre of everything ... that's where socialising happens and it happens very easily around food ... where conversations can happen while somebody is preparing food, or where people are sharing food ... and where we talk about stuff and debrief at the end of the day. I think Moira is at home there. She eats there, we all eat there, she prepares her food there, we all prepare our food there.

For Shiree, the kitchen is not only the space where food is prepared but it is also where everybody in the house congregates, including Moira, signifying that Moira is high up in the household hierarchy. My home observation confirmed this. Margaret expressed similar pride that the kitchen served to bring people together in an intimate way:

The dining room is only really where we eat when we have guests, but the kitchen counter is where we eat all other meals and where everything else happens. Like if people come round for tea, or a drink ... and I also like the fact that Phyllis has her meals there ... but also when the gardener comes once a week, he and Phyllis sit at the counter together and they eat their meal and they listen to their soap opera on the radio and it's quite nice because the counter is right there as you come in, it's the place where everybody congregates ... so there is something democratic about it.

These examples point to a number of changes that have occurred over the last two or three decades. Firstly, meals are less formal and there is less use of dining rooms:

**Sonya:** Its kind of a bunfight at meal times anyway; we all democratically jump at the food together.

**Sue:** We turned our dining room into a playroom for the kids. Who has a dining room these days?

Secondly, employers are very conscious in these politically correct times to distance themselves from the physical manifestations of apartheid: in the household context these

include differentiated access to spaces and facilities. My data suggest that, while rules of hierarchy and status exist to structure the relationship between employer and domestic worker, these seldom extend to physical manifestations of difference. However, despite this consciousness on the part of the employer, some domestic workers remain uncomfortable in some spaces in their employer's homes. Many agreed with Phillipa's report that,

In my kitchen is where we all meet and where Zanda and I have most conversations. She happily sits at the table with me there but in any other room she is visibly uncomfortable sitting and having a conversation. What does this say about her place in my house?

Some domestic workers remain "uncomfortable" in some household spaces implying their 'outsider' status in the home and in the class of the employer. Yet many domestic workers are uncomfortable only when the employer is present. In other words, it is not the room that creates discomfort, it is its symbolic value. The domestic worker might well watch television in a particular room while the employer is at work, or with the children but not when the employer – or spouse - is present.

While the domestic worker is more of an insider to the house and its members than are guests, she is nevertheless an outsider to household members' social relationships beyond the household. This observation is supported by Ramphela (1991) who notes that space has a social as well as a physical dimension and that "psycho-social space" denotes the way space influences individuals' conceptions of their position in a situation and affects their self-image. One employer commented, "When I have people over she stays in the kitchen and doesn't join us for tea, say. It makes me feel bad but it's easiest all round, isn't it?", highlighting the tension between similarity and difference within the relationship that the arrival of the employer's friends brings to the fore. This example also shows the limits of boundary crossing. Thus while domestic service involves the mixing of a variety of categories that would otherwise be kept separate, and workers certainly cross a number of boundaries in the home simply by virtue of their presence, the invisible boundaries are reinstated in particular circumstances – usually the arrival of 'others'. As shown earlier, the worker often becomes privy to personal details of her employers' lives and thus transgresses the boundary between public and private although the transgression is unspoken. The concepts of 'insider'

and 'outsider' can be thus be aligned with other parallel contrasts identified by Dickey (2000) which include public/private, similar/different, close/distant, family/not family. In addition to revealing aspects of the employer/domestic worker relationship, the statements and practices presented demonstrate these employers' concern with their image, both self-image and the image they present to peers, regarding attitudes towards and treatment of domestic workers.

An aspect of the domestic employment situation related to spatial difference is that of crockery and cutlery use. According to the questionnaire, only one domestic worker out of 171 was restricted to using separate crockery and cutlery from the employer. In one focus group this employer, Clare, rationalised her choice by saying that her children were also forbidden to use the 'good' crockery and cutlery. She was aware that her peers might be critical of this and indeed they vociferously were. Whereas the use of separate crockery and cutlery was the norm for most domestic workers in apartheid South Africa, the practice is now viewed by these employers with horror – but not, apparently by all. Mertia, my au pair informant, related the following:

I worked last year for a family in Hout Bay but I wasn't allowed to eat off their plates - you must bring your own plates and cutlery. I looked after their children who were lovely .... You had to use portaloos, not inside loo's.... There were four domestic workers, we had to eat in the garage.

In this extreme situation, domestic workers may not use any of the household crockery or cutlery or eat in the house. In other words, they may not have a spatial relationship with their place of work (Momsen 1990). The spatial and physical restrictions that prevail in this household above are very limiting but this assertion of Momsen's (1990) cannot be applied to all employer households as in many households domestic workers are not overtly restricted.

Caring for children makes more spaces and foods available to the domestic worker. But, as Morreira (2005:36) points out, while this seems to allow greater autonomy to workers, it can also reinforce inequality. The study bears this out to some degree as domestic workers were sometimes accorded 'child' status when they looked after children, presented, however, as the worker's preference: "She likes to have her lunch with the children in their playroom."

Thus, space can be used to position the domestic worker as a child, just as it can and does position her as an outsider.

### **Proximity, class and race**

In her work in rural India, Dickey (2000) identifies the proximity between employer and worker inherent in the domestic setting as a threat that workers pose to employers deriving from the juxtaposition of spatial and emotional intimacy combined with class distance. Of the employers in this study, 93% reported that they see their domestic workers “often” and interact with them at home on a regular basis. While the survey indicates that emotional and spatial intimacy foreground tensions and contradictions, these research findings differ from Dickey’s assertion that employers experience the domestic worker as a ‘threat’. These data suggest, rather, that employers know they are in control of the relationship and are therefore not threatened by it. The following sentiments were expressed in various formulations by many respondents:

**Priscilla:** She knows she must just not overdo the food thing.

**Mariene:** To be realistic, the terms of the relationship are ultimately my decision.

**Meg:** The power ultimately lies with me so I go overboard to make her feel autonomous in the food department.

As exemplified through these reports about food and autonomy, it was apparent throughout the research that it is the employers’ opinions that count regarding what is appropriate in the employment relationship. I agree here with Hansen (1989) who writes that employer control is a result of their advantaged position relative to their employees who have only manual labour power. This finding also ties in with Barnard’s (2000:143) description of Bourdieu’s theory of power: that those people who can impose their ‘practical taxonomy’ of the world on others, by definition wield power. Employers, partly because the relationship plays out in their homes but also because they are the dominant class, impose their classification of how things work on the relationship and thereby wield all the power. The concept of class is therefore relevant to any study of the domestic employment relationship; as owners of resources, employers control the work situation to effect their domestic workers’ compliance. However, it needs to be said that domestic workers do have some power in the relationship.

Some employers, particularly those who are working mothers, are dependent on domestic workers:

**Celine:** I couldn't manage without her.

**Magda:** I'm completely dependent on her.

Such employer dependence as illustrated in the households above gives the domestic workers some semblance of power.

Power differentials occur across several different axes – race, class, ethnicity and gender are all significant in the domestic employment relationship although in some households, in some relationships and in specific instances, some factors may become more important than others, writes Morreira (2005) in her thesis on post-apartheid employment relationships. This study indicates that race, class, ethnicity and gender usually occur together. The domestic employment sphere is often the principal social space for inter-racial interaction between these individuals. Domestic workers are almost always of a different race from and lower class than their employers. While South Africa has legislated that race play no role in job acquisition (except in redressing historical inequalities), it remains a determinant in domestic employment relationships. Hence, while class is always a significant factor in the employer-domestic worker relationship, it is often joined to race in the household hierarchy as shown below.

Class is directly derived from both economic and social standing. The mean domestic worker wage (R2,947 per month) is a fraction of the average household income of employers in this study (R25,573). This is one measure of the difference in class between them. Another measure is the fact that most (just under 70%) of employers in this study have tertiary education whereas most domestic workers have not finished school. Class is a distinct form of hierarchy in that its basis is in economic power, combined with the tangible and intangible possessions that financial resources produce – education, achievements and conspicuous consumption – which themselves become sources of economic power (Dickey, 2000). Domestic work everywhere, and not just in South Africa, is performed by members of the

economically and socially subordinate classes. What is particular to South Africa, as described by Cock in 1980, Van Onselen in 1982, Boddington in 1984, Abrams in 1986, and a number of others, is that the relationship between race and class positions domestic workers at the bottom of a number of hierarchies. The research data indicate that race and class can be linked for the purposes of this study.

While race, class and gender are all variables in the structure of societal hierarchies, with black women positioned at the bottom, a number of authors have written extensively about which of these factors is the most significant. While Boddington (1983 and 1984), Hansen (1989) and Whisson and Weil (1971) focus on class domination and Abrams (1986) and Walker (1982) on gender oppression, this research suggests that all three factors are equally significant in the employment relationship. While Makosana (1989) brings all three aspects together with her account of domestic workers' lives that focuses on a gendered experience of race and class, more recent literature is more pertinent to the findings of this study. Fish's 2006 depressing audit of domestic worker conditions in South Africa supports my findings that the habituated relations of privilege and dominance in the employment relationship are maintained through the persistence of race, class and gender inequalities. While the studies mentioned have examined the relationship through the domestic worker, this study views the relationship from the perspective of the employer. Despite the different research angle, the findings of this study reflect those of Fish (2006) closely in that power and privilege, despite increased intimacy between workers and employers, remains highly unequal.

Employer and domestic worker opinion on what constitutes appropriate behaviour is a point of interface between spatial intimacy and class distance. During the focus group meetings much 'story-swapping' took place between employers on the breaching of food boundaries by domestic workers. Judy, for example, reported, "I told her she could eat anything she liked but I put my foot down when she ate all the Woollies smoked salmon. It was just so not appropriate." In this household, Judy had made it known to the domestic worker at the outset of the relationship that she could help herself to all but luxury items, which Judy would herself dispense in limited quantities. The domestic worker, however, had never encountered

smoked salmon and did not know that it was an expensive, luxury item. From the worker's point of view, this had been an innocent error; from the employer's point of view, the worker had 'taken advantage' of her right to help herself to food. Class differences thus manifest through knowledge (or ignorance) of certain foods.

The disparity in class (material and social wealth) is evident in what employers and domestic workers have the confidence to talk about. Several employers related how food choices often revealed class (and race) differences between themselves and their domestic workers and Jane related a multi-racial work situation that captures race and class-linked food differences rather neatly:

We have a small group of colleagues at work called the 'avocado club' and ...I wouldn't say it's exactly on racial lines, I think it's a class thing...Some people buy ground coffee and make real coffee at home and eat avo and seed loaf for lunch...and prefer fresh milk to long-life milk...[and others] spend R20 on getting a burger and chips... And we'd buy one avo and then a loaf of wholewheat bread and maybe some coriander... [it cost] ten rand and fed four people...and in the context of sort of organisational development and diversity management, this came up as an issue (Jane, interview, 29 August 2006)

This anecdote illustrates the sensitivity and discomfort people experience when class differences are highlighted through food choice, hence the raising of this food difference in a "diversity management" context. Class differences that occur in the narrow confines of a domestic employment context, point to even closer links between spatial intimacy and class distance.

Two other areas that emerged from the study to link spatial intimacy and class distance are a lack of employer privacy and African domestic workers' "cultural" propensity to speak loudly. Employers found it difficult to raise or even acknowledge these two areas of intimacy in group discussions. A number of employers raised the topic of privacy and its loss when the domestic workers are present. The issue of diminished privacy made employers uneasy about the domestic worker's access to their private lives. Certainly the desire to have both domestic help and privacy is apparently contradictory. An even greater contradiction is employers' desires to have a close relationship with domestic workers but without obligation for conversation. However, it was not these contradictions that led to employer discomfort

regarding this topic; it was, rather, that employers had to face the fact that they were different to their domestic workers. Sylvia articulated what many had noted: "Black women tend to speak more loudly than white women, particularly when with each other or on the telephone." It is the association of difference with class, culture and race, rather than the action itself, that makes employers uneasy. Myrna encapsulated the essence of what I noticed employers indicating through murmurs, nods and laughter on the topic of intimacy and privacy: "It sounds bad but I like to talk to her but not all the time; I also like to have silence in my house so I can think." Such ambiguity is difficult for domestic workers to understand or negotiate comfortably, especially since the preference is never verbalised. There is simply an expectation by the employer that the worker will share her judgement of appropriateness. The data thus indicate that employers accept and in many cases encourage some degree of familiarity and intimacy with the workers but the degree is on the employer's terms.

Melissa Steyn has written extensively about 'whiteness' and what this means in post-apartheid consciousness. A number of my findings concur with Steyn's observations. In a 2001(a) study, she links the "right" way ideologically to the 'white' way where privileged white people assume that the way they do things is universally accepted as the right way. In the 'smoked salmon' example above, Judy claimed that the worker's behaviour was "just so not appropriate", confirmation that Judy decides what is appropriate for the domestic worker to eat in that household. There were many instances in the book club discussions where employers made statements about food that they assumed were universally acceptable. For example, Tanya commented, "When Lydia ate mealie meal and bread together, I told her one just doesn't mix carbohydrates like that." Tanya has assumed that the 'white' way is the 'right' way but more importantly, she feels it necessary to impose what she deems appropriate on the domestic worker.

Barnard (2000:142) refers to Bourdieu's analysis of the Latin word *habitus* meaning 'habitual state', a culturally defined classification of the world. While domestic workers and employers often have a different 'habitus', it is the employer's 'habitus' which dominates. The study has found that the power structures within the employment relationship remain deeply embedded

in apartheid-era relationships and have persisted to current relationships. Skewed power relations have thus become a persistent 'habit' of employers.

Steyn (2001b) writes that whites, as the privileged group, tend to see their identity as the standard by which everyone else is measured. This makes white identity invisible and results in many whites being unconscious about the effect being white has on their lives. Even people who try to record the experience of domestic workers sympathetically are not immune to this hierarchical arrogance. In her account of the life stories of domestic workers, Suzanne Gordon (1985) aims to allow domestic workers to speak for themselves and her book therefore contains numerous quotations from interviews conducted with domestic workers. In the process she records her own interpretation of their physical and emotional states. Gordon's commentary reveals a hierarchical relationship between herself and the domestic workers of the research as she positions her subjects' lives in her own narrative. Gordon links quotations from her respondents' verbatim stories with her own observations and analysis of their situations. The case material of this study reveals similar, although subconscious, reinforcement of the hierarchical order that exists between employer and domestic worker in the households. The data suggest that often the most 'liberal' employers, those most at pains to neutralise the power differential inherent in the relationship, were the ones to firmly reinforce the unwritten rules governing hierarchy and respect. This is noteworthy considering it is these most liberal employers who are particularly conscious of both differences between domestic workers and employers and their own privilege. In Steyn's (2001b) terms, Gordon's whiteness is invisible to her and she unconsciously interprets their stories in terms of her life.

Steyn (2001b) goes on to say that whites tend to ignore the way race has structured people's life opportunities in society. This observation is not true of the employers of this study; on the contrary, they are sharply aware of their relative privilege and the history and circumstances that led to it. Indeed it is this awareness, together with their proximity to domestic workers that foregrounds class differences between employer and worker and that causes employers discomfort. Three employers in this study explicitly mentioned that they removed labels from new clothing before bringing the items home, for two reasons: firstly, they worried that it

might upset workers that their employers had demonstrably more money than them; secondly, they felt embarrassed to have spent so much more than the domestic worker would be able to afford. Household work brings the material possessions of the employer into stark relief for the domestic worker, thereby demonstrating class differences in an ongoing way. I agree here with Sanjek and Colen (1985) who state that household work polarises the houses of the employers and employees conceptually.

Domestic workers are fully aware of the financial differences between themselves and employers, so the discomfort relates again to the employers' post-apartheid consciousness and tension. This is an example of spatial intimacy combined with class distance: domestic workers' work-space is the employers' home space and domestic workers therefore have access to employer items of a personal nature. Domestic workers see what new items have been bought, they also clear the rubbish bins and therefore have access to the price tags of the purchases (unless the employer has removed these as related above). In this way, class distance is invoked. The fact that domestic employment relationships are conducted in such close proximity can also lead to other tensions. For instance, the employer might not want anyone at all to know that she has been shopping. She might be able to hide the labels but would not be able to hide the clothes once they need to be washed.

Literature about domestic service suggests that similar tensions manifest across many societies because of the combination of intimacy based on the worker's closeness to the family and distance based on class and other hierarchies (Gill 1994, Hansen 1989, Rollins 1985, Romero 1992). My findings concur with Steyn (2001b:8) where she reported that South African whites have never experienced their whiteness and the advantage it afforded them as invisible, such invisibility being a key component, she writes, in the way whiteness is theorised in the "Metropolitan heart of whiteness". Certainly the employers of this study are race-sensitive, their race is very visible to them, and intensely aware of their position of relative privilege as shown in the price tag example above. This awareness causes them intense discomfort, explored at some length in the next chapter.

## **Intimacy**

Employers reported high levels of domestic intimacy in their relationships with their workers. Claudine, for example, described a close relationship: "I sense this personal connection, personal bonding", and many employers made similar claims. Over 96% reported that they got on well with their domestic worker and most described their relationships with workers as equal and intimate. Data from the ten home observations supports this description as all ten relationships appeared affectionate, a finding supported by both parties in each instance.

The average length of employment for domestic workers in the sample is 5.7 years. The average is skewed by a small number of domestic workers who have worked a very long time for the same employer – up to 39 years. The median is 4. Hence, 50% of domestic workers have been employed for 4 years or less, 75% have been employed for 8 years or less and 90% have been employed for 13 years or less. Many employers, particularly once they have children, consider their relationship with domestic workers to be extremely intimate and the evidence suggests that relationships are closer when childcare is involved. These data concur with Morreira's (2005:43) findings as she identifies emotion as being an integral component of the work experience of child carers and one which is more meaningful to them than mere cleaning work.

Often the children of the household have extremely close relationships with domestic workers. Claire spoke for many mothers when she noted, "My kids love Zanda as much as they love me; she spends eight hours with them a day, that's a huge amount of their waking time." Adelaide described the intimacy between her teenage daughter and the domestic worker: "When they see each other, they throw their arms around each other and that's not someone who's an employee anymore, is it?" Adelaide's question pinpoints the essence of what makes the domestic worker employment relationship so particular: it is an employer/ employee relationship but it

can also be one of the most supportive and close relationships employers and their children have. As Colleen elaborates:

They're in your house, they've looked after your kids. It's very intimate. They know what's inside your drawers, you know. They know everything about you, they've watched you get rid of men, get new men, fight with your child - breastfeed, for goodness sake! She's touched my boobs when I was breastfeeding. That's the sort of intimacy. I mean, not even my husband did that!

While Colleen expressed her feelings in a particularly graphic way, many employers of the study identified with the essence of her comment, reporting feelings of great intimacy in their employment relationships. While Colleen's portrayal evoked nervous laughter, it was also met with nods and murmurs of agreement. Certainly few other jobs would require the same level of intimacy; the tasks of washing, cleaning, tidying, cooking, childcare are unavoidably intimate. Tina's frank comment adds a further level: "She sees me when ... I mean, she washed my underwear! You know, she knows when Andrew and I have had sex, probably ...". Precious, the domestic worker in Cheryl's household, on the other hand, maintains physical 'social distance' from Cheryl but not from Cheryl's invalid husband: "Precious won't eat with my husband and me, but she'll eat with him. So she won't eat the three of us but he needs the company so she'll eat with him." This scene is unusual as husbands usually have more distant relations with domestic workers than their wives. In fact, most husbands of the study appear to have virtually no interaction with the domestic worker. In Cheryl's household, the situation requires Precious to be intimate and since that is part of the job, she complies.

Employers are often called upon to provide emotional and financial support to the domestic worker. Employers are also called upon – or take it upon themselves - to play a motherly role. Monica, for example, reported, "She said she is diabetic so I told her she needs to eat vegetables ...I put this 'diet for overweight diabetics' on the fridge." Monica clearly plays both a nurturing and an instructive role. But nurturing from the employer side can quickly lead to patriarchal (or matriarchal considering the employer is in such instances often a woman) ways of interacting. Carla's tone exemplifies: "I tell her 'Remember to eat some fruit!'

Although this reminder is a nurturing gesture and indicates concern for the health of an individual, it could also be seen/felt to be patronising and controlling to make such a statement to a fellow adult. Liz' instruction reflects the same noble intentions, yet ultimately controlling instruction: "I tell her: "You have a headache, Mavis, because you are not eating enough. Please take this chicken home and eat it tonight".

The nurturing is not all on the employer side. Cheryl reported an interaction where the roles were reversed:

I only used to buy white bread as my mom wouldn't allow us to eat it while we were growing up. But Myrna told me very strictly that "you must buy brown bread for us, it's much better for me and you and the children". So now we all eat brown bread, even me.

This already blurred border becomes even more blurred when the household contains children. Jessica reports: "If I shout at my daughter, she shouts at me. She gets very cross if I get cross with her (my daughter)."

In these two households, the domestic workers feel sufficiently empowered to challenge the employer. I conducted a home observation in the first household and certainly had the sense that Myrna and Cheryl displayed intimacy and nurturing behaviour towards each other.

### **Enforced Intimacy**

In some instances, the relationship between employer and domestic worker was not initially intimate, but became so over time. Sue described her relationship with Christina as an aging person might speak of a spouse – as mutually dependent: "Christina's been with me for nearly forty years, I'm afraid it's death us do part. She's going to bury me. We're stuck together." This level of responsibility, a kind of burden of togetherness, generally reserved for family members is not required in most other jobs.

While domestic workers and employers often form close attachments to each other, tensions are inherent for both within the forced intimacy. The mixing of friendship and intimacy with the unequal power relations inherent in the relationship at times puts both in contradictory positions. On the one hand, each is a friend, confidante and caregiver; on the other hand, one is paid, the other pays. The contradictory, dual role the domestic worker is required to play serves to reinforce the inequality of the parties irrespective of their respective levels of consciousness (or otherwise) regarding the inequality.

Employers sometimes exaggerate the intimacy of the relationship to their own advantage, as in Sophie's rendition: "We need each other, we're completely co-dependent". Several employers reported a degree of mutual dependence in the relationship but while mutual, the degree cannot be equal as employers ultimately control the relationship. Both employers and domestic workers are fully aware that the supply of domestic workers is considerably greater than the number of available/desirable jobs.

Leigh echoed many when she indicated, "This [indicating the house] is her domain", intimating that the domestic worker is in control of the house, and therefore has more power than the employer. There were certainly instances where domestic workers were given autonomy over some areas of their work. In Cindy's home,

With Mereika, you know, if she really wants something sweet or whatever, then she'll bake and she, whatever she bakes, she takes half home... And she doesn't ask me when she wants to bake ... so suddenly you just come home and there is this glorious carrot cake ... so tomorrow she takes half the carrot cake home.

In this example, there is an incentive for Mereika to bake: she may take home half the product. More importantly, however, she has been empowered to decide if and when she would like to bake, and free access to ingredients.

### **Myth of equality**

The examples above demonstrate clearly that employer and domestic worker are neither “completely co-dependant” nor equal in power as co-dependency suggests. Many employers used food to blur the borders between equality and intimacy on the one hand, and employer dominance and control on the other.

**Cathy:** “I’d never deny her any food she wants but I don’t have to say anything, she knows not to overstep the mark...She knows I’d do anything for her.”

**Sylvia:** “She has complete access to the fridge. I’ve told her I trust her not to abuse our good relationship.”

Both these employers and many others emphasise intimacy/trust and their own control simultaneously, and in the process manage to convey – to themselves and those listening – their own generosity.

In general there are few employment relationships in which a subordinate is her manager’s ‘equal’; there is always a certain hierarchical structure. Marge was not typical of the employers in that she was consistently very explicit to the worker about the unequal power relations in their relationship: “I say to her “Prudence, don’t make me feel like a ‘madam’”. Every now and again, something happens and I say “No. Don’t do this to me. Don’t make me be a ‘madam’”.” Shamila elaborates employers’ feelings of discomfort in setting parameters around food: “She sometimes takes things [food] without asking but it’s very difficult to lay down absolute boundaries without feeling like a bitch.” The discomfort arises because setting parameters contradicts the myth employers create that the domestic worker is their equal. Employers know the relationship is unequal in many respects but they experience difficulty in reconciling this fact with their belief that everyone is of equal worth (also confusing status difference with moral superiority). As the data show, employers use covert codes and norms to maintain the skewed power structure, but more often than not, employers are unaware of their own propensity to do so.

### **Similarities**

Identities of madam and maid are complicated by the fact that they are not only employer and employee. The subjects of this research on employer/domestic worker relationships are almost all female. Momsen (1990) comments that the common experiences of femininity and motherhood sometimes overcome differences of race and class. The participants in this study certainly emphasised commonalities with the domestic workers around both womanhood and motherhood:

**Sheila:** "We are the same, we're moms of two kids ...[and] women in this male-dominated society."

**Deirdre:** "We do things side-by-side in the house, we process kids and talk about female stuff. We have a lot more in common, in a way, than my husband and I."

Both employers above claim commonality with their domestic worker. Although such commonality may overcome, to a degree, class and race, it does not make the power in the relationship more balanced. Penny had this to say: "It's almost like another mother in the house...that person's opinion, that person's needs are just as valid as every single body else's." Despite the implication of equality, I extend Momsen's assertion and suggest, rather, that the similarities of gender and parenthood are sometimes used by employers to their own advantage. Employers highlight similarities with their domestic worker when it suits them (as in the examples above), but they also keep the domestic worker at a distance socially.

### **Rules of intimacy**

The case material indicates that, in the intimate working environment of the employment relationship, employers create distance (consciously and unconsciously) as a tool of control within the relationship. Some employers use the intimacy of the domestic employment relationship to obscure the unequal power relations within it. Alison captures the contradiction without noticing its irony: "We have a very close working relationship...of course I have to put my foot down now and again – I don't want her to abuse me!" And many employers use intimacy to overstep the boundaries of the domestic worker's job description:

**Carol:** She'll do anything for me as I do a lot for her family...and I'm always sending a lot of food and stuff home. I often ask her to stay late if I'm stuck at work.

**Sue:** I pay her well and I expect her to work hard. I look after her family too in some ways by sending masses of things home. We depend on each other and expect a lot from each other.

In these examples, the employers blur the borders between paid work and personal servitude and expect the unpaid overtime work in exchange for their ongoing largesse. Such blurring of the distinctions between work and payment in kind invokes deference and reinforces inequality in the relationship.

Distance is established through the use of various rules not only so that certain boundaries are not crossed by the worker but also to maintain workers' subordinate position. Kerry verbalised this contradiction: "She's my friend but I don't want her to get too close as she's very different and she works for me." Similarly, Maya noted: "She's really nice and we get on extremely well, but she's frankly not on my intellectual wavelength."

This construction of difference so integral to the power inequality within the domestic employment relationship is not particular to South Africa. These findings concur with both Hansen (1989) in Zambia and Dickey (2000) in urban India who explore this distancing aspect of the power differential. They reveal that employers believe that social and emotional distance is a crucial factor in retaining control over servants in both countries. Dickey (2005), in urban India, states that employers manipulate workers' closeness to and distance from employers. Even in Victorian times, relationships between employers and domestic workers were "uneasily intimate" and structured around rules of distance. In Hill's review (2007) of Light's book on Virginia Woolf and her servants, she notes that the female employers of the time used both professional and psychological distance to balance the inherent intimacy of the relationship.

A number of employers encountered during fieldwork complained that their domestic worker was so much 'a part of the family' that their power (to discipline her) had waned. Too much

closeness can make employers feel vulnerable to domestic workers. As Ilana noted: “ She knows everything about me, it’s scary! It feels weird then to tell her what to do.” In general, employers do not want to lose their power in the relationship through intimacy with domestic workers.

Childcare adds a further arena of contradiction and ambiguity: employers want (and need) domestic workers to become attached to their children but, simultaneously, perceive their role as ‘mother’ being potentially undermined by the intimate relationship between worker and child. Morreira’s findings concur, labelling this “Inherent contradiction” as “[an] intimacy ... contained within a defined set of rules, and workers are still expected to maintain some distance” (2005: 39).

#### **Intimacy, appreciation and food provision**

Many employers linked a high level of appreciation of the domestic worker to food provision. Riva spoke for many, noting, “She’s just an amazing person and we’re mad about her. She’s indispensable to us and so we feel we need to feed not only her but her family too.” While such sentiments no doubt express sincere feeling, this giving creates a sense of obligation, gratitude and loyalty from the domestic worker, whether or not so intended. Interestingly, Shireen Ally, in her paper on domestic workers in post-apartheid South Africa (2007), noted that domestic workers, in turn, are fully aware that cultivating personal ties with employers can create favourable working conditions.

Pumla, a live-in domestic worker, echoed Riva’s synopsis of the link between value and food provision. She suggested that her employer was not giving her sufficient food because she did not like her: “At the beginning they asked me “what do you want to eat?”. She bought some [food] one month and the following month she didn’t carry on buying food. I think it is because they don’t like me.” Such a situation highlights the hidden nature of the relationship and reveals domestic workers’ vulnerability to exploitation and employer whim. Domestic work is isolated from ‘the world at large’ and most aspects of its conditions are subject to the

judgment of the employer alone. The relationship too is therefore removed from censure and comparison.

Pumla offered another explanation for the employer's behaviour: that the employer was going through a bad time in her marriage. It seems most unjust that a domestic worker should suffer because her employer is experiencing hard times. But the intimate nature of the employment relationship does mean that domestic workers, through no fault of their own, often bear the brunt of circumstances beyond their control.

Although Pumla's situation may be extreme, I found a link in many households between food provision and employer regard for the domestic worker. Tania's description was explicit about the link between food provision and affection: "I'm not generous with domestic workers I don't like. It's a power thing – I can be cruel to her if I don't like her. I love our current domestic worker and I buy her lots of food." Tania seems callous but she is being honest about a situation that is surprisingly common amongst these research participants: employers provide better quality food in higher quantities to domestic workers whom they value or have affection for than for those they like less. While the questionnaire did not tap this issue, the link between appreciation and better food was discussed in all but one book club.

## **Household hierarchy**

### **'A Part of the family'**

Of the 171 employers, 14% view their domestic worker as 'a part of the family', 37% view domestic workers as being 'an employee' while 49% view their domestic worker as either both employee and part of the family or 'somewhere in between' these two categories. In summary, 63% of employers view their domestic workers as being, to a lesser or greater extent, 'a part of the family'. In disaggregating this sample, both employer age and length of employment were insignificant in determining whether employers viewed their domestic workers as 'part of the family', whereas of the three gross monthly income categories, the 41% in the middle category R18 000 – R34 000 were most likely to view workers in this way.

Where domestic workers provide childcare, the employer is more likely to say that the domestic worker is 'both' or 'somewhere in between'.

Many employers reported that they treat their domestic worker as if she were a family member. Hannah's statement, though specific about vitamins, was also very typical: "She is part of my household ... so when I buy my kids vitamins, I buy her kids vitamins."

However, buying vitamins does not demonstrate that the domestic worker holds equal power in the household. These findings concur with Morreira (2005:29) who notes that while employers often report the relationship in terms of kinship ("she's one of the family", "she's almost part of the family", "she's one of us", for example), employer treatment of domestic workers indicates that this is not the case. Ally's contention (2007) that the 'like one of the family' myth operates as an employer ideology of control is supported by these findings.

### **Childcare and hierarchy**

Of the sample, 44% of domestic workers perform child care work while 56% do not. This study confirms Morreira's finding (2005:39) that the relationships domestic workers develop with children can affect the power dynamic between employers and employees. In many households domestic workers are given sole responsibility for children for long periods.

Domestic workers who look after children appear to have higher status than domestic workers who do not and the workers recognise this. Mavis noted, "Now I get better food, better treatment than [in] the other one [job]. You see, I didn't look after children there, just the cleaning, the ironing, you see." However, this higher status in terms of responsibility is not reflected in their pay. While, in other job situations, higher responsibility is linked to higher reward, domestic workers in this study are paid a higher hourly rate where there is no childcare work (R18 per hour) than where the job involves caring for children (R14 per hour). However, the higher responsibility that child care affords domestic workers results in other rewards. Employer questionnaire answers indicated that domestic workers who perform childcare work have unlimited access to a far greater range of foods than those who do not.

During one home observation the employer gave the domestic worker, the following instruction as she left the house: "The girls are coming home about 12.30. Amy's boyfriend is also coming. If I'm not here, please 'Jonga' ('Watch')." This employer was requesting that the domestic worker play chaperone to the teenage girl, in effect saying, "If I am not here, be me - become a surrogate mother, one of the family". While many employers require such levels of responsibility of their domestic workers, the latter are rarely accorded concomitant power or status. Thus while caring for children can allow greater autonomy in some areas, it can also facilitate increased exploitation and give rise to ambiguous employer behaviour. Power is thus ambiguous and contradictory in the childcare context (Morreira 2005): workers feel that employers hold most power; employers recognise workers' important role in childcare and often feel that workers are more powerful than them in this sphere. Childcare can complicate the power dynamics further if employers resent the domestic worker's closeness to the child, as illustrated somewhat sadly in Pru's comment: "She's the one at home making decisions about his [the child's] well being which makes me jealous."

On the other end of the spectrum, as mentioned in relation to space earlier, a number of employers of the study equated the status of domestic worker with that of a child in the household. Some employers unconsciously demonstrated that the domestic worker has the status of a child in the household:

**Lily:**When I hand out cakes and sweets to the children, she gets some too.

In the above household, the domestic worker receives a portion of cakes and sweets alongside the children. This quotation illustrates a clear difference in attitude – not just in words. An adult being reduced to child status is very patronising, particularly as domestic workers are often called upon to discipline children as part of their childcare function. If the employer positions the domestic worker at the level of a child in the household hierarchy, the message to children in the household is that domestic workers are inferior to other adults in the household:

**Holly:** If the kids don't want the food or clothes, I've told her she can have it to take home. If she doesn't want the food, she must give it to the dogs.

In this extreme situation, the domestic worker is placed below children in the household hierarchy. Rollins (1985) in her study of white employers and black domestic workers in the United States, uses the term 'maternalism' to denote controlling employer practices such as payment in kind (as illustrated in the example above). The findings of this study are in agreement with those of Rollins when she says that 'maternalism' makes domestic workers grateful to the employer and therefore reinforces the unequal power balance between them.

### **Hierarchy between domestic workers**

Mertia, a very experienced au pair who has watched relationships between domestic workers and employers for 20 years, made some useful observations on hierarchy between workers within households. According to Mertia, au pairs generally have greater status within the household than domestic workers. This was confirmed by a domestic worker who noted that her employer would make tea for the au pair but not for her. This is attributable to the fact au pairs are more often than not of the same social class as the employers and the difference in relationship once again reinforces the household hierarchy, with the domestic worker on the lowest rung (though part-time male gardeners are below them).

But there are ceilings on the amount of responsibility nannies, au pairs or any other category of domestic worker is allowed to take. As au pair Mertia reported:

Another time there were two au pairs, Lucy and I, working together. Lucy was cooking kiddies' meals in bulk and putting them in tupperwares and she was clearing space in the freezer ... They went mad. [They said] it wasn't her place to decide what to do with the food.

Lucy clearly overestimated her rights and status within this particular household. She assumed that her position in the household hierarchy was higher than it turned out to be. House-sitters appear to have even higher status. Mertia has worked as both au pair and house-sitter for the same household and was accorded very different status in each role. As an au pair, "I wasn't allowed to eat off their plates ... we had to eat in the garage ... [but] when I house-sat for them they said, "Please use all the food in the fridge and freezer." It was

stacked full of luxuries like prawns.” In this case the different status levels were made evident through access to food, crockery and use of space. The main difference between house-sitter and au pair jobs is that the latter involves childminding. Yet despite the seeming overriding importance of child-care, the established hierarchy agreed to by employers across households for female domestic workers from bottom to top is cleaner, child-carer, au pair and house-sitter. This seems to suggest that material possessions – ie, in the case of the house-sitter, concern for the security of the house – are more important than the children. It is doubtful that these distinctions are either recognised or deliberate on the part of employers. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that most house-sitters for white house owners (as in this study) are also white, adding a racial dimension to the hierarchical differentiation.

### **Payment in Kind**

My research shows that the payment-in-kind system is still firmly in existence in South Africa and serves to reinforce both the hierarchical and the paternalistic aspects of the relationship. Many employers see payment in kind as a bonus of sorts but the data suggest it is more complicated than that. According to Dickey, who wrote extensively about domestic workers in middle- and upper-class households in urban India (2000), payment in kind is a powerful means of coercion and control that remains entrenched in the employment relationship and contributes to its unequal power relations. Dickey’s point is a good one, however, she makes no mention of the role of the domestic worker in the continuation of this system. Many domestic workers expect employers to offer them food and clothes instead of discarding these or giving them to others. Sharon and her domestic worker have established an agreed hierarchy for the disposal of edible food. According to Sharon, “with leftover food, if it’s something I don’t like, then I’ll give it to Julia and then if it’s something she doesn’t like, she’ll take it home for her son and if her son doesn’t like it, she’ll give it to her dog.”

In his analysis of the payment-in-kind relationship, Clarke (1974) comments that treating domestic workers well serves as a mechanism for creating affection in workers. That, in turn, can be interpreted as manipulative as serves to make an employee more pliable, reliable, and trustworthy. All ten domestic workers that I interviewed during home observations

indicated that they felt affection for their employer, and most indicated that they were grateful towards them. Payment in kind is certainly a more powerful control than payment in cash as it removes an element of choice in consumption.

While the payment-in-kind system reinforces the lowly place of domestic workers in the household hierarchy, a number of employers ensure that the domestic worker can save face and turn down unwanted items with dignity. Ali's version allows a measure of choice in the transaction: "I don't want to demean her...I say "Nozi, can you flog this?" In that way she's not saying whether she's going to wear it."

Clarke (1974) notes that payment in kind can create an adult/child relationship, where the employer is in the position of being responsible for deciding what is good for the domestic worker and the domestic worker is dependent on both the employer's benevolence and the degree of responsibility the employer feels. These data reflect Clarke's argument in that food is often used, probably unconsciously, to nurture the domestic worker, and in so doing, relegates them to a child-like status.

### **Older and younger employers**

The survey revealed a trend of differences between younger and older employers (below and above 40 years of age). The total sample consisted of 49% aged below 40 and 51% above 40. Some differences between the 51% older (over 40) and 49% younger (under 40) employers are explained by the fact that younger employers often have young children (44%) and different kinds of domestic help are required if childcare is a factor. A more collegial relationship between worker and employer often develops when a domestic worker helps to rear children, whilst simple cleaning work is less likely to engender intimacy. It is often working mothers who view their domestic worker as 'a part of the family' because these workers usually care for the employer's children, a task that presupposes considerable familiarity, respect and trust.

The difficulty older (40+) employers reported in actually asserting themselves as the 'boss' was much talked about throughout the research process. In contrast, giving orders to an older woman did not seem problematic for employers in the under-40 age category. But for those in the older age category it surfaced as a problem: "She's my mother's age, how can I tell her what to do?" was a sentiment repeatedly expressed. Tina (51) noted, "I feel uncomfortable with Ethel when I'm not happy with something. Because Ethel is my senior, an older Xhosa woman and I'm from the Eastern Cape, I have respect ...I actually can't manage her." Tina finds it difficult to give orders to an older woman and others echo the sentiment: "I feel uncomfortable being an employer like my boss is with me" (Cheryl) and "If you've known somebody for a long time... [it is difficult to give orders]...it's a bit like saying to her "Oh, the house is dirty"." (Rebecca).

In these households, employers find it difficult to have an employer/employee relationship with the domestic worker because they do not view her simply as an employee. As a result of these difficulties many older employers experience frustration with the relationship. Di commented, "I can't stand there and say "this is how I like it done"; and Elizabeth admitted that she would "rather re-clean the bathroom than say anything to her". Di and Elizabeth are typical of the uncertainty of the older generation of employers in the study. They would rather do the work themselves in the way they want it done, than criticise or reprimand the domestic workers. Statements made by these older employers such as, "I clean up before she comes", epitomise the tensions between the expectation of the employer and the inability to make those requirements known.

Many younger employers were quick to acknowledge that the relationship is not one of equal power. In the following households of the younger age category, the employers were open about the inequality in the relationship:

**Kate:** She will say "Can I have a muffin?" or "Can I have a piece of cake?"

**Susie:** She doesn't just help herself.

**Theresa:** I'd never say "Help yourself"

In these three households, each employer has made it clear that she is in charge and will therefore dispense the food. A few employers gave reports of domestic workers who behaved as though they were the employer's equal in the household hierarchy. Anneke's was one example:

She cooks quite well but I've stopped asking her to cook because she would scoop food out for her and her son before us as a family and I found that unacceptable. I understand that she's poor, but I'm paying her ... We had the leftovers!

Anneke is very clear about the limits she wishes to set. And equally clear about who holds power. However while younger employers are less likely to indicate to the domestic worker that the relationship is equal in power, they are more likely to demonstrate their appreciation of the domestic worker. During book club discussions younger employers readily expressed how much they valued their domestic workers, while the older employers were much less forthcoming. Sandra's statement evoked much mirth but certainly reflects the appreciation expressed by employers in the younger cohort:

I said to my husband the other day 'Look what the love of my life did for me. No, I'm not talking about you, I'm talking about Emma. She's the love of my life!' I can't do enough for her. I need to make her feel valued and show her how much she means to me.

While Sandra expressed this sentiment to her husband in a melodramatic way to remove its implicit threat, her gratitude to 'the love of my life', the domestic worker, is felt deeply. Other employers aged below 40 echoed these sentiments. In Judy's words: "She is precious to me. I trust her to look after my most precious things - my children." Overall, younger employers were considerably more vocal about their appreciation of domestic workers than employers over 40. This does not mean that the older (40+) employers did not feel appreciative; they just did not express it as readily. Many members of this older grouping indicated that they do not often talk or 'even think' about the relationship - as if they find it difficult to do so. I surmised that this is why they were less forthcoming about their appreciation of their domestic worker. Furthermore, older employers reported a lot of contradictory feelings about the relationship:

**Carol:** I respect her and accept that I will always supplement her income even when she no longer works for me but her neediness drives me mad.

**Angela:** I think the legacy of apartheid means I must do my bit by employing people and making their life better but it feels such a burden sometimes to have other mouths to feed.

Both Carol and Angela identify a contradiction in how they see their role - they feel an obligation to the domestic worker but at the same time resent it as an unwelcome burden. Younger employers tend to view the relationship in less patriarchal terms. I observed that, while older employers appear to grapple with this tension between obligation and expectation, younger employers are more inclined to have professional, more explicit relationships. Younger employers reportedly find it easier to be “the boss”, without patronising the domestic worker by proclaiming the power dynamics in the relationship to be otherwise. I observed that, whilst older employees often spoke of the relationship in negative terms as shown above (“burden”, “neediness”), younger employers described the relationship in more positive terms, such as “filled with respect and communication” or “simple and easy”.

#### **Changes in issues of intimacy, power and hierarchy**

All the participants in this study had memories and opinions on how intimacy and power relations have shifted since apartheid. (The memories related mostly to their mothers for both employers and workers, albeit from opposite sides of the employment relationship.) Patricia commented: “My mother’s domestic worker was way more subservient. She slept in a little back room in the house. I don’t think she featured as a whole person in the household.” Amanda made similar observations regarding the workers’ ‘presence’: “Often you see that the children who were brought up back then in the sixties kind of ignore the maid - almost like she wasn’t actually in the room, that kind of thing.” Indeed, separation of space, food and utensils were prominent features in most employers’ memories:

**Cindy:** “They had separate spaces to eat and relax in. There was real segregation in this area.”

**Felicity:** “They definitely had their own food, their own bread, their own margarine, their own meat ... and an enamel plate.”

For the most part, the research participants were keen to distinguish their own households from the marked segregation of the earlier era as well as their relationships with domestic workers from their mothers’. Many commented on the differences in the intimacy levels. Frances, for example, insisted that, “For me, my

personal relationship with Cynthia is, like, light years away from my mum or my gran [and their relationships with domestic workers]. She [Cynthia] is an empowered person.” Helen and many others noted that domestic workers would “never, but never!” call an employer by her first name. Josephine noted, “I think it’s a much more frank relationship than my mother ever had ... When she left, my family didn’t even know where she went and I often wondered about the women who looked after me when I was a child.” And Theresa showed insight with her remark that,

There is a greater vulnerability I think, that I expose to her and talk to her frankly about, than I think my mother would have tolerated. Although I think that Christine could see into my mother’s life in a way that my mother couldn’t - or wouldn’t - have wanted.

All 171 employers reported that relationships between domestic worker and employer had become both more intimate and less subservient on the part of the worker since their childhoods. They also believed that relationships and conditions have become relatively more equal on a number of levels. Melissa was incredulous in retrospect at her parents’ expectations:

My parents expected tea to be made for them at 6am. To the extent that when they moved to a farm from [the town], this poor man who worked for them had to get on his bicycle and ride quite a distance to prepare it. I still think ‘How could you have done that?’ and they were considered quite progressive!

While the inequality in power relations today is less overt and/or extreme than in the past, in some current households, particularly those of employers’ parents’ generation, apartheid style hierarchy remains in its overt form. Cherise, for example, reported that, “My mother’s domestic would never dream of walking into the TV room and sitting down to talk to her.” However, in some such households the relationship changes when long- term employers become more dependent on their domestic worker. Mia, for example, noted: “My mother had a very ‘them and us’ attitude to her domestic worker. But now she and Nomonde are much more equal ... she [the mother] is quite deaf and she [Nomonde] does a lot for her.”

In most current relationships, employers are acutely aware of status differences between themselves and their employees and, as demonstrated throughout this work, the differences

cause them discomfort. When outsiders perceive the closeness employers would like to believe they have, it is cause for pride. Charlotte, for example, related:

The lady who worked for my mom when I was in the house is someone I still see. She's 90 .... I treat her like my grandmother – I visit her as much. The lady at the nursing home said to me the other day 'Oh, are you her daughter?' as I went upstairs. I mean, clearly, she's Black as Black can be. I do not look anything like her.

Charlotte took it as a compliment that someone had recognised the time she had spent visiting her 'grandmother' to indicate a certain level of intimacy (and responsibility and perhaps obligation) commensurate with a granddaughter/grandmother relationship, despite the racial difference.

The domestic employment relationship can be one of the most intimate relationships employers have but the space of home holds contradictory meanings for both employers and domestic workers. In this chapter I have argued that although formal apartheid has been abolished, many apartheid-era codes and norms of distancing and hierarchy that structure the relationship between employer and domestic worker remain. Despite changes in spatial relations, many domestic workers remain "uncomfortable" in some household spaces. The mixing of intimacy and proximity with the unequal power relations inherent in the domestic employment relationship raises a number of tensions and contradictions. Employers create a myth of equality yet use rules of hierarchy to invoke distance within the relationship. Furthermore, employers use similarities of gender and motherhood and differences of race and class to control the relationship. Both the hidden nature of domestic work, and the link I found between appreciation and food provision highlight the role of employer whim in the relationship and, by extension, the potential for exploitation. In the next and final chapter, I examine employer unease and guilt, a theme that runs throughout the research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **EMPLOYER UNEASE AND GUILT**

**“I can’t actually tell her how I feel about her work. After all, if it wasn’t for apartheid, she’d probably not have to work for me, would she?”**

**-An employer (14 March, 2006)**

This chapter summarises the findings of the research and show a shift since 1994 in the relationships between domestic workers and their employers. Yet, at the same time, these relationships remain complex and over-determined by the codes and norms of apartheid. Employer discomfort and guilt is one of the principal research findings of this sample of employers. Liberal-minded employers feel conflicted because of their position of privilege relative to the domestic workers and because the relationship tends to expose uncomfortable contradictions between the professed values of the employer and the actual working situation. Tensions exist between the desire to espouse racial equality and the claim to be on close terms with the domestic worker, and the need of the employer to exert control through unacknowledged rules. I explore employer attitudes in a peer group context, as well as employer feelings of responsibility towards domestic workers. My investigation includes the differences displayed by older subjects, who were employers during the apartheid era and still are, and younger individuals who became employers only after 1994.

#### **Employer unease**

The domestic employment relationship is an emotional subject for many employers. The data demonstrate that the presence of a domestic worker reminds employers of the inequities of apartheid and the continued post-apartheid differences between the social and economic status of employer and employee. The research reveals that many employers regard their relationship with their domestic worker as ‘close’ but when reflecting on the relationship, contradictions and tensions emerge.

The study shows that many employers today believe they should be more generous with food than employers were in the past, yet they are conflicted about effecting that change. On the

one hand, employers know that most domestic workers have no expectations of eating the same quality food as them. On the other hand, they struggle to reconcile such differentiated food provision with their value systems. Many employers whose perspectives are included in this survey do not want domestic workers to have 'free reign' over the food in their house but few indicate this overtly, as illustrated through the examples of contradictory communication in Chapter 3 and the rules of hierarchy as shown in Chapter 4 which invoke distance and boundaries within the relationship. Instead subtle and covert rules are implemented that indicate to the domestic worker the way the employer wants things to work and which perpetuate positions of subordination and control.

### **Employer self-image**

Thus, for many employers of this sample, a dissonance exists between their self image and proclaimed beliefs about equity and the domestic arena. For the most part, I observed that employers display acceptance of the hierarchical role that many domestic workers seem to expect. Such habituated behaviour can be seen as a carry-over of apartheid norms and a recurrence to some extent, of the roles employers played in the past, although there are some notable differences as have been shown in earlier chapters and will be highlighted below.

The research indicates that many employers wish to project an image of themselves as 'good' employers, even if it does not reflect their situation fully. I suspected in many instances that employers were not presenting an accurate picture of the food situation in their households. This was confirmed by the unsolicited comments of several book club members to me after the meetings indicating that fellow members had not been fully accurate about their domestic situations.

I was surprised that this particular group of employers (well-educated, politically liberal) were not more self-reflective, although the data reveal that this was partly to do with fear of peer censure, an aspect I discuss below. Related to this contradictory tension between image and action is another paradox. While the image many employers have of themselves is of

enlightened and progressive human beings, many are not fully self-aware. They might choose to give their domestic workers inferior coffee but would not like other employers to know that they do so, nor do they like to face this fact to themselves. This observation concurs with Steyn's finding (2001a) about the invisibility of whiteness which results in employers not being able to see their role in the perpetuation of power structures. Thus many employers of the study are unable to see objectively their role in the relationship, a role which accounts for contradictory behaviour, ambiguous messages and dissonance between how they believe they are conducting themselves and the reality. In these cases employer silence exists around the relationship between domestic worker and employer. Where no discussion or reflection on these employment issues takes place with peers, it can be accepted that these employers opt to be blind to the fact of whiteness and the complex and uneven reality of the relationship. While this reflects a contradiction between image and reality, it is only one of a number of contradictory behaviour patterns, evidenced by the average employer, that has emerged in the study.

Aurelia, for example, is not typical of employer respondents in the study, in that she engages openly with issues most of her counterparts avoid. I observed that Aurelia had noticeably different views from those of her peers throughout the book club discussion. While the book club to which she belongs is at the least enlightened end of the attitude scale of all the groups, and there are slightly more parallels between Aurelia and members from other, more liberal-minded, book clubs, on the whole Aurelia's views are markedly different from the whole sample of interviewed employers, including personal friends with whom she socialises. She provoked negative reactions from her peers for statements such as, "Sarah likes filter coffee and it is expensive but I haven't got the heart to go and buy her Frisco or Ricoffy, like most households actually do." Other employers in the group felt Aurelia was letting her domestic worker take too many liberties: "Wow, you let her get away with a lot!" and "She obviously has a great time at *your* house!" were two exclamations that typify the responses to Aurelia from her group:

Where some employers might have been embarrassed or humbled by the views of such a generous employer, Aurelia's peers were not. Instead, they seemed hostile towards her. Their comments, including the two quoted above, were made in a disparaging tone. As mentioned earlier, this book club was exceptionally conservative relative to the other nine of the study. Were Aurelia to have made her statement about filter coffee in any of the other book clubs, the peer response would likely have been very different and likely to have been openly approving. Whether or not those employers would have *felt* approval of Aurelia's actions is a different matter.

Although Aurelia's book club members are unrepresentative of the whole employer grouping of the study, her comment about different qualities of coffee illustrates a tension I often encountered when listening to employers from the more politically enlightened book clubs. On the one hand, these employers know that the average domestic worker has no expectations of eating the same quality food as them, and would accept food of an inferior quality. On the other hand, they struggle to reconcile such constraints on food provision with their notion that the domestic worker is equal to them, and should therefore be provided access to good quality food.

### **Peer group pressure and book clubs**

As shown, many employers displayed discomfort and defensiveness when discussing domestic workers in the company of their peers during book club gatherings. Indeed, peer censure and the fear of peer censure had an effect on both data collection and the actual data.

While members of some book clubs knew each other well through work or social networks, this was not so for all clubs. I found that where people knew each other well, discomfort levels were high. On the face of it, this is paradoxical as these employers were familiar with each other, but it is precisely this familiarity which made them uncomfortable as they were anxious about being judged by peers and, even more so, by friends. Many of the book club members habitually socialise with each other. They also belong to other interconnecting

networks. These include work situations, children's schools, church communities, husbands' social or sport networks, and family friendship networks where parents of book club members are friends. But even individuals who are unconnected outside the book club context maintain close relationships with fellow members, and much personal disclosure occurs at club meetings. In her book on book clubs, or reading groups as they are called in some countries, Shireen Dodson (2001:7) notes that "the heart of any reading group is discussion and disclosure". An employer, Kitty, noted "We talk about anything and everything - men, kids, sex, careers, weight, food; everything goes, nothing is shocking."

This standard of openness and familiarity makes it particularly significant that so many members found the disclosures about the employment practices of others in the group "shocking". Clodagh expressed this irony as, "It's funny that we know so much about each others' sex lives but not about this kind of stuff [employment relationships] and whether our friends make the maid drink Ricoffy!" Clodagh captures the essence of the findings around disclosure and peers groups: while peers might be happy to disclose intimate details about many aspects of their lives, it makes them uncomfortable to talk about their relationships with their domestic workers. The research suggests that the reason for this is employer unease and ambivalence about the domestic working relationship in which some of the inequities of apartheid practices are still evident.

Another factor is the employers' awareness of their own potential (and power) to exploit their workers. Many employers are aware that they do exploit their domestic workers from time to time and were anxious about censure from their peers. Many recounted experiences of 'friends' ("my friend feels..." or "I know this woman who..."), which I suspected were their own experiences that they were unwilling to declare as such. Many employers did make value judgements about their peers openly which led to instances of considerable tension. In seven of the ten book club meetings, I witnessed at least two shocked exclamations at admissions about what food the domestic worker was allowed/not allowed to eat. At three of the book club meetings, upwards of ten shocked exclamations at admissions on this topic were noted.

After two meetings I was told that some information had emerged of which even longstanding friends had been unaware.

In an instance where an employer indicated that she did not provide food for the domestic worker and that she expected her to use different crockery, the negative response from the other group members was immediate and created an atmosphere of marked discomfort in the room both during and after these disclosures. Previously talkative group members became silent and anxious and appalled glances were exchanged. Two employers exclaimed, "You can't be serious, Clare!" and I noticed a number of others who tried, through their own contributions, to distance themselves from these admissions. They appeared horrified that someone they knew would behave in a manner so typical of apartheid employment relationships.

In this particular book club, although most had been members for close to ten years and know each other well, the group is unusual in that their ages and educational backgrounds vary considerably. Despite the shock at Clare's disclosure, this book club was the least politically liberal of all ten in the study. For instance, shock was also expressed at another disclosure during the same twenty-minute discussion, for a very different reason. Indeed, many people expressed dismay ("I'm horrified") that one member, Juanita, was happy for her domestic worker to help herself to food when and as she felt the need: "She eats everything, and anything that's there, she eats. If I cook anything, or she cooks meals for herself." In this group, this employer was an exception in that the working conditions and relationship with her domestic worker were comparatively relaxed and generous compared to the rest of the group. I read her peer group's attempt to make her feel as though she was doing wrong as a way of rationalising the comparatively inferior working conditions of their own employees. Discomfort was marked during this focus group discussion where some members felt strongly that Juanita, gave her domestic worker too much freedom. One member's protest that "she is not a guest in your house!" was reflective of majority peer censure within the group.

It was my perception that many employers disclosed a great deal of personal information in the group discussions that they had never previously acknowledged, even to themselves. Not only are employers reluctant to disclose this potentially sensitive information for fear of being judged, they also seem to have difficulty in facing with frankness their domestic situation to themselves. Many indicated that it was the first time they had ever thought or talked about many of the topics of discussion. This demonstrates that the employer group of the survey has a considerable political self-consciousness, yet I observed that, despite fear of peer censure as mentioned above, many employers appeared to appreciate the opportunity to discuss this topic. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I often struggled to move employers on to the next topic, and to bring the discussions to a close, as a result of employer interest in the subject of the domestic employment relationship.

### **Employer responsibility**

The topic of employer responsibility regarding domestic workers generated vociferous debate in nine out of the ten discussion groups. Most focus group time was spent on this topic as employers had particularly strong views on the subject. Employers were asked, both in the questionnaires and in the book club discussions, whether they feel it their responsibility to provide domestic workers with a balanced diet. Responses were almost equal, with 45% accepting responsibility and 49% rejecting it (6% responded 'don't know').

The topic of employer responsibility eclipsed the other topics in terms of input. In two of the ten club sessions the employers were less forthcoming but in eight sessions I struggled to move employers to other topics as they had so much to say about employer responsibility. Some members were surprised, others openly incredulous, at the opinions of their peers. In four sessions there were heated arguments while in the other four the tensions led to some discomfort and silence. It was an unexpected research finding that it is unusual for employers to talk with others about responsibility towards domestic workers. Again, such a finding shows that this employer group displays a political and social self-consciousness rooted, it seems, in guilt around their position of privilege, and generating an uncertainty about what they can and should and want to be seen to be doing, for their domestic worker.

The data show that age and income are significant to whether employers think it is their responsibility to provide a balanced diet. Of the 45% who accept responsibility, 46% are under 40 and 54% over 40 years of age. Similarly, more in the younger category reject responsibility: 55% of the under 40s and 45% of the 40+ category (n=165). The distribution in regard to income (n=139, i.e., fewer of the total disclosed income) of the 43% who accept responsibility, is 27% for those with an income of less than R18,000, 45% of those with an income of R18,000 and 28% with an income of more than R35,000; whereas, among the 54% who reject responsibility, fewest (26%) are in the highest income group (>R35,000) and the other two income groups each have 37% who reject responsibility for providing a balanced diet for their domestic workers.

Employers aged over 40 are more likely to feel a responsibility to provide domestic workers with a balanced diet than are employers under 40. Employers whose households gross between R18 000 and R35 000 per month are more likely to feel a responsibility to provide their workers with a balanced diet than both those employers who fall into either poorer or richer categories. There were many and varied responses to this issue. Phillipa, for example, responded that not taking responsibility “ would be like not looking after your parents” thus implying that one ought to have concerns for domestic workers similar to those for close family members. A large number of employers seem to grapple with achieving a balance between being caring and the feeling that they are disempowering their employees: “To me its like a feudal thing when you kind of take over the responsibility for organising someone’s life.” Such employers grapple with the paternalism that has characterised the relationship between domestic workers and employers in South Africa in the past and which, as this research shows, continues to shape relationships in the post-apartheid present.<sup>1</sup> Again, this is both positive and negative. While on the negative side paternalism is a continuation of apartheid-era behaviour, the fact that the employer is grappling with it, indicates some sensitivity about being controlling.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maternalism**, perhaps, considering they are all female.

The following two comments typify employer responses on the topic of nutrition:

**Stephanie:** We are quite conscious that it's probably the most nutritious meal of the day, so we give her some vegetables and some meat as well.

**Holly:** I'll make sure to buy her chicken and rolls .... I will make it part of my day ... before I go to do my meetings or whatever, like, I would never say to her, you know, "Make yourself something from the fridge". You know, I feel responsible for having her.

Shannon and Holly make an effort, seemingly on a daily basis, to provide the domestic worker with a balanced diet. Others go even further in their sense of responsibility: "We've sent her to someone to discuss eating correctly." In fact, a number of employers have sent their domestic workers to nutritionists and dieticians.

There was also a lot of argument around whether it is the duty of the employer to steer domestic workers away from unhealthy foods:

**Kate:** I spoke to a professional nutritionist once and it emerged that she buys her domestic worker white bread, yellow cheese, margarine...and I said to her "Why do you do that? And she said "No, well, this is what Matilda wants"...I'm so conscious of how very bad it is to eat very bad food.

Kate is particularly health conscious and was thus appalled that a professional nutritionist would be complicit in her domestic worker eating "bad food".

Much unease in the book club discussions was generated around the following questions: Where should employers draw the line? Do employers have the right to impose their own nutritional values just because they have the power to do so? These questions raised through the food debate go to the heart of paternalism and employer unease over playing a possibly disempowering role within the employment relationship.

Some employers have taken their responsibility to an even further:

**Cindy:** If there is no cooked meal my mother phones me to come home and cook a meal for Crystal as 'Nobody can work on an empty stomach'.

**Jenny:** We're desperately trying to think of what she would like to eat and we watch her all the time. If we see her actually eating some specific thing, we say "chicken?, do you like chicken? Can we make you some chicken?" It's kind of like an obsession.

In both these households, time and attention is clearly dedicated to ensuring that the domestic worker eats well when at work. In the second house, the domestic worker is fairly new. Both employers, and the employer's mother in the first example, play a paternalistic role in ensuring the domestic worker eats a proper meal<sup>2</sup>. The research shows to some extent that it allays employer feelings of guilt over their position of relative privilege if they provide the domestic worker with good quality food.

A related area of employer unease is the question of how to act when the domestic worker perhaps wants the employer to play a more authoritative role.

**Meg:** Christina hardly eats but what can I do? She and her husband.... fell off the wagon and stopped going to church. And the minister came to our house and told my husband that he must tell Christina and Merwe to go to church. And he said 'I can't possibly tell someone to go to church'. But he came to me and said 'You know, if I did tell Christina and Merwe to go to church, they would go to church'. It's almost like a slave mentality...she wants to be told what to do .... I'll take her to the doctor for all sorts of ailments who says 'Her liver's enlarged. She's got borderline alcohol poisoning' and I ask myself: 'What is my responsibility here?'

These examples demonstrate the moral quandary for the employer whose role is further challenged by continuing social inequity, the broader problems of poverty and the relative absence of adequate welfare services in South Africa. Millions of people continue to live in extreme poverty in post apartheid South Africa and the state has elected not to play a paternalistic role. The flipside of the responsibility coin is often that of increased dependency by the domestic worker. It is difficult for an employer to change a paternalistic relationship, or the expectation of such a role, without invoking the very hierarchical power relations employers wish to overcome.

The expectations of domestic workers of employer responsibility for food provision also affect the relationship. Kathy, who did not provide a full meal for her live-in domestic worker, was met by dissatisfaction from the worker, indicating that there is often an expectation of certain level of food provision as part of the employment package:

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<sup>2</sup> The employer and her mother live together.

**Kathy:** The thing is that I never cook or prepare the traditional family meal of the day... My husband cooks when he is here but the kids and I, we have whatever... She was not happy with that. Well, I just said, "Look, I'm sorry, sort of scrounge in the fridge and make yourself a baked potato or sandwich like me".

Despite Kathy adjusting her family life to satisfy her own circumstances, she felt uncomfortable and guilty that the expectation of the domestic worker for a proper cooked meal was not being met.

### **Extended employment**

Another aspect of employer responsibility discussed was the question of extended employment. Of the 162 employers that replied to the question 'Would you carry on employing your domestic worker when you no longer needed her', 40% would continue and 23% would not. Most employers agreed with the sentiment, "We would continue employing her until she didn't want to work anymore." The reasons given ranged from "I'd like to make her life as easy as possible" to seeing extended employment as a reward for the positive role the worker played in their children's upbringing. A number of employers offered the following or a similar response: " Even though it's going to get irritating, we're here together", implying that an extended relationship is inevitable. Some felt they would not carry on employing their domestic worker when they no longer needed her but would feel responsible for finding her a new job.

When cross tabulated with income, the data show an uneven distribution of employers likely to continue their workers' employment across the three income categories. The largest proportion, 41%, were in the income bracket R18,000-R35,000. The majority, 44%, of those who replied 'maybe' to the continued employment question was in the same income category, as were 43% of the respondents who replied in the negative to this question.

The table shows that employer age is not a significant factor in the employer responsibility answers. However, income is a factor. The final table shows a trend that wealthier employers are more likely to feel responsibility (as reported on the questionnaire) towards their employees than the less wealthy.

### **Changes in responsibility**

An overwhelming belief was expressed by employers that, pre-1994, employers felt more responsibility towards domestic workers than they do today. This was a rather surprising finding considering the overt rejection of apartheid-era relationships and criticism of their parents' generation of employers by most of the group. Certainly the piecemeal nature of char work results in employers not feeling the same level of responsibility towards their help than those who employ full-time live-in domestic workers. Similarly, whereas in the past, domestic workers mostly lived-in, today this seems not to be the case. Certainly of the 171 employers of this survey, only 11 employ domestic workers who live-in, the remaining 160 domestic workers being employed on a full- or part-time basis. A sentiment expressed in all ten book clubs was that in some cases, the patriarchal employment arrangements that existed before 1994 had substantial advantages over the current living and working conditions for some domestic workers. Sandy, one of the older book club members, offered the following example from an earlier era:

Mr Thrupps, who's your friendly grocer in Johannesburg, delivers each one a tin of jam, each one a packet of mealie meal and sugar each week and they stashed it away in their rooms and that was the last I saw of it. I know that they were oversupplied with food, I know that they stashed it under the bed and they took it to their families, but they considered it a part of their wage... So we had large volumes of meat that came in and chickens, you know, that sort of thing. More food than they often get nowadays.

Sandy (aged 70) had employed several domestic workers simultaneously at the time, and many others over the course of her life, and felt strongly that domestic workers were provided with more food in apartheid days than today. Older employers such as Sandy clearly took pride in ensuring that domestic workers were provided with food of quantity and quality and in communicating that fact to the club members. However, such generous employers were clearly in the minority in the past. The middle-class liberal employers participating in this study are particularly conscious of the implicit paternalism in such arrangements even though the majority also claim to treat their workers well. The tension that employers experience around responsibility and the playing of a dominant role epitomises the guilt they feel. They want the relationship to be more professional, with apartheid-era obligations a thing of the

past along with the exploitative nature of many relationships at that time. However, employers also feel that domestic workers lose out in the 'more professional' relationship mode and the employers' dilemma is reinforced when domestic workers expect greater employer responsibility for the workers' lives.

Once again complexity and contradiction are manifest: While employers are, in the main, critical of their parental generation for the authoritarianism and exploitation in the relationship, they are simultaneously admiring of the level of responsibility that that generation displayed towards their domestic workers. Of course, even if these reports of older employers of their own past behaviour are accurate, they were clearly a minority, as Cock's (1980) work shows.

### **Older and younger employers**

As was shown in chapter 4, the data revealed a trend of differences between younger and older employers (below and above 40 years of age). In general, the younger employers appear to have more relaxed, less angst-ridden relationships with domestic workers than their older counterparts. This difference has to do with the fact that the older generation experienced growing up and adulthood under apartheid. They were both beneficiaries of apartheid and witnesses to its dire impact on the lives of the disenfranchised, whilst the younger generation only reached adulthood after apartheid formally ended. Although as much beneficiaries of apartheid as the older group they felt, perhaps, less implicated. I argue that it is a consequence of this difference that the older generation appear to carry more guilt for being privileged than their younger counterparts.

Older employers were more likely to say that domestic workers are treated badly (by others) while the generally more pragmatic younger employers were more likely to say that attitude and treatment depended on the qualities of the employer. This difference between the generations is significant in that older employers reportedly experienced more apartheid-style employment relationships, including those of their parents and grandparents. One employer, Frances, says of her mother: "she is still traumatised by what she saw her parents, my

grandparents, do to their staff. Her memory of her father, my grandfather, beating up a domestic worker for stealing sanitary towels is something that still haunts her". Current employer guilt includes the factor of inherited familial guilt, as illustrated through the example above, which contributes to anxiety around their own domestic relationships, and by extension those of others.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation arose from research on food provision to domestic workers by their employers in contemporary South Africa, in a Southern suburbs area of Cape Town. Viewed through the lens of food provision, I explored the social relationships between workers and their employers in post apartheid households, mostly, but not exclusively through the reports of employers.

**Chapter one** locates this research within the historical, social and political context of contemporary South Africa and foregrounds the sphere of domestic employment. **Chapter two** describes the methods employed and explains the choice of employer perspective. While employers report that a lot more communication takes place today than in apartheid-era relationships, **chapter three** shows a disjuncture between what employers believe themselves to communicate and what they actually do communicate to domestic workers. Indeed, the data indicate that much employer communication is contradictory and ambiguous and often reminiscent of apartheid-era relationships. This is because many employers use unacknowledged, covert rules which result in a perpetuation of the subordinate position of domestic workers. The findings of this study also suggest that those employers who are explicit in communicating basic parameters and rules are more likely to have open and satisfactory relationships with domestic workers than those employers who do not.

In **chapter four** I argue that, while apartheid has formally ended, there remain many apartheid-era codes and norms of distancing and hierarchy which structure and constrain the relationship between employer and domestic worker. Despite changes in spatial relations,

many domestic workers remain distanced from feelings of belonging in household spaces. The mixing of intimacy and proximity, with the unequal power relations inherent in the domestic employment relationship, raised a number of employer tensions and contradictions. The main contradictions found were instances where employers profess equality and claim to be on close terms with the domestic worker but nevertheless exert control through unacknowledged rules. Both the concealed nature of domestic work and the link between appreciation of the domestic worker and food provision highlight the role of employer whim in the relationship and, by extension, the potential for exploitation. This final chapter (**chapter five**) has explored in greater detail a theme that runs through all the relationships described, namely, employer unease and guilt experienced by many of the more liberal employers in this study as a result of their recognition of their positions of privilege relative to those of their domestic workers. I investigate employer unease about their relationships in the company of peers, within the book club context as well as employer feelings of responsibility towards domestic workers. I examine the influence of age and income on the attitudes of older and younger employers, as employers, recognising the differences in their respective experiences of apartheid.

After the formal ending of apartheid, a huge disparity remains between the resources, financial and social, of domestic workers and employers and is reflected in this research conducted among well-educated, middle to upper-middle class women. The relationship seems characterised by employer contradiction, a myth of racial and class equality and a hope, or assumption, that the social and work relationships of domestic workers have changed for the better since the demise of apartheid. The research shows however that, while many relationships have changed in positive ways, many remain determined by the habituated norms and codes of apartheid-era employment. Thus while some aspects of the relationship between domestic worker and employer have changed since Jacklyn Cock's seminal 1980 'Maids and Madams' study, the vulnerability and powerlessness of the domestic worker, to a large extent, remain.

I am concerned that the findings of this study seem negative. However, I believe, as does Melissa Steyn (2001b), that 'white guilt' such as displayed by this sample of employers, is functional and necessary to some extent. I think it positive that employers display unease because this indicates both an awareness of complexity and a potential for change. Steyn (2001b:22) praises whites who have shifted their paradigm from "preserving privilege for some, to taking responsibility for promoting development of all, [through] ... grapple[ing] with, and at least to some extent not evad[ing], feelings of guilt". I also believe that some of the tensions in the relationship between employer and domestic worker are not resolvable. Certainly, some 'comfortable contradictions' (Frankental 1998) are inevitable in all relationships, especially within the intimacy of the domestic context. However, these tensions need to emerge in order to be confronted, understood and negotiated. Keeping the variable nature of domestic worker/employer relationships silent will allow continued exploitation.

These employers are my own peer group (I am 38 so fall into the 'under 40' age cohort but I have many friends who are in their 40s) and I therefore identify with them. The challenges, dilemmas and contradictions around the issues of domestic employment are not only those of 'others' but also my own. The research is thus both subjectively and objectively critical. My own relationships with our nanny, Nettie Ndabambi and char, Matilda Skeepers, have changed since the commencement of this research process. I continue to grapple with bringing communication out into the open and being aware of the inherent power I hold in each interaction. Similarly, a number of research participants have mentioned that they have become more reflective on the nature of their own relationships as a result of the questions posed in the study.

I am more certain now than ever of the importance of further research on employers. To understand the employment relationship, and indeed to highlight the position of domestic workers fully, it is crucial to include a focus on the employer. Hopefully the issues identified here have provided a foundation on which to build further research.

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## APPENDIX 1 Employer Questionnaire

### Discussion questions for Employer of Domestic Worker (some adapted from Jacklyn Cock's surveys for 'Maids and Madams', 1980)

*Please ring the applicable answers where possible and write in answers where not. You may need to ring more than one answer to some questions. Feel free to custom-make, or qualify your answers with notes. The more detail the merrier but it's absolutely fine to whip through it too. It's a lot shorter than it looks.*

*If you have more than one domestic worker, please fill in a separate form for him/her. To avoid the him/her eyesore, I will hereafter refer to your domestic worker as a woman.*

#### **Some Personal Details of Yours (the Employer):**

1. Sex: (1)Female (2)Male
2. Age: (1)20-24 (2)25-29 (3)30-34 (4)35-39 (5)40-44  
(6)45-49 (7)50-54 (8)55-59 (9)60-64 (10)65-69  
(11)70-74 (12)75-79 (13)80-84 (14)85+
3. Estimated Household Income per month (net): (1)less than R3 000 (2)R3 000-R6 000  
(3)R6 000-R12 000 (4)R12 000-R18 000 (5) R18 000-R25 000  
(6)R25 000-R35 000 (7)R35 000-R45 000 (8) R46 000+
4. Did you finish school? (1)Yes (2)No
5. Please specify any further qualifications:
6. Do you have a domestic worker? (1)Yes (2)No  
\*If you answered 'No' here, please skip to questions 36-38.

#### **Details of Domestic Worker:**

1. Sex: [1]Female [2]Male
2. Age (an approximation is fine):
3. How long has your domestic worker been in your employ?
4. Does your domestic worker live [1]In [2]Out [3]A combination of living in and out – please specify [4]Other
5. What wage/salary do you pay your domestic worker (per day/per week/per month – please specify which):
6. What additional contributions or benefits do you provide her with (these might include transport money, school fees, old clothes, food, pension provision, medical insurance, ad hoc cash handouts, emergency funds, a Christmas or birthday cash bonus).  
Please specify:

7. What are her duties?  
 [1]Cooking  
 [2]Cleaning  
 [3]Laundry  
 [4]Ironing  
 [5]Childcare  
 [6]Other
8. Which days of the week does she work for you?  
 [1]Monday  
 [2]Tuesday  
 [3]Wednesday  
 [4]Thursday  
 [5]Friday  
 [6]Saturday  
 [7]Sunday
9. What are her working hours?
10. How much time does she have off during the day?
11. How often do you see your domestic worker?
12. If you seldom see her, how do you communicate with her?
13. Does your domestic worker eat and drink when she works at your house?  
 [1]Yes [2]No  
 Why?  
 If you answered 'No', is a portion of your payment to her intended to cover her food costs? [1]Yes [2]No
14. What meals does she usually have at your house? [1]Breakfast  
 [2]Lunch [3]Morning tea [4]Afternoon tea [5]Supper  
 [6]I don't know
15. Does your domestic worker eat: [1]Food that you/ your household eats [2]Different food  
 [3]Both  
 Why?

15. Which foods does she regularly eat at your house?

Please fill in the table below, putting ticks in the boxes where appropriate:

Foodstuffs	Unlimited Quantity	Limited Quantity or as allocated by you	This Item is mostly in the form of leftover food	Items that she may not partake of	Items that she is not interested in	I Don't Know	Any comments or reasons
Red meat (same as employers')							
Red meat (different to employers')							
Chicken							
Fish							
Fruit							
Vegetables							
Tea							
Coffee							
Jam							
Bread							
Samp							
Mealie Meal							
Cheese							
Eggs							
Sugar							
Milk							
Biscuits							
Cake							
Sweets							
Fruit Juice							
Cordials (eg.Oros)							
Butter							
Tinned foods (baked beans, tuna, pilchards etc.)							
Other Foods (specify)							

17. Do you talk about which foodstuffs she may and may not have? [1]Yes [2]No  
Why?/Why not?
18. Does your domestic worker prepare food for your household (adults and/or children) that she does not eat herself?  
Why?
19. How important do you think it is for an employer to set parameters around food with their domestic worker? [1]Not important [2]Important [3]Very Important  
[4]Other  
Why?
20. Do you communicate such parameters to your domestic worker? [1]Yes [2]No  
[3]Sort of
21. Do you think there are times when your domestic worker is unsure of your expectations of her regarding a food issue? (for example, she might be unsure of what she may or may not eat, or what quantity she may eat) [1]Yes [2]No [3]I don't know
22. Has your domestic worker ever asked you to buy foods specifically for her?  
[1]Yes [2]No  
Which foodstuffs?
23. Is she allowed to take food home with her? [1]Yes [2]No
24. Does your domestic worker have other members in her household?  
If so, is the quantity of food you provide sufficient to feed [1]your domestic worker alone, or [2]your domestic worker and her family?
25. Do you think it is your responsibility to provide your domestic worker with a balanced diet? [1]Yes [2] No [3]I don't know
26. Do you think she sometimes takes food without asking? [1]Yes [2]No  
[3]I don't know
27. Do you think she likes the food you provide? [1]Yes [2]No [3]I don't know
28. Where does she eat her meals? [1]Kitchen [2]Dining Room [3]Sitting Room [4]Outside at a table [5]Outside on a bench [6]Scullery [7]Family Room/TV Room [8]Other [9]I don't know

29. Does she use the same crockery and cutlery that you use? [1]Yes [2]No [3] Some of crockery/cutlery that I use [4]I don't know
30. If your domestic worker has been in your employ since before the change in government in 1994, has anything in your relationship with your domestic worker changed since 1994 (please specify)?  
Does this relate to food issues?
31. Do you consider your domestic worker to be [1]a part of the family [2]an employee [3]Both [4]Somewhere in between
32. Do you get along well with her? (1)Yes(2)No
33. How would you describe your feelings towards her?
34. What do you think her feelings are towards you?
35. Would you carry on employing your domestic worker when you no longer need her?  
[1]Yes [2]No [3]Maybe [4]I don't know  
Why?
- \*36. Why do you think we provide food for domestic workers in South Africa, whereas in many other countries food does not form part of this employment relationship?
37. Do you think domestic workers as a group are on the whole [1]Well treated [2]Badly treated [3]Satisfactorily treated [4]Other
38. How do you think things have changed since people of your parents' generation employed a domestic worker? What can you remember of employment relationships in those days that were different from those of today?

**Would you be willing for me to conduct a more in-depth interview with you? [1]Yes [2]No**

**If you are even half-willing, please leave your contact details on this page so that I can give you a ring to tell you what it would entail.**

**Thank-you very much!**

## APPENDIX 2 Communication Tables

**Table 4 Do you talk about which food she may have?**

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Yes	52	31.71	31.71
No	112	68.29	100.00
Total	164	100.00	

**Table 5 How important is it to set parameters around food with your domestic worker?**

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
not important	59	35.98	35.98
important	86	52.44	88.41
other	19	11.59	100.00
Total	164	100.00	

**Table 6 Cross-tabulation of both questions above**

How important is it to set parameters around food with DW?	Do you talk about which food she may have?		Total
	Yes	No	
not important	10	49	59
	16.95	83.05	100.00
	19.61	45.37	37.11
important	34	47	81
	41.98	58.02	100.00
	66.67	43.52	50.94
other	7	12	19
	36.84	63.16	100.00
	13.73	11.11	11.95
Total	51	108	159
	32.08	67.92	100.00
	100.00	100.00	100.00

**Table 7 Do you communicate parameters to her?**

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Yes	44	28.21	28.21
No	60	38.46	66.67
Sort of	47	30.13	96.79
99	5	3.21	100.00
Total	156	100.00	

**Table 8 Cross-tabulation of importance of parameters and whether employer sets parameters**

How important   is it to set   parameters   around food   with DW?	Do you communicate parameters to her?				99	Total
	Yes	No	Sort of			
not important	10	37	2	3		52
	19.23	71.15	3.85	5.77		100.00
	22.73	63.79	4.35	60.00		33.99
important	32	15	36	1		84
	38.10	17.86	42.86	1.19		100.00
	72.73	25.86	78.26	20.00		54.90
other	2	6	8	1		17
	11.76	35.29	47.06	5.88		100.00
	4.55	10.34	17.39	20.00		11.11
Total	44	58	46	5		153
	28.76	37.91	30.07	3.27		100.00
	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00		100.00